

Western Left and Human Rights Organisations, Muslim Far-Right, Victims, Secularism - Algeria and beyond

Friday 12 January 2018, by [HEINTZ Andy](#), [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2017).

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Andy Heintz

Andy Heintz - How has the good Muslim-bad Muslim narrative adopted by many Western leaders played into the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists whom they are fighting? How difficult is it to make the case that Islamic fundamentalism is an extreme right wing political movement that uses religion as its cover, as opposed to solely a religious movement?

Marieme Helie Lucas - Before I get into your question, let me just explain why it is so important today to use concepts in a very accurate way. Fundamentalists have launched an ideological battle and they have been successfully spreading their ideology through the global adoption of their concepts. Lazy journalists and politicians keep using terms like “Muslims”, “sharia law”, “fatwa” etc... [1], as if they knew what they were talking about. What is at stake here is the adoption of the vocabulary, hence of the conceptual framework, that the religious Far Right successfully imposes. What is at stake is the promotion of false realities that prevent a free analysis of a situation. I have been writing for 30 years about the dangers of adopting the language of the enemy, and its categories of analysis, pointing at the fact it forces us into reasoning within the limits delineated by fundamentalists. For instance, when they impose the terminology “sharia law”, it is meant to make everyone believe that there is such a thing as a universal Islamic body of laws that would be common to all “Muslim countries”. This is not the case. A quick glance at laws said to be in conformity with Islam across Asia, Africa and the Middle East immediately proves that the “Muslim world” is not homogeneous. The laws in these countries are not only very varied, but often in total contradiction with each other [2].

If one looks, for instance, at the rights of women in marriage, one can see that it ranges from equality of husband and wife in rights and duties to the total submission and absence of rights for the wife. Which of these legal provisions reflects the “true Islam”? Which one is THE “sharia law”?

Showing this diversity and the contradictions from one country to another reveals the evidently man-made character of the laws, as well as at the various sources for these differences. Different interpretations of the Quran, selective use of the hadith, and also the incorporation of local traditions into what becomes the official way to practice this religion in a specific location in a specific time, and even colonial laws, when it suits the interests of the powers that be and of patriarchy, are passed off as pertaining to “sharia”!!!

This finally made its way into the dominant discourse via the Western media and political leaders adopting this fundamental conceptual distinction. However, they managed to twist it and to reintroduce the notion that all of us are “Muslims”. This is achieved through the “good Muslims” vs “bad Muslims” narrative. The “good Muslims” are the “moderate Muslims”, — sometimes even labeled in the media “moderate fundamentalists,” a contradiction in terms as if there could be “moderate fascists” — a terminology that betrays the underlying racist assumption that all Muslims must be fundamentalists and the “bad Muslims” are the violent ones. One can understand, under the present circumstances, with the growing presence in the media — and on the ground! — of Taliban, Boko Haram, Daesh, Shabab, Al Qaeda and the likes, that believers in Islam attempt to distance themselves from criminal activities by claiming: “they are not good Muslims”, “this is not Islam”, this is for them the equivalent of “not in my name.” But this is no reason for the adoption, globally, at the level of political leadership, of such an apolitical terminology. What it does is create a transnational “race” of “Muslims” (good or bad is beyond the question) in which the individual faith of a person is first presumed by his or her geographical origin (or that of his/her ancestors) and later imposed on the individual in the name of preserving his/her identity. An un-washable original sin that the Jews before us experimented with the consequences that we all know.

This perfectly suits the Muslim Far-Right’s political goals which insists a.) that no one can get out of Islam, and b.) that they alone, and their repressive follies, represent the true Islam. Labeling “Muslim” everyone whose family originated, for instance, in the Middle East or Pakistan or Sudan, is the exact equivalent of the way white Europeans or North American are labeled “Christians”, or sometimes “Crusaders”, by the Daesh. This does not speak well for the intellectual sophistication of those who use this terminology. For a good size of the people who were born and raised in a “Muslim” country are not believers in Islam, just like a sizable proportion of people born and raised in a “Christian” country do not believe in God the Father and the Holy Family. However, the freedom of conscience that seems to be part of the fundamental rights of Europeans and North Americans is denied to us. We are first “presumed Muslims” by virtue of our geographical origin, and then we are put “under culture/religion arrest”.

