

## Islamophobia: A Call to Confronting a Creeping Disease

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*"The war on terror has not contributed so far to isolating the terrorists, but seems to have led to increasing anti-American sentiments. The Bush administration has been ill-advised by individuals and groups driven by anti-Islam agenda that made an already difficult war even more complicated."*

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President Bush reacting to the unearthing of the alleged bombing plot over the Atlantic August 10 remarked: "This nation is at war with Islamic fascists who will use any means to destroy those of us who love freedom, to hurt our nation."

On Aug. 7, during a press conference from his ranch in Texas, he said terrorists "try to spread their jihadist message - a message I call ... Islamic radicalism, Islamic fascism". A moment later, he said "Islamofascism" was an "ideology that is real and profound". White House spokesman Tony Snow told the "Atlanta Journal-Constitution" Aug. 11 that the president will continue to use the phrase.

This is not the first time that Bush and members of his Administration have used this deliberate coupling of Islam with evil ideologies or actions, such as fascism or terrorism. Bush referred to "Islamofascism" in his address to the National Endowment for Democracy, Oct. 6, 2005. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) addressing Christians United for Israel (CUFI) held their first Washington-Israel Summit in Washington D.C., July 2006, declaring "Islamic fascism is a mosaic..." Media baron Rupert Murdoch pontificated in Sydney, Australia June 26, 2006: "You have to be careful about Muslims who have a very strong, in many ways a fine, but very strong religion which supercedes any sense of nationalism wherever they go."

The term is coined, and was initially used, by radical Zionist pundits and their allies in the Far Right, and is intended to drive a wedge between Western and Muslim communities. The fact that it is already being used by President Bush and his top lieutenant underscore the extent to which Islamophobia is gradually creeping into public discourse.

Blaming Islam and Muslims for the rise of terrorism that threatens the U.S. and the West is at the heart of the strategy developed by individuals and groups whose systemic attacks on Islam and Muslims, borne out of either ignorance or hatred, constitute the recent and painful reality : Islamophobia.

Islamophobia reflects an attitude and a posture normally associated with the Far Right, but that has been creeping slowly to the center of political debate. Islam and Muslims are separated out from the citizenry and increasingly presented as a problem to be addressed and a question to be tackled. The last time a world religion was considered a problem and a question was in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Then, the “Jewish Question” was widely debated by both the enlightened and bigots among European thinkers.

Islamophobia is a strategic weapon in the campaign to marginalize Muslim Americans by ideological extremists and paranoid bigots. On one level, Islamophobia stems from ignorance, deception, and misrepresentation. On a deeper level, however, it stems from a very basic human instinct to dominate, exploit, and abuse, combined with a scrupulous attitude that refuse to recognize moral principles and boundaries. While Islamophobia has existed since centuries, perhaps the term became public in Europe in the 1990s. Today, some are recognizing this creeping disease may even be prompted to confront it. In 2001, some concerned Britons formed The Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR; [www.fairuk.org/intro.htm](http://www.fairuk.org/intro.htm)); and in Dec. 2004, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan hosted a seminar on “Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding”.

The Council of Europe defines Islamophobia as “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them”. Matti Bunzl, Associate Professor Department of Anthropology University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, in his paper “Between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Some thoughts on the new Europe” (“American Ethnologist” 32(4): 499-508) argues: “Whereas traditional anti-Semitism has run its historical course with the supersession of the nation-state, Islamophobia threatens to become the defining condition of the new Europe.” In Britain, the term “Islamophobia” was not used in government policy until 1997, when the race relations think tank Runnymede Trust published the report “*Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All.*” [1] In a section entitled *The Nature of Islamophobia*, the report itemizes eight features that Runnymede attributed to Islamophobia:

- Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
- Islam is seen as separate and “other”. It does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them.
- Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist.
- Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a Clash of Civilizations [an idea enunciated by Prof. Samuel P. Huntington, with the publication of his book, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” Simon & Schuster; 1998].
- Islam is seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage.
- Criticisms made of 'the West' by Islam are rejected out of hand.
- Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.

- Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal.

The twentieth century witnessed great struggles all over the world to overcome bigotry and racism, and to create more open and inclusive societies in which different races, ethnicities, and religions live side-by-side and cooperate for the betterment of society. After many devastating tragedies and wars, including two world wars that wiped out more than 80 million people, a holocaust, and a long civil rights struggle, chauvinism, racism, and bigotry were finally condemned, though not totally rejected. By the mid-twentieth century, the concept that individuals must be treated on the basis of their individual characters and actions, and that no individual or group should be targeted on the basis of religious, ethnic, racial, or national affiliations became widely accepted.

