

Godforsakenness*

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This essay traces the dynamic encounter between Rohingya ulama (scholars), who travel as muhajir (migrants), and Bangladeshi Deobandi Islamists, who re-enact the role of the ansar (helpers), as they explore godforsakenness during two waves of migration in 2016 and 2017. Bringing together theological aphasia and references to contemporary jihad, this ethnographic meditation calls into question the assumptive logics of secular historicism and liberal humanitarianism as it confronts the deathworld of the War on Terror through Islam's founding texts and traditions. Drawing from Talal Asad's reading of the secular as "conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism" and a formation that contains "a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities," it highlights and unearths the secular core of liberal concepts of humanitarianism, historicity, spatiality, and geography, to specify their uses within the discourse of the War on Terror. The ulama in the border region point to the secular and identify it as a structuring coordinate within the discourse of liberal civil society. At the level of sensibility, the interactions between the scholars and Islamists in the border region reveal a domain consisting of moods, anxieties, and perceptive qualities that runs counter to the affective life immanent to secularity.

Key words: Deoband, humanitarianism, Islam, muhajir, Rohingya, secularism, War on Terror

Preface

This ethnographic meditation reflects on and discloses particular sensibilities, modalities, moods, and anxieties that reverberate among the Rohingya muhajireen (migrants) and the Deobandi ansar (helpers) interacting as the damaged body of the *umma*¹ entrapped between necropolitical secular regimes (Myanmar and Bangladesh) during two waves of migration in 2016-17. The essay describes and interprets a deathworld where the practitioners of the Islamic normative tradition find themselves within a deathly call, a call that makes the "world as universal horizon" impossible as the ground of experience and history.² At the border region, there is not a pre-given world available to all, the basis for Husserl's *Lebenswelt*. The deathworld, by contrast, without "the passive having of the world" (Husserl 1936: 108-9), instead has as its originary point the negative of the world, the abyss of death.

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Allen Feldman, in a different context, mentions “the death world” as not having a “stabilized ground” and constituted through and within “historical dislocation, amputation, inaccessibility, and loss of essence and reference” (Feldman 2015: 355).³ What does it mean to be oriented within such dislocation and without an essential ground or reference? The Rohingya and the Deobandi *ulama* find themselves in a fragmented condition, in a state of catastrophe and quiet at the surface of movement in which individual embodiment, stable grounding, and placemaking are impossible. At first, the interactions between the scholars and the Islamists are pre-logical, non-verbal, and even pre-political—if by political we assume a discourse of modern subjectivity. Later in the encounter, there is an emergence of a critical discourse on the practical significance of *da’wa* (inviting to God, reform) and the ontological non-exhaustibility of *jihad*.

The Islamists, in their dynamic movement, political-mystical quietude, and discursive practices, problematize the secular as they interrogate the spatial, the historical, and the ideological. If secular spatiality is the lived experience of space as secular within the dominant cartographic apparatus of the modern state, then the interactions between the Islamists within physical precarity and the condition of non-enunciation immanently call into question the assumptive logics of such spatiality. There is no ideal body, space, or experience as such, whether as pre-givens or as possibility. The Rohingya *mubajirin* (migrants) and the Deobandi *ansar* (helpers) transgress (and are constricted by) the spatial coordinates of secular states as language fails to capture the silence between them. Their movement as the damaged body of the *umma* interrupts the predictable linearity of secular history. If historicity is progression from religious heritage to the concrete universal, i.e. the secular, then, to use Walter Benjamin’s (2003) phrase, such historicity is “blasted open” in the border region; the Rohingya “activate the emergency brake” against such a historical telos (Hegel 2001; Marx 1993).⁴ The dynamic at the border region reveals not merely the persistence of religion in the present but a stubborn refusal to reduce Islam into religion, thus, reconfiguring the universal itself.

The interactions between the Rohingya *ulama* and the Deobandi practitioners also undermine secularism as ideology. Gil Anidjar writes:

Most importantly, moreover, secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions. And the question now remaining is whether there was a specific religion that was particularly targeted with this name (Anidjar 2006: 62).⁵

Talal Asad, however, wants to “get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion” and warns us that “liberalism’s secular myth should not be confused with the redemptive myth of Christianity, despite a resemblance between them” (Asad 2003: 26).⁶ While Noreen Khawaja agrees with Anidjar that “the way in which the Christian religion relates to Western culture more broadly is not analogous to the way in which other religions relate to other cultures” (Khawaja 2016: 236), she thinks that defining and identifying “Christianity as a singular *agent* in history” and superimposing “the history of secular reason with the history of Christianity” is a mythical, not historical, interpretation.⁷ It may be historically inaccurate to collapse Christianity and secularity onto each other, but I read Anidjar’s political intervention to mean that when secularism acts as “the transcendent mediation” (Asad 2003: 5) and establishes itself as universal, it allows Christianity to remain hegemonic from which other traditions can be addressed as particulars. And, as a discursive and ethico-political tradition, Islam is not presented as just another one among many particulars. It is identified as *the*

tradition of the fanatic, the enemy, and the terrorist. It is *the* competing monotheism, a world-historical threat, and the “revolution of the East” (Hegel 2001: 669).

The ethico-phenomenological meditation that follows is a tracing of how Islam resists such particularization through an engagement with a condition I term godforsakenness. The Rohingya and Deobandi *ulama* refuse the religionization of Islam through their cleaving to *hijarat* (migration) and *jihad* (struggle), signifying the globality of Islam, and through a primordial curiosity about godforsakenness, signaling an obedience to the imperceptible that is larger than the powers of secular regimes. As an ethnographer, I name this “godforsakenness,” but the phenomenon is evident in my interlocutors’ words. For instance, Maulana Azam exclaims, “Is this *fasad* (disequilibrium and larger catastrophe) a test from Allah? May this expiate our sins.” Or, as Jahan cites this *hadith* with a quaver in his voice when I ask him what the encounter with the Rohingya meant to him, “The sign of Belief is to love the Ansar, and the sign of hypocrisy is to hate the Ansar” (Sahih al-Bukhari 3784, book 63, hadith 9). He adds, “We are there because we love Rasulullah (messenger of Allah), our nearness to the Rohingya is our nearness to him, and this *kothin porikbkeba* (difficult test) shows to Allah, the Glorified and the Exalted, our endurance. Allah may be *gayeb* (Bengali, lit. ‘missing’; Arabic *ghayb*) but He knows.” God never makes himself known in human form, and, therefore, godforsakenness signifies the working out of this unknowability by my interlocutors within the discursive tradition of Islam. Due to the normative doctrinal imperative of God being *al-Ghayb* (Unseen and Unknown), godforsakenness in the Islamic context makes the secular ideological substitution of God by the state (necessary for the conceptual undergirding of humanitarianism) untenable, for it structurally refuses God’s arrival in the flesh, in history, in the first place. Therefore, godforsakenness does not become a problem of humanitarian theodicy for the *muhajir* or the *ansar*.

