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Malcolm Craig. "The "Islamic Bomb": Perceptions of Middle Eastern Nuclear Proliferation, 1979-1989." *Diplomatic History* 44:4 (September 2020): 580-607.

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Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Dayna Barnes | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY DARIUS WAINWRIGHT, UNIVERSITY OF READING

In October 2017, American President Donald Trump referred to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an agreement Iran reached on its nuclear program with China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States as “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions that the United States has ever entered in to.”¹ The Obama administration had instigated the agreement, which is popularly referred to as the ‘Iran Deal,’ in 2015 to encourage U.S.-Iran rapprochement and achieve geopolitical goals. In return for the lifting of international economic sanctions on the country, Iran agreed to halt its nuclear programme and assist, albeit informally, U.S. and European efforts to combat the fundamentalist Islamic State threat in Iraq and Syria. Seven months later, Trump removed the United States from the agreement on the premise that the Iranian government was still maintaining its nuclear programme. Trump’s decision had significant ramifications, kick-starting a period of tense bilateral clashes that played out in the Persian Gulf and in the media and only abating after his acrimonious departure from office.

Even in the Trump presidency’s wake, the issue shows no signs of fading. At the time of writing, senior Biden administration figures are negotiating the agreement’s resurrection with their Iranian counterparts in Vienna. Biden’s attempts to resurrect the deal are, however, not without critics, not just within his administration, but also on Capitol Hill. Malcolm Craig’s article, “The “Islamic Bomb”: Perceptions of Middle Eastern Nuclear Proliferation, 1979-1989,” places these critiques in their wider context, providing a fascinating historical explanation of their origins. His paper examines the “persistent trope in Western discourses about Muslim majority nations and atomic weapons, the so-called Islamic Bomb” (580). It explores how these misplaced fears and insecurities emerged, developed, and mutated before coming to public prominence in the late 1970s. The article subsequently examines how American politicians, and the media, employed this trope between 1979 and 1989 before finally explaining its prevalence in discussions and debates on U.S. provision of military and economic aid to Pakistan during the Reagan years.

Craig elucidates how the Western discourse surrounding the ideas of an ‘Islamic bomb’ affected American popular and elite thinking towards Muslim majority nations. The piece underlines how politicians and prominent journalists have employed this oft-cited trope to vindicate and supplement portrayals of actors in the Arab world, Persian Gulf, Iran, and Pakistan as a substantive, existential threat to Western security and geopolitical stability. The notion of an Islamic bomb became “an unofficial nuclear age narrative,” “a shorthand” that brought together fears surrounding the use (and abuse) of nuclear weapons, Islamophobia, and misplaced Orientalist fears (page citation, unless it is 606). These discussions resulted in these generalisations and misperceptions becoming “irrevocably embedded in nuclear discourses” (606). Though the origins and inaccuracy of these depictions have frequently been commented on in and outside academia, the role of the ‘Islamic bomb’

¹ Donald J. Trump, “Speech on ending American Participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” 8 May 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>

in perpetuating and cementing these stereotypes has not been previously discussed in considerable detail.² Ido Oren and Ty Solomon, for example, focus on how politicians frequently employ ambiguous phrases, such as “WMD” (weapons of mass destruction) and “rogue nations,” that become part of the wider vernacular in foreign policy and nuclear weapon discourses. Focusing on proceedings in Britain, on the other hand, Johnathan Hogg analyses the tensions between governmental advocates of nuclear deterrence and the non-proliferation standpoint of most pressure groups and non-governmental organisations.³ Craig’s article goes one step further, in what is demonstrably an original, highly significant contribution to the literature and historiography. The piece brings the scholarly discussions in both hitherto mentioned works together. It illustrates how unhelpful tropes surrounding an ‘Islamic bomb’ dominate discussions of majority Muslim nations attaining nuclear proliferation. Indeed, the article unearths how this “outdated and unhelpful discourse” (608) not just substantiates Islamophobic attitudes but is also a critical factor shaping contemporary international nuclear relations.⁴

Craig proffers a detailed elucidation of the ideological drivers of the rhetoric surrounding the ‘Islamic bomb.’ This is initially prefaced with an overview of the constructivist origins of Western thinking towards the “unfixed spatial location” that have historically been termed the “greater Middle East” by policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic (581). Craig points out the term’s inconsistent, unclear application by U.S. and UK officials as a key factor driving not just diplomatic thinking towards the region, but also as an element underpinning discourses surrounding the ‘Islamic bomb.’ Despite the term’s pre-eminence in political and public discourse, what constitutes the ‘Middle East,’ or even the ‘Islamic World,’ has remained undefined. The piece rightly outlines how such a simplistic approach overlooks the vastness of what constitutes the “Islamic World.” Despite possessing considerable – or in some cases majority – Muslim populations, India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (among other Asian nations) are largely overlooked in the discourse about the ‘Islamic Bomb’ or even the ‘Middle East.’ These assertions add credence to subsequent arguments, highlighting the reductionist constructivism underpinning U.S. foreign policy and media representations towards North Africa, the Arab world, and the Persian Gulf. Muslims, Islam and the ‘Middle East’ are all treated as universal terms, an “imagined space” (581-582). This characterization ignores the ethnic, regional, and cultural diversity of peoples and cultures within this vast region, as well as the differing – at times wildly contrasting – foreign policy concerns of state actors. Craig rightly ties this to the theory of Orientalism posited by eminent literature scholar Edward Said, which critiqued the “negative and monolithic” media and political representations of Islam more broadly.⁵ However, he goes one step further, employing the arguments espoused by Said and his adherents as a lens to explain Western fears and insecurities of the so-called ‘Islamic bomb.’⁶

