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Christie's 'Crazies'

Sharia is not a figment of our imagination.

This “sharia-law business is crap . . . and I’m tired of dealing with the crazies!” So blustered Chris Christie. Bluster is the New Jersey governor’s default mode. It has certainly served him well. When directed at surly advocates of New Jersey’s teachers’ unions — who, after all, deserve it — bluster can apparently make a conservative heartthrob out of a pol whose bite is bipartisan moderate, however titillating his bark may be.

The style is so effective that Christie seems to be trying it out on everyone. A few weeks back, a local reporter had the audacity to ask His Honor whether he believes in creationism or evolution — a question that seemed more pertinent than impertinent in light of the controversy over whether the former ought to be taught in the schools that the governor’s 9 million constituents subsidize to the tune of \$11 billion annually. Yet his answer was to growl, “That’s none of your business.”

“None of your business,” has moved to the front of the Christie repertoire. So discovered a citizen who recently had the temerity to ask her governor why he does not send his children to the public schools whose bloated budgets he is trying to pare. It was a pretty tame question, one customarily asked of politicians who crow about the alleged greatness of our public-education system while opting out of it when it comes to their own kids.

As it happened, the governor had a compelling, three-part answer: Like other New Jersey homeowners, he pays the exorbitant property taxes that subsidize the state’s public-employee pensions . . . er, I mean, public schools. Second, the Christies, like many parents, choose parochial schools so their kids get religious instruction. Third, Christie’s fiduciary obligation as governor requires his best judgment about what’s right for the state and its schools, regardless of what private choices he makes for his own family. Perfect. Except Christie couldn’t help being Christie: Even as he made it his business to share these convincing views, the state’s top public servant couldn’t resist telling his public, “It’s none of your business. I don’t ask you where you send your kids to school, don’t bother me about where I send mine.” Probably best not to ask him about charm school.

Former Bush speechwriter Pete Wehner, whose monitory posts at *Commentary*’s “Contentions” blog frequently stress the need for civility in public discourse, evidently missed these and other Christie gems. But Pete certainly caught this week’s diatribe against the “sharia crazies,” and it’s got him just as goose-bumpy as the *Washington Post*’s left-wing blogger Greg Sargent.

According to Pete, “unfair animus toward Muslim Americans” is among the “troubling tendencies” in today’s conservatism, particularly among the tea-party types who are the *bête noir* of establishment GOP commissars of compassion. That’s why Pete is “grateful,” he continued, that Christie “spoke out in defense of his appointment of Sohail Mohammed to a state bench.”

Media questions about the Mohammed appointment were the provocation for Christie’s outburst. “Ignorance is behind the criticism of Sohail Mohammed,” the governor thundered. He complained that disquiet over the appointment owed solely to a toxic combination of irrational bias (because Mohammed is a Muslim) and ignorance (because the fact that a lawyer defended people detained in the 9/11 investigation, as Mohammed did, does not mean the lawyer sympathizes with the terrorists).

As far as they go, both these assertions are true. But, as we’ll see, they don’t come close to telling the whole story. There are Muslims in the United States who despise the West, and there are patriotic American Muslims who embrace the West, some of whom serve honorably in our military, are key assets to our intelligence community, and have enabled us to infiltrate terror networks, thwart plots, and save lives. The question is how to figure out which is which.

Moreover, our Constitution guarantees counsel to people accused of crimes, a guarantee that courts routinely extend to people who are temporarily detained in the civilian justice system even if they are never formally charged, much less convicted. Some of the most patriotic Americans I know are defense lawyers who’ve represented convicted terrorists. These attorneys took on the obligation to defend people who can’t afford counsel, a duty without which our civilian justice system could not function. They dutifully represented indicted terrorists upon request and assignment by the court. By contrast, many of Mohammed’s clients were never charged with participation in the 9/11 plot, although that hardly means they were “wrongly arrested,” as Christie claimed.

Christie was just getting warmed up. He exploded when a reporter followed up with a question about sharia, the law of Islam. “Sharia law has nothing to do with this at all, it’s crazy!” he snapped, adding that this “Sharia-law business is just crap . . . and I’m tired of dealing with the crazies.”

