

The Islamophobia Industry

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How the Right Manufactures
Hatred of Muslims

SECOND EDITION

Nathan Lean

Foreword to the First Edition by John L. Esposito

Foreword to the Second Edition by Jack G. Shaheen

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2012; new edition published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3717 3 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 3716 6 Paperback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0135 7 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0137 1 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0136 4 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

Islamophobia from the War on Terror to the Age of Trump

When Craig Hicks, a burly 44-year-old gun enthusiast living in the Finley Forest apartment complex in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, showed up at Deah Barakat's doorstep the first time, he grumbled about the subdivision's parking rules. Barakat, a lanky and charming student whose parents were immigrants from Syria, didn't make much of it. Life was too exciting to worry about grumpy neighbors. He was just moving in and getting ready to start dental school at the University of North Carolina that fall. If that wasn't enough, he was also set to marry the love of his life, Yusor Abu-Salha, a shy but affable undergraduate student at nearby North Carolina State University, to whom he was engaged. Abu-Salha's family was Palestinian, and while she wore the hijab, or Muslim headscarf, she fit in seamlessly with the southern community that she called home: she loved *Call of Duty*, had attended a public high school, blasted Nicki Minaj from her car's sound system, and though she didn't drink alcohol, she loved sweet tea, or "southern table wine," as it is often called in North Carolina. And college sports, too. "I love my sweet tea and football as much as anybody. But at the same time I appreciate that it's very diverse in this part of the South," she said.¹

The Research Triangle was indeed a diverse part of the state. The opportunities for Muslim and immigrant families to connect with one another at local mosques, Islamic schools, or businesses created a sense of community within community—Palestinians and Syrians enjoying the specificities of their religious or ethnic

traditions while also seeing themselves as fully American. But not everyone saw them that way. Craig Hicks, for instance. His vigilante-style policing of the apartment complex parking spaces may have occasionally targeted other residents, but he seemed to have an odd obsession with Barakat. Nearly every month, he would show up and complain that the 23-year-old's friends or family members were parking in his reserved spots. On one occasion, he wanted to make the message especially clear, and so rather than shouting or making a scene, he simply pulled up his shirt to show Barakat the pistol that hung in a holster on his belt.² On another occasion, shortly after Abu-Salha had moved in with Barakat following their honeymoon, Hicks knocked on their door. This time, he was unnerved. "You were too loud—you woke up my wife," he shouted at them, angrily. And again, he flashed his gun—a black .38 revolver with an extra five rounds of ammunition and a speed-loader, all nestled in a slim sheath. Images of the weapon and its accessories were featured on his Facebook page.³ Barakat, in his usual manner, was polite and calm, and tried to alleviate the tense moment. Inside the apartment, though, Abu-Salha and their guests were rattled. Hicks's warning wasn't difficult to understand: He'd happily discharge the firearm if they didn't comply with his demands.

On February 10, 2015, that moment came. In an unthinkable act of rage, the former auto-parts salesman and self-described "anti-theist" stormed upstairs and pounded on the door of Barakat's apartment, rattling a nearby plaque that bore the phrase "Praise be to Allah." Barakat, Abu-Salha, and her sister, Razan, a confident and family-oriented architecture student at North Carolina State University, who liked to wear snapback caps over her *hijab*, were inside. Police discovered their bodies later that evening, after calls reporting the sound of gunshots. Barakat was lying dead in the front doorway, bleeding from a gunshot wound to the head, and several others to his body. According to the autopsies, Abu-Salha and her sister Razan were also shot in the head, execution-style, one in the bedroom, the other on the floor of the kitchen. A

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witness told police that he “noticed a white male, approximately in his mid-forties, wearing a beard and with a balding spot on the top of his head, wearing a gold Carhartt coat, walking fast from the back of the apartment.” Eight shell casings were discovered in the living room. They matched the .357-caliber handgun that Hicks had in his possession when he later turned himself in for the three murders.⁴

