The Islamophobia Industry and the Demonization of Palestine: Implications for American Studies

Hatem Bazian

The field of American studies must more aggressively tackle the spread of Islamophobia because it has become an overtly acceptable racist discourse that is saturating civil society in the United States and Western societies in general.[1] Certainly, when racism toward a group is tolerated in public discourse, then in due time racist groups and individuals end up capturing society's political agenda and directing their racism at all marginalized communities. The current debate on immigration and crime is a case in point. The "othering" of Islam and Muslims has become an acceptable norm. The Muslim subject is problematized at the university, where the study of Muslims' lived experiences are relegated to religious studies or Middle/Near Eastern studies and included in other disciplines as a problem.[2] Islamophobia is narrowly approached without interconnectedness to existing and historical otherness in race, gender, immigration, and diaspora, transnational, and "postcolonial" studies.[3] American studies more than any other field should account for Islamophobia as a new signpost for overt racism, which, I argue, created a new rationale for more intense violent racism toward African Americans, Latinos, and minorities in general. When President Barack Obama was attacked for his supposed Muslim background, which was used by racists as a signpost for his blackness, the emphatic insistence that he is not should have been recognized as inherently racist.[4] While work on Islamophobia in the media, US Empire, and restrictions imposed on Muslims is already under way, one critical blind spot in research is the explicit link between pro-Israeli groups and organizations and the effort at demonization and otherization of Islam and Muslims in the United States and Europe with a focus on maintaining and consolidating support for Israel.

I do maintain that pro-Israel groups in the United States are the primary funders, producers, organizers, and distributors of Islamophobic content, which is dominating political and public discourses in Western societies. Critically,

the entanglement of pro-Israel organizations and groups in Islamophobia and the demonization of Palestine and Palestinians continues to reinforce academic distance from the subject because of existing fear of being targeted for writing or highlighting Israeli links. Though this brings up a host of issues about Islamophobia, this essay focuses on a particular segment of Islamophobia Industry that is linked directly to the pro-Israel agenda, that is, the groups and organizations entangled in promoting the otherization of Muslims but whose central concern is to undermine the possibilities of Palestinian advocacy. In particular, this essay attempts to respond to the following questions: Who are the groups that are producing Islamophobia, what are their links to those involved in defending Israel politics, and how should American studies research approach it in the coming years? How are these organizations connected to academic discourses? How is Islamophobia used to garner further support for Israel, and how successful has it been in the post-9/11 era? What has been the response of the US academy in general and American studies in particular to Islamophobia and/or support for Israel?

An Islamophobic, Orientalist, and Racist Ad Campaign

In spring 2012 the American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), an organization established by Pamela Geller, a leading figure in the Islamophobic global network,[5] produced a series of national advertisements for buses, train stations, and billboards with the accompanying message: "In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel, Defeat Jihad." Compared with earlier Islamophobic campaigns, these ads made an explicit connection with Israel, the "war on Jihad," support for Israel, and the racist framing of Palestinians to whom the ads explicitly refer to as "savages." The ads appeared across the United States, and in a few cities, including San Francisco and New York, cultural artists mounted a visual and resistance campaign by painting over the ads and contesting the appearance of racism in public space. According to Geller's website, these ads were in response to two ad campaigns. The first, by the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), featured "My Jihad" as a theme, to challenge essentialist and racist political and media discourses on Islam and Muslims by presenting a more nuanced understanding of the term *Jihad* in a post-9/11 era. The second campaign, labeled by AFDI as a "vicious anti-Israel campaign," involved ads placed in train stations showing the shrinking map of Palestine.[6]

Another Islamophobic and more inflammatory set of AFDI ads showed

Haj Amin al-Husseini, the pre-1948 Palestinian leader, sitting next to Adolf Hitler. According to AFDI, this new Islamophobic ad was in response to a campaign by American Muslims for Palestine (AMP) that called for cutting US aid to Israel.[7] The AFDI ads are part of a larger campaign aimed at vilifying Islam and Muslims that is promoted by pro-Israel and pro-Zionist producers of Islamophobia. The ads make explicit and immediate connections between Islamophobic rhetoric directed at Islam and Muslims and the centrality of Israel as an essential element in the open-ended "War on Terror," thus constructing Palestinians ontologically as archetypal terrorists in order to maintain uncritical US support for the Zionist state.

