

## Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism: Causes and Remedies

By Mohamed Nimer\*

### *Definitions*

Islamophobia and anti-Americanism denote hate directed at a faith community or a people because they happen to be Muslim or American. Such hate is expressed through vitriolic rhetoric and/or physical acts of violence and discrimination against objects or persons on account of their association with Islam, Muslims, America or Americans. To appreciate the grave dangers of Islamophobia and anti-Americanism, one must be clear about their essence—what they are and what they are not. A critical study of Islam or Muslims is not Islamophobic. Likewise, a disapproving analysis of American history and government is not anti-American. One can disagree with Islam or with what some Muslims do without ill-feelings. Similarly, one can oppose American policies without detesting America as a nation.

These demarcations may sound clear and simple, and yet both Islamophobia and anti-Americanism are on the rise. Anti-Muslim feelings in the United States have increased, especially after the terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001 (hereafter referred to as 9/11). Between one-fourth and one-third of Americans hold negative views of Islam and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Opinion leaders, especially on Internet blogs, talk radio, and cable television are increasingly using harsh language to refer to the Islamic faith. Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, religious leaders often courted by elected officials and politicians, have called Islam “a wicked religion”, the Prophet Muhammad “a terrorist,” and Muslims “worse than Nazis.” A global survey of world public opinion about the United States in November 2005 revealed that uneasy feelings were mutual. In five major Muslim-majority countries, from 51 percent to 79 percent of the respondents expressed unfavorable view of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

There is a circular cause and effect relationship between Islamophobia and anti-Americanism. Consider the following sequence of events starting arbitrarily with 9/11: the strike by Al-Qaeda left thousands of people dead and injured and triggered the most remarkable anti-Muslim violence in American history and the most vocal wave of anti-Islam rhetoric in the West. The attack is then used to justify the invasion of two Muslim-majority countries: Afghanistan and Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of people have been killed or injured. And this unleashed a wave of terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets of U.S. allies around the world (the bombing of establishments frequented by nationals of U.S. allies in Bali, Indonesia, Casablanca, Morocco, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Istanbul, Turkey, Madrid, Spain, London, United Kingdom).

We've also witnessed increased American pressures on Muslims here and abroad, including human rights abuses and the use of torture in the name of national security. Revelations about such practices at Abu Garib and other U.S. holding facilities inflamed anti-American sentiments and may have contributed to the resurgence of al-Qaeda and Taliban in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So the pattern is clear: Terrorist attacks against Americans are followed by anti-Muslim rhetoric and policy. This in turn reinforces anti-American sentiment and provokes a new round of terrorist attacks. For those who seek to promote reconciliation, it is pointless to ask which of the two phenomena began first. What is more important is to recognize the positive relationship between the two, namely, as Islamophobia increases, anti-Americanism is strengthened and vice versa.

What factors have led to this unfortunate state of affairs? What remedies should be sought to ameliorate prejudice? Below I discuss the most salient misconceptions and real grievances fueling the current vicious cycle. I also outline the basic ingredients of solutions that may bring about its end.

### *Misconceptions*

While Hollywood movies reduce Muslims into what Jack Shaheen calls the three Bs: billionaires, bombers and belly dancers, many in the Muslim world view Americans in terms of the three Rs: rich, ruthless and raunchy. Evidence shows that many Muslims do hold strong negative stereotypes of Westerners in general and Americans, in particular. A June 2006 Pew Research Center poll found “pluralities in all of the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed associate Westerners with being greedy, arrogant, immoral, selfish and violent. And solid majorities in Jordan, Turkey and Egypt—as well as a plurality of Muslims in Nigeria—view Westerners as being fanatical.”<sup>3</sup>

The problem lies in the broad-brush generalization of Muslims and Americans as morally lax people who have ample means and will to harm others. This sweeping notion, which constitutes the crux of anti-Americanism and Islamophobia, is usually accompanied by demonization and justification of hostility.