Therefore, the recent efforts that aim at presenting Islam as a challenge and Muslims who practice their faith as a problem are both disheartening and disquieting. They represent a dangerous move to reverse human progress and return to the age of outright racism and intolerance. This renewed focus on Islam as a problem has been justified by invoking security concerns. Many voices, particularly within the U.S. policymaking community, either out of ignorance or prejudice, decided to place the blame for terrorism squarely at the door of Islam. The decision to ignore complex and painful realities that give rise to discord and tension between Western and Muslim countries, and to blame it all on a major world religion and its practitioners, will only exacerbate an already dire situation. This exercise in self-delusion can only distract us from confronting the real sources of the concerns on both sides and delay the efforts to bring forth a permanent and lasting solution. Meanwhile, tremendous resources are wasted, and the credibility and prestige of the United States are being undermined.

The failure to understand the profound changes taking place in the Muslim world is not simply a matter of ignorance and lack of insight into Muslim cultures, but a reflection of the bewildering stubbornness of neoconservative analysts in the U.S. and Europe, and their comfort in employing the archaic Orientalist attitudes and tools to analyze relationships between the West and the Muslim world. Muslims are not awarded the dignity of equal human beings with intrinsic values and legitimate concerns, but are often presented as thoughtless and violent masses incapable of articulating their conditions and solving their problems. Consequently, no effort is made to initiate dialogue and exchange, and all energy is focused on devising strategies for the manipulation and control of the Muslim world.

Many self-proclaimed experts on Islam continue to behave as if Islam and Muslims are a distant part of reality and an external problem to address, rather than partners for dealing with common problems and challenges. An increasing number of Muslims are proud Americans, serving American society as professors, businessmen, medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, sports stars, firefighters, police officers, and teachers. Many experts in Middle East and Islamic Studies departments have their ancestral roots in Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures. Many Muslim Americans are active in the debate on how best to bridge the divide, or at least change the perceptions of a divide, between the Muslim world and the West.

## **The Far Right**

In Islamophobia, the Extreme Right has finally found a clever way to arrest America's march toward asserting its foundational principles of equality, religious freedom, and the rule of law. Their strategy is to transform the war on terror into a war against Islam and use security needs to subvert constitutional protections. The Extreme Right draws its ranks from the fringes of the Christian Right and the neoconservatives, particularly those who see in the indigenization of Islam and the presence of authentic Muslim voices in the U.S. a direct threat to their ability to manipulate the public and promote their narrow religious and foreign policy agendas. The 9/11/2001 tragedy has given a new impetus to the campaign against Islam and Muslims, as the Far Right discovered that the climate of heightened fear and uncertainty provides an exceptional opportunity to advance their bigoted and racist agenda under the guise of patriotism. They have focused in the last four years on turning Islam into an enemy. In their efforts to demonize Islam and Muslims, they have persistently advanced two themes: (1) that Islam is intolerant, violent, and anti-western, and must not, therefore, be allowed a legitimate place in American society, and (2) that Muslim Americans who assert their Islamic identity, and express positive views of Islam cannot be trusted, and must be chastised and marginalized.

Although their fanatical views were initially rejected by mainstream America, the post-9/11 environment of confusion and fear provided them with a unique opportunity to advance their racist agenda. Their views and arguments have steadily gained more receptive ears among key agencies and leaders in the Bush administration. Not only have they succeeded in creating doubts in the White House and the Congress about mainstream Muslim American organizations and leaders, but they, evidently, have succeeded in injecting their language into the political discourse of public institutions and government agencies. Senior administration figures have moved from calling the current war against groups involved in indiscriminate killing of civilians a war on "terrorism" to a war on "Islamic terrorism," "Islamist terrorism," and "radical Islam." Most recently, top leaders in the Bush administration, including George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld have accepted the argument, popular among the Extreme Right that the war on terror aims at preventing Muslim extremists from establishing an "Islamic Caliphate" and an "Islamic Empire."

