

Deconstructing Islamophobia



Pilgrim Scroll: London British Museum Ms.Add. 27566: Miniature of the Kaaba: the sacred house of Islam

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ISLAMOPHOBIA - FEAR OF, AND HOSTILITY TOWARDS, THE ISLAMIC FAITH and Muslims - is a relatively new word in the English language. It first appeared in print in 1991. It appears to be a novel epithet for an old problem. Several scholars have argued that Islamophobia is a historically entrenched Western discourse on the 'other' and emerged with the birth of Islam. It went into a period of hibernation, as the Cold War loomed large in the Western consciousness. The threat of the global spread of Communism as well as the prospect of a nuclear confrontation between the US as the 'leader of the free world' and the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire' temporarily cast aside concerns and fears about Islam as a faith and the challenges that it posed to the West.

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Some scholars - such as Cornell's Mahmud Mamdani - have argued that the need for a pragmatic alliance between Islamic extremists and the US emerged under the Reagan administration. It was driven by the amoral principle that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Islamic *Mujahedeens* fighting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were eagerly embraced as the foot soldiers to defeat the ideological adversary of Communism. Even Hollywood celebrated this alliance. In one of the *Rambo* movies, the muscular Sylvester Stallone teamed up with the *Mujahedeens* to vanquish a common enemy.

The courting of the *Mujahedeens* was a departure from the doctrine of strategic containment of the Soviet Union and its Communist satellites that was the hallmark of US foreign policy. It led typically to the support of 'friendly tyrants' in the Muslim world and elsewhere during the Cold War era, while avoiding the engagement with an international coalition of non-state actors. In moving away from the traditional notion of strategic deterrence, little did the strategic planners of the Reagan era and the movie producers at Hollywood realise that *Rambo's* comrade-in-arms would one day mutate into global jihadists daring to strike at the American heartland.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US-led West was widely seen as winning a fundamental ideological battle. Liberal democracy and the ethos of the free market finally arrived as global phenomena. One could celebrate, as Francis Fukuyama famously declared, the 'end of history'.

For a while, this verdict seemed to resonate with the global community. Two of the world's most populous countries - China and India - embarked on a remarkable change in their ideological directions. The enthusiastic embrace of a market economy by a post-Maoist China, and the gradual shedding of its Nehruvian socialist garb by India, reinforced the notion of Western - and more specifically US - triumphalism. Thus was born the post-Cold War era and the enthronement of the lone superpower.

The celebration of the 'end of history' lasted for a short time. Samuel Huntington - one of the most influential strategic thinkers of the US establishment - declared the beginning of a new era of the 'clash of civilisations'. The 'evil empire' was gone, but the US-led West faced dual threats from Islamic extremism and the economic ascendancy of East Asia, best exemplified by the rise of China.

In retrospect, it appears that 'Sinitic assertiveness' [as Huntington put it]

entailed more of an economic rather than an ideological threat to the US and its Western allies. It could be blunted through peaceful co-option. This led to a project to transform China into a strategic partner of the West through its membership of the WTO and the UN Security Council. These arrangements could be relied on to accommodate the peaceful rise of China.

Islamic extremism, however, could not, Huntington appeared to argue, be readily appeased. Unlike Sinitic assertiveness that expressed itself through economic aspirations to grow rapidly and accumulate wealth, the fundamentalist adherents of the Islamic faith represented an implacable ideological foe. They were consumed by nihilistic rage against the West; they were driven by the need to recreate a glorious past while being unable to adapt to modernity. This was the thesis offered by influential Princeton historian Bernard Lewis in his account of the 'roots of Muslim rage'. The Islamophobic narrative that was being constructed at the end of the Cold War needed, it seems, a trigger - most notably the terrorist attacks on the US - to unleash the fears and phobias in the West against a designated 'other'.

In mid-July, 2004, two influential American politicians - the Democrat Senator Joe Liberman and Republican Senator Jon Kyl - announced that they had embarked on a

bipartisan enterprise to resurrect the 'Committee on the Present Danger' [CPD], first set up in the 1950s to deal with the global threat of Communism. Now, argued the midwives who saw the re-birth of the CPD, it was necessary to deal with the global threat of Islamic fundamentalism. The construction of the 'new enemy' - or the reconstruction of an old nemesis - was accomplished: the 'green menace' of Islam replaced the 'red menace' of the past. Some, such as influential *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, went even further and suggested that the 'religious totalitarians' or 'Islamists' were more of a threat than the Soviets because the former 'hate us more than they love us' while the latter 'loved life more than they hated us'.

The key point, then, is that the phenomenon of Islamophobia cannot be disentangled from its historical roots and isolated from its geopolitical context. The challenge is to move beyond Islamophobia to a more pluralist discourse that can promote inter-faith harmony. This will require a delicate strategy of winning the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens in both the West and the Muslim world. This will in turn mean prudence and vigilance on the part of civic/political leaders of all religious persuasion not to conflate the justifiable concern about

prejudice against Muslims with the urge to suppress legitimate debate about the role of Islam in the contemporary era. At the same time, as several scholars - such as Karen Armstrong, William Dalrymple, Richard Bulliet, John Espisoto and others - have argued, a greater appreciation of the shared heritage of the world's great religions is long overdue. This recognition of our common humanity lies at the core of building an inclusive, multi-faith global community - the ultimate antidote against Islamophobia as well as global terrorism.