
Book Review: *American Islamophobia*

American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear by Khaled A. Beydoun (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018). 232 pp. pbk, 244 pp. hbk, \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-5202977-9-1
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This short well-written book will have a tremendous impact. It addresses one of the hot-button issues in the United States, and in the opinion of this reviewer, *in extenso* in the rest of the Western world. Islamophobia is not just a passing phase but a structural phenomenon.

The author, Khaled A. Beydoun, is a rising legal scholar who is drawing praise from many circles. The blurb on the back cover, for example, has praise from Naomi Klein. Beydoun has published many legal articles in prominent law journals, such as *California Law Review* and *Columbia Law Review*. He has also written for major newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and for television networks such as Al Jazeera. The present book is his first, but it targets a large audience of those who are not familiar with the topic. Hence, the writing style is simple and clear.

The book has seven chapters plus an introduction and an epilogue and notes. (This reviewer still wonders why notes are continuously placed at the end of books and not at the bottom of the pages in the main text. It may make the publisher's life easier, but certainly not the reader's. Notes more often than not provide readers with gems of information not necessarily belonging to the narrative's main body.)

Addressing the issue of Islam in the United States, the author states that "Islam in America has never been simply a religion one chooses. From the gaze of the state and society, Islam was and still is an indelible marker of otherness, and in War-on-Terror America, it is a political identity that instantly triggers the suspicion of acts of terror and subversion" (15). The issue of otherness

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triggers discrimination and various forms of phobia. In this particular instance, the author identifies in chapter 1 three basic forms of Islamophobia.

First, there is what he calls “private Islamophobia.” It “is the fear, suspicion, and violent targeting of Muslims by private actors” (32). Such private actors can be individuals or institutions “acting in a capacity not directly tied to the state” (32). The author cites as an example the murder of three Muslim American students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, as a clear example of private Islamophobia committed by a single individual. An example of institutional Islamophobia is the right-wing think tank based in New York City, the Gatestone Institute, which focus on the Middle East, Muslims, and Islam’s incompatibility with Western societies (33).

Another type of Islamophobia, a more dangerous one, is what the author calls “structural Islamophobia.” In this instance, “it is the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of government institutions and actors. This fear and suspicion are manifested and enforced through the enactment and advancement of laws, policy, and programming built upon the presumption that Muslim identity is associated with a national security threat” (36). Islamophobia is not just a novel form of bigotry, but is the “progeny of Orientalism,” which the author defines as a “master discourse that positions Islam—a faith, people, and imagined geographical sphere—as the civilizational foil of the West.” He adds that “connecting Islamophobia to Orientalism is a vital first step toward understanding that Islamophobia is deeply entrenched, fluidly remade and reproduced, and deployed by the state to bring about intended or desired political ends” (38). Chapter 2 examines the formative racial classifications and immigration policies that caricatured Muslims as Arab or Middle Eastern and stifled their attempts at naturalization. That lasted from 1790 to 1944!

A third form of Islamophobia is “dialectical Islamophobia.” It is the “least detectable, but it is the very thread that binds the private and structural forms together” (40). Dialectical Islamophobia is “the process by which structural Islamophobia shapes, reshapes, and endorses views or attributes about Islam and Muslim subjects inside and outside of America’s borders” (40). At its core, it is a presumption of guilt assigned to Muslims by private and state actors. The process has become more intense after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The “War on Terror” has shaped the official American outlook toward the Muslim world. The excesses of the US invasion of Iraq drove forward the negative image of the “*haji*,” a pejorative term used by US forces about Iraqi resisters to the occupation. The emergence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and attacks on US soldiers made easy the negative narrative on Islam. In chapter 3, titled

“Reoriented Clash of Civilizations,” the author contends that America’s political system is dependent on the binary of good and evil, so “someone or something had to play the role of the villain” (77). The end of the Cold War saw the withering of the Communist threat, so a new one had to be invented. “American policy needed a new geopolitical villain to facilitate its foreign policy objectives and carry forward political interests on the home front” (77). The author further adds: “Again, *we are what we hate* lacking that existential archrival and cultural antithesis created confusion about who *we*, Americans are and aspire to be” (77, original emphasis).

The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing immediately led to swift indictments of “Islamist extremist,” even though it became clear that it was the work of American White terrorists. Therefore, “by resurrecting Orientalist tropes and gazing toward the events unfolding in the Middle East, the United States not only found a suitable replacement, but [also] a more visually foreign and religiously inspired archrival” (78). Hollywood was quick in picking up the new thread. For a thorough analysis of how Hollywood depicts Islam and Muslims, the author refers to the seminal works of Jack Shaheen (Shaheen 1984, 2014). He further notes that it did not require much convincing for stereotypes of Islam as totalitarian, backward, and hostile to be deeply embedded in the American imagination, supported by wide media coverage of Middle Eastern hijackers and angry mobs in city squares shouting at the camera (78).

The fall of the Soviet Union has led Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington to declare formally that Islam, and the billions of people of that faith, is the existential threat to American civilization. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, a widely read essay: “the fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power” (Huntington 1993). Many, like Georges Corm and Edward Said, have effectively debunked such a theory originally put forward by Bernard Lewis in *The Atlantic* in 1990. With both articles and authors as a theoretical cover for adventurous foreign policy, US presidents George W. Bush, Barak Obama, and Donald Trump embarked upon a series of wars against the Muslim and Arab world. Hollywood glorifies such endeavors, and structural Islamophobia has become entrenched in the US political landscape and psyche. Illustrating his point, the author refers to Clint Eastwood’s film *American Sniper* (2014) telling the true story of a US soldier in Iraq named Chris Kyle who had 255 kills. His victims, ever remained nameless, were just “ragheads”! The sniper has presumed—and with him the

American public—that his victims were guilty and “worth of death” (84). The film was acclaimed by “critics” and grossed over US\$500 million globally, out of which US\$350 million was in the United States! (84).

In fact, “showcasing Islamophobia was big business for currying popular support for formal law and government programs snatched to push and promote wars abroad and police and punish Muslims at home” (85). There is a long line of films recreating Huntington’s civilizational rivalry on screen where the American hero swoops through deserts to conquer “Islamic extremism.” Therefore, it was not surprising that Trump, in his campaign and office tenure, has peddled Islamophobia at little cost to himself.

Furthering Islamophobia was the media’s coverage of events in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The author notes that “images and ideas filtered by the news media were virtually indistinguishable from film and vice versa, affirming and reaffirming the ideas that the United States was at war with Islam and Muslims were vested in killing Americans at home and abroad” (86).

The new orientalism is expressed in policy in the so-called “War on Terror,” which is also a “war on Muslims.” That is the gist and title of chapter 4. As in all chapters, the author illustrates his point by anecdotes and serious research. His anecdotic approach stems from his direct knowledge of incidents where American Muslims were subjects of attacks and hate crimes. Even non-Muslims, but perhaps looking like them, such as Sikhs, were mistakenly associated with Muslims. It makes the book not only readable but also quite lively as a documentary with real-life incidents. The book is likely to become a significant addition to the curious mind’s library. It should be so.

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