

Muslims as Perpetual Victims

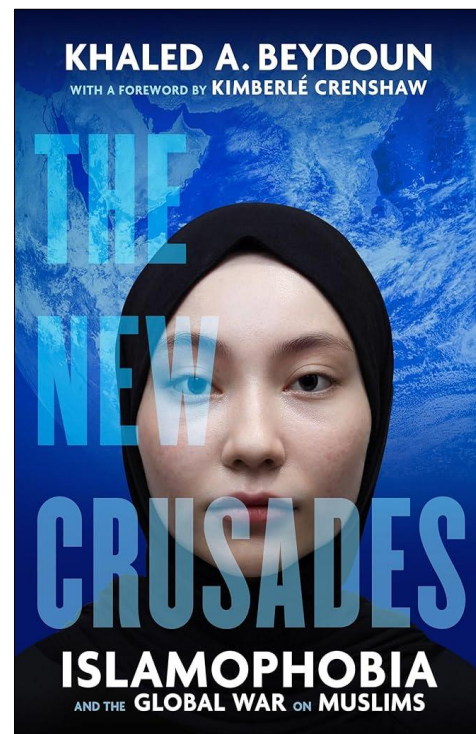
by Dexter Van Zile

The ongoing effort to portray contemporary Muslims as fragile, innocent victims with no power to author their own destiny or shape world history has reached a hysterical crescendo in Beydoun’s recent text, a triumph of overwrought polemic and unrestrained self-pity.

The New Crusades—Islamophobia and the Global War on Muslims. By Khaled A. Beydoun. University of California Press, 2023. 390 pp. \$24.82.

In his introduction, Beydoun describes his feelings when a massive explosion took place in Beirut on August 4, 2020, which was inaccurately portrayed as a terrorist attack by people in the country. Combining this with unnamed news outlets and pundits who blamed the “familiar list of Muslim networks” for the tragedy, Beydoun argues that the assumption that the explosion was an act of Muslim terrorism illustrates the influence of a “fundamental lie” propounded by Western Islamophobes—“that terrorism is a uniquely Islamic enterprise.”

No one argues that terrorism is a “uniquely Islamic enterprise.” Government officials in Western democracies, such as administrators of countering violent extremism (CVE) programs in the United Kingdom and the United States regularly highlight—and exaggerate—the threat of violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists in the UK and white supremacists in the United States. They do this as an attempt to demonstrate their good intentions toward Muslim communities in their countries: “Look, we know terrorism is not a uniquely Muslim thing, and we’re going after non-Muslims to remind everyone of this fact.



Please don’t call us ‘Islamophobes’ for trying to do something, anything, about Islamist violence.”

The fact that the Beirut explosion, which killed more than 200 people, was likely caused by an illegal and unsafe cache of ammonium

nitrate amassed by Hezbollah,¹ (which clearly qualifies as a “familiar Muslim network”), is apparently lost on Beydoun who uses the conflagration on that fateful Tuesday in 2020 to harken back to another tragedy that took place on another Tuesday 19 years earlier:

Two mornings on opposite sides of the world, on distinct sides of a war on Terror, which stand as permanent signposts of an evolving sense of difference spawned by it. Two Tuesdays, that for me serve as bleak book ends of a narrative about Islamophobia that was no longer isolated to one country or population alone, but had become a global phenomenon.²

There’s a lot to unpack here. First, the “sense of difference” between Muslims and the rest of the world that Beydoun so bitterly laments has existed since Islam’s founding, the whole point of which was to bring about something new and different into the world that wasn’t there previously. One cannot claim to be an adherent of any religion without being different from people who aren’t adherents.

Second, the “two Tuesdays” that Beydoun invokes as bleak bookends to Muslim feelings of difference were marked by tragedies brought about by Muslims. It was Muslim terrorists who perpetrated 9/11 and given Hezbollah’s efforts to derail the investigation into the cause of the blast, it is reasonable to conclude that incompetent and feckless members of that organization are responsible for the explosion that took place in Beirut in 2020. (Beydoun doesn’t think that a rogue cell of Maronites in Lebanon was able to stockpile that much ammonium nitrate in the Port of Beirut, does he?)

