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## Islam in the West: Perceptions vs. Reality

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## **Review Essay for *International Studies Review***

### **Books Under Review**

Croft, Stuart (2012). *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Morey, Peter, and Amina Yaquin (2011). *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

### **Islam in the West: Perceptions vs. Reality**

**By Robert J. Pauly, Jr.**

#### **Introduction**

The perceptions members of the societal majority have of their counterparts in minority communities are central to the effective integration of such communities within any country. Such perceptions, in turn, are shaped by interactions between each of those sets of actors, and how they are characterized by government officials, politicians, communal leaders and the media. Regrettably, it is typically the more negative such interactions that drive those representations, particularly when significant acts of violence and resulting costs are involved.

Consider, for instance, the effects on societal perceptions of Muslim communities of terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists, whether members connected to clearly identifiable groups, or not, against targets in the West. Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001 represent the most significant case to date. Other examples include smaller scale strikes undertaken by groups and individuals with Islamic extremist

motivations (and loose connections to Al Qaeda and its affiliates), such as the March 2004 and July 2005 bombings of this transportation systems in Madrid and London, respectively, as well as the November 2009 Fort Hood shootings by Maj. Nidal Malik Hassan and the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings by the brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tasernaev.

The events of 9/11 shocked the populations of United States and the Western world more broadly to an extent that increased the potential for the development of new, if not deepening of already existing, negative perceptions suggesting connections between Muslim communities situated in the West and Islamic extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The subsequent attacks Madrid, London and the United States only reinforced the proclivity for media outlets to report on such connections, rendering the expression of such sentiments by members of the societal majority ever more likely and creating a demand for government officials to development and implement policies designed to mitigate threats posed by Islamic extremism at home and abroad.

Some of the policies put in place by Western governments since 9/11 to counter terrorist threats Islamic extremist groups such as Al Qaeda justify on the basis of extreme, perverted interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunna they advocate have had a tendency to exacerbate the marginalization of Muslim communities and thus undermine their prospects for integration. Such integrative complications growing out of the inaccurate representation of Muslim communities in the West broadly and in the United Kingdom and United States in particular are addressed in two recent books—Stuart Croft's *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (2012) and Peter Morey and Amina Yaquin's *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (2011)—both of which are considered in this review essay.

The essay is organized into five related sections that unfold in the following manner. The first section places the books under review in the context of the existing literature on the causes, characteristics and consequences of the marginalization of Muslims communities in Western societies generally and those in the United States and Western Europe specifically, with an emphasis on the post-9/11 world. The second section reviews the central arguments put forward, identifying the most significant similarities and differences between their authors' approaches in the process. The third section assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of the central arguments articulated in those works. The fourth section specifies the audiences likely to benefit most from reading the books. And the final section presents a set of concluding observations that emphasize the ways that the books assist in the continued development of a cohesive Western Islamic identity that can assist in reducing the marginalization of Muslim communities in the West in the future.

### **Marginalization, Integration and Muslims in the West**

For most of the 20th century, scholarship on the development of Muslim communities in the West and the implications for the governments and minority and majority segments of the populations of the United States and countries of Western Europe in particular was an esoteric field with a limited, relatively broad body of credible literature. That has changed significantly during the post-Cold War era and especially since the events of 9/11, with subfields of that literature expanding across academic disciplines and growing in relevance among academics, policymakers and, increasingly, the general public as well. Two such interconnected subfields are central to this review—the evolution of the identities of Muslim communities in the West, most notably among the American- and European-born younger generations situated therein; and

the ways in which security concerns drive societal majority perceptions and media representations of those communities. Each is addressed here, followed by an explanation of how Croft's, and Morey and Yaquin's, works fit in.

Identity is central to the roles minority groups play in any society and, not surprisingly, one can study the ways in which the identities of Muslim communities have evolved in countries throughout the West from a range of single-, multi- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, most notably history, international studies, philosophy, political science, religion and sociology. Among those who have applied multiple such approaches to researching Islam in Western Europe and the United States most effectively over the past two decades are Jocelyn Cesari (2006), Gilles Kepel (2006), Peter Mandaville (2003) and Tariq Ramadan (2005). Prominent works focusing on the evolution of Muslim communal identities in the United States and Western European states, respectively, include Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (2002) and Karen Isaacson Leonard (2003) for the former and Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vasse (2006), Jorgen Nielsen (1995), Robert Pauly (2004) and Ramadan (2000), for the latter.

