

## September 11th, Islamophobia, and the 'Persecution Industry'

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In one of the last pieces he published at Salon before moving to The Guardian, the American columnist Glenn Greenwald mounted a devastating [critique](#) of what he labeled, in the article's title, "The Sham 'Terrorism Expert' Industry." In his inimitable style, Greenwald proceeded to discuss the work of several so-called terrorism experts — among them, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, J.M. Berger, and Fran Townsend — who have embraced the pretense of scholarly objectivity to justify the US government's "war on terror." As is well known, this is a "war" that has overwhelmingly targeted Muslims, due in no small part to the pervasive Islamophobia that has spread through western Europe, Canada, but above all, the United States, since the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001.

Greenwald points to "terrorism experts" as having played a particularly insidious role in stoking fear of "Islamic terror" through the exaggeration of so-called jihadi violence, and thus having provided a pretext for U.S. violence against Muslims over the past decade. Of course, Greenwald is far from alone in pointing to 'terrorism expertise' as a veritable industry: Among the scholars he cites as having exposed the steady growth and intellectual bankruptcy of this purported field of study are Stephen Walt of Harvard University, Remi Brulin of New York University, and Richard Jackson of New Zealand's National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

Not unlike the "terrorism expert" industry that Greenwald eviscerates, there is a separate quasi-academic industry that has seen its fortunes rise precipitously since September 11, 2001, again due in no small part to pervasive Islamophobia. This is what I would call the "persecution expert| industry, with the persecution in question being that directed against Christians in Muslim lands. And, this is an industry that has long had Egypt as one of its principal targets of reproach.

Before I discuss "persecution expertise" as industry, I should emphasize that none of what follows is to suggest that persecution of Christians in Muslim lands is nonexistent or unimportant. Indeed, I have written at great length elsewhere of the imperative that Egypt address its problem with sectarianism — a problem that is of the utmost importance in the post-revolutionary context, with the rise of various currents of Islamists on the political scene. Discrimination against Copts and anti-Christian attitudes are disturbingly genuine phenomena, arguably on the rise, that Egyptians can no longer breathlessly deny as they invoke the well-worn symbols of national unity. And, activism to combat these phenomena, both in Egypt and among Egyptians abroad, is a vital part of the solution to this problem.

What I find disturbing is the alacrity with which particular US political forces have taken up the cause of anti-Christian persecution, notably over the past decade, just as the "war on terror" has gained so much momentum. And perhaps unsurprisingly given these political links, "persecution experts" have, much like their counterparts in the 'terrorism expert' industry, tended to find their way to particular think-tanks in Washington.

Arguably the leader in this regard is the Hudson Institute, which houses the Center for Religious Freedom under the directorship of Nina Shea. According to the Hudson Institute's website, the Center "promotes religious freedom as a component of U.S. foreign policy by working with a worldwide network of religious freedom experts to provide defenses against religious persecution and oppression." Despite the emphasis in this description on a 'worldwide network,' a quick scan of op-eds by Center staff reveals that the geographic scope of their concern is substantially narrower: The vast majority of the articles concern the Muslim world, and among them, Egypt features most prominently. The venues in which Center staff publish op-eds is likewise worthy of note, and far and away the most popular is National Review Online, "America's most widely read and influential magazine and web site for conservative news, commentary, and opinion."

Why would American conservatives take a particular interest in sectarian tensions in Egypt? As is well known, in recent decades, evangelical Christians in the United States have moved increasingly rightward in political orientation. At first glance, it would appear that Christian conservatives are moved by the plight of fellow Christians like the Copts. In practice, however, these Christian conservatives are moved to a still greater extent by Israeli protestations of insecurity. Given their track record of unstinting support for Israel, and relative disregard for the plight of Palestinian Christians, the focus on Egypt's Copts emerges as a function of 'Realpolitik' rather than ideals. And with the political rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt since the 25 January revolution, accusations of anti-Christian persecution have become a particularly useful tool for discrediting the Islamists who are now in government.

It is disturbing enough that the important issue of sectarian relations in Egypt is bandied about Washington as a means of leveraging Israeli security. Emblematic of this was how a panel at this year's American-Israel Public Affairs Committee conference evolved into a sort of elegy for the Coptic community, led by Nina Shea.

Perhaps more disturbing, though, is how particular Copts have endorsed the Islamophobia of "persecution experts" without considering their political consequences in Egypt or the United States. In this regard, I cannot help but recall an image recently posted to "The Free Copts" page on Facebook. In the image, President Obama, with a photo-shopped beard and turban, appears under the following caption: "This idiot helped transform Egypt from a modern state into a Muslim Brotherhood dominated tribe and still claims it's a transition into democracy!" In a breathtaking concoction of bigotry, white anxieties about a black president are fused with Coptic anxieties about the rise of Islamism. To my mind, the post speaks powerfully to the influence, and the ignorance, of the "persecution industry."

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