

Is it Easy to Distinguish between Muslim and Muslim?

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Politicians and analysts have been trying hard to distinguish between ordinary Muslims and the prime suspects in the terror bombings of September 11. Some have succeeded more than others, but the issue begs attention and reflection.

The distinction between Muslims appears commendable at face value. It seems to be driven by a genuine desire not to offend all Muslims and paint them with the same brush-stroke of religious extremism.

Islamophobia, which has been in the making for a long time seems to have found a real, genuine, case. And there are sufficient warmongers who need to be reminded of the distinction between Muslims.

But what kind of criteria should be used to make distinctions among Muslims? Is it all right to be moderate and supportive of American foreign policy in international relations, and repressive on the home front? Is it all right to have come to power on the basis of a coup? Even nuclear readiness seems now acceptable as long as one is ready to hunt Osamah bin Laden and his shadowy network.

The suspicion towards Muslims is less evident here in South Africa than in Europe and the United States. Apart from some isolated incidents, South Africans should feel proud that they have not been swept up in the frenzy of suspecting every veiled woman, and bearded man, of Asian origin.

And yet, we have not entirely escaped from aspects of the dilemma. The Democratic Alliance asked the government where it stood in the clash of civilisations. And some academics have echoed the same theory as they outlined an essential conflict between the secular, democratic world, and the long-standing fundamentalist desire to create Islamic states.

The opposition between Islamic fundamentalism and the free western world merits a second look. It stands at the heart of distinguishing between moderates and radicals in Islamic societies. But it raises more questions than answers about the meaning of the free, democratic West.

Much has been said about the creation of the Taliban and the extremists by the CIA. It has now become clear how religious zealots were trained to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, and how the networks now said to be criss-crossing the world of the terrorists were hatched in the 1980s.

What is forgotten, however, is the long pedigree of this collusion in the creation of religious groups. Sometimes the plans succeeded and sometimes they backfired.

The French colonialists, arch secularists at home, promoted traditional Islam in the colonies to ward off pan-Islamist networks against colonialism. The British also supported some religion and culture in the interests of stability, support and dependability.

In the logic of the Cold War, the employment of Islam and other religions was extended. In South Africa, many religious groups were encouraged to oppose liberation movements named as Marxist and Communist.

The Israelis, while repressive in the extreme in the occupied territories, also allowed Islamic groups to develop. They were specifically encouraged to oppose the secular socialist-oriented PLO.

Muslim countries themselves were not free of collusion in the employment of one Islamic trend against another. To mention one example, cold war strategy in the 1960s against socialist Nasser supported the Saudis in exporting their own brand of Islam.

Mosques and centres of learning mushroomed in all parts of the world, espousing a moderate religious foundation that would resist the radical socialist orientation of newly independent African and Asian states. The Gulf States like Saudi Arabia had their own interests in furthering such tendencies, but they could not have done so without the approval and support of the free democratic world.

What were the implications and consequences of this religious mobilisation? In the first instance, it seems that Islamic groups were recognised as potential allies against irreligious enemies.

In each of these cases, religion was not an incidental, accidental feature. Religion in general and Islam in particular were all mobilised or encouraged to fight what was branded as an atheist threat.

So the alarm at religion taking such a central role in public life begs explanation. As soon as the unexpected consequences of supporting religious zealots is felt, analysts want to lecture the world on the threats posed by religious fundamentalism to the free, Western world of democracy. Religion, they say, should be a matter of private concern in a pluralistic world, governed by secular principles.

Others repeatedly tell how these terrorists are prepared to die for Aalah (sic) that seems beyond our comprehension. These same terrorists were clearly understood when their tenacity and devotion was valued to fight the Soviets or the PLO.

Secondly, it is clear that the religious militias were expected to be temporary and dispensable allies. They should have performed their allotted tasks and then returned to the mosques. Islam was a useful mobilising force and served its purpose.

And this seems the logic of the free democratic world outside its borders. Just as cheap commodities and cheap labour drive capital, so it seems has foreign policy pursued its interests through the creation of useful but dependable allies. And once the field is exploited, no one is ready to take any responsibility.

Of course, what was forgotten was that the groups mobilised were not robots. And this is the third consequence. These newly formed groups did not turn out to be the expendable warriors they were supposed to be. And they have arisen to haunt their erstwhile supporters and well-wishers.

The Israelis had not imagined that the Islamists would oppose them more vehemently and more bloodily than the PLO. And the CIA did not factor in the possibility that once the Mujahidin ousted the atheistic Russians, they would turn against the materialistic Americans.

And the threat they pose does not only stop at Western interests. Once they developed their own paths and their own ideologies, these groups became a greater threat to their own societies. Ask the new Afghan refugee waiting to cross the border into Pakistan.

The new Islamic creations created their own history, and their plans. This was not part of the colonial, Israeli or American plan, but the unintended consequences cannot be denied in the name of secular theory at the metropolitan centres.

It seems to me that our global world cannot so easily be divided between fundamentalist Islam and the free world. The world of fundamentalist Islam is not so much the antithesis of the West. It is its intimate nightmare.

The debate should not start with Aalah (sic) and jihad against global secularism. It should start with the dependencies between the free world and its insatiable need for cheap and dependable resources, human and otherwise.

It should start with the difference between what is acceptable in the West and what is acceptable on foreign soil. It should start with all of us who have witnessed the horrors of turning each other into symbols and proxies for our greed, our hatred and our fears.