

Strange Alliance: The Convergence of the Radical Left and Radical Islam

Written by Sirvan Karimi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/07/23/strange-alliance-the-convergence-of-the-radical-left-and-radical-islam/>

SIRVAN KARIMI, JUL 23 2025

The undeclared strategic alliance between the radical left and radical Islam has become so conspicuous that it demands a comprehensive dissection and analysis. This growing strategic and ideological affinity between the radical left in the West and radical Islamic organizations and regimes that have wrapped themselves up in anti-imperialism flag has not only trivialized the left's vociferous commitment to democracy, social justice, and anti-oppression but has also turned the radical left into the "frontier guards" for fundamentalist and militant Islamic organizations and regimes. This strange symbiosis between these diametrically opposing movements not only contributes to the greater strangulation and stifling of democratic aspirations in Islamic societies but is also geared to embolden radical Islamists to foster illiberal values in the West.

Before analyzing the ramifications of the unusual alliance between two diametrically opposed ideological movements for democracy, it is essential to examine the basis for their mutual attraction. It has become mind-numbing to witness how the radical left that conceptualizes religion as "the opium of the masses" and displays a progressive view of gender and sexual orientation has gravitated toward radical Islam, which espouses principles that run counter to the values that the radical left stands for. As will be demonstrated later, even though both movements raise the flag of social justice, equality, and fighting oppression, these are not necessarily the basis for their mutual attraction. The historical force of mutual attraction between these two ideologically different radical movements emanates from their shared hostility toward the US-led Western imperialism in particular and Western liberal democracy in general (Vidino, 2022; Salzman, 2025).

The roots of the radical left's attraction to and fascination with radical Islam can be traced back to the 1979 revolution in Iran, which culminated in the collapse of the pro-Western monarchy and the ascendancy of the Islamic regime. The prevailing anti-American and anti-Western slogans during the revolution resonated with the Western leftist intellectuals' anti-imperialist crusade (Sixsmith, 2018). The Islamic Revolution in Iran was perceived by prominent Western leftist intellectuals, such as Edward Said and Richard Falk, as a harbinger of emancipation and freedom from the yoke of imperialism, colonialism, and Western hegemony (Zarnett, 2007). Even Michel Foucault, a known homosexual and utterly devoid of any religious beliefs, was infatuated with the Islamic revolution in Iran and vehemently envisaged radical Islam as the most effective revolutionary force to counter and challenge Western liberalism (Afray and Anderson, 2005). Noam Chomsky (2019), the renowned intellectual voice of the radical left, has envisioned the Islamic regime in Iran as an international fortification displaying a successful defiance against US imperialism. Within the radical left circle, there is a strong propensity to envision even Hezbollah and Hamas movements as parts of the axis of resistance against US imperialism and Israeli dominance (Babak, 2014).

Thus, anti-Americanism and anti-Western liberal democracy have served as a gravitational force in fostering the strategic alliance between these two ideologically distinct camps. Disillusioned and disappointed by the lack of an international working class to wage a revolutionary class struggle against capitalism and Western imperialism, the radical left views political Islam as the most effective revolutionary agent of transformation. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists view the radical left as a force that has the potential to not only challenge liberal democracy in the West but also oppose and slow down the wheels of Western intervention in Islamic countries. This is why, while radical Islam in power has already exhibited its willingness to violently suppress leftist activists at home, it has been

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incessantly striving to galvanize the leftist discourse around the globe as a strategy to undermine liberal democracy and weaken the US influence (Jose, 2022).

As Abbas Milani (2023), an Iranian scholar living in the USA, has pointed out, the Islamic regime in Iran has been spending millions of dollars in the West, particularly the US colleges and universities,

to create an intellectual proxy in the West to fight the 'culture war' and facilitate the 'Historic Turn.' ... one that would bring about an end to the catastrophic era of Judeo-Christian Western hegemony and usher in the apocalyptic victory of Islam.

This confounding marriage of convenience between the radical left and political Islam has debilitating implications for the left, democratic struggles in Islamic societies, and the state of democracy in Western countries.

The radical left's strategic alliance with the Islamic fundamentalists has trivialized the left's anti-oppression commitment, which is, in turn, conducive to lending credence to the left's critics who have questioned the sincerity of the radical left's dedication to social justice and opposing any form of oppression. While the radical left has eagerly collaborated with the militant Islamists to sustain persistent demonstrations against Israel which is perceived by both sides as the outpost of Western imperialism, the radical left has been shockingly reticent on certain atrocities and inhuman situations such as the mistreatment of LGBTQ in Islamic societies, the suppression of Uyghur Muslims in China, the slaughtering of more than 500,000 Syrians by the deposed Assad regime aided by the Islamic regime of Iran and Russia, and the ongoing violent suppression of progressive forces including leftist activists in Iran by the Islamic regime (International Workers League, 2012; Smith, 2018)). The radical left's selectivity in opposing oppression is bound to tarnish the left's ideological underpinnings and impugn the sincerity of its proclaimed commitment to fighting oppression. The selectivity of the radical left in opposing oppression raises a legitimate question. Would the radical left have still excoriated Israel if the latter were not an ally of the United States and the West?