Maybe Governor Christie ought to ask S.D. if sharia law concerns are “just crap.” We know “S.D.” only by her initials to protect her from further

indignity. She is a Muslim woman from Morocco who was serially raped and beaten in New Jersey by the Muslim man to whom she was wed as a teenager — one of those arranged marriages common in Islamic cultures. A New Jersey judge declined to give her a protective order, though. Under sharia, a man cannot rape his wife: “A woman cannot carry out the right of her Lord til she carries out the right of her husband,” declares one relevant hadith ([Ibn Majah 1854](#)). “If he asks her to surrender herself she should not refuse him even if she is on a camel’s saddle.” Or, as S.D.’s husband translated this sharia tenet as he forced himself on her, “This is according to our religion. You are my wife, I [can] do anything to you. The woman, she should submit and do anything I ask her to do.”

Based on this, the judge (who, thankfully, was later reversed) reasoned that the husband couldn’t be criminally culpable. According to the New Jersey court, “He was operating under his belief that it is, as the husband, his desire to have sex when and whether he wanted to . . . consistent with his practices, and it was something that was not prohibited.”

This is far from the only instance in which American courts have supplanted American legal protections with Islamic legal principles. To be sure, there is no critical mass of such cases in the United States, as there is beginning to be in parts of Europe. Consequently, while sympathetic to the underlying concerns, I’m not a fan of anti-sharia legal initiatives that have sprung up in various states. We don’t need law to pull the society along. We need sunshine.

If Americans examined the classical interpretations of sharia, core tenets of which are antithetical to Western liberalism, you wouldn’t need to pass a law against it; it would be discredited. But that is an examination government officials like Governor Christie — taking their cues from the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations — seem determined to make sure we never have. It’s a religion of peace; now move along, there’s nothing else to see here.

And similarly, you are to understand that there’s nothing else to see in the matter of Sohail Mohammed’s elevation to the bench. He is, Christie blustered, a solid American citizen and an “outstanding lawyer” who “played an integral role in the post–September 11th period in building bridges between the Muslim American community in this state and law enforcement.” Ah yes, “building bridges” — code for “Muslim outreach,” the law-enforcement strategy that started in the Clinton years, picked up steam in the Bush years, and has become the backbone of Obama counterterrorism.

Like many bad ideas, this one began with the best of intentions. When the Islamic-terror onslaught started in the early 1990s, it was treated as a crime problem. State and federal law-enforcement agencies had precious little intelligence about the Muslim communities in which terrorists insinuated themselves. The solution: reach out to Muslim leaders, show them we see this as a “violent extremism” issue, not an Islam issue, and they’ll share information with us.

Nice idea on the drawing board, utterly wrongheaded in practice. You see, the problem *is* Muslim leaders. Rank-and-file Muslims in the U.S. tend to be pro-American and supportive of counterterrorism efforts, albeit quietly so. That’s because they are intimidated by the leadership in the mosques and Islamic centers, which tends to be heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, and thus anti-Western, anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, anti-assimilationist, and wedded to the fundamentalist, classical interpretation of sharia.

That’s why, as Governor Christie ought to understand, sharia concerns can’t be dismissed as “crap.” They help us sort out the pro-American Muslims we want to empower from the Islamists. When we dismiss these concerns, we end up building bridges to all the wrong people, as government has done, to its repeated embarrassment, for two decades. That is how we end up “partnering” with the likes of Abdurrahman Alamoudi and Sami al-Arian (both ultimately convicted, with their ties to terrorism duly exposed); Salam al-Marayati, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee [leader](#) who [argued](#) that Israel should be at the top of the 9/11 suspect list; and such Islamist organizations as CAIR and the Islamic Society of North America, which, though not indicted, were shown by the Justice Department to be co-conspirators in the Holy Land Foundation terrorism-financing case.

Governor Christie would have you believe opposition to Mr. Mohammed was sheer bigotry: “It’s just unnecessary to be accusing this guy of things just because of his religious background,” he railed to reporters. It’s a narrative Christie fans would like to help cement. It’s not true.

For the record, Sohail Mohammed is not just an attorney. He served as a board member for an Islamist organization, the American Muslim Union, which, as [Commentary’s Jonathan S. Tobin](#) and terrorism expert [Steve Emerson](#) have shown, has a checkered past of rationalizing jihadist attacks and supporting jihadists.

Indeed, when the Holy Land Foundation was shuttered in 2001 for its facilitation of terrorist groups, Mohammed told the *Bergen Record* that the federal government was unjustly singling out Muslim organizations. Seven years later, a jury convicted several HLF operatives for channeling millions of dollars to Hamas, the terrorist organization that is the Muslim Brotherhood’s Palestinian branch. Mohammed also ripped the Justice Department’s prosecution of al-Arian as a “witch-hunt” and a “politically motivated indictment.” Al-Arian eventually pleaded guilty to a terrorism charge in a case that showed him to be a key operative of the murderous Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization.

