

Ziabari: The number of Muslims in Europe and the United States is growing rapidly. Many of these Muslims are immigrants who move from developing or underdeveloped countries to the West in search of more prosperous, peaceful lives. However, they are often finding their daily lives more challenging as their civil liberties and social freedoms are being restricted. Are Western governments not responsible for the wellbeing and security of their Muslim minorities?

Lean: European and American governments have an obligation to support the rights of everyone who calls those places home. Ultimately, though, government is a flimsy and often-pathetic institution. Its leaders campaign on value issues, but govern on special interests. A congressman from the deep American South would have little incentive to support policies that facilitate mosque construction or alleviate religious discrimination toward Muslims in the workplace. The same is true for various locales in Europe: An Austrian or Belgian politician caters to the desires of the group that elects them.

This domestic political malaise is also tightly woven to the banner of foreign events — flashpoints of violence like ISIS [Islamic State] beheadings — that sow angst at home by fortifying nationalism and common identity. In Europe as in the United States, this may mean a coalescence of racial and religious groups whereby the interests of the majority (non-Muslims) prevail over the minority, Muslims.

Ziabari: Statistics show that of all terrorist attacks that take place in Europe and the United States, only a small portion are carried out by Muslims. For instance, a Europol report showed that in 2010, of the 249 terrorist attacks on European soil, only three were perpetrated by Muslims. This is while a large number of politicians, law enforcement officials and media are inclined to repeatedly talk about the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and Islamist terrorism. What's your take on that?

Sean Hannity / Wiki Commons

Sean Hannity / Wiki Commons

Lean: It is true that the number of terrorist attacks carried out by Muslims in Europe is quite small, compared to other groups. In the United States, that is also the case. The University of North Carolina and the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security released a research report in 2014, indicating that since the attacks of 9/11, Muslim-linked terrorism has killed only 37 people in the United States. Nearly 200,000 people have been killed by gun violence in that same period of time.

The problem, however, is that for most Europeans and Americans, Islam and Muslims are foreign. They exit “over there,” beyond “our” borders. As a result, it's not the instances of domestic terrorism that we focus on as much as it is the instances of foreign terrorism: groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and others. These groups do kill lots of people. Those images, which circulate on mainstream news media, are not balanced by depictions of non-violent Muslims. This results in a warped view of reality, and the real danger posed by these terrorist outfits is countered, in part, with domestic

programs that are premised on the faulty notion that Muslim-led domestic terrorism is the biggest threat.

Ziabari: Yes, as you say, the rise of the terrorist group ISIS has significantly contributed to the growth of anti-Islamic attitudes across the world, making those who believe the Islamic State is representative of Muslims more doubtful about the peaceful nature of Islam. How is it possible to make these skeptics believe that ISIS doesn't have anything to do with Islam, and that all major Muslim scholars, both Sunni and Shiite, have denounced its atrocities and shameful killings of children, women and innocent men?

Lean: What will cause people to understand that ISIS has nothing to do with the normative Islam practiced by the vast majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims? In a word: time.

These types of prejudgments are not easily rectifiable. Fortunately, however, Muslims today have more tools at their disposal to push back against prejudice and persistent misinformation. While the Internet is a breeding ground for Islamophobia, it's also fast-becoming an outlet for viral memes and other expressions that offer nuanced views. Popular culture, too, is playing a major role. Wildly popular comedians and actors — most of them non-Muslims — are using their platforms to speak out against misinformation that targets Muslims. And as Muslim voices become more centrally featured in the world of popular culture and news — film, television, radio, etc — Americans and Europeans will become more comfortable with the idea that groups like ISIS are aberrations.

Ziabari: In your internationally-acclaimed book, you called Islamophobia an industry. Do you think Islamophobia is really being promoted as an industry? Are there systematic efforts at work to propagate an illusory fear of Muslims, to make them the bogeyman and enemy who is responsible for all the evil that happens today?

Lean: The Islamophobia “industry” is not like the automobile industry: There are no large companies, conglomerations, CEOs or assembly lines. But it is an industry in a more organic sense. A network exists — one that connects dozens of individuals and groups on several different continents. Major foundations with tens of millions of dollars (Donor's Capital Fund, Scaife Foundation, Bradley Foundation, etc) donate money to think-tanks and pseudo-scholarly organizations and projects (Clarion Project, Middle East Forum, Horowitz Freedom Center, Center for Security Policy, etc) that reflect the donors' ideological bent.

