Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims

By S. Sheehi (2011)

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Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon; it was first used in 1922 in an essay by the Orientalist Étienne Dinet, but it acquired currency after the publication of the Runnymede Trust report in 1997 and gained momentum and intensified after 9/11. It is an anti-Islamic discourse, widely used in politics, the media, and among the general public, including Muslims and some Muslim organisations.

Although the word 'Islamophobia' is widely used, it is a contested concept; there is no consensus among scholars about its definition. For example, Halliday (1999) preferred 'anti-Muslim hate' or 'anti-Muslim racism', while Meer and Modood (2009) accepted Islamophobia as a form of racism, similar to Stephen Sheehi in his book *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims*. Although Sheehi does not provide an operational definition of this phenomenon, the intellectual space he occupies is explicitly reflected in his narration:

Islamophobia is about power. It is about American power; the power of global capitalism; it is about demonizing Muslims as they symbolically represent in the American mentality the brown of resistance to US empire, global capitalism and, to paraphrase Public Enemy, the sometimes not-so-unconscious fear of a brown planet (p. 226).

If someone wanted to know the origin and current discourses of anti-Muslim narratives and their institutionalisation in the fabric of contemporary US

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society, then Sheehi's book is a suitable source. The intention of the book is not to provide strategies to deal with structural anti-Muslim racism; rather it is about 'where does Islamophobia come from and whose interests does it serve' (p. 226).

Anti-Islamism behaviour based on the Orientalist ideas of Islam – i.e. religion of swords, barbarous, backdated, oppressors, an enemy of Christian and Western civilisation – has been brewing in the United States for a long time. Long held enthusiastic, bigoted, stereotyped and prejudiced beliefs and attitudes are not confined to people who subscribe to a conservative, neo-liberal, anti-liberal but liberal worldview. Sheehi demonstrates how these beliefs and attitudes are continuously perpetuated and reinforced by politicians, pseudo-academics and the media. They all selectively focus on evidence that serves their own interests which are underlined by their prejudiced beliefs and hatred towards Arabs and Muslims (p. 50).

In the first chapter, Sheehi focuses on showing how rogue academics, pundits, opportunistic journalists, think-tanks and lobbies developed a successful network to naturalise and normalise Islamophobia 'as natural and putative talking points and frameworks for discussing the Middle East and the United States domination of it' (p. 65). All the components that readers need to know to understand the formation of Islamophobia are briefly discussed in this chapter and set the tone for the next six chapters.

The second chapter discusses how some journalists, academics and native informants¹ subscribe to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab narratives, which have their origin in Orientalist tradition, without hesitation or questioning. According to Sheehi, these narratives are all about controlling the 'others' that pose a political and financial threat to the United States, and the formation of Islamophobia arises 'from [an] American white supremacist worldview that seeks to justify American political interests that contradict the liberal principles that they otherwise espouse' (p. 88). The chapter argues that the media and some academics operate control mechanisms that impose their own version of Islam and Muslims on everyone.

Chapter 3 focuses on native informants and their contribution to reinforcing the ingrained belief that America should be the protector of Western civilisation, democracy and Muslim women. As Sheehi states:

the issue of women has been central to justifying the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as validating the maintenance of vigilance in the war on terror globally. Enlisting the opportunism of those ... tells us that the United States government, American think-tanks, political organizations, universities, and media outlets have little interest in collecting voices that will not confirm their Islamophobic view that Muslim men oppress Muslim women. (p. 114)

Sheehi argues that some media commentators and academics act as a political and structural agent of the United States to maintain the agenda of capitalism. Some Muslim states also contributed to the formation of this ideology. Although Sheehi does not focus on this issue much, he recognises that political figures in some Muslim states are more concerned about their self-serving interests than the people they are supposed to serve (p. 80).