In the Rohingya–Deobandi encounter, I notice that there is a pause and an emphasis on God as the absent author. Godforsakenness is a meditation on this condition of absence during times of divine tribulation. What does it mean for the Rohingya and Deobandi clerics to have a pure and immediate curiosity about God’s authoritative absence? Absence is not non-existence; therefore, there is no ontological necessity or urge to *make* Him present. Nor do the Islamists have the audacity to think that they can *make* Him present. God does what He wills. And God is always already present, even when he is absent. As Amira Mittermaier explains, speaking of charity practices in post-revolutionary Egypt—bypassing the philosophical binary of transcendence and immanence—“at times God is far removed [...] Other times God is intimately present” and “God is not only rhetorically present [through absence] God interferes in, and directs, believers’ lives [through His unknowability]” (2019: 7).⁸ More broadly, the very notion of charity is reconfigured by Muslims engaged in various forms of giving. Mittermaier observes that “God [...] is continuously *made* present through rituals, such as prayer, sacrifice, and almsgiving, and through the very phrase *li-llah* and the way that it relentlessly orients charitable gifts away from the human recipients” (Mittermaier 2019: 7). Godforsakenness, then, is a careful attempt to grasp this divine interference, a primordial curiosity.

Upon hearing about the first waves of Rohingya migration across the Bangladeshi border, when the Deobandi practitioners rush to the border region, they are guided by the *ansar* (helpers) who helped the Prophet Muhammad during the time of originary persecution in Arabia. They act as (if they are) the *ansar*, as they read the world-historical present through Prophetic history. “Placing God in the foreground” (Mittermaier 2019: 4) immanently interrupts secular humanitarianism. Indeed, the secularity of humanitarianism is in question: Didier Fassin, in his genealogical investigation, explains that “[t]he constitution of life as sacred and the valorization of suffering,” both concepts of

Christianity, are central for the historical emergence of humanitarian reason and “represent the religious aspect of the contemporary democratic order” (Fassin 2011: 251).⁹ In other words, even though overlaying “the history of secular reason with the history of Christianity” (Khawaja 2016) is not entirely accurate, Christianity’s constitutive role in the specific construction of secular humanitarianism is undeniable. Basit Iqbal, drawing from his ethnographic work with charity organizations in Jordan in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis, suggests that his interlocutors critically engage “the secular grammar of the international humanitarian regime” (Iqbal 2022a: 51).¹⁰ I agree with Iqbal’s point broadly that such engagement is often inevitable, indicating the hold of Christianity over secularity within the dispositif of humanitarianism itself. In the context of Kashmir, Cabeiri Robinson’s interlocutors take it a step further and term their charity work “humanitarian jihad.”¹¹

I agree with Mittermaier, Iqbal, and Robinson that in the various contemporary situations of violence and displacement Muslims do not uncritically participate in given humanitarian logics. They engage, challenge, and even try to transform humanitarianism. But I am skeptical of the powers of neologization, hybridization, and other maneuvers of translation in the face of capitalist crisis. The humanitarian context unveils a Christian heritage not only in the way suffering and charity are articulated and justified but also in the way human nature itself is conceptualized and structured under capitalism. The meditation that follows on the Rohingya/Deobandi encounter is an exploration not only of the authoritative absence of God but also of the limits of metaphysical abstractions on human nature itself. It reflects on two brief moments of Rohingya migration in 2016-2017, prior to the emergence of state sanctioned humanitarianism.

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There are two open tabs on my computer screen and a notebook at my desk. The first tab has a digital image of a Rohingya imam leading prayers at the site of a *masjid* (mosque) under construction in Balukhali, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. The second tab takes me to a *Hadith* website that cites the Prophet’s dreams about Medina as the destination of *hijra* (flight, exodus, migration). The notebook at my desk has texts related to recent conversations with Bangladeshi Islamists about their work with the Rohingya. The texts take multiple forms: long sentences, short remarks, crossed out thoughts, question marks, exclamation marks, interpretive comments next to ethnographic statements, and blank spaces.

The imam in the image is leading obligatory (*farḍ*) prayers under the open sky. The *masjid* under construction is a simple rectangular space at this point. There are piled up bamboo sticks in front of the imam that will be used to build the mosque. In the background, in the hills, are small, temporary homes. The black and white image is gloomy. The deathworld exceeds its representation, but the image—like a shard of broken glass—interrupts the secular flow of digital reproduction.

The *Hadith* website, citing the Prophet’s loving wife Aisha, reports that he dreamed of Medina before the *hijra*. Medina, in the Prophet’s dream, is “a land of date palm trees, between two lava fields, the two stony tracts” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3905). It is a place of tranquility, a place where soft-mannered believers hospitable to the Prophet and his companions greet them. Boys and girls see the Prophet and exclaim in joy: “This is the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him), he has come!”¹²

The fieldnotes in the notebook are stories of devastation, of a great *fasad* (corruption); not just political violence but a disequilibrium of global scale caused by Man’s desire for sovereignty and audacity to rebel against a divine order. The interlocutors in these notes experience abandonment—a feeling of

being left alone by communities, neighbors, states, and the world as such. God himself appears quiet. Did God forsake them? It is precisely in moments of absolute loss that a *mu'min* (believer) depends on the *ghayb*—on what cannot be perceived by the senses, but under whose gaze death finds an ideal home in those who submit, and life finds tribulation in those who persist.

