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www.afgazad.com

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Israel and the anti-Muslim blow-up

By MJ Rosenberg

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I don't know why I am at all surprised that the American Right - including the Republican Party - has decided that scapegoating Muslims is the ticket to success. After all, it's nothing new.

I remember right after 9/11 when the columnist Charles Krauthammer, now one of the most vocal anti-Muslim demagogues, almost literally flipped out in my Chevy Chase, Maryland synagogue when the rabbi said something about the importance of not associating the terrorist attacks with Muslims in general.

It was on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, but that did not stop Krauthammer from bellowing out his disagreement with the rabbi. Krauthammer's point: Israel and America are at war with Muslims and that war must be won.

It was shocking, not only because Krauthammer's outburst was so utterly out of place but also because the man was actually chastising the rabbi for not spouting hate against all Muslims - on the Day of Atonement.

The following year, the visiting rabbi from Israel gave a sermon about the intifada that was then raging in Israel and the West Bank.

A sermon with a twist

The sermon was a nutty affair that tearfully made the transition from intifada to Holocaust and back again.

I remember thinking, "this guy is actually blaming the Palestinians for the suffering of his parents during the Holocaust." I thought I had missed something because it was so ridiculous.

Then came the sermon's ending which was unforgettable. The rabbi concluded with the words from Ecclesiastes.

"To everything there is a season. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, a time to reap ... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance..."

He then looked up and said: "Now is the time to hate."

At first, I thought I had not heard him correctly. He could not be calling on the congregation to hate. There were dozens of children in the room. It wasn't possible.

But it was. To their credit, many of the congregants I spoke with as we left the sanctuary were appalled. Even the right-wingers were uncomfortable with endorsing hate as a virtue.

Yet, the rabbi was unrepentant. I emailed him to complain and he told me that he said what he believed. Nice.

One could ask what the Middle East has to do with the vicious outbreak of Islamophobia (actually Islamo-hatred) that has seemingly seized segments of this country.

US Islamophobia's origins

The answer is everything. Although the hate is directed at Arab-Americans (which makes it worse) it is justified by invoking 9/11, an attack by Muslims from the Middle East.

This hate is buttressed by the hatred of Muslims and Arabs that has been routinely uttered (or shouted from the rooftops) in the name of defending Israel for decades

Just watch what goes on in congress, where liberals from New York, Florida, California and elsewhere never miss an opportunity to explain that no matter what Israel does, it is right, and no matter what Muslims do, they are wrong.

Can anyone possibly argue that such insidious rhetoric has no impact on public opinion?

At the very least, it gives anti-Arab and/or anti-Muslim bias a legitimacy that other forms of hate no longer have. Bigots who hate African-Americans or Jews, for instance, feel

that they must claim that they don't. That is not the case with Muslims who can be despised with impunity.

And here the liberals are worse than the conservatives because liberals exempt Muslims and Arabs (and now Turks) from the humanitarian instincts that inform their views of all other groups.

Conservatives combine their Arab-bashing with a general xenophobia, as is evidenced by their views on immigration.

Illiberal Liberalism?

Liberals, on the other hand, single out Muslims for contempt.

They do it actively - i.e., by defending every single Israeli action against Arabs with vehement enthusiasm. And they do it passively, by refusing to evince an iota of sympathy for Muslims who suffer and die at the hands of Israelis - like the 432 Palestinian children killed in the 2008 Gaza war.

Liberals join conservatives in rushing to the floor of the House of Representatives and Senate to defend the Israelis against any accusation (remember how they robotically attacked the Goldstone report on Israel's war crimes in Gaza, not caring at about the horrors Goldstone described).

And then they read their AIPAC (American Israeli Public Affairs Committee lobby) talking points, enumerating all the terrible things Arabs have done while Israel has, Gandhi-like, consistently offered the hand of friendship. It would be laughable if the effect of all this was not so ugly.

Why wouldn't all this hatred affect the perception of Arab-Americans too? Hate invariably overflows its containers, just like hatred of Israel sometimes crosses over into pure old-fashioned anti-Semitism.

Bottom line: it's a witches' brew that is being stirred up, and it is one that will no doubt produce violence. But the witches are not all on the right. Just as many liberals are stirring the pot to please some of their donors.

I'm not saying you should not blame Fox News' Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh for all this hate. But don't forget to blame your favorite liberal and progressive politicians. With a few (very few) exceptions, they are just as bad.