

The Myth of Islamophobia

“Khurafat al-Islamophobia”

By Bassam M. Madany

Lately, the subject of **“Islamophobia”** is being debated among some Western Christians. It would be helpful for all concerned to read the view of a reformist/liberal Arab intellectual, who dealt with this topic back on 23 July, 2007. He posted it on the Kuwaiti website of www.kwtanweer.comⁱ with this title: **“Khurafat al-Islamophobia?” The Myth of Islamophobia?**

Here are excerpts from this article, followed by my analysis and comments.

The author began with these introductory words:

“We have heard and read a great deal about “Islamophobia,” i.e. the fear of Islam. It is claimed that Western Intelligence Services have invented this term to generate fear of Islam among their peoples. This was necessary, we are told, after the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Socialist camp in Eastern Europe. This theory claims that the West has always needed a common enemy to maintain its cohesion and its alliances. The Communist threat served that purpose for around half a century, and now it is Islam’s role to do the same.

“Let’s be realistic: how did the term “Islamophobia” originate? And, who benefits from it? Who is threatening whom? Is it true that the West is afraid of Islam? If there is a fear of Islam in the West, which Islam is the West afraid of? Is it Islam as a religion, or is it rather political Islam, that has produced Irhabⁱⁱ, and continues to commit its ugly crimes against humanity in the name of Islam? Which side suffers the most from these crimes, is it the West, or the Islamic peoples? ”

*“Now, if the West is truly afraid of Islam, who caused the rise of this phobia? Aren’t Muslims themselves responsible for that? Arabs suffer from an incurable disease known as the **“Conspiracy Theory of History.”** They know they are terribly underdeveloped, but at the same time, they resist joining modern civilization. They have nothing to offer save oil, Irhab, and destruction. And notwithstanding their backwardness, as their illiteracy (reading ability) stands around 60%, while their cultural illiteracy is around 90%; Arabs believe they are the best people on earth! They regard the West, with all its sciences, technology, modernity, philosophy, democracy, and human rights; as living in the days of Jahiliyya,ⁱⁱⁱ according to the theory of Sayyid Qutb.^{iv}*

“So, if you tell Muslims they are underdeveloped, they will respond loudly and tell you that Western imperialism, Zionism, and Crusaderism are responsible for their underdevelopment. They add that the West wants nothing less than the destruction of

Islam and to appropriate the Muslims' possessions! This theory has contributed to filling the minds of Muslim youth with hatred and enmity for the West, and has encouraged them to join the ranks of Irhabis.

“Unfortunately, such theories do not emanate only from the propagandists of political Islam, but equally from some liberal-minded writers. For example, the columnist Ouled Abahu contributed an article to the online daily, Al Sharq al-Awsat on 20 July 2007, in which he blamed the rise of Islamophobia on the West. He wrote: ‘It is clear that this negative picture [of Islam] has been fashioned by the Neo-Conservative Movement in the United States, the new British Literary Movement, and the French Conservative-Leftist intellectuals who supported the new Rightist French President Sarkozy.’ ”

This writer went on blaming these groups for *“regarding Islam as the greatest threat facing Western civilization.”* To prove his point, he referred to two recently-published novels that dealt with Islamic subjects. The one was Salman Rushdie's *‘Shalimar.’* Its Muslim hero had only one goal: forcing people to build mosques, and hiding women under chadors. The second novel, *‘The Last Days of Muhammad Atta’* depicts Atta as a woman-hater who acquired this attitude from the **Qur'an** and the **Sirat [Life] of the Prophet of Islam**

“The question remains: Do these quotations from the aforesaid novels accurately describe the actions of Muslims, or were they false accusations of Islam? Aren't Muslims those who require women to wear the hijab? Don't they also claim that women are mentally and religiously deficient, and are therefore inferior to men? Don't Muslims quote various Hadiths attributed to the Prophet Muhammad as having said, ‘No man should embark on a project without seeking another man's advice; but if he fails to find a man, let him ask a woman's advice, and then do exactly the very opposite of what she had advised?’ Another Hadith shows the low esteem for women in Islam: ‘When you obey women, you'll soon regret it!’ Another similar Hadith: ‘Men have perished when they obeyed women!’