One of the AMU’s most influential members is Mohammed Qatanani, a 47-year-old Palestinian firebrand from Jordan, who is not just an associate but a client of Sohail Mohammed’s. According to federal law enforcement, Qatanani is a former Muslim Brotherhood member who, when apprehended by Israeli authorities in 1993, confessed to being a member of Hamas. Not surprisingly, Qatanani is also an avowed enthusiast of the Brotherhood-Hamas one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Mr. Tobin notes, he’d have the Jewish state disappear by its absorption into an Islamic “Greater Syria.”

New Jersey has one of the country's largest Islamic populations, and Qatanani has been the imam of one of the state's largest Muslim communities, the Islamic Center of Passaic County. His predecessor as imam there, Mohammed el-Mezain, is among the five defendants convicted of financing Hamas in the HLF case. In fact, el-Mezain boasted of raising money at the mosque for Hamas. No surprise, then, to learn, as Steve Emerson recounts, that imam Qatanani included his predecessor and the other HLF defendants in a 2007 prayer for relief from oppression

Oh Allah assist our brothers and sisters in Philistine [Palestine], and Iraq and Chechnya . . . Oh Allah remove occupation and oppression, and oh Allah improve the matters of our community . . . to assist our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land Foundation, ask oh Allah . . . to assist them and to remove the difficulty that they have been inflicted with, all of the brothers and sisters in this country, oh Allah to prove them non-guilty.

The Department of Homeland Security has been trying for some time to deport Qatanani for lying on his 1999 immigration paperwork. He'd been granted a religious-worker visa in 1996, enabling him to be the imam at the Islamic Center. When it expired in 1999, he sought to become a permanent U.S. resident. Though specifically asked about his criminal history, Qatanani failed to disclose that he was convicted in an Israeli military court for his membership in, and support of, Hamas. Mohammed's firm helped Qatanani prepare the I-485, and Qatanani later claimed that he'd signed the form because he "trusted his attorney, Sohail Mohammed." (See Homeland Security Investigation, Appendix, p. 4.)

The deportation case against Qatanani was heard by an immigration judge in 2008. Christie was then the Bush-appointed U.S. attorney for New Jersey, though his office did not handle the case. In light of Qatanani's track record and the Islamic Center of Passaic County's connections to the Bush Justice Department's then-ongoing HLF prosecution, it is nothing short of shocking that U.S. attorney Christie went to Qatanani's mosque for a Ramadan celebration while the immigration case was underway. There, he is reported to have embraced Qatanani and praised the former Hamas operative as "a man of great good will."

More astoundingly, Christie permitted one of his assistant U.S. attorneys, Charles B. McKenna, to testify at the immigration hearing as a character witness on behalf of Qatanani — i.e., a Justice Department official was dispatched to undermine the Homeland Security Department's case against Qatanani, which was built in part on an investigation conducted by the FBI, an agency of the Justice Department.

The immigration judge, Alberto Riefkohl, ultimately ruled in Qatanani's favor, an absurd decision in which he baselessly discredited two federal agents who'd testified about Qatanani's admission that he'd been arrested for Hamas activities, and irrationally discounted the evidence of Qatanani's Israeli conviction. The judge stressed, in arriving at this ruling, how impressed he'd been by "law-enforcement officers that took time from their respective duties to appear before the court." I'm sure. But the feel-good hallucinations of bridge-building can't erase the reality of terror promotion. Judge Riefkohl was later reversed by the Board of Immigration Appeals, which found that there was no basis for Riefkohl to have ignored the government's evidence.

The questions about Governor Christie's appointment of Sohail Mohammed and his exertions on behalf of Mohammed's client, Mohammed Qatanani, have nothing to do with either sharia or the all-purpose smear of Islamophobia. They are about the governor's judgment. They are about a U.S. attorney with political ambitions pandering to a politically active constituency at the expense of national security and enforcement of the immigration laws. They are about his decision to award a state judgeship to an attorney who was an active and vocal board member of a very troubling Islamist organization — and who has a penchant for presuming that perfectly valid anti-terror prosecutions are, instead, anti-Muslim persecutions.

Those questions are not answered by bluster.

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