A study, conducted under the auspices of the very respected National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France 15 years ago, interestingly showed the similarities between those presumed to be Muslims and those presumed to be Christians. In both categories, around 25 percent declared themselves atheists and 5 percent were practicing believers. The rest of the population would only celebrate social dates (such as Christmas or Eid or Ramadan), religious ceremonies at births, marriages and funerals, while generally having nothing else to do with religion. What is really thrilling for me — and seems most unacceptable to many here — is the formidable parity between so-called Christians and so-called Muslims. It counters the racist assumption that “Muslims” are inherently different and must be identified in religious/cultural terms.

Why do you think Islamic fundamentalism has become such a popular response to globalization in much of the Middle East and Africa instead of secular international leftist movements? What strategies and methods need to be implemented to bring about a unified international front in favor of equal rights for women, freedom of speech and secularism in the government?

What I can clarify is the circumstances in which these movements emerged. Both in Algeria, North Africa in general and in the Middle East, there has been a fierce repression of the Left in general, particularly communists, since the times of Nasser and Ben Bella (who were both considered socialists). This repression also was exercised against trade unionists and all other progressive people. While unions remained powerful in certain sectors, such as the mining sector in Tunisia, or textile industry in Egypt, the Left at large was mostly reduced to working underground.

In Algeria, where we were under the one-party system from 1962 (independence) till 1988, we had only one union called the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), which was under the National Liberation Front (FLN) party in power. It was a very top to bottom form of organization that left little space for popular democratic expression. We had, throughout this period, only one daily newspaper, *El Moudjahid*, which also was controlled by the FLN party. The destruction of the Left and its political organizations was met with indifference by most of its counterparts in Europe and from human rights organizations. It was a far cry from what later happened, and still goes on, with the all-out defense of the Religious Right, its political parties and organizations. When repression also fell on "religious organizations" there were protests abroad, but not when it fell on "communists" or those alleged to be. It left all the space to supposedly religious organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria to become the main, and sometimes the only representatives of popular dissent and anger.

How was the FIS in Algeria able to hijack the youth revolt and gain so much popularity in their conflict with the authoritarian Algerian government?

In 1988, there was a youth revolt in Algeria which shares many characteristics with the Tunisian uprising that came about two decades later. It was unorganized, and without a political program. It was not initiated, as far as we know, by the Religious Right organizations, but they swiftly took it in their hands after it started. There were no Left organizations left to do so. We witnessed similar hijackings of popular revolts by the religious Far Right in Tunisia and in Egypt in recent years. The silence of the Left in the West regarding the eradication of our progressive forces is something that still needs to be exposed and further researched.

You have been critical of human rights organization like Amnesty International's treatment of Islamic fundamentalism. Can you explain your criticism of AI's coverage of the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s and its treatment of human rights issues today?

It is not Amnesty International alone, but let us start with this organization. I have first-hand experience of trying to convince AI during the nineties that they should report on all the crimes and violations that were committed in Algeria, not just on those committed by the State. If you look at AI's annual reports in this period, you will realize that at the worst of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) killings in the mid-nineties, there was a huge discrepancy between the number of pages devoted to violations by the Algerian State versus those devoted to violations committed by armed fundamentalist groups (the proportion was around 20 pages for state human rights abuses to one and a half for the armed groups). I spoke repeatedly to AI's representatives in Paris and in London about this discrepancy. All I got was that it was for the state to protect citizens against non-state actors. In such a case, this was a blatant misuse of the concept of "due diligence." The equivalent would be: making De Gaulle accountable in court for the bombs planted by the FLN during the Battle of Algiers, or the mayor of New York for the planes that destroyed the Twin Towers. At the same time, human rights organizations made use of the fact that GIA was controlling territories in which they would collect taxes, perform marriages, manage city councils, etc., and thus considered Algeria should be declared a "failed state" and quickly replaced. And — double bind indeed — AI was also blaming the state for the repression against fundamentalist armed groups.

AI was the first human rights organization that was set up in Algeria. The three founding members put so much energy and courage in reporting on all violations, whether committed by the state or by the GIA, Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), Islamic Front for Armed Jihad (FIDA), and all the fundamentalist armed groups. But, in the end, barely anything other than state violations were incorporated into official AI reports. Caught in between their headquarters' policy and a totally disappointed population, the three founding members wrote a very moving, personal, private letter to the then Paris-based head of AI. In this letter, which I saw at the time and still have a copy, they reiterated their deep commitment to human rights in general and to AI, while warning about the damage being done to the organization's reputation in Algeria because of its one-sided reporting. They did not get a reply, and were expelled from AI without having ever been heard.

