

Rethinking Islamophobia: Myth or Reality

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ABSTRACT

Does Islamophobia really exist? Or is the hatred and abuse of Muslims being exaggerated to suit politicians' needs and silence the critics of Islam? The trouble with Islamophobia is that it is an irrational concept. It confuses hatred of, and discrimination against, Muslims on the one hand with criticism of Islam on the other. The charge of 'Islamophobia' is all too often used not to highlight racism but to stifle criticism. Islamophobia can generally be defined as unfounded fear of and hostility towards Islam. Such fear and hostility leads to discrimination against Muslim, exclusion of Muslim from mainstream political or social process, stereotyping, the presumption of guilt by association and hate crimes. This paper focuses on terrorism, and to be more precise, the issue of Islamophobia because of the misperception towards Islam. These issues become even more crucial when such phobia has led to a stress among the world community. People need to understand what Islam really meant, so that they would be clear that they cannot judge Islam by looking at the Muslim itself. Thus, the question arises whether the idea of 'Islamophobia' is a myth, or a reality?

Keyword: Islamophobia, Propaganda, Islam

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the United Nations general assembly gets underway in New York, a push is on by the 57-member-country Organisation of Islamic Co-operation to make blasphemy an international criminal offence. This has long been a goal for many Muslim countries but it has new impetus after an amateur film mocking the Muslim prophet Muhammad was posted on the internet. Since then, a French satirical newspaper has published some cartoons that depict Muhammad naked, and, in Australia, some serving and former soldiers have posted anti-Muslim comments on a website. The response from the worldwide Islamic community to all these events has ranged from violent, even deadly protests, to a Pakistani government minister offering a bounty for the death of the film-maker, to the more general charge of Islamophobia. But is Islamophobia a reality or a myth? One expert says the term has been used to silence debate about Islam. Writing in The Australian newspaper recently, Clive Kessler called it a 'moral bludgeon'. Clive Kessler is emeritus professor at the University of NSW and an expert in the sociology of religion. He's spent 40 years studying Islam, especially in Asia, specifically in Malaysia and he challenges the idea that Islamophobia is rife. Kenan Malik (2005) says:

“Ten years ago, no one had heard of Islamophobia. Now everyone from Muslim leaders to anti-racist activists to government ministers want to convince us that Britain is in the grip of an irrational hatred of Islam - a hatred that, they claim, leads to institutionalised harassment, physical attacks, social discrimination and political alienation. Former Home Office Minister John Denham has warned of the 'cancer of Islamophobia' infecting the nation. The veteran anti-racist Richard Stone, who was a consultant to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, suggests that Islamophobia is 'a challenge to us all'. The Director of Public Prosecutions has worried that the war on terror is 'alienating whole communities' in this country. The government is so concerned that it is introducing a new law outlawing incitement to religious hatred.”

2. ISLAMOPHOBIA AND FALSE BELIEFS ABOUT ISLAM

Historically, the term Islamophobia has been used since the late 1980s and 1990s which related to the backlash against Muslim immigration from countries like Pakistan and Turkey. However, it became crucial after the September 11th where people especially from the west started to use it as to describe prejudice and fears about Islam. Even worse, people started to believe that Muslims have been taught to be mean, cold or even cruel which eventually ended up with terrorism. A survey thrown by Pew which is a research centre for the people and press shows that 25% of Americans believed that Islam encourages violence more than other religions in 2002, and it even grew to 35%. After the collapse of World Trade Centre, Muslims have been labeled as terrorists and there's a saying that Islam allows all the Muslims to start a war and it eventually led to a stress among world community towards Muslims. On December 12th 2005, Sydney Morning Herald reported that "*A BARE-CHESTED youth in Quiksilver board shorts tore the headscarf off the girl's head as she slithered down the Cronulla dune seeking safety on the beach from a thousand-strong baying mob*".

According to Ghali Hassan (2005), such incident is something that happens commonly in Australia and it's even allowed as the government policies including the criminal war against Iraq and the introduction of "anti-terrorism" laws have legitimized racism against Arab and Muslim Australians. It also said that Islamophobia is encouraged by the Howard-Bush claims that they are engaged in a "war of civilization" against Muslims. Even worse, it is now not uncommon to see white males abusing Muslim women wearing a hijab or headscarf in buses, on beaches, even on the street of Australia's big city and this is because insulting or harassing Muslim women wearing hijab is not an offence in Australia, in fact it is considered as part of Bush-Howard mission of liberal Muslim women. A study conducted by the University of South Wales in 2003 found one in eight Australians interviewed admitted they were prejudiced towards Muslims especially Muslim Australians. Some of them even living in denial of such prejudice and 80% of the surveys recognized racism was a problem. However, racism against Muslims is openly promoted and this decreases the process of integration, it is propagated by a politician as a tool to instill fear in the community besides allowing them to invade Islamic countries.

