The Shrine of Hojja Ahmet Yasawi in Turkestan City, Kazakhstan, as seen in this June 2004 photo, was begun by the 14th-century Central Asian ruler Tamerlane to honor this figure in the spread of Islam among Turkish-speaking people. Unfinished, it is visited by hundreds of thousands of Central Asian Muslims each year.

Islamophobia: America's New Fear Industry

By Stephen Schwartz

Since Sept. 11, 2001, Americans, both elite and ordinary, have found themselves inveigled and sometimes convinced by a new bigotry: Islamophobia. Prior to the Al-Qaida attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., contempt for Arabs and Iranians was a low-intensity element in American public discourse, motivated by resentment over the geopolitical role of the Middle Eastern energy-producing countries. Knowledge of the religion of Islam was sparse; most Americans seemed to have discovered the existence of Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of one day of fear nine years ago.

The growth of a volatile American anti-Muslim sentiment following the 2001 atrocities might have seemed inevitable. But Americans proved better than many among them expected, and few anti-Muslim hate incidents have been recorded in the U.S. Nevertheless, Islamophobia began to emerge almost immediately after 9/11.

Islamophobia consists of formulating a specious theory of Islamic absolute evil, or inciting mass atrocities against civilians outside war areas. Islamophobia does not comprise criticizing negative aspects of Islamic history or social life, or identifying,

detaining and interrogating — even harshly — terrorist suspects, or engaging in minor and superficial acts of bigotry. Based on secondary sources, personal biases (especially among Christians), and slippery slopes, Islamophobia argues that the terrorism of Al-Qaida is an inevitable product of the principles of Islam; that Islam is an inexorably violent religion motivated by jihadism ("holy war"); that the radical interpretation of Islam is the only authoritative one; and that Muslims are therefore a menacing "other" inextricably linked to radical ideology. The books and other media embodying this view could accurately be called artifacts of the new American "fear industry."

The endurance of, and threat to, Islam

Islamophobia has gained a stable but small audience since 9/11. There are many reasons for this. As previously noted, regarding the absence of widespread violence against Muslims after the Twin Towers collapsed, the Pentagon was hit by a hijacked plane, and another hijacked passenger jet, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed in Pennsylvania, Americans were too decent and calm in their assessment of other peoples, cultures, and faiths simply to commit acts of unrestrained vengeance. In

addition, Americans did not know enough about Muslims to hate them, notwithstanding revulsion at the 9/11 conspirators and their Saudi inspirers and enablers.

Then came the wars in Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003. As of late spring 2010, more than 5,500 American lives have been lost seeking to liberate Muslims from the tyranny of radicalism, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. Local Afghan and Iraqi Muslim political and religious leaders and volunteer military personnel soon supported American-led coalitions in these conflicts. During the course of the fighting, some Islamophobes absurdly accused then-U.S. President George W. Bush of "weakness," because Bush described Islam as a faith based on peace and "hijacked" by the terrorists. For the paragons of the fear industry, Bush should have declared war against the entire Muslim religion — counting more than a billion adherents, the overwhelming majority of whom have not joined the jihad, to which they are clearly either indifferent or hostile, if only by observation.

But Americans then elected a president bearing an Islamic middle name — Barack Hussein Obama — demonstrating that for their majority, Islamophobia was moot. Too few said so, but Americans seemed to have instinctively grasped certain truths: that Islam would not simply go away and could not be defeated in a direct confrontation; and that moderate Muslims would be valuable allies in defeating radical Islam.

Even if it has not taken hold over the American imagination, Islamophobia remains a problem for the West as well as

for Muslims, in that it leaves Americans ignorant of the real situation in the Islamic world, and cuts the West off from potential allies in defeating radical Islam. I do not propose to enumerate, review, and refute the better-known Islamophobes, for a simple reason (beyond the obvious one that they don't deserve recognition by name). I am a Muslim, and to answer the charges would place me in the position of submitting to a religious inquisition. In the American tradition of free exercise of religion, I am not required to defend my faith. My belief in Islam is my own affair so long as I obey the laws of the land, as I do, and do not propose to subvert the country's historic order, which I do not. Indeed, I assist U.S. authorities in preserving the existing system against Islamist extremism. Rather, I will offer a general sketch of the Islamophobe and examine prior encounters between the West and aggressive expressions of Islam to develop insight into the effect of Islamophobia on society.

