

Why the Left Casts a Blind Eye on Radical Islam

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This week came news that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant burned alive a Jordanian pilot in a metal cage. Thursday morning's National Prayer Breakfast speech represented the first sign that President Obama is prepared to acknowledge a connection between Islam and the violence -- beheadings, mass murders, rape, human slavery, state sponsorship of terrorism, and military conquest -- jihadists are perpetrating in Muhammad's name.

To be sure, President Bush's "global war on terror" shielded the exact identity of America's adversary. But the Obama administration has taken euphemism to new heights. By avoiding reference to Islamic extremism or radical Islam, Obama has reinforced the left's proclivity to condemn critics of radical Islam instead of the jihadists who fight in its name.

Only last week, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz staunchly denied to an incredulous press corps that the Taliban is a terrorist organization. As former federal prosecutor Andrew McCarthy pointed out, that is nonsense. The relevant provision of the U.S. Code is Sec. 1189 (a) of Title 8. Since the Taliban is a foreign organization, engaged in terrorist activity, and a national security threat to the United States, it qualifies as a foreign terrorist organization. The purpose of the White House's ludicrous denial is to hide that the basis of the Taliban's enmity, strategy, and objectives is a doctrine of Islamic supremacy.

Such suppression is nothing new for the administration. As early as early 2009, it renamed campaigns in the struggle against Islamic extremism "overseas contingency operations."

Then, in November 2009, U.S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan committed premeditated mass murder at Fort Hood in Texas, killing 13 and wounding 30 more. Astonishingly, the administration classified the massacre as a case of "workplace violence." It was certainly violent. It was also inspired by Hasan's religion as he made clear while shouting "Allahu Akbar" as he sprayed military personnel with bullets. He also received guidance from foreign terrorist organizations and had exchanged emails with al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki.

Last September in a White House speech, Obama actually declared that ISIL -- even as it was establishing a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria -- had nothing to do with Islam.

The president has crass political calculations for disguising the religious inspiration of the jihadism currently roiling the Middle East and plotting terrorist attacks around the globe. Obama claims to have routed al-Qaeda, brought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to successful conclusions, and to have made progress in negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran over its nuclear program.

It would be awkward to acknowledge that individuals, organizations, and states dedicated to radical Islam and committed to crushing and conquering the West are making headway in the very arenas where he has declared victory or boasted of gains. But the president also has reasons grounded in the progressive or left-liberal sensibility that he epitomizes to avoid mention of the Islamic roots of the jihadists' rage. Michael Walzer, editor emeritus of *Dissent*, elucidates those reasons in a striking article in the magazine's current issue. Although he never mentions Obama by name,

Walzer argues persuasively that the left has failed to adjust its thinking to the rise of "Islamist zealotry" because of a set of increasingly typical moral and intellectual errors.

One of the nation's outstanding political theorists for almost half a century and a politically engaged man of the left for just as long, Walzer criticizes fellow leftists from within the tent. He faults them in his essay, "Islamism and the Left," for misunderstanding the moral and political imperatives that flow from the leftist quest to advance freedom, equality, toleration, and pluralism.

Walzer emphasizes his "generalized fear of every form of religious militancy" and notes that every religion is capable of inspiring fanaticism. But since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, he argues, Islamist zealotry is the form of religious militancy that has posed the principal transnational threat to liberty and democracy. Yet, he laments, many on the left ignore it or apologize for it.

The problem, Walzer argues, stems in part from the general failure of those on the left to appreciate religion. Notwithstanding the evidence of recent decades, progressives cling to the Enlightenment conceit that faith is destined to fade as science flourishes and secularism spreads.

Another reason the left has failed to grapple with the religious beliefs of radical Islam is "the terrible fear of being called 'Islamophobic.'" This, Walzer maintains, "makes some sense in Western Europe and possibly also in America, where Muslims are recent immigrants, the objects of discrimination, police surveillance, sometimes police brutality, and popular hostility." But opposition to bigots, he insists, cannot justify exempting Islamists or Islam from criticism.

