I am dazed and confused: American terrorists, Islam and Peter King
Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, APR 19 2011

I started writing this blog in an angry retort to the bombastic voice of Peter King but what I have ended up with is more confusion than insight. The Chair of the Homeland Security Committee, Peter King has previously made a number of comments towards Islam and Muslims that have been perceived by various commentators as objectionable and I decided to find some of these objectionable quotes, including in 2007, for example, that there are "too many Mosques in this country". In researching on the internet, watching video clips, reading newspaper articles and commentaries, reading blogs, etc. there seems to be a them/ us divide in this debate; the right are supporting and the liberals are criticising Peter King. Is it possible that he could have made a slip-up when he said there are "too many mosques"? If you consider what comes right after these words, and in the same sentence, then maybe; "… there's too many people that are sympathetic to radical Islam, we should be looking at them more carefully". Could he have meant that there are too many people in the Mosques that support, whether direct or indirectly, radical Islam? Off course, he does not define how many too many is, which he needs to be questioned on.

NOTE 1: I do not know what he meant, nor do I know whether he is anti-Islamic or anti-radical Islam, and none of the information I have read has fully developed a rational and well resourced criticism against him. It seems as if the visceral Culture War between the left and right seems to have reared its head at the expense of reliable information. How am I to make my mind up in such a situation? Don't get me wrong, I want to dislike him; I just haven't been given the tools to do so!

This all brings me to my thoughts on Peter King's Congressional hearings on the radicalisation of Muslim-Americans. I do not see why there is opposition to the idea of having a commission looking into the radicalisation of American-Muslims. Surely, and according to the Congressional Research Office, if the number of arrests for '"homegrown" Jihadist-inspired terrorist plots by American citizens or legal permanent residents of the United States' was 22 between May 2009 and November 2010, an increase from 21 for the previous seven years then the US political system has a legitimate right to ask why?

NOTE 2: There is a counterpoint to my naivety. It is not necessarily the content of the investigation but the way it is investigated that is important. A Congressional hearing rarely intends to be a serious attempt at investigating an issue but an opportunity for those involved to grandstand. And Peter King's does seem at first glance to have elements of this (not had chance for a second glance so comments by you guys is appreciated).

My interest in these hearings was further spiked when I read the Washington Post's voluminous descriptions of Peter King's allegiance to the Irish Republican Army's military cause in Northern Ireland to free the North of the Island from British control. Whether I agree with the sentiment behind the Washington Post's comments it seems to me to be a character assassination to de-legitimise his voice. The article is top-loaded with opponents calling him hypocritical. For example, Tom Parker from Amnesty International calls him hypocritical because, "if you say that terrorist violence is acceptable in one setting because you happen to agree with the cause, then you lose the authority to condemn it in another setting".

This comment confuses me on a couple of levels. First, what if Peter King did not see the IRA's actions as terrorism

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but as legitimate liberation violence? It would mean that his actions and comments were not hypocritical? Surely, the individual making the claims has the right to determine what they see as terrorist or not? Second, why does one 'lose' the 'authority to condemn' any other example of violence if you have supported it somewhere else? Surely, it is context-specific? Can one not be a supporter of one political cause that uses violence to further its goals but not another? I do not deny that it is possible to legitimately claim everything should be seen through black and white glasses. But there are complications to this rule from the fact that it does not reflect reality. However, let's consider this for a minute. Using this strict interpretation, if the Taliban can be seen by the US government (and NATO) and its Afghan-supported (puppet?) government as terrorists then, using this rule, equally, the Mujahedeen in the 1980s have to be seen as terrorists because that's what the Soviets and their Afghan-supported (puppet?) government labelled them. And yet most governments in the West, particularly the US saw (and still see) them as liberators.

I think it is equally legitimate to support the Mujahedeen against the Soviets and their puppet Afghan government during this time but not the Taliban in the 2000s. Is Tom Parker making the same comparative structural connection between the Mujahedeen and the Taliban? The logic of his statement, to me, implies that he does. If not, then would he not be equally open to the same criticism that he is directing towards Peter King e.g. saying that context is important in determining a viewpoint?

My hypothetical is a brief attempt to question who has the authority to determine whether a group is a terrorist or a freedom fighter, and whether it is incomplete to say that different situations are capable of having different responses.

My final point was raised by someone in a discussion group when examining this hearing and asking why the hearing is taking so much prominence. To a degree, it appears that the hearing is an attempt at American soul-searching in regards to the society's attitude towards Islam and Muslims. Or perhaps, one should say blame-searching. As they say, everyone needs a scapegoat but a scapegoat to what? Is it possible that this hearing is a measurement of how the US political system sees the success of the 'War on Terror'? In other words, the lack of a military and political success of the post-9/11 grand strategising to maintain US international dominance (say Iraq and Afghanistan) has meant that the county has turned inwards to find someone to blame for its failure? I have not worked this out fully and it may just be a neatly contrived and wordy polemic that has no substantive basis in reality, your thoughts?

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but othertimes it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.