Any Muslim reading this book of Professor Norris’s would therefore inevitably wonder what his motive might be in treating such a serious topic in such an academically irresponsible way. I leave it to each reader to seek the answer in his or her encounter with the contents of Professor Norris’s book.

Rešid Hafizović


The 9/11 incident has spotlighted the nature of relations between the United States and the Islamic world. The US invasion and occupation of two Muslim states, namely, Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), purportedly for noble intentions, has further strained the relationship like nothing before. Enough has been said and written about it in the past decade, yet the volume under review is an incisive valuable addition to available knowledge on the subject.

The basic thesis of the author is that there were “two tragedies of September 11, 2001: the deaths of more than 3,000 innocent human beings on the day itself and the squandering of a unique opportunity in the months and years that followed, which contributed to the loss of countless additional lives” (p. ix). He goes on to say that the US began “marching down a path that would systematically alienate sympathetic Muslims and play into the hands of the extremists by setting up precisely the ‘clash of civilizations’ that the bin Ladens of the world had long sought” (p. x).

The Al-Jazeera effect, if one may call it, enabled the Arabs to see the world through Arab lens, which not only gave a new perspective to the news but also an aggressive new sense of Muslim solidarity. Arab television channels were simply not available to those who did not speak Arabic. So the American audiences remained “largely oblivious to [the] shift in Arab and Muslim perspective” (p. xiii). The Americans could, however, go to English language websites but few bothered; after all, life was “much simpler in black and white.” The result was a set of “information ghettos whose inhabitants- in the United States and the Muslim world- saw dramatically different versions of the same reality: ‘Surgical strikes’ versus dead babies; the ‘oppressed’ being
'liberated' versus civilians under siege, and so on (p. xiii).

In the opinion of the author, US President George Bush’s response to the incidents of 9/11 was anything but statesman-like. Bringing religion and moral high ground to justify political decisions was nothing new in world history. After all, the Crusades, the Spanish conquest of Americas, the British Empire; each had marched below the banner of God and truth (p. 3). Bush also tended to see world in black and white, right and wrong, good versus evil. Author reminds Bush of the words of John F. Kennedy who had underlined dangers of such absolutist worldview by warning Americans “not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats” (p. 6). [emphasis mine] Unfortunately, Bush was no Kennedy. An analysis of 15 of his major policy speeches between 2001-03 brings out that notions of evil and peril appeared at least once in every ten paragraphs (p. 91). So when Bush said either you are with us or against us—Osama bin Laden could not have agreed more.

The writer traces the Muslim antipathy to America as a direct consequence of American foreign policy. He disagrees with the prevalent notion in American decision making circles and a substantial part of academia and intellectuals that no foreign policy change could have appeased Bin Laden (p. 131). Rather he argues that had US maintained a fair and balanced foreign policy, the present conflict between the US and militant Islam could have been avoided. He notes that while surveys in Muslim countries showed a strong dislike for American foreign policy but simultaneously they often reflected quite positive attitudes towards American society, culture and people (p. 23).

Tracing the history of Islam-USA relations, mention is made of the inauspicious start, when confrontation with Berber pirates over the taking of American slaves off the coast of Libya, around late 1770’s, became the young republic’s first foreign policy challenge- and the US’s first encounter with Islam (p. 21). The negative view of Islam never changed and coverage of Arabs in New York Times was negative even between 1917-47, i.e. the three decades immediately preceding the creation of Israel (p. 32).

Thus, it was no surprise that America subscribed to mistaken and historically untenable Jewish slogan of “a land without people for a people without land” in support of their claim on Palestine to create a state. The writer claims, without any substantiating argument or evidence that in 1948, the US “presided over the creation of Israel.” He also claims that the US recognized Israel exactly 11 minutes after it declared its independence (p. 16). He also points finger at the billions of dollars of aid that Israel received in over half a century of its existence and the American veto of 38 different
resolutions between 1972-2004 criticizing Israel (p. 17). The book points to the power to Jewish votes in American politics while averring that the American Muslims, coming from different national, ethnic, racial or ideological backgrounds, seldom vote en bloc (p. 22). It was probably the power to the Jewish lobby that the United States banned all official contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a measure that they never even contemplated for their own enemy number one—the Vietcongs (p. 18).

Palestine issue may be the root cause of Muslim anger against the US but several other issues like supporting the brutal regime of the Shah in Iran, attacking Lebanon to prop minority Christian government against Muslim majority, arming Saddam Hussain to kill his own people in Iraq, and supporting unpopular despots like Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak and thugs like Uzbekistan’s fascist junta, also fuelled the rage (p. 22). American policy towards terrorism fits well into the aphorism that a terrorist is someone who does something that you don’t agree with, a freedom fighter is somebody who does something that you agree with (p. 143). President Ronald Reagan had the audacity to call the Contra rebels of Nicaragua, “moral equivalents of founding fathers.” His predecessors had supported Israeli Prime Ministers with terrorist backgrounds like Shamir, who led the terrorist outfit called Stern gang and Begin who was the brain behind terrorist force, Irgun. To add insult to injury, both of them, were awarded Nobel Prizes for—guess what—‘Peace.’ The terrorism associated with Islamism and Zionism, uses more or less the same tools: religious zeal, divine justification, assumed myths of victimhood, and scriptural arguments (p. 28). Then why treat them with different yardsticks? The US Presidents may cling to the litany that terror does not work, History shows it does (p. 133). Both Israeli and Palestinian examples are enough to demonstrate this.