Pamela Geller

Pamela Geller

These organizations and projects rely on a handful of self-proclaimed experts on Islam, the Middle East, terrorism, national security and related fields, [including] Daniel Pipes, Robert Spencer, Zuhdi Jasser, Steven Emerson, Frank Gaffney, etc. These individuals manufacture narratives about Muslims and Islam — threat of sharia law in the United

States, supposed influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, etc — that are disseminated to bloggers and activists such as Pamela Geller, Brigitte Gabriel [and] Walid Shoebat, who are paid hefty salaries to propagate them.

These groups, which thrive on conservative politics and hard-line support for Israel, form part of an online echo chamber (Jihad Watch, Atlas Shrugs, BareNaked Islam, Gates of Vienna, Blazing Cat Fur, etc). Additionally, through their best-selling books, speaking tours, consulting fees and public events, the individuals in this “industry” draw incomes well into the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

Ziabari: What role have corporate media companies played in stoking Islamophobia? Media organizations in the West normally take pride in their honesty, transparency and independence. Do they take orders from governments, or simply run their campaign of fear-mongering against Muslims on the basis of their editorial policies?

Lean: The media plays a central role in stoking Islamophobia. While they don’t take cues from the government, they do advance stories that speak to the preferences of their respective audiences. The media’s problem on this issue is threefold.

First, Muslim voices are largely absent. Most often, it’s non-Muslims talking about Muslims, rather than talking with them or featuring them as anchors, reporters, producers or others who can insert nuance, complexity and nurture a more sensitive conversation.

Second, news media is a corporate venture, and money comes from advertisements, which come from high ratings. The way to keep raking in money is to keep raking in viewers. The way to keep raking in viewers is to keep them glued to the story.

So, how do you keep viewers glued to a story when there is little information to report, for instance, after an explosion somewhere in the world? By asking leading questions that keep the story going. Rather than telling audiences to come back when more information is available, reporters often ask questions that suppose, infer, suggest, hypothesize, insinuate, wonder, imagine, conjecture, etc. They do things other than report the simple facts. An anchor might ask: “Do we have any information that this attack in Kansas was carried out by Islamic terrorists?” Another might wonder: “Could it be that al-Qaeda or ISIS affiliates in Europe were behind this slaughter?” Still, we might hear: “There are no indications at this early point that Muslim extremists were involved.” Suddenly, the possibility of Islam and Muslims being implicated exists, which perpetuates the idea that they are the usual suspects. And this sensational storyline — whether it is true or not — usually keeps people glued to their television sets.

Lastly, in some cases, journalists breach objective protocol altogether and intentionally inflame. Fox News is the archetype, with figures like Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly bloviating on air about “jihad” this, or “sharia” that. A 2011 study by ThinkProgress showed that Fox disproportionately deploys terms that reflect negative views of Muslims, inserting phrases like “radical Islam” into broadcasts significantly more than their competitors. It is also well-documented that Fox’s chief, Roger Ailes, drives news stories

that confirm his paranoid worldview — one that is so teeming with violent Muslims [that] he once put an entire building on lockdown upon seeing a janitor who was wearing “Muslim garb.”

Ziabari: And as the final question, let me refer to one of your previous statements. In a September 2012 interview with Al-Ahram Weekly, you said that Islamophobes and right-wing extremists in the United States make thousands of dollars each year through arousing controversies and spreading hatred against Muslims. How is this possible? Have you really come to the conclusion that Islamophobia is a lucrative industry for right-wingers and neoconservatives?

Lean: Islamophobia is a lucrative industry. It’s a well-paying career for several people, who devote their life’s work to promoting narratives that sustain it.

Take the boorish blogger Pamela Geller, for instance. Tax filings show that she draws an annual salary from her hate group, the American Freedom Defense Initiative, of well over \$200,000. She also draws income from book royalties, donations to her website and public speeches. Robert Spencer, a New Hampshire-based Catholic deacon who operates the online diary JihadWatch, receives nearly that amount each year from David Horowitz’s Freedom Center.

Frank Gaffney, whose DC think tank was behind the unfounded claim that the Muslim Brotherhood have infiltrated the American government, drew a salary of just under \$300,000 in 2011, while David Yerushalmi, who serves as an attorney for Geller and Spencer and who drafted the anti-sharia legislation, raked in more than \$150,000, with much of it coming from consulting fees charged to Gaffney and legal fees paid by “lawfare” cases he filed on behalf of his clients.

The Clarion Fund, which produced the anti-Muslim film *Obsession*, has received more than \$18 million, while Daniel Pipes’ Middle East Forum has reported close to \$6 million in income over the years. The Council on American Islamic Relations reports that between 2008 and 2011, 37 different groups earned a combined \$120 million in total revenue.