The meaning of, and implications behind, the scare tactics

To many Islamophobes, the term itself embodies discrimination and prejudice. "Islamophobia," they declare, is a "politically correct" trope used to silence critics of the menacing or otherwise negative characteristics found among Islamic believers or in Islamic countries. Thus, some polemicists proclaim themselves "proud Islamophobes," as if turning back against users the moral condemnation implicit in the term. But this is a contradiction; logic is abandoned.

Notwithstanding this mélange of denial and defiance and hysteria, Islamophobia is a reality that abolishes distinctions between the small minority of Muslims engaged in terrorism and the overwhelming majority who repudiate fundamentalism, decline to support jihadism, and practice Islam as a normal religion. (Conventional polling is unreliable in measuring the views of the mass of Muslims; most Western pollsters do not ask Muslims about their views of specific radical ideologies, but rather question respondents on a broader conflict between West and East, or try to gauge abstract feelings about America and Islam. In addition, few media representatives have acquired the detailed knowledge of Islam that would help them better define, for the global public, radical and moderate Islam.) Most Muslims treat their faith as do Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and followers of Chinese religions: as an important and positive aspect of their daily lives, but not as a force summoning them to extreme action. To write these moderate Muslim believers out of the contemporary analysis of Islam, as Islamophobes do, is to grant the radical fundamentalists and terrorist schemers a priceless gift: legitimacy for their claims.

The Al-Jazzar Mosque in Akko, Israel, seen in this June 2006 photo, is a major Islamic monument and center of Sufi spirituality; it was erected under Ottoman rule in the 18th century.

In my view, Islamophobia also served as a convenient pretext for the revival of bigoted attitudes against Jews, Catholics, and African-Americans that had been present in the American psyche for generations, but which became socially unacceptable after the transformation of race relations during the 1960s. The Muslim is deemed by the Islamophobe:

● To believe in a "religion of hate" at odds with the Christian "religion of love" — also a long-established lie hurled at Jews

● To feel loyalty to a universal community superior to one's national identity — as Catholics have been accused of a higher obedience to the Vatican than to the laws of the American republic

● To be sexually voracious (the specter of the harem and polygamy), male chauvinistic, and defiant of common law

— stereotypes applied to African-Americans

In "'Profiling' the Critics of Extremist Islamic Ideology," an article published in 2005 for the online publication *Tech Central Station*, now a Web TV medium called *Ideas in Action*, and accessible at http://www.islamicpluralism.org/135/ profiling-the-critics-of-extremist-islamic-ideology, I explained six defining aspects of Islamophobia, summarized as:

● Attacking the entire religion of Islam as a problem for the world

● Condemning all of Islam and its history as extremist

● Denying the active existence, in the contemporary world, of a moderate Muslim majority

● Insisting that Muslims accede to the demands of non-Muslims for

The tombstone of Sufi Sheikh Mehmed Sezaj (1871-1947) of Kosovo, seen in this April 2000 photo, is located in Prishtina, the capital, at a shrine visited by Sufis and other townspeople seeking spiritual healing. Sezaj was a member of the Qadiri Sufi order.

The tomb and shrine of Sheikh Ahmed of Shkodra (1881-1927), head of the Rifai Sufi order in Albania, as seen in this July 2006 photo, is one of numerous modest but significant Islamic monuments in a country abounding with Islamic structures.

various theological changes
● Treating all conflicts involving Muslims as the fault of Muslims
● Inciting war against Islam as a whole
Today I would add more basic psychological habits for which Islamophobes have become known:
● The Islamophobe, who is typically a non-Muslim but occasionally an apostate from Islam, claims prescriptive authority to define Islam, its principles, foundations, and essence.

