

Book Review: *Homegrown Radicals: A Story of State Violence, Islamophobia, and Jihad in the Post-9/11 World*, Youcef Soufi, NYU Press: New York, 2025.

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In an era in which the language of “radicalization” is deployed more as a security tool than as an analytical concept, *Homegrown Radicals* by Youcef Soufi offers a rare and timely intervention. Published in 2025, the book comes out just as Canada’s Special Representative on Combating Islamophobia, Amira Elghawaby (2025), warns that “Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism continue to threaten [the] social cohesion and [the] shared values as Canadians.”

Soufi argues that the figure of the “homegrown radical” or the “utopian jihad” is not the inevitable outcome of religious belief or cultural pathology. Instead, it is a political product of state violence and the post-9/11 securitization regime. In this sense, Soufi’s work solidifies existing critiques—such as Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004)—that the categorization of Muslims is not a cultural truth but a geopolitical construction.

Soufi seeks to highlight both the state violence faced by Muslims in the West and the overlooked forms of epistemic violence that accompany it. At a linguistic level, the author explicitly interrogates the terms “radical” and “terrorist,” showing that the blurring of the line between “modern/radical divide” is a state strategy (5). The author uses “radical” to interrogate the Muslims’ assumption about those labeled this way (32), and contrasts state terms (traitor, threat) with the community’s view of them as simply “going astray” (*al-dalal*) (61).

Similarly, the use of terms “home” and “homegrown” is significant in the book. Soufi understands “homegrown” as individuals who lived in the West, often with citizenship, yet moved in and out of target populations (18). Home, as understood within the nation-state, was

not equally available to everyone. For example, Islamophobia (anti-Muslim racism) and surveillance tools led some citizens to be excluded from the “home” imagination (12-15), and this is a critical point to a multicultural country such as Canada. Hence, the global Muslim community, or “ummah,” that shares “mutual care,” was the alternative and prioritized home for the excluded individuals (86, 93, 131).

Through an introduction, six chapters, and the epilogue, Soufi’s core argument intentionally and comprehensively departs from “radicalization studies” that search for individual-level causal variables (see Metodieva and Zeller 2023; Jensen and LaFree 2016). He points out that such analyses miss “historical specificity” (35). Accordingly, the book does not extensively engage with psychological or economic factors—except insofar as these are shaped by the state’s “War on Terror” discourse. While Soufi very well justifies emphasizing structural (macro-level) factors, micro-level dynamics—such as social or personal motivations—can also illuminate why individuals turn to violence. Ted Gurr’s *Why Men Rebel* (1970), for instance, highlights how relative deprivation can drive political unrest. Soufi’s structural lens, while powerful, risks underestimating micro-level factors and undermining individual agency. Thus, I would suggest that such projects require a macro–micro integration—a genuinely multi-level analysis designed to challenge radicalization studies.

Drawing on historical research and classical Islamic law texts, the author anchors his auto-ethnographic approach in theory (29). Soufi explores the discourse on civilization (73) and the “War on Terror” (78), examining how they shape the individual’s experience of affective injury and suspicion (71). Simultaneously, Soufi utilizes texts on *jihad* to demonstrate how the contemporary Al-Awlaki’s “utopian jihad” vision represents a break from the historical Muslim legal tradition’s pragmatism (99, 135).

Soufi produces an intensely personal yet rigorously documented account of three men—Ferid Imam, Miawand Yar, and Muhanad Al Farekh—who left Canada in 2007 to join an armed struggle abroad. His auto-ethnographic voice is strategically woven into the theory and analysis, humanizing and illustrating his broader arguments. He also acknowledges limitations in his ethnographic access: “I did not have much insight into the communal ties that shaped the women’s prayer space” (40). While he gestures toward the gendered dynamics of Islamophobia, the absence of women’s perspectives risks reproducing the very male-centric framing of radicalization he critiques. It is essential to document the voices of women in such analyses to avoid reproducing epistemic silencing—whether understood as violence or injustice (see Medina, 2023; Fricker, 2007), or as agony (Sawafta, 2025)—that the “War on Terror” itself enacts against Muslim women.

A key question concerns the generalizability of the Winnipeg case. Soufi persuasively argues that his findings resonate across North America, noting that “[b]oth countries drew from analogous immigrant Muslim populations after the 1960s” (7) and that “Canadian Muslims have experienced their state’s security agencies as an extension of the American state’s security imperatives” (p. 8). These shared contexts—along with others the author notes, such as cultural and linguistic exchange—strengthen the case’s relevance to American Muslims. Yet, as Sofia Ali-Khan (2022) cautions, “[t]here is a huge contrast between being Muslim in Canada and being

Muslim in America.” Soufi gives limited attention to such divergences, explicitly identifying only one central difference: “the presence in the United States of a prominent African American Muslim demographic shaped by the experience of slavery and an ongoing struggle against anti-Black racism” (8). This limited attention, if more fully explored, could meaningfully complicate his conclusions about generalizability.

