

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 27, 2015

Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*, Verso, 2014, 336 pp., \$16.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781781685587.

Arun Kundnani's *The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* is a valuable addition to a number of critical books published over the past five years, examining the rise of Islamophobia and its relation to global, American, and British politics. That said, *The Muslims are Coming!* should not be read as a scholarly book. This is because much of its analysis is not new. While Kundnani diligently references materials he uses, some original and some well-known, he often underplays or ignores contemporary works on Islamophobia, which have identified the origins, motivations, and discursive and political effects of Islamophobia within the United States. These works have extensively analyzed Islamophobia not as a byproduct of September 11 or as a result of cultural misunderstanding and misperceptions of Muslims and Muslim Americans. Rather, this growing canon of research has established a baseline understanding of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 world. It has evinced that anti-Muslim sentiment and hate acts arise from ideological formations within American racial history and politics. Researchers have proven that, while Islamophobia is a widespread phenomenon that cuts across the US political spectrum, right wing financed institutions, activists, and campaigns have propagated Islamophobic paradigms in the media, the political sphere, and on Main Street. Scholars have also shown that Islamophobia is a component of racial history in the US, as well as of the imperialist, Orientalist history in the United Kingdom; it is linked, therefore, to the shifting racial hierarchy in North America and anti-Semitism in Europe. Kundnani nevertheless reiterates that Islamophobia cannot be separated from the shifting political landscape of the post-Cold War world, defined by American empire.

This is not to say that *The Muslims Are Coming!* lacks value. To the contrary, if read as a trade book, Kundnani's research is well-written, substantially argued, and politically compelling. His keen political analysis, informed by a Trotskyite sensibility, elegantly weaves information into an incredibly readable and approachable narrative. The book's journalistic narrative is chock-full of interesting vignettes, valuable interviews, and fascinating stories, all of which are interwoven into a compelling narrative by the author's engaging style and smart analytic prism. The author covers now familiar organizing themes of Islamophobia. These organizing tropes, most of which have been discussed by others, include noting public campaigns such as those spearheaded by right wing activists like Pamela Geller and how the writing of Bernard Lewis served not only to give the veneer of credibility to dehumanizing

views of Muslims but also as the academic justification for a theory of Islamic “radicalization” that still prevails in Washington. He notes the connections between these Islamophobic groups and personalities in the US and figures and extreme hate acts in Britain and Europe, not the least of which is Anders Behring Breivik. Kundnani provides prominent and lesser-known anecdotes and information regarding federal law enforcement policies of entrapment, paid informants, and the use of agent-provocateurs. And, throughout the book he contributes further, more recent evidence to support the assertion that Islamophobia is not only a cultural formation, but a sustained campaign that intensified after 9/11 under the Bush administration only to be normalized by the Obama administration (7). In doing so, he contributes to the theory that Islamophobia and anti-terror legislation is a means by which federal and local authorities survey, profile, and target Black Muslim Americans and ethnic Muslims in US, as well as anarchists, environmentalists, and pro-Palestine activists, while, at the same time, these same authorities failed to pursue with equal rigor and due diligence far right and neo-Nazi groups in the US and Britain (e.g., 200-201). Perhaps this is the strongest point of the book; that it narrates the “big picture” of Islamophobia by centering, not diluting, the political and ideological origins of state violence and racism in British and American civil society.

Kundnani supports a now well-established understanding that Islamophobia and “official and popular understandings of terrorism are more a matter of ideological projection and fantasy than of objective assessment” (17). More specifically, theories of “radicalization” have become a deterministic “lens through which Western societies viewed Muslim populations,” which depoliticizes “Islamic terrorism” and accounts for “why young Muslims become terrorists.” These counterterrorist “models make an unfounded assumption that ‘Islamist’ ideology is the root cause of terrorism,” which displaces the political origins of terrorisms “onto the plane of Muslim culture” (10).