Have the Extreme Right succeeded in pushing their extremist views on Islam and Muslim into mainstream political discourse? Are those who want to turn the war on terror into a war on Islam getting the ears of government agencies and political leaders? And what can we do to expose the Extreme Right's deceptions and bring peace to a world that continues to drift toward turmoil and upheaval?

### **Demonizing Islam**

Ever since George Bush, rushing to defuse the post 9/11 tension, described Islam as "a religion of peace," the Far Right sprung to action to challenge the Administration's position and to generate ill-will toward Islam and Muslims in the U.S. and Europe. The anti-Islam fanatics have been working hard to demonize Islam and marginalize Muslim Americans. Using their propaganda machinery, and occasionally likeminded individuals in key governmental agencies, the Extreme Right have been able to confuse the public about Islam and Muslims, by using half-truth, innuendo, and sheer fabrications and lies.

Their tactics of confusing the public, painting all Muslims as potential terrorists, and presenting Islam as the source of hate and violence have brought them limited successes, including profiling of Muslims in airports, smearing the good name of mainstream Muslim American organizations, and intimidating Muslim leaders and activists through repeated interviews by security agencies. The anti-Islam fanatics have made it known that they are not happy with their limited success, and continue to drive at a complete crackdown by law enforcement agencies on all forms of Muslim organizations. They seem to have made a breakthrough if a recent report by Paul Perry, an anti-Islam writer, turns to be correct. Perry, the author of "Infiltration: How Muslim Spies and Subversives have Penetrated Washington" (Nelson Current; 2005), reported that a Pentagon's intelligence agency, the Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA), has embarked on a project to understand Islam by studying the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad (ITALICS *salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*). Citing an internal document allegedly obtained from CIFA, Perry contends that the CIFA document "notes that unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam advocates expansion by force. The final command of jihad, as revealed to Muhammad in the Qur'an, is to conquer the world in the name of Islam. The defense briefing adds that Islam is also unique in classifying unbelievers as "standing enemies against whom it is legitimate to wage war.

"Muhammad's behaviors today would be defined as radical," Perry quotes the document, "and Muslims today are commanded by their 'militant' holy book to follow his example. It adds: Western leaders can no longer afford to overlook the 'cult characteristics of Islam.'"

Perry further contends that the CIFA document "ties Muslim charity to war. Zakat, the alms-giving pillar of Islam, is described in the briefing as 'an asymmetrical war-fighting funding mechanism,' which in English translates to: combat support under the guise of tithing."

It is shocking to learn that a public agency can sink to this level unless it is fed by the anti-Islam campaign. While Perry's words cannot be trusted, Americans worried about abuse of public agencies for turning the war on terror into a war on Islam cannot afford to take chances. The Extreme Right has already succeeded in persuading the Bush administration to appoint a war monger to the United State Institute of Peace (USIP), and it took a great effort to make the divisive agenda of Daniel Pipes clear to the USIP board, leading to his demise as a USIP director.

### **Cloaked Racism**

The events that shook the U.S. on 9/11/2001 represent a watershed for the anti-Islam campaign. The brutality of these attacks, and the indiscriminate terror unleashed by the fanatics, has raised many questions in the mind of Americans about the connection between Islam and terrorism. American interest in understanding Islam and deciphering the connection between the act of terrorism and the Islamic faith led to a sharp increase in the number of books published on Islam. While few of the books published since 9/11 provide a balanced views of Islam's teachings and history, most aim at demonizing Islam and Muslims. Of the 30 bestsellers by Amazon.com, by far the largest online distributor, 19 promote views that range between the negative and abusive, while 8 advance more favorable views of Islam. Three books offer neutral views on Islam. The eight positive books include two translations of the Qur'an and two on the renowned Muslim mystic Al Rumi. The anti-Islam books that dominate the Amazon bestsellers include books by well-known hate mongers and Muslim bashers who made careers out of demonizing Islam and attacking Muslims, including Robert Spencer, David Horowitz, Tony Blankley, and Steven

Emerson. At the heart of the writings of these four, and other collaborators, is a racist strategy whose aim is to persuade American leaders, and the public at large, that Islam is the enemy and that Muslims cannot be trusted.

The authors of anti-Islam books are not scholars who are objectively interested in understanding Islam and Muslims, but a group of activists who deeply committed to promoting an expansionist foreign policy. They perceive world politics as a zero-sum game that requires the U.S. to use its military power against present and future competitors. They have consistently presented Muslim countries as incapable of democratic rule, and Islamic values as antithetical to world peace and religious diversity.

