

*The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam*

Peter Osborne

London: Simon & Schuster, 2022, £25 (h/b)

**John Booth**

**I**f you need a revival of spirit and energy this summer, Peter Osborne's ambitious new book could help top up your political Vitamin D. For in its telling of some of the history of Britain, France and the United States in relation to Islam, it reminds us why the struggle for principle and truth in the Labour movement is so important and why an understanding of the past is such a crucial component of committed comradeship.

Not that Osborne has himself been part of the Left. In his evocative prologue he describes his upbringing in a middle-class Tory family with strong military connections and how private education, Cambridge and a spell in the City before political journalism imbued him with admiration for the British state. He writes:

I loved and was thankful for the monarchy, Parliament, the army, the rule of law, the NHS, the Foreign Office, the BBC and everything that the United Kingdom stood for. I considered liberal capitalism the best system of economics the world has had. I was a conventional Conservative. I wrote for Conservative newspapers.

He worked alongside Boris Johnson at *The Spectator* and was its political correspondent at the time of 9/11. Not long afterwards his comfortable and well-rewarded worldview changed.

The turning point was Iraq, and my realisation that the British state was party to a lie about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in order to justify an illegal war. This led me to re-examine everything that I believed.

That pilgrimage quickly brought an awareness of how 'the manufacture of fabricated stories about Muslims has become endemic in British culture'.

He writes:

Prejudice against Islam – often given the cumbrous portmanteau name Islamophobia – is arguably the UK's last remaining socially respectable

form of bigotry. This means there is very little social, political or cultural protection for Muslims: as far as the British political, media and literary establishment is concerned, the normal rules of engagement don't apply.

I started to understand that a special form of discourse has emerged to define, ostracise and isolate Muslims, and set myself the task of exploring how it works.

*The Fate of Abraham* is the result of 20 years of that endeavour.

In addition to the parts on three national histories, Osborne draws on material from his extensive travels as a questioning journalist. Equally important to those of us on the Left who are outside the London power circles, is what he reveals from his inside knowledge of the British establishment.

He has performed this important task before, most memorably for me in his book on cricketer Basil D'Oliveira.<sup>1</sup> Those of us who campaigned against apartheid South Africa long suspected the existence of discreet dirty work between Pretoria, the Conservative Party, the Foreign Office, No 10 Downing Street and the Lord's cricket establishment. But we had to wait for Osborne's revelatory 2004 book, drawing in part from his establishment intimacy, to have our suspicions confirmed.

A few years later Osborne dipped his toes into the ocean explored in *The Fate of Abraham* with his *Dispatches* programme on the work of the Israel lobby in Westminster.<sup>2</sup> With it he opened the eyes of those who cared to look to the powerful financial influences on our mother of Parliaments.

Osborne begins his historical analysis in this new book with the United States – 'the primary source of global Islamophobia' – and the experience of African Muslims taken there as slaves followed by the new state's first overseas war against the 'Barbary pirates'. The belief in the 'Manifest destiny' of the US fitted neatly into Old Testament convictions of the Christian Zionists with the foundation of Israel. From this fertile soil the McCarthyism of the Cold War era quickly became the 'war on terror' following the collapse of the Soviet Union, all gaining traction with the 'clash of civilisations' rhetoric from Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, and then from 9/11 in 2001.

The author details the propagandist role of the pro-Israel think tanks in

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *Basil D'Oliveira, Cricket and Conspiracy: The Untold Story* (London: Little, Brown, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> The Dispatches programme on the Israel lobby is on YouTube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lby-BP5xVRI>>. The text of the programme is at <<https://tinyurl.com/595rpbxs>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/pro-israel-lobby-in-britain-full-text/>>

demonising Muslims and simultaneously promoting what Avraham Burg calls 'catastrophic Zionism'.<sup>3</sup> All of this is given a strong following wind by Rupert Murdoch's extensive media outlets and crystallised into strong political power by the Moral Majority and its successors.

The British involvement with the Muslim world goes back much further. Osborne sees the Venerable Bede as 'the father of English propaganda against Islam' but after the First World War 'the UK had become the greatest Muslim power in the world, holding sovereignty over approximately half the global Muslim population'. This included some sizeable Muslim communities which had developed in the 19th century in UK port cities, including Cardiff, South Shields and Liverpool. Osborne writes:

Scholars, merchants and soldiers often acquired an astonishing knowledge of Muslim culture and Islamic learning, along with a deep understanding of the societies where they were based.'

Winston Churchill was one of that knowing assembly.

As a newly elected Conservative MP, Churchill stood out against his party and most of the country by attacking the national hero, Kitchener, for bloody reprisals against the Dervishes and for desecrating the Mahdi's tomb and even his corpse. He voted against an award for Kitchener from public funds