

CHAPTER II

RISING OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AFTER THE "9/11" INCIDENT

Islamophobia is a new term used to refer to an irrational fear or prejudice towards Muslims and the religion of Islam. Some believe that prejudice against Muslims has increased since the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US war against terror. Many human rights organizations have documented this recent increase in Islamophobic events and hate crimes against Muslims and Islamic organizations have done the same. Secretary-General Kofi Annan told a December 7, 2004 UN conference on the emergence of Islamophobia that "(when) the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry — that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with 'Islamophobia'

⁹ American journalist Stephen Schwartz has defined Islamophobia as the condemnation of the entirety of Islam and its history as extremist, denying the existence of a moderate Muslim majority, regarding Islam as a problem for the world, treating conflicts involving Muslims as necessarily their own fault, insisting that Muslims make changes to their religion, and inciting war against Islam as a whole.¹⁰

Post "9/11" has changed our world dramatically and significantly affected relations between the West and the Muslim world, the lives of many Muslims in the West, and the state of Muslim-Christian relations. The continued threat and response to global terrorism in a post "9/11" world must walk a fine line between distinguishing between the faith of Islam and violence and terror in the name of Islam, and between the majority of mainstream Muslims and the acts of a minority of Muslim extremists and terrorists. Blurring these distinctions risks the adoption of

⁹ Kofi Annan, Secretary-General, Addressing Headquarters Seminar on Confronting Islamophobia, Stresses Importance of Leadership, Two-Way Integration, Dialogue, "Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding," *United Nations press release*, December 7, 2004.

¹⁰ Kenan Malik, "Is Islamophobia a myth?", *Prospect Magazine*, issue 107-108 (February-March 2005).

foreign and domestic policies that promote a clash rather than co-existence of cultures. Islamophobia is not simply a Muslim problem it is “our” problem.

“9/11” Incident and the US war on terror

The 'War on Terrorism', “War on Terror” or “Long War” can refer to several distinct conflicts, but it is most recently the name given by the United States of America and its allies to an ongoing campaign with the stated goal of "ending international terrorism," launched in direct response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S., for which al-Qaeda claimed responsibility. The campaign's stated goals include preventing those groups identified as "terrorist" by the United States (largely focused on militant Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates) from carrying out attacks and posing a threat to America and its allies; "spreading freedom" and liberal democracy; and putting an end to state sponsorship of terrorism in so-called rogue and failed states, beginning with Operation Active Endeavor, NATO's anti-terrorism response to the trafficking of weapons. It was followed by the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, which had sheltered elements of al-Qaeda including its leader, Osama Bin Laden.¹¹

The Bush Administration said it intended to base its counterterrorism strategy on several step. Its main Objective and strategies are as follows; (1) Defeat terrorists and their organizations. (2) Identify, locate and destroy terrorists along with their organizations. (3) Deny sponsorship, support and sanctuary to terrorists (4) Diminish the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit. (5) Defend U.S. citizens and interests at home and abroad.¹²

In the Strategy for Countering Terrorism, first, the successes in the Global War On Terrorism are presented and the phenomenon of terrorism is discussed, particularly the issue of Trans nationalization and refuge states. What follows is a

¹¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/nationalsecurity/index.html>.

¹² http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/counter_terrorism/counter_terrorism_strategy.pdf.

presentation of a concrete strategy against terrorism. The long range strategy it is to further the spread of democracy and support democratic changes. The formerly named causes for terrorism are repeated with the argument, that democracy is capable of demising all of them. Political isolation is replaced by participation, frustration and accusation are replaced by the rule of law and peaceful conflict resolution. Finally, an ideology that furthers violence is replaced by the respect for human dignity. So, democracy is the antithesis of and the solution to terrorism. Short term, though, one will refer further to military means. One will attack terrorist organizations in all their dimensions and diminish their capability to attack.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a controversial neologism defined as the phenomenon of prejudice against or demonization of Muslims, which manifests itself in general negative attitudes, violence, harassment, discrimination, and stereotyping (particularly vilification in the media). The term dates back to the late 1980s or early 90s, although its use has increased since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Others have called it a myth, arguing that references to Islamophobia confuse legitimate criticism of Islam with discrimination against Muslims. An intermediate position characterizes Islamophobia as a real phenomenon, even if the word is sometimes misused to attack all opponents of Islamic radicalism.¹³

