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"My Compatriots' Vote to Ban Minarets is  
Fuelled by Fear" by Tariq Ramadan*

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## Of Minarets, Headscarves, and Cartoons

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## Of Minarets, Headscarves, and Cartoons

### Abstract

It is difficult not to agree with Tariq Ramadan. The fear of and discrimination against Muslims in Western societies since 9/11 is clear and worrying. The anti-Muslim populism he cites is real, although it may also be part of a broader anti-immigrant populism. The posters he describes are extremely disturbing, and reminiscent of World War II propaganda. They are an artifact of fear of the misunderstood "other."

### Keywords

Human rights, Switzerland, Minarets, Freedom of religion, Political rights, Religious discrimination, Muslims

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## Of Minarets, Headscarves, and Cartoons

by Kurt Mills

It is difficult not to agree with Tariq Ramadan. The fear of and discrimination against Muslims in Western societies since 9/11 is clear and worrying. The anti-Muslim populism he cites is real, although it may also be part of a broader anti-immigrant populism. [The posters he describes](#) are extremely disturbing, and reminiscent of World War II propaganda. They are an artifact of fear of the misunderstood “other.”

We—society—create and, indeed, seem to need enemies—an Other. The Other is usually portrayed either as a monster or a shadow, particularly in wartime propaganda. And usually in highly militaristic terms. The minarets as missiles surely represent the perceived militarism of Islam. If anybody doubts this dynamic, I would direct them to the excellent documentary, filmed during the 1980s Cold War, entitled *Faces of the Enemy*. It appears that the organizers of the anti-minaret campaign watched the documentary and decided to mimic the propaganda techniques portrayed, so cartoonish are their stereotypes—a shadowy other, infiltrating society and intent on subverting it from within. This caricature is seen as reasonable given that we are in a war, indeed the most insidious, shadowy war possible to imagine—the “war on terror.” And who knows what evils might be hidden in those minarets or under those burqas?

The decision to ban the building of minarets in Switzerland was discrimination of the highest order, and hopefully the European Court of Human Rights will overturn it. Indeed, the fear will have spread much deeper than I would have imagined if it does not.

Ramadan also cites a number of different symbolic debates which all seem part and parcel of anti-Muslim sentiment in Western societies—including debates over headscarves in France and elsewhere, and the Danish anti-Islam cartoons—but which, in fact, all require more nuanced understanding.

The issue of headscarves has become a controversial issue in the UK. However, one must also look at the broader context. In the UK, we have had students expelled from school for wearing other—Christian—religious symbols. This is the outcome of an extreme form of the so-called “nanny state”—the attempt by authorities to protect us from all harm and all difference—even as state officials, rather ironically, preach multiculturalism. If everybody acts the same, dresses the same, and, indeed, thinks the same, then there will be no disagreement—and, therefore, no threat to our harmonious, never-changing society. This kind of society is also easier to police and keep orderly. Indeed, while there may be some anti-Muslim/anti-immigrant sentiments at the root of such situations—and hearing government ministers claim the wearing of a headscarf is an issue of societal order is cringe inducing—I would argue that it has as much to do with making it easier to control children in schools. Any variations in clothing or hints of individuality call this control into question. This itself, raises human rights issues, but is in fact broader than a single anti-Muslim agenda.

Further, it is not only in Western societies that the headscarf is an issue. Turkey, in its attempt to become a secular, Western, modern society, restricts the wearing of headscarves in certain situations—including in parliament (although it recently lifted a ban on headscarves in

universities). Headscarves and other religious expressions are perceived as the thin edge of Islamism. And fear of Islamism is found in other Muslim societies too, such as Egypt. They are worried that political Islam will become a base for revolution against the (Western-supported) corrupt regimes of the moderate Muslim world. Thus, while the bigotry and stupidity symbolized by the minaret decision, among others, must be recognized and condemned, the multifarious fear of Islamism in the Islamic world also needs to be recognized. This is not to condone such actions. Rather, it is to recognize that uncertainty over Islamism goes far beyond the West.

Or, take the issue of cartoons. The Danish cartoons were condemned as insulting to Muslims. However, it is not necessarily a human right not to have your feelings hurt. Invariably, on those rare occasions I am subjected to Fox News in the US, I am outraged and offended by the drivel that spouts from the mouths of the “fair and impartial” reporters and commentators. The same would apply to the offensive opinions which appear in too many of the daily newspapers in the UK. Yet, libel and slander laws notwithstanding, I would defend their right to say stupid things. Or, as with the periodic outbursts from the Catholic Church whenever a new film deemed blasphemous comes out, we argue that it is an issue of free speech and do not—or at least we should not—give in to those who would censor unpopular opinions (one need only remember Galileo to imagine the possible effects when any religious organization decides it should have a veto over thought and speech). I would prefer just to ignore what they say. And this is what should have happened with the cartoons. What we saw was certain sectors of Muslim society—not all, by any means—and their liberal supporters decry them as outrages and demand censorship. We should not forget that this is exactly the kind of action one would find in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed the countries behind the attempts at the United Nations to create international norms against offensive speech are the same ones that would like to reign in anti-government speech domestically. Some of these countries are also the same ones where one can find blatantly anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and outrageous anti-Western conspiracy theories. Yet voices calling for their censorship certainly are not prominent.

Recently a man was convicted in the UK of the “honor killing” of his 15 year old daughter. These are the kind of retrograde practices—albeit still very rare—that we should be worried about not the sincere and unthreatening religious and cultural expression of a minaret. If we ban minarets, it is rather hard to argue that other societies—whether in the Muslim world or, indeed, China—should allow the free expression of Christianity or other “Western” religions or systems of belief and thought.

Ramadan puts minarets, head scarves, and Danish cartoons all into one anti-Muslim basket. I would argue that, looking beyond the apparent symbolism, we need to recognize that each situation is different and, while the sentiments behind some of the apparent anti-Muslim actions appear identical, they demand different understandings and responses.

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