Human Rights Watch, which later in the decade also sent inquiry missions to Algeria, followed the same policy as AI, which produced similarly biased reports. I was requested on three occasions to help prepare the HRW visits to Algiers by establishing relevant contacts. I can testify to the fact that, among the persons targeted by GIA that I suggested as interesting sources of information, no one was ever met by the successive investigating teams. I do not blame the young researchers who were sent in this hell hole for being terrified and subsequently staying at their posh hotel, but this meant the only people they could meet in this hotel were the so-called "human rights lawyers" who defended exclusively FIS and GIA members. Others could not circulate near the hotel because they would be putting their lives at risk. This should have been said clearly in HRW reports.

I do blame the researchers for not stating exactly the reasons why they did not report on the two sides of the situation. A close friend of mine in Algiers, Z, who was a very vocal feminist and the spokesperson for an active secular women's organization, was hunted down by the FIS and GIA to the point that, to escape her killers, she had to change location every other night for three years. Many friends, colleagues and other people one knew had already been killed in the targeted attacks that marked the first half of the decade. Z and I went together to HRW Headquarters in Washington, D.C. to confront the researchers and denounce the inadequacy of the reports. Just like what had previously happened to me when I was visiting AI's headquarters in Paris or London, we were well received but nothing changed: another HRW report came out that followed exactly the same line.

By the middle of the decade, my friend Z hosted a meeting in Algiers between two AI researchers — one woman had a prominent role at the London headquarters — and eight victims who survived attacks by armed groups. The victims came from eight different regions in Algeria to testify in front of AI's representatives. At that time, traveling in buses or trains was extremely risky, as public transports were attacked daily by armed groups — travelers got killed every single day in one location or another. One survivor of a GIA attack, a woman, even brought along her young daughter she thought equally dangerous to leave behind. For her own archives, Z taped the testimonies that AI representatives listened to, and these tapes still exist. However, these testimonies were never made public in any AI publication. Furthermore, when Z and I were denouncing this intolerable situation during our visit to HRW, the person we were talking to wanted to check on our story: she called AI London on the telephone and spoke to the AI woman researcher who attended the Algiers meeting. The AI researcher denied it ever took place. Many years later, when Gita Sahgal, who was then heading the Women's division in AI London, asked the same researcher where in the archives she could access the report from this meeting. She again denied the meeting ever took place.

Throughout the nineties, I never stopped pushing human rights organizations to report on ALL violations, regardless of who the perpetrators were. I was once asked by a former AI staff in a public meeting when would I tire of "begging at (their) door". On top of private meetings with prominent members, there were even bigger conferences organized (one in Montreal and one in New York) to bridge the gap between what Algerian feminists were reporting and what HR organizations published. None of these conferences led to any solution. I still have a copy of the letter I wrote to a

Scandinavian AI office who had organized one more of the usual program on “violence in Algeria” in which only FIS lawyers were featured. I suggested, in vain, that victims of FIS should also be invited and offered to help with the contacts. Our repeated offers to organize meetings between AI and the young, courageous, independent journalists who rushed on location and talked to survivors of the villages massacres that took place in the second half of the nineties, were not considered.

After the famous massacre in Bentalha, in which the village was nearly eradicated, Z organized a press conference in the Senate in Paris, and brought with her three survivors, two men and one woman; all of them were the only survivors in their whole family. No one else was left, they had managed to hide and were not found by the attackers. I especially remember one man who had lost 18 members in his family under the most atrocious circumstances. He witnessed the slaughter from his hiding site. They testified to the fact that attackers were GIA, they gave details about the leader of the GIA group who was a former FIS member, then moved to GIA. They told us his name, where in the village his family lived and the profession of his father. They explained the attackers knew the family names of the villagers they were to kill, and called them by name when breaking their doors. Z herself had been one of the first journalists to enter this village the morning after the massacre, and she confirmed the testimonies. When the survivors stopped talking, Z requested the representatives of human rights organizations and of progressive newspapers who attended the press conference to take time with the victims in private, even for hours or days if necessary, and to get from them all the details they may want to collect. No one showed any interest, no one spoke to those who had just testified. Journalists and human rights people left the room. For them to be interested and report about this massacre, it would have required that survivors accuse the Algerian State of being behind it.