Nature of the concept

Islamophobia was a new name to an old phenomenon, and that "stereotyped and disrespectful comments about Islam were allowed to circulate and be published with the outcome that hatred and prejudice against Islam gained credibility, and the stereotyping in media coverage became a global sport." ¹⁴ since the "9/11" attacks, religion has surpassed race as the primary focus of conflict, and that a person's

¹³ Dominic Casciani, "Islamophobia pervades UK – report," *BBC News*, June 2, 2004.

¹⁴ Rima Berns McGowan, *Muslims in the Diaspora* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 268.

religion is regarded as synonymous with their culture. In the case of Muslims, this opens up another dimension of prejudice,

In 1996, the Runnymede Trust, an independent anti-racist think tank in the UK, established the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. In the following year, the commission's report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All* Trust¹⁵ described Islamophobia as involving eight distinctive features: (1) Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change. (2) It 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. (3) It is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist. (4) It is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a Clash of Civilizations. (5) It is seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage. (6) Criticisms made of 'the West' by Islam are rejected out of hand. (7) Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society. (8) Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and notwithstanding the arguments of some Westerners. In a book - *Islamophobia exists; it is not a myth*¹⁶ describes that Islamophobia consists of: (1) attacking the entire religion of Islam as a problem for the world; (2) condemning all of Islam and its history as extremist; (3) denying the active existence, in the contemporary world, of a moderate Muslim majority; (4) insisting that Muslims accede to the demands of non-Muslims (based on ignorance and arrogance) for various theological changes, in their religion; (5) treating all conflicts involving Muslims, as the fault of Muslims themselves; (6) inciting war against Islam as a whole.

While there may be by this definition some Islamophobes in the world, the definition actually obscures more than it reveals. Does the labeling as 'Islamophobic' the practice of attacking the entire religion of Islam as a problem for the world mean that it is Islamophobic to focus attention on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet

¹⁵ *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997).

¹⁶ "Colonialism, Criminalized Tribes and Islamophobia," in *Muslims and Crime: A Comparative Study*, ed. Muzammil Quraishi, 60 (Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005).

as motivations for terrorist activity? If so, then jihad terrorists worldwide are themselves Islamophobic, for as we have seen, they routinely point to jihad passages from the Qur'an and Hadith to justify their actions. Nor is a frank discussion of the doctrine of Islamic jihad equivalent to saying that the entire religion of Islam is a problem for the world no one is saying that tayammum (ablution with sand instead of water) or dhikr (a dervish religious devotion) or other elements of Islam pose a problem for the world.

Defining as 'Islamophobic' the condemnation of all of Islam and its history as extremist is similarly problematic. Likewise; it may be 'Islamophobic' to deny the active existence, in the contemporary world, of a moderate Muslim majority, but this also is beside the point. The existence of a moderate Muslim majority is not a question of Islamophobia but it is a fact that is very hard to determine with certainty not least because of the problem of definition: it's useless to affirm that there is a "moderate Muslim majority" without clearing up the meaning of the word moderate. What makes a moderate Muslim? One who does not and never will engage in terrorist acts? That would make moderates an overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide. Or is a moderate one who sincerely disapproves of those terrorist acts? That would reduce the number of moderates. Or is a moderate Muslim one who actively speaks out and works against the jihadists? That would lower the number yet again. Or finally, is a moderate Muslim one who actively engages the jihadists in a theological battle, trying to convince Muslims on Islamic grounds that jihad terrorism is wrong? That would leave us with a tiny handful.