Soufi commences with a personal moment: a call from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) about Muhanad Al Farekh’s capture in Pakistan and impending U.S. trial. This prompts Soufi to reflect on the “mess and a mystery” (4) that engulfed him and the Winnipeg Muslim community after Muhanad’s disappearance. He situates this within the paradigms of “suspect populations” and “guilt by association” (5–14), which justified intrusive investigations into men who had “never articulated radical positions (however loosely defined), let alone partaken in terrorism” (13).

Throughout, Soufi engages with prominent scholars, including Sherene Razack, Baljit Nagra, and Sunera Thobani, highlighting how Canadian Muslims were “unable to fully benefit from rights afforded to fellow citizens” and were compelled to “claim equal access to the Canadian nation” (142). He documents the Canadian Security Intelligence Service’s (CSIS) use of surveillance, harassment, intimidation, and recruitment attempts, which instilled “fears, anxieties, and self-policing” and marked Muslims as a “problem” in Canada (142). These tactics devastated “young Muslim men’s livelihood, social ties, mental health, and mobility” (147).

The book is also about mourning. Soufi frames it as “grieving through remembering,” following his initial resistance to seeing the men’s departure as a “communal tragedy” (35–36). In chapters one and two, this right to grieve emerges after he is reminded “it was alright to grieve the loss of these men” (35), even though the Winnipeg Muslim community largely avoided open discussion or mourning. Drawing on Spivak’s famous question—“Can the Subaltern Speak?”—Soufi examines Muslims’ “grievability” in a context where the “War on Terror” was framed as a defense of “civilized nations” against “savages” (82). In doing so, he extends Judith Butler’s concept of grievability as a tool for self-critique, urging Western readers to confront their selective empathy and the moral implications of their states’ actions. This extension of grievability is essential; it also serves as a way to reject all kinds of violence and to refuse “to sacrifice human life for the sake of political ends” (229).

The lingering question of why the three men radicalized comes to the fore in chapter three. Soufi attributes their shift to the influence of Anwar Al-Awlaki, the American imam who, after 2004, began endorsing violent resistance (110). He concludes that jihadist ideology among “homegrown radicals” was a product of the post-9/11 era (136), responding to the affective injury felt by North American Muslims witnessing Muslim suffering abroad. Soufi distinguishes Al-Awlaki’s post-9/11 appeal to Anglophone Muslims from earlier al-Qaeda ideologies that “resonated mostly with Saudis and other Arabs” (135), underscoring the context-specific nature of radicalization.

Chapter four illustrates how individuals were harmed by “tenuous” associations (160) and the flawed principle of guilt by association (144). Soufi recounts being flagged at the U.S. border in

2008 simply because he had traveled on a *hajj* trip with the three men. His humiliation and pain (158) become evidence of systemic “abuse[s] of power” (139, 153), exemplifying how injustice occurs not only in exceptional moments but in the “everyday workings of the law” (17).

In chapters five and six, Soufi observes: “But even as beliefs change, we cannot always escape the consequences of our actions. As much as he tried, Muhanad’s fate had already been determined thousands of miles away in meetings among powerful politicians in Washington, DC” (187). He shows how terrorism trials place the “Muslim terrorist” in an ambiguous space between citizen and enemy, producing tension between the military’s logic of elimination and the judiciary’s logic of rights (190). National security imperatives, he argues, ultimately override fair trial principles.

In the epilogue, Soufi warns of a “return to darker times” amid U.S. and Canadian support for Israel’s violence in Gaza and the revival of “civilized and the savage” discourses that render Muslim lives ungrievable (223–224). Yet he closes on a hopeful note: a “new political dawn” grounded in solidarity through a chosen “relationship of care toward the other” (228–229). His vision is a profound call for self-transformation beyond the “imagined national community” (15).

After reading the book, I was left wondering: What if one of Ferid Imam, Miawand Yar, and Muhanad Al Farekh had been interviewed? How might the structure or argument of the book have changed? In answering the “so what” question about the book’s needed contribution, I find that Soufi primarily extends existing concepts and frameworks, such as Judith Butler’s notion of “grievability.” At the same time, he develops the idea of the “utopian jihad” by drawing on Western political thought on utopia—particularly the works of Marx, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, and Fredric Jameson—to interpret the ideology promoted by figures such as Al-Awlaki.

Ultimately, *Homegrown Radicals* redefines understandings of radicalization and Muslim life in post-9/11 North America. It is essential reading for scholars, students, educators, practitioners, and theorists in peace and conflict studies, political science, Islamic studies, and Middle East and North African studies. Soufi offers a rare and significant contribution that blends multiple methodologies with a narrative style that is at once rigorous and deeply humane—precisely the kind of work needed in an era marked by emotional turmoil and epistemic violence.

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