Perhaps, what has been said by Grand Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi of the Al-Azhar mosque of Cairo as one of the most influential Islamic leaders could clear all the ambiguity as he has condemned all attacks by suicide bombers were the enemies of Islam and those extremist Islamic groups had appropriated Islam and its notion of jihad, or holy struggle for their own ends. According to Sheikh Mohammed (2003) "extremism is the enemy of Islam. Whereas, jihad is allowed in Islam to defend one's land, to help the oppressed. The difference between jihad in extremism and Islam is like the earth and the sky". This flexibility is consistent with the theory of 'responsibility to protect' which required leaders or governments to protect their country or people from any harm that might affect them.

Generally, the world knew that the Qur'an is guidance to all Muslims. The Qur'an comprehends the complete code for Muslims to live a good, chaste, abundant and rewarding life in obedience to the commandments of Allah in this life to gain salvation in the next. It is the chart of life for every Muslim, and it is the constitution of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It should be noted that the concept of war is mentioned in the Qur'an only six times; First, God and his messenger declare a spiritual war on the rich who make money by unproductive financial transactions (interest, currency trade, stock market speculation, derivatives). He asks creditors to give debtors time, or better yet, to forgive the debt as charity (2:278). Second, after praising Abel for not fighting back when Cain murdered him, and decreeing that killing one soul is like killing all humanity, God condemns mass murder by gangs, calling it a war against law and order. The only exceptions are killing in self-defence and court-ordered execution of a murderer when the victim's family does not forgive (5:27). Third, we learn that people in certain groups will keep trying to kindle a fire of war, and God promises to put it out (5:64). Fourth, God condemns nations that regularly violate international treaties and start wars. He requires other nations to prepare forces of deterrence against such war starters, but commands us to make peace with them whenever they are open to it (8:56ff). Fifth, the Quran tells us that warmongers will commit mass murder and falsely blame it on Muslims in an attempt to start a war against Muslims. Fortunately, the verses tell us that such

plots are fragile, built on the crumbling edge of a mud hill, bound to collapse with the plotters into Hell (9:107ff). Finally, God tells us that when war is over, the killing must stop and prisoners must be exchanged or set free (47:4).

In short, it shows that Islam never teach Muslim to be cruel, means, or even cold. In fact, Muslim is not allowed to start a war except to the extent of self-defence and to protect their land. To be more precise, Qur'an does not order war but allows it on condition that it should be in God's cause and for defence purposes which also enjoins that the limits set by God must not be exceed such as, Islam does not permit war for motives such as conquest or plunder, to quench a lust for revenge, for the sake of some material advantage or satisfy racist persuasions. In fact, Islam has also set a limitation on the conduct of relations before, during, and after conflict such as "do not betray any agreements you have entered into, do not plunder, do not commit injustice and torture, do not touch the children; the womenfolk, the elderly, or other non-combatants of enemy, and do not even destroy fruit-trees and tilled lands.

However, those limits have been abused by the western especially the United States Army. For instance, in the case of Palestine and Afghanistan we can see that war have no mercy towards the children, the womenfolk and even the elderly as the bullets have no eyes and mercy on the subjects. Even worse, they do not only torture the opponent but then they abused their faith and exceed the limits by abusing the human rights. Women have been rape without mercy, Muslim men are forced to do something contrary to their religion, and children are not safe in their own house which supposed to be the safest place to the children. Yet they acting like there are nothing happen and still blaming the Muslim, the sovereignty of Islamic states has been denied when they invade it.

3. PROPAGANDA BY THE MEDIA

After the September 11th, the world starting to believes that Islam is a threat to the world. The western media portrays Islam or describes it as 'militant Islam' or 'fundamental Islam' as a threat to the west. To certain extent, those policy-maker or politician in the West, especially the United State take this as an opportunity where they used all the major American television networks and newspaper to whip up mass hysteria against "militant Islam". A number of events like the Rushdie affairs, the September 11th terror attacks, bombing in Bali and London have contributed to the growth of Islamophobia as it has been propagated by the media and the political leaders to galvanise support for the war on terror as in the invasion of Palestine and Iraq.

