

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **Times Higher Education**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/78330/>

Paper:

Berger, LG (2014) *Review of "The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror", by Arun Kundnani*

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/the-muslims-are-coming-islamophobia-extremism-and-the-domestic-war-on-terror-by-arun-kundnani/2012227.article>

The Muslims Are Coming

By Arun Kundnani

One of the central themes in Arun Kundnani's critique of what he describes as the domestic "War on Terror" in the UK and US is the apparent neglect of or even taboo on discussing the role which Western foreign policies have played in bringing about the horrific acts of violence witnessed on the streets of London in July 2005 and May 2013. Kundnani is adamant that "(w)hat governments call extremism is to a large degree a product of their own wars." There are a number of theoretical and methodological problems with Kundnani's account.

Kundnani is right in highlighting methodological concerns about existing studies of Islamist radicalization which rely on a small number of cases and fail to include control groups of people who share radical ideologies, but choose not to engage in political violence. But this is not a new insight. Indeed, researchers across Europe have already published plenty of insightful critiques of the theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches of the radicalization literature. Even worse, Kundnani commits the same mistakes when he presents no theoretical justification for his choice of case studies and fails to explain why the vast majority of Muslims who disagree with those Western foreign policies he highlights as potential roots causes did not become engaged in political violence. If we look at public opinion polls from across the Muslim world, including Muslim communities in the West, support for violence against Western civilians stands, on average, at between 5-10%. If Kundnani's assertions are correct, then this number should be much higher given the fact that overwhelming majorities of up to 90% in some Muslim countries criticize US/Western policies. In fact, as this reviewer has shown in an article in publication with the *Journal of Peace Research*, it is not perceptions of US foreign policies toward Israel or Middle Eastern oil which shape approval of terrorist violence against US civilians, but the rejection of US culture and some of its most prominent manifestations such as the freedom of expression. This finding might go against the conventional wisdom which Kundnani seeks to repackage as his own unique insight. But it is quite intuitive if we remind ourselves of Katzenstein and Keohane's ground-breaking analysis of Anti-Americanisms in which they differentiate between a view which assesses US foreign policies on their own terms and a view which regards the same policies as reflecting the fundamentally evil nature of US society.

Kundnani is more convincing when he criticizes the Islamophobia peddled by right-wing US and UK media and politicians and Western counterterrorism efforts, which, particularly in the United States, should pay more attention to the more widespread threat of right-wing violence. Kundnani is also right to highlight the problems inherent in the attempts of various Western governments to meddle in the politics and discourses of Muslim communities in the name of fighting terrorism. While it is important not to turn a blind eye toward radical discourses that (can be used to) justify political violence against civilians, there is a danger that Western governments, in an attempt to address the cacophony of voices that is typical of the decentralized, pluralistic religious discourses in many (Sunni) Muslim communities around the world, end up telling Muslims what the ‘correct’ interpretation of Islam is. Yet, again, these two issues have already received considerable academic attention with plenty of excellent analysis from peer-reviewed publications to countless undergraduate essays.

In short, Kundnani’s critique of hostility toward Muslims by some Western media and politicians and of Western governments’ interaction with their Muslim communities is convincing, although not wholly original. His highly ideological insistence on the link between Western foreign policies and Islamist terrorism is neither.

Bio by-line: Dr Lars Berger is Associate Professor in International Security at the University of Leeds. His article “Foreign Policies or Culture – What Shapes Muslim Public Opinion on Political Violence against the United States?” is currently in publication with the *Journal of Peace Research*.