The aim of Chapter 4 is to provide evidence of the way Arab and Muslim academics and students have been harassed and intimidated by the US administration because of their subscription and advocacy to alternative narratives that go against US foreign policies in the Middle-East; what Sheehi coins 'the culture of repression.' He argues that the culture of repression is felt not only by Arab and Muslim academics, students and activists, but also by Arab and Muslim American communities. Undoubtedly, this culture creates an atmosphere of fear where 'only the threat of retribution has to exist. The danger of losing one's job, of being portrayed as a pariah, an anti-Semite or terrorist, or even being incarcerated are compelling motivators for self-censorship and self-surveillance' (p. 130) by Arabs and Muslims. These deter public dissent due to the possibility of prosecution, harassment and deportation.

Chapter 5 shows the way both cultural and institutional Islamophobia operates in the United States. As a result Muslims, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are living in fear of arrest, deportation and harassment in the United States. This chapter reinforces the argument Sheehi puts forward in Chapter 4 that 'it has very real consequences and discursive, material, political and psychological effects on American Muslims, Arab Americans and the peoples of South West Asia' (p. 141).

In Chapter 6, Sheehi argues that Islamophobia was sustained in the Barack Obama era in the United States, although there was a real hope for change when he took office. However, Obama continued with the same mission as his predecessor, George W. Bush, defining peace 'as a function of security'. According to Sheehi, Obama on the one hand offered an opportunity 'to entice and co-opt elites, both friendly and adversarial as well as opposition groups' (p. 185). On the other hand, he used 'soft power' backed up by the 'threat and possibility of punitive techniques, including military intervention, economic boycott and political isolation through use of its [US] allies in the developed world and its inordinate weight in the global economy and the United Nations' (p. 185). Furthermore, Sheehi argues that the critical construction of Islamophobia in the United States was born out of the grain of Orientalism; the Orientalist belief never escaped from the Western world, rather it has been taking on a new shape and form in recent years.

In the last chapter, Sheehi draws on metaphor and suggests that some people navigate their ship by following powerful people's route(s). They behave and act in such a way that reinforces the message of the powerful to justify their existence as intellectuals, ignoring the historical, social, political and economic evidence that underpins the formation and rise of the anti-Muslim discourse. Similarly, some journalists, media commentators, columnists and intellectuals use evidence selectively to recommend actions that the US government needs to take to resolve issues in the Middle East. Ignoring the complexity of institutional, cultural and historical issues indicates acceptance of reductionism and a simplistic way of viewing Islam and Muslims, which potentially could breed more prejudice and assumptions that keep the flame of Islamophobia alive. This is because 'a desire exists within Islamophobia to keep Arabs and Muslims in a state of underdevelopment and authoritarianism so as to make them more pliable to the requirements of neo-liberalism and American Empire' (p. 224).

The book is a resource for exploring how Islamophobia in the United States resurfaced and was normalised. Sheehi argues that Islamophobia is an ideological construct. His arguments are mostly anchored on structural and institutional factors. Undoubtedly, structure and institution have their own place in Islamophobia, but they cannot survive without its base, i.e. individuals and groups; undeniable symbiotic relationships between these three could have been demonstrated in the book to provide an integrated framework to understand Islamophobia in the United States.

The chapters are informative and provide a useful roadmap to understand and grasp Islamophobia in a globalised world. Both patience and time are required to fully appreciate the way Sheehi establishes that Islamophobia is an ideological formation specific to the 'unipolar moment' (p. 65). I am not implying that the book is difficult to read and not well written; far from it. It is about reading and reflecting in order to consider his arguments fully and thoroughly. There are materials in this book to provoke thought and illuminate debates in relation to the naturalisation and normalisation of Islamophobia. The way forward would be to combat this ideology. All of us should engage in more critical reflection on the way Islamophobia is normalised in the Western world.

Note

- 1 In this context a 'native informant' is someone who is an Orientalist, presents themselves as an expert on Islam and Muslims by virtue of belonging to Islam previously or currently. In other words, an 'indigenous person considered a collaborator with the colonial or invading power' (Malik 2018).

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