Anxieties about "Orientalism" also play a role. Literary theorist Edward Said claimed that decades of condescending Western scholarship produced distortions of the Muslim world by which Western elites sought to marginalize Islam. This is the same Said, Walzer notes, who

declared in his 1979 book, "The Question of Palestine," that "the return to 'Islam'" was a "chimera."

In addition, many on the left are blinded, Walzer contends, by anti-Americanism. They celebrate Islamists whom they imagine to be resisting the Western imperialism that they deplore. University of California, Berkeley Professor Judith Butler, for example, regards it as "extremely important" to understand Hamas and Hezbollah – Iranian-backed movements devoted to jihad -- as "progressive" and "part of a global left."

Many on the left, moreover, view Western imperialism as the true source of Islamic extremism. Applying a loosely Marxist analysis, they regard Islamism as the distorted ideological reaction to the poverty and oppression that the West has inflicted on the Muslim world.

Finally, there are the radical multiculturalists. Their propensity to excuse Islamic extremism is epitomized by French postmodernist Michel Foucault, who, Walzer writes, justified "the brutality of the Iranian revolution" on the grounds that "Iran doesn't 'have the same regime of truth as ours.'"

But surely, argues Walzer, the respect for the dignity of the individual expressed in basic human rights, democracy, and the rule of law is not a Western idea, but rather a universal one that the West has embraced and seeks to champion at home and abroad.

How then, according to Walzer, should the left respond to the challenge of Islamist zealotry? The left must admit that the progressive belief in the inevitable triumph of science and secularism has proven both elusive and facile. Leftists should attempt to understand the theological bases of Islamist morality and politics. This will enable them to distinguish between Islamic zealotry and Islam in all its contemporary complexity and historical richness. And, having shed their own ideological blinders, it will allow the left to grasp the transnational menace the Islamist zealots pose to freedom, equality, toleration, and pluralism.

Walzer's analysis and recommendations are eminently sensible. It is a measure of the extremism that grips much of the left that in an exchange in Dissent following the article, Yale political scientist Andrew March greets them with barely disguised disdain.

A self-proclaimed leftist, March stresses his commitment to understanding Muslim religious claims. But he seems to confuse understanding Islam with an uncritical sympathy for those who profess it. For example, he bitterly asserts that "the war against violent Islamism is taking care of itself" although he fails to provide a shred of evidence that Islamists in Libya, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Iran are on the run, or that zealotry is abating. March maintains that criticism of imperialism, colonialism, and global capitalism is in short supply, which will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with our universities. And he refuses to

join Walzer in regarding the Islamists as enemies; March finds too much uncertainty about what can be done in the greater Islamic world to promote "left-liberal political goals" to take a stand.

In replying to March's tutorial on the imperatives of an authentic leftism, Walzer exhibits admirable restraint. Even if Islamist zealotry were a response to "colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism," Walzer rightly notes, it would still be necessary for the left to understand why the zealots embraced radical Islam and not, for example, Marxism, as well as to examine precisely what Islamist beliefs demand from the faithful.

To March's argument that as a leftist, Walzer should forthrightly oppose the massive state violence directed at the Islamists, Walzer responds that "the left-wing anti-communism of Dissent in its early years" was subject to analogous criticism. But many of those who apologized for or defended Stalin, Walzer trenchantly observes, "went on to defend or apologize for third-world dictators who call themselves anti-imperialists and for terrorists who call themselves liberators -- and now for Islamist zealots."

While March prefers to dwell on the crimes of the West and boasts of his belief in reform arising from within the Islamic world, Walzer counters with a hard fact: "the America he [March] excoriates is right now the only force effectively opposing or, at least, containing, the power of ISIS and therefore the beheadings and the mass executions and the enslavement of Yazidi girls."

May Michael Walzer's bracing critique of his fellow leftists ascend speedily to the top of Barack Obama's reading list.

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