

## Book Review

**Arun Kundnani** *The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*, Verso, 2015, 336pp, £9.99

Three terror attacks in three months have left the British security services desperately searching for ways to prevent another atrocity being committed in our streets. But the frightening reality is that terrorism has become impossible to police. The attacks in Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge were carried out by extremists who had nothing in common apart from a view of the world that places the murder of innocent people at the heart of a warped ideology. Their different ages, ethnicities and social backgrounds demonstrate the size of the task now facing counter-terrorism agencies in this country .... These men were all born or raised in Britain and radicalised in very different ways. Although Scotland Yard and MI5 were aware of them, there is no evidence that the men ever knew each other. Their circumstances comprise such a wide spectrum of behaviour, associations and life histories that they do not fit a straightforward terrorist profile. Of urgent concern for the security services is understanding why Masood, Abedi, Butt and the third London Bridge attacker, Youssef Zaghba, a 22-year-old Moroccan-Italian, were all known to them but were not stopped. The answer is that the security services were – and are – drowning in the sheer volume of police reports, intelligence and referrals from members of the public. In essence, MI5 is trying to establish the moment when a nonviolent view of the world turns to thoughts of terrorism. (Robert Verkaik, *Why it's becoming impossible to stop the terrorists*, Guardian, 8 June 2017).

In its assumption of ideology and radicalisation as key elements driving violent acts, the quote above highlights some of the problematic conceptions informing UK and US state strategies to address domestic terrorism that Kundnani's book sets out to critique. The piece also draws attention to the volume of people having been put

under surveillance since the Prevent programme was initiated by the Blair Government in 2006, and how ineffective the strategy can prove to be.

Kundnani argues that state strategies to tackle terrorism are shaped by the unfounded assumption that ‘Islamist’ ideology is the root cause of terrorism. This analysis, he argues, is based on two ideas: first, what he calls a ‘culturalist’ account which suggests that Islamic culture has failed to adapt to modernity and that this is exacerbated by a lack of separation between Islam (religious power) and the state (political power); and second, a reformist account that 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologues have perverted Islam’s message to produce a totalitarian ideology. The concept of ideology is central to these accounts, in which holding a specific ideology leads to terrorist acts. This approach, he suggests, has led to a conflation of Muslim culture with terrorism and structural racism towards Muslims. In particular, Kundnani contends, such an analysis ignores the role of social and political circumstances (e.g. Western imperialism) in shaping how people understand and act upon the world, and the way in which Western states have been increasingly willing to use violence affecting innocent civilians in a wider range of contexts (pp10, 55-88).

As Verkaik points out in the quote above, a key concern of Western Governments has been the risk posed by “home grown” terrorists who have, as they understand it, become radicalised and gone on to commit violent acts. Kundnani lays out the arguments of key theorists who offer explanatory theories for this phenomenon which suggest that there are specific indicators than can be statistically associated with radicalisation. This notion of radicalisation has become central to state strategies to tackle terrorism. However, as Kundani points out, none of the studies cited can prove causality, i.e. that there is a certain link between holding specific ideas and committing violent acts. Key omissions in these influential studies are the failure to study people other than Muslims (far right groups for example) and people who hold strong views but don’t commit violent acts. Importantly, the social and political context is not considered, in particular the role of Western state foreign policy impacting on Muslim populations in other countries.

This emphasis on looking for indicators of ‘radicalisation’ as a precursor to potential violence has led to huge numbers of, mainly Muslim, people being put under surveillance. Indicators of radicalisation are specifically linked to Muslim cultural identity, style of dress, adherence to religious practices and so on, leading to an ‘othering’ of Muslim identity and a justification of their poor treatment. The reformist account focuses on recruiting Muslim populations considered more sympathetic to Western values (ie who reject violence) to win the hearts and minds of those who might be influenced by the more radical elements of Islam. This has led to a spurious assessment of specific forms of Islamic identity as more or less likely to lead to radicalisation. Definitions of extremism then can encompass conservative religious beliefs, the idea of a global Islamic identity taking precedence over national identity or radical opposition to Western governments (p279). Kundnani also convincingly argues that the concept of the ‘bad Muslim’ is set against the construction of liberalism as an identity into which “lesser people’s need to be civilised” rather than liberal democracies representing a space where different ways of being can come together (p287).

Of particular interest to Community Educators is Kundnani’s critique of the policy of utilising soft power strategies in the UK framed as ‘Community Engagement’ (i.e. Prevent and Channel project). This is ostensibly about improving community relations, “winning hearts and minds” and diverting young people from potential terrorism but, essentially, it is about intelligence gathering. This has led to youth workers, teachers, local charities, University staff and Muslim people themselves being encouraged to perform surveillance and report on (young) people perceived to be a (or at) risk. As Kundnani points out in a postscript, this led in 2013 to 153 children under the age of eleven being identified as potential terrorists (p 292). Aside from the inherent racism at the root of these approaches, a key concern is the insidious undermining of civil liberties, freedom of speech and the suppression of dissenting views which can be constructed as indicators of radicalisation, but which might actually serve to encourage reasoned debate on the implications of Western states’ violent foreign policy.

Particularly alarming is Kundnani's accounts of FBI *agent provocateurs*, who have basically encouraged vulnerable individuals to commit what they think will be a violent act (in some cases induced by promise of financial reward), allowing the FBI to claim they have stopped a terrorist (who was unlikely to have done anything without their intervention) and resulting in the individuals concerned receiving long prison sentences. In addition, Kundnani documents the harassment of Muslim populations and organisations either considered to have the potential for extremism or indeed being criminalised as extremist in a US political context resonant of the "reds under the bed" hysteria surrounding communists during the McCarthy era. In the UK he highlights the rise of a far right focus on attacking Muslim populations, ironically distancing themselves from Nazism by recruiting Zionists to their cause. In both the UK and US far right positions and harassment of Muslim populations are implicitly justified by state explanations of terrorism, which effectively encourage Islamophobia.

An important point that Kundnani makes is that the political class in Western economies essentially do not want an active Muslim citizenry that asks them to address issues of social and economic inequality, preferring to construct a model of 'the good Muslim' as one who protects or at least does not threaten Western economic interests at home and abroad. This, he argues, is counterproductive:

Al- Qaeda's violent vanguardism thrives in contexts where politics has been brutally suppressed or blandly gentrified. (p15)

He goes on to argue:

What is needed is less state surveillance and enforced conformity and more critical thinking and political empowerment. The role of communities in countering terrorism is not to institute self-censorship but to confidently construct political spaces where young people can politicise their disaffection into visions of how the world might be better organised, so that radical alternatives to terrorist vanguardism can emerge (p289).

This is an accessibly-written and important book which draws the reader into each chapter by telling the stories of individuals to illuminate his key points. As workers who can be recruited to support the domestic ‘war on terror’ and as citizens who can be encouraged to fear ‘Islamic extremism’, Kundnani reminds us of the importance of a reasoned political analysis of the nature and extent of the problem to be addressed.

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