Since 9/11, concerns over terrorism have played a prominent, albeit often unfair, part in shaping Western perceptions of Islam and the practice of that faith by Muslims living in the West, especially members of the younger generations. Above all, terrorist attacks carried out against civilian targets within the populations of countries such as Spain, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States, few though they are, have driven media depictions of Islam that isolate Muslims as existing outside of Western norms and thus exacerbate their societal marginalization. At the head of an ever more robust literature in this issue area are recent contributions from Cesari (2013) Ayhan Kaya (2012), John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (2011) and Ramadan (2009).

Of the aforementioned scholars, Ramadan in particular focuses on the development of a Western Islamic identity, one that interprets the Qur'an and Sunna in a fashion informed by, and applicable to, Muslims' daily lives in the United States and Western Europe. He emphasizes the importance for Muslims to seize the opportunity to move that initiative forward, stressing,

It is up to Muslim individuals to be and become committed citizens, aware of their responsibilities and rights. Beyond the minority reflex or the temptation to see themselves as victims, they have the means to accept a new age of their history. For those who were born in the West or are citizens, it is no longer a question of "settlement" or "integration" but rather of "participation" and "contribution." My point is that we have now moved, and must move, to the age of "post-integration" discourse: we must henceforth determine the profound, accepted meaning of belonging. (Ramadan, 2010, 5-6).

Through their analyses of the development and reinforcement of public perceptions of Western Muslim communities, Croft's and Morey and Yaquin's books add valuable insights that contribute to a better understanding of the challenges the younger generations within those communities continue to face in shaping their identities. The most daunting such challenges is often to do so in ways that demonstrate clearly the inaccuracies in media-reinforced images of Islam as threatening.

### **Security and Muslim Communities in the West: Common and Distinctive Themes**

The books under consideration here, Croft's *Securitizing Islam* and Morey and Yaquin's *Framing Muslims*, are best examined through a review of the most significant commonalities and

distinctions evident in comparing the conceptual themes, methodological approaches and empirical evidence they present.

Thematically, both works correctly emphasize linkages between security concerns and Islam generally and Muslim communities in the West specifically since the events of 9/11. Further, they each recognize the need to focus on media and, to an extent, governmental tendency to fallaciously characterize Islam broadly and Muslims communities in the West as homogeneous rather than heterogeneous entities. However, there are also useful distinctions to be drawn. Geographically, for instance, Croft examines Muslim communities in the United Kingdom in particular, while Morey and Yaquin focus on Islam in the United Kingdom, United States and the West more broadly. In addition, Croft provides a more theoretically grounded basis for analysis, one drawing from the securitization model, which focuses on security at the individual level rather than at the state or international systemic levels.

With respect to methodology, the books share emphases on the utility of drawing on a range of academic disciplines to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issue area of Islam in the West and also on the importance of identifying qualitative cultural factors that drive both the evolution of Muslim communal identities and their characterization by Western media outlets and governments therein. While each book uses case study analysis, Croft focuses on one case (the United Kingdom) as opposed to Morey and Yaquin's multiple cases (the United Kingdom and United States).

In terms of evidentiary sourcing and analysis, each work uses a credible blend of academic and media sources to trace the development and reinforcement of perceptions of the identities of Muslim communities in the West. Further, both construct effective literature-informed foundations for analysis, followed by an effective blend of secondary academic sources

and primary research on media reports and government documents. The one significant distinction to be drawn is Croft's reliance on government policy documents as opposed to Morey and Yaquin's focus on broad scope of media sources, to include television series and film.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Approaches to Security and Perceptions of Islam in the West**

As with any books, the two this essay assesses have both strengths and weaknesses, which are identified in turn and then woven into a broader comparative discussion on the roles of Muslims in the Western societies in which they are situated at present and the prospects for the evolution of their identities in the future.

