

## BOOK REVIEW

**American Islamophobia. Understanding the roots and rise of fear, by Khaled A. Beydoun, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2018, xii + 245pp., index, £21 (hardcover), ISBN 9780520297791**

What is Islamophobia and why is it a problem in the USA? According to Beydoun, Islamophobia, understood as dread or hatred of Islam, is a key feature of American politics and society, which has been growing in significance since the Iran “hostage crisis” of 1979–81, when 62 US diplomats were detained by Iran’s revolutionary government for 444 days. The crisis did for Jimmy Carter’s hopes to be re-elected as president in 1980. Fast-forward 36 years and the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 is seen by Beydoun as a further step down the road of a vilification of Muslims in the USA, a process immensely hastened and deepened by 11 September 2001 (“9/11”), when nearly 3,000 people were killed by an al Qaeda attack on the USA.

Trump’s election was to a significant extent, Beydoun contends, driven by “dread or hatred of Islam” from a significant portion of the American electorate (Chapter 7). The claim is not that it was the sole or even perhaps the most important factor in Trump’s election victory but it was a component which dovetailed neatly with the idea that to make “America Great Again” it was necessary to highlight and build on the European roots of the American civilization. The latter was a goal inseparable from the idea that the USA has much to fear from globalization, not least, in terms of trade with China and others, but also, in addition, as a result of the transnationalization of terrorism which, globally, is widely seen as the province of extremist and violent Islamists.

Beydoun paints a vivid, chronological, picture of a country sliding into increasing isolationism across successive presidencies, from George W. Bush, following 9/11, to its (perhaps) apex in Trump 1 (2017–2020) perhaps to be followed by Trump 2 (2021–2024). The issue is relevant to a journal such as *Democratization* for two main reasons: first, Islamophobia in the USA is a carefully constructed political project by right-wing populists, notably Trump, who have realized that there is a core of Islamophobes in America whose views are generally moulded by a fear of foreigners and unwelcome change and a deep suspicion that the world has, in general “got it in” for the USA. A recent example of this was the bellicose chanting of “send her back” by Trump supporters directed against a female Muslim congresswoman, Ilhan Omar, in July 2019 in North Carolina. Second, America’s democratic structures are historically and purposefully colour-, race-, and religion-blind. Of course, there are many examples of vilification of minorities over time in the USA: African Americans, Chinese, Jews, Poles, Italians, Japanese, and so on. While America has been good to many white Christians – especially mainline Protestants and latterly Catholics – its record is less exemplary in relation to at least some racial and religious minorities.

The book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters and an epilogue. The book is written in an expressly polemical style and the author is quick to let the reader know that he is a Muslim American, born of a Lebanese Shia father and an Egyptian Sunni mother. He is an activist for the rights of Muslim Americans. He writes in a clear, focused and attractive style, well-referenced and on top of the literature. Chapter 1 tells the reader how the author understands Islamophobia in the USA, both as scholar and activist. Chapter 2 traces the post-1970s development of Islamophobia in the USA and the third chapter relates the issue – and this is a key catalyst for Beydoun - to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” paradigm which surfaced in the 1990s and which, bolstered by 9/11, formed a core component of a growing US government concern with Muslims, both in America and overseas. Developed by both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidencies after 9/11, Beydoun explains, in Chapters 4 and 5, that having failed in the attempt to “deal with” Islamist terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US government turned attention to Muslims at home via the “Countering Violent Extremism” programme, launched by the Obama presidency in 2011. The – perhaps predictable – result was not only to set Muslim against Muslim - that is, “moderates” against “radicals” – but also to widen and deepen the feeling in the USA that Muslims, at home and abroad, are THE enemy, who must be fought in all ways with no restraint. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the impact on Muslim Americans of all persuasions, both immigrants and home-grown, including African American Muslims, a quarter of all American Muslims. The book

concludes in an epilogue detailing the effects of the Trump presidency on the perceptions of the author about the position of Muslim in the USA.

In conclusion, this is a well-argued and researched book that will be of interest to anyone interested in the democracy and democratic structures which comprise the political and electoral framework of the USA. It sheds light on a relatively little-known aspect of American politics and reminds us that the “land of the free” is freer for some than others.

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