In the post-9/11 era, a number of US-based individuals, groups, and organizations managed to successfully pursue this agenda of employing Islamophobia to centralize Israel and demonize Palestinians. This cluster of pro-Israel Islamophobic groups is considerably understudied by US academics despite the increased number of published works on Islamophobia. The link between the two is evident in the recently announced website, Canary Mission, a highly Islamophobic site that gives McCarthyism a new lease on life and is centered on countering BDS activism on campus and promoting Israel's agenda.[8] Historically, US academics for the most part have kept a distance from anything pertaining to Israel out of fear that they will be targeted and face erroneous charges of anti-Semitism. Those who venture to deal with the Palestine–Israel conflict outside the pro-Israel accepted parameters are an exception rather than the norm, and most academics stay clear of the subject altogether. Cases like that of Joseph Massad at Columbia University, Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, and Rabab Abdulhadi at San Francisco State University illustrate the consequences of writing and speaking about Palestine in the US academy.[9]

The Islamophobia industry, while representing a tiny minority of individuals and organizations operating across the Atlantic, shares resources and enjoys official support in some countries,[10] and has been able to shape the political discourse and influence policy debates on security, immigration and training.[11] In *Legislating Fear*, a report published on September 19, 2013, CAIR identified thirty-seven groups at the core of the Islamophobia industry and another thirty-two peripheral organizations that have together spent $119,662,719 million between 2008 and 2011.[12] CAIR's report builds on the work of the Center for American Progress Action Fund that issued an earlier study titled *Fear, Inc.*[13] The report traced the funding of the Islamophobic industry. At the hub of the anti-Muslim Islamophobic industry sits the pro-Israel organiza-

tions and groups with a pernicious anti-Palestinian sentiments undergirding the campaign.

Post-9/11 and the Shaping of an Israel-Friendly US Public Opinion

The 2001 attacks introduced a shift in US foreign policy and introduced a more muscular and military interventionist approach toward the Arab and Muslim world with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as a robust US military presence in over thirty new countries.[14] The coinciding of the 9/11 attacks with the start of the second Palestinian Intifada presented a golden opportunity for a strong cadre of neoconservatives connected to the American Enterprise Institute to push for a more decisively pro-Israeli stand in the Bush administration.[15] The top tier of the Bush administration adopted a neoconservative line of thinking.[16] The neoconservatives in the administration were committed to Israel's defense and opposed to territorial compromise with the Palestinians; several had participated in drafting the "Clean Break" strategy in 1998.[17]

The post–September 11 shift focused on a preemptive strategy directed at what they called "terrorist" organizations with global reach and nation-states that provide support or shelter to groups, such as Al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations, but not groups engaged in national struggles like Palestinian factions and the Basque separatists in Spain. President Bush's "either you are with us or with the terrorists" framing forced nation-states to make policy decisions to facilitate access to execute this global war. The global alliance that emerged cooperated in the "War on Terror," with Israel playing a central role, providing training and know-how and marketing its "extensive expertise" in fighting terrorism. Israel's security agencies jumped into the counterterrorism-training business and managed to become key players in local, regional, national, and international joint terrorism programs. For example, Urban Shield, a joint-counterterrorism training program held in the San Francisco Bay Area, which centers Islamophobia in its conceptual framework and posits Muslims and Arabs as potential threats in its training program, has the Israeli security team playing a major role in setting the scenarios for supposed terrorist attacks and providing guidance on how to profile terrorists.[18]

Israel was a key participant in the War on Terror, highlighting the "Iraqi threat" that was presented as directly "linked" to the funding of suicide bombings. Critical to the Iraq campaign was a communication strategy devised by US pro-Israel supporters to influence public opinion and maintain the focus on Saddam Hussein while managing to intensify a negative view of the Pales-

tinians. PR firms like the Luntz Research Companies pushed public opinion farther to the right and in support of the Iraq invasion as a way to defend Israel. The PR document prepared by this organization offered specific talking points and recommendations on how to speak about Israel to the US public.[19] While some might point to a conspiracy, the reality is that a well-organized, disciplined, and well-funded Zionist and neoconservative network operated in an ideologically fertile and supportive administration with allies in sensitive positions who managed to shape public debates on issues pertaining to war at home and abroad. Indeed, those who operated in this space managed to refortify and again consolidate Israel's narrative in the United States and dominate the discourse inside academe, including American studies.