The principal strengths of Croft's book are threefold. First, he recognizes the near certainty that continuing media mischaracterizations of Islam generally and Muslim communities in the West specifically as threatening monoliths will further marginalize those communities and polarize the societies in which they are situated. Second, he presents sound, theoretically-grounded analysis examining the "securitization" of Islam in the United Kingdom. Third, he does a commendable job supporting that theory with the requisite evidence drawn from media reports and government documents. The work's only minor weakness is its limitation in focusing exclusively on a case study of the United Kingdom rather than working in a bit more comparative analysis with Muslim communal roles in other Western state societies.

Morey and Yaquin's book also has three significant strengths. First, like Croft, they see the danger that misrepresentative "sound bite" characterizations of Islam will only perpetuate Muslim minority vs. societal majority divisions in Western states. Second, they draw on multiple academic disciplines to achieve nuanced analysis from prudent range of perspectives. Third, they present a greater breadth of analysis by comparing cases of what they describe as

stereotypically negative portrayals of Muslims in the United Kingdom and United States. One weakness is the need for a consideration of the reluctance of Western governments to characterize Muslim communities inaccurately because of a reliance on sound bites to chartering those communities in stark, monolithic terms, whether good or bad in orientation.

### **Suggested Readers for Continuing Debate on Security and Perceptions of Islam in the West**

The arguments articulated by the authors of the works under review are most appropriate for three brands of audiences—scholars who focus on the issue of Islam in the West from a range of academic disciplines; members of the media and government officials whose representations of, and policies directed toward, Muslim communities, affect majority-minority relationships in Western states; and the individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims, who engage in those relationships. Those sets of readers each have distinctive interests and can thus benefit from the books considered in different ways.

Most importantly, from the perspectives of their academic counterparts, Croft, Morey and Yaquin have used their books to continue to push forward the ongoing (and often interconnected) debates over the nexus where media portrayals of Islam, governmental policies targeted toward Muslims, individually and collectively, and Muslim communal behavior in the post-9/11 era come together. In particular, scholars and students interested in the evolution of the identities of younger generations of Muslims in the West, especially those born and/or raised there, can benefit from perusing both books.

With respect to government policy makers and practitioners on one hand and reporters, editors and producers from media outlets on the other, *Securitizing Islam and Framing Muslims* provide evidence-based opportunities to reconsider the ways in which they view Muslim

communities, and craft policies toward and present stories about the individuals therein.

Developing clearer, much more nuanced understandings of the roles a range of interpretations of Islam play in Muslims' lives would be beneficial to governmental and media actors alike.

And, last, notwithstanding the academic nature of the two books, members of the heretofore public in countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States, could consider some of the themes Croft, Morey and Yaquin raise as a proverbial first step in reconsidering the ways they perceive Islam and interact with the Muslims they encounter in their daily lives. Such reconsiderations, in turn, could lead to behavioral changes that produce more constructive minority-majority interactions moving forward.

### **Conclusions**

This essay was designed to achieve first central objectives through the presentation of the sections that unfolded above. First, it built the requisite academic foundation to situate the books under review properly in the contexts of the existing literature on the evolution of Muslim communities in the West generally and perceptions of the identities of individuals within such communities from both Muslim and societal majority perspectives. Second, it identified the commonalities and divergences in the issues addressed and arguments presented by the authors of the two works. Third, it assessed the relative strengths and weaknesses of those arguments. And, fourth, it specified the three types of audiences likely to benefit most from the insights the books' authors put forward.

Above all, both books correctly emphasize the extent to which the roles Muslim communities play in Western states are increasingly central to the maintenance political and social stability therein. In addition, they make the necessary connection between the growing

visibility of Muslim communities in Western states that media outlets often portray in polarizing rather than more accurate, nuanced fashions. In each case, perceptions of Muslims' identities are not likely to grow more accurate without a genuine willingness of the members of the younger generations to impress upon the societal majority the diversity evident in ongoing constructions of American, British and broader European and Western Islamic identities.

Ultimately, in light of Croft's and Morey and Yaquin's findings—those of the shared and distinctive varieties—it is quite clear that these authors have a great deal to contribute to helping shaped the continued development of a cohesive European Islamic identity, one that can assist in reducing the marginalization of Muslim communities in the West.

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