

Islamophobia: The Heat of Empire And The Flames of Intolerance

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Theme: [Religion](#)

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In Britain, the intelligence agencies have been for some time intensively monitoring Muslim communities. The result of the Swiss referendum held in 2009 means that building a mosque with a minaret is now banned in that nation. There were only four in the entire country anyhow. And, in 2010, France passed a law to prevent women wearing the niqab in public.

The discussion about wearing the niqab, which has also been raging in Britain and other countries too, starts with people saying, "You don't know what 'they' could be carrying beneath it or who is behind the veil." They begin by attempting to justify the banning on 'safety' grounds. Then, when pushed, racist undertones and intolerance come to the surface - if 'they' want to live here in 'our' country, 'they' should behave/dress like 'us'.

The implication of all this is the belief that Muslims are particularly dangerous and need to be watched closely. And anti-Islam Danish cartoons or films whose main purpose is to provoke a predictable reaction among certain Muslims purposively contribute to this belief. It all serves to whip up public paranoia and concerns about immigration, illegal asylum seekers, certain groups' incompatibility with 'our' values, religious fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism and so on. In trying to mask racism and prejudice with platitudes about 'our' culture being diluted, bombers wanting to kill us or public services being over stretched due to an influx of immigrants, the media and politicians are fuelling and pandering to society's worst prejudices.

The far right British National Party (BNP) in Britain has had some degree of success in recent times by specifically tapping into such frustrations and prejudices held within white working class communities in economically deprived areas. The Labour Party has abandoned this constituency of voters and has let in the BNP and the English Defence League (EDL). The EDL has especially attempted to whip up simplistic, knee-jerk anti-Islam feeling on the back of complex issues pertaining to identity, culture, race and class.

But this isn't confined to Britain or Europe. In the US, Sarah Palin played her part in fuelling the establishment's agenda by fanning controversy over the proposed construction of a mosque and community centre near 'Ground Zero', the site of the 9/11 Twin Towers attack in New York, by calling it an "unnecessary provocation."

In 2010, Palin wrote in a Twitter post, "Peace-seeking Muslims, pls understand, Ground Zero mosque is UNNECESSARY provocation; it stabs hearts." And people opposing the mosque dominated a hearing on the subject.

"It would be a terrible mistake to destroy a 154-year-old building in order to build a monument to terrorism," one woman was reported as saying.

"A monument to terrorism" – it seems strange that she would talk of a mosque in such a way while ignoring the genuine living, breathing monument – GW Bush – or for that matter Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, Bill Clinton or Tony Blair, who had all felt justified in applying sanctions and killing hundreds of thousands in Iraq, bombing innocent people in Sudan or supporting various wars and despots.

In April 2011, the law that was passed in France banning full-face veils in public places targeted about 2,000 people out of a French population of more than 65 million. As recently reported in the New York Times, Mohammed Henniche, secretary general of the private Union of Muslim Associations of Seine-Saint-Denis, has said that the effects have been that such women now limit their moves and stay in their own neighborhood, while others have reluctantly removed the veil in public places. He believes the ban is part of a political effort to stigmatise a community. With that in mind, over the last year in France there have been controversies over the height of minarets, halal fast food, prayers in the streets when mosques overflow, halal meals in schools and the right of foreigners to vote in local elections.

All of this is not being carried out in the name of secularism and freedom, as much of the media and politicians would have us believe, but in the cause of empire and repression because it is the direct result and ideological underpinning of modern imperial wars of occupation and intervention.

From Libya and Sudan through to Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and into Pakistan, the US and its proxies have stoked up ethnic and political tensions and have attacked or debased the sovereignty of nation states in an attempt to secure control of the entire region. Iran is a work in progress. Whether it is part of the bogus 'war on terror' and 'civilising the barbarians', or whether it occurs under the lie of 'humanitarianism', US-led imperialism has effectively brought an arc of tragedy to the region. And it's a tragedy of epic proportions.

But the links between predatory capitalism, economic crisis, war and the rise of intolerance are sidelined in favour of a narrow, simplistic discussion that merely focuses on the differences between 'them' (Muslims) and 'us', how multi-culturalism (ie tolerance!) has apparently failed and how it is time for 'them' to conform and be clamped down on.

Instead of holding to account and directly challenging the wider system of capitalism and empire, politicians and the mainstream media seek out proxies to blame for the economic crisis, unemployment, the running down of public services or acts of terror at home. If the West really wants to prevent terrorism, for instance, it should take Noam Chomsky's advice: stop committing it!

The West has a long legacy of bloody colonial exploits and consequent scapegoating, racism and fanning the flames of hate. It has always excelled in divide and rule. It still does. Try building a minaret in Switzerland or wearing a niqab in Paris. Better still, just listen to Sarah Palin – if you can bear to.

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