So far, so Orientalist. Yet it is not just ideological factors underpinning the notion of an ‘Islamic bomb,’ but historical factors, too. Craig places the peddling of this trope in the context of the Cold War and the growing Islamic revivalism of the 1970s. The most remarkable aspect here, though, is the elucidation of how American fears and insecurities of an Islamic

² Al Venter, *Allah’s Bomb: The Islamic Quest for Nuclear Weapons* (Lanham: Lyons Press, 2007); Steve Weissman and Herbert Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb: The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the Middle East* (New York: Times Books, 1981).

³ Ido Oren and Ty Solomon, “WMD WMD WMD: Securitisation through Ritualised Incantation of Ambiguous Phrases.” *Review of International Studies* 41:2 (2015): 315-320; Johnathan Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture: Official and Unofficial Narratives in the Long Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁴ Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2017); Osamah F. Khalil, *America’s Dream Palace: Middle East Expertise and the Rise of the National Security State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2016); Spencer Weart, *Nuclear Fear, a History of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Allan Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

⁶ Andrew J. Rotter, “Saidism Without Said: Orientalism and U.S. Diplomatic History,” *American Historical Review* 105: 4 (2000): 1205–1217; Ussama Makdisi, “After Said: The Limits and Possibilities of a Critical Scholarship of U.S.-Arab Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 38:3 (2014): 657–684.

bomb stemmed from traditional elite thinking on race and religion. Such discussions reflect the growing body of literature on the United States and the world, which examine how these two factors have intersected or shaped American diplomacy. Scholars, notably, have employed race and religion as lenses to explain U.S. formal and informal imperial expansion.⁷ Craig's article, though, focuses on how Congressional and media figures, as well as academics, perpetuated and peddled their own fears and insecurities when expressing views on the possibility of nations like Pakistan or Libya obtaining nuclear weapons.

The piece points to the othering of Muslim peoples as "violent, otherworldly, possibly deranged, almost certainly fanatical" (583). Such views and perspectives are historically rooted. Craig reveals how the Eisenhower and Kennedy administration's collective determination to limit nuclear proliferation was framed via racial means. Officials in both White Houses noted how Latin American, Asian, and African peoples "lacked the capacity for rationality and reason" to be the "ultimate weapon's custodians" (584). Cold War considerations also manifested themselves in elite-level deliberations regarding China's possible nuclear programme. Referring to racialised falsehoods regarding "East Asian peoples" disregard for human life, President John F. Kennedy feared that senior Chinese officials would wantonly use nuclear weaponry to bring about a militaristic Communist world (585).

Craig's discussion of the wider historical context here provides a perfect foil for the subsequent analysis of how misperceptions of race and religion shaped political and media thinking towards an 'Islamic bomb.' Throughout, he cites numerous media portrayals of an 'Islamic bomb,' from journalists, academics, and analysts, to highlight how this influenced the thinking of political elites. These are not just sensationalist commentators, but a diverse range of figures, notably Biden throughout his career, political scientist Joseph Nye, as well as former Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger.⁸ Complementing these commentaries are a whole host of fictional representations, from the outline of syndicated journalist Morton Kondracke's counterfactual narrative of a despotic Arab dictator obtaining and ordering the use of nuclear weapons, to the 1980s cult classic "Back to the Future" movie, "when 'Doc' Brown is gunned down by Libyans for whom he was providing nuclear assistance" (597).⁹ These examples support, and further elaborate on, the article's overarching premise. It illustrates how certain politicians, analysts, and media commentators regard Islam as an essentialist, monolithic entity, a seemingly noteworthy adversary in what political scientist Samuel Huntington later termed 'a clash of civilizations.'¹⁰ These examples link Pakistan's nuclear aspirations with Islam, specifically its purported disregard for human life. Craig includes articles from a vast range of publications, most notably the *Guardian* and the *Observer* from the UK as well as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. He utilises articles from all these publications, in tandem with some excellent finds from Congressional records. For a journal article, the number of collections consulted – including but not confined to The National Archives in London, the National Security Agency Archive, US National Archives, the James E. Carter Presidential Library, and the Foreign Relations of the United States – is highly impressive. The diverse range of primary sources consulted on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as online, provides a rounded, sustained view of proceedings. Moreover, the focus on prominent Anglo-American newspapers – on both sides of the political spectrum – underscores the media's role in shaping popular opinions.