A hate crime investigation was opened, though after initial investigations, a US Attorney for the state of North Carolina said that the murders were “not part of a targeted campaign against Muslims.”⁵ Instead, they suggested that a parking dispute spurred the crime. Tellingly, in the span of one week following Hicks’ rampage, a handful of other anti-Muslim acts reverberated across the country. A Houston man set an Islamic center on fire; two Michigan men beat a Muslim father who was grocery shopping with his children; vandals spray-painted the phrases “Fuck Allah” and “Now this is a hate crime” on the walls of a Rhode Island school; a Hindu temple, which vandals mistook for a mosque, was emblazoned with the words “Muslims get out”; and two Muslim men were stabbed outside of a Michigan shopping mall.⁶

* * *

The political and social climate that gave birth to the Chapel Hill massacre was ripe for such expressions of hate. Fourteen years after September 11, 2001, a time when many would have expected anti-Muslim sentiment to be in decline, it was not. In fact, it was rising, and in the wake of a surge of European populism, and the burgeoning 2016 American presidential election, which was beginning to strike a similar nationalist chord among potential voters, immigrants, and religious minorities of many different stripes were placed in the crosshairs. Pew Research Center polls from 2001 show that 59 percent of Americans that year expressed a favorable opinion of Muslims.⁷ In fact, in March of that year, six months before hijacker-pilot Mohammad Atta and his repulsive

terrorist comrades ever entered the collective psyche of the republic's populous, 45 percent of Americans suggested that their views of Muslims were generally positive.⁸

With the first decade of the twenty-first century, though, things soon began to turn south, despite the fact that violence perpetrated by Muslims was at notably low levels. In 2002, an annual report released by the FBI showed that hate crimes against Muslims had increased by an eye-popping 1600 percent; 28 incidents were reported in 2000 and 481 were reported two years later.⁹ In 2004, a mere one in four Americans expressed a positive opinion of Islam. Forty-six percent, according to a Pew Research poll, believed that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence.¹⁰

Pew was not the only organization to notice an upward trend. The following year, ABC News released a report showing that 43 percent of Americans still believed that Muslims had little respect for people of other faiths. By 2005, nearly six in ten Americans thought that Islam was a religion prone to violence; half of respondents held Muslims in low regard.¹¹ In five years, the numbers had completely flipped—the same percentage of Americans that once viewed Islam in a positive light now held the exact opposite opinion.

The year 2006 came and went with little change in Americans' personal discomfort with Muslims. A *Washington Post* poll showed that as the war in Iraq grinded into its fourth year, half of Americans had a negative view of Islam.¹² As the 2008 American presidential election came to pass, Barack Obama was inundated with growing anti-Muslim fervor. For some, his unfamiliar name and a background that traced through Indonesia and the Kenyan homeland of his Muslim father, made him an easy target for portentous narratives that warned of a Muslim takeover in Washington. The fact that Obama, who would become the nation's first African-American commander-in-chief, was labeled a Muslim by his opponents (who intended the inaccurate description as a slur) only aggravated anguish among some quarters of an already-paranoid electorate. So sensitive was the political climate that candidate

Obama, a Christian, took great care to avoid any circumstances that would possibly be construed as an affiliation with Islam. In Dearborn, Michigan campaign staffers moved two Muslim women wearing the veil from a photo op with the future president. Surely any trip to a mosque would have triggered a ferocious hue and cry from his opponents. As John Esposito, professor of Islamic studies at Georgetown University, has noted, the campaign's hypersensitivity on the issue echoed the denials of alleged Communist sympathizers during the Cold War: "I am not now, nor have I ever been a Muslim." Embedded within the soon-to-be president's statement, whether intentional or not, was the supposition that being a Muslim was a bad thing.¹³

By 2012, roughly 41 percent of the American public reported unfavorable views of Muslims—an improvement from 2010 when, according to a study conducted by the Arab American Institute, 55 percent of Americans viewed their Muslim compatriots in a negative light.¹⁴ Still, the fact that four in ten Americans harbored some antipathy toward Muslims signaled that Islamophobia was not a prejudice that would easily disappear. As evidenced by Obama's re-election campaign in 2012, it was tightly woven to the banner of politics. Indeed, of all the conspiracies that plagued Obama during his first term, the "birther" conspiracy, which claimed that the president was not born in the United States and was therefore occupying the Oval Office illegally, persisted.