Beydoun doesn’t allow Muslim responsibility for the suffering on these two Tuesdays to stop him from telling a familiar story—that the primary threat to Muslim safety and well-being in the modern world is non-Muslims who have been given license to abuse Muslims because of the rhetoric of the War on Terror led by the United States. The blame for the suffering of Muslims in Africa, China, India, Myanmar, and New Zealand is laid at the feet of the United States, and former US President Donald Trump who said bad things about Muslims during his campaign and time in office.

By blaming the United States and its elites for the suffering of Muslims in places like Africa, China, India, and Myanmar—where intra-communal violence between Muslims and non-Muslims had been a reality long before 9/11—Beydoun promotes a Western-centric view that the only people who have any real influence over the unfolding of world history are white, non-Muslim westerners (Americans, especially) who, as a result of their powerful and malign gaze, condemn Muslims throughout the world to an intolerable mix of violence, famine, and oppression. In Beydoun’s narrative, non-Muslims mistreat Muslims in Africa, China, India, and Myanmar because the US gave them permission to do so after 9/11. The fact is, Muslims have been both sources and targets of violence in these areas long before 9/11. Beydoun is unable to countenance the reality that violence against Muslims in China is not rooted in “Islamophobia” but the result of the Chinese Communist Party’s pursuit of cultural unity that drives the government to oppress people of all faiths in the country. China did what it is doing to the Uighurs, to the Tibetans, and is doing the same thing to the Christians. But acknowledging the reality of

¹ Numerous reports document Hezbollah’s interference with a government investigation into the blast. For example, see “[Hezbollah chief Nasrallah says Beirut port explosion investigator biased](#),” Reuters, August 27, 2021; “[We will remove you](#),” Hezbollah official told Beirut blast judge,” Reuters,

September 30, 2021; and Marc Daou, “[Hezbollah’s campaign against Beirut blast judge paralyzes Lebanon’s government](#),” France 24, October 29, 2021.

² Beydoun, 2023, p. 6.

Sinicization would deprive Beydoun of the opportunity to blame the West for the suffering of his coreligionists in China.

Beydoun advances his “blame white Westerners” narrative in chapter one in which he details the suffering of Somalian refugees in Wajir, Kenya, who have fled the violence perpetrated by Al-Shabaab, a terrorist organization responsible for numerous attacks on both sides of the Kenya-Somali border.

Beydoun describes how he saw a look of defeat in the face of a young man named Muhammad who will be destined to live a life of poverty and suffering as a result of Al Shabab’s violence. He then explicitly describes the suffering endured by another refugee, an elderly woman named Kalsoum, as she undergoes cataract surgery—without anesthesia—in Wajir.

Then the villains arrive on the scene—two staffers from the US State Department tasked with the evil program of countering violent extremism of Muslims in Somalia. They are there to implement a CVE strategy based on “radicalization theory” which was “focused exclusively on Muslims.” These staffers reveal just how evil they are by asking where Beydoun and his fellow Muslims doing relief work in Wajir are from. With this question—one that expats ask one another all the time when gathered in foreign countries—the two staffers personified the “American imperial gaze.”

The Americans did not see little Mohamed or Kalsoum or the refugee

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population of Wajir as victims of cruel circumstance, but as presumptive radicals. ... The two agents did not see Wajir as a place of humanitarian crisis, but as a rugged training ground for terrorists. A soil where souls were snatched and made into “radicals” by terrorists who roamed the

badlands like hyenas in search of fresh meat.³

In a subsequent paragraph, Beydoun declares that the sight of the two employees from the US State Department was “marred by a vision of unrelenting war and empire, a blindness that no medical doctor could cure.”⁴ (The only real lesson one can take away from this vignette is that engaging in polite and innocent small talk with Beydoun is probably not a good idea because he might find you guilty of talking while Western.)

While Beydoun roots American “Islamophobia” and support for the War on Terror in 9/11, he roots European hostility toward Muslims in the Crusades which lasted from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries. He asserts the ideas and imagery of the Crusades “permeate the psyche of Europe.”

