Opinion: When Muslims admired the West and were admired back

By Nile Green

Is it right to talk about friendship in a time of hatred? More specifically, is it right to consider Muslim affection for the West when, from Boston to Paris to perhaps San Bernardino, Muslims appear to be saying we hate you?

Security analysts have looked at the social profiles of the terrorists in London, Madrid, Paris, and Boston, and there is no clear pattern of poverty, no pattern of poor education, no pattern of training in terror camps. But it's clear to me, as a historian, that what the murderers have in common is a narrative.

It is a story they share in which the West has always oppressed Muslims, in which the West is inherently against Muslims. I've traveled to the Muslim world every year for 25 years, and have heard that narrative a thousand times. Like most acts of political violence—from Nazism in the 1930s to Serbian nationalism in the 1990s—Islamist violence claims justification through stories of oppression.

It wasn't always that way. In my research on the earliest Muslim encounters with the West, I discovered a journal written in Persian by a young student who, with five fellow Iranians, came to the London in the early 1800s. The diary reveals that Muslims certainly lived peaceably in the West in the past—they admired the London of Jane Austen, and moreover, were admired there in return. Their story offers a counter-narrative to the founding myth of Muslim (and non-Muslim) neo-cons that Islam and the West are irreconcilable.

Finding Mirza Salih's diary felt like unearthing a lost testament to coexistence.

Salih came to England with the others to learn the advanced sciences—engineering, medicine, and chemistry. He wanted to bring knowledge back to his home country. At the time, Iran was trying to defend itself from invading Russians. Reaching London in the fall of 1815, Salih and his fellow students first struggled to make sense of the culture. Women went unveiled and mixed freely with men; moreover, women received education and wrote books that men both read and admired.

Through their own curiosity and the good will of their hosts, the young Muslims came to understand, and admire, this strange land – with not a single mosque in the whole country. Rather than regarding the Christians as their enemies, the students saw them as people from whom they might learn, morally and politically, as well as scientifically.

One of the most moving scenes in the diary occurred when the students made a kind of feminist pilgrimage to pay respect to the novelist and social reformer Hannah More, the high-minded rival of Jane Austen. As the author of numerous books—some of them huge bestsellers—she seemed the epitome of the England that Salih called the vilayat-i azadi, or "land of freedom." The students praised her learning and library; she gave them signed copies of her books, which they promised to print when they returned home.

On another occasion, they passionately discussed the parallels between Christianity and Islam with the Unitarian minister Lant Carpenter, whom they begged to found a Sunday School for the poor children of his parish. They saw the value of a Christian education and of Christian values. England's charity schools were one of the things that most impressed Salih.

This year we've been bombarded by stories about people killed in the name of Islam. Even I have personal stories to share

about the violence I witnessed across the Muslim world, from Morocco to Yemen and Afghanistan. But there are enough books about that. There also need to be books about the friendships that are the other half of the historical record. Salih's story can reassure Westerners that Muslims are not inherently opposed to their way of life; and it can show Muslims how their learned forebears admired and respected Western norms. As a historian, all I can hope to do is show how such coexistence was, and still is, possible.

Nile Green is professor of history at UCLA and founding director of the UCLA Program on Central Asia. He is the author of "The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen's London" and has written numerous books on the history of Islam.