How are trials and tribulations in the deathworld of the present read from within the classical texts of Islam's discursive tradition? How do the *ulama* (religious scholars), like the Rohingya imam in the image, find nearness to Allah in their conviction, in the aftermath of *hijrat* (ethico-religious migration)? We do not know from the notes if the imam had dreams of hospitality awaiting across the border. We know from the Prophet's dreams that there is the possibility of a true welcome after migration. .

In reports from his wife, the Prophet's dreams show us that hospitality receives its form when the *muhajirin* (migrants) arrive. When strangers and guests arrive, it is as if angels have arrived; a divine light illuminates a dark world. The *ansar* (helpers) now have the opportunity to please Allah. Contrary to secular humanitarian charity, in which the volunteer helps the dispossessed refugee, there are no victims, there are no volunteers in these interactions between the Rohingya and the Bangladeshi Islamists. The suffering travelers remain steadfast: they are the *sabirin* mentioned in the Qur'an, where those who persevere are given a divine promise.¹³ They find brotherhood in calamity. In the certainty of death they (re)discover the Real and emulate the Prophet. It is as if life is breathed into them in the dreamscape of the Prophet. It is as if they are his companions, his brothers.¹⁴

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Jahan dedicated his time in three different locations in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar: Palongkhali, Balukhali, and Kutupalong. Jahan volunteered from his madrasa and joined others in Islamist efforts to help the Rohingya during two different waves of migration. First, in 2016, he and other madrasa clerics and students provided materials, money, and food in small packets. The camps were not yet ready, so they could only help the Rohingya while they were still on the move, without a clear idea of an actual place of refuge. Jahan walked alongside the Rohingya in their journey. What does it mean to walk alongside fellow believers who are distressed and in despair? What does it mean to walk without a clear destination? What does it mean to engage in *khidmat* (service) while being on the move? What can one attend to?

Jahan spoke little in those encounters. During the 2016 migration, words were mostly used for the sake of *dhikr* (the remembrance of God), to ask Allah for forgiveness, for mercy, for help. Jahan listened more and made himself available and adequate to history. Even though his local dialect is similar to the Rohingya language, there was a language barrier. This barrier was also an opening for a world of the quiet, a meditative silence, in which believers grasp the place of divinity within calamity, within catastrophe. This mode of quietude is not about theodicy (philosophically justifying suffering in the face of a benevolent God). Jahan is not wondering why a perfect God allows for suffering. His quietude is literal. Jahan does not initiate active conversations with the other, nor does he ask himself questions, or demand divine answers in desperation. The moving space between them is a place of theological aphasia,¹⁵ a non-enunciative space, a place where utterances and speech acts become impossible. This inability to find words creates the conditions for a leap of faith,¹⁶ i.e., *tawakkul* (reliance on God), generating a meditative space of stillness. Jahan practices *dhikr*: he repeatedly glorifies Allah. The recitations—praising the Unseen—signal full submission. They squeeze out

speech and construct a singular world of Allah's 99 names. They prepare a ground in a groundless world—a temporary refuge, a transient condition in which human contingencies are subsumed under a divine order of divine names—only to be groundless again.

Jahan's approach reminded me of a specific Prophetic story in the Hadith. In *Sahib Muslim*,¹⁷ Anas reports that a woman suffering and experiencing grief said:

'Allah's Messenger, I want something from you.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) responded: 'Mother of so-and-so, see on which side of the road you would like (to stand and talk) so that I may do the needful for you.' He stood aside with her on the roadside until she got what she needed (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2326, bk. 30, 5751).

Some have translated the last part "until she got what she needed" more specifically as "until she was able to say what she wanted to her heart's content."¹⁸ The Prophet did not initiate a conversation, but rather allowed for the fellow believer in distress to speak as much as she needed. When the Prophet asks, "on which side of the road you would like (to stand and talk)?" he not only gives permission to the woman to share her thoughts, he also orients himself and the woman in relation to the road on which they were both standing. This positioning and orienting prepares a particular kind of space that is generative for theological counsel. In 2016, when Jahan walks alongside the Rohingya, their bodies in motion in remembrance of God position themselves in relation to each other, at the outskirts of nation-states within the War on Terror. In doing so they transgress secular spatiality, allowing for a sense of belonging without having to dwell in a home.

In a more recent conversation, I asked Jahan about the 2016 migration and the construction of the space of non-enunciation and the meditative mood of the encounter:

In 2016, when the Rohingya Muslims crossed the border and arrived in Cox's Bazar, escaping Burmese state violence, you had mentioned that the Islamists from your madrassa and other areas had to organize very quickly. But it seems the lack of preparation in terms of organizing materials and resources allowed for a different approach in the way you accepted them and tended to their needs. You spoke little in those interactions. The description of it seems to have this mood of stillness. Of course, it was a time of calamity, but behind it or beneath it there was a kind of quietness.

Jahan responded:

The migration was unexpected. The government at the time did not officially state they would allow the Rohingya to come in. The Rohingya traveled into Cox's Bazar regardless, and we felt obligated to be there, to do whatever we could. We were not prepared. We tried to provide them with some essentials, but our lack of preparation meant that we received them, welcomed them but did not have enough materials for them. We did not speak much. Their condition made us silent. We wondered why Allah allowed such devastation and despair.

The Rohingya and the madrasa groups worked at the margins and in-between space of nation-states. It was unclear if the Rohingya would settle somewhere on the Bangladeshi side, or if they would return to Myanmar. Precarious either way, this mobility of the Rohingya destabilizes their territorial predetermination—signaling a kind of geographical indeterminacy and volatility. The movements in

the border region, immediately outside of the killing fields of the Burmese state and barely within Bangladesh, do not signify an absolute outside to the nation-state cartography so much as denote the manner in which the War on Terror constricts and puts pressure on movements while simultaneously tracing and following along the pathways created by enemy combatants, thus demonstrating not just how the war is global but how capacious it remains in its own transgressive powers. To put it in reverse: while there are moments of interruption of secular geography by the movements of the Rohingya in their dynamic with the Deobandi Islamists, it is the War itself that transgresses secular boundaries even as it engages in a secularizing war against Islam—the attempt to de-essentialize its orthodox corpus. The War on Terror creates statelessness, a condition that far exceeds migration. What is the dynamic between statelessness and *hijrat*? *Hijrat* reframes itself from Islam’s classical tradition into the present, and instead of solely articulating a moral justification for migration (from the lands of disbelief to an ideal place of refuge), it operationalizes a cartographic strategy for evading situations of perpetual war. As modern secularity hegemonizes at a world-historical scale and capitalist expansion destabilizes the geographical binary of Muslim versus non-Muslim lands, *hijrat* refounds itself as a mechanism for respite—as believers prepare for jihad.