Israeli spokespeople were very effective in deploying their messaging at the local, regional, and national levels in the United States, while the pro-Palestine responses were often delayed and singular in nature. The communication strategy was built on years of negative stereotyping, and misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims made the language easier to deploy in an existing productive and orientalist materiality. Edward Said (*Orientalism* [1978] and *Covering Islam* [1981]) and Jack Shaheen (*Reel Bad Arabs* [2001]) ground the subject and point to the cumulative effect of such pro-Israeli strategies. The pro-Israel communication strategy was deployed in existing racist and essentialist representations of Arabs and Muslims, which, in post-9/11, were successfully focused on Palestinians in general and Hamas in particular as the archetypal terrorist.

This communication strategy made it possible for Israel to become more connected to US policy formations in fighting the War on Terror. More precisely, Israel's know-how on fighting Palestinian "terrorism" was peddled and packaged as the best and most successful approach to dealing with a fomented Islamic threat. Overnight, Israel became the model for such a strategy with the emergence of numerous Israel-linked corporate outfits offering training services and counterterrorism strategies that helped consolidate the stereotypical image of the Arab, Muslim, and most definitely Palestinian terrorist across the United States, as joint terrorism task forces and intelligence agencies adopted wholesale the Israeli security framework and thus Israeli communication strategy, with many taking up training courses or visiting Israel with a distinctive and hostile view of Arabs and Muslims upon their return.[20]

Consequently, the US academy was brought into the same project with immediate development of courses that further problematize Islam and Muslims as archetypal terrorists, investment in teaching the Arabic language as a necessary service to the national security apparatus, and cooperation with Israeli

institutions on studying violence and counterterrorism. In addition, several key Islamophobic figures became regular guests at universities, including a select group of Muslims connected and funded by the same Islamophobic industry.[21] The result is that Islam and Muslims are studied in the academy as an inferior and terrorist "other" in need of interventions and remedies. Furthermore, the ever-present link to the questions or concerns of Israel-affiliated scholars dominate the framing of Islam and Muslims in the US academy, with a constant litmus test applied to individual scholars on Israel and Palestine, as the latest case of Salaita firing illustrates this point clearly.[22]

Further, almost all US top leaders have visited Israel to get "educated" about the challenges facing the country and Israel's effectiveness in fighting "terrorism." The fully funded trips to Israel by US politicians, journalists, and academics are designed to shape public discourse, since the participants begin to use Israeli talking points when discussing Palestine, Arabs, and Muslims. The participants who went on these fully paid tours included a large number of university presidents and top administrative leaders on campus.[23] These trips and Israeli securitized training programs are designed to increase support for Israel and have diverse spokespeople who can influence public opinion and maintain hegemonic backing for Israel in the United States. Recently, Shalom Hartman Institute's Muslim Leadership Initiative began to target American Muslim leaders for fully funded trips.[24]

Israel's communications strategy also includes high-quality documentaries aimed at constructing threats posed by US-based Muslim groups. These documentaries included a sophisticated and systematic attempt at establishing a "link" between international terrorist groups and American Muslim organizations in a strategy intended to remove any distinctions between these groups to justify Israel's actions against the Palestinians. This strategy is intended to tarnish Muslim organizations and put them on the defensive and exclude them from policy discussions, as seen in the attacks on CAIR, American Muslim Alliance, Muslim American Society, and American Muslims for Palestine.

These documentaries made constant references to Palestinian violence while selectively providing outrageous and out-of-context ahistorical images from religious figures for maximum negative impact.[25] The high point in the Islamophobic pro-Israeli documentary industry was in 2008, when twenty-eight million copies of *Obsession: Radical Islam's War against the West*, a film produced and funded by the Clarion Fund,[26] were distributed in swing states before the general elections to influence the vote against then presidential democratic candidate, Barack Obama. The goal was to influence the outcome

of the elections by drawing right-wing anti-Muslim voters' attention to Obama's father's name, Husain, a common name among Arabs and Muslims. We do not have data on the effectiveness of the documentary in shaping voting behavior. However, I maintain that the cumulative effect can be detected in the 2010 elections, which witnessed victories by Tea Party candidates, who used anti-Muslim rhetoric in their electoral campaigns.[27]

After the release of *Obsession*, *The Third Jihad* was another high-quality propaganda documentary produced and funded by the Clarion Fund. The target was American Muslims who were accused of having clandestine links with groups defined as terrorist by the US government, with an emphasis on demonizing of Palestine and the Palestinian struggle. The goal was to banish a number of Arab and Muslim organizations, such as CAIR and ADC, from policymaking circles, put them on the defensive, and confine US public space to pro-Israel right-wing advocacy.

