

Islamophobia: How Anti-Muslim bigotry was brought into the American mainstream

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Ahmed Sharif was a 44-year-old Muslim Bangladeshi taxi driver in New York City. It was August 24, 2010, a time that marked the height of vitriolic protests against a planned Islamic center to be located in lower Manhattan, a few blocks away from the site of Ground Zero. Sharif picked up 21-year-old Michael Enright for an early evening ride. Everything was going smoothly until Enright, three blocks away from his stop, yelled at Sharif, “this is a checkpoint, motherfucker, and I have to bring you down.”

Enright, a filmmaker who kept a [diary filled with strong anti-Muslim sentiment](#), pulled out a knife and slashed Sharif across the throat, face and arms. Enright tried to escape, but was arrested by the New York Police Department. Sharif survived, but he packed up and moved to Buffalo, in upstate New York. It was a crime that seemed to fit in with the general climate of hysteria over Muslims that developed that summer.



This is how Nathan Lean begins telling the story of how a small group of bigots seized upon the frustrations and fears of post-9/11 America and exploited those feelings to create a circular industry of hate. Lean’s new book, [The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims](#), is a compact and punchy look at this industry stretching across continents that has sowed hatred of Muslims into the fabric of Western society.

The book, written by the editor-in-chief of [Aslan Media](#), comes at an opportune time. Released in September 2012, the book landed just one month after American Muslims witnessed a stark increase in hate attacks during the holy month of Ramadan. A [report by the Council on American Islamic Relations](#) documented that the Ramadan of 2012 “saw one of the worst spikes of anti-Muslim incidents in over a decade.”

From the beginning of 2012 to July 20, which is when Ramadan began, there were 10 incidents in which Muslim places of worship were targeted. During Ramadan—specifically over 13 days in August—“Muslim places of worship were targeted eight times.” These incidents include the destruction of a mosque in Missouri by fire; the leaving of pig legs at a planned mosque site in California; and the firing of air rifles outside a mosque in Illinois.

How, exactly, did we get here? By the time Ramadan of 2012 rolled around, it had been almost 11 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks were carried out by a group of Islamic fundamentalists part of Al Qaeda. You would expect anti-Muslim bigotry to decrease after the wounds of 9/11 healed, after it became clear that the vast majority of American Muslims have no inclination to attack their own country. You would be wrong.

Jumping from the U.S. to Israel to Europe, Lean traces the arc of the Islamophobic sentiment that has exploded in the West. The foreword from scholar on Islam John Esposito lays out the importance of Lean's work: "It exposes the multi-million dollar cottage industry of fear mongers and the network of funders and organizations that support and perpetuate bigotry, xenophobia, and racism, and produce a climate of fear that sustains a threatening social cancer."

Lean properly places anti-Muslim bigotry in the context of American hysteria over religions and ideologies that refused to conform to mainstream standards. Before jumping into the contemporary context, he reminds readers that Catholics were once the target of acceptable religious bigotry. The conspiracy theories spun out of thin air about Catholics would ring a familiar bell to those consuming [Frank Gaffney's utterly insane theory](#) that the Muslim Brotherhood has infiltrated the U.S. government and is subverting it from within.

But by far the most important contribution Lean makes is his unmasking of the bigots who have infused American politics with virulent anti-Muslim sentiment. Lean zeroes in on a number of high-profile episodes and figures to make his points, from the pro-settler Clarion Fund's distribution of an anti-Muslim film to the 2010 Values Voter summit to Anders Behring Breivik's killing spree in Norway. Lean points to an "industry" of hate mongers that have gone to "great lengths to sell its message to the public." The difference, though, between this industry and others is that "in many cases the very networks that spread their products are themselves participants in the ruse to whip up public fear of Muslims....It is a relationship of mutual benefit, where ideologies and political proclivities converge to advance the same agenda."

The most important nodes in this industry are the online peddlers of hate. The author particularly focuses on Pamela Geller, the blogger at the front of the network of Islamophobes in the U.S. You can see Geller's fingerprints in many of the public battles over Islam in this country, most prominently the ginned-up hysteria over the Park 51 Islamic center. Currently, Geller is in the spotlight for a series of anti-Muslim ads she has put up in New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.-with more on the way. She has used her celebrity, boosted by Fox News (a principal player in the Islamophobia industry), to create cross-continental activist networks against Islam. Robert Spencer, Geller's partner in crime, is also a focus of Lean's. "People such as Robert Spencer, Daniel Pipes, or Martin Kramer, all online Islamophobes, spread each others' postings and write-ups to their own audience," writes Lean. "With each new click of the mouse, the story grows."