That is, the Islamophobe tells the Muslim what makes up the latter's religion and even, in many cases, delivers the judgment that the jihadist is the "true Muslim" and the moderate, spiritual Sufi, or other non-jihadist, an "apostate." A rare Christian would dare tell a Jew what comprises Judaism or what relationship radical ideology within Judaism has to an intrinsic Jewish belief. And few Jews presume to dictate to Christians the basis of the faith to which the latter adhere, or to lecture Christians on the association of Christianity's core message with the extremism of the Spanish Inquisitors or the authors of the Holocaust. Each community allows the other to formulate their creed. But the Islamophobe denies this right to Muslims.
● The Islamophobe favors the interpretation of Islam propounded by radical, fundamentalist terrorists because the Islamophobe clearly, and almost pathetically, needs an enemy.

Without the justification for prejudices provided by the atrocities of terrorists, an Islamophobe's rage is exposed as, simply, bigotry. Islamophobes will not admit it but recognize this problem when proclaiming they're against Islam, not Muslims. But what is Islam if not the religion of Muslims?
● An Islamophobe feels entitled to "test" the moderate Muslim in an inquisitorial manner by demanding to know if the moderate Muslim accepts or disavows negative aspects of Islamic history (which the Islamophobe has assembled in magpie fashion).

But the Islamophobe does not want the moderate Muslim to dissociate from radicalism; the Islamophobe wants to prove that the moderate is indistinguishable from the jihadist. The more the moderate Muslim opposes jihadism, the more the Islamophobe raises accusations of inauthenticity, apostasy, deception, stupidity, naivete, mental imbalance, or irrelevance. The Islamophobe insists on extracting a confession from the moderate Muslim; that alone epitomizes the Islamophobic inquisition.
● The Islamophobe is, above all, a fear merchant.

The Islamophobic fear industry will not help the West and its moderate Muslim allies win the conflict with radical Islam. Fear produces passivity, appeasement, irrationality, and haste. To prepare the West and its allies for the defeat of radical Islam, support for moderate Muslims would go much further in building the self-confidence, and belief in ultimate victory, by which all wars are won.

The history, and future, of (in)tolerance

English medieval historian and University of Oxford professor Sir Richard Southern observed in his neglected 1962 work *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* that during most of the first 500 years between the emergence of Islam in the 7th century A.D. and the main Crusades, Westerners knew nothing accurate about Islam. This void in knowledge is visible in historical sources (such as the documentation contemporaneous with the emergence of Islam and assembled in Robert G. Hoyland's 1997 *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*): Many Christians imagined Islam to be a plague sent by God; a creation of Satan; heresy; idol worship (an especially absurd mistake, based on mere ignorance, considering the hostility of Islam to any such practice), with the mosque perceived as a temple of polytheism; simple irreligion; and the personification of vicious sexual appetites (via the harem). Islam was said — as is often claimed today by its enemies — to lack a theology or a rational conception of God.

Generally, the current Western discourse on Islam, unfortunately for Westerners no less than Muslims, reproduces the ill-informed and prejudicial discussion of Islam in Christian Europe during the 750 years between the Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Moderate Muslims respect non-Muslims for defending non-Muslim religions. But it is hard to respect non-Muslims when their defense is based on a fear-mongering, straw-man version of Islam. Southern argued that it took Christian Europe centuries to realize that jihad could only be answered on the basis of an accurate account of Islam. How long will it take the West to learn this lesson a second time? ∎

Stephen Schwartz has published more than 20 books, of which the most widely read is *The Two Faces of Islam: Saudi Fundamentalism and Its Role in Terrorism* (2002). Other relevant volumes written or edited by him include *A Guide to Shariah Law and Islamist Ideology in Western Europe, 2007-09* (2009), and *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony* (2008). He was born of a Christian mother and Jewish father, but was brought up without religion. Schwartz became Muslim, his first religious affiliation, in 1997, at age 49. He has lived and worked extensively in the Balkan countries of *Bosnia* and *Herzegovina* and Kosovo since the beginning of the 1990s. Schwartz studied linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, but was lured from academia to journalism, beginning at the short-lived but memorable weekly *City Magazine* of San Francisco, published by filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, at which he was staff writer. He occupied the same position from 1989 to '99 at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Schwartz is executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism, a nonprofit international network of moderate Muslim journalists, intellectuals, clerics, and activists, headquartered in Washington, D.C.; go online to www.islamicpluralism.org. Email him at Schwartz@islamicpluralism.org.