

Politics and Religion: Stoking the Fires of Islamophobia in the US Congress

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Global Research, March 28, 2011

28 March 2011

Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [Religion](#)

It is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of their leaders. That is easy. All you have to tell them is that they are being attacked and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country. (Hermann Goering, Nuremberg Trials)

What the daily press reports as the malign acts of 'terrorists' or 'drug lords' or 'rogue states' or 'illegal arms merchants' often turn out to be blowbacks from earlier American operations. (Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*)

The House Homeland Security Committee's hearings on "Muslim radicalization," which began on March 10 and expected to be held periodically for 18 months, are objectionable on a number of grounds.

To begin with, the hearings are championed and chaired by a politician, Congressman Peter King, who is known for his notoriously negative attitude toward Muslims. In an interview with *Politico*, for example, [Mr. King argued](#) that there are "too many mosques in this country. . . . There are too many people sympathetic to radical Islam. . . . We should be looking at them more carefully and finding out how we can infiltrate them." In an earlier interview with radio and television host Sean Hannity, he had said that 85 percent of the mosques in this country are controlled by "extremist leadership," a claim that has been roundly refuted by [evidence](#):

"American Muslims recognize the validity of the democratic process and are eager to participate in it to shape the political environment in which they live. Recent surveys on political attitudes within the community have clearly indicated that American Muslims will participate quite vigorously in the coming presidential elections and will also engage the political process at multiple levels. For example, a recent study of Detroit Muslims showed that over 93% of those surveyed were determined to vote. A survey by the Washington DC based Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) found that 93% of its respondents were registered to vote; of them, 92% were determined to vote."

Not surprisingly, Mr. King's insistence that 85% of American mosques have "extremist leadership" has come under criticism by many law enforcement officials, counter-terrorism professionals, civil rights organizations, religious/interfaith leaders, editorial boards, the American Civil Liberties Union, and more.

Second, by focusing exclusively on Muslims, Mr. King and his cohorts close their eyes on the more numerous instances of violent acts committed by non-Muslim. Using the FBI statistics, [Franklin Lamb points out](#) that between 1980 and 2005 only six percent of terrorist incidents in the US were committed by Muslims while 94% were committed by non-Muslims. "The FBI claims that of the 83 terrorist attacks in the United States between 9/11 and the end of 2009, only three were clearly connected with the jihadist cause (3.6% of total)." Lamb further points out that "The picture is similar in Europe. Of a total of 1,571 terrorist attacks in the E.U. from 2006-2008 only 6 were committed by Islamist terrorists which translates to less than 0.4% of all attacks, which means 99.6% of all attacks were committed by Non-Muslims."

In light of this evidence, it is not surprising that a number of critics have characterized Mr. King's hearings on the "Radicalization of Muslims" as witch hunting or McCarthyism, comparing them with earlier prejudices and persecutions of other ethnic and religious minorities such as Catholics, Jews, African Americans, Asian Americans, and others.

Third, and more importantly, the champions of Muslim hearings completely fail the elementary principal of any problem-solving endeavor: a sound diagnosis of the problem. They make no effort at shedding some light on the submerged factors or causes that may contribute to some Muslims' suspicion of security forces, or some misguided acts of violent behavior. Instead, they (implicitly) attribute such suspicions or behaviors to their religion, or the "pathological problems of the Muslim mind." Rather than asking "Why convulsive reactions of the disenfranchised Muslims (or other ethnic/religious minorities) sometimes take religious form," they ask "What is in Islam that leads to such convulsive reactions?"

While extreme, Mr. King is unfortunately not alone in demonizing Islam and/or Muslims. His is simply a more blatant case of a broader narrative of Muslim-bashing. Mainstream media reports, editorials, political pundits, and talk shows tend to harp on the narrative—some directly, like Fox News, others in subtle ways—that the roots of "Muslim radicalization" must be sought in Islam itself, or in their "hatred of our way of life," as President George W. Bush famously put it.

The pernicious view that "they hate our way of life" is essentially a popularized version of the so-called theory of "the clash of civilizations," which was initially expounded by Samuel P Huntington in the early 1990s. Huntington sets out to identify "new sources" of international conflicts in the post-Cold War world. During the Cold War years, major international conflicts were explained by the "threat of communism" and the rivalry between the two competing world systems. In the post-Cold War era, however, argue Huntington and his co-thinkers, the sources of international rivalries and collisions have shifted to competing and incompatible civilizations, which have their primary roots in religion and/or culture. In other words, international conflicts erupt not because of imperialistic pursuits of economic advantage, territorial conquests, or geopolitical ambitions but because of "Muslim's inability to change."

A more insidious version of Huntington's "clash of civilization" is Richard Perle's strategy of "de-contextualization." Perle, a leading neoconservative militarist (and a prominent advisor to Israel's ultra-nationalist Likud Party) coined the term "de-contextualization" as a way to explain both the desperate acts of terrorism in general and the violent tactics of the Palestinian resistance to occupation in particular. He argued that in order to blunt the widespread global criticism of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians, their resistance to

occupation must be de-contextualized; that is, we must stop trying to understand the territorial, geopolitical and historical reasons that some groups turn to terrorism. Instead, he suggested, the reasons for the violent reactions of such groups must be sought in the arenas of culture and/or religion.

Like Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory and Perle's "de-contextualization" strategy, Congressman King's "radicalization of Muslims" is part of a well-orchestrated effort to divert attention from the root causes of terrorism, and attribute it to "Islamic way of thinking." There are both economics and political forces behind this insidious effort at demonization of Muslims.