As the Rohingya (as *muhajir*) and the Islamists (as *ansar*) as the singular body of the *umma*¹⁹ move through space in transition, I want to highlight Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s observation in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “How the body inhabits space (and time, for that matter) can be seen more clearly by considering the body in motion, because movement is not content with passively undergoing space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their original signification that is effaced in the banality of established situations” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 105).²⁰ Referring to the 2016 movement alongside the Rohingya refugees, Jahan explains the instability of not having a given destination:

We did not know where they would go. We were unsure. Are they arriving here and disappearing within the country? Or, are they returning to Burma after a few days of respite? We wanted to be there in the immediate context, when they arrived. That was important to us. To be present.

It is here, without “the banality of established situations,” that the Rohingya find new space in their movement as the damaged body of the *umma*.²¹ But there is a difference between a generic, individual body, which acts, and the Rohingya collective mass moving as a body in a situation of permanent war, which has to act. To act and to have to act are not the same. The former demonstrates agency, autonomy, action, and even creation, and the latter reveals historical immanence and the ontology of closure. The Rohingya create space as if by accident, as a mass in which they are not the sum total of discrete individuals but are an abstract mass who are persecuted within the historicity of the War on Terror. This mass, the disfigured part of the *umma*, immanently violates secular historicity as it inhabits space in motion. For the Rohingya, “the banality of established situations” is also an experience of constant (re)adjustment to new techniques of war. Even though they are accustomed to an established structure of war, they encounter unexpected shifts and deviations. The “established situation” of war is anti-foundational, has self-movement within it, and is without a predictable pattern in the way it surveils, targets, tortures, and disciplines the Rohingya. Because of this inherent heterogeneity, the War on Terror forces the Rohingya to adjust to varying speeds and intensities of motion. Even as they are creating a new space in movement, the Rohingya Muslims are subjects of suspicion, always at risk of being without a ground. In other words, a banal brutality is present whether there are “established situations” or not. They are on the move, as *muhajirin*, stateless strangers, and terror suspects.²²

I pressed Jahan to tell me more about the condition of silence, his sense of curiosity, and their relation. He had said, “their condition made us silent at first” and, “we wondered why Allah allowed such devastation and despair.” Is silence a necessary condition to wonder about the works of God during divine calamity? This was not a demand made of God but a political-mystical exploration of godforsakenness: a journey into the vast ocean of absence. Jahan clarifies:

We are not like the seculars. We do not doubt God. We want to have a sense of our condition. God is intervening through absence. What exactly is this intervention? We want to feel this intervention in our heart (*bridoj*), we want to grasp it on the inside (*bhitor theke bujhte chai*).

God forsakes us, in order to not forsake us. This awareness of a condition among the Islamists—of a particular kind of godforsakenness in which God abandons because He remains—works in direct opposition to atheist existentialism. That latter position, in attempting to move beyond metaphysics, places existence prior to essence and remains within metaphysical assumptions.²³ Jean-Paul Sartre’s emphasis on subjectivity and freedom, for example, is a precise articulation of this problem. Sartre remarks:

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse (Sartre 2007).²⁴

In Jahan’s statements, by contrast, there is no focus on the problematic of existence or essence. Instead, through feeling and sensing, he arrives at an instinctual anti-historical question-mark. This anti-historicity, that is, interrogating how God intervenes through absence, calls into question historicism’s stubborn grip on itself through the War on Terror. In other words, if secularity is repetition—the accumulative history of the secular as the iteration of particular discourses, institutions, rules of law, epistemologies, rationalities, methodologies, sensibilities, and specific practices of governance—and the War on Terror is its militant expression, then godforsakenness, interrupts this recurrence from within the surface of history itself. Godforsakenness for the *mu’min* (believers like Jahan and the Rohingya *ulama*) detours away from the philosophical problem of God’s existence into a perplexed sensing and feeling of how and why God as the Unseen (*ghayb*) generates world-destroying effects in times of divine calamity. Such an orientation challenges instrumental reductions of divine and human agency and remains inconclusive; even as His name is imprinted in the hearts (*qalb*) of believers, God remains unfamiliar, unavailable for instrumentalization. Thus, the disruption of secularity by godforsakenness, as demonstrated in Jahan’s statements, never fully renders this unfamiliarity into the familiar (White 1978).²⁵ In this hesitation and immanent refusal of knowability, godforsakenness breaks with Christian genealogy and secular ideology. God never makes himself known, let alone integrates himself in Man to make him open to crucifixion and transition. The political-theological shift from God to state, namely, the necessary historical step for humanitarianism as moral reason and governmental practice, is here refused (Asad 2015).²⁶ As much as he argues against God’s existence, Sartre’s atheist existentialism (contrary to Jahan’s anti-historicity), remains within the genealogy of a Christian sensibility, within the knowable, within

reason. God may not exist for Sartre, but the appearance of a fundamental freedom does, which is at the foundations of modern liberalism, as secularism veils its Christian traces (Anidjar 2014).²⁷ The Deobandi approach to godforsakenness, as articulated by Jahan, transitions from a political-mystical stillness expressed in the impossibility of language—where signs reveal themselves to be interpretations of other signs (Foucault 1998)²⁸—into a political theology of jihad, without having to rely on a metaphysics of freedom.