Beyond agreeing with negative statements about Americans and Muslims, there is agitation that invokes antagonistic emotions. Pat Robertson has repeatedly said on national television al-Qaeda militants are only carrying out Qur’anic commands to kill Jews and Christians. Such accusation was echoed in other forums beyond the so-called Christian Right. For example, the Simon Wiesenthal Center hosted an event at the University of Toronto countering the UN Secretary General seminar on Islamophobia in December 2004. The Canadian event featured Bruce Tefft, a former CIA official, who blamed Islam for terrorism. He stated in his lecture: “Islamic terrorism is based on Islam as revealed through the Qu’ran.... To pretend that Islam has nothing to do with Sept. 11 is to willfully ignore the obvious and to forever misinterpret events.... There is no difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, which is a totalitarian construct.”<sup>4</sup>

This extreme form of associating Islam with violence also suggests treating Islam not as a religion but as an aggressive ideology. This message has had resonance in some conservative circles. Most recently Oklahoma state legislator Rex Duncan (who is Republican) refused a gift of Islam’s holy book saying, “Most Oklahomans do not endorse the idea of killing innocent women and children in the name of ideology.”<sup>5</sup>

Anti-American agitation by Muslim radicals often takes the form of blaming America for most of the Muslim world's problems, even in areas where America is not a player. For example, Bin Laden repeatedly held American imperialism responsible for the persecution of Muslims in the Indian state of Assam. Bin Laden's faulty rationale goes like this: the exercise of American power has left Muslims unable to support vulnerable Muslim minorities, such as those in India. But there is no link between the rise of American power and the persecution of Muslims in Assam. In fact, the general weakness of Muslim-majority countries predated the rise of America in global affairs.

This spurious association is also evident in linking Iraq to 9/11, where the real connection is the broad demographic characteristics of religion and ethnicity. Perhaps mindful of the sensitivity of this linkage, the Bush Administration first said that in the post 9/11 world, America cannot afford to let Iraq keep weapons of mass destruction. The administration also accused the Iraqi government under Saddam to have had links with al-Qaeda. Of course, evidence for such claims was lacking from the start. Yet U.S. government officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, testified in U.S. and international forums, that the U.S. possessed intelligence confirming these reports.

In both cases—the invasion of Iraq and the attacks on Americans and their allies—the justification of violence is made via ideology-based views on history and world affairs assigning responsibility for events not on the basis of relating actors to actions but on grounds that selectively mix geopolitical analyses and visions with ethnic, religious and/or national affiliations. In other words, Bin Laden's stretching the line of logic beyond reason and fact in blaming America is clearly anti-American, just as the Bush's justification of the War in Iraq on grounds of 9/11 is Islamophobic.

*Real Grievances*

In addition to misconceptions, Islamophobia and anti-Americanism have been fueled by real grievances. Unjust American policies cause anti-American feelings, while terrorism stirs up Islamophobia. University of Maryland political scientist Louis Cantori reports on attending a public meeting in 2004, at which returning members of the American occupation administration in Iraq expressed exhilaration regarding what they saw as successful American imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

But many of the world's Muslims perceive such American policies as increasingly a leading factor in stifling their progress and denying them genuine political reform. There is no doubt that the American invasion of Iraq has reinforced this perception, which is viewed by many as a campaign having the broad aim of weakening Muslims.

Clearly, Islamophobia and anti-Americanism reflect the sad state of U.S.-Muslim world relations. The U.S. has inherited and maintained the status quo of a Muslim world divided by colonial European powers. For long the U.S. has invested in relations with Muslim-majority states, which are controlled for the most part by rulers who have marginalized civil society. Yet supporters of this untenable set of relationships are the most vocal in demanding that Muslims, who are rendered powerless, turn inward and band together in order to uproot terrorists.

Yet Islamic activists across the globe condemned 9/11 in no ambiguous manner. American Muslim leaders and major Islamic centers signed on an anti-terror *fatwa* (religious opinion) issued by major Muslim jurists.<sup>7</sup> And Muslim public affairs agencies have maintained regular contacts with law enforcement agencies. American Muslim organizations encourage the recruitment of Muslims in law enforcement agencies.