In March 2011, Donald Trump sat down for an interview with *Good Morning America*, and while floating the idea that he was considering a presidential run, admitted that he was a "little" skeptical on the issue of Obama's citizenship, especially as, in his view, "No one knew [Obama], growing up."¹⁵ That comment ignited a blaze that burned up the political world for months to follow. Birtherism, as it came to be known, was launched and Donald Trump was the face of the movement. While some discounted the controversy as a carnivalesque sideshow, it was a critical moment in American history as it rallied a sleeping base of predominantly white, middle-class conservative voters that not only loathed the

politics of the sitting Democratic president, but resented the fact that Obama—a Black American—was the most powerful man in the world. Where overtly racist language would have been swiftly castigated by most, narratives about the birthplace of the president, while premised on the idea that he was “not one of us,” or “foreign,” slipped into political discourse more easily. In the end, though, it was not and never had been his nationality that was actually of concern. The real focus of those who called for Obama’s birth certificate was his religion. In a March 2011 interview with Laura Ingraham, Donald Trump said exactly that:

He [Obama] doesn’t have a birth certificate, or if he does, there’s something on that certificate that is very bad for him. Now, somebody told me—and I have no idea if this is bad for him or not, but perhaps it would be—that where it says “religion,” it might have “Muslim.” And if you’re a Muslim, you don’t change your religion, by the way.¹⁶

Remarkably, in September 2015, nearly seven years after he took office, one in five Americans reportedly believed that Obama was not born in the United States; 29 percent of respondents to a CNN poll said that, despite his repeated assertions that he was a Christian, they believed that he was a Muslim—among Republicans, the figure increased to 43 percent.¹⁷ Across the United States, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim prejudice was growing. A 2014 study conducted by Zogby Analytics found that 42 percent of Americans believed that law enforcement officials were justified in profiling Arab and Muslim citizens, and favorability toward Arab-Americans dropped to 36 percent, while for Muslims, the number hovered just over a quarter of the population.¹⁸ As the end of Obama’s presidency drew near and the 2016 American presidential campaign shifted into high gear, these views not only persisted, but grew worse.

The rise of ISIS and its continued attacks, instances of terrorism carried out by Muslims in North America and Europe, and ginned up animosity among an anxious electorate proved to be a toxic

combination. By November of 2015, nearly 60 percent of the population expressed unfavorable views of the Muslim faith—a nearly 20-percent increase from October of 2001, just one month after the attacks of 9/11.¹⁹ A spate of hate crimes targeting minority communities, many of them Muslim and Arab, rocked urban cities and rural America towns alike, with mosque arsons, home vandalisms, physical assaults, threats, and murders becoming an ordinary part of daily life in the United States. When Donald Trump finally threw his hat in the election ring, the Republican Party's candidates were forced to take tougher stances on issues of immigration and homeland security, which ultimately meant competing over who would be the toughest on Muslims. Candidate Ben Carson declared that an American Muslim could never be the president of the United States because, in his view, the religion of Islam and the Constitution were incompatible. Ted Cruz coddled conspiracy theorists who warned of a Muslim takeover of America. Trump floated the possibility of a religious test for citizenship, and touted a "Muslim ban" that would suspend immigration from several Muslim-majority countries around the world. In an interview with CNN in March 2016, he stated plainly what many of his supporters believed. "I think Islam hates us," he told Anderson Cooper. The war against "radical Islam," he added, was "very hard to define" because "you don't know who's who."²⁰ At the time, many dismissed the rhetoric as the usual prattle of high-stakes elections. The possibility of such noxious ideas ever making their way to the halls of power seemed absurd to many.

* * *

The arch of prejudice and anti-Other discrimination is a long one. Societies in Europe and North America have, over the course of their histories, grappled with populations that they felt were not truly a part of the essential national fabric in an ugly way. At the root of much or all of this intolerance is xenophobia, the fear or intense dislike of foreigners.

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For the most part, the term “foreigners” is used to describe a group of people not deemed to be a part of the group that is deploying the word. They are considered to be outsiders that come from other countries and whose values and cultures are different. The predominant sentiment among many right-wing Americans regarding Muslims, for instance, is that they are not welcome in “our” country. Such ferocity and dogged nationalism is predicated on the assumption that Muslims are immigrants and that the religion of Islam is not a fluid or borderless belief system, but rather originates from afar and has, with the relocation of populations from Morocco to Bahrain, invaded the United States.