Economic interests behind the effort are vested largely in the military-security industries that have mushroomed around the Homeland Security. There is a whole host of security-based technology industries and related businesses that have rapidly spun around the Pentagon and the Homeland Security apparatus in order to cash in on the Pentagon's and Homeland Security's spending bonanza. For example, as William Hartung and Michelle Ciarrocca [point out](#), "Air Structures is introducing fortified vinyl domes for quarantining infected communities in the aftermath of a potential bioterror attack, Visionics is looking into designing facial recognition technology, and PointSource Technologies is developing a sensor to detect biological agents in the air or water."

Just as the notorious military-industrial complex is known for inventing external enemies in order to justify the continued escalation of the Pentagon budget, so does the Homeland Security needs enemies and "threats to national security" in order to justify both its parasitic role and its lion's share of our tax dollars. In light of the fact that Homeland Security has become an effective money-making machine in the hands of some of the powerful technology corporations, it is no accident that Mr. King, one of the most Islamophobic members of the Congress, is selected to chair the Homeland Security Committee of the House of Representatives.

The politics of the witch-hunting Muslim hearings are equally dubious. In his pursuit of higher office and re-election, Mr. King is known for eagerly groveling to the Christian Right and the Israeli lobby. His McCarthy-type hearings suit this nefarious purpose well. While monetary and military support for the colonial policies of the state of Israel is essential to garnering the electoral clout of the Jewish and Christian Zionism, demonization of Muslims is also viewed to be an added service to these powerful groups. Muslim-bashing has indeed become a major component of the support for Israel.

While an extreme case, Mr. King's political strategy of pandering to special interests at the expense social cohesion and long-term national interests is tragically not rare. It includes most American politicians. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the members of the US Congress, as well as the resident of the White House, routinely compete with each other in doing the bidding of the military-industrial-security-Israeli lobbies.

Bigotry, intolerance and xenophobia also play an important role in the demonization of Muslims. Not only is the anti-Muslim propaganda divisive and detrimental to social peace and stability, it is also disingenuous. I suspect that Mr. King and his Islamophobic cohorts are afraid not so much of the US "Muslim radicalization/terrorism," or of the absurd view that "Muslims may establish the *Sharia* judicial system in America," as they are of the Muslims' steady advancements and achievements in all fields of the American socio-economic and political life—that is, of their gradually becoming part of the American mainstream.

Not only does the insidious view that Islam is “incompatible” with change and Western values tend to sow the seeds of ignorance, hatred and social tension, it also fails the test of history. The history of the relationship between the modern Western world and the Muslim world shows that, contrary to popular perceptions in the West, from the time of their initial contacts with the capitalist West more than two centuries ago until almost the final third of the twentieth century, the Muslim people were quite receptive of the socio-economic and political models of the modern world. Many people in the Muslim world, including the majority of their political leaders, were eager to transform and restructure their societies after the model of the capitalist West. The majority of political leaders, as well as a significant number of Islamic experts and intellectuals, viewed the rise of the modern West and its spread into their lands as inevitable historical developments that challenged them to chart their own programs of reform and development. John L Esposito, one of the leading experts of Islamic studies in the United States, describes the early attitude of the political and economic policy makers of the Muslim world toward the modern world of the West:

“Both the indigenous elites, who guided government development programs in newly emerging Muslim states, and their foreign patrons and advisers were Western-oriented and Western-educated. All proceeded from a premise that equated modernization with Westernization. The clear goal and presupposition of development was that every day and in every way things should become more modern (i.e., Western and secular), from cities, buildings, bureaucracies, companies, and schools to politics and culture. While some warned of the need to be selective, the desired direction and pace of change were unmistakable. Even those Muslims who spoke of selective change did so within a context which called for the separation of religion from public life. Western analysts and Muslim experts alike tended to regard a Western-based process of modernization as necessary and inevitable” (*The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 9.)

In light of this background, the question arises: What changed that entire earlier receptive and respectful attitude toward the West to the current attitude of suspicion and disrespect?

The answer to this question rests more with the policies of the Western powers in Muslim lands than the alleged rigidity of Islam, or “the clash of civilizations.” It was only after more than a century and a half of imperialistic pursuits, and a series of humiliating policies in the region, that the popular masses of the Muslim world turned to religion as sources of defiance, mobilization, and self-respect. In other words, for many Muslims the recent turn to religion represents not so much a rejection of Western values and achievements as it is a way to resist or defy the oppressive policies and alliances of Western powers in the Muslim world.

Most of today’s regimes in the Muslim world such as those ruling in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt (even after Mubarak), Jordan, Kuwait, and a number of smaller kingdoms in the Persian Gulf area are able to maintain their dictatorial rule not because their people want them to stay in power but because they are useful to some powerful interests abroad.

It is not surprising, then, that many people in these countries are increasingly asking: Why can’t we elect our own governments? Why can’t we have independent political parties? Why can’t we breathe, so to speak? Why are our governments so corrupt? Why are our people, especially Palestinians, treated like this? Why are we ruled by regimes we don’t like and don’t want, but cannot change? And why can’t we change them? Well, the majority of these countries’ citizens would answer, “Because certain powerful interests in the West, especially in the United States, need them and want them in power.”

Nor is it surprising that many people in the Muslim world, especially the frustrated youth, join the ranks of militant anti-U.S. forces and employ religion as a weapon of mobilization and defiance. Correlation between U.S. foreign policy and such reactions was unambiguously acknowledged by the members of the United States' Defense Science Board, who wrote in a 1997 report to the Undersecretary of Defense for acquisition and science, "Historical data shows a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States."

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