*“As for Muslims' attitude toward non-Muslims, the **Fuqaha** [legal authorities] of Irhab love to quote this Hadith: ‘I have been commanded to fight people until they say **La Ilaha illa'l Allah**; when they utter these words, they have my promise that I would not shed their blood, or acquire their possessions.’ Isn't it political Islam that urges young men to kill innocent non-Muslims, as well as Muslims who don't agree with them? Aren't Muslim religious leaders who use texts from the Qur'an and Hadith, to blame for transforming Muslim doctors living in the West, into Irhabis? If all that I have detailed is true, why then blame Westerners for inventing the term, **“Islamophobia?”***

*“Had the West been really afraid of Islam as a religion, Western governments would not have allowed Muslim communities to settle in their countries, or offered financial aid in building their mosques, or allowed them to bring **Imams** [preachers and leaders of mosques] from Muslim lands. If the West was truly afraid of Islam, why were some propagandists of political Islam allowed to settle in Western countries? Millions of Muslims come to the **‘Infidel West’** and live in it, in peace and tranquility. In fact the*

proportional number of mosques in the West is greater than in Islamic lands. For example there are more than one thousand mosques in Britain, while the number of Muslims living there is around two million! At the same time, Copts in Egypt are not allowed to build new churches unless they get permission from the President; and obtaining the needed permit for that is almost an impossibility. Furthermore, when a Christian comes to Saudi Arabia, he is not allowed to bring his Bible with him; if he has one, it is confiscated at the airport!

“Muslims enjoy complete freedom of worship in the West; in fact they have more freedom in Western lands than in Islamic countries. Actually, religious freedom for Muslims is granted only and uniquely to the type of Islam that is sanctioned by the state. Thus, Shi’ites living in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia don’t enjoy the freedom to express their own type of Islam. As for Iran, the case is reversed, since Shi’ism is the official religion of the state, Sunni Muslims do not enjoy complete freedom. It is a fact that no mosque has been bombed in any Western country, whereas attacks on mosques, [both Sunni and Shi’ite mosques] often happen in Islamic countries. ”

*“It was the followers of political Islam who invented the term **“Islamophobia”** and they are the ones who benefit from it. Their goal is to place the Muslim communities in the West in a state of confrontation with the host nations; pushing them to adopt a radical form of Islam, and thus, inflaming the struggle with the West. They have succeeded, up to a point, to gain the sympathy of some moderate Muslims who criticize the West, and rail against its **“Islamophobia.”**”*

*“For example, after the failed terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow, an Arab organization in Britain issued a statement criticizing the terrorist attack, while at the same time, it blamed Britain’s foreign policy as a possible reason for that attack. But such a claim is nothing but a pack of lies! There can be no justification whatsoever for any act of terror. Let’s never forget that those who were involved in the terrorist attack were medical doctors who betrayed the honor of the medical profession. It was a religious ideology that changed Muslim doctors into Irhabis. Now, aren’t Westerners justified if they fear people like them? After all, **Ayman al-Zawahiri**, the second in command in al-Qaida, is a doctor and the son of a doctor! ”*

“Yes, political Islam is a threat to the world. The majority of terrorists are Muslim, who have been brainwashed and made to hate the West and its civilizational values. Those who encourage this attitude rely on religious texts to convince would-be terrorists to commit their terrible crimes. Thus, it is the duty of reasonable Muslims to save Islam from those who have high jacked it and use it to reach their goal, namely to recreate the Islamic Caliphate. But such a dream can only be realized within their sick minds. What is needed is to bring certain Islamic texts, the Ayat al-Sayf wal-Qital (The Qur’anic Sword Texts) in line with the conditions of the present time. Unless peaceful coexistence with the rest of mankind is advocated, Islam and Muslims would find themselves in a perpetual confrontation with the rest of the civilized world. The results would be catastrophic for Muslims themselves. Actually, in the West, there is no fear of Islam as a religion; but there is fear of political Islam, the source of Islamic Irhab, whose danger is

greater for Muslims than for the West.”

Analysis

The writer is at pains to explain that the West did not invent “*Islamophobia*” as a means to combat Islam and Muslim nations in the 21st century. It is radical Muslims and their fellow-travelers who use this term, in order to silence any honest and needed critique of certain aspects of Islam. He points to the fact that many Muslims have settled in the Western world, where they enjoy freedom of worship, and an opportunity to earn a decent livelihood. If there is a fear of Islam, it is of “*Political Islam*.” He holds it responsible for the spread of the fear of Islam, in other words, “*Islamophobia*.” He insists that radical Islam, and not the West, is responsible for the rise and spread of this term.

Comments

Indeed it is refreshing to read such an article on a widely-visited website. The author is very frank and extremely bold in telling a truth that is seldom heard from the side of Arab and Muslim writers.