It is for the foregoing reasons, rooted in wrong and lopsided policies that the US pursued that violent extremism against America among the Islamists has emerged. Contrary to popular beliefs that terrorists come from uneducated poor background who revolt against the haves, Pintak refers to a study of Hizbollah militants in Lebanon, that found that poverty was inversely related while the level of education positively related with likelihood of somebody joining Hizbollah (p. 113). The only variable consistently associated with the number of terrorists was the freedom house index of political rights and liberties (p. 114). The Muslim countries with least political freedoms as Saudi Arabia and Algeria produced the most Islamist fanatics and the ones with relative freedom like Turkey and Malaysia, produced the least.

Pintak reserves his scathing criticism for the role played by the media from the two sides that exacerbated the misunderstandings between the
Muslims and the Americans. He agrees that truth is usually the first casualty in war as Hemmingway aptly remarked that the “history of war coverage is history of propaganda, censorship and distortion.” Substantiating this point, the writer gives another interesting quote from George Orwell, the famous novelist, about the Spanish civil war:

> Early in life I noticed that no event is ever reported correctly in the newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie (p. 49).

Objectivity “can come back to fashion when the shooting is over,” and that is true for the ongoing war on terror also. Jack Fuller, the former President and publisher of Chicago Tribune noted that the thought that news reports should be true, “dawned journalists only recently” (p. 48). But Fuller was talking about American/Western newsmen. As for the Arab press, this dawn has not happened there.

Pintak laments, what he calls, a “eunuch like condition of Arab journalists and Muslim intellectuals who had sold themselves out to high salaries” (p. 65). In the Middle East, even the coverage of issues of no consequence to the government was frequently rife with innuendo and falsehood—some bought and paid for, some the result of lazy or sloppy journalism” (p. 67). So when objectivity was not a requisite for a story concerning government, there was little incentive or inclination to do so in other stories. Hence, even in respected papers outlandish stories might be carried. Like after a spate of bombings in Baghdad during 2004, it was rumored that Democratic Presidential challenger, Senator John Kerry, was behind it, so incumbent President Bush would look bad. No media channel intervened to correct the picture. Even most respected journalists would insinuate, for instance, that Wahabi sect in Arabia was a British invention as part of divide and rule strategy. This may be so because popular analysts and intellectuals in the Arab world are known, not for objectivity, which is already at a discount, but for opinions. The more radical or extremist the opinions are, the more popular they become.

Pintak is also critical of the American media, that singles out to highlight any act of violence done by a Muslim, whatever the reason. But the truth is that between 1983–2000 half of world’s total suicide bombings were carried out by Tamil guerillas linked to LTTE in Sri Lanka but that was seldom reported. (p. 37) The bottomline is that the US public did not care about Sri Lanka, so neither did the media. “Deny them publicity” argument, that terrorists should not become masters of ceremonies at a media spectacle (p. 35) never worked with the US media as newspapers and television channels vied
to cover the most sensational news. The US media has erred, in their patriotic zeal, to stereotype all Muslims. The writer admits that definitions are important but argues that they also get in the way: “There is no cookie cutter that produces an ‘Islamic militant,’ no template for a terrorist. Moderate Muslims come in all shade and colors” (p. xvii).

It was again media from both sides that showed Fallujah massacre (believed to be Arab Stalingrad) and footages and shots of prisoner treatment in Abu Ghuraib ad nauseam. These pictures further added fuel to fire and gave enhanced justification to the militants to attack the Americans in Iraq. Media is one of the factors that has led to the “enhancement of a global community of Muslims, or ummah, that is far more cohesive than ever before” (p. xv). Just like it was instrumental in developing a sense of common identity among American in the wake of 9/11.

For the Muslims today, to get to know America, there are two sources left—television and mosque—and both are equally distorted. Money can help buy hearts and minds a la Marshall Plan (p. 310). So money must be spent on mosques and media to help and encourage them build bridges between civilizations, not destroy the already existing ones too.

Saad S. Khan


The book under review, as it clearly shows, was originally a theory-heavy doctoral thesis submitted, in 2007, to the Free University of Berlin. It was published in German as No. 14 (not: 13) of the publisher’s Mizân series of Studies on Literature in the Islamic World.

Its turkophone German lady author specialized on the Turkish writer and human rights activist Orhan Pamuk (p. 56), winner of the German Booksellers’ prize in 2005 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 2006, is holding as well honorary doctorates from the universities of Berlin and Brussels.

In preparation of her book on the role of Istanbul and “its melancholic soul” in Pamuk’s work, the author was able to spend three years in that city