



Fearing a Muslim Planet

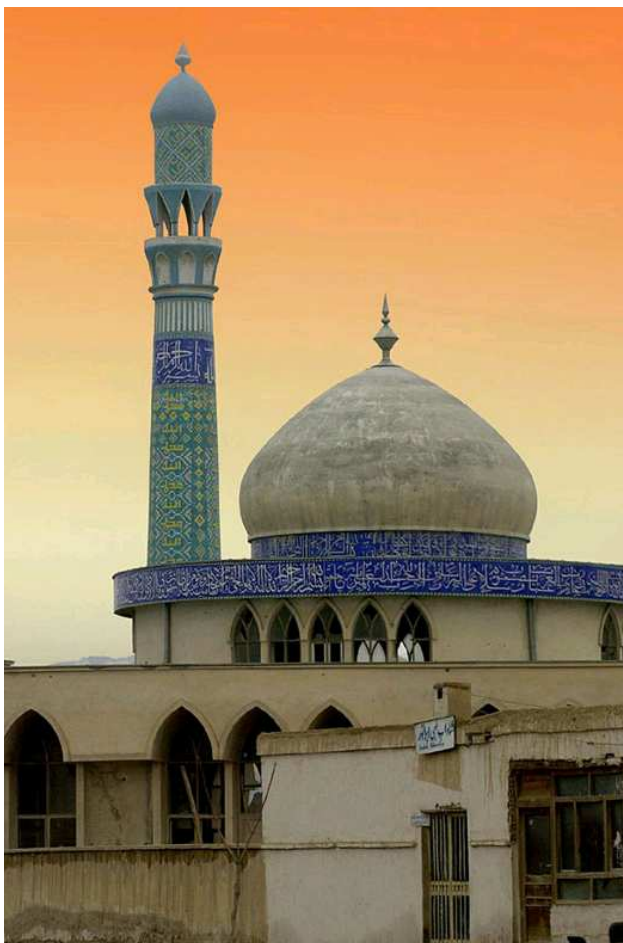


What's behind all the Sharia hysteria?

By Leon Hadar

Would you like a spot of Islamophobia in your tea? It seems that a few of the Tea Party's representatives in the midterm elections concluded that voters would like their favorite drink brewed with very hot anti-Muslim spices.

"He is the only Muslim member of congress," Tea Party Nation leader Judson Phillips, a Tennessee attorney, wrote in an e-mail to supporters in which he urged them to help defeat Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) because of his Muslim faith. "The Quran in no uncertain terms says some wonderful things like, 'Kill the infidels,'" wrote Phillips. "I have a real problem with people who want to kill me just because I'm the infidel," he continued, expressing support for Ellison's opponent, Lynne Torgerson, an independent candidate.



"What do I know of Islam?" Torgerson wrote on her website. "Well, I know of 9/11. Nineteen (19) men from Saudi Arabia, all Muslim, hijacked planes and flew into the two

(2) World Trade Towers murdering thousands of people, and tried to fly into our Pentagon. ... People say that we can't include the moderate, peace loving Muslims. Well, I agree. But, who are they? ... I cannot tell. It is not for me to go and try and find them. Rather, it is their duty to stand up and identify themselves, if there are any." Case closed.

Then there was Republican Senate candidate Sharron Angle, who told a crowd of supporters in Nevada that Americans must address a "militant terrorist situation" that had supposedly allowed Sharia, the Islamic religious law, to take hold in some American cities.

During a rally in the resort town of Mesquite, Angle was asked by a supporter about reports of an alleged Muslim plan to extend the Caliphate into North America. "I keep hearing about Muslims wanting to take over the United States ... on a TV program just last night, I saw that they are taking over a city in Michigan and the residents of the city, they want them out," he told Angle. "So, I want to hear your thoughts about that," he added.

Angle responded that "we're talking about a militant terrorist situation, which I believe it isn't a widespread thing, but it is enough that we need to address, and we have been addressing, it." Muslims, she suggested, have already imposed their religious law on areas of the country. "My thoughts are these, first of all, Dearborn, Michigan, and Frankford, Texas are on American soil, and under constitutional law. Not Sharia law," she explained. "It seems to me there is something fundamentally wrong with allowing a foreign system of law to even take hold in any municipality or government situation in our United States."

