

Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications

Adib Farhadi

# Countering Violent Extremism by Winning Hearts and Minds

 Springer

## About this book

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Since 9/11, the United States and its allies have been waging an endless War on Terror to counter violent extremism by “winning hearts and minds,” particularly in Afghanistan. However, violent extremism remains on the rise worldwide.

The effort and sacrifice of the War on Terror have been continually undermined by actions, narratives, and policies that many of the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide perceive as Islamophobic. Incidents of Islamophobia on the part of Western governments, media, and civilians, whether intentional or unintentional, alienate the majority of Muslims who are law-abiding and would be key allies in the fight against violent extremism. In Afghanistan, for example, violent extremist groups portray U.S. and NATO forces as blasphemous, anti-Muslim invaders to frighten Afghan villagers into compliance. A similar perception weakens domestic countering violent extremism programs in the West that rely on cooperation with Muslim communities.

As the Great Powers Competition emerges among the U.S., Russia, and China, America and the West can ill afford any further impairment in their counterterrorism strategy.

The dangers of Islamophobia must be recognized and eradicated immediately.

In *Countering Violent Extremism by Winning Hearts and Minds*, Adib Farhadi demonstrates how Islamophobia poses a threat to U.S. national security by utilizing historical context, statistical analysis, and in-depth case studies. Farhadi, who headed Afghanistan’s National Development Strategy, describes how Koran burnings, anti-Islamic rhetoric, and racial profiling harm relationships with the majority of Muslims who are not involved in violent extremism and thus perpetuate the War on Terror.

America has sacrificed thousands of lives and has spent more than \$6 trillion on the War on Terror. It can ill afford to squander more valuable resources in a strategy undermined by Islamophobia or perception of Islamophobia. As Farhadi explains, only through a reconciliatory narrative, can we work toward a shared future where violent extremism is eradicated.

This book is essential reading for scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and executives who are invested in maintaining and rebuilding American credibility essential to global security and peace.

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ISSN 1613-5113 ISSN 2363-9466 (electronic)  
Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications  
ISBN 978-3-030-50056-6 ISBN 978-3-030-50057-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50057-3>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*For my mother, a Muslim American woman,  
who has lived most of her life in Greenville,  
North Carolina.*

*For my father, recently passed, but forever  
a source of strength and inspiration.*

# Forward

Dr. Farhadi raises several issues in this informative and timely work. In the context of the emerging Great Power Competition between the USA, China, and Russia, the USA needs to capitalize on every strength and minimize every vulnerability. Can the USA afford to squander one of its greatest assets toward validating American values and rebuilding international credibility?

He argues that Islamophobia represents a significant national security concern especially in the context of the ever-evolving War on Terror. The values espoused in the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution have for generations served as a rallying point, drawing immigrants to our shores. Adherence to those values provides the USA with an opportunity to nullify much of the extremists' rhetoric and re-establish American credibility both domestically and internationally. He illuminates how contradictions to those very unique espoused values conversely represent an increasing threat to our national security.

He presents staggering statistics supported by notable research. His data should concern all Americans. Acts of Islamophobia incite hostilities toward the USA and Americans. While this concept may seem abstract to some, it should not be so. In WWII, we faced similar paranoia toward second-generation Japanese, or Nisei, Americans. When challenged, the discrimination faced by Nisei Americans was proven unfounded and detention camps were deemed unconstitutional. In the last decade, acts of Islamophobia like Pastor Terry Jones' burnings of Korans in Florida incited violence against Americans. The Associated Press directly associated his actions with outbreaks of violence in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

In the face of global competition against two emerging powers like China and Russia, can we afford to alienate ourselves from more than one billion Muslims worldwide, including the roughly 3.5 million Muslim Americans? Both of America's primary competitors have significant Muslim populations that have been brutally targeted. We can no longer afford to allow paranoia and fear to separate us from the part of the American populace that can actionably enhance our credibility in today's globalized world. He effectively argues that Muslim Americans offer a unique opportunity.

