

# Struggling against Islamophobia without lapsing into Orientalism

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**Islamophobia in Europe today is linked to a long history of colonial rule and enduring armed conflict in the Middle East. In opposing this form of racism, it is important that leftists in Europe reject culturalist tropes about Muslims and remain committed to the struggle for democratic rights.**

While contemporary Islamophobia is connected to forms of anti-Arab racism and colonial and imperial histories, it exploded in Western countries after the attacks of September 11, 2001, carried out by the jihadist organization, al-Qaida. A new global enemy had been found, and laws discriminating against Muslim populations blossomed in Europe, North America and Australia, but also elsewhere, such as in India, Russia and China. Western states built up Muslims as a dangerous “other” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and the “War on Terror” helped the USA and its allies to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider region of the MENA under the guise of combating terrorism.

At home, in both Europe and the United States, new counterterrorism policies and measures largely targeted Muslims, who were treated as legitimate objects of suspicion, along with other non-white populations. Building on this “otherness” and “dangerousness,” authorities have increased laws and means to monitor Muslims, and constantly ensure their adherence to so called “Western Values” or, in France, “Republican Values.” The implementation of the state of emergency and, more broadly, the anti-terrorism policy active in France since 2015, have led to “the emergence of a security Islamophobia, affecting Muslims through an anti-terrorist policy that undermines the rule of law.” This is according to the [Collective against Islamophobia](#), whose role as an association is to provide assistance to victims of Islamophobia. Moreover, the adoption of the “anti-separatist” law in February 16, 2021, by the French National Assembly, provided more security tools to target Muslim organisations and associations, while other organizations, such as the Collective Against Islamophobia, were dissolved.

Similarly in the UK, the British government also stigmatized Muslims through various so-called “security” policies such as the “Prevent” security program, which began to be implemented in 2005. The program allows British authorities to put under surveillance anyone who disagrees with government policy and the actions of the British state, such as opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bombing of Libya, or support to the Palestinian cause, or even opposition to “British core values.” Muslim students were particularly targeted in [this campaign](#).

The continuously growing Islamophobia in Europe over the past two decades is, above all, the result of the increasingly authoritarian and racist policies of European governments.

In Europe, over the past two decades, the prohibitions on forms of Muslim veiling in various public spaces have gone from the hijab ban in French schools, and restrictions for teachers in some parts of

Germany, to an outright outlawing of the face-covering niqab in public spaces in Denmark, Belgium, France, and more recently in Switzerland. This has been accompanied by [rising violence](#) targeting Muslims, mosques and Islamic symbols. These developments demonstrate how anti-Muslim feelings have penetrated far beyond limited sections of society to attract wider acceptance.

Islamophobia has continued to grow in the USA and European countries over the past decade, with governments exploiting the rise of a new jihadist organization, the “Islamic State” (IS), together with the arrival of millions of refugees from the MENA region, to deepen their racist and repressive policies. Many of these refugees are not only fleeing the deadly repression of authoritarian and despotic regimes, such as that in Syria, but also the effects of foreign intervention. But despite having Islamophobic sentiment directed against them, some segments are also the very people who escaped the rise of the IS in Syria and Iraq, and more recently of the Taliban in Afghanistan. They add to the 20 million Muslims who call the European Union (EU) home. Against this background, increasing numbers of far right and fascistic political parties throughout the continent have scapegoated Muslims and other non-white populations. National Rally (formerly known as the National Front), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the English Defense League, Spain’s Vox Party and the Austrian Freedom Party are some of the political parties that share a common discourse and policy to rid Europe of its “Muslim issue.”

These far-right political movements, however, are not the ones that have implemented the racist and exclusionary policies against Muslim populations. It is the social liberal and right-wing governments that have done so. Successive center-right political leaders have repeatedly spoken against “Islamist terrorism” (German Chancellor Angela Merkel) and the incompatibility with European values of so-called “Islamist separatism” (French President Emmanuel Macron). The continuously growing Islamophobia in Europe over the past two decades is also not limited to a reaction to the terrorist Islamic State attacks or due solely to propaganda of far right groups, as claimed by mainstream media and governments. It is, above all, the result of the increasingly authoritarian and racist policies implemented by European governments. These policies have the objective of consolidating a nationalist imagination by inviting the majority ethno-racial group to unite against invented threats posed by Muslims.

Our struggle should be rooted in an internationalist and humanist perspective, without leaving room for “orientalism in reverse.”

Nevertheless, while leftists agree that racialization of Muslims by the right and political center is an important problem, two influential responses to it have raised tensions and contradictions that call for discussion within anti-racist, anti-imperialist movements. The first problematic response is a left adherence to a crude form of atheism that draws on a misinterpretation of Marxist ideas and negates Marx’s own defense of religious rights in the context of state interference with religious freedom (1875) and Jewish civil rights (1843).