Jahan explains that while their interactions with the Rohingya in 2016 involved minimal speech, at night the Deobandi Islamists engaged in spirited analytical conversations on the possible causes and conditions of this divine catastrophe. A *khutba* (sermon) given by leading twentieth-century Islamic scholar Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi in the early 1960s at Rangoon's Surti Jamah Masjid soon became the basis of these conversations.²⁹ The text of the speech (in the original Urdu as well as Bengali translations) began to circulate widely in various madrasa networks. The core message from the *khutba* is clear in the following excerpt (in my translation):

Everything in this *duniya* (world) is *dhongshoshil* (destructible). Property, respect, everything will end one day. What will remain eternally is only Allah's name, *mehnat* (striving) in Allah's path, and active work and *qurbani* (sacrifice) for Allah's *din* (way of life) [...]. If you take time outside of your business and work to propagate and establish Islam, then Allah the Exalted will gift you with power in this country and paradise in the next life. But if you do not do so, then remember, you will not be able to even stay in this country. Not as a political figure, I am saying this through the light given to me by Allah as a *mu'min* (believer)—it will become impossible for you to stay in this country if you do not try with all your spirit to propagate and spread the *din*.

In their own analyses, Jahan and his Islamist companions not only agreed with Syed Nadwi's emphasis on Islamization at the base of society through *da'wa* (invitation to Islam), they also observed that the situation was exacerbated by the failures of jihad against the Burmese state. Jahan explained:

We were listening to Shaykh Nadwi's *khutba* over and over again during this time. He predicted the crisis (*shongkoi*) faced by the Rohingya in Myanmar many years ago. But I also spoke to other *ulama* during this time who had participated in jihad against the Burmese state. They told me that many of the traveling *mujahidin* from Bangladesh were detained by the Burmese security because corrupt elements in the Rohingya had collaborated with Burmese intelligence. Some of our *ulama* blame the failures of the jihad on this moral corruption. Shaykh Nadwi was right, the society at large needed *da'wa*, but under the new circumstances there was no alternative to armed jihad. And, a real breakthrough would be possible if the Rohingya with the help of other Muslims had an ongoing successful jihad without any moral deviance.

In a different context, anthropologist Cabeiri Robinson shows how processes and transformations in the real, social world produce jihad in the concrete sense. She calls this "the social production of jihad" (Robinson 2013). Jahan's emphasis reverses Robinson's point. Jihad becomes an objectively necessary ethical instrument for the construction of new social relations, resulting in the jihadi production of the social. In this sense, jihad is ontologically prior to the social, because Rohingya militancy fights against those social conditions; conducting jihad is an immanent breaking-with and displacing of the social for a new social. Jahan's emphasis on the simultaneity of *da'wa* and jihad emerges from an anti-historical aspiration to exceed the immanence of history, and disarticulates and reconfigures freedom itself. In other words, jihad in this specific discourse is the name of a dynamic transgression of the

present. It creates the ground for the *umma* as a single body composed of migrants (*mubajirin*) and helpers (*ansar*) as it receives itself to exceed itself.

In the autumn of 2017, when the refugee camps were established, Jahan and other Islamic workers not only carried and distributed food and donated money and other essentials, they also built twelve mosques, installed thirteen tube-well water pumps, and some toilets. Jahan says: “Our main objective this time was to build *masajid* [mosques], and to organize money to pay salaries for permanent imams and teachers.” At the time, Jahan did not realize that there would be government intervention soon. The months September through November now feel distant. Those three months allowed for unrestricted opportunities to engage in Islamic activity. By wintertime, the regime had restricted their efforts, only allowing licensed NGOs to work in the camps. The government gave orders to destroy many of the mosques. While they gave practical justifications for such decisions, the *ulama* suspect that this was a strategic security measure of de-Islamizing the camps. Jahan confirms:

In the last four years, there has been a decrease in Islamic activity for the Rohingya. In the past, Islamists used to visit the camps to teach the Qur’an and Hadith to give them *shantona* [relief], but that is not possible anymore. Now, most of the work is done by government-supported NGOs.

While Jahan did not directly condemn the NGOs, he indicated their limitations in the Islamic context. He stated that the NGOs would not know how to help the Rohingya with their own self-preservation because they would look at them simply as “refugees.” To an anthropologist well-aware of critiques of liberal-secular humanitarianism (e.g., Fassin 2012; Robinson 2013; Asad 2015; Mittermaier 2019; Iqbal 2022a), this was an ideal point in our conversation where I felt compelled to press Jahan to explain more and to give an example of how the Rohingya were more than refugees. Instead of deconstructing humanitarianism as having a western genealogy, Jahan utilized Islamic vocabulary and concepts to make his point. “The Rohingya made *hijrat* to Bangladesh. There were many mid-level and senior *ulama* among them who had classical knowledge. This knowledge could have been used for their own welfare, to help them stand up with dignity again,” he said. I asked him if he had the opportunity to meet with the Rohingya *ulama*. Jahan replied:

At our madrasa, I read a book on Arabic linguistics [*bhashatotto*]. The book was written in Urdu. The author was a Rohingya *alim*. Our madrasa historically had a connection with the training of the Rohingya in classical Islamic education. When we went to the camps, we heard that a renowned *alim* was among the refugees. I asked for his name, and they said: Maulana Azam. I realized then that he is the author of the linguistics book I studied in my *Daurae-badith* program. I met him at the camp. We spoke in Arabic.

I asked: “Why did you speak in Arabic? You lived in Chittagong for so long. Your *chatgaiyya* [the regional dialect] is similar to the Rohingya language, right? You could have also spoken to him in Urdu. Why Arabic?”

Jahan paused, and then tried to explain:

There are several dialects in Chittagong depending on specific regions, and I could not catch the Rohingya dialect that well. I don’t know why we did not speak in Urdu though. We spoke in Arabic. It happened spontaneously.

The first encounter between Jahan and Maulana Azam was not ideal. The *talib-ul-'ilm* (student of religious knowledge) did not meet the author in a seminar or a conference. The *talib* is active in the world; he translates the verses of the Qur'an into his concrete life; his *qalb* (heart), affected by the stories of Rohingya suffering, initiates a step of humility—a need to receive himself as an ordinary believer in a divine order who has to find himself, realizing that he can grasp himself precisely when the world that makes him disintegrate. It is in these moments of divine tribulation, as he witnesses history in fragments as broken pieces, that he encounters the Real through hospitality. The *maulana* arrives within the appearance of death and destitution. He arrives within those three to four months before government restrictions, when the *umma* takes care of itself. He arrives after making *hijrat*. The *talib* receives him, listens to him, pays attention to him, inquires about his well-being—about the condition of his soul. Jahan does not yet know that the *maulana* is the author from whom he had already learned. Someone in the camp mentions the senior *alim*'s name: Maulana Azam! Jahan remembers. Jahan becomes curious. He is concerned in an affectionate way. He wants to make sure the *maulana* is unharmed. He is also anxious. The *maulana*'s book taught him Arabic linguistics, opened up a new language with a grammar to decipher a different world. That author, whose book he read in the early years of the *Daurae Hadith* program,³⁰ is present in front of him, in the flesh but with a broken heart, across from the killing fields of the Burmese state.