Discriminatory acts against Muslim Americans, growing markedly in the aftermath of 9/11, shift the centrality of the extremist threat from Middle East and South and Central Asian regions to our own homeland. The sheer magnitude of this threat is shifting under our feet due to our own hypocrisies. He challenges us, highlighting how we can delegitimize extremists by winning the hearts and minds of our fellow Muslim Americans as well as those in Afghanistan and Iraq, and highlighting to the world how to respect Islam. How can we defend our values when we are violating them here at home?

With the rest of the world watching, now more than ever before thanks to social media and mass communications, every act of Islamophobic discrimination degrades our credibility on the world stage. He brings to the forefront the tremendous risks that we amplify by allowing such acts to occur. More importantly, he characterizes these risks as opportunities lost to delegitimize extremists' rhetoric and recruiting efforts. Most importantly, America risks delegitimizing herself on the global stage by allowing such acts.

As this third consecutive US administration faces the protracted threats of international extremist violence, and attempts to withdraw American presence from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, can we afford not to embrace and mobilize domestic Muslim Americans to enhance our national security? He presents clear, logical arguments describing why we must undermine extremism by embracing Muslim Americans through our own national values. This is a book that needs to be widely read and studied by all those who are involved or are interested in national security.

December 2019

Sean Ryan

# Preface

Ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in which Islamic violent extremists killed thousands of Americans and caused billions of dollars in damage on US soil, American political and popular discourse has treated radical Islam, Islamic terrorism, and Islamic violent extremism as ever-present threats to Western safety and ways of life. These violent ideologies and activities have, indeed, caused enormous bloodshed and destruction, affecting millions of civilians in the USA and abroad. However, the West's fear of violent extremism, and the groundless conflation of this violence with the religion of Islam itself, have also morphed into a troubling new crisis: a rise in Islamophobia. Defined as fear and suspicion of those who are or are perceived to be Muslim or belonging to the Islamic faith, Islamophobia is based on a false equivalency of violent extremism with Islamic religion and culture as a whole. In recent years, Islamophobia has created an environment of ambient hostility toward the law-abiding majority of Muslim American, Muslims in the West, and in Afghanistan who would otherwise be key allies in the fight against violent extremism. From anti-Islamic rhetoric, to racial profiling, to Koran burnings, the litany of Islamophobic narratives, policies, and events of the past twenty years have been undermining the US initiatives for countering violent extremist (CVE) and its efforts at counterterrorism & counterinsurgency efforts both domestically and abroad.

For the two decades since 9/11, the USA has been waging a Global War on Terror to counter violent extremism worldwide. Over time, the war has mushroomed into a conflict of a unique nature and unprecedented scale, wherein US policymakers and military leaders have attempted to defeat violent extremism by gaining the support of the local people most affected by it, a strategy known as "winning hearts and minds" (WHAM). According to this soft power strategy, the best way to conduct counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations is to cultivate support among the local communities. This is done by showcasing that the USA and its allies have the community's best interests at heart so that those same communities will contribute to the effort. The WHAM strategy depends upon the development and maintenance of harmonious cross-cultural relationships between

the USA and its Muslim allies. It is also the most promising route to achieving a stable peace in Afghanistan.

However, Islamophobia among Americans and their allies has eroded relationships with local Muslim communities in Afghanistan, as well as with many of the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide. Whether intentional or not, incidents and policies perceived as Islamophobic, when perpetrated by Western governments, media, and civilians, alienate and sometimes radicalize crucial Muslim allies. Islamophobic incidents have led to discrimination, harassment, and even threats and physical attacks against Muslims, thereby stigmatizing and endangering millions of peaceful, law-abiding Muslim Americans and Muslims worldwide. Over the past two decades, Islamophobia has continued to spread, despite ample statistics and studies supporting the view that Muslims are as good and as law-abiding of citizens as anyone else. Islamophobia directly undermines the effort of the USA and its allies to win hearts and minds and stabilize Afghanistan. Islamophobia has exacerbated the war by spreading false and divisive narratives that compromise efforts by policymakers and practitioners. Through the spread of these poisonous narratives and the events they set in motion, Islamophobia poses a direct threat to the success of CVE strategies and efforts in the War on Terror. Violent extremist groups in Afghanistan leverage evidence of Islamophobia to frighten Afghan villagers into compliance, portraying US and NATO forces as blasphemous, anti-Muslim invaders who threaten the Afghan people's religion and their very way of life. In the West, similar perceptions weaken domestic programs aimed at countering violent extremism, as these programs rely on cooperation with local Muslim communities.