The second problematic response, and the one that has received far less examination, is that of an undiscerning support for Islamic fundamentalist movements in the region. This common response to Islamophobia by particular Western leftist figures and organizations presumes to give the people of the MENA region an essentialized Muslim identity and perpetrates a form of reverse Orientalism. Our struggle should be rooted in an internationalist progressive and humanist perspective, without leaving room for a form of “orientalism in reverse” which affects certain left-wing currents, in the West as in the MENA.

As Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm put it already in 1980, in this reverse orientalist perspective, [“ideas, beliefs, philosophical systems and ideological superstructures are sufficient to explain the ‘laws of motion’ of Oriental societies and cultures.”](#) Following the success of the Iranian Islamic revolution, the authors

adopting this form of orientalism in reverse argued that the Arab Left is to rearrange their priorities in such a way as to stand them on their head: “to give ultimate importance to the cultural and ideological factors which move the masses and to proceed to reformulate scientific, economic, and social truths on this basis.”

In other words, as Gilbert Achcar [explains](#), “‘Orientalism in reverse’ shares a common core with traditional Orientalism: the essentialist view according to which ‘religiosity is a permanent and essential phenomenon’ for Muslim peoples.” Its “reversal” entails that rather than a source of backwardness, Islam is seen as the necessary agent of modernization and political progress in all Muslim regions.

It is a mistake to see fundamentalism as some deflected expression of anti-imperialism

Forms of orientalism in reverse have found followers among some academics as well, albeit a minority view. The perspective is represented in the work of both Western and Arab scholars (for instance: Carré and Gérard 1983, Roy 1985, Burgat 1995, Dot Pouillard 2009, Jensen 2009, Saad Ghorayeb 2002, Pearson and Salamey 2007) who claim that Islamic fundamentalism constitutes the Arab expression of cultural and social resistance to Western encroachment. François Burgat, for instance, characterises “Political Islam as a need for a return to the cultural roots throughout the Muslim world.” For him, political Islam is the mode of expression of cultural resistance appropriate to the Arab world – the ‘Muslim speech’ (“[le parler musulman](#)”). While such figures might have correct positions in opposing Islamophobia in the West, they tend to support Islamic fundamentalist movements uncritically in the MENA, and see Islam as the essential language and culture of Muslim peoples. According to this doctrine, the driving force of history in the East is Islam and not, as in the West, economic interests, class struggles and socio-political forces.

As explained by Syrian scholar, Aziz al-Azmeh, regarding this trend of Orientalism in reverse: “Islam as a culture explains in itself the affairs of Muslim communities and over-determines economic, social and political factors. It has two main protagonists, who give each other mirror images: one is the Islamic fundamentalist revivalist and politician, the other is the Western writer or actor who shares the essentialist culturalism of the first, and who raises an obscurantist discourse on the present, past and future of Muslims to the status of unquestionable knowledge: that is, the all-too-common procedure by which the essentialist reading of the past, present, and future offered by Islamic (or otherwise apologetic) political discourse is taken as adequate of the past, a diagnosis of the present, and a plan for the future of all Muslims.”

Some sectors of the left, also a minority, have also advocated that Islamic fundamentalist movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhoods, are “anti-imperialists” or represent a “progressive” form of Islam, and have compared them with the south American liberation theology movements that flourished in the 60s and 70s. These considerations are far from any reality, while falling into a destructive logic of [“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”](#).

Liberation theology and Islamic fundamentalist movements are not the same in nature and their objectives are different: liberation theology is not so much an expression of cultural identity – in the sense of self-preservation vis-à-vis an “other” Western domination, as claimed by the Islamic fundamentalist movements – it is more rooted in a discourse of development and emancipation of the subaltern. It has primarily mobilized the poor and exploited, while Islamic fundamentalist movements tend to target the educated middle classes and petite bourgeoisie as the main agents of political change. Islamic fundamentalist movements aim primarily to Islamize society, politics and the economy, whereas liberation theologians never intended to Christianize society, but rather to change it from the perspective of the oppressed.

It is also a mistake to see fundamentalism as some deflected expression of anti-imperialism. The fundamentalists possess a religious conception of the world, notably the goal of returning to a mythical “Golden Age” of Islam as a means of explaining the contemporary world and providing a solution to its problems. First of all, we should be critical of the notion that the liberation and development of Arab countries depends firstly upon an assertion of an Islamic identity posited as “permanent” and “eternal.” This is reactionary, pure and simple, and stands in stark contrast to the genuine anti-imperialist movements of the past.

Nationalists and socialists look forward to progressive social transformation of the socioeconomic structures of oppression and domination; fundamentalists instead frame the struggle as a battle of cultures and religions. They view imperialism as a conflict between “Satan” and the oppressed faithful, not as nationalists and socialists traditionally view it— as being a conflict between great powers with their capitalist system and oppressed countries/peoples. In this regard, Islamic fundamentalists echo Samuel Huntington’s conception of the world as a “clash of civilizations,” where the struggle against the West is based upon a rejection of its values and religious system rather than exploitative global relations.

