

Off The cuff

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Waving Islamic Flags

AS THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN has intensified the British Government has been faced with a serious dilemma concerning public reaction towards the fatalities and grievous injuries being inflicted upon our soldiers by the enemy. Public disquiet about the purpose and legitimacy of the War, and rumours and reports regarding the poor or inadequate equipment issued to our troops are widespread; perhaps a majority of the population would favour bringing all our soldiers home. Gordon Brown's government has responded by encouraging flag waving at every opportunity, and has persuaded the military and many local authorities to stage homecoming parades by regiments returning from tours of duty in Afghanistan.

These parades are being organized for a population, which is largely unfamiliar with military conflict or martial spirit. They take place in shopping streets and public spaces long dominated by mass consumption, and the service industries which have turned most of our town centres into entertainment destinations rather than a spatial focus for the celebration of national duty and civic virtue.

Despite these circumstances, the parades have been well attended and the response of the public has been respectful if not hugely enthusiastic. However, the protest mounted by Al-Muhajiroun or Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah at the homecoming of the Royal Anglian Regiment in Luton earlier this year stimulated real outrage among many of those present, who, whatever they think about the War, believe that our soldiers deserve our undivided admiration and respect. They are "our" soldiers, after all.

It is not surprising that a handful of Islamists took a different view of the Royal Anglicans on parade, because, of course, Islamists are in sympathy with

“our” enemies in Afghanistan and may even be counted as their allies. In their protest in Luton the young Islamists demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. They thought that by protesting against our soldiers they were taking a stand against the War – instead they alienated a great many people who might oppose the War, but resolutely respect “our” soldiers.

It also provided an ideal opportunity for a bunch of hard drinking burly white football supporters to form a loose knit organization called the United Peoples of Luton, which has since morphed into the English Defence League, and spun off a Welsh Defence League and a Scottish Defence League, all committed ostensibly to defending the rights of women from Sharia and all things Islamic. They appear to be unable to make any useful distinction between, the political outlook of Islamists, the founding tenets of Islam, and the mass of ordinary Muslims. However, opposition to the threat posed to “our way of life” by devout Muslims is their *raison d’être*.

The EDL’s provocative protests in a number of towns and cities have created the opportunity for Unite Against Fascism to organize numerous counter demonstrations aimed at clearly identifying the EDL as part of the network of racist groups in orbit around the British National Party; UAF aims to challenge directly the drunken antics of the EDL when they mobilise protests against Muslims and Muslim communities.

In the process of its work the UAF has made it pretty clear that it opposes flying the Union Jack and the flag of St George. Its leaders have been resolute in using the “*butcher’s apron*” argument: the Union flag is the hated and blood soaked symbol of colonial domination and no right-thinking person would want to wave it. This is a pretty simple and straightforward position. However, just like the militants of Al-Muhajiroun, the activists of Unite Against Fascism, in opposing the raising of the Union Jack, are demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation.

Most British people would readily acknowledge all sorts of wrong doing on the part of our country in its imperial past and during its recent troubled history, but this does not lead them to lack national pride or to hate the conventional symbols of the nation like the flag and the Queen. Despite all sorts of misgivings most British people are not going to trash the Union Jack or jeer at soldiers returning from battle.

These misunderstandings came to a head last weekend in Nottingham during a homecoming parade of 500 soldiers of the Second Battalion of the Mercian Regiment. The young soldiers were back from a six-month tour of duty in Helmand Province having lost five of their comrades and suffered many injuries.

Members of the English Defence League decided to stir the pot by announcing their intention to demonstrate in support of the returning soldiers. Unite Against Fascism promptly organized a counter demonstration. EDL, following an intervention by the police, agreed to move their demonstration away from the parade route, but this did not stop clashes and running battles between the police and the rival organizations when the English Defence League finally emerged, drunk, from a couple of pubs in the city centre. In the confusion a group of anti-fascist students decided to aggravate matters by gathering under the flag of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Clearly the left's hostility to the Union flag set beside their preparedness to tolerate the flag of the Islamic Republic does not bode well for their future, nor does it say much for their tactical sensitivities.

The economy of our country has shrunk by more than four per cent this year, millions are unemployed, and hundreds of thousands of young people are facing disappointment and severe economic hardship as they look for work and housing. This is absolutely not the time to play fast and loose with national sentiment or with provocations around religion and race.

In their struggle with widespread racism in Britain, and the narrower problem of fascism, leftwing organizations need to be clear that they hold no brief

for the intolerance of Muslim clerics, Catholic priests, or Orthodox rabbis. The left needs to be as resolute in its opposition to religious obscurantism as it is in its defence of religious freedom. Most Muslim clerics do not believe in the right of those born into Muslim families to leave the religion, and many believe that violent or even murderous sanctions against apostates are entirely legitimate. Consequently, most Muslim clerics are opponents of religious freedom and of much else which anybody on the left should hold dear.

It will simply not do to brand all the enemies or opponents of core Muslim beliefs as “Islamophobes” or racists. There is as much to hate and fear in observant Islam as there is in Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity. Indeed there is very little to choose between them when it comes to belief in male supremacy and heterosexism; they are indeed all much of a muchness.

However, in the context of the present armed struggles being waged between Islamists of various stripes, and the British state and the British people, the attitude of Muslims towards this country has inevitably become an issue. The left cannot and should not attempt to hide behind rhetoric about “Islamophobia” – if the broad left’s internationalism does not permit it to wave the Union Jack then it should surely also oppose those who flourish the flag of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Left wing organizations like Unite Against Fascism need to reject rank opportunism regarding allegations of “Islamophobia”; hating a set of religious beliefs is not the same thing as hating those who hold the beliefs in question, and it certainly does not amount to racism. UAF, and the left more broadly, need to adopt a principled stand, and to display rather more candour concerning their alliances with Muslim organizations, if they are ever to build a strong following among the largely secular British population.