While Dearborn, Michigan, does have a thriving Muslim community, Frankford, Texas, which was annexed to Dallas in 1975, doesn't. According to Wikipedia, Frankford now consists only of a small church and cemetery. Dearborn mayor Jack O'Reilly, who criticized Angle for her comments, noted that there was no Sharia law in Dearborn and the issue was never raised by residents. "Muslims have been practicing their faith in our community for almost 90 years without incident or conflict," he said. "To suggest that they have taken over ignores the fact that Dearborn hosts seven mosques and 60 Christian churches." Well, never mind.

But members of the Tea Party movement should mind. It is not clear that bashing Islam and Muslims offers electoral rewards to Republican candidates. Angle was defeated in Nevada, which, to be sure, had more to do with her offending Hispanics rather than Muslims. Ellison, an African-American who was born and raised Roman Catholic and converted to Islam later in life—and who isn't actually the only Muslim member of Congress—was elected for a second term to represent a district with very few black or Muslim residents.

And while Tea Party darling Kristi Noem, riding to victory as a Republican House candidate in South Dakota, accentuated during her campaign her opposition to building a Muslim community center two blocks from the World Trade Center site, it was her anti-Obama message and personal appeal to the mostly conservative voters in her district that brought about her success. At the same, Carl Paladino, a Tea Party favorite running for New York governor who messaged the "Ground Zero Mosque" issue to death as he ran against an unpopular Democrat in an economically distressed state, is not going to spend the next four years in Albany. Unlike Noem, the defeated Paladino was just a lousy candidate.

Historically, the Republican Party has been the beneficiary of the Muslim vote, reflecting the conservative cultural values and business sense of a large number of American Muslims. Close to 80 percent of American Muslim voters backed George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election. But by 2004—three years after 9/11 and against the backdrop of American-led wars in two Muslim countries—the Republican president had lost about half of his support among Muslims. Indeed, 85 percent of Muslim voters backed Barack Obama in 2010, the most solid voting bloc among any major religious group. With 79 percent of them voting for Obama, American Jews, reflecting their traditional support for Democratic candidates, ended up being proportionally the second largest pro-Obama group, a sign that while pursuing the aggressive neoconservative agenda in the Middle East has antagonized American Muslims, it has failed to win over Jewish voters.

Even in the aftermath of 9/11 and at the height of the War on Terror, President Bush and his aides refrained from defining their Middle East agenda as a clash between the West and Islam and initiated numerous public relations campaigns aimed at distinguishing between radical Islamists and the moderate majority of Muslims at home and abroad. But Obama's efforts to reach out to Muslims overseas by promoting diplomatic engagement with Iran and embracing a more balanced U.S. position on Israel/Palestine, coupled with controversies over Islam at home, have led some Republicans, including members of the Tea Party, to conclude that exploiting anti-Muslim sentiments could produce electoral gains.

While the notion that America has been gripped by Islamophobia is exaggerated, the controversy over the mosque near Ground Zero, the threat by a loony Florida pastor to burn the Koran publicly on 9/11, and online peddling of the absurd view that Obama is Muslim seemed to create a political environment on the eve of the midterms in which criticism of Obama for his domestic economic agenda could be integrated into a larger narrative in which the president—the son of a secular Kenyan Muslim and who had spent some of his childhood in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country—was not only a big-government liberal but psychologically un-American, if not a closet Muslim plotting the fall of the United States and the West.

Hawks who believe that the U.S. has an obligation to spread democracy worldwide, including through the use of military power, have the right to be critical of Obama's policies abroad that, if anything, are based on the kind of realpolitik that guided the foreign policy of President George H. W. Bush. Similarly, there are legitimate reasons for conservatives to oppose a mosque blocks from Ground Zero, although a commitment to property rights and religious freedom is not among them. And the relationship between Islamic religious law and American law would probably require urgent attention if this country were being flooded by millions of Muslim immigrants. But according to no less an authority than the leading anti-Islam scaremonger, Daniel Pipes, the number of Muslim immigrants and their progeny in the U.S. is “somewhere above two million”—less than 1 percent of the country's population.

