

# **The Rise of a New Islamophobia in America and the West?**

**The Cultural Reverberations of the War on  
Terror Reach American Shores**

***Fawaz A. Gerges\****



Almost a decade after 11 September 2001, Islam and American Muslims are still on trial in America and the west, linked to Al-Qaeda through guilt-by-association for simply being of the same faith. In addition to military adventurism in Iraq and Afghanistan-Pakistan, mushrooming national debt, militarisation of domestic affairs, the politics of terrorism and the terrorism narrative, and the notion that the west remains under constant and imminent threat have exposed deep cultural, legal, and philosophical fault lines within western societies. This has ultimately resulted in the creation of illiberal tendencies and draconian legislation aimed at Muslims. Such tendencies, which have come to be known as Islamophobia, have swept across western countries and threaten the very fabric of western values and thought.

Islamophobia, sometimes referred to as the new anti-Semitism, has reared its ugly head under a new guise and used a different pretext to reach America's shores. The 'global war on terror' has allowed the far right, including the religious right, to demonise Muslims and portray them as aliens and as a fifth column within western societies. Though initially driven by powerful far-right groups, the sentiment has gone mainstream within the US.

In Europe, the alarm over the perceived Islamisation of the continent – masquerading as fear of a demographic crisis in which Muslims will out-breed their Christian counterparts – has become commonplace, and is reflected in the literature, ranging from more sophisticated treatments such as Christopher Caldwell's *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* to cruder polemics such as Mark Steyn's *America Alone: The end of the world as we know it* and Bat Ye'or's *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*. *America Alone*, a New York Times best-seller, which resonated widely with European and American ultra-conservatives, offers a terrifying vision of an enfeebled, infertile, powerless Europe overrun by fecund, violent Muslims. The Muslim hordes are coming, the book warns. Given the extent and intensity of ideological mobilisation and incitement since 9/11, such alarmist narratives have become commonplace.

Recent surveys and public opinion polls, including an important survey by the respected Pew Research Center, suggest that an increasing number of westerners are accepting an image of Muslims that used to be believed by those on the right-wing fringes of society. Many in the mainstream now say they are not willing to allow Muslims the same religious and legal freedoms and rights that are enjoyed by others. According to a nationwide poll conducted by Cornell University in the US, forty-four percent of all Americans say that the government should restrict the civil liberties of American Muslims.

There is a growing cottage industry of western commentators and politicians who feed off Islam-bashing, being provided with a substantial level of cover by the 'war on terror' discourse. While 'terrorism experts' such as Daniel Pipes, Steven Emerson, and Robert Spencer initially led the anti-Islam charge, such sentiment has since become much more pervasive. A blog post in September 2010 by Martin Peretz, editor-in-chief of *The New Republic*, is indicative of this venomous rhetoric: 'Frankly, Muslim life is cheap, most notably to Muslims.' Peretz added: 'I wonder whether I need honor these people and pretend that they are worthy of the privileges of the First Amendment, which I have in my gut the sense they will abuse.' Although Peretz apologised for the second part of this, he nevertheless defended his assertion that Muslims regard Muslim life as cheap. 'This is a statement of fact, not value,' he wrote.

Writing in *Forward*, Matthew Duss, the national security editor at the Center for American Progress, noted that hatred of Arabs and Muslims has had a permanent home not only in *The New Republic*, 'one of America's oldest and best-respected liberal magazines', but also in many other pro-Israeli forums which stoke fear of Islam for

political gain. Duss points a finger directly at Peretz for increasing the Islamophobia at The New Republic.

Fox News, the home of right-wing commentators Glen Beck and Sean Hannity, and several nationally syndicated radio talk show hosts, including those by influential neo-conservative commentators Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, frequently promotes Islamophobia on the national stage. Another example is conservative media personality and leading Fox news anchor, Bill O'Reilly, who, in an interview on 'The View', a popular American ABC television talk show, declared: 'Muslims killed us on 9/11.'

Furthermore, prominent politicians such as presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich, and Republican politicians Peter King and Senator Saxby Chamblis, all legitimise the demonisation of Muslims with misleading language. Critical sections of the evangelical Christian Movement in the US, and prominent and influential figures in the Christian right such as Pat Robertson, John Hagee, and Franklin Graham, to name a few, have also contributed to the intensification and escalation of this phenomenon throughout the U.S.

Similarly, a debate about Muslims is currently raging across Europe, the bastion of liberalism and multiculturalism. In Switzerland, a large segment of the population voted to ban the construction of mosque minarets, even though the Muslim community in Switzerland numbers only 400 000, with most being not Arabs or Africans but Europeans from Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo. Belgium is debating whether to pass legislation to proscribe women's wearing of the niqab (face veil). In October 2010, a ban on face veils was passed in both houses of the French legislature by overwhelming margins, and is scheduled to come into effect before the middle of this year.

European countries which possess sizeable Muslim minorities have seen a notable increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric. Such sentiment is worsened when coupled with anti-immigrant fervour, based on economic hardship and high unemployment rates. This wave of Islamophobia has raised serious questions about the future of multicultural and multi-religious western societies. Exploiting the bitter debate, Al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri released several audiotapes condemning discrimination against Muslims, and vowed to attack those European countries that insulted Islam and its Prophet. The irony is that Islam-bashers provide bin Laden and his associates with more tools with which to mobilise support.

