

Islamofascism:

A fringe term goes mainstream, with a little help from the media

The term "Islamofascism" came into common use after the September 2001 attacks as a favorite way for neoconservatives to describe the ideology of extremist and violent groups such as Al-Qaeda that claim to act in the name of Islam.

A search of the Nexis database shows just two mentions of the term before 2001, both in British media. The first (**Independent**, 9/8/90) came in a remark by writer Malise Ruthven about governments in predominantly Islamic countries: "Authoritarian government, not to say 'Islamofascism,' is the rule rather than the exception from Morocco to Pakistan." (Ironically, considering the term's current usage, most of these authoritarian governments--including Morocco and Pakistan--were backed by the U.S. at the time.) The second mention (**Independent**, 10/6/90) came in a response criticizing Ruthven for coining the term.

Since 2001, use of the expression has exploded. That year, according to a search of major English-language papers in the Nexis database, the word and its variant "Islamofascist" appeared 12 times, nearly all in reference to Al-Qaeda. The next year that number rose to 69, and it reached 92 in 2003 as the word's definition began expanding to include Saddam Hussein's historically non-religious and somewhat ecumenical Baathist regime. (As an example, Tariq Aziz, Hussein's familiar spokesperson, was a Christian.)

The word's prevalence continued to increase in 2005, the year George W. Bush used it in a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy (10/6/05), and in 2006 it appeared 594 times in major papers. David Horowitz's "Islamofascism Awareness Week" (IFAW)--organized on about a hundred college campuses in October 2007--was a sign that the term had fully arrived in some right-wing circles, though not all conservatives seemed to entirely understand the message it is supposed to convey. At Michigan State University, the campus chapter of Young Americans for Freedom invited a bona fide fascist--Nick Griffin, the head of the racist British National Party--to speak on how Europe is becoming "Eurabia" (**Spartan Spectator** blog, 10/22/07). The embarrassment caused Horowitz (**InsideHigherEd.com**, 10/29/07) to disavow an event that, as far as content was concerned, promised to differ little from IFAW's official proceedings.

In defending the term, the **New York Times'** William Safire, former op-ed columnist and current "On Language" columnist, wrote (10/1/06), "Islamofascism may have legs: The compound defines those terrorists who profess a religious mission while embracing totalitarian methods and helps separate them from devout Muslims who want no part of terrorist means."

But the term does precisely the opposite, say critics, linking an entire religion to the violent and intolerant actions of a minority claiming to act in its name.

Many scholars dismiss "Islamofascism" as little more than a political slogan that "War on Terror" proponents use to play on emotions by invoking odious historical enemies. As former Clinton security advisor and Center for Strategic and International Studies fellow Daniel Benjamin put it in a **BBC** interview (8/12/06):

There is no sense in which jihadists embrace fascist ideology as it was developed by Mussolini or anyone else who was associated with the term....This is an epithet, a way of arousing strong emotion and tarnishing one's opponent, but it doesn't tell us anything about the content of their beliefs.

Niall Ferguson, the right-leaning Harvard historian, points out the term's role in Western propagandizing against the latest enemies in the large and disparate Islamic world. According to Ferguson (Interviewed for Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley's "Conversations with History" series, 10/19/06), Islamofascism is

a completely misleading concept. In fact, there's virtually no overlap between the ideology of Al Qaeda and fascism. It's just a way of making us feel that we're the "greatest generation" fighting another World War, like the war our fathers and grandfathers fought. You're translating a crisis symbolized by 9/11 into a sort of pseudo=World War II. So 9/11 becomes Pearl Harbor, and then you go after the bad guys who are the fascists, and if you don't support us, then you must be an appeaser.

As the term has been increasingly criticized, its use in the media has dropped, with 328 occurrences in 2007 and a pace that will barely break 200 so far in 2008. In April 2008, the White House thought better of the term, deciding it would no longer use it, along with "Jihadist" and other similar expressions. The administration explained (**Associated Press**, 4/24/08), "Such words may actually boost support for radicals among Arab and Muslim audiences by giving them a veneer of religious credibility or by causing offense to moderates."

All true, but there is also the problem of double standards--a theme that runs deep in any investigation of Islamophobia. **Boston Globe** columnist John Carrol put it well in a column about politicians using the term (1/21/08):

The pairing of "Islam" and "fascism" has no parallel in characterizations of extremists tied to other religions, although the defining movements of fascism were linked to Catholicism--indirectly under Benito Mussolini in Italy, explicitly under Francisco Franco in Spain. Protestant and Catholic terrorists in Northern Ireland, both deserving the label "fascist," never had their religions prefixed to that word. Nor have Hindu extremists in India, nor Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka.

Carrol adds, "The point is that there is a deep religious prejudice at work, and when politicians adopt its code, they make it worse." Journalists would do well to heed these words as well.