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It is fair to say that the history of Europe, and by extension the United States, in relation to Islamic regions has been one characterized by violence and misunderstanding. By the end of the 8th century a vast empire from India to the east, spreading across the Middle East, North Africa and into Spain, consolidated Islamic rule. By the end of the 15th century Ottoman rule extended as far north as Hungary and across much of the Balkans. The response in Europe was over eight centuries of armed conflict, starting in the 8th century in a struggle to drive Islam out of the Spanish peninsula, which culminated in 1492, and almost simultaneously a long period of Crusades through the Middle East and Eastern Europe, beginning in the 11th century and lasting until the end of the 15th century. We do not need to revisit this troubled history to understand that what ensued has been an uneasy relationship between predominantly Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East.

At the start of the 21st century, after the horrendous events that have come to be known as 9/11, it would appear that Europe and the US have entered a new round of ‘crusade-like’ conflict with the entire region. Under the pretense of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the US and a loose coalition of so-called allies (mainly the UK) have been engaged in conflict in the region. Like all complex events, the underlying causes of this conflict can be found first in the struggle over Palestine since the end of the Second World War, then in the economic turmoil of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo as a result of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War during which Israel was supplied with military support by the US, and then in the Gulf War of 1990–1991 when a US-led force drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. We cannot understand the combination of forces arrayed without also considering the geo-politics of the day, as the US sponsored, trained and armed religious groups fighting against the Soviet forces that had occupied Afghanistan throughout most of the 1980s. As the 20th century came to a close, all of these factors contributed to the events that signaled the beginning of this new crusade. First, the US and some NATO forces invaded Afghanistan with the stated goal of pursuing and dismantling al-Qaeda in response to their role in the 9/11 events. By the Spring of 2003, US forces (again, leading a coalition mainly consisting of the UK, Australia, and Poland) was at war with, and invaded, Iraq under the pretext of what now has been documented to be false assumptions.

As the first decade of the 21st century came to a close it appeared that European and US forces were finally withdrawing from the region. Troops were no longer in Iraq, leaving behind chaos and sectarian violence that has destabilized the region. The last troops are scheduled to depart from Afghanistan within the next year, and most people in the US, UK and NATO countries have little interest or willingness to remain engaged militarily – at least to the degree that troops are involved in a ground campaign, though selective bombing and the use of drone attacks continue. Yet, as 2014 comes to a close, the events unfolding in Syria and Iraq, and the rise of yet another extremist faction known as ISIS, has created one more round of saber-rattling in the US (the UK parliament

seems to be a bit more resistant) as air strikes have begun and the talk of deploying ground troops into the region once again fills the airwaves.

Throughout these past two decades we have witnessed an increasing hysteria about Islam, and the linking of militant violence with adherents of that faith. Racial profiling at airports and increasingly in urban centers has now included anyone who appears to be a Muslim, though in reality that has come to mean someone from the Middle East (given that almost a quarter of the world's population follow that faith, it is not possible to know what a Muslim looks like any more than we can simply identify a Christian), all with the purpose of exposing potential terrorists. ISIS, as extreme as the organization may be, cannot be a representative of Islam writ large any more than one can claim the existence of the Ku Klux Klan, with its violent history of murder, bombing, lynching and burning, is proof that all of Christianity breeds violence. It should also be noted that much of the violence in Christian Europe was directed at sectarian struggles as Catholics killed Protestants or Huguenots and vice versa, not unlike the ongoing violence between Sunni and Shia within Islam. The point is that there is little justification for much of that hysteria we now confront as every terrorist must be a Muslim, while in the US we ignore our own Christian Right militants who have killed and bombed US citizens.

This journal has explored these issues more frequently in recent years, examining the tension between liberalism and religious tolerance of immigrants (Brown, forthcoming; Hammond, 2011), the relationship between race and religion (Byng, 2013) or the role of religion in politics (Aho, 2013; de Graaff and van Apeldoorn, 2011), and looking into the nature of Islamic society (Critelli and Willett, 2013; Duzgun, 2013). Our recent appointment of a North Africa and Middle East (MENA) editor will result in more voices from the region appearing in the pages of *Critical Sociology* in the coming issues. Given the current state of events, it is fitting to begin Volume 41 with a special issue on Islamophobia, in which authors explore the meaning and impact of being a Muslim in the US and UK, living under this era of racialization of religious beliefs.

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