



What Is 'Islamofascism'?

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"Islamic fascists"--used by President George W. Bush for the conspirators in the alleged trans-Atlantic airline bombing plot--and references by other prominent figures to "Islamofascism," have been met by protests from Muslims who say the term is an insult to their religion. The meaning and origin of the concept, as well as the legitimacy of complaints about it, have become relevant--perhaps urgently so.

I admit to a lack of modesty or neutrality about this discussion, since I was, as I will explain, the first Westerner to use the neologism in this context.

In my analysis, as originally put in print directly after the horror of September 11, 2001, Islamofascism refers to use of the faith of Islam as a cover for totalitarian ideology. This radical phenomenon is embodied among Sunni Muslims today by

such fundamentalists as the Saudi-financed Wahhabis, the Pakistani jihadists known as Jama'atis, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In the ranks of Shia Muslims, it is exemplified by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the clique around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran.

Political typologies should make distinctions, rather than confusing them, and Islamofascism is neither a loose nor an improvised concept. It should be employed sparingly and precisely. The indicated movements should be treated as Islamofascist, first, because of their congruence with the defining characteristics of classic fascism, especially in its most historically-significant form--German National Socialism.

Fascism is distinguished from the broader category of extreme right-wing politics by its willingness to defy public civility and openly vio-

late the law. As such it represents a radical departure from the tradition of ultra-conservatism. The latter aims to preserve established social relations, through enforcement of law and reinforcement of authority. But the fascist organizations of Mussolini and Hitler, in their conquests of power, showed no reluctance to rupture peace and repudiate parliamentary and other institutions; the fascists employed terror against both the existing political structure and society at large. It is a common misconception of political science to believe, in the manner of amateur Marxists, that Italian fascists and Nazis sought maintenance of order, to protect the ruling classes. Both Mussolini and Hitler agitated against "the system" governing their countries. Their willingness to resort to street violence, assassinations, and coups set the Italian and German fascists apart from ordinary defenders of ruling elites, which they sought to replace. This is an important point that should never be forgotten. Fascism is not merely a harsh dictatorship or oppression by privilege.

Islamofascism similarly pursues its aims through the willful, arbitrary, and gratuitous disruption of global society, either by terrorist conspiracies or by violation of peace between states. Al Qaeda has recourse to the former weapon; Hezbollah, in assaulting northern Israel, used the latter. These are not acts of protest, but calculated strategies for political advantage through undiluted violence. Hezbollah showed fascist methods both in its kidnapping of Israeli soldiers and in initiating that

action without any consideration for the Lebanese government of which it was a member. Indeed, Lebanese democracy is a greater enemy of Hezbollah than Israel.

Fascism rested, from the economic perspective, on resentful middle classes, frustrated in their aspirations and anxious about loss of their position. The Italian middle class was insecure in its social status; the German middle class was completely devastated by the defeat of the country in the First World War. Both became irrational with rage at their economic difficulties; this passionate and uncontrolled fury was channeled and exploited by the acolytes of Mussolini and Hitler. Al Qaeda is based in sections of the Saudi, Pakistani, and Egyptian middle classes fearful, in the Saudi case, of losing their unstable hold on prosperity--in Pakistan and Egypt, they are angry at the many obstacles, in state and society, to their ambitions. The constituency of Hezbollah is similar: the growing Lebanese Shia middle class, which believes itself to be the victim of discrimination.

Fascism was imperialistic; it demanded expansion of the German and Italian spheres of influence. Islamofascism has similar ambitions; the Wahhabis and their Pakistani and Egyptian counterparts seek control over all Sunni Muslims in the world, while Hezbollah projects itself as an ally of Syria and Iran in establishing regional dominance.

Fascism was totalitarian; i.e. it fostered a totalistic world view--a dis-

tinct social reality that separated its followers from normal society. Islamofascism parallels fascism by imposing a strict division between Muslims and alleged unbelievers. For Sunni radicals, the practice of *takfir*--declaring all Muslims who do not adhere to the doctrines of the Wahhabis, Pakistani Jama'atis, and the Muslim Brotherhood to be outside the Islamic global community or *ummah*--is one expression of Islamofascism. For Hezbollah, the posture of total rejectionism in Lebanese politics--opposing all politicians who might favor any political negotiation with Israel--serves the same purpose. *Takfir*, or "excommunication" of ordinary Muslims, as well as Hezbollah's Shia radicalism, are also important as indispensable, unifying psychological tools for the strengthening of such movements. Fascism was paramilitary; indeed, the Italian and German military elites were reluctant to accept the fascist parties' ideological monopoly. Al Qaeda and Hezbollah are both paramilitary.

