

A problematic term: why both sides are wrong about Islamophobia

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Islamophobia has become a controversial term in politics. The natural instinct of American progressives has been to use the term in defense of Muslims, which they see as the underdogs facing unnecessary and often excessive discrimination by the nation state. Meanwhile, Republicans in their ongoing and mostly successful attempt to claim a monopoly over how political correctness should be defined and interpreted have often dismissed Islamophobia as another overreaction by hypersensitive liberals and cultural relativists.

The narrow-minded views adopted by both major parties are inaccurate and tragic because their narratives omit some of the most prescient voices who have critically examined the problematic term Islamophobia. While progressives are certainly correct that discrimination against Muslims and the excesses of the National-Security State should be vigorously opposed, most progressives have failed to recognize how the term has been co-opted by Islamists to vilify anyone who interprets Islam differently than them or – horror of horrors – offers a critique of Islam.

Essential dissenting voices like Marieme Helie Lucas, Pragna Patel, Gita Sahgal, Fatou Sow, Diep Saeeda, Karima Bennoune, Houzan Mahmoud, Pervez Hoodhboy, and others have offered principled objections to the paucity of secular progressive voices from the Middle East and North Africa who, through often tragic and heartbreaking experiences, know the grave dangers of letting Islamists and extremists (whether they be violent or non-violent) define what it means to be Islamophobic.

Unfortunately none of these people — or the incredibly brave people they try to draw attention to — have garnered much attention in the mainstream or progressive media.

Bennoune's excellent book *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* is perhaps the best example of why the voices of Muslims risking jail, torture and death in the Middle East and North Africa merit more than just a little attention from the international media. The book highlights two important points: 1.) It illuminates progressive Muslims and secularists from a Muslim heritage's incredible bravery by showing their willingness to risk (and often sacrifice) their lives to attain gender equality, freedom of press and universal rights and, 2) These examples undermine far-right narratives about a monolithic and mummified version of Islam incompatible with Western values because the majority of the people risking their lives to oppose Muslim fundamentalism are also Muslims.

Anytime a media pundit in an air-conditioned office pontificates on the need for more moderate Muslim voices opposing Islamic terrorism, someone should loan him or her a copy of Bennoune's book and direct him or her to turn to the beginning of Chapter 4 which gives a detailed account of when the Algerian newspaper *El Watan* (The Nation) is bombed by fundamentalists, killing eighteen and wounding 52 of their colleagues and neighbors. It was at that moment that Algerian newspaper publisher Omar Belhouchet decided this would not stop the *El Watan* and its respective newspapers from putting out a product the next day.

"We were never intimidated by these people," Belhouchet said to Bennoune. "I said, 'We must not be afraid. We will continue our work. They must kill all of us to stop that.'"

While making laws that discriminate against a group because of their religion is wrong, offering critical commentary about the idea of Islam (or Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.) is not anti-Islam, its free speech that should be fiercely protected. This is why Islamophobia should be consigned to the dustbin of history in favor of the term anti-Muslim bigotry, which should be defined as discrimination by the government against Muslims specifically because of their religion and hate speech and hate crimes against Muslim Americans. This definition opposes indiscriminate discrimination, while not allowing it to be used like a cudgel by Islamists against their secular rivals.

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P.S.

* "Both sides are wrong about Islamophobia". August 16, 2016:

http://www.ottawaherald.com/opinion/columns/both-sides-are-wrong-about-islamophobia/article_91cddcab-faee-584c-b718-2a8923968ee0.html