In organizing the immense amount of material and the many tropes of Islamophobia, Kundnani locates official American and British policies towards Muslims, domestically and abroad, in two competing paradigms: “culturalist” and “reformist.” He poses the culturalists as led by Bernard Lewis, whose view that Muslim culture is rife with hostility to modernity, democracy, and all good things Western. Paul Berman and Gen. David Petraeus provide the counterpoint, seeing that the West needs to launch a “mental war on Islamism,” in Berman’s words, or a battle for “hearts and minds,” in the General’s well-known adage, where Islam and Muslims can be saved by liberal, democratic virtues (68). These two paradigms do not necessarily break down along right/left wing lines, but are strategies that navigate and manage US imperialist power and domestic policies.

Kundnani’s large-scale view of Islamophobia will serve as an interesting comparative work to readers on both sides of the Atlantic less familiar with Islamophobia in the United Kingdom or the United States. The book brings together the two separate but often overlapping histories of Islamophobia in these countries, placing the respective government’s reactions to Islamist political violence within a larger context of how these governments handled political violence by leftists and dissident groups in previous eras.

The author insightfully discusses the origins of multiculturalism in Britain, locating its origins not in a progressive or inclusive impulse of the British Left but in a cultural and political strategy of the Right to socially and politically manage ethnic and racial minorities in the wake of the radical racial politics of the 1960s. Yet, despite the differences in racial politics and histories and their places in world power, Kundnani connects the two separate ignominious traditions of Islamophobia in the US and UK, placing them within a larger context of global politics of post-Cold war Empire. This reviewer would have liked to see a

more disciplined and particular parsing of the Anglo-European and American traditions of Muslim-hating, considering that the author admits that systematic policies and cultural racism against Muslims are ideologically based.

Kundnani does not veer away from examining figures and texts within militant political Islam. In doing so, he draws attention to how “hard-line” Islamist texts, movements, discourses, and personalities are “shaped by political contexts within which they are read,” act and react, and are born rather than “unfold” within an inherent “violent dynamic” of Islam or Muslim intellectual, social, and political traditions (107). While his examination of Sayyid Qutb is informative, the author’s profile of Anwar al-Awlaki, the American Salafi imam killed by the Obama administration in a target drone assassination in 2001 is most emblematic of the book’s argument about the relationship between the rise of militant political Islam and US world power. More specifically, al-Awlaki’s “radicalization,” the author notes, was a product not of *salafi* or “extremist” thought, texts, and tradition but a direct byproduct of America’s war on terror discourse. That is, Kundnani notes how al-Awlaki’s understanding of *jihad* shifted from the largely commonplace understanding of the “inner” struggle of an individual in order to become a better Muslim, to the understanding of *jihad* as a “global struggle” against *kufr* (disbelief). While the author notes the way in which al-Awlaki’s translation with militant Islamism became formative in this shift, he also more poignantly identifies the “radicalization” of the American as a direct consequence of military and political policies in the Arab world including support of repressive police states, in his case Yemeni, at the hands of which al-Awlaki was “abused” (145). Most interesting, in this reviewer’s opinion, is that Kundnani notes how Al-Awlaki’s radicalization as a global *jihadi* explicitly was in response to what the imam called “Rand Islam,” the discourse of “moderate,” “pro-West Islam” that the Rand Corporation declared needed to be cultivated among Muslims (147). In his conclusion, while not justifying militant Islam’s use of violence, Kundnani notes how political violence used by “jihadis” should be seen as a political act and expression rather than an emancipatory act—a genuine act of “impotence” and disempowerment (289).

*The Muslims Are Coming!* is a valuable contribution to the growing number of critical books examining the political implications and motivations of Islamophobia. Kundnani offers a thorough examination of a number of the multiple layers (social, cultural, political, racial, and historical) that undergird the vilification of Muslims and Islam in the United States and Britain. His analytic framework is admirably and unabashedly political and critical of US power, while also visiting other modes of local resistance and response to that power (such as “Tahrir Square” and the “Arab Spring”), making this work a readable and complex overview of the relationship between globalization, empire, regional politics, and cultural history.

Stephen Sheehi  
Sultan Qaboos bin Said Chair of Middle East Studies  
College of William and Mary

© 2015: Stephen Sheehi

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Sheehi, Stephen, Review of *The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*, *SCTIW Review*, August 27, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/693>.

ISSN: 2374-9288