All trends of Islamic fundamentalism promote a sexist vision that endorses male domination and restricts women to subordinate roles in society.

Thus, Islamic fundamentalist movements tend to promote the idea that the liberation and development of MENA countries depend primarily on the affirmation of their Islamic identity, which would be “permanent” and “eternal,” rather than by fighting against capitalism and imperialism. Thus, they do not have an anti-imperialist worldview. Indeed, unsurprisingly, both the jihadist and gradualist wings of Islamic fundamentalism have had imperial and regional state sponsors. As noted previously, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported Islamic fundamentalist movements in Afghanistan as a tool in their interimperialist conflict with Russia against the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul. The same is true of other forms of Islamic fundamentalist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and/or Hezbollah. Far from consistent anti-imperialism, they have cultivated a relationship with both imperialist and regional powers. The Brotherhood was sponsored by Saudi Arabia until 1991 and more recently by Qatar, and it reached a deal with the United States in its brief period in charge of Egypt. Hezbollah is sponsored by Iran and collaborates with Russian imperialism in the Syrian counterrevolution.

This does not mean that we do not oppose imperialist and Israeli wars and interventions against states and these movements in the region. The right of resistance of the Palestinians, including military, is an inalienable right, as it is for any other population subjected to occupation, colonization, foreign intervention or authoritarian dictatorship. Israel accumulates various forms of oppression against the Palestinian population. Support for the right to Palestinian resistance, which is a matter of principle, should however not be confused by socialist with support for the political ideology of the various Palestinian political parties.

From this perspective, it is important to remember that religious fundamentalism is an international phenomenon, which is not unique to the Middle East or to predominantly Muslim societies. Similarly, a clear distinction must be made between the Islamic religion and fundamentalist groups. Organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS), Al Qaeda, the various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah differ in their formation, development, composition and strategy. Gradualists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah in Lebanon participate in elections and existing state institutions. On the other hand, jihadists such as Al-Qaeda and IS view these institutions as un-Islamic and instead turn to guerrilla or terrorist tactics in the hope of a possible seizure of the state. Among the jihadists, there are also debates and divisions over tactics and strategies to achieve their goal of an Islamic state. In various historical contexts and periods, the

various fundamentalist currents have sometimes collaborated and at other times have been in competition and even clashed.

Nevertheless, they defend a common political project, despite significant differences. All variants of Islamic fundamentalism share the goal of establishing “a Sharia-based Islamic state” that preserves the existing capitalist order. Islamic fundamentalist movements, such as Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have promoted neoliberal policies by supporting measures such as privatization, market liberalization and openness to foreign capital, while denouncing and attacking social movements below, particularly trade union movements. Islamic fundamentalist movements do not encourage policies to emancipate society, nor do they oppose neoliberal policies. On the contrary, they promote them and repress trade unions and workers. Other issues can also be discussed, such as the struggle for women’s rights, the struggle against sectarianism, the role of the state, etc. This can be seen quite starkly in their attitude toward women. All trends of Islamic fundamentalism promote a sexist vision that endorses male domination and restricts women to subordinate roles in society. First and foremost, they define women’s primary function as “motherhood” and, in particular, inculcating the next generation with Islamic principles. They impose clothing and behavior supposed to preserve women’s honor and that of the family. Any straying from such norms and restrictions they consider a concession to Western cultural imperialism.

Islamic fundamentalist groups have not hesitated to oppose protest movements in their own countries

Similarly, Islamic fundamentalists hold reactionary views of LGBTQ populations, accused of “destroying societies” and as being a foreign import that threatens Islamic society with moral deviance and aberrant lifestyles. These types of accusations have also befallen against Marxism and more generally any actors connected to the left, which are also denounced as being a product of the West and an ideology foreign to the “authentic Islamic culture”. The Tunisian Islamic leader Rached Ghannouchi, head of al-Nahda, has not hesitated for instance to accuse the Tunisian General Trade Union (UGTT) of being a heritage of the French colonial period and of not being a natural institution of Muslim society.

Moreover, Islamic fundamentalist movements have not hesitated to oppose protest movements in their own countries like Hezbollah and Popular Mobilization Units respectively in Lebanon and in Iraq, while various movements connected to the Muslim Brotherhoods have been enthusiastic supporters of the Turkish authoritarian state headed by Erdogan. The various Islamic fundamentalist forces thus constitute the second wing of the counter-revolution, the first being the existing despotic regimes.

Leftists must therefore oppose Islamophobic discourse developed and maintained by Western elites, governments and media against Islamic fundamentalist movements and denounce their repression by authoritarian regimes when it is the case in certain countries. But this principled position should not prevent us from supporting and fighting for radical change in MENA societies, by developing a materialist analysis of the societal dynamics and the parties of Islamic fundamentalism that oppose by different means the continuation and deepening of revolutionary processes and radical change from below.

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