

Barack's Nobel: A Symbolic Gesture of Hope to the World's Youth

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The Huffington Post
October 10, 2009

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Barack Obama is a symbolic gesture to youth all over the developing world who have a new hero, our symbol.

Here is an example. In 2007, with support from the National Science Foundation and Department of Defense, I researched attitudes related to political violence among youth in the tumbledown neighborhood of Jemaa Mezuak in Tetuan, Morocco. The Mezuak had provided 5 of the 7 young men who blew themselves up when cornered by Spanish police for their role in the 2004 Madrid train bombing, as well as several others who had volunteered for suicide missions in Iraq.

One of the questions I asked was, "Who's your hero? Who do you want to grow up to be like?" Number one was a soccer star, number two the fictional film character "The Terminator" (with no awareness of any relation to the present governor of California) and number three, Osama bin Laden.

But in mid-November 2008, when I repeated the survey, Obama had surpassed Osama as the youths' top political role model. Ali, the deeply religious owner of Mezuak's "Cyprus Barbershop," who was following the progress of the survey, and had known and tended the Madrid plotters and Iraqi volunteers since their boyhood, commented:

Hope isn't always reality. The Middle East is a rose, a flower so sweet that no bees can resist it for their honey. Bees, you know, have to work together, and Obama must as well. That's the way of the world (tariq al-'alam).

"But people can change things," I protested. And a dictum dawned on me whose originator I have forgotten: "The only true law of history is the law of surprises," I blurted. The barber of boys who would kill for a cause — or be Barack Obamas — lifted his eyebrows and then his whole face to sky, stroked his beard and smiled: "Maybe someday, but not today." Perhaps the ability to simply inspire that hope now indeed merits a Nobel.