In a recent article analyzing a host of survey results since 2001, Charles Kurzman concludes that the data illustrate how "American attitudes toward Muslim Americans have grown more negative" and that "a growing segment of the . . . population is willing to express negative views about Muslim Americans in recent years."[28] More alarmingly, the data show that the percentage of Americans responding unfavorably to Muslims in general has steadily increased since 2006. The survey results raise important questions about the causes for such a shift, the forces behind it, and how best to reverse it in the future. Indeed, the alarming data reflect the success of the Islamophobia industry and its massive investment in demonizing Muslims as a launching pad for pro-Israel groups from which to maintain US unconditional support for Israel.

One way to understand the unfolding pro-Israel strategy is to extend Edward Said's use of "Latent" and "Manifest Orientalism" to the study of Islamophobia. Said argued that Arab and Muslim subjects are constructed and "judged in terms of, and in comparison to, the West, so they are always the Other, the conquerable, and the inferior."[29] Kurzman's and Said's writings bring into focus the link between what I refer to as latent and manifest Islamophobia.[30] Latent Islamophobia is conceived through an inception process using films, news reports, media talking heads, book publishing, and emphasis on Islam as a violent, backward, and oppressive religion inclined toward despotism and lack of progress. Culture production is not independent of politics or economy; rather, it is informed and hegemonically determined by it.

Manifest Islamophobia is evident in the speeches and writing of Daniel Pipes, a right-wing Israel supporter and founder of the McCarthyite-type web-

site Campus Watch. Speaking before the convention of the American Jewish Congress on October 21, 2001, Pipes stated, "I worry very much from the Jewish point of view that the presence, and increased stature, and affluence, and enfranchisement of American Muslims. . . . will present true dangers to American Jews."[31] This offers a glimpse into some of the thinking behind the Islamophobia industry and how it mobilizes to demonize of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians.

Conclusion

Academe should take the lead in exploring the entanglement of the pro-Israel groups and organizations in Islamophobia content production. Scholars in American studies should centralize research and teaching about Islamophobia because of the impact it has in normalizing racist discourses in society. I urge American studies scholars to be at the forefront and earnestly embrace Islamophobia studies with intersectionality and connectedness to all struggles for social justice while also affirming the centrality of Palestine's narrative in the field. In this regard, the forum on Palestine in American studies can play a vital role in collaboratively addressing the Islamophobia crisis with regular panels at the annual conference and regional academic workshops on how to teach and counter it on campus and community levels through partnerships with the American Cultures Community Engaged Scholarship. Lastly, American studies scholars should build robust academic relations with Palestinian universities, foster exchange programs, and proactively seek to centralize Palestinian narratives in the conversation and expose Israel's role in promoting a racist and hostile campus and civil society environments that seek to limit academic freedom and speech while hiding behind distortions about BDS, Palestine, Islam, Muslims and the "War on Terror."[32]

Notes
1. The term *American* and *America* are used in this essay to denote the United States of America and not other parts of the Americas; while it is a common usage, it excludes all the nations and inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere who have equal claim to it.
2. See www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/10/souls-muslim-folk-20131029124336354563.html and http://www.dailysabah.com/columns/hatem-bazian/2015/04/27/the-muslim-question.
3. Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric, postcolonial, and orientalist global power structures. It is directed at a constructed global Muslim threat, which is used to maintain and extend existing disparities in economic, political, social, and cultural relations.

4.   See polling data at www.vox.com/2015/2/25/8108005/obama-muslim-poll and www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/aug/26/why-do-so-many-people-think-obama-muslim/.

5.   The Islamophobia global network is a cluster of groups and organizations that cooperate, share information, and cross-reference each other's work to maximize the targeting of Muslims in the United States and Europe but also increasingly in parts of Asia and Africa. The Center for American Progress produced two reports, *Fear Inc.* and *Fear Inc. 2.0.* CAIR also produced *Legislating Fear*, which documented thirty-seven core groups at the hub of the Islamophobia network and thirty-two on the periphery. These three documents provide a window into much of the efforts directed against Muslims and Islam.

6.   See www.komonews.com/news/local/Defeat-jihad-ad-appears-on-TriMet-vehicles-174480551.html.

7.   See www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/dr-gridlock/wp/2014/05/15/in-metrobus-ads-pro-israel-group-features-photo-of-hitler/.