The spread of Islamophobia since 9/11 has not only hindered US efforts in the Global War on Terror; it has also created direct harm for the large part of the global population who are or are perceived to be Muslim. From mistreatment to outright attacks, the effects of Islamophobia exacerbate a broader sense of Muslim alienation from the rest of society. Recent polls indicate that large numbers of Muslim Americans are subjected to discrimination, suspicion, and even physical threats and attacks based on their religion. Many Muslims have come to feel as if they are outcasts, expressing stress and wariness about their livelihood and well-being within the USA. The sense of constant suspicion erodes relationships between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim USA and, ironically, provides a motive for friendly Muslims to become radicalized. Muslims' devotion to defending their faith is then exploited by violent extremists within terrorist organizations, who recruit previously friendly Muslims into their cause. In this way, Islamophobia fuels these extremists' cause by amplifying ordinary Muslims' sense of being under threat and driving them into the fold of the violent extremists.

The US two decades of waging the Global War on Terror has brought it no closer to a viable solution to violent extremism, much less a victory in the war. With \$6.4 trillion spent and nearly 7,000 American lives lost, the USA is no closer to finding a viable solution to violent extremism or ending this multilayered, generational conflict. Violent extremism is on the rise worldwide, its perpetrators more emboldened than ever. The War in Afghanistan has been described as a Forever War or an Endless War, extending past the generation that began it and

encompassing a new generation who does not have first-hand knowledge of the world before 9/11. As America's longest-running war, the Afghan War has lasted longer than the American Civil War, WWII, and Vietnam combined.

This book uses historical context, statistical analysis, and in-depth case studies to detail the extent and severity of the recent rise in Islamophobia, arguing that this worrisome trend poses a national security threat to the USA. Islamophobic narratives, discourses, policies, and events undermine US counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts by alienating the overwhelming majority of Muslims who are not involved in any kind of extremist activity. The success of US counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in the Global War on Terror depends on a better understanding of the nature and consequences of the current surge in Islamophobia, as well as a concerted effort to end the spread of indiscriminate fear and offensiveness toward ordinary Muslims. Defeating violent extremism will require more than bloodshed; it will require soft-power strategies of diplomacy, inclusion, knowledge dissemination, relationship-building, and culture-shifting. This is a different kind of war, requiring a different kind of solution. The perspective in this book can inform efforts to effectively contest a tiny, radicalized element of Muslims through the support of the 1.8 billion mainstream Muslims worldwide and, in particular, the 3.5 million Muslim Americans, who are key potential allies in this cause. The stakes are higher than ever as the geopolitical climate shifts to a Great Power Competition in which the USA competes for hegemony with ascendant rivals.

# Acknowledgements

I could not have written this book without the help and inspiration of many people. It has been said that books are not the labor of an individual, but rather the product of many. I have found this to be incredibly true.

I have to start by thanking my many students at the University of South Florida, specifically students of my countering violent extremism, and religion and violence classes. They served as the motivation for this book through countless in-depth class discussions. They assisted in selecting the case studies, in sharing their thoughts, research, and personal experiences. This book would certainly not have been possible without their important contributions.

I would like to thank my researchers, Steven Dolan, Michelle Assaad, Christina Mancini and Theresa Barkasy for their tireless work, researching and editing the text, for sharing their ideas, approaching the work with enthusiasm and creativity, and lending their voices to the book.

A most heartfelt thanks to Dr. Marty Hannratty with whom I originally spoke to about the concept. Dr. Hannratty assisted with the complex inner workings of the US government and shared his personal notes which was instrumental and greatly helpful.

I would also like to thank Mr. Michael Peters, Dr. Sean Ryan, Dr. Michael DeJonge, Mr. Ramin Asgard, and Dr. Barnett Rubin for their valuable assistance with readings, thoughts, and support.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family—my wife, children, and mother—for their support, patience, and love, not only in regard to this project, but in everything that life gives us.

Thank you.

