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Trump, Public Imagination, and Islamophobia

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Donald Trump's crafty manipulation of Islamophobia, we are told, was one of the factors that propelled him to the presidency of the United States of America. He was very much aware of the prevalence of negative sentiments towards Islam and Muslims within segments of the American electorate. Because Islamophobia was part of the public imagination, he had no scruples about exploiting it for political gain. Even though Trump's actions have been widely criticized, the Western media have failed at a deeper level to examine and reveal the ways in which Western interventions and occupations in Muslim societies have fuelled a sense of popular frustration and hostility that has been manifested in dramatic acts of violence by a very few, which have in turn provided fodder for further interventions premised on the need for "regime change" in order to ensure the stability of a global Pax Americana. Consequently, Islamophobia is not simply a form of cynical populist politics but is rather a fundamental component of a longer cycle of geopolitical struggle. One that must be scrutinized more carefully if we are to imagine alternatives.

Taking Advantage of Islamophobia

Islamophobia has been embedded in the Western psyche—more in the European than in the American worldview—for centuries. There are a number of reasons for this: the early triumph and rapid expansion of an emerging Islam among Christian entities in WANA right up to the Iberian Peninsula from the 8^{th} to the 12^{th} centuries; the onslaught of the European Crusades, their re-conquest of Jerusalem and their subsequent defeat at the hands of the Muslims between the 10^{th} and 13^{th} centuries; the rise of Western colonialism from the 16^{th} century onwards which led to the subjugation of most Muslim polities in Asia and Africa; and the re-assertion of these polities from the middle of the 20^{th} century as they seek to establish their own identities within a global order that centers around US dominance. All have contributed, in different ways, to the spread of a negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims in the West.

Needless to say, this attitude has been exacerbated by a series of acts of violence and terror committed by Muslim groups and individuals themselves in the US, Europe, Africa and Asia. The association of terrorism with Muslims and Islam in the public imagination in the West has now spread to other parts of the world and constitutes a formidable barrier to inter-civilizational dialogue between Muslims and the rest. Though it is a miniscule fraction that perpetrates acts of terror, their diabolical deeds have fuelled Islamophobia as never before.



Trump's own campaign coupled with his personality was also undoubtedly a factor. He exaggerated and dramatized violence that implicated Muslims, ignoring evidence that showed that Muslim American involvement in terror attacks had decreased by 40% in 2016.[1] By focussing upon Muslims and equating them as a religious community with terrorism—his use of the phrase, "Islamic radical terrorism" is a case in point—he has brought Islamophobia to a new low. This is reflected in the steep increase in attacks upon hijab-attired Muslim women, in the physical targeting of mosques, and in the venomous vitriol leveled against Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in the popular media.

Islamophobia: Failure to Address Root Causes

Trump's antagonistic posture towards Islam and Muslims has provoked condemnation from a significant segment of the US citizenry. It is not just liberals in the political arena who have criticised him. Christian and Jewish theologians and others who are committed to an inclusive America have also been vocal.

These public pronouncements have made an impact upon public imagination. They help to some extent to check the toxic negativity arising from the politics of hatred and distrust generated by Trump. But they do not address the underlying causes of Islamophobia.

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There are two closely related dimensions to these causes. Because their lands have been occupied and their people massacred and marginalised, some of the victims of injustice have resorted to violence which in turn has reinforced Islamophobia. This is part of the explanation for the wave of terrorist acts that occurred in the sixties and seventies associated with Palestinians and those committed to their cause. At the root was Palestinian dispossession as a result of Israeli occupation and usurpation of their rights. The invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 by the US and Britain and the death and destruction that ensued is yet another major reason for the violence of the victims and their sympathisers in recent years, which has reinforced a

negative perception of Muslims in the West.

Occupation is related to the larger politics of US hegemony and “regime change.” In order to ensure that it perpetuates its global power the US has on a number of occasions sought to overthrow governments in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Different excuses are employed to justify these violations. Fabricated threats of “weapons of mass destruction” or “mass murder of innocent civilians” easily morph into fears of Islam and Muslims in a situation where Islamophobia is already embedded in American cultural imagination.