Notwithstanding that fact, however, it would be silly for anyone to treat all conflicts involving Muslims as the fault of Muslims themselves, or to incite war against Islam as a whole. To go to war with Islam as whole all this indicates that 'Islamophobia' is virtually useless as an analytical tool. To adopt it would be to allow oneself to submit to the most potent form of theological equivalence, and to affirm, against all the evidence, that every religious tradition is equally capable of inspiring violence. It would be to deny the very sensible observation of the eminent doubter

even worse than all this, however, is the way the charge of ‘Islamophobia’ is used to silence opponents of the jihad ideology.

Islamophobia can be characterized by the belief that all or most Muslims are religious fanatics, have violent tendencies towards non-Muslims, and reject as directly opposed to Islam such concepts as equality, tolerance, and democracy.

Islam & Islamophobia

In his address to the nation on September 11, 2006, President Bush’s arguments revealed the perverse logic of Islamophobia today:

*“Since the horror of 9/11, we’ve learned a great deal about the enemy. And we have learned that their goal is to build a radical Islamic empire where women are prisoners in their homes, men are beaten for missing prayer meetings, and terrorists have a safe haven to plan and launch attacks on America and other civilized nations. The war against this enemy is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation.... This struggle has been called a clash of civilizations. In truth, it is a struggle for civilization. We are fighting to maintain the way of life enjoyed by free nations”.*¹⁷

The common thread that ties together all these attacks on Islam is a polarized view of the world. On one side are the values of freedom, democracy, rationality, women’s rights, liberty, and civilization; all associated, furthermore, with Christianity. On the other side are a people who are irrational, evil, barbaric, and uncivilized; who hate freedom and democracy and want to create, according to Bush, an Islamic empire stretching from Europe to South East Asia.

In short, Islamophobia today has wide significance. However, these attitudes and ideas are not new, and they were not developed by the Bush or Blair administrations. Rather, Islamophobia in its current form derives from a body of

¹⁷ “President’s address to the nation,” September 11, 2006, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060911-3.html>.

knowledge known as ‘Orientalist’ thought, which came into being in the late eighteenth century

Orientalist root

Imperial nations as Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and other embarked on a mission of colonial expansion, they developed ideologies to justify conquest. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, colonizers justified the slaughter and exploitation of the Indians in the New World by arguing that the Indian ‘savages’ were wild animals, idolaters whom God had ordained to be enslaved by Christians.¹⁸ The enslavement of Africans was similarly justified through the book of Genesis. It was argued that Africans were a cursed people (drawn from the myth of the Curse of Ham or Canaan) whose skin color had blackened to mark the curse. Thus, even after the African slaves converted to Christianity they could be retained as slaves.¹⁹

In the late nineteenth century, when the British poet Rudyard Kipling wrote “The white man’s burden” he was simply reinforcing an idea that was by then widespread. Kipling wrote of the inherent superiority of the West and their ‘burden’ to civilize and tame the peoples of the East. Characterized as half devil, half child, the colonized were seen as both evil/barbaric, but also childlike and therefore in need of protection. Originally published in 1899, Kipling used the subtitle “The United States and the Philippine Islands,” as a way to urge the U.S. to take on the same responsibilities as the British.²⁰

The Orientalist thought that emerged from this process has a few characteristic features. First, it draws on a “civilizational” view of history the idea that civilizations come into being, prospers, and then goes into decline. Such a view of history assumes that civilizations are distinct entities, which exist in isolation from each other, and which have a core set of values that drive them. Freedom, law, rationality, science, progress, intellectual curiosity, the spirit of invention, and so on,

¹⁸ Deepa Kumar, “Islam and Islamophobia,” *International Socialist Review*, issue 52, (March–April 2007), available at <http://www.isreview.org/issues/52/islamophobia.shtml>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.2

²⁰ *Ibid.*

were seen as the core values of the so-called West, thus constructing the West as a unique civilization with its roots in ancient Greece. Every other civilization was then defined in relation to this notion of a superior West, while the world of Islam is expected to be as authoritarian, static, inequitable, and rigid.

In addition to civilizational theories, the Orientalists drew on the theories of race discussed above that placed European Caucasians at the top of the racial hierarchy and colonized peoples close to the bottom.