8.   See www.canarymission.org. The boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement is a call made by Palestinian civil society that has become a flash point for organizing on college campuses and activism on the Palestine issue in general.

9.   See, respectively, columbiaspectator.com/2012/01/13/investigation-finds-no-discrimination-barnard, www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/28/aaup-slams-u-illinois-handling-steven-salaita-case, and electronicintifada.net/blogs/nora-barrows-friedman/california-university-comes-defense-professor-targeted-zionist-groups.

10. Political parties from both the right and the left in the parliaments of Austria, France, Netherlands, Belgium England, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany have championed Islamophobic laws and restrictions directed at Muslim minorities.

11. See www.loonwatch.com/2011/09/fbis-involvement-with-anti-muslim-islamophobes-more-extensive-than-previously-admitted/.

12. See www.cair.com/islamophobia/legislating-fear-2013-report.html.

13. See www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/report/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/.

14. See www.sfgate.com/news/article/After-9-11-U-S-policy-built-on-world-bases-2777808.php.

15. Led by Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense; Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy; Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the vice president's chief of staff; Elliott Abrams, the National Security Council staffer for Near East, Southwest Asian, and North African Affairs; Richard Perle, and others. See mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/IsraelLobby.pdf. The American Enterprise Institute is a neoconservative think tank in Washington, DC, that through its resident scholars and researchers played a key role in George W. Bush's administration, and in particular the lead-up to the Iraq invasion (www.aei.org).

16. This group included Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were on the outer circle of this group. See *mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/IsraelLobby.pdf.*

17. See mondoweiss.net/2014/06/about-though-israel. The Clean Break document was an articulation of the neoconservative pro-Israel agenda for the Middle East, which intended to fuse US foreign policy objectives with those that will provide maximum benefit to Israel first and foremost, which included regime change in Iraq.

18. See www.urbanshield.org.

19. See www.leftbusinessobserver.com/LuntzIsrael.text.

20. See www.wired.com/2011/09/fbi-muslims-radical/all/1, www.globalresearch.ca/us-police-get-anti-terror-training-in-israel-on-privately-funded-trips/5403801; www.wired.com/2011/07/fbi-islam-101-guide/; and www.islamophobia.org/islamophobic-individuals/zuhdi-jasser/111-zuhdi-jasser.html.

21. See www.islamophobia.org/islamophobic-individuals/walid-shoebat.html.

22. Three colleagues on academic job interviews in fields not connected to the Palestine–Israel area of research had to endure questioning by committee members on their views on the conflict and how they would deal with it in the classroom. The interviewers continued also during the informal dinner to fish for answers on their important questions as if hired by an Israeli outfit rather than a US-based institution. A fourth colleague whom I know said that he remained away from the Palestine–Israel conflict until he got his tenure to avoid getting derailed in the process. A fifth colleague likewise said that he is careful not to speak about Israel–Palestine and will do so only after getting tenure, and then stated confidently that his "powder is too wet and "he doesn't" want to be in the same position.

23. See electronicintifada.net/blogs/abraham-greenhouse/uc-president-yudof-attend-israeli-conference-boycotted-stephen-hawking; www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/08/06/scholars-raise-questions-about-free-academic-study-tours-israel.

24. See electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/islamophobia-bankroller-behind-organizer-israel-junket-us-muslim-leaders; www.turkeyagenda.com/shalom-hartmans-mli-program-a-constructive-engagement-paradigm-2527.html.

25. See www.obsessionforhate.com/therebuttal.php.

26. The Clarion Fund "is a nonprofit organization led by U.S. neoconservatives and rightwing Israelis that produces alarmist films and publications aimed at hyping the threat of "Radical Islam." See more at rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/Clarion_Fund#sthash.0sU8N3KX.dpuf.

27. See CNN interview with Congresswomen Rene Ellmers during the 2010 elections: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfAqarG8l6w and www.youtube.com/watch?v=McICacLSk6w.

28. See islamiccommentary.org/2014/02/anti-muslim-sentiment-rising-in-the-u-s-what-is-happening-to-religious-tolerance/#_ednref10

29. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 5.

30. See www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/04/latent-manifest-islamophobia-a-2014414124948207223.html?fb_action_ids=10103012697252363&fb_action_types=og.recommends&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582.

31. See the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting write-up on Daniel Pipes at fair.org/article/the-dirty-dozen/.

32. See mondoweiss.net/2015/03/blowback-orchestrated-advocacy.