My problem with the article is that the distinction the author makes between Islam as religion, and political Islam, can be sustained only on a theoretical level. In reality, however, *it is Islam as religion that eventually gave birth to Islam as a state with its political ideology*. This is the verdict of the history of the last 1400 years.

Islam began in 610 A.D. as a religious movement. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, claimed that Allah was giving him a definitive word for mankind. The revelations that “descended” on Muhammad in Mecca (610-622) dealt with purely religious themes: the unity of God, the vanity of idols, and the necessity to submit to Allah according to His holy *Shariah* or law. As one begins to read the Qur’an in Arabic, he will notice at the head of every chapter is a superscription that gives its name, and the place of its “descent.” For example, *Surat al-Fatiha* (Chapter One) is “*Makkiya wa-Ayatuha Sab’a*” (It is *Meccan*, and has Seven Verses); while *Surat al-Baqarah* (Chapter Two) has 281 verses, and was the first to “descend” in *Medina*.

It was during his sojourn in *Medina* (622-632) that Muhammad became both *Prophet and Statesman*. The revelations “*descending*” upon him in this new place dealt with both religious and political issues. When he died in 632, his successors, the Caliphs, began their *futuhats* or conquests of the world. They built within one hundred years, a huge empire stretching from Spain in the West to India in the East. It is very doubtful that Islam, as a religion (or the Islam of the Meccan chapters of the Qur’an) would have spread as it actually did, without the aid of the political-military complex it had become.

Not long ago, an Islamic Caliphate or Empire still existed. I have in mind the Ottoman Empire that had once succeeded in finishing off the Byzantine Empire in 1453. It controlled the Middle East, the Balkans, several parts of Central Europe, and twice

reached the gates of Vienna (1529 and 1683.) But since the abolishing of the Caliphate in 1924, by the Turkish strongman *Mustapha Kemal Atatürk*, a powerful malaise has set in within *Daru'l Islam*. Muslim intellectuals kept asking, “*What Went Wrong?*” The dream of resurrecting the old glory of the Caliphate has never died. Soon after the end of Western colonialism and the various nationalistic-socialist experiments in the Arab world had proved their utter bankruptcy, attempts to revive Islam as a political power gained momentum. It is at this point that Islamic triumphalist ideologies gained popularity among Arab and Muslim young men. Thus, what is now called political Islam, or *Islamism*, was reborn. It is not, however, entirely unconnected with Islam per se. For this faith, unlike all other religious faiths, constitutes an indivisible religious, political, and cultural entity.

It is next to impossible to bring in line or modify the Qur’anic texts, known as *Ayat al-Sayf, wal-Qital (the Sword and Fighting texts)*! Such a project requires the “**re-opening of the door of *Ijtihad***”^{vi} and the rise of a new hermeneutic that would consider as non-normative, many parts of the Medinan Chapters of the Qur’an.

I don’t want to be pessimistic, but the forecast for the future remains rather disturbing. As long as Islamic Terrorism continues to threaten the world, non-Muslims are justified in being afraid of Islam. On the other hand, no one should charge the West for inventing “*Islamophobia*” as a means to subjugate the Islamic world. It’s high time to bury this dangerous myth that plays into the hands of the *Irhabis*.

ⁱ This website is no longer active; most likely, the Kuwaiti authorities did not appreciate the kind and tone of the articles that were posted on the website! It is unfortunate that we have been deprived of this source of information.

ⁱⁱ *Irhab*: terrorism

ⁱⁱⁱ *Jahiliyya*: In Islamic historiography, the period that preceded the rise of Islam in Arabia is regarded as the *Days of Jahiliyya (Ignorance)*. Nowadays, it is a term used by Islamists to denigrate and vilify their opponents.

^{iv} *Sayyid Qutb*: A prominent member of the *Muslim Brotherhood*. Because of his opposition to President *Nasser*, he was tried and executed, by hanging, on 29 August, 1966. He is considered as the intellectual “father” of radical Islam.

^v *Muhammad Atta* was the leader of the 19 hijackers who attacked the World Trade Center Towers, in New York, and Washington, D.C. on 9/11

^{vi} *Ijtihad* is an Arabic word that designates a theological activity, especially in interpreting the sacred texts of Islam. It is generally agreed that the early activities or endeavors in theology (*Kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) during the early years of the *Abbasid Caliphate* came to an end. *Imam al-Ghazzali* (died in 1111 A.D.) is regarded as the Muslim scholar who played a major role in the “*Closing of the Door of Ijtihad.*” To re-open the *Door of Ijtihad* requires nothing less than the adoption of a new hermeneutic for the interpretation of the Qur’an!