Orientalists argue that the West is a dynamic, complex, and ever changing society, while the Orient, and particularly the world of Islam, is static, barbaric, and despotic, and therefore in need of Western intervention to bring about progressive change.

Modern-day Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington have argued that the conflict between the U.S. and the Middle East is a “clash of civilizations.” According to Huntington, who has done much to popularize this notion, western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little significance in Islamic societies.

While these ideas remained on the margins during the 1990s, when the Clinton administration preferred the language of “humanitarian intervention” to justify U.S. imperialism, they have now assumed center stage after “9/11”, with both the Republicans and Democrats equally comfortable with this rhetoric. The end result is a political climate in the U.S. where Islamophobic ideas are largely taken for granted, large sections of the Left have internalized the “clash of civilizations” thesis.

Marxist approach to religion and then expose five inter-related myths about Islam and the West that are in play today:

1. Islam is a monolithic religion
2. Islam is a uniquely sexist religion
3. The “Muslim mind” is incapable of rationality and science
4. Islam is inherently violent
5. The West spreads democracy, Islam spawns terrorism.

Marxists have argued that the motion for religious thought initially emerged from human beings’ relative lack of control over nature, and later, the oppressed condition of the exploited majority. As Frederick Engels notes, ‘All religion...is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces’. In the beginning of history it was the forces of nature which were first so reflected and which in the course of further evolution underwent the most manifold and varied personifications among various people.²¹

Religion has since played a contradictory role in history. It has functioned as part of the ideological apparatus of ruling classes, and as an ideology of the oppressed. Christianity, for example, emerged as the religion of the oppressed against the exploitation of the Romans. However, once the Roman Empire accepted the religion it was transformed into its opposite; it became a bulwark of the system.²² Different denominations of Islam have followed a similar route, for example Shiism in Iran. Religion’s mass appeal in most cases, however, has not been as a challenge to the status quo, but as a comfort and solace for the oppressed.

At various points, religious wars have been fought by various sects. Marxists understand these wars as being motivated not by particular religious

²¹ Kumar, “Islam and Islamophobia,” p. 4.

²² Ibid.

differences, but by the class interests represented by the various factions. In his analysis of the Reformation in Germany, Engels writes:

In short, the role of religion in any society is best understood by examining the specific historical conditions that constitute that society. All the major religions of the world have undergone transformations in order to adapt to changing circumstances. In some instances, religion has played a progressive role and in others a reactionary one. In still others, it has simply adapted to new conditions in order to retain its mass appeal.

Islam is a monolithic religion

The idea that Islam is a monolithic religion is not only false but functions as the basis for all the other myths. For it is only by denying the diversity of Islamic history and practices that one can then argue that it has certain inherent, unchanging characteristics that render it anti-democratic, violent, and backward-looking, etc.

Islam is practiced in dozens of countries around the world. According to U.S. State Department figures, nearly 1.5 billion people around the world are Muslims 85 percent are Sunni and 15 percent are Shiites. Within these two main denominations, there are many more branches.

There are several countries and regions which have majority Muslim populations, and they span the globe from Indonesia to Bangladesh, to several central Asian countries, the Middle East, and North Africa. Islam looks very different in each of these regions and countries largely because as the religion spread it adopted the customs and traditions of the people of various lands. Thus, Sufi Islam practiced in Northern India is quite different from Wahabi/Salafi Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, which is in turn different from the type of Shiism practiced in Iran. The claim that Islam is a homogenous and monolithic religion is therefore ludicrous, given the diversity of Islamic practices in nations that run the gamut from secular democracies such as Indonesia to dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia.

Much of the current Islamophobic rhetoric seeks to demonize Arabs in particular. However, all Muslims are not Arabs, and all Arabs are not Muslims. Arabs are people who speak Arabic, share certain common cultural traditions, and claim a common Arab identity. Geographically, the Arab world has traditionally been divided into two parts (east and west of the river Nile): the Maghreb or the West, which includes Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and so on, and the Mashreq or the East, which includes Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and all the countries to the east up to, but not including, Iran. Because of linguistic and cultural differences, Iranians and Turks are not considered Arabs.