But if the criteria for a good Muslim cop includes the requirement of holding the Muslim community suspect, then there is a serious obstacle facing Muslim involvement in law enforcement. After 9/11 profiling of Muslims has become rampant. In August 2007, the New York Police Department released an Islamophobic report implicating the whole Muslim community in the promotion of radical tendencies. It even suggested that a young Muslim who quits smoking and

starts attending mosque may have entered a radicalization funnel.<sup>8</sup> No wonder then there are 750,000 people on the U.S. government terrorist watch list.<sup>9</sup> And there is no surprise that many Muslims in America express frustration regarding the suspicious treatment they receive at the nation's airports.

Legitimate grievances must be addressed to dry up the sources of anger. This is not a call for the United States to let its guard down or to relinquish its advantageous military and economic positions to appease others. Nor does it mean that governments in Muslim-majority countries should censor speech in order to prove that they are cracking down on extremism. It means that the American government should work to resolve or, at the very least, refrain from opposing national liberation movements, because this hostility feeds legitimate resentment against it. Michael Scheuer, former CIA Head of Bin Laden Unit, may caution, however, that this may not happen so long as the U.S. government is in the grip of those who believe in an imperial America.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, controlling terrorism is a task best handled by security agencies. Muslim-majority countries should not only work to curb terrorist activity, but should also guarantee freedom of speech and association so that extremist ideas can be recognized and isolated by mainstream Muslim opinion. This prospect could prove more effective than American military adventures. Only the hope of a better future can temper the frustration of increasingly desperate Muslims.

### *Remedies: Dialogue and Reform*

Dialogue for the purpose of exposing myths and forging a common understanding is a must to assure a peaceful future. Richard Cizik, a leader in the National Association of Evangelicals movement warns Muslims against equating evangelicals with fundamentalist Christians.<sup>11</sup> Muslims have complained for so long that Western academics and journalists invented the term *fundamentalist Islam* and equate its characteristics with profiles of practicing Muslims, equate those with extremists, and extremists with terrorists. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979

such assumptions were applied to Shia Muslims and after 9/11 Sunnis became the main villains.

Charting the way out of stereotyping and communication based on ignorant profiling, Muslims, Christians, and Jews must acknowledge their Abrahamic roots as one strong foundation for communication between all followers of these three religions. Religious scriptures of all major world religion enunciate the golden rule, which simply recommends treating others as one would like to be treated. This universal principle offers a solid moral ground for peaceful coexistence.

Political realists may think such a lofty idea will not change the nature of international relations, which, in their view, are based on mistrust, power and interest. But those who believe in the free will of human beings may disagree. Therefore, there is reason to support a global discourse premised on a shared future. Within this framework, various sub-discourses may prove fruitful.

One conversation should deal with the notion of world domination. Neither the Qur'an nor the Bible justifies domination and oppression. Princeton scholar Richard Bulliet argues that Islamic and Western civilizations are more interlinked than many are prepared to acknowledge.<sup>12</sup> Michael Morgan underscores the fact that today's digital age would not have been possible without the contributions of the Muslim mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwārizmī (780-850) to algorithm.<sup>13</sup>

Another exchange in the global dialogue revolves around interfaith relations. There are some who criticize conventional, feel-good interfaith meetings, believing they have produced few tangible results. They believe fruitful engagements must appreciate differences as well as agreements between faith communities. Yet contacts between American Muslims on the one hand and Catholics and mainline Protestants on the other have gone beyond pleasant exchanges of good ideas and intentions. There have been joint responses to crises, including political alliances to defend civil rights and oppose unjust wars. Still, relations between Muslims, Jews and Christian Zionists are very tense and conflict-ridden. And increasingly anti-Muslim sentiment is

finding a place in certain segments of the American conservative movement, including some think tanks and Republican politicians and activists.

Unfortunately many Muslims mix criticism of Israel with ambivalence or even prejudice against Jews. On August 31, 2007, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union of Reform Judaism, a movement that claims 1.5 million members, raised this issue in his address to the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).<sup>14</sup> The ability of ISNA leaders to bring about this change will be strengthened if they could show their Muslim brethren that their Jewish counterpart is equally willing to acknowledge the faults of organized Jewry that goes the extra mile in justifying Israel's repression of the Palestinians. American Muslim leaders have repeatedly criticized Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians. It is time American Jewish leaders delivered a credible criticism of the Israeli brutal occupation.

