

The Ben Affleck-Bill Maher-Sam Harris dispute: Anti-Muslim bigotry and American imperialist policy

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The dispute that occurred on the October 3 edition of HBO's "Real Time with Bill Maher," between Maher and author Sam Harris, on the one hand, and prominent actor Ben Affleck, on the other, was revealing. In particular, it helped clarify the relationship between anti-Muslim bigotry, the "identity politics" of the affluent middle class and defense of American imperialist policy in the Middle East.

The argument erupted when Harris, a right-wing political commentator and defender of Israeli repression of the Palestinians, seconded by Maher, denounced "the treatment of women and homosexuals and public intellectuals in the Muslim world," suggesting this alleged mistreatment was intrinsic to Islam as a religion. "Liberals have failed us," he went on, by essentially inventing something called "Islamophobia" and refusing to criticize Islam as a doctrine.

Affleck heatedly responded that those positions were "gross" and "racist." He commented, "It's like saying 'you shifty Jew.'" When Harris went on to claim that "Islam is the mother lode of bad ideas," Affleck responded, quite legitimately, "That's an ugly thing to say."

The actor continued, "How about the more than a billion people who aren't fanatical, who don't punish women, who just want to go to school, have some sandwiches... and don't do any of the things that you're saying all Muslims [do]?... [It's] stereotyping."

Harris persisted in his contention that keeping "women and homosexuals immiserated" was imbedded in Muslim culture. Affleck responded pointedly, "We've killed more Muslims than they've killed us by an awful lot. We've invaded more Muslim countries ... and yet somehow we're exempted from these things because they're not really a reflection of what we believe in." He added

sarcastically, "We did it by accident ... that's why we invaded Iraq."

Maher thereupon insisted that Islam was "the only religion that acts like the Mafia, that will f***ing kill you if you say the wrong thing, draw the wrong picture or write the wrong book."

This is pretty rich. The chief Mafioso in the world today is President Barack Obama, who presides over kill lists, drone strikes and universal, illegal surveillance, and now has engaged the US in a new war in Iraq and Syria behind the backs of the population. Affleck's point could be elaborated upon: the US military and CIA are responsible for the deaths of over one million Iraqis, the destruction of its cities and infrastructure and the fomenting of murderous, sectarian warfare, as well as the devastation of Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, at the cost of countless casualties and immense social misery.

Moreover, as is quite well known (and the vice president of the United States recently admitted), ISIS, Al Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalist groupings are either the former recipients of US funding and encouragement, the response to previous disastrous, hated American interventions in the Middle East, or both.

In any case, Maher later seamlessly switched the discussion to one about US policy in relation to ISIS and Syria. The issue of "ground troops" arose, with Harris suggesting that seeing as there was "a genocide under way," American and foreign military action was clearly needed. As though the global population has not heard the same lies and justifications for "humanitarian intervention" before, time and time again, in the past two decades, from the military operation in Bosnia onward!

In short, adopting the language and the arguments of the identity politics "left," Maher and Harris used the "Real Time" discussion to promote Washington's policy in the

Middle East and Central Asia, which has nothing to do with the rights of women and homosexuals—and everything to do with oil and geopolitics. The effort to cloak the US ruling elite’s plundering of the region in the mantle of “human rights” has become one of the chief means by which layers of the upper middle class are swung behind imperialist war. Affleck, albeit in a limited fashion, disrupted that effort. Inevitably, the latter has come under attack from right-wing and pro-Zionist sources as a result.

Sam Harris has made a career for himself, since the attacks of 9/11, as a specialist in “rationalist,” “atheist” opposition to Islamic faith, which he argues is responsible, at bottom, for terrorism. An ostensibly liberal version of the *Clash of Civilizations* argument of right-wing figures such as political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, Harris’ view of the world has, in fact, quite sinister, even genocidal implications. It is unclear from his writings, given his view that Islam and terrorism are fatally intertwined, why a war of extermination against Muslims should not be preemptively launched.

What else can one infer from this passage in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004)?: “There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense. That is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, at an even greater cost to ourselves and innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world. We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas.”

Bill Maher, a former standup comic, has been hosting “Real Time,” a weekly, hour-long program, on cable television network HBO since 2003. Prior to that, he hosted the late-night talk show “Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher” on cable television’s Comedy Central from 1993 to 1997 and ABC from 1997 to 2002.

Maher, along with other late-night talk show hosts, is one of the manufacturers of official public opinion in America. He created a certain name for himself as a defender of Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal (1998-99) and made much comic hay at the expense of the sitting president during George W. Bush’s eight years in the White House. In this fashion, he served as one of the influential “opinion makers” who helped open the door for Barack Obama, as the ruling elite made a tactical shift toward the Democrats in 2008. (In 2012, Maher made a one million dollar contribution to the pro-

Obama “super PAC.”)

The comic, who is capable on occasion of amusing one-liners, presents himself as a teller of truths no one else will dare to utter. Commentators likewise regularly treat him as “aggressively iconoclastic,” “sharp-tongued” and “sharp-witted,” one of the comedian-television hosts who say “what can’t or isn’t being said elsewhere on television.”

The conceit of programs like “Real Time” is that they eschew the “insider” perspective, that their hosts and guests are “outsiders” able to mock and “speak truth to power, whatever partisan or ideological stripes such power represents,” in the words of one sympathetic critic.

In fact, Maher, worth \$23 million according to *Forbes* magazine, is one of the coping mechanisms of the present political system. His sneering, cynical, “anti-establishment” posturing is aimed at taking in a certain section of those, especially among the young, disaffected with official politics and orienting them in quite a reactionary direction. His “iconoclasm” has never gone farther than skin deep. It is a very easy thing to make fun of the idiocy of American political life. Hardly anything could be easier. But Maher, along with Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* and the rest, have never come within a hundred miles of criticizing the holy of holies, the economic structure of American society and the vast inequality it has bred.

One of the benefits of the desperate crisis of US capitalism is that it forces a variety of erstwhile “radicals” and “libertarians” to openly reveal their colors as defenders of the system that has made them very rich and very self-satisfied. Maher’s oppositional pretensions are falling away, as his condemnation of whistleblower Edward Snowden, enthusiastic support for the slaughter in Gaza carried out by the Israeli military and anti-Muslim tirades have made clear.



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