

# Review of *The Muslims are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*

Arun Kundani, Verso, 2014.

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This book provides a powerful story of the way in which the ‘war on terror’ has established a ‘paradigm of an open-ended perpetual global war’ (Kundnani, 2014:7) not on a people or on a nation but on ‘a set of ideas’- ‘radical Islam’- a body of thought that is, according to Kundnani, only ever vaguely defined. At the same time, for example, he points out, as ‘the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt’ were providing ‘practical refutation’ of al Qaeda’s argument that ‘violence against western civilians’ was the only way to defeat the near enemy of autocratic regimes in the Middle East, the western war on terror continued apace (2014:7). Kundnani presents a strong case to the effect that the strategies of the US and the UK to prevent the circulation of ‘extremist ideology’ could not be sustained without the ‘racialised dehumanisation’ of its Muslim victims. Kundnani argues that the war on terror is an ideology designed to help sustain the imperial violence of the superpowers.

These superpower states, he claims, rely on a strategy developed many years ago, in Russia under the Tsars and in the UK, by Scotland Yard, of using informants and agents provocateurs amongst networks of radicals to try to uncover potential terrorists. Official definitions of terrorism, however, he argues, ‘are more a matter of ideological projection and



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fantasy' than objective assessment (2014:17). In the cases both of the Boston and the Woolwich attacks, to take two examples he refers to, the connection between the 'isolated and amateurish' nature of the attacks and the violence perpetrated by US and the UK foreign policies went unexamined (2014:18).

Particularly moving are Kundnani's case studies of individuals wrongly pursued by the US or the UK states, or wrongly targeted as being in need of counter radicalisation measures. He gives a number of illustrative cases of individuals wrongly pursued by the FBI or individuals wrongly targeted in the UK by the Prevent programme.

On the other hand, even if Kundnani is right, as he may well be, that imperialism, colonialism and the specific interventions on the part of the US and the UK, in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have partially produced the Islamist ideology, it is important also to note that violent incidents such as the Boston bombings, the Woolwich attacks and the Westminster Bridge incidents are real and the violence they displayed was real. Moreover, it is also important to note that some Islamist organisations – see below – were supported and aided by the US. Even if he is right as, again, there is no doubt that he is, that there have been arrests and imprisonings of individuals when there is no good justification for this, once again it does not show that there is no violence on the part of some individuals and groups and that some of them have been inspired by an ideology that they themselves have claimed derives from their reading of the Koran. When Kundnani, for example, refers to Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) simply as 'the oldest organisation representing political Islam in south Asia', (2014:171) he fails to mention the nuanced account of this organisation given by thinkers such as Afiya Zia, who refers to the liberal, secular opposition in Pakistan as contributing to preventing key members

of Jamaat-i-Islami's desire to institute a formal Islamic dress code on women. Kundnani also fails to note that the JI leadership has constantly sought to discourage women from working and maintains the notion that the unveiling of women is a threat to Islam (see Zia, 2018). Indeed, Kundnani also fails to mention the work of Gita Sahgal who, in several places, including her film, *War Crimes File*, (Sahgal, 2010) has pointed to their role in running death squads in the genocidal war against the people of Bangladesh. She has also strongly argued that the JI, far from being an oppositional force against imperialism, were partially created through a strong military alliance with the US. Furthermore, they were central in the UK in the anti-Rushdie campaign and in various ways they have been central to the process of state Islamisation of a key US ally – Pakistan.

Kundnani's account, then, in its focus on the creation of an ideology of radical Islam by the western superpowers, risks underplaying both the actual agency of radical Islamists and the violence of the perpetrators of some of the attacks carried out by their supporters. It fails, indeed, to note the power of fundamentalist Islamists in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, to mention just three. Moreover, just as fundamentalist Islamists, today, are no doubt partially formed in a reaction to imperialism and colonialism, as were communist and Marxist groups in the past, that derivation does not in itself provide an analysis of the value or lack of value of the politics produced by this imperialism.