Many Muslims in the United States and Europe do originate from elsewhere. Statistics show that. In 2005, more people from Muslim-majority countries became permanent US residents—nearly 96,000—than in any year in the previous two decades.²¹ Today, Pew Research reports that more than 64.5 percent of Muslims in the United States are first-generation immigrants.²² In France, as of mid-2010, Muslims were expected to account for more than two-thirds of all new immigrants, and in the United Kingdom, more than one-quarter.²³ In the wake of the destruction meted out by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, these numbers are expected to grow over the years, a reality that has reignited debates about immigration caps and citizenship. Unfortunately, fears of immigrant populations are often channeled into explicit racism. This was typified by Daniel Pipes, a conservative American political commentator who is considered by many to be the grandfather of Islamophobia in the USA, who stated plainly in a 1990 *National Review* article:

Western European societies are unprepared for the massive immigration of brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and not exactly maintaining Germanic standards of hygiene ... All immigrants bring exotic customs and attitudes, but Muslim customs are more troublesome than most. Also, they appear most resistant to assimilation.²⁴

More recently, Congressman Steve King echoed that nativist sentiment in a series of Tweets. “We can’t restore our civilization with someone else’s babies,” he wrote, and huffed that Middle Eastern immigrants were “importing a different culture, a different civilization, and that culture and civilization, the imported one, rejects the host’s culture.”²⁵

Many people have been critical of Islam and Muslims for the reasons Pipes and King described. They believe that immigrants are unable or unwilling to adapt to the cultures of the countries to which they move. This is premised on the inaccurate idea that the United States has belonged historically to one main group of people with a core value system. Yet the United States has no state religion, class system, or overarching set of moral tenets; thus, it is impossible to conceive that Muslims or any other group could refuse such a thing. Still, capitalist economic values that overlap with social ideals breed suspicions that ethnic, racial, and religious minorities want to take advantage of freedoms and opportunities for prosperity that are thought to be uniquely American or European.

Fears of the foreign also rest on geographical suppositions that have become increasingly blurred and irrelevant altogether. American and European Muslims born in the United States and countries like France and Britain, are, to Islamophobes, just as foreign as immigrants. Even if they may be naturalized or natural-born citizens, they are cast into the larger pot of strangeness that designates their differing religious beliefs as valid reasons to make them outcasts. American and European Muslims are seen as only Muslims, foreigners whose religious identity is their primary identity, and as a result, they are represented as being inferior to non-Muslim Americans and Europeans.

Cleaving identities in this way—that is, forcing one aspect of a person’s whole self apart from its other aspects—is of an expressly political nature. By turning majority populations against minority ones and exaggerating differences, some world leaders have been able to advance atrocious agendas.

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In the 1947 anti-racist documentary “Don’t Be a Sucker,” a 15-minute flick produced by the Department of War that examines the divisive rhetorical atmosphere that fueled the rise of Nazi Germany, a rabble-rouser stands atop a soapbox on an American street corner decrying “the truth about Negros [*sic*] and foreigners.” He attacks immigrants, Jews, Catholics, Freemasons, and blacks. Men in the crowd nod their heads in agreement until they belong to the group included in the trash talking. A polished, soft-spoken man from Hungary explains to a young fellow watching the tirade that the very same thing had happened before in pre-World War II Germany. Only this time, the groups under attack had changed. He said:

The Nazis knew that they were not strong enough to conquer a unified country. So they split Germany into small groups. They used prejudice as a practical weapon to cripple the nation. We human beings are not born with prejudices. Always they are made for us. Made by someone who wants something.

Adolf Hitler wanted something. He wanted power. And he understood that populations in Germany would remain subservient and ignorant under a perpetual state of fear. By 1933, the Great Depression had driven nearly 6 million Germans into unemployment. Men wandered aimlessly through the streets wondering how they would provide for their families on the petty government handouts, which, lasting just six months, seemed only to add insult to injury. The delirium, many believed, would never end, and for a battered and worn 224,000, the only thing they thought could end their unsustainable grief was suicide. The misery was virtually universal and Germany was at a bitter dead end.

When Hitler took the reins of power as chancellor, he had before him a population of near-skeletons and a Nazi movement that had grown tremendously. He used his position and influence to launch a fear campaign that resulted in the Holocaust. Hitler blamed