I do not believe these characteristics are intrinsic to any element of the faith of Islam. Islamofascism is a distortion of Islam, exactly as Italian and German fascism represented perversions of respectable patriotism in those countries. Nobody argues today that Nazism possessed historical legitimacy as an expression of German nationalism; only Nazis would make such claims, to defend themselves. Similarly, Wahhabis and their allies argue that their doctrines are "just Islam." But German culture existed for centuries, and exists today, without submit-

ting to Nazi values; Islam created a world-spanning civilization, surviving in a healthy condition in many countries today, without Wahhabism or political Shiism, both of which are less than 500 years old.

But what of those primitive Muslims who declare that "Islamofascism" is a slur? *The Washington Post* of August 14 quoted a speaker at a pro-Hezbollah demonstration in Washington, as follows: "Mr. Bush: Stop calling Islam 'Islamic fascism,' said Esam Omesh, president of the Muslim American Society, prompting a massive roar from the crowd. He said there is no such thing, 'just as there is no such thing as Christian fascism.'"

These curious comments may be parsed in various ways. Since President Bush used the term "Islamic fascists" to refer to a terrorist conspiracy, did Mr. Omesh (whose Muslim American Society is controlled by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood) intend to accept the equation of Islam with said terrorism, merely rejecting the political terminology he dislikes? Probably not. But Mr. Omesh's claim that "there is no such thing as Christian fascism" is evidence of profound historical ignorance. Leading analysts of fascism saw its Italian and German forms as foreshadowed by the Ku Klux Klan in the U.S. and the Russian counter-revolutionary mass movement known as the Black Hundreds. Both movements were based in Christian extremism, symbolized by burning crosses in America and pogroms against Jews under the tsars.

The fascist Iron Guard in Romania during the interwar period and in the second world war was explicitly Christian--its official title was the "Legion of the Archangel Michael;" Christian fascism also exists in the form of Ulster Protestant terrorism, and was visible in the (Catholic) Blue Shirt movement active in the Irish Free State during the 1920s and 1930s. Both the Iron Guard and the Blue Shirts attracted noted intellectuals; the cultural theorist Mircea Eliade in the first case, the poet W.B. Yeats in the second. Many similar cases could be cited. It is also significant that Mr. Omesh did not deny the existence of "Jewish fascism"--doubtless because in his milieu, the term is commonly directed against Israel. Israel is not a fascist state, although some marginal, ultra-extremist Jewish groups could be so described.

I will conclude with a summary of a more obscure debate over the term, which is symptomatic of many forms of confusion in American life today. I noted at the beginning of this text that I am neither modest nor neutral on this topic. I developed the concept of Islamofascism after receiving an e-mail in June 2000 from a Bangladeshi Sufi Muslim living in America, titled "The Wahhabis: Fascism in Religious Garb!" I then resided in Kosovo. I put the term in print in *The Spectator* of London, on September 22, 2001. I was soon credited with it by Andrew Sullivan in his *Daily Dish*, and after it was attributed to Christopher Hitchens, the latter also acknowledged me as the earliest user of it. While working in Bosnia-

Hercegovina more recently, I participated in a public discussion in which the Pakistani Muslim philosopher Fazlur Rahman (1919-88), who taught for years at the University of Chicago (not to be confused with the Pakistani radical Fazlur Rehman), was cited as referring to "Islamic fascists."

If such concerns seem absurdly self-interested, it is also interesting to observe how Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, dealt with the formulation of Islamofascism as an analytical tool. After a long and demeaning colloquy between me and a Wikipedian who commented negatively on an early book of mine while admitting that he had never even seen a copy of it, Wikipedia (referring to it collectively, as its members prefer) decided it to ascribe it to another historian of Islam, Malise Ruthven. But Ruthven, in 1990, used the term to refer to all authoritarian governments in Muslim countries, from Morocco to Pakistan.

I do not care much, these days, about Wikipedia and its misapprehensions, or obsess over acknowledgements of my work. But Malise Ruthven was and would remain wrong to believe that authoritarianism and fascism are the same. To emphasize, fascism is something different, and much worse, than simple dictatorship, however cruel the latter may be. That is a lesson that should have been learned 70 years ago, when German Nazism demonstrated that it was a feral and genocidal aberration in modern European history, not merely another

form of oppressive rightist rule, or a particularly wild variety of colonialism.

Similarly, the violence wreaked by al Qaeda and Hezbollah, and by Saddam Hussein before them, has been different from other expressions of reactionary Arabism, simple Islamist ideology, or violent corruption in the post-colonial world. Between democracy, civilized values,

and normal religion on one side, and Islamofascism on the other, there can be no compromise; as I have written before, it is a struggle to the death. President Bush is right to say "young democracies are fragile . . . this may be [the Islamofascists'] last and best opportunity to stop freedom's advance." As with the Nazis, nothing short of a victory for democracy can assure the world's security.