Another discussion involves Muslims in the West and the rest of the *ummah* (worldwide community of believers). There are good ideas which Western Muslims are sharing with their fellow Muslims across the globe—ideas that may contribute to reform capable of giving hope and blunting radicalism. For example, Jamal Badawi, a reputable Canadian Muslim scholar and activist, differentiates between secularism and secularity.<sup>15</sup> The former is an anti-religion ideology, which Muslims would oppose, whereas the latter is a principle that allows the creation of effective polities, which Muslims may view as good. He argues that the American model of separating church and state follows the secularity concept. If this understanding becomes a basis for political reform in Muslim-majority countries, it would demonstrate that American principles are consistent with Islamic ideals.

But there are voices arguing that Muslims are not ready for democracy or that Islam and democratic ideals are not compatible. Such rhetoric may manifest Islamophobia. Essentially, it suggests that Muslims are prone to violence and prefer war over negotiations to settle their differences. American civil society groups should engage their counterparts in Muslim-majority states, rather than justify denying them a place at the political table. The debate over Islam and democracy must be seen in a

new light: Subscribers to the notion that the two are incompatible are those who would like to see the West clash with the Muslim world. In other words, the question of compatibility is not answerable through a positivist scientific discovery. Rather, it is subject to one's preferences regarding East-West relations. Those who opt for conflict would welcome the intensification of Islamophobia and anti-Americanism.

### *Obstacles and Catalysts for Change*

Serious obstacles limit the chances of a meaningful conversation. Denial is major complicating factor. Insisting that the CIA hatched the 9/11 attacks to justify the subsequent wars only widens the gap of understanding. The same effect results from denying that Islamophobia exists or that anti-Americanism is related to America's unjustified militarism and support of oppression.

Despite the existence of stereotypes in Muslim perceptions of Americans, most recent surveys show that majorities in Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, four of the most heavily populated Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, North African, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, oppose attacks on civilians, support the application of Islamic law in their countries, favor democratic governance, and see value in openness to global exchange.<sup>16</sup>

But condescending attitudes toward others eliminate the prospects of building relationships of trust necessary for a fruitful engagement. Muslims who speak of America as a sick culture contribute to the reinforcement of mistrust. Another form of denigration is common among pundits who use the views of former Muslims as a yardstick for "moderate Islam," which implies the intolerant position that one can dialogue with Muslims only when they renounce their faith. Neither Islamophobia nor anti-Americanism is destined to dominate American-Islamic relations. But if mainstream voices cave in to the loud noises of fanatics and zealots, then the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilizations will become the order of the day.

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<sup>1</sup> Such findings are supported by public opinion polls commissioned by CAIR in 2004 and 2005. See CAIR, *American Public Opinion about Islam and Muslims* (Washington, DC, 2005). A Gallup/USA Today poll in 2006 found four in ten Americans admitting prejudice against Muslims. See [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/197/story\\_19765\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/197/story_19765_1.html), (November 1, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/6/arab-and-muslim-perceptions-of-the-united-states>, (November 2, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?PageID=831>, (November 2, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> “Islamic Terror Based on Qu’ran: Ex-CIA Official” <http://www.cjnews.com/viewarticle.asp?id=5056> (December 10, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.asp?articleID=071023\\_1\\_a1\\_spanc46170](http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.asp?articleID=071023_1_a1_spanc46170) (October 31, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Islamophobia and Anti Americanism*, pp.67-68.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cair.com/AmericanMuslims/AntiTerrorism/FatwaAgainstTerrorism.aspx>, (November 5, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> New York Police Department, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (City of New York, NYPD Intelligence Division, August 2007), p.31.

<sup>9</sup> NBC News, October 24, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous (pseudonym) *Imperial Hubris* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s Inc., 2004).

<sup>11</sup> *Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism*, pp.115-118.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Interview by Riz Khan with Michael Morgan, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEK16-7Qafv> (November 5, 2007). Also see Michael Morgan, *Lost History: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers, and Artists* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Books, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> See the text of the address at: <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1302> (October 29, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> *Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism*, p.56.

<sup>16</sup> PIPA, *Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda*, (Washington, DC, 2007).

The poll was conducted in April. See at:

[http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START\\_Apr07\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf), (November 5, 2007).