Islam is no different to any other. It arose in one context, among a trading community in the towns of 7th century Arabia, in the midst of a society still mainly organized on a tribal basis. It flourished within the succession of great empires carved out by some of those who accepted its doctrines. It persists today as the official ideology of numerous capitalist states (Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran etc), as well as the inspiration of many oppositional movements.

Islam is a uniquely sexist religion

Islam is unique in its sexist approach to women, goes an oft-repeated argument, and therefore, Muslim women need to be rescued by white men in their pith helmets and jodhpurs. This was one of the arguments that the Bush administration used to justify its war on Afghanistan. And more recently, France passed a ban on the hijab (couched as a ban on all religious symbols in schools) and many argued that this would “liberate” Muslim women. The reality is that neither Afghan nor French Muslim women have been liberated by these actions.

This argument about women’s liberation has a long history. The British used a similar justification when they invaded and occupied Egypt in 1882. Lord Cromer, who oversaw the occupation, viewed Egyptian society and Islam as follows: “Islam as a social system has been a complete failure...the degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten

into the whole system of Islam.”²³ The solution was that Muslims “be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilization.”²⁴ For Cromer there was no contradiction between championing women’s rights in Egypt while trying to curtail them at home. As a colonial overlord, he was simply deploying arguments that could strengthen Britain’s hold over Egypt. At home in Britain, he was against women’s rights and was a founding member and president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage. Similarly, while the Bush administration trumpeted women’s liberation in Afghanistan, it has sought to further curtail women’s rights at home.

Imperialist justifications for war and occupation have always been a deception, but one might still ask if Islam as a religion is uniquely oppressive towards women. After all, women’s rights have been severely shortened by right-wing Islamist regimes in power, such as that in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Islam was adopted the cultural practices of various empires, including that of the neighboring Persian and the Byzantine empires. Among the Christians who populated the Middle East and the Mediterranean there were more rigid customs associated with women. In the Christian Byzantine Empire, the sexes were segregated, women were not supposed to be to be seen in public, they had to be veiled, and were given only rudimentary education. As the expanding Islamic empire incorporated these regions, it also assimilated these cultural and social practices.

The “Muslim mind” is incapable of science, rational thinking, and reason

Pope Benedict XVI gave his now-infamous speech on September 12, 2006, he connected Catholicism with reason and Islam with violence and the lack of reason. In making this argument, the Pope joined a long line of Orientalists who have argued that reason, rationality, and science are alien to the world of Islam.

²³ Kumar, “Islam and Islamophobia,” p.6

²⁴ Ibid.

Ernest Renan, who championed science and reason, in an essay published in 1883 titled “Islam and Science” stated: “Early Islam and the Arabs who professed it were hostile to scientific and philosophic spirit.” And anyone with any knowledge of current affairs can see quite clearly the actual weakness of the Muslim countries, the dissolution of the states governed by Islam, the intellectual barrenness of the races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone.

Today, the so-called debate on whether Iran should be allowed to have nuclear weapons draws from these arguments. The mainstream media faithfully reproduce the line of the political elites and don’t raise the question of why it is legitimate for the U.S. to police other nations, especially when it is the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons. Iran is represented, at best, as a petulant child incapable of responsibly handling nuclear technology, and at worst, a demonic force that must be vanquished. Little time is devoted to shedding light on why Iran, as a rational political actor, might want to acquire nuclear weapons. After all, Iran is surrounded by states that possess nukes such as India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and Israel, not to mention by U.S. bases in Qatar, Iraq, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, which might have nuclear weapons.

There are many ways to expose this myth about Islam, science, and rationality. The important point here is that the West would not have gone through the renaissance had it not been for the contributions made by the Muslim empires.

After the fall of Rome from the fifth to the tenth century, Europe entered the so-called Dark Ages, a period of scientific, artistic, and cultural decline. During the seventh century, Islam came onto the scene and the Muslim armies established a vast empire that stretched from Central Asia through parts of Europe, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The Muslim rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (661–1258 AD) recognized the advanced development of the kingdoms and cultures they had conquered and took it upon themselves to assimilate and adopt these cultures. They established libraries and translation centers where the great works of science, medicine, and philosophy, both Eastern and Western, were collected and translated. This age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity when a new

generation of Muslim thinkers and scientists built upon this knowledge and made their own contributions.