“Who kills in Algeria?” was not a real question: it implied that it was the state who killed. It was the state’s army and its police forces, and that whoever said it was the fundamentalist armed groups, even if this person was an eye witness of crimes and violations, was lying and covering up for the government. The campaign “who kills in Algeria?” was launched by AI’s Head who was then based in Paris — a campaign that so greatly damaged the efforts of Algerian victims to be heard. Bitter experiences, especially for people like Z and I who had been — at different times and in different capacities — in the Left opposition to the successive Algerian governments.

The dismissing of Gita Sahgal as Head of the Women’s division at the London AI headquarters is probably the best known of the many clashes created by human rights organizations’ political positions on fundamentalism. Gita waged a long battle from within, voicing her concerns internally, but she could not affect AI policy on fundamentalism. She finally could not cope with seeing AI officials parading Moazzam Begg (a former Guantanamo detainee and fierce supporter of Taliban in Afghanistan) throughout European capitals as a “human rights defender” and she went public about it. Another incident involved AIUSA and one of its prominent legal advisers, K., who was well versed in the violations committed by fundamentalist armed groups in Algeria. K organized for Gita and me to be invited to AIUSA annual conference in New York to share our experiences with AI members. This was accepted. However, our testimonies led to her being isolated, interrogated, and “on internal trial” for two years before she left AIUSA. Both Gita and K can testify about it. Many more examples come to mind. [3].

Let me mention one more example. At the first conference of human rights defenders, held in Paris, a group was invited that gathered mothers whose children disappeared at the hands of the Algerian state. White balloons were to be launched at the end of the conference on the Parvis des Droits de l’Homme. Each balloon was to carry the name of a disappeared person. I called the then-head of the International Federation for Human Rights, FIDH was co-organizer of the event, and insisted that all disappeared should be mentioned, regardless of who disappeared them — the state or non-state actors. Leaflets were distributed which pointed exclusively at the responsibility of the state. Three

friends then stood at the white balloons ceremony with a banner on which painted the words: "All disappeared." Only these words, I can guarantee because I had made the banner myself. They were insulted, pushed, and spat on by members of the French human rights organizations. They had to leave.

I had great difficulties even with the feminist human rights defenders. The Women Human Rights Defenders Coalition, of which I was a founding member, allowed me to speak about the human rights violations committed by non-state actors in Algeria and in other countries at our first Founding Conference in Colombo. However, it was never possible to later reflect collectively on how to adequately deal within a human rights framework with the role of non-state actors as perpetrators of human rights violations. Human rights organizations within our coalition had too much weight to allow it. For years, I made many efforts to discuss with human rights organizations the need to rethink human rights concepts such as "due diligence" and "non-state actors". Human rights concepts were designed more than 50 years ago to account for situations of war between two armies of two nations. In the present day, most armed conflicts involve at least one party (often more) that is a non-state actor. These concepts thus become highly inadequate and ultimately served at whitewashing the crimes committed by non-state actors who are not held accountable. I finally understood that I was wasting my time. We were facing a straightforward political opposition that had nothing to do with human rights. I remember the decade of the nineties as a period of "madness."

We were confronted with a situation in which what people saw with their own eyes, lived through and knew for certain was turned upside down and re-interpreted by organizations that had the power to shape public opinion. For instance, at a time when our friends and colleagues were slaughtered by fundamentalist armed groups, we were told that it was the government slaughtering them. And when progressive people were decimated, they were called eradicators by the human rights organizations and left media in Europe. It was the victims who were blamed. No doubt such a denial can give a feeling of living in a mad world where concepts are turned upside down, the ground is unstable under your feet and there is no reality anymore. Imagine a situation in which Algerian Muslim fascists slaughter around 200,000 people in the nineties — ordinary people, not necessarily the fighting type, but people who send their children to school, or bring them to the hospital, or get a birth certificate from the town hall — while the GIA decides that whatever has to do with the government (such as education, health or administration in a country where everything is State-owned) is *kofr*. So the people who use the facilities of the *kofr* government are *kofr* themselves and *kofrs* deserve capital punishment. Imagine these people are decimated, not one family spared, some losing up to 18 to 20 members in one go in an attack on a village. Others seeing with their own eyes what is being done: torture and killing of their loved ones (women, girls, children). They have reasons to be deeply traumatized.