I'd like to make a comparison with another group that was produced, at least in part, as Kundnani alleges is the case with contemporary Islamists, by western imperialism and colonialism. The Sandinistas came into being as a reaction to US imperialism and to the Contras interference in their country - Nicaragua. They used guerrilla tactics to fight the Contras and, for a while, they appeared to succeed in their aim of becoming the major

power in Nicaragua. Whether or not the government they instigated was a force for good, remains a moot point. There were some significant achievements and some failures. But they were real – the Sandinistas were both created by imperialism and they really existed<sup>i</sup>.

Similarly, contemporary fundamentalist Islamists, who wish to bring about sharia law in some form, really exist, and it is also a moot point whether or not they are a force for good. Moreover, the contemporary case – the Islamists focussed on by Kundnani - are formed in an era of identity politics. Whatever the rights or wrongs of their movement, the Sandinistas were very different. They were formed on principles that set out to create a just and a more equal society for all in Nicaragua. The contemporary fundamentalist Islamists are very different. By their very nature, they exclude anyone who is not a follower of Islam. In their desire to create a state run along the lines of sharia law, they necessarily exclude both non-Muslims as well as Muslims who seek to practice their faith differently from them. It does not matter whether or not those writing about them, like me, follow what Kundnani calls a ‘culturalist’ analysis of them or a ‘reformist’ analysis (Kundnani, Chapter 3), it remains the case that the ‘radical’ fundamentalist religious reaction to imperialism at the present time, whether it be the Islamists, the Hindutva, the Buddhists in Myanmar or the Christian right in the US are all formed within an exclusionary identitarian ideology that excludes and ‘others’ those who do not fall within its remit. Indeed, Kundnani admits as much when he analyses the ‘reformists’ focus on providing funding for religious groups in the UK at the same time as developing strategies for challenging potential recruits to radical Islam.

Kundnani is vociferous in his challenge to those who would denounce radical Islam purely in ideological terms – they are, he alleges, akin to

those who claimed that totalitarianism, for example, was a purely intellectual error, as did Popper, for example in his book *The Open Society and its Enemies* (2014:100). This kind of analysis, he claims, forgets the political context of the label and the way in which its use changes depending on context. 'Liberal' 'tolerant' states such as the US, he argues, helped destroy the civil rights movement because of their 'war' on communism, forged under the heading of a fight against 'totalitarian' movements. Islam, similarly, Kundnani argues, cannot be isolated from the context in which the Koran is read. So, Kundnani claims, one cannot, as the 'culturalists' in the US set out to do, directly link a particular form of Islamic ideology and terrorism. One ought not, then, the implication is, to see possession of certain books as necessarily a sign of extremism.

Once again, though, it is important to note that while it is surely correct to claim that ideologies change their form dependent upon circumstances, and that it is indeed somewhat facile and deeply wrong to see the possession of certain books as a sign of radicalisation, it doesn't follow that there are not radicals who are setting out to maim innocent people and to destroy lives. It is also important, that while it is right to offer a challenge to right -wing racism that seeks to produce a racist ideology that denounces all Muslims as potential terrorists, it is not right to go the whole hog, as Kundnani tends to, and deny the very existence of Islamic fundamentalists. To reiterate, contrary to Kundnani's claim that Islamic fundamentalism is purely a creation of the 'liberal' western state, the picture is more complex. As Cowden and Sahgal (2017) have put it, fundamentalists combine an interest in 'ancient Vedic truths with a fascination with Nazism', and as Chetan Bhatt writes: a 'theocratic concept of politics and civil society' with a 'racial concept of the nation' (Bhatt, 1997:205). This is 'deeply illustrative of the way religious fundamentalism occupies this curious double relationship with

modernity; at once entirely a product of it, but seeking to reject it, all at the same time' (Cowden and Sahgal, 2017:14).

As we have pointed out in this journal, there is a tendency for many on the political left in the UK and the US, to denounce all criticism of any form of Islamism, as 'Islamophobic'. Kundnani indeed seems to fall into this category. Instead of accepting that there are 'fundamentalist' forms of all religions, including Christianity and Judaism, but also including Islam, he sees any such claims as being part of the 'westocentric' ideology that demonises all Muslims. However, there are different ways of conceptualising Islam and some of these comprise 'fundamentalist' forms.