Another implication of the radical left's affinity with radical Islam is stifling the aspiration for democracy in Islamic societies. Due to its excessive obsession with anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, the radical left has expediently sacrificed its anti-oppression principle. Western-based anti-imperialist leftists have not only subordinated people's struggle for democracy in non-liberal democratic countries to their preoccupation with fighting imperialism but have also intentionally or inadvertently condoned oppression and egregious atrocities committed by these authoritarian regimes, such as the Islamic regime of Iran, which have wrapped themselves up in the flag of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism (Smith, 2018).

As Saeed Rahnema (2009), an Iranian scholar living in Canada, has observed, some Western leftist intellectuals have not only eschewed showing sympathy for Iranian progressive forces fighting for democracy, but they have sedulously endeavored to depict a positive picture of the Islamic regime in Iran. In other words, the radical left in the West has become an obstinate defender of the Islamic fundamentalist organizations (such as Hezbollah and Hamas) and regimes such as the Islamic regime in Iran, which utilize anti-Americanism and anti-Western liberal democracy as a certified license to oppress their population, including progressive and secular leftists which is bound to suppress aspiration for democracy. Thus, the radical left's use of anti-US imperialism as a justification for ignoring the oppressive nature of the Islamic movements in general and the Islamic regime in Iran in particular has been conducive to betraying the long-held socialist principle of international solidarity with all oppressed people of the world (Smith 2018,)

In the quest for promoting inclusivity and protecting marginalized groups from harmful language and behaviors, the radical left has emerged as the enabler of radical Islam in the West. While the left as a whole and the radical leftists in particular have no qualm in excoriating and even responding with hostility to any forms of extremism related to major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, they have refrained from criticizing Islam and Islamic extremists (Walzer, 2016). The radical left in academia and even Centre-left governments justify such a controversial stance as an essential bulwark against the spread of "Islamophobia" (defined as unreasonable fear of Islam that leads to discrimination against Muslims). However, the use of such an ambiguous definition of

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Islamophobia is tacitly geared to stifle freedom of expression, which is, in turn, conducive to engendering an auspicious environment for radical Islam to flourish in the West (Tatchell, 2019). In other words, while Islamic fundamentalists utilize the cherished civil liberties in the West to advance their agenda, they are protected from being censured and questioned for propagating illiberal values (Reid, 2011).

The radicalization of Muslims has already emerged as a pressing issue that Western countries have encountered (Azaam, 2007; Balzacq and Settoul, 2022). As the former French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, has pointed out, the charge of the Islamophobia label is convincingly harnessed by progressive elites and Islamists' apologists as a tactical weapon to silence any legitimate criticisms of Islamists and Islamic organizations (Goldberg, 2015). Pascal Bruckner (2010) argues that the term "Islamophobia" is "a clever invention because it amounts to making Islam a subject that one cannot touch without being accused of racism" (p.48).

Shielding radical Islam from even constructive criticisms constitutes an impending threat to democracy, as Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed, the Deputy Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), alluded to in 2017. In his insightful and bold speech at a public panel in Riyadh in 2017, which served as a wake-up call to the Western liberal democracies, he warned that:

There will come a day when we see far more radicals, extremists, and terrorists coming out from Europe because of a lack of decision-making and trying to be politically correct or assuming that they know the Middle East or Islam better than we do, and I am sorry that is pure ignorance (Cited in Salem, 2019).

Infatuation with Islamists' anti-American imperialism and anti-Western liberal democracy slogans has gripped a substantial segment of the Left in the West since the Islamic revolution in Iran. The radical left's attraction to and outright support of political Islam has not only been prone to tarnish socialist principles but has also been conducive to legitimizing the suppression of the democratic aspirations of progressive and secular forces in Islamic societies such as Iran. Furthermore, the radical left's insistence on the application of "Islamophobia" as a mechanism to shield radical Islamists from being criticized has emboldened and enabled the latter to propagate illiberal values.

The alliance between the Iranian left and radical Islamists during the Iranian revolution, which was accompanied by violent purges of the left by the governing Islamic regime, should provide a painful but valuable lesson to the radical left in the West. Given the destructive outcomes of the collaboration of leftists with Islamists in Iran, it is an illusion to assume that through its partnership with radical Islamists, the left in the West would bring about justice, peace, and democracy to the marginalized and oppressed people of the world.

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