But the Islamophobia industry does not just exist in the fever swamps of the online world. There's real on the ground work being done. And there are disparate players in this industry. They come, principally, from right-wing Zionism and evangelical Christianity, uniting to form a Judeo-Christian front in their battle against Islam. Their funders, too, come from these worlds-though the right-wing Zionist world has fueled the majority of anti-Muslim activists.

Right-wing Christian ideology places Muslims beyond the pale. "The idea that Muslims may also be in possession of God's revelation and truth, is not only unacceptable, it is an offense so blasphemous that it must be stopped," Lean notes. Evangelical Christians, as a core part of the Republican base, have actively pushed their ideas about Islam into the mainstream of American politics. They have been aided by figures such as Newt Gingrich, who while reinventing himself as an ardent Christian conservative has also spread panic about Sharia law taking over the United States. Many Christian conservatives are also, of course, Christian Zionists who see Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy that will continue until

the Messiah comes down again.

It is this Christian Zionism that closely binds right-wing evangelicals with strong supporters of the Jewish state. The Zionists who spread anti-Muslim bigotry can be placed in three camps, according to Lean: religious (Jewish) Zionism, Christian Zionism and political Zionism. “For Religious Zionists, prophecy is the main driver of their Islamophobic fervor. For them, Palestinians are not just unbidden inhabitants; they are not just Arabs in Jewish lands. They are not just Muslims, even. They are non-Jews-outsiders cut from a different cloth—and God’s commandments regarding them are quite clear,” he writes. And there is the political Zionism that sheds religious language but is still hostile towards Muslims. As [Max Blumenthal wrote](#), these figures, some of whom are neoconservatives, believe that “the Jewish state [is] a Middle Eastern Fort Apache on the front lines of the Global War on Terror.”

Lean’s spot-on analysis about how Zionism is connected to Islamophobia is a refreshing departure from other works and institutions that shy away from examining the connection. The most prominent investigative reporting on Islamophobia and its sources of funding has come from the Obama-linked Center for American Progress (CAP). But the Zionist motivations of many of the funders CAP highlights are not interrogated. You have to turn to this [piece](#) by activists Donna Nevel and Elly Bulkin on those connections to get the full picture.

Lean also pinpoints how anti-Muslim bigotry has spread from the Internet world to the very heart of some government policies on terrorism. From the New York Police Department’s surveillance program to Peter King’s hearings on “Muslim radicalization,” anti-Muslim bigotry has become institutionalized in some quarters of government.

But Lean’s discussion of how parts of the U.S. government have become infused with Islamophobia does not tell the full story—and this is the main critique I have of an otherwise excellent book. Lean correctly focuses on how the right has manufactured fear and hatred of Muslims. But it would be wrong to leave out the other side of the equation: how liberals in this country who are part of the Democratic Party have also helped anti-Muslim sentiment to spread.

This is not to say that Democrats spew Islamophobia in their election campaigns. No, the Democratic Party does not go that far. But they are largely silent when ugly anti-Muslim bigotry comes into play, which allows the right to step into the vacuum in a debate over Islam in the U.S. When the Democrats run away from the issue, there is no one left in the mainstream to challenge the right’s Islamophobia.

As Deepa Kumar, [author of her own book on Islamophobia](#), pointed out in [The Nation, Islamophobia is a “bipartisan project.”](#) Liberal Islamophobia, Kumar writes, “may be rhetorically gentler but it reserves the right of the US to wage war against ‘Islamic terrorism’ around the world, with no respect for the right of self-determination by people in the countries it targets.” You can see this liberal Islamophobia in action when you look at the fact that “Obama has continued Bush’s policies of torture, extraordinary rendition and pre-emptive prosecution. American Muslims continue to be harassed and persecuted by the state.” And then there was Obama counter-terrorism adviser [John Brennan pronouncing](#) that the NYPD’s targeting of Muslim in their surveillance program was legitimate. “My conversations with Commissioner [Ray] Kelly indicate he’s done everything according to the law,” Brennan told reporters.

While the White House walked back his comments, Brennan's continued presence in the administration tells you all you need to know. Liberal Islamophobia's march continues ahead-and ignoring how the Obama administration has failed to combat anti-Muslim bigotry is setting people up for failure. The way to combat Islamophobia is through activism and coalition-building, but if you ignore its manifestations no matter where they emanate from, you won't get very far.

Besides that oversight, though, Lean's *The Islamophobia Industry* is a vital contribution to the still-growing body of literature on anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. If you want to understand the genesis of the right's toxic Islamophobia and how it has spread, [pick up Lean's book](#). You won't regret it.

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