To ensure that their views are not challenged by the academic community, the Extreme Right has been working hard to undermine academic freedom and intimidate scholars with balanced views of the Middle East. Martin Kramer's "Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America", published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP -- October 2001) is a diatribe against Middle East Studies in U.S. universities, and Daniel Pipes' Campus Watch, an organization devoted to smearing professors critical of U.S. foreign policy and Tel Aviv's treatment of Palestinians, have initiated a new campaign that aims at intimidating free thinking on the Middle East and silencing any views that challenge the Extreme Right's propaganda. Stanford professor Joel Beinin ("Le Monde diplomatique", Spring 2006) described WINEP as pro-Tel Aviv think tank.

### **The Concerted Effort to misrepresent Islam**

The anti-Islam campaign is carried by self-appointed experts who have little understanding of Islam and Muslims, yet are bent on depicting the faith of 1/5th of humanity as intolerant, violent, and anti-western. Having little insight into Muslim societies and Islamic faith, and history, they often rely on the crude and faulty logic of generalization about Muslims from the experiences of fringe Muslim groups, and of reading Islamic texts out of context, both the socio-political and the discursive.

Robert Spencer, a prolific anti-Islam writer and a leading Islamophobe who is bent on distorting Islam and demonizing Muslims, has persistently argued that violence and terrorism employed by Muslim extremists is rooted in the Qur'an and its message. Spencer calls the Qur'an, "the jihadists' Mein Kampf," in reference to Hitler's memoir. He blames the Qur'an for giving impetus to the terrorist open war against the West. He declares: "So is the Qur'an the Mein Kampf of the totalitarian, supremacist movement that is the global Islamic jihad? If we take seriously the words of the book itself and how they are used by jihadists, then it clearly is their inspiration and justification" (FrontPageMagazine.com December 8, 2005). Spencer contends: "Nor are these jihadists misrepresenting, twisting, or hijacking what the Qur'an says. There are over a hundred verses in the Qur'an that exhort believers to wage jihad against unbelievers. 'O Prophet! Strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites, and be firm against them. Their abode is Hell, an evil refuge indeed' (Sura 9:73). 'Strive hard' in Arabic is jahidi, a verbal form of the noun jihad. This striving was to be on the battlefield: "When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield, strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly" (Qur'an 47:4). This is emphasized repeatedly: 'O ye who believe! Fight the unbelievers who gird you about, and let them find firmness in you: and know that Allah is with those who fear Him.' (Qur'an 9:123)."

Spencer picks few out of the hundreds verses that deal with issues of peace and war, and misrepresents Islam by arguing that the Qur'an directs Muslims to fight non-Muslims on the account of having different faith. He does that by obscuring both the textual and historical contexts of the verses he cites. The Qur'an is unequivocal that fighting is a last resort and is permitted to repulse aggression and stop oppression and abuse: "A declaration of disavowal from God and His Messenger to those of the polytheists (Arab pagans) with whom you contracted a Mutual alliance." (9:1)

The reason for this war against the pagans was their continuous fight and conspiracy against the Muslims to turn them out of Medina as they had been turned out of Makkah, and their infidelity to and disregard for the covenant they had made with the Muslims: "Why you not fight people who violated their oaths, plotted to expel the Messenger, and attacked you first" (9:13). Out of the hundreds of the Qur'anic verses left out of Spencer's discussion are those that direct Muslims to initiate fighting only to repel aggression while urging them to seek peace when the other party seeks peace: "Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not commit aggression, for God loves not aggressors. And fight them wherever you meet them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for persecution is worse than slaughter. But if they cease, God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no oppression and the religion is only for God, but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression." (2:190-193)

### **The Specter of Islamic Empire**

In an effort to link extremism to the larger Muslim communities and organizations, the Extreme Right has repeatedly exaggerated the size of extremists among Muslims, and obscured their identity and the political conditions leading to their emergence. In order to instill fear of Islam in the heart of Americans and Europeans, the Far Right contends that mainstream Muslim communities and organizations in the West are part of a global movement with wild aspirations and grandiose design to control the world and impose institutions and laws borrowed from 7th century Muslim society. It is true that fringe groups within Muslim societies espouse literalist views of Islamic sources and history. Yet the Far Right not only fails in identifying these groups as the exception to the rule, but they have erroneously presented them as the only voice in Muslim communities.