They permeate its legislative discussions and popular debates and inform academic discourse and judicial determinations throughout the continent. The imprint of the Crusades is not only prominent, but dynamic, alive, and ongoing. The Crusades stain the psyche of discourses popular and political in France, Belgium, and the rest of Europe, as prominently as

³ Ibid, p. 36.

⁴ Ibid, p.37.

the stained glass of the ancient churches that abound on the continent. Islamophobia is embedded deep into Europe's psychological fabric, and its architecture [is] more firm and fixed than its American counterpart.

Later he writes:

In Europe, particularly in nations with sizable Muslim populations, the new crusades spurred on by the War on Terror are an extension of the old Crusades first waged about a thousand years ago. This, surely, is not rational. But neither is Orientalism or Islamophobia, the epistemologies that shape this distinct European view.

By invoking the Crusades in both the title and in the text in such an accusatory manner, Beydoun is relying on the Occidentalist notion that Christian Europe's invasion of the Middle East was a naked act of imperialism and colonization. The reality is a bit more complex. As documented in *God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades*, by Rodney Stark,⁵ the Crusades "were precipitated by Islamic provocations: by centuries of bloody attempts to colonize the West and by sudden new attacks on Christian pilgrims and holy places."⁶ Stark puts it bluntly when he writes, "The history of the Crusades really began in the seventh century when armies of Arabs, newly converted to Islam, seized huge areas that had been Christian"⁷ and that after these conquests "massacres of Jews and Christians became increasingly common with the passage of time."⁸ In sum, Stark argues that the Crusades were an inevitable response to Muslim violence against European Christians.

Beydoun and his fellow Islamophobiacs may not want to admit it, but a similar story can legitimately be told about "Islamophobia" in the modern era. The real history of "Islamophobia" doesn't begin with the US War on Terror, which started a few days after 9/11, but with what Benny Morris calls the "Thirty Year Genocide" against Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Christians in the Anatolian Peninsula that began in 1894,⁹ gained traction with decades of antisemitic and anti-Christian violence in the Middle East starting in the early twentieth century, accelerated with the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979 and the Salman Rushdie Affair of the 1980s, and then came to catastrophic fruition with 9/11. In light of these accelerating catastrophes, non-Muslims living in the West who knew next to nothing about Islam, Muslim history, and the Islamic corpus, can be forgiven if they take Islamists at their word when they assert that there is no difference between their violent and utopian political agenda and the Muslim faith.



The upshot is that Muslims living in the Middle East probably understood that the Crusades were an inevitable response to the conquests they had just achieved, and instead

⁵ Ibid, p. 36

⁶ Ibid, p.37

⁷ HarperCollins, 2009.

⁸ Ibid, p. 8

⁹ Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894-1924*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019.

of lamenting the hostility with which they were viewed by Christians took it for granted. Some probably reveled in it. But Beydoun and the Islamophobiacs he leads show no such toughness and would have us believe that the pushback against more than a century of Muslim violence against non-Muslims is unexpected, unreasonable, and unforgiveable. How does Beydoun expect Westerners to respond to the attacks they've endured over the past few decades? With the milk of human kindness? With pacifism?

France, the scene of numerous jihadist attacks over the years, is subjected to particularly harsh treatment in Beydoun's text. The COVID-19 pandemic, he writes:

exposed the fundamental hypocrisy of the French plague [of Islamophobia]. While every citizen was ordered to cover their face, Muslim women who cover their face for religious purposes were legally reprimanded and fined 150 euros, fifteen more than the penalty for violating the new face mask mandate. One face covering was legally mandated, the other legally prohibited.

Beydoun fails however, to come to grips with legitimate concerns over the impact of the hijab on the welfare of women when its use becomes prevalent. Sarah Haider from Ex-Muslims of North America, who opposes hijab bans,¹⁰ has argued that while defending the "right" of women to wear the hijab may, at first glance, be an affirmation of the rights of all Muslims in the face of bigotry, such a defense ends up empowering conservative imams intent on enforcing modesty rules that deprive women of their freedom and boxes Muslims into a "religious conservatism." When Westerners reduce pro-Muslim activism to

defending the hijab, they racialize aspects degrading religious practices "as simply 'a different way of living.'" Placing such a strong emphasis on the practice to Islamic identity as a whole increases the pressure on Muslims women to wear it," she said.