Across the Atlantic, the reverberations of the 'war on terror' have put America's values of religious tolerance and individual freedom to the test. Out of a population of 300 million, there are between 2.5 and seven million Muslims in the United States, a third of whom are African-Americans. Confrontations have broken out over proposed mosques in numerous places such as Tennessee, California, Georgia, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Illinois, Brooklyn, and Staten Island. Particularly alarming and revealing has been the high-profile battle over a Muslim community centre to be built two blocks from Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan – the site of the 11 September 2001 attacks. Critics and detractors of the centre have dubbed it the 'Ground Zero Mosque'.

Well-known Islamophobes and neo-conservative propagandists such as Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer have seized on the proposed Islamic centre to stir up anti-Muslim sentiment. Presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich weighed in strongly in opposition to building the centre, saying its construction should not be allowed for as long as Saudi Arabia prohibited the construction of churches and synagogues. To build the centre 'overlooking the World Trade Center site – where a group of jihadists killed more than 3 000 Americans,' Gingrich opined, is a political act of 'Muslim triumphalism'. He said the

US Congress could ‘create a national battlefield memorial area’ and control what’s built there. Gingrich justified his position by drawing an analogy with the Holocaust. ‘Nazis don’t have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington,’ he said. Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer made a similar argument in several Washington Post editorials. In general, right-wing politicians have jumped on the Islam- and Muslim-bashing bandwagon to score cheap political points. Campaigning for the governorship of New York State, Republican Rick Lazio claimed that the plan to build the centre undermined the right of New Yorkers to ‘feel safe and be safe’.

A number of politicians and citizens, including New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and, eventually, President Barack Obama, who defended the centre’s construction after the decision by the New York City Landmarks Commission to approve it, backed the project based on the principle of freedom of religion. However, the virulent debate showed clearly that the politics of terrorism and the terrorism narrative serve to threaten enshrined American values. Even Obama raised the issue of the ‘wisdom’ of building the Islamic centre at the location in question.

Anti-Muslim sentiment has spread across many areas within America. Pastor Bill Rench of Temecula’s Calvary Baptist Church in California perhaps best expressed the feelings of those opposed to mosque construction in Temecula. ‘The Islamic foothold is not strong here, and we really don’t want to see their influence spread,’ Rench told the Los Angeles Times. ‘There is a concern with all the rumors you hear about sleeper cells and all that. Are we supposed to be complacent just because these people say it’s a religion of peace? Many others have said the same thing,’ he added.

A decade of heightened anti-Muslim sentiment has ultimately taken its toll. In 2010, Gallup’s Muslim West Facts Project published the results of a major poll about American prejudices toward Islam. They showed a causal link between rising anti-Islam and the politics of terrorism. The most significant finding is also the most unsurprising: a slight majority of Americans, fifty-three percent, said their opinion of the faith is either ‘not too favorable’ (twenty-two percent), or ‘not favorable at all’ (thirty-one percent). Americans are more than twice as likely to express negative feelings towards Muslims than they are toward Buddhists, Christians, or Jews. Sixty-six percent of Americans disagree with the statement that most Muslims are accepting of other religions, while sixty-eight percent claim that Christians’ and Muslims’ religious beliefs are not ‘basically the same’. Unsurprisingly, forty percent of Americans admitted that they knew either very little about Islam, while twenty-three percent claimed that they know nothing at all.

Putting the best face on the Gallup finding, Boston Globe columnist James Carroll said that Muslims are wildly misperceived and wrongly judged, but that Americans are ‘at war, and afraid’, and ‘exaggerated fears fuel themselves, and the dynamic of prejudice can be a riptide.’ He compared the blanket stereotyping of Muslims to an unseen current that has run below the surface of western culture for a millennium. Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Stephan Salisbury warned that the anti-Muslim current embraced by major political candidates may pave the way for ‘the emergence of a leader who can synthesize the demonizing and scapegoating of Muslims, fears augmented by severe economic anxiety, the maturing of extreme right-wing activism, and widespread and growing contempt for official Washington’. America’s political leaders, he wrote, ‘have been honing an anti-Muslim narrative which fertilizes anti-Muslim sentiment to the point where it is now spreading like a toxic plume, uncapped and uncontrollable.’

The 'M-word', USA Today suggested in August 2010, in an article discussing why a growing number of Americans believe President Obama is a Muslim, has become a pejorative term in America. According to a Pew Research survey on Religion and Public Life released in August 2010, eighteen percent of Americans said they believed Obama was a Muslim, up from eleven percent in March 2009. A Newsweek poll found that fifty-two percent of Republicans believe that it is either 'definitely true' or 'probably true' that 'Barack Obama sympathizes with the goals of Islamic fundamentalists who want to impose Islamic law around the world.' Despite the efforts by the president's office to downplay the astonishing findings, USA Today zeroed in on the 'M-word' as mockery, or worse, to call someone a Muslim only when you dislike, fear or disagree with the person – the way to put someone down in polite company. The newspaper asked, 'Is the M-word becoming the political slur that gets through the social filters?'

The terrorism narrative and the rise of Islamophobia in the west, particularly in America, undermines American and western values worldwide, allowing bin Laden and his lieutenants to portray themselves as legitimate warriors or freedom fighters who resist the sole remaining superpower. Since the late 1990s, Al-Qaeda's fundamental goal has been to trigger a clash of cultures between the world of Islam and the west. Although bin Laden and his men lost the struggle for Muslim hearts and minds, Islamophobia fuels Al-Qaeda's narrative and provides it with the oxygen that sustains it.

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