Similarly, mainstream Muslim organizations are depicted as supportive of global terrorism and Muslim American leaders and activists as fifth column. These organizations have been the target of a smear campaigns in which innuendo, half-truth, and guilt by association have been employed to undermine and disrupt their efforts to integrate the Muslim American community into mainstream American society.

In the last three years, mainstream Muslim organizations have been the subject of rough treatment by law enforcement agencies under the urging of the Far Right. In 2002 the offices of the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), the highest Muslim religious authority in the North America, and the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS), a major Muslim institution of higher learning for training Muslim chaplains, were raided by federal agents, led by an agent of the customs service who apparently relied heavily on information provided by the Steven Emerson's Investigative Project and his former assistant Rita Katz's SITE Institute.

Although the raids were publicized as an important operation in the war on terrorism, three years after the offices of these, and other Muslim institutions were searched and hundreds of documents confiscated, no criminal charges were returned, and the Justice and Homeland Security Departments made no apology.

In June 2003, the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism and Government Information held a series of hearings on radicalization of Muslim inmates. Several Extreme Right spokesmen accused Muslim chaplains of promoting radical views. Indeed, the anti-Islam pressure groups succeeded in persuading Sen. Schumer (D-NY) that GSISS and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) have been promoting "Wahhabi Islam" and demanded that the Justice Department conduct an investigation to uncover "radical" Islamic activities in federal prisons. A year later, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) of the Justice Department issued a report that showed that, contrary to these claims, Muslim chaplains made a positive impact and brought balanced and moderate teachings to Muslim inmates, and that radicalization was more likely in prisons where inmates did not have Muslim chaplains. Federal correction facilities officials further testified that, contrary to the claims of the self-proclaimed experts who provided Sen. Schumer with erroneous information, "ISNA is a moderate, mainstream, non-Wahhabist, Islamic organization that encompasses Muslims from several Islamic sects."

In Dec. 2003, the Senate Finance Committee listed Muslim organizations and charities on a suspect list, and asked the IRS to provide financial records to uncover alleged support for global terrorism. Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) stated in an interview with the "Indianapolis Star" that his committee "did not find anything alarming enough that required additional follow-up beyond what law enforcement is already doing." A week later, the Committee, apparently under pressure from the Extreme Right, issued a press release, reversing Grassley's statement, and contending that the fact that Committee's conclusion of reviewing the information it received from the IRS "does not mean that these groups have been cleared by the committee."

### **Creeping Islamophobia**

Islamophobia is no more the attitude of the marginal extremists, as it has colored the writings and analyses of mainstream research organization such as the RAND Corporation and Freedom House. The RAND report on Islam (Cheryl Benard: "Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies"; 2004; and the 567-page study "The Muslim World After 9/11"; 2004) makes no efforts to seriously engage authentic Arab and Muslim voices for more accurate information on Islam and Muslim Americans.

The same attitude permeates other think tanks and policy formation groups.

In an 89-page study, published in 2005 under the title, "Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Fill American Mosques," the Freedom House made sweeping and largely inaccurate generalizations about Muslim Americans. After collecting a few copies of some Saudi publications that their researchers alleged were found on the library shelves of fifteen mosques, they accused mosques across the nation of promoting hate. The Freedom House found it quite permissible to smear every mosque in the U.S. without conducting a single interview, or inquiring about the reasons and circumstances of carrying questionable Saudi publications. There are more than two thousand mosques in the U.S., and fifteen out of two thousand mosques constitute less than 1 percent of all mosques in the country.

Evidently, the authors never stopped for a second to ask: How has the presence of the Saudi literature impacted the attitudes of the mosque-goers? They have also failed to consider asking the leaders of the Islamic centers about their views and activities, or how the Saudi material was used. One would think that this is the most reasonable and sensible thing to do in a study that aims at ascertaining the truth and enhancing understanding.

Islamophobia has contaminated public discourse on Islam and Muslims, and has affected the best judgment of religious and political leaders, and, hence, has made the efforts to deal with terrorism more complicated and less effective and led to a long series of missteps. Let us recall the most serious ones:

In 2001 and 2002, bigotry and intolerance were elevated to a tolerable national discourse by leading Evangelical leaders who insulted Islam and its Prophet, and did it with impunity. Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson described Islam as "wicked, violent and not of the same god," and called the Prophet of Islam a "terrorist" and "pedophile," and were allowed to get away with it. Little has been done so far to rein in Christian and Jewish extremists.