Now imagine that the killers, or their leaders, or their defense lawyers, or the representatives or spokespersons of their parties, are invited abroad to speak up in Left, Far-Left, and human rights circles, or at World Social Fora (in Porto Alegre, in Bombay), or at the U.N. they are granted asylum in Europe while you are denied it, although your name has been listed on a sheet of paper pinned up on a door mosque calling for your "execution." And you have exhausted your possibilities of hiding at friends' places. That while they killed so many of your folks, friends and comrades and hunt you down, YOU are the one who is labeled an "eradicator" and blamed publicly in the international media for demanding from your government not the physical elimination, but the political elimination of the Muslim Far Right. For instance, by calling for ending the electoral process in 1991: this was done by unions, women's organizations and whatever was left-leaning in the country at that time. You are therefore the one branded "anti-democracy", and your killers are supported as great "Democrats". Imagine that your daughter has been publicly beheaded, her head subsequently

paraded in front of her age-group friends and her breasts cut off in the street for refusing to bend to their head-covering orders. Then you read in the newspapers or hear on TV that in Europe the Left, Far-Left, human rights groups, the anti-globalization movement, the Council of Human rights and European Parliament discuss and often support “the right to veil”, and that they give a platform to the ideologues that started off the killers.

This is what the policies of European Left and human rights organizations have done to the Algerian people. And what made it worse is that it came from people who we expected to be our natural allies. They based their analysis of our situation on premises that were inadequate. The Left’s traditional focus on the state impeded its ability to de-code in time the warning signs of supposedly religious non-state forces rising as powerful extreme Right political actors. Human rights organizations also had trouble de-linking from an exclusive focus on the state and considering these new players for what they really are.

One of your main criticisms of human rights organizations has been aimed at what you see as a hierarchy of rights where minority, religious and cultural rights take precedence over women’s rights. What reforms would you like to see made by human rights organizations to fix this perceived bias?

The Left seems plagued with Eurocentrism. They were more concerned with their own struggles with their own governments’ policies toward migrant minorities, and they applied their analysis of this situation in Europe to what was happening in our own countries. In the process they have abandoned the vital forces of resistance to the Muslim Far Right. By selecting victims of the state as their preferential victims, they created a hierarchy of victims. Those attacked by non-state actors were ignored to the benefit of those attacked by the state. And by ignoring the crimes committed against women by Muslim fundamentalist non-state actors, they have also created a hierarchy of rights in which women’s rights come last, after religious rights, cultural rights and minority rights.

Do you think there is an underlying racism in the notion that women’s rights, freedom of religion and freedom of speech are Western values as opposed to universal values? How destructive have these assumptions been to progressives advocating for these values in non-Western societies? You also have been critical of the lack of coverage secular women’s rights groups featuring women from Muslim backgrounds have received from the mainstream media and the international left. Why do you think groups like WLUML have not received more attention from these organizations?

The underlying assumption is that progressive people and secularists in Muslim majority countries are not representative of their people, that they are illegitimate. This is a denial of historical facts. Some years ago, we collectively gathered material on “Our Great Ancestors”, i.e. feminists in Muslim contexts, and we found many examples of great feminist figures. The research started from the 7th century, but one could have found examples much earlier. [4]. It shows how similar the demands have been across centuries: education for girls comes first, then economic independence, the right to manage one’s own assets, properties and finances, freedom of movement, the right to marry of one’s choice, the right not to marry and to embrace celibacy, negotiating marriage contracts in ways that most European women could not even imagine today (restriction on polygamy, right to initiate the divorce, to have guardianship of children upon divorce, etc...). We can really prove that feminist struggles are indigenous to Muslim contexts. And I believe that, should we undertake similar research on agnostics, freethinkers and atheists throughout centuries in Muslim contexts, we will come up with another equally well hidden and extremely interesting piece of our history. Reclaiming this history is a very important strategy for feminists and for secularists, especially because it is something Muslim fundamentalists want to disappear at all costs. Unfortunately, it seems that progressive people in Europe also believe that this history does not exist. It is as if the general belief

was that “Muslims” had to be backwards to be authentic. And, yes, of course, this is racism.