Nevertheless, Pipes has been warning that Muslim militants “want to change America and make it Islamic.” Pipes, together with Robert Spencer, the head of JihadWatch.org, and Frank Gaffney of the war-mongering Center for Security Policy, has been warning for years that these Muslim radicals are attempting to assert the primacy of the Sharia over American law. These professional Muslim-baiters have been joined lately by more mainstream figures like Newt Gingrich, who has called for a federal ban on Sharia law, as well as by local activists around the country who have been pressing for measures that would bar state judges from considering Sharia in formulating rulings.

But as Rachel Slajda, a researcher for Talking Points Memo, observes, much of this talk about the Sharia threat is based on papers written by members of radical Islamic groups around the world—such as the Muslim Brotherhood—that dream up implausible and often bizarre anti-American strategies. Political activists who perceive a threat from Islamic law also refer to a 2009 case in which a judge refused to grant a restraining order against a Moroccan immigrant who forced sex on his wife. The judge said the husband's belief that his wife must submit to sex was consistent with his religious practices. But according to the *Wall Street Journal*, an appeals court reversed the judge and granted the restraining order, citing a Supreme Court decision rejecting a Mormon's claim that his faith exempted him from an anti-bigamy statute.

It is true that a few American cities now have religious bodies that help adjudicate family-law disputes and other personal matters among believers through binding arbitration. But these are Jewish religious bodies and the believers are Orthodox Jews who adhere to the Halakha, the Jewish religious law. In any case, these verdicts have to be accepted by the disputants and are enforced by American courts that ensure that they won't violate U.S. laws.

In Britain, in the same way that rabbinical beth din courts can rule on civil cases among Orthodox Jews, Sharia courts were given power to adjudicate Muslim civil cases ranging from divorce and financial disputes to those involving domestic violence. Whether the U.S. would allow practicing Muslims the same rights as Orthodox Jews

have to operate such courts could become an issue if the number and influence of Muslims grows in this country.

But what exactly does this have to do with the threat that al-Qaeda and other Muslim terrorist groups pose to America? For those who suggest that Islam by definition is the breeding ground for contemporary terrorism, the notion that Muslims could become law-abiding American citizens or American patriots is a contradiction in terms. As *Reason's* Jesse Walker notes, this fear of Islam echoes the Know-Nothings' anti-Catholic sentiments and the fear of the Vatican. The main difference between then and now is that the Know-Nothings of the 19th century were not advocating sending American troops to depose the pope and invade Catholic countries to force them to embrace American values.

Muslim anti-Americanism and violence, on the other hand, is in large part a response to American attempts to establish domination over the Middle East. Interestingly enough, in his groundbreaking essay "The Clash of Civilizations," Samuel Huntington warned against the kind of policy that would inflame anti-Americanism in the Middle East and foment conflict between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The suggestion that Muslims are invading America and trying to force their values and law on us seems to be a form of projection bias—attributing our own impulses to the other side. We want to control Muslims in the Middle East, and we blame the Muslims for planning to control us here at home.



Nation-states certainly have the right to control their borders and implement a policy that takes into consideration the economic, socio-cultural, and national- security costs of immigration. That makes it necessary to have debates over the mostly Hispanic immigration to this country and the mostly Muslim immigration to European countries. But the main threat Americans face from Muslims is in the realm of national security and in the form of terrorism. Taking steps to reduce U.S. military intervention in the broader Middle East and employing a mix of intelligence and security operations to prevent terrorism could prove very effective in lessening this threat. We certainly have no interest in closing the doors of this country to talented and industrious Muslim immigrants who would be ready to embrace American values and adhere to our laws.

Pursuing a foreign policy that presupposes a unified, homogeneous, and anti-American Muslim world runs very much contrary to U.S. strategic interests. We would be better off recognizing that this imaginary entity, the Caliphate, consists in reality of many conflicting nation-states, ethnic groups, and religious sects. Some of them want to work and trade with us, and some don't. But sowing fear of a monolithic Islam serves the interests of our client states, defense contractors, and lobbyists who press for rising defense budgets and further military interventions. This anti-Islam narrative is also promoted by Republican activists and conservative-movement pundits who hope that like the Red Menace of old, the specter of a Green Peril could serve as a unifying force for the political right. But this kind of policy would only end up overextending the military, ballooning deficits, and devastating our economic base. That's exactly the kind of tea that conservatives and libertarians have sworn not to drink.

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