In November 2002, John Ashcroft, then the U.S. attorney general, got away with similar bigoted remarks when he asserted that "Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him," while "Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you." Ashcroft never denied that he made the statement, nor did he apologize despite demands by several Muslim American organizations to retract his statement. In the same year Ashcroft made his remarks, the Department of Justice embarked on a massive detention and deportation of thousands of innocent Muslim immigrants in the name of fighting terrorism. Many of those who were detained were denied visitation by family members and representation by lawyers. Deprived from the due process enshrined in the US constitution, they were eventually deported on minor violations. In October 2003, Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, was allowed to keep his job after telling church gatherings that the Christian God is "real" and the Muslim is "idol." Secretary Rumsfeld defended Boykin's bigoted remarks by citing the latter's freedom of speech.

In December 2003, the military accused Capt. James Lee, a dedicated Muslim Chaplain and West Point graduate, of spying, and ordered his incarceration in a maximum security facility, but failed to provide any evidence to back up these serious charges. Chaplain Yee was eventually found innocent of all charges laid against him, including charges of adultery and pornography concocted when the spying charges were withdrawn. The army refused to issue an apology and Lee resigned.

In May 2004, Brandon Mayfield, a Muslim lawyer and former Army officer, was arrested by FBI agents in connection with the Madrid terrorist bombing. The FBI maintained its certainty that Mayfield's fingerprints matched those found on bags left behind by the terrorists even after Spanish authorities said that the original image of the fingerprint did not match Mayfield's. He was eventually released after spending two weeks in prison.

In December 2004, the open season on Islam and Muslims by extreme Religious Right pundits reached a new low, when the Washington Times, a leading American newspaper, published an

article by Sam Harris, entitled "Mired in a Religious War." The article declared Islam the enemy, and openly advocates an all-out war on Islam and Muslims.

In December 2004, 46 American Muslims were fingerprinted, searched and held for 6 hours by U.S. border security agents upon returning from a religious conference in Canada. The incident is the latest in a series of overzealous ethnic and religious profiling, and of the targeting of law-abiding American Muslims in the name of national security.

The above list, though far from being complete, reveals disturbing patterns of Muslim bashing and abuse, and underscores the troubling fact that some public officials in various departments and at highest levels espouse prejudices toward Islam and Muslims. While the number of bigots and zealots is still limited, the damage they have done to both American Muslims and the reputation of the United States is enormous.

This attitude toward Islam and Muslims, and the policy recommendations that stem from it, have so far led to continuous radicalization of Muslim societies and have strengthened the very divisive forces that desire to marginalize and eliminate Islam and Muslims in the West. Many of the complex challenges the United States faces are the outcome of a faulty or unbalanced foreign policy, formulated from information supplied by ill-informed, Islamophobic experts. These policies are the result of defining adversaries on the ground of ethnic and religious identities, rather than universal ethical principles and actions, which include respect for the religious sensibilities of others

While both truth and vanity play a role in shaping Islamophobia, I am less concerned with the vain sources of these sentiments that take the form of deception, jealousy, and arrogance. I am more concerned, however, with the true sources of Islamophobia, namely anti-Muslim attitude and exclusivist political ideologies that fuel extremism. U.S. foreign policy, as articulated by the neo-conservatives, is bent on dominating and manipulating Muslim societies for achieving narrow economic and geopolitical interests; similarly, exclusivist ideologies continue to inflame the vicious terror campaigns that justify the killing of civilians for achieving political ends.

### **Rethinking US Foreign Policy**

The war on terror has not contributed so far to isolating the terrorists, but seems to have led to increasing anti-American sentiments. The Bush administration has been ill-advised by individuals and groups driven by anti-Islam agenda that made an already difficult war even more complicated. By listening to prejudiced and bigoted voices who have shown little respect to the followers of the Islamic faith, and who have urged the administration to exceed established moral and legal limitations, the Bush administration has made several blunders that undermined the credibility of the United States.