WLUMML was most praised and promoted when it developed strategies that were “specific” to a supposed “nature” as “Muslims”. For instance, the strategies of re-interpretation of religion were always well-received and favored by funders, but also by the international women’s movement. Comparatively, strategies which were more “secular”, or at least not directly concerned with religion per se, were seen as not really addressing “our specific” problems. The fact that for a long time WLUMML was using and promoting all these different strategies concomitantly, and that they were seen as complementary, not antagonistic, was something many outsiders found most difficult to understand and accept. Long ago, I wrote an article on “the construction of Muslimness” which was entitled “What is your tribe?” [5]. In this article I pointed at the fear of our “sameness” and the need for emphasizing our “difference” that I encountered in Europe and North America, that also led to locking us up into a forced religious identity; to being “under culture arrest”, as one can be “under house arrest”. If we do not comply with this preconception, we are seen as traitors to the ahistorical transcontinental imagined “culture” (in the singular) that is attributed to “Muslims”, to our presumed religion. The inability for many progressive people in Europe and North America to conceive of women of Muslim descent as feminists (unless it is confined to the infamous “Islamic feminism” — a women’s branch of fundamentalist organizations) and secularists is just outrageous. It is interesting to note that, after the wave of exotic exhilaration for the religious interpretations strategies in the last decade of the century, a new trend is emerging. I already mentioned that more and more young people stand publicly for secularism and more and more declare themselves atheists, despite facing harsh attacks by Muslim fundamentalists. The increasing number of Councils of Ex-Muslims testifies to this new trend. In October 2014, we organized in London an international conference on secularism in which women (and especially women from Muslim countries) were not only the very visible majority, but also the overwhelming one.

This worldwide phenomenon of an emerging secular popular dissent does not yet make it into mainstream media. What still attracts the attention is the fate of the poor Muslim fundamentalists oppressed by undemocratic governments. Compare the number of articles devoted to them to those on the atheist Bangladeshi bloggers being hacked to death, which only briefly made the headlines. We are still very far from being treated on par with Muslim fundamentalists, in terms of protests against human rights violations. It is implied, if not said, that atheist bloggers deserved it and that they should not “offend” the beliefs of Muslims by making use of their fundamental human right of freedom of conscience. It was similar to the reaction to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. [6]

It is only with the recent terrorist attacks in Paris (in particular with the massacre at the Concert Hall Bataclan and at restaurants and terraces nearby) that articles signed by clearly secular women of Muslim descent appear in the mainstream French media and that it seems their analysis is taken seriously. For the first time in 30 years I was interviewed by a British Far-Left organization, and an angry article I wrote after sexual violence erupted on New Year’s Eve in various major cities in Northern Europe was reproduced on many Left and Far Left websites, and translated into various languages. Obviously, it is not the quality of what I have been writing for 30 years that suddenly improved. What gives us this sudden legitimacy in the eyes of the Left? Is it the fear, for the first time, that what has been happening in our countries is now taking place in theirs? Could it challenge the views that “Muslims” are necessarily victims and not perpetrators as well? Will it bring a sudden revelation about the political nature of the armed Muslim Far-Right movement? The terms “political Islam” or “Islamists” are misleading: both suggest religious movements when they should be characterized in political terms. In Algeria, since the nineties, we have been calling them green-fascists (green being here for the color of Islam) or “Islamofascists”.

The Left (and Far Left) in Europe did not take the trouble of going through a thorough analysis of the political nature of Muslim fundamentalist movements and their political programs. It mostly saw

them as popular movements — which indeed they are, and populist too, but that did not ring a bell — opposing capitalism, imperialism, or undemocratic governments. The European Left only looked at what it thought — often mistakenly, for example when it presumes the Muslim-Right is anti-capitalist — fundamentalist movements stood against, never at what they wanted to promote. Indeed, fundamentalists stood against our undemocratic governments, but from a Far-Right perspective. How can the Left support Far-Right fascist-like movements in the name of anti-imperialism? In the words of prominent far-Left thinker and leader Daniel Bensaïd: “The control of capital over bodies, its strong will to reveal their market value, does not at all reduce their control by religious law and the theological will to make them disappear...The poor dialectic of main and secondary contradictions, forever revolving, already played too many bad tricks. And the “secondary enemy”, too often underestimated, because the fight against the main enemy was claimed to be a priority, sometimes has been deadly”. [7]

What can progressives from Western governments like the United States do to help women’s rights groups like WLUML? What do progressives in the West have to learn from the progressive Left inside countries in the Middle East and North Africa that are being assaulted by Muslim fundamentalists within and outside their respective governments?

This is a really important question that is very frequently asked to us. Progressives in Europe and North America have not yet realized that “helping us” actually means helping themselves because we are all in the same boat. Armed Muslim fundamentalists are now also targeting them. Subsequently, there is a rise of xenophobic Far-Right movements, as is the case throughout Europe at the moment. It seems to me that the question should be re-formulated as what can we do together to prevent a wave of fascism from sweeping our different countries? My answer is “sweep at your doorstep first”, oppose the Religious-Right wherever it surfaces and the traditional Far-Right as well. Stand with the anti-fascists at home, before having the idea to go stand by them abroad.