Media have transgressed when they test the patience of the Muslim by turning against the Muslim during the Rushdie Affair where Salman Rushdie came out with the novel called 'The Satanic Verses'. The media label the Muslims as aliens because of the inability of Muslim to appreciate the value of free speech and to assimilate into western society. Even worse, there were twelve editorial cartoons were published in the Danish newspaper 'Jyllands-Posten' in 2005 which again published in the name of 'freedom or right of speech'. However, the cartoons were a clear propaganda of Islamophobia intended to humiliate the Danish Muslim minority by insulting the Prophet Muhammad. It is come to a climax when 'Fitna', a short film produced in 2008 by a Dutch parliamentarian, Geert Wilders has been air out on the Youtube which showing the linkage between the Muslim's revealed book, the Qur'an, and terrorism. This entire event has led to a stress among the Muslims worldwide and it shows that there is a provocation by the western which contributed to the rise of extremism and violence among the Muslims all around the world. As pointed out by Abdul Rashid Moten (2010):

"The Western media's portrayal of Islam and Muslims are Islamophobic. The Western media has consistently been using value-loaded and inaccurate language to portray Islam as a dangerous religion rooted in violence and irrationality. The media is the most accessible and indiscriminate disseminator of Islamophobic ideas at the local and global levels. Barring some "responsible" media publication, certain specific and often predictable sourced have been attributing to all Muslims, the entire spectrum of negative characteristics that are fundamental to Islamophobia".

They even reinforce the feeling among Muslims that their religion and way of life is under attack from the west. The American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq under the false pretext of destroying weapons of mass destruction have added to the existing fury in many parts of the Muslim world. This invasion, together with the issue of despicable acts of torture at Abu Ghraib Detention Centre and the propaganda propagated by the media are beyond the patience of Muslim. Thus, it can say that it was the western itself who start the fire and create such a war between Muslim and the west. It was unfair to blame the Muslim when the western touch the sensitivity of Muslim community and condemn the teaching of Islam while on the other hand, Muslim can tolerate with the non-Muslim's lifestyle.

According to Mahathir Mohamad (2003), "...the non-Muslims are at least partly to blame because they often propagate ideas about Islam and Muslim which are negative. Among ethnic Europeans the memories of the crusade and the conquest of European land by Muslims is enlarged and linked with the religion even though it may have nothing to do with it. It is not acknowledged that Muslim are ordinary people divided by race and culture and are as subjected to ordinary human weaknesses as anybody else but regarded as a monolithic group..." It is important to note that, in terms of terror and systematic oppression, the ethnic Europeans have no match. Adolf Hitler's massacre of six million Jews during World War II ranks as the most heinous of crimes against humanity in the 20th century. In fact, now we are witnessing the mass-killings of Albanians in Kosovo which was preceded by the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Muslim in Bosnia-Herzegovina and yet those acts by ethnic Europeans are never labelled as European or Christian terrorism.

4. ISLAMPHOBES, EXTREMIST, AND ISLAM

According to the Oxford dictionary, 7th edition (2010), "an extremist can be defined as a person whose opinions especially about religion or politics, are extreme and who may do things that are violent, illegal etc. as for what they believe". Thus, it is an insult to consider the whole Muslim, to put them on one side and label them as extremist. If we look back at the history, begun way back to when the first settlers went to the United States, they were from various states like Spain, England, and even France and they were fighting at that land with the Indians. But then, nobody claims this person as an extremist as they were fighting for a better living, which we understand that they are not doing for the sake of religious motive, and it is not extremist.

In Islamic's view however, extremism is when someone is using religion to label intolerance, to turn from religion and take idea that they can extract for themselves or even use to make a militant movement and disturb the peace in a country or around the world and that is what called "extremism" or "Islamic extremism" and not for a movement that fight for a better living (Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, 1999). For instance, when Malays were fighting the British and Japanese it is not extremism yet they were trying to escape from the oppression they have suffered for many years in their own land. However, for those extremists there are two ways of understanding the situation of Islam which is from one side; they think that they have to reform it as it is a duty for them to cleanse the world of devils and demons and of country that suppress them, oppress them and try to shut them down. This is because they have been brainwashed with such an idea.

This is important for the world to know that Muslim community as a whole is innocent from whatever extremism and extremist ideology is being spread around the world and in the case of extremism, when someone has been brainwashed or demand that a person doesn't think, even the brother or the parents tell him to stop he still has to go with what he has been asked to do and that is why there are 5000 suicide bombers being trained by Osama bin Laden. We can see from the other point of view, in America itself there is number of peoples who reject their government policy and disagree with their government's action in Iraq and they even protest the action yet the government of America never label those people as an extremist. Besides that, the United Nation says there is a significant rise in religious extremism and intolerance throughout the world and there are no religions that are free from extremism. According to Abdel Fattah Amor, the UN's Special Rapporteur on

Religious Intolerance (1999), "At the national and international levels, unjust economic, social and political systems which really constitute violations of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, contribute to the birth and/or nurturing of extremism,". As the matter fact, what Florida pastor, Terry Jones planned in burning the Holly Qur'an on anniversary of September 11th can also put him as one of the religious extremist.