There is a tendency, then, in Kundnani's thinking, to 'victimise' the fundamentalist Islamist too much. He tends to write as though Islamic radicals are the innocent victims of western 'liberal' propaganda rather than being themselves inspired by models of jihad deriving from powerful states like Saudi Arabia. Amongst the states that inspire fundamentalist Islamists are those such as Iran that themselves practice a state form of sharia law, that entails such 'radical' activities as imprisoning women for dressing improperly and allowing the hanging of young children.

These are not simply 'ideological creations' of the western state. As Cowden and Sahgal, once more, point out in their article 'Why Fundamentalism?': 'The Iranian Koranic scholar and writer Navid Kermani has described the Saudi sponsorship of the puritanical ideology of Wahhabism that is behind so much contemporary Islamist politics as a travesty of the 'multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural Orient': "Sponsored with billions from the oil industry [this is] a school of thought

that has been promoted for decades in mosques, in books and on television that declares all people from all other religions heretics, and reviles, terrorises, disparages and insults them...That such a religious fascism even became conceivable, that IS finds so many fighters and even more sympathisers... - that is not the beginning, but rather the end point of a long decline...of religious thought” (Kermani, 2015:80-81, quoted in Cowden and Sahgal, 2017:18). Fundamentalist religions are not simply reactions to the west but are also attempts to establish reactionary interpretations of religious text as the route to political power. As we pointed out, Wahhabism is just one instance of the ways fundamentalists distort religious texts to serve political purposes.

At the same time, then, as he appears to be offering a radical alternative to the right -wing ‘western inspired’ creation of a largely, in his terms ‘imaginary’ Islamic identity, Kundnani reproduces the simple dualisms of ‘western’ and ‘Islamic’. ‘Reformists’ Kundnani claims, when they discover that they have no tools with which to defend ‘western’ values as against the powerful ideology of Islamic radicalisation, attempt to turn liberalism into an ideology itself. He quotes Andrew Anthony, an Observer journalist, (2014:110) in his book *The Fallout* who sets ‘western Enlightenment’ values against what Anthony labels the ‘Endarkment’ of the Islamic world. Anthony, according to Kundnani, sets out to develop a ‘western liberal’ ‘identity’ against the ‘third world’ of ‘petty corruption, sexism, homophobia, tribalism and patriarchal authoritarianism’ (2014:111). In setting up a contrast between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ in this way, Kundnani unwittingly reproduces the very dualism he sets out ostensibly to challenge. It is not only people like Andrew Anthony who set out to defend the values of human rights. There are many people in the ‘eastern’ Islamic world who deploy the language of human rights to critique what they themselves see as the dangers of Islamic religious identity politics. Afiya Zia and others have documented the systematic

murder and torture of those in Pakistan who are resistant to the Islamist militancy there (see Zia, 2018). Indeed, if we were to take the perspective of someone who has grown up, since 1979, under the Islamic law of Iran, then the normal form of radical political identity would not be the form taken up by the western 'radicals' who began as Marxists or American black power movement people but who converted to Islam as a form of political radicalism against the US or the UK state, but rather they would be advocates of equality for women (to be able to wear what they like) or rights to express an identity other than the Islamic one imposed upon them.

So while there is much to commend in this book, it provides a somewhat quasi-Orientalist picture of fundamentalist Islam that, at the same time as it seeks to value 'the Muslim' actually undermines its own intention by painting a too one -faced and one -dimensional picture of the 'Muslim' it seeks to support. Failing to attribute any responsibility to fundamentalist Islamists for the crimes they have committed is surely itself to deny them agency in a way that he would not want to do.

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<sup>i</sup> See Stephen Kinzer *Blood of Brothers*, Harvard University Press, 1991 for one useful account of the period of the Sandinistas rule in Nicaragua.