I presume it is clear for you as well as it is for me that European and North American governments, when they go to war to “save the poor oppressed Muslim women” as they did in Afghanistan, or to “kick out a dictator” as they did in Iraq and in Libya, are in fact doing their best to preserve their access to oil, or other similar vested interests. And that they are prepared to instigate chaos in other countries (let’s add Syria to Iraq and Libya) by attacking governments that are no more or no less dictatorial than many of their allies throughout the world. They are doing this for the sake of selling more arms and weapons of mass destruction, including to Muslim fundamentalist groups. At home, progressives can oppose communalism and cultural relativism that promotes different laws for different categories of citizens, according to their ethnic or presumed religious affiliation, thus trapping women into a system of unequal rights in family matters. Challenge the political platform that is given to Muslim Far-Right fundamentalists by international human rights organizations. Support the universality of rights and challenge the new terminology (Muslim human rights, Dalit human rights, etc...) that now flourishes even at U.N. level. The Muslim Far-Right would not survive and thrive without the active ideological blessings of many misled liberals and human rights people, the Left, and even feminists. Progressives should support the anti-fascists, the secularists from Muslim descent. We exist everywhere, you don’t have to create us or invent us, just give us visibility and link up our struggles. We need to create a broad anti-fascist front and to make sure we identify the Muslim Far-Right as a new form of fascism.

How has the United Kingdom’s willingness to allow religious leaders to be the so-called legitimate representatives of their communities further isolated the country’s citizens from each other and provided not only potential recruits for the Muslim Far Right, but also fodder for the traditional xenophobic Far Right in Europe? Can you explain why Great Britain’s promotion of Muslim religious schools and communalism is such a mistaken

response to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism?

This takes us back to the role historically played by the U.K. in undermining secularism as a concept. Secularism is intimately linked to democracy and equality between citizens. In its original meaning, it refers to the separation between Church and State at the time of the French Revolution to put an end to the domination of the Vatican over politics. "Separation" then was an essential component of the emancipation of the political power from the Vatican's imperialism, and it was a matter of survival for the emerging democracy in France. But in a country where the Head of the Anglican Church is also the Head of the State, this separation was seen as impossible! The legal framework drawn from the original definition of secularism allows for equality between all citizens (religiously inclined or not), rather than equality between religions. In this legal context, religious belief is a personal option just like agnosticism or atheism. Hence the law does not grant "religious freedom" specifically, but freedom of conscience in general. Secularism is not just another belief, at par with religions, it is clearly defined as exclusively a legal and administrative provision through which the role and place of religions in politics is regulated and limited.

Secularism encountered strong opposition from the various religious authorities since the beginning. There are recent attempts to undermine it in France, which have taken the form of weakening the concept by adding to it various adjectives which all amount to doing away with the clear-cut idea of "separation"; hence we now hear in France about "positive secularism", "open secularism", "tolerant secularism", "inclusive secularism", "plural secularism", etc. This is under the pressure of Europe's institutions which are influenced by the U.K. The most effective and long-lasting blow to secularism is the redefinition of the concept by the U.K. from separation between state and religion, to equal tolerance by the state of all religions — thus preserving the double function of the King or Queen. In other words, the state moves from refusing to deal with representatives of official religions, considering this is outside its mandate, interacting only with equal citizens of a republic; to being a party to the competition between official religions and their representatives for political power. This considers citizens not as equal members of the nation, but as members of communities that are not based on individual choice, but pre-defined by their ethnic or religious background. By creating "communities" as recognized political entities, the U.K. created and bred "communalism".

We have witnessed the flourishing of self-appointed conservative men endorsed as legitimate representatives of so-called communities, as well as the most retrograde demands for specific laws and jurisdiction imposed on sections of the people by virtue of their foreign place of birth or of their presumed religious affiliation. Indeed, this creates inequality of rights between citizens as the law of the land, democratically voted can be replaced by "divine" laws as interpreted by reactionary clerics and enforced on unwilling citizens. This is a highly undemocratic process. In this context, keeping education out of the hands of religion/s is a crucial element in building an equal citizens' identity. Secular schooling was an integral part of a republican identity ('republic' being here opposed to theocracy) in the context of the French revolution and beyond. It amounted to creating a de facto mixing of classes, beliefs, origins so that children will learn to consider themselves as citizens, not as representatives of a community. Today in the U.K., unless families are open enough to invite "difference" at their dinner table, young people may reach adult age without having ever stepped out of their "community". Depriving children of this much needed mixing inevitably trains them to continue their adult life with their "sames" rather than with their "others". This in the hands of two Far-Right trends, that of the Muslim Far-Right and that of the traditional xenophobic Far-Right. We could reflect on the notion of "difference", which has been promoted both by the Left and by feminists as very progressive and respectful of "diversity", but we all experienced the notion of "difference" that was also used throughout history to separate human groups and lock them into an ontological Otherness, as was the case for South Africa under apartheid or the Southern States of the USA, and is now the case with Muslim fundamentalism.