When Europe emerged from the Dark Ages, its renaissance in art, culture, and the sciences drew on this enduring legacy of the past, as European thinkers flocked to the great Muslim libraries to not only re-learn their own history and traditions, but also absorb the further development of these traditions by Muslim thinkers. But this history is either ignored or revised by the Orientalists who present this mythical entity known as the “West” that apparently developed in isolation from the rest of the world.

Islam is an inherently violent religion

Today, it has become common place to argue that Islam is an inherently violent religion and that the growth of political Islam is the logical result of the teachings of the Koran.

One of the Danish cartoons featured the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb on his turban. This is nothing if not the visual depiction of the notion that Islam is inherently violent. The term “jihad” is used repeatedly to signify a “holy war” that the East is supposedly waging against the West. Mahmood Mamdani argues against this translation, stating that the term jihad has two meanings. The first, which is the greater jihad, refers to the struggle within oneself and against one’s own weakness. The second, the lesser jihad, is about self-preservation and self-defense and is more appropriately described as a “just war” rather than a “holy war.”

Yet, this is not how the history of Islam is represented by politicians and the media. Instead, Islam is portrayed as a violent and intolerant religion. Thus, Bush routinely refers to the “enemy” as “evil doers” turned on destroying the West through violence and establishing a “radical Islamic empire.” U.S. News and World Report recently featured a historical overview of Islam titled “Spreading the faith: A chronology,” that begins with the birth of Muhammad in 570 and ends with “9/11”

These claims are self-serving, and justify a level of violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine on the part of the United States, its allies, and Israel that far surpasses the scale of killing and devastation, anything that the small bands of terrorists have inflicted in the United States, Israel, or Europe.

The claim that Islam was spread through war is indeed correct. In the two decades after the Prophet's death in 632 A.D., the Muslim armies defeated the two great neighboring empires, the Byzantine and Persian (Sassanid) empires, conquered large part of their land, and set up an Islamic empire,

Christianity had also risen to dominance through conquest and conversion, first in the Roman world and then in the neighboring areas of Europe, Armenia, Arabia, Eastern Africa and Central Asia

The struggle between Islam and the West has lasted fourteen centuries. It has consisted of a long series of attacks and counterattacks, jihads and crusades, conquests and re-conquests. Today much of the Muslim world is again seized by an intense and violent resentment of the West.

Mamdani recently observed that after "9/11", the sales of the Koran rose as Americans sought out the holy book of the Muslims to find an explanation for "9/11". He pointed out that, on the contrary, when the U.S. bombed and destroyed Afghanistan and Iraq, the people of the Middle East didn't rush off to buy the Bible to look for explanations of U.S. policies. For there are no cultural or religious explanations for these wars, the explanations are historical, political, and economic, but by focusing on religious wars, the peddlers of the "clash of civilizations" thesis insist that we look for cultural explanations instead. This recourse to "culture talk" then takes attention away from the real reasons for U.S. intervention, offering up instead some vague references to Transhistorical civilization and cultural rivalries.²⁵

There are some in the Middle East who share this view and see U.S. intervention as a cultural and religious war. However, in this they are just as mistaken

²⁵ Kumar, "Islam and Islamophobia," p.6.

as their Western counterparts. The U.S. is in Iraq and Afghanistan not to wage a religious war but to assert its control over the region's strategic resource: oil. This is why Saudi Arabia, whose royal family adheres to the ultra-conservative Wahhabi/Salafi strand of Islam, is an ally of the U.S., while the largely secular Syrian Baathists are not.