In depicting these journalistic, academic, and fictional representations of the 'Islamic Bomb,' Craig adeptly highlights how this trope affected U.S. foreign-policy thinking during the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Of course,

⁷ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide and Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (London: Bodley Head, 2019); Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116:5 (2011): 1348-1391.

⁸ Joseph Nye, 'Soft Power and American Foreign Policy', *Political Science Quarterly* 119:2 (2004): 255-270.

⁹ "Interview with Morton Kondracke and Richard H. Smith of Newsweek Magazine," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, 4 March 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/interview-morton-kondracke-and-richard-h-smith-newsweek-magazine>.

¹⁰ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (1993): 22-49.

there were numerous ripostes to the 'Islamic bomb' trope by senior officials. CIA analysts in Reagan's term dismissed the notion entirely, "institutionally aware of diversity and disunity amongst 'Muslim' nations" (600). Even with these more sober assessments of proceedings, perceptions of an 'Islamic bomb' still affected USFP thinking...no differentiation in forecasts and analysis between Iraqi Baathist Saddam Hussein and Islamic world; fear that Islamabad would share nuclear capability with another "Islamic" nation. Still, considering the wealth of material peddling the 'Islamic bomb' trope, it is unsurprising that most elites possessed a narrow conception of Islam and 'Arabs' with both largely conflated and depicted as a threat to American interests. Such fears were illustrated in fears surrounding Pakistan's possible procurement of a nuclear weapon, which were not helped by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran Hostage Crisis.

These events seemingly vindicated the preconceptions of most politicians and media figures about Islam and the Muslim world's apparent appetite for the West's nuclear destruction. Pakistani President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, for example, was depicted as a "madman" who was hell bent on using the weapon to overcome India first, before turning to use it on other belligerents (citation). The Libyan leader Muammar Quaddafi, similarly, was portrayed as "an 'unpredictable' advocate of an Islamic bomb" (598). Perhaps there was some merit in the aspersions cast over the latter, but Craig rightly points to the problematic linkage of both figures' nuclear aspirations to their religious views. Media correspondents claimed that after overcoming its Indian adversaries, Pakistan would share details of bomb to other Muslim countries, most notably Libya, as part of a broader pan-Islamic conspiracy to overcome Israel and gain global supremacy.

However, it is Craig's examination of the intersection between the Islamist threat and Cold War considerations that is most striking. Even with the ferocity and prevalence of the 'Islamic bomb' trope – as mentioned, something which was increasingly cited by Congressional members opposed to nuclear confrontations – executive concerns regarding superpower tensions eclipsed anxieties of a Muslim majority nation going nuclear. Indeed, the State Department and the intelligence community's fears surrounding Pakistan or Libya's possible procurement of a nuclear weapon centred around the prospect of further regional instability. Israel, Egypt, Iran, or Saudi Arabia may respond accordingly. Not only would this prevent U.S. access to Persian Gulf oil, but also propel actors in the region into conflict, as well as their U.S. and Soviet allies. Israel's June 1981 strike on a nuclear reactor in Iraq did not help to allay the Reagan administration's concerns, with a growing assumption within the White House that the country would respond in a similar way to Pakistani nuclear capability.¹¹ In the end, though, these discussions and fears were moot, ironically superseded by proxy conflicts and regional Cold War developments. Reagan required Congressional approval to support the mujahadin in their struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, via providing military and economic aid to Pakistan. The President and his senior officials accordingly sidelined discussions, fears, and insecurities regarding Pakistan's possible development of an 'Islamic bomb,' dismissing any mention by Islamabad as rhetoric intended to foster regional support for its policies.¹²

Even with the Cold War's end, the notion of an 'Islamic bomb' is still present in American political life, with Craig noting how Washington's nuclear anxieties have shifted from Islamabad to Tehran. Even excluding the furore surrounding Iran's nuclear aspirations, this article possesses considerable contemporary relevance. It underlines how "outdated and unhelpful" perceptions of an 'Islamic bomb' are deeply engrained in Western political discourse (608). The analysis is engaging, richly detailed, and highly enlightening; a must-read for scholars and students interested in nuclear history or American encounters with the Muslim world.

Darius Wainwright is a lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Reading and a Guest Teacher in the London School of Economics' International History Department. His research focuses on Anglo-American public

¹¹ Steven E. Lobell, "Why Israel Launched a Preventive Nuclear Strike on Iraq's Nuclear Weapons Program (1981): The Fungibility of Power Resources," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1837116>

¹² Usama Butt and Julian Schofield, *Pakistan: The US, Geopolitics and Grand Strategies* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Dan Caldwell, *Vortex of Conflict: US Policy towards Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

diplomacy in Iran and the Persian Gulf. His recently completed Ph.D., which will be turned into a monograph published by Palgrave Macmillan, explores British and American cultural diplomacy in Iran in the 1950s. He is currently writing an article on US sports diplomacy in Iran and is undertaking research on the U.S., Iran and the 1939 and 1964 New York World Fairs.