From Guantanamo, Abu Ghuraib, and other abuses, to massive detention and deportation of Muslim immigrants, to profiling the predominantly law abiding Muslim Americans, to letting off the hook high ranking officials caught making derogatory and bigoted remarks about Islam and its followers, to denying visas and turning back from U.S. airports Muslim leaders who have been working hard to build bridges between Islam and the West, to supporting authoritarian regimes implicated in human rights violations, the Bush administration has adopted the wrong approach

and gave the wrong impression that the war on terror is gradually shifting from targeting individuals implicated in terrorism and indiscriminate violence to targeting mainstream Muslim communities and organizations.

The Bush administration should reject the racist strategy of the Far Right and become more discreet in executing the war and terrorism, making a clear distinction between fringe groups driven by hatred and fanaticism, and the overwhelming majority of law abiding Muslims who aspire for just peace. The administration should also enlist the help and the crucial resources that the American Muslim community, and mainstream Muslim organizations and leaders, can bring to bear on the war on terrorism and extremism. It is not difficult for any person aware of the patterns of U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and of the terror campaign conducted by militant Muslims, to see that the two are interrelated and feed one another. The U.S. has for decades supported dictatorships and corrupt military regimes in the name of maintaining stability, and those regimes have bred extremism and gave rise to terrorist groups.

Yet the fact that U.S. foreign policy feeds into, and is fed by, the rise of extremism and terrorism in Muslim countries does not mean that we are moving in a vicious circle. The U.S. is in a position to end the cycle of violence and counter-violence, and American Muslims are well situated to help in redirecting U.S. foreign policy and in bridging the deepening divide between Muslim and Western societies. There are reasons to believe that after 9/11, the Bush Administration has become increasingly aware of the pitfalls of supporting autocratic regimes in the Muslim world, and has made several readjustments in its foreign policy approach toward Muslim countries. Not only is the Administration increasingly reluctant to openly support military and authoritarian regimes, but is increasingly coming to terms with the fact that no democratic government is possible without the involvement of Islamically-oriented political groups, as developments in Turkey and Iraq have demonstrated.

This does not mean that the Bush Administration has undergone a profound change of attitude; nor does it mean that the Administration has distanced itself from unilateralism and military preeminence that led to the war in Iraq. John Bolton, a neo-conservative unilateralist, was appointed US ambassador to the UN. This is the same Bolton who, more than two years ago, expressed an utter contempt toward international law and the UN. "It is a big mistake for us," he wrote, "to grant any validity to international law even when it may seem in our short-term interest to do so—because, over the long term, the goal of those who think that international law really means anything are those who want to constrict the United States."

We must reject the neoconservatives' obsession with domination and empire building. Their drive to ensure the political and military dominance of the U.S. might appear at first glance patriotic, but in actuality it is undermining the political and moral standing of the U.S. by undermining democracy and freedom at home and rolling back the most important American achievements on the world stage: international law and the UN.

### **Muslims Must Stand Up**

Muslim Americans are well positioned to expose the deceptions of power hungry unilateralists, and bridge the divide between Muslim and Western countries. They equally reject the bigoted spirit of exclusivist ideologies that use religion in all its forms as a weapon for achieving political

supremacy, and demonize and dehumanize political opponents. Muslim Americans should take a firm and resolute stance against individuals and groups that use violence and terror against civilians in the name of religion, and condemn all campaigns of terrorism by groups like al-Qaeda, as they do condemn those who justify violence and aggression against Muslims in the name of biblical prophecies and religious supremacy.

The time has come for the world to undertake a profound shift in political thinking and practice, similar to the one achieved in Europe in modern times. A democratic and free Europe came to life when the feudal system that privileged a small class of European elites was rejected and replaced with a system based on political equality and the rule of law. A democratic and free world will be achieved when the current political structure that perpetuates political and economic disparity is replaced with one in which all are equally treated under international law, and have fairly equal access to international organizations.

For two centuries, America has shown that it is capable of transcending its limitations and marching behind those who struggle to realize the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. And throughout its history, America stood behind those who fought for equal rights and equal dignity against self-centered groups that wanted to preserve their privileges. American Muslims must take a firm stand against the militant Religious Right that is bent on denying them the equal dignity they deserve. As long as they uphold the values of freedom, justice, and equal dignity for all, and reach out to other fellow Americans who share with them deep commitment to these values, they are destined, with the grace of God, to defeat the unscrupulous and mean-spirited attacks led by hate mongers and religious bigots.

**Note:**

[1]. *"Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All"*

Published by: Runnymede Trust

<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>

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