Jahan's body stiffens. He is anxious.³¹ It is a strange circumstance for a first meeting with an *alim*-author who was formative in his Islamic learning. But there is a second kind of anxiety that is much more elemental and fundamental. This other anxiety—residing outside of the problem of recognition and interiority—initiates a feeling of groundlessness. In the border regions, cartographies reveal themselves as apparitions and states appear to lose stability. The *talib* and the *maulana* find themselves elsewhere, as if in another geography. This elsewhere has a regionality outside of known regions. There is a disruption of the obviousness (Heidegger 1962) of a secular spatiality³²—in which the condition of not-being-at-home is not essentially about the absence of community, or exclusion from a citizen-state, or the overall failure to find sovereignty, but rather reveals itself to be a primordial condition. Absence and exclusion in the given order, in the immediate and concrete deathworld, work as the entry point for a speculation on absolute absence, resulting in a foundational anxiety.

As words are uttered and language mediates speech, both the *talib* and the *maulana* refuse their mother tongue. Jahan speaks in broken Arabic, and the *maulana* responds in perfect *fus'ba* (Qur'anic Arabic).³³ When I asked Jahan why he spoke in Arabic, he did not have a precise answer. He paused. This pause before utterance is the distance between the two forms of anxiety—the nervousness with which Jahan made sense of the fact that the author he read had made *hijrat* and arrived, and the more fundamental anxiety that shakes the very ground of the world Jahan inhabits. The silence and pause between the two forms of anxiety and between speech acts respectively demonstrate the psychic and enunciative effects of movement without destination.

Even though his reasoning appeared pragmatic at first, Jahan's utterances and sentences expressed the same kind of groundlessness and an immanent anxiety. The space, the camps, and that specific region were simultaneously a place and a non-place.³⁴ It is home, it is not home. It is home precisely because it is not home. It is an attempt to move away from ruin, from gunfire. And in language as well, in Jahan and the *maulana*'s refusal of regional languages in favor of Qur'anic Arabic, there is the momentary emergence of an elsewhere, in which there is a dwelling without permanence.

Jahan's encounter with Maulana Azam is not primarily between a reader and an author. It is not just a meeting between a *maulana* and a *talib*. And even though they meet each other unexpectedly in the midst of devastation, it is not an encounter between a refugee and a humanitarian worker. The essence of their first meeting is not the tragedy of a humanitarian catastrophe. What the given circumstances make clear is that there is in fact a divine responsibility³⁵—a kind of caring-for that obligates Jahan towards the *maulana* long before their actual encounter in the refugee camps, before the first time reading his book on Arabic grammar in his madrasa classroom, and before even his first imagination of what it might mean to meet him one day—whether in dreams or as they have met in the border regions between Rakhine and Cox's Bazar, in the corridor of the War on Terror.

Jahan began a conversation with Maulana Azam about the condition of the Rohingya in Myanmar. The *maulana's* response quickly shifted from the personal (biographical) to the political, as he shared his political-theological observations. Jahan explains:

Maulana Azam shared his personal memory of Chittagong. He studied in Chittagong. He inquired about one of his *alim* friends from the past. I asked him about the Rohingya situation, and asked what he thought was the root cause of this massive catastrophe [*boro shongkoŋ*]. Maulana Azam recited the famous *ayat* from Surah Ra'd: 'Indeed, Allah would never change a people's state of favor until they change their own state of faith. And if it is Allah's Will to torment a people, it can never be averted, nor can they find a protector other than Him.' I asked him how this *ayat* applies to his community. The *maulana* explained: "Our problem is that we keep thinking about OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation] funds and how they will help us. This kind of thinking is inside our people. The Burmese authorities commanded us to leave. And, now we are here. There is no thinking of resistance [*protibader kono chinta nai*]. Since the '80s, the Rohingya have assured themselves by thinking that if anything happens, we will move to Bangladesh. People from the Rohingya nation are spread out in different parts of the world. They left their home and their heritage."

A second *alim*, Maulana Abdullah, a scholar who wrote in Urdu and Arabic about the Prophet's family and heritage, was standing next to Maulana Azam. He chimed in and provided nuance to the conversation:

Yes, it is true that the resistance has been unsuccessful, but you have to remember that the Rohingya are not targets only because they are Muslim. There are other Muslims in Rangoon. The Myanmar society is fine with them. Those Muslims are established there. They have recognition and are respected. The Rohingya are looked at as a different *jaat* (nation or race), as poor, and as later immigrants to Burma. They are treated as foreigners. Some of the non-Rohingya Muslims in Rangoon also hate us.

Maulana Abdullah's valuable insights add the question of subalternity³⁶ to Maulana Azam's Qur'anic assessments and ethico-political frustration. The two articulations enhance each other. The concern over the status of faith among the Rohingya becomes less of a moral concern when their subaltern condition is identified. While Mahmood Mamdani's (2004) contextualization of the production of "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims" in the political-historical post-9/11 world is relevant here,³⁷ the question of the Rohingya exceeds the positionality of "the bad Muslim." The Rohingya are enemy combatants as "bad Muslims" within the contingencies of the War on Terror, of course, but they are also what the political cannot register as subjects, and in this sense, they haunt the secular present

from an unknown region. They arrive, they remain silent, they disappear. Or, they arrive, they find a temporary home in divine language as they narrate a jihad from the future, and then disappear.

