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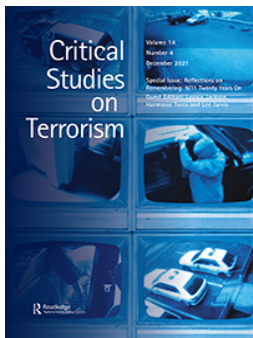Published online: 24 Sep 2021.

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Reflection: the "war on terror", Islamophobia and radicalisation twenty years on

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As I watched the planes hit the Twin Towers on that historic Tuesday back in September 2001, I knew then that for the foreseeable future the Muslim world and the world of Muslims would remain of keen interest to western foreign policymakers, with potentially severe implications for the numerous Muslim minorities across the global north and Muslim majorities in the global south. Fast forward to today and we have witnessed the securitisation of Muslims through the normalisation of Islamophobia, for example through: legislation that hinders Muslim women's cultural and religious expression; minaret bans in Europe; cartoons mocking significant Muslim religious symbols for mocking's sake; and digital surveillance is now the new normal, whether it is online or through the eyes of CCTV cameras everywhere.

In essence, the "war on terror" has normalised the securitisation of Muslims and regularised the existence of Islamophobia. This has increased the likelihood of radicalisation, not reduced it. In terms of foreign policy, Afghanistan remains mired in complex multifaceted conflicts that have much to do with the presence of external actors, even though, twenty years on, the US and its allies have by and large left the country. The invasion of Iraq was motivated by a geo-strategic interest in the Middle East, with non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" used as a justification. Iraq descended into chaos once it was invaded in 2003, with the contagion affecting Syria. It was the necessary precursor to the emergence of the so-called Islamic State just over a decade later. Libya has also been affected by western interests, destabilising the country, bringing more extremism and chaos into play, not less. For many, the "war on terror" has been a unmitigated disaster, but one that was predictable at the outset because the war on Afghanistan was motivated by revenge and a gung-ho mentality supported by unrestrained weaponry.

Preventing and countering violent extremism, or its precursor, the somewhat nebulous term, deradicalisation, have put the cart before the horse. The essential issue here is that Islamist radicalisation and violent extremism are assumed to be inherited from within the religion and therefore if it is possible to limit the effects of the ideological pull of extremism, there will be less likelihood of young Muslims the world over joining organisations, taking part in spreading hate or ultimately joining a violent extremist endeavour. Such an approach takes agency away from an individual or group actors whose motivations may well be more to do with their perceptions and experiences in relation to the idea of seeking justice, recognition or seemingly having no choice but to respond to

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violence with violence. Rather than seeing violence as a problem of minority discourses and issues to do with the abuses of power at the hands of governments or corporate interests, radicalisation is seen to be a problem of those who follow a religion that is medieval at best (i.e. rigid, dogmatic, uncompromising, promoting violence). The misconception of radicalisation increases Islamophobia, which then has the knock-on effect of increasing radicalisation. Yet state authorities have continued to look for the problems and solutions within the religion, people's interpretations, Jihadism as ideas within Islamic poetry, or using notions of strategic communications or combating online narratives as a way in which to deal with the problem before it supposedly clicks into place.

While both the effort and the investment are necessary, the impact has been limited due to the disproportionality of interest. The vast majority of Muslims across the globe face all sorts of genuine social pressures. Most people who are mobilised into violence do so often through the lack of choice, not through choice per se. While indeed the ideologues are problematic and they are often in possession of numerous tools at their disposal, they remain rare relative to the ordinary young men and the few women who join the likes of extremist organisations for quite local reasons but project their ambitions globally. But sometimes joining extremist groups is an expression of agency. There are cases of the far right providing unemployed, directionless and frustrated young men jobs with income as a means to mobilise them as actors to facilitate the spread of far-right hate and ideology. The young jihadi who joined the Islamic State was no different. Due to the impact of class structure that embeds inequalities, however, elite discourses continue to separate working-class groups, preventing them from organising together against dominant interests.

The "war on terror" continues to exist even if the nomenclature has shifted. However, the emergence of the far right in the last few years has now become normalised in the countering violent extremism milieu. The prognosis is that the "war on terror" will continue to remain in all but name. Concerns to do with radicalisation and violent extremism will continue to remain important not because they are a problem of religion because they are often a problem of structural disadvantage and inequality. What we have seen over the last two decades is that inequalities have widened across the world, including in relatively prosperous countries. These inequalities lead to social divisions that can be transformed into polarisations through a political language that is reproduced by uncritical media, which leads to the ongoing framing of minorities as the perpetual problem and that somehow the religion of Islam and Muslims themselves are the specific issues. As Muslim minority populations continue to grow relative to majorities and as the Muslims across the world grow relative to others, there will be a growing sense that "our" (majority) liberties, freedoms, values and norms will be threatened by the very existence of these (minority) "others". All of this stems from the racist, neoliberal, and secular logic of the "war on terror", with acute Islamophobia its biggest consequence. Islamophobia will remain a problem for the foreseeable future, and this will have implications for the radicalisation of not just younger jihadis but also far-right extremists.

The important issue to take into consideration is that there is a particular historical trajectory concerning Islamophobia, radicalisation and the "war on terror". Without a doubt, it has its origin within the temporality of orientalism and wider racism that emerged during the European colonial era, which has remained intact in the post-war period. In many ways, the continuation of the perpetuation of the negativity associated

with the representation of Islam and Muslims in culture, society and economy has a particular historical lineage that has remained intact, despite the many efforts to bring about progressive social change. There is a perceptible continuity concerning time, as if the current period is an accelerated concentration of what has evolved over a thousand years between Christian and Muslim world contact. Past, present and perceptible future bleed into one, where the defining characteristics of Islamophobia continue to remain intact while it adds features that are reflective of the current digital age. Islamophobia is as rampant on social media during the covid period as it has been in the real world.

To social scientists, context is everything. And yet the decontextualization of the "war on terror" suggests a particular type of temporality. It leads to a certain kind of loss of memory concerning counter-terrorism laws which are introduced without genuine debate or discussion, and which necessarily infringe on civil liberties and human rights that are seen as lower-order concerns when terrorism is propelled to its highest level of perceived risk and danger to society as a whole. At the same time, there is a form of biopolitics that relates to the needs of human beings which are seen as expendable. A focus on security per se takes away intention on the ontological insecurity that faces vulnerable groups whose loss of identity and the sense that they have no role in shaping their future existence leads them to become vulnerable to the Islamophobic forces that are generated by it. And thus the cycle is complete.

Two decades after the "war on terror", and we are no wiser and no better informed. And yet it was obvious enough at the very beginning of this period what would happen as the mighty US empire reacted robustly to the attacks on its soil on that fateful day on 11 September 2001. Throughout this period, considerable investment has gone into understanding the nature of Muslim communities. We know more about Muslims than we have ever known and yet we fail to understand what Islam and Muslims stand for. The "war on terror" has made the world an unsafe place and divided the Muslim world with the rest of the world far more than it had done before it began. And while great efforts will be made to return to some semblance of normality once the covid pandemic ceases to hold its grip on us all, there is every likelihood that we will return to where we came, which , in this case, is the general order of Islamophobic things.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Tahir Abbas is a an Associate Professor at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University in The Hague. His recent books are *Countering Violent Extremism* (Bloomsbury, 2021), *Islamophobia and Radicalisation* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2019), and *Contemporary Turkey in Conflict* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

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