Nakba mural in Rafah. Photo credit: Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash 90.

That occupation, regime change and hegemony in general—all linked to US foreign policy—have also contributed in no small measure to Muslim anger, and that anger in some instances has expressed itself in terrorism, is something that most Americans are not conscious of. It is not part of the public consciousness. Mere criticisms of Trump’s antipathy towards Muslims will not lead to a deeper understanding of the profound forces that shape Islamophobia. The media and even the intellectual community as a whole have failed to develop that sort of awareness among the public. It is partly because of their failure that Islamophobia has become such a virulent force in the hands of Machiavellian politicians like Trump. Of course, there are individuals in the media and intellectuals—few and far between though they may be—who keep reminding Americans and the world at large of the less benign face of US power and what its consequences are.

It is not just less benign. The US ‘deep state’ has been involved in something much more hideous. Through its security network, it has been providing arms, training, and intelligence to terrorist groups in places such as Syria where it aims to achieve

regime change. While not known to the general public, a handful of Western journalists and intellectuals have also played a role in exposing this nefarious activity.[2]

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There are Muslim governments that are not only colluding with the deep state in Washington DC and other capitals but are also in the forefront of terrorist operations. The role of the Saudi elite in such operations is well established.[3] It is ironic that an elite that is perceived in the Muslim world as the protector of the sanctity of the religion is also guilty of tarnishing its image. This may be because of ideological bigotry and power. More specifically, Wahabism associated with the influential stratum in Saudi society justifies the elimination of those who do not subscribe to its puritanical view of Islam. The Saudi elite's Wahabi ideology is also one of the main reasons why it is opposed to Shiism and Iran, which it perceives as a challenge to its regional power and status.

Countering Islamophobia: Transforming the Public Imagination

It is obvious that countering Islamophobia in the US will have to set as its priority the interrogation of power. How the US elite uses and abuses power in its relations with other countries, especially Muslim states, should be subjected to intensive scrutiny. The overt and covert manifestations of power should be analysed in an honest and transparent manner. The media, specifically the alternative media, will have to play a central role in this. Scholars and activists should utilise new communication technologies to the fullest extent and explore how attitudes towards Islam and Muslims have been moulded over time by the hegemonic thrust of US foreign policy. In a nutshell, it would be an attempt to discover how the desire for global dominance and power has undermined the potential for amity and empathy between the American people and the Muslim world.



If responsible media together with the strong, explicit support of civic and cultural leaders of high moral standing in the society undertake this mission with sincere conviction, there is a possibility of a significant transformation of public consciousness in which Islamophobia yields to empathy for Muslims and with Islamic civilization. Such an effort might even herald respect and affection for other civilizations.

This is the kind of public imagination—in the US and around the world—that should set the tone and tenor for a new era in international relations in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] "Muslim American involvement in terror attacks decreased by 40% in 2016, report says."

Jessica Schladebeck, *New York Daily News*, Saturday January 28, 2017, online edition.

[2] I have in mind well-known journalists such as John Pilger and Eric Margolis and

intellectuals like Tim Anderson and Michel Chossoduvsky. See for instance, Margolis, "Hail to the Chief – fingers crossed." *The Sun* (Malaysia), January 24 2017; and "Not so fast, crusader Trump." *The Sun* (Malaysia), February 1, 2017. See also Tim Anderson, "Who Supports the Islamic State (ISIS)? Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Israel,
UK, France, USA." *Global Research*, November 20, 2015.

[3] For details of Saudi involvement in terrorism see John Wight, “Trump Is Wrong — Saudi

Arabia, Not Iran Is the World’s Number One Terrorist State.” *Transcend Media Service*
13, February 2017, and Patrick Cockburn, “Saudi Arabia, 9/11 and the Rise of ISIS.” *Counterpunch*, September 15, 2014.

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