The abstract question of human nature is not at the surface in interactions between the Rohingya and the Islamists at the border region. But “what it is that makes us who we are” remains as a curiosity, a question mark, an object of inquisitiveness that emerges in the midst of devastation. Islamic classifications and categories initiating practices of silence, speech, and analysis explode conventional philosophical binaries of essence/existence, determination/free will, and despair/agency. Their practice offers a conceptual universe, a particular orientation (*abl al-qibla*), an ethical disposition, and an ontological positioning. In the history of the War on Terror, this orientation, instead of placing the transcendent in opposition to the immanent, produces political-spiritual disclosure as well as a form of psychoaffective reflexivity within divine calamity. You glimpse the endless horizon, an eternal journey through the window, through a small crack in a cell. Then you notice that this window is a looking-glass, a mirror, reflecting back onto the viewer. An endless desert breaks through the cell behind him, expanding space. In the immanent place of wretchedness, where one feels damned, godforsakenness is the condition of possibility of what flickers, what asks questions; a situation in which divine tribulation speaks to itself for itself.

In the most immediate sense, godforsakenness as wretchedness is a condition within history, inside time, and within secular space. In another sense, however, the condition of being damned—in which Man finds himself alone with time, or alone with himself without time—is a primordial mode of eternal fall from the heavens, a permanent situation of being thrown into the world in a state of disorder.

God—the Merciful—remains on his throne.

By tracing the pause between speech and language, the stillness of believers in states of despair, the immanent unfolding of a momentary space outside and in-between given cartographies of nation-states, this ethnographic meditation has dwelled on the fundamental anxiety beneath movements that trouble the narrative arc of secular historicism.³⁸ The conversations between Jahan and the Rohingya *ulama* reflect a fragment of a global Deobandi discursive tradition. By re-historicizing classical Islamic stories of the *ansar* (helpers) and the *muhajir* (emigrants), from the Prophet’s Medina to the present, such a discourse calls into question the assumptive logics of secular humanitarianism and displaces categories of humanitarian “volunteers” and “refugees.” As the essay discovers heterogenous observations in the encounters between Rohingya *ulama* and Deobandi practitioners—on moral self-criticism, political-theological critiques of the modern War on Terror states, and the possibility of anti-secular geographies—it finds coherence in contemporary Islamism. Working itself out in movement within echoes of collective recitations in praise of God (*dhiker*) as it confronts displacement and calamity, the essay withdraws from this-worldly resolution, and refrains from articulating a politically stable rhetoric as divine texts and prophetic dreams in the classical tradition haunt the future of extinguished time.

Jahan’s affirmation, “They [the Rohingya] are *muhajir*, we are *ansar*,” as he speculates on the condition of godforsakenness with extraordinary poise, can be (mis)read as an yearning to break history open in the present or as fetishized nostalgia for an ideal self-valorized community, but such statements in

their sentiment explore in a state of perplexity what it means to obey the impossible in the utter absence of origins and grounds.

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- 1 Theodor W. Adorno's notion of "damaged life" is influential here, though it is important to note that attention to "the damaged body of the *umma*" is less focused on what it means to experience a damaged life per se and rather on what it means to always already be in a deathworld as that part of the *umma* that is specifically targeted as the figure of the terrorist and enemy combatant. See, Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978).
 - 2 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970 [1936]), 108-9.
 - 3 Allen Feldman, *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
 - 4 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, vol. 4 1938-1940*, ed. H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003); cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of World History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001) and Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin Classics, 1993).
 - 5 Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 52-77.
 - 6 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
 - 7 Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
 - 8 Amira Mittermaier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).
 - 9 Dider Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).
 - 10 Basit Kareem Iqbal, "Economy of Tribulation: Translating Humanitarianism for an Islamic Counterpublic," *Muslim World* 112 (Winter 2022a): 33-56.
 - 11 As Cabeiri Robinson writes, "Kashmiri jihādīs declared a temporary stop to the armed activities in order to engage in the labor of relief work. Those whom I met in the relief operations described their involvement in the relief work as a part of their practice of jihād—a practice they called 'humanitarian jihād.'" See, Cabeiri deBergh Robinson, *Body of Victim, Body of Warrior Refugee Families and the Making of Kashmiri Jihadists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
 - 12 Narrated by al-Bara bin Azib (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3925). It is important to note that in some English translations instead of "boys and girls" it is said "even slaves" or "even slave girls" greeted the Prophet in joy. I contacted Arif Rabbani, an Islamic practitioner with expertise in Hadith studies. He explains: "The Arabic word *al-īmā* is referred to as *mamlūkah* (being owned) in all the major explanation (*sharḥ*) works of *Sahih al-Bukhārī*. The same meaning can also be found in the classical Arabic dictionaries. However, the hadith scholar al-Bayhaqī employed the word *juwārin* in his *Dala'il-un-Nubumwab* in the same context, which may refer to both girls and slave girls."
 - 13 "Obey Allah and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, or you would be discouraged and weakened. Persevere! Surely Allah is with those who persevere" (Q. 8:46).

- ¹⁴ Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “I wish I could meet my brothers.” The Prophet’s companions said, “Are we not your brothers?” The Prophet said, “You are my companions, but my brothers are those who have faith in me although they never saw me” (Musnad Ahmad, no. 12169).
- ¹⁵ Frank Wilderson mobilizes the term aphasia in describing the condition of blackness and social death. I do not substitute what takes place in the subjugation of blackness with the *zulm* (oppression) experienced by the Rohingya. Rather, theological aphasia, in the context of the Rohingya/Islamist encounter, emerges materially through the confrontation of the secularizing disciplinary structures of the War on Terror against Islamic orthodox traditions. Its operations are different from political aphasia, even if the term helpfully names a “condition of non-enunciation”. See: Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents,” *Intensions Journal* 5 (2011).
- ¹⁶ See Kierkegaard (1985) for “leap of faith.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay (London: Penguin Classics, 1985). I thought of the following hadith as well: “Wondrous is the affair of the believer, for there is good for him in every matter; and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If he is happy, then he thanks Allah and thus there is good for him; and if he is harmed, then he shows patience and thus there is good for him” (*Sabih Muslim* 2999).
- ¹⁷ This is considered to be one of the most credible and authentic collections of *hadith*—sayings and deeds of the Prophet (peace be upon him).
- ¹⁸ Arif Rabbani clarified that the first translation for *ḥattá faraghat min ḥajatihā* (“until she got what she needed”) is literal, and the second translation (“until she was able to express herself to her heart’s content”) is more interpretative within the context of the *ḥadīth*.
- ¹⁹ See Tanzeen Rashed Doha, “Brokenheartedness,” *Political Theology* 23, no. 6 (2022): 594-609, footnote 30: “*Umma* is often translated as the Muslim community, but in my understanding *umma* exceeds positivist and communitarian accounts of a group identity. This exceeding of “community” (especially as given in the history of liberal political philosophy) is the true potential of *umma*. It constantly exceeds and expands itself as it becomes itself, and therefore, it lacks the boundedness of identitarian conventions.”
- ²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012 [1945]).
- ²¹ Al-Nu‘man ibn Bashir reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6011).
- ²² It was narrated from Abu Hurairah that the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said: “Islam began as something strange and will go back to being strange, so glad tidings to the strangers” (Sunan Ibn Mājah, no. 3986).
- ²³ Heidegger distances himself from Sartre and other existentialists: “Existentialism says existence precedes essence. In this statement he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which, from Plato’s time on, has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it, he stays with metaphysics, in oblivion of the truth of Being” (Heidegger 1976: 232). Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- ²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
- ²⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
- ²⁶ Talal Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (2015): 390-427.
- ²⁷ Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