5. TERRORISM

Terrorism is not a new sentiment to us. It has emerged since the beginning of history in which the definition of the term 'terrorism' is difficult to justify. Terrorism has been described variously as a whole tactic and strategy, a crime and a holly duty, as well as an appropriate reaction to the oppression and despicable act forgiven (Samuel Zumve, 2009). In some cases, terrorism has been used as a tool in creating conflicts without taking into account the type of threat, thus blaming terrorism on top of criminal activity. The problem of this concept has gone viral when there is no one solid justification on what terrorism is really meant.

The United States Department of Defense for instance, defines terrorism as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate Governments or Societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological". Within this definition, there are three key elements- violence, fear, and intimidation-and each element produces terror in its victims. The FBI uses this: "Terrorism is the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" and The U.S. Department of State defines "Terrorism" as "premeditated politically-motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

Steve Best and Anthony J. Nocelle II (2004), in their study have questioned the details of the definition of terrorism in a more specific, "everyone uses the term, but who really understand it? What precisely is terrorism? What causes it? Who engages in it? Should terrorist be identified according to their intentions, ideologies, tactics or targets? When is violence justified so that it is not "terrorism"? How is terrorism different from assault, murder, and other violent "criminal" acts? How can one morally culpable terrorist from legitimate guerrillas, insurgents, counter- terrorist, or freedom fighters?" The sequence of these problems, there is the question whether terrorism serve as a tool in creating conflict, in which terrorism is justified for a crime, thus creating a form of political label on any individual or state to label terrorism as a justification for the action to be taken by them.

According to Mahathir Mohamad (2001), what is more confusing is that some are condemned as a terrorist one day, only to be considered respectable people another day. Examples of the ambivalence in the definition of terrorist are many. The Jewish Haganah, Irgun Zeva'I Le'umi and Stern Gang were at one time regarded as terrorists and were hunted by the British. But later they became respected leaders of Israel. Jomo Kenyatta and Robert Mugabe were described as terrorists and were condemned by the British only to become in the end the acknowledge leaders of independent states. Thus, it is a must for us to ensure that a terrorist is a terrorist to all and everyone at all times so that the whole world can join in the fight against terrorism.

At the moment, Osama bin Laden and his followers are considered to be terrorist. Admittedly, at the moment they are the prime suspects and they should be hunted. But despite protest that the war against terrorist is not war against Islam, what cannot be denied is that only Muslim terrorist are being targeted. In Palestine, civilians, including children are being shot and killed every day by Israelis. And in retaliation the Palestinians kill Israelis with human bombs at times. Every day Palestinians face the possibility of being killed. Can it be said that they do not live in terror of being the next victim? The Israelis too, but they have superior firepower and obviously they instil more terror in the hearts of Palestinians than the other way round.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus, it shows that Islam is not radical yet it is beautiful as it teaches Muslim to do good deeds. On the other hand, Islam is ad-din which means Islam is a way of life which covers every single aspect of our life. Besides that, Muslim have been taught to obey Allah and stick with the five pillars of Islam which it was believes that faith without action arid practice is a dead end, as far as Islam concerned. Faith by nature is very sensitive and can be more effective, and when it is not out of practice or out of use, it quickly loses its liveliness and motivation power. Ones cannot judge Islam by looking at the Muslim itself as the saying goes, “don’t judge a book by its cover”. Ones should understand Islam and study the teaching of Islam so that the view of Islam would be more precise not by looking at a Muslim.

This is because, to certain extend a Muslim doesn’t mean he is a good follower. Thou they have been asked to obey Allah and the teaching of Islam, yet desire overcome everything and people began to lose consideration and cannot distinguish between good and bad. Last but not least, the idea of Islamophobia should not arise as people should look at the idea of Islam itself so that they will be clear with the teaching of Islam so that they are not obscured by the act which may cause bad perception towards Islam. It is clear that Islamophobia is not literally existence yet it’s kind of political rhetoric or a believe that suddenly happen after the incident of September 11th. To certain extent, a misunderstanding of Islam may have contributed to the idea of Islamophobia which eventually a platform for the west to invade in Islamic countries.

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