Do progressives need to re-valuate the idea that legitimate elections alone prove that a government is dedicated to democracy? What other qualities other than being democratically elected need to be realized for a government to be considered truly democratic? In countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Libya and Egypt where Islamic groups have been — or would have been — elected into office, what stance should secular progressives within and outside these countries adopt?

The fact democracy cannot be equated and limited to the rule of the majority is something that has been discussed in the Left for a very long time, hence the debate on bourgeois democracy, social democracy, etc... and I will not come back to it. Many dictatorships around the world and throughout history have come to power through legal means such as elections. Hitler is a good example of it. The fact that dictators immediately put an end to elections (or fake them) and remain in power by force is nothing new. The second in command of FIS publicly declared in front of the international press before the 1991 elections in Algeria that, should FIS win the elections, there won't be any more elections because "If one has the law of god, why should one need the law of the people? One should kill all these unbelievers!"

I think the Left in Europe and North America should meditate on this kind of statement before shouting against the military louder than they ever shouted against the Muslim fundamentalist Far-Right. Obviously, if the Left was decimated in our countries over a long period of time, no other force than the military is left to counter the religious Far Right. At least armies in Algeria and in Egypt are Republican (by which I mean, for a republic, and against a theocracy). In Algeria, people have repeatedly chosen to keep our undemocratic army-backed government (as has been the case of all our governments since independence, from our first president Ben Bella to Bouteflika today), rather than to live under the fascist boot of FIS and GIA. It does say something about the real terror they inspire. When cornered, people have the right to prefer to live under Thatchers than under Hitlers. In Iraq and Libya, in the name of protecting people from their local Thatchers, people have been thrown to their local Hitlers by supposedly well-meaning imperialist armies. They nearly succeeded in doing this again in Syria.

There is no doubt in my mind that considering the suffering and misery that followed, people would gladly exchange their present situation for the previous "dictatorial" one. How does it make sense to exchange bad situations for worse ones? If we do not have progressive forces ready to take power, we should work on this and build people's organizations before risking a loss to the fascists. Those from outside who are prepared to bring down our undemocratic governments — for our own good! — should be forced to stay and live under the fascists they have contributed to bringing to power.

Marieme Helie Lucas

P.S.

* This interview will be included in Andy Heintz's upcoming book *Dissidents of the International Left*.

* Andy Heintz is a freelance journalist who has been published in the Culture Project, Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres, Foreign Policy in Focus, Secularism is a Women's Issue, Balkan Witness and CounterVortex.

Footnotes

[1] See ESSF (article 42846), [Religions and Islam: What is a fatwa? – Fatwas, opinions and Aristotle: ‘The concept of dog does not bark’](#).

[2] See: “Knowing our rights Women and family laws”, a publication of the Women Living Under Muslim Laws international solidarity network.

[3] See interview of Rhonda Copelon in The Struggle for Secularism in Europe and North America (<http://www.wluml.org/resource/dossier-30-31-struggle-secularism-europe-and-north-america>). Copelon, a prominent feminist and US-based human rights lawyer gives details about the discrepancy between the support she got from human rights organizations in her struggle against the Christian Right, and her abandonment when she struggled against the Muslim Far Right. She concludes “it was a very lonely struggle.” And see also on ESSF (article 19186), [USA: The CCR controversy — Why I spoke out on Anwar al-Awlaki](#).

[4] See: Great Ancestors: Women Claiming Rights in Muslim Contexts www.wluml.org/fr/node/7958

[5] See: <http://www.wluml.org/fr/node/343> What is your tribe? Women’s struggles and the construction of Muslimness

[6] See ESSF (article 34031), [After the Charlie Hebdo Massacre in Paris, Support those Fighting the Religious-Right](#).

[7] See The struggle for secularism in Europe and North America