- 28 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, vol. 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 269-78.
- 29 This article does not claim to represent Syed Nadwi's views in a general sense. Rather, through an ethnographic focus the article sheds lights on the emergence of a discourse on the ground among the *ulama* and Islamist helpers in the aftermath of the Rohingya crisis in which this specific *khutba* (sermon) by Nadwi became central.
- 30 Daurae Hadith is a curriculum that involves the detailed study of 8 major compilations of Sunni Hadith collections. The program's length can vary from 6 to 18 years. A student receives recognition as an *alim* (scholar) after the completion of this curriculum. The curriculum has been recently recognized by the government as equivalent to a Master's degree in Islamic Studies. On the broader Deobandi movement, see for example Brannon Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).
- 31 I am not using anxiety in a Freudian sense, though there are questions of identification and recognition in this elaboration as well.
- 32 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Basil Blackwell, 1962 [1927]).
- 33 It is important to note that *fus'ha* is often translated as "Modern Standard Arabic," but it has a genealogy in the Qur'an as the foundational text that inspired the language's standardization. Tomasz Kamusella (2017) writes: "Standard Arabic is directly derived from the language of the Quran. The Arabic language of the holy book of Islam is seen as the prescriptive benchmark of correctness for the use and standardization of Arabic" (Kamusella 2017: 117). See, Tomasz Kamusella, "The Arabic Language: A Latin of Modernity?" *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 11, no. 2 (2017): 117-145). In my ethnographic context, for my interlocutors, *fus'ha* is treated as Quranic Arabic, signifying a contemporary foundationalist politics of language within Islamism. In fact, for Jahan and Maulana Azam, the speaking of *fus'ha* is not just about the Arabic itself, but also manners of speaking strategies that involves continuous reference to the Prophet's sayings (*hadith*) and biography (*seerah*). In other words, it is treated as divine language originating in the Qur'an, which then also for the revival of the Prophetic way references the *hadith* and the *seerah*, therefore turning it into an Islamist rhetorical tactic of language.
- 34 Marc Augé argues that under "super modernity" there is an explosion of spaces that are non-places (e.g., airports, hotels, computers, etc.) which impact our perception: Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2009). While for Augé, non-places are openings in space that are produced through excessive information, I suggest that secular sociality restricts space and turns it into a specific experience, and that Islamist interventions through movement (*hijrat*) and language create non-places within a restrictive cartographic history of secular states.
- 35 Emmanuel Levinas writes: "Prior to consciousness and choice, before the creature collects himself in present and representation to make himself essence, man approaches man. He is stitched of responsibilities. Through them, he lacerates essence. It is not a matter of the subject assuming responsibilities or avoiding responsibilities, not a subject constituted, posed in itself and for itself like a free identity. It is a matter of the subjectivity of the subject, as non-indifference to others in limitless responsibility, limitless because it is not measured by commitments going back to assumption and refusal of responsibilities" (Levinas 2003 [1972], 67). Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. N. Poller, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003 [1972]). While I agree with Levinas here, it is important to note that his support for Zionism and his failure to condemn Israel for the Sabra and Shatila massacres indicate for me not just a failure of the philosopher in living up to the expectations of his own ethical theory, but rather the inconsistency of the theory itself (see Michael L. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Unlike Levinas's infinite responsibility, which entails a (Jewish) nationalism, the divine responsibility I speak of here is critical of both nation-state cartographies and identitarian communities.

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- ³⁶ Gayatri Spivak (2017) emphasizes the subaltern condition of the Rohingya as she explains the difference between being stateless and being a migrant. To be stateless is to not be registered in the civil society, where even if the Rohingya are to speak, the civil society cannot hear them. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rohingya Issue in a Global Context,” Cornell University, October 30, 2017, <https://www.cornell.edu/video/gayatri-spivak-rohingya-issue-global-context>. Of course, my point here is to describe the interactions between the Rohingya and the Bangladeshi Islamists in 2016 and 2017 in which encounters of silence and language were mediated within a specific discursive tradition of Islam outside of civil society. In other words, when the Rohingya speak through the sign-system of Islam, then the Deobandi traditionists in Bangladesh who share that same sign-system can hear them.
- ³⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2004).
- ³⁸ Here I am engaging Koselleck (1988) and Iqbal (2022b) to an extent, although my focus in this essay—whether discussing the physical movement of the Rohingya and the Bangladeshi Islamists, or the fundamental anxiety experienced by Jahan as he encounters a Rohingya *alim*—is less about the (in)validity of analytic categories like “crisis,” “critique,” or “historicism” than about the pauses, withdrawals, ruptures, and gaps within the dynamic of modern history’s formation of itself as the secular. Islam is the most prominent name signifying such a phenomenon. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988); Basit Kareem Iqbal, “Reprising Islamic Political Theology: Genre and the Time of Tribulation,” *Political Theology* 23, no. 6 (2022b): 525-42.