# About the Book

Since the occurrence of 9/11 two decades ago, the USA has been waging a War on Terror to counter violent extremism worldwide. With \$6.4 trillion spent and nearly 7,000 American lives lost, the USA is no closer to finding a viable solution to violent extremism or ending this multilayered, generational conflict. Violent extremism is on the rise worldwide, its perpetrators more emboldened than ever. US policymakers and military leaders have long known that winning the War on Terror depends not solely on military might, but also on the “soft power” of a reconciliatory narrative between the Muslim world and the West. In Afghanistan, particularly, the US needs to gain the support of the local people most affected by violent extremism, a strategy known as “winning hearts and minds.” However, relationships with local Muslim communities in Afghanistan, as well as with many of the 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, have persistently been eroded by Islamophobic incidents and policies on the part of Western governments, media, and civilians that alienate and sometimes radicalize crucial Muslim allies. Islamophobia’s rise in the years since 9/11 can be traced to some Westerners’ persistent belief in a false equivalency between the religion of Islam and violent extremism.

This book uses historical context, statistical analysis, and in-depth case studies to detail the extent and severity of the recent rise in Islamophobia, arguing that this presents a national security threat to the USA. From anti-Islamic rhetoric, to racial profiling, to Koran burnings, the litany of narratives, policies, and events that are perceived by Muslims as Islamophobic have been undermining US counterterrorism/counterinsurgency efforts domestically as well as abroad. Whether intentional or not, incidents of Islamophobia alienate the majority of Muslims who are law-abiding and would otherwise be key allies in the fight against violent extremism. Violent extremist groups in Afghanistan leverage evidence of Islamophobia to frighten Afghan villagers into compliance, portraying US and NATO forces as blasphemous, anti-Muslim invaders who threaten the Afghan people’s religion and their very way of life. In the West, similar perceptions weaken domestic programs aimed at countering violent extremism, as these programs rely on cooperation with local Muslim communities.

The success of US counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in the Global War on Terror depend on an improved understanding of the nature and consequences of the current surge in Islamophobia, as well as on a reconciliatory narrative that unifies Western and Muslim interests. Only through such a reconciliatory narrative can the USA work toward a shared future where violent extremism is eradicated and a durable peace is achieved in Afghanistan. The stakes are higher than ever, as the geopolitical climate shifts to a Great Power Competition in which the USA competes for hegemony with rivals Russia and China. This book builds on the work of leading scholars of Islamophobia, integrating current events and lessons learned from the Global War on Terror and domestic CVE programs, to offer critical conflict resolution insight on integrating mainstream Muslims into US counterterrorism & counterinsurgency strategies and rebuilding the American credibility essential to global security, stability, and peace. This book aims to inform broader discourses on radicalization and security studies through policy-practitioners, researchers, students, military leaders, and those invested in national security.

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	1
<b>The Invisible Rise of AL Qaeda</b> . . . . .	15
<b>A War of Narratives</b> . . . . .	38
<b>Compounding Violent Extremism</b> . . . . .	59
<b>The Faces of Islamophobia</b> . . . . .	82
<b>Consequences of Islamophobia</b> . . . . .	113
<b>Conclusion and Recommendations</b> . . . . .	129

## About the Author

**Dr. Adib Farhadi** is an Assistant Professor and the Faculty Director of Executive Education at the University of South Florida. A recognized global leader in fragile and post-conflict states, he has more than 20 years of experience in economic development and counterinsurgency.

He teaches courses related to peace and conflict, countering violent extremism, sustainable development, and international political economy. His research focuses on radicalization, computational modeling and data analytics, and the Silk Road region. He previously served as the Deputy Minister of Commerce, Executive Director of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, and Head of Secretariat for the United Nation’s Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board in Afghanistan. He has also extensively advised both the US and Afghan governments. Throughout his career, he has promoted peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and cultural and religious toleration from the villages of Afghanistan to the USA. He has been involved with efforts of keeping America safe and rebuilding Afghanistan since 9/11.

It was during his teaching and conversations with students at the University of South Florida, considered alongside his experiences working on economic and political stabilization in Afghanistan that he became inspired to write this book. He had observed that the Western narrative was failing to “win the hearts and minds” of the local Afghans, even as Islamophobia was rising dangerously in the West. These two failures of narrative, observed worlds apart, motivated the writing of *Countering Violent Extremism by Winning Hearts and Minds*.