The West spreads democracy, while Islam spawns terrorism

This idea peruses that Islamic civilization is not capable of democracy, and it can only produce despotism. Since it is a static and unchanging society, it is the burden of the West to civilize, modernize, and democratize. This "white man's burden" argument has been used, in different forms and guises, by all the European powers in the past. It is no wonder, then, that today the U.S. too, finds it useful, just as it seeks, for the first time, to actually occupy and administer a Middle Eastern country. The Bush administration has insisted again and again that the U.S. is in the Middle East to bring democracy to the people of the region.

The Middle East and North Africa were shock by national liberation struggles after the Second World War. Between 1932 and 1962, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria all succeeded in shaking off the hold of their colonial masters (mainly Britain and France). In the wake of these struggles there was a widespread mood for reform and change in region, and new political and social forces emerged. Secular Arab nationalism gained a stronghold, but socialist and communist parties also vied for political influence.

U.S.-Middle East policy has been motivated by one chief objective: namely, to control the oil wealth of that region, at any cost. Consequently, U.S. foreign policy has been directed toward preventing the emergence of any government or movement that might threaten its dominance in the region. Thus the U.S. ruling class viewed the emergence of Arab nationalism and socialism as a threat. From the 1950s to the 1970s, U.S. policy in the region was twofold: to minimize the influence of the Soviet Union, and to squash all progressive and leftist challenges to U.S. domination.

The strongest challenge to the U.S. was Arab nationalism. Arab nationalists like Gamel Abdel Nasser attempted to unify Arabs across different countries as a way to fight imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism. The program of Arab nationalism rapidly acquired revolutionary overtones in response to militant working-class pressures from below. Nasser, the president of Egypt, went so far as to declare himself an advocate of “Arab socialism.” Although what he meant by socialism was a more or less authoritarian state planning of the economy, or “state capitalism,” even this was too much for the U.S.

The U.S. played a key role in marginalizing secular and leftist forces, thereby creating the political vacuum that Islamist groups would come to fill. In addition, the U.S. funded, armed, and trained the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to fight their proxy war against the Soviets in the 1980s. In the process, the U.S. created an army of jihadist fighters who would turn on their patrons once the Soviets were defeated. This turn was to be expected, given that modern Islamist organizations, whether mainstream or right wing, came into being as a means to fight imperialism

There are also internal factors that explain the rise of political Islam. Arab nationalism, despite its radical rhetoric and promises, had weaknesses and contradictions. Ultimately, it was a movement of the middle classes in the interest of the middle classes. And like their counterparts in many other postcolonial nations, the Arab nationalists failed to deliver economic growth and prosperity for the vast majority of ordinary people, establishing oppressive dictatorships that flattened dissent. The Left in the region, primarily the thoroughly Stalinized communist parties, failed to offer an independent class-based alternative to the nationalists, but rather tailed them uncritically. In short, it is a combination of these pressures U.S. imperialism, on the one hand, and internal dynamics on the other that laid the groundwork for the emergence of political Islam. And radical Islamist groups, far from being the direct outgrowth of the teaching of the Prophet in the seventh century, are the products of particular historical conditions.

Today, the weakness of the Left and the collapse of liberalism in the U.S. have meant that much of the history discussed in this article remains hidden. Many liberals and some on the left as well, have bought into the clash of civilizations argument. Thus, when liberals went along with Bush's argument that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to liberate the women of that country, they bought into the racist idea that it is legitimate for the U.S. to "democratize" the Middle East because the people of the region are incapable of doing it themselves. On the flip side of this coin, some anti-war liberals have argued that it is not legitimate for the U.S. to "democratize" the Middle East because "democracy" is an alien concept to the people of the region.

Confronting Islamophobia and challenging American racism towards the people of the Middle East is an essential precondition for the rebirth of a strong anti-war movement. Thus far, the movement's inability, or unwillingness, to confront Islamophobia has been one of its biggest weaknesses. And while Bush argues that "the calling of our generation" is to fight "Islamofascism," we need to assert instead that the calling of our generation is to build an anti-racist anti-war movement that can challenge the attacks on Muslims and Arabs domestically and that can stop U.S. imperialism in its tracks and shape the course of the twenty-first century. Our future, quite literally, depends on building such a movement.