The problem that Beydoun refuses to confront is the possibility that the debate over the hijab in Europe is rooted in legitimate concern about the impact of large-scale Muslim immigration on the rights of women. As documented by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (who Beydoun predictably vilifies in his text) in her recent book, *Prey: Immigration: Islam and the Erosion of Women's Rights*,¹¹ an influx of young men into Europe from Muslim-majority countries is contributing to measurable declines in the safety and welfare of women in the continent. Women are less visible in public places in neighborhoods of Brussels, London, Stockholm, and Paris than they were in years past because of the abuse they endure from young Muslim men. "A growing number of European women are questioning their safety. Cases of rape, assault, groping and sexual harassment in public places seem to have become more numerous," Ali writes.¹² After hard-won advances in the rights of women in Europe since the 1800s, Ali reports, "the pendulum is swinging back toward misogyny as liberal Europe changes to accommodate migrant cultures."¹³ And this misogyny, Ali reports, is directed in particular at women who do not abide by the Islamic rules of modesty which are imposed to protect women from harassment. In Muslim-majority environments, Ali writes, there is an "overarching category of women: immodest." Women who move freely in public without a chaperone, or ignore the modesty dress code are deemed immodest and subject to

¹⁰ Haider has expressed [opposition](#) to hijab bans.

¹¹ HarperCollins, 2021.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

harassment. “Women with this unprotected status are seen as fair game ... They can be leered at, harassed, groped, or assaulted.”¹⁴

Instead of addressing the legitimate concerns about the impact of Muslim immigration on the status of women in Europe and considering the possibility that the debate over the hijab is a proxy for concern over this issue, he tries to finesse the topic by placing Iran, which requires women to wear the hijab as part of a larger system of misogynist oppression, with France and Belgium which prohibit wearing it in public in an attempt to protect women. “If Islamophobia is anything, it is the systemic denial of the free exercise of religious liberty to Muslims in the country that I call home [the United States], and even more sharply in places abroad—including Muslim-majority countries,” he writes.¹⁵ According to this logic, the oppression of women and non-Muslims in Iran and Afghanistan would qualify as “Islamophobia.” Without meaning to, Beydoun has revealed “Islamophobia” to be an all-purpose cudgel that only force, but no meaning, a cudgel bereft of content.

In his ferocious treatment of France’s “Islamophobia,” Beydoun does yeoman’s work to downplay the terrible acts of violence perpetrated by Islamists against the country. Yes, Beydoun acknowledges the Charlie Hebdo massacre which took place on January 7, 2015 (which resulted in the deaths of 17 people), and the Paris attacks that took place the following November (which killed 137 people). But then, in a shameless attempt to downplay the horror of these attacks, Beydoun argues that because there were only eleven ISIS-inspired attackers involved in the Paris attacks, “ISIS succeeded only 11 times” in its effort to encourage young Muslims to become terrorists despite the fertile ground for jihadist recruitment generated by French Islamophobia. Similar sleight of hand could be used to minimize the reprehensible murder of

fifty-one people in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a single attacker at two different mosques in 2019, an attack which features prominently (and reasonably so) in Beydoun’s text. One could write that the folks who encourage anti-Muslim bigots to attack Muslims “only succeeded one time” because there was a single attacker.

This is not to say that grave injustices have not been perpetrated against Muslims in the modern world. The murder of Muslims in New Zealand in 2019 was horrific, Muslims are subject to terrible acts of violence in India, and it sure looks like China is intent on doing to the Uighurs what it did to the Tibetans. The question Beydoun and his fellow Islamophobiacs need to ask themselves—and their fellow Muslims—is if they truly think they can enlist Western democracies in the effort to bringing an end to these outrages while the same time falsely portraying the West as inhospitable to Muslims, when in fact it isn’t. Preventing the destruction of the Uighurs in China and convincing India to treat Muslims more fairly will take a huge amount of political capital that will only be diminished by efforts to falsely portray the West as an abattoir of Muslim aspirations and well-being.

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¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 150-151.

¹⁵ Beydoun, 2023, p. 95.

