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# Liberal Extremism Disguised as Defense of Muslims

By Matt Peppe
December 15, 2015

After 14 people were killed and 22 more injured in the San Bernardino massacre by a couple whom authorities claim were "radicalized" by Islamist ideology, Islamophobia among the American public has seemingly reached a fever pitch. But while many people are fighting back against hateful discrimination against Muslims, many are doing so with a liberal narrative of American values that rationalizes and perpetuates American state violence, while failing to recognize this violence as its own form of extremism.

Since San Bernardino, hate crimes against Muslims have been widely reported across the country. In one week alone, a hijab-wearing woman was shot at and several mosques firebombed. Additionally, there have been attacks against storeowners, community centers, and civic organizations. Muslims have been intimidated outside their places of worship by armed, right-wing vigilantes.

Donald Trump, the current Republican front-runner for the Presidential nomination, whose racist demagoguery has prompted debate over whether he is a fascist, reacted with the most extreme policy proposal of any politician. Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the United States because of the "dangerous threat" they pose.

One popular way people have been denouncing bigotry against Muslims is through seemingly-progressive stories of American and British soldiers who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan vocally

embracing Muslims, despite their experiences on the battlefield and the loss of their friends and fellow servicemen.

In a post on Medium, former US Army soldier David Swan writes an open letter to Muslims in which he states, "I don't hate you. I don't fear you. I don't want you to leave this country." Swan goes on to say he would like to have Muslims over for a barbecue, to talk about fantasy football, and for their children to play together.

Swan differentiates Muslims that are willing to accept this type of assimilation from"the radical Islamist." The moderates, he claims, share the American value of being "peace loving." On the other hand, the Islamists who have been radicalized are "wolves" – irrational, barbaric and inherently violent – who "will not stop killing sheep until they are put down… Please do not blame us for using our staff to protect the flock."

Radicalism is seen as a virus that can turn normal people into the equivalent of bloodthirsty zombies. The notion that someone's beliefs – if taken too literally or too seriously – can turn them from a normal person deserving rights into a subhuman is problematic, to say the least. Though it is unsaid, this virus is implicitly understood as unique to Muslims. There is no such popular imagery of radical Christian, Jewish or Mormon death cults.

The United States and its imagined values are seen as impartial and neutral. Swan sees his own actions as purely reactive. The Army was forced to invade and occupy Iraq because the radical Islamists gave them no choice. "We take no joy in killing you, but we will do it because you have forced our hand," he writes.

Rather than being an innocent bystander simply seeking a peaceful coexistence among nations, the United States has a long, sordid history of bloody interventions and human rights violations across Muslim countries in the Middle East and beyond.

For the last 70 years, the US government has been an active participant in dispossessing Palestinians from their lands, erasing their culture and endangering their very survival as a people. They have enabled the illegal occupation by giving Israel more than $100 billion in military aid, and vetoed 42 UN Security Council resolutions and countless more General Assembly resolutions seeking to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law.

Starting in the early 1950s, the US government meddled in Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian politics to prevent moderate nationalist forces who sought to utilize their countries' natural resources (primarily oil) for the social and economic benefit of their populations.

The US government recruited, armed and trained foreigners and sent them on a mission in the 1980s to go to Afghanistan and fight a Holy War against the "infidels." Under the Carter Doctrine, the US government declared that the Persian Gulf region was of "vital interest" to the United States, thereby justifying a proliferation of bases in Saudi Arabia and across the Middle East to protect access to petroleum reserves.

The US government invaded Iraq twice, killing hundreds of thousands of people and reducing what was a modern nation with advanced highways, infrastructure, hospitals and cultural sites to crumbling ruins. In the 12 years between illegal invasions of sovereign Iraqi territory, the US enforced horrifyingly deadly sanctions that caused the deaths of 576,000 children. Two UN officials overseeing the sanctions regime resigned when their protests against the inhumanity of the program were ignored. Confronted with the shocking toll of lives lost, a Clinton administration official said "it was worth it."

Groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS did not form in a vacuum but as a reaction to this historical context . They are not a manifestation of Islamic theology found in texts like the Quran, but of specific social, political and cultural conditions – conditions the United States played no small role in creating. Some people who feel powerless and desperate will inevitably resort to violence against those they see as responsible. While indiscriminate violence is not morally justifiable, it is also not irrational.

Swan's metaphor of radical Islamists as wolves mercilessly attacking a flock of sheep, detached from any social or political objectives, evokes Edward Said's description of Islam symbolizing among Westerners "terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians."

"The argument, when reduced to its simplest form, was clear, it was precise, it was easy to grasp," Said writes in *Orientalism*. "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power."

While America is imagined as being free of the toxic ideology infecting radical Islamists, the narratives driving the US's many violent interventions across the Middle East can be seen as a manifestation of Said's description of Orientalism. The assumption that Muslims acting without reason must be brought under control by more civilized nations is itself a highly ideological position.

As Arun Kundnani explains in *The Muslims Are Coming!*, the dominant discourse about Muslims has changed since the days after 9/11 when blanket fear of all Muslims was prevalent:

But now, liberals say, we have moved beyond that, and we understand that Muslims in America are just like the rest of us. However, just as in *The Russians Are Coming!*, the liberal caveat is that Muslims are acceptable when depoliticized: they should be silent about politics, particularly US foreign policy and the domestic national security system, and not embrace an alien ideology that removes them from the liberal norm.

In other words, Muslims should feel free to barbecue and talk about fantasy football. But speaking out against American imperial wars in Muslim countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, questioning whether they are really a battle of good versus evil, would indicate extremist ideology – which, in turn, would suggest a disposition for terrorism.

"Those defined as moderate Muslims can have their religious traditions valued within the parameters of Western tolerance," writes Kundnani, "while the state focuses its powers on surveillance, coercion, and violence on those categorized as extremist."

A former British soldier who lost his leg in the Iraq war writes that despite people expecting him to hate Muslims because of what happened to him he refuses to hold an entire religion responsible for groups and individuals who sought him harm.

This is an admirable sentiment. But it presupposes that the violence against the soldier was more reprehensible than the violence he was himself responsible for. The soldier was a combatant taking part in an illegal war of aggression. The people who took up arms in resistance against him have a legal and moral right to do so, just as he would have a right to defend his own country from a foreign invasion. If people selectively condemn individual Muslims for violence, it should be no surprise that many people will use this to fuel racist stereotypes.

Murderous assaults on hospitals, sadistic torture, "shock and awe" aerial bombardment, and assassinations against unknown targets are terrorism just as much as indiscriminate shooting sprees, suicide bombings or summary executions of hostages. Those seeking to defend Muslims would be well served to question whether their own their own nationalist doctrines help rationalize the plague of state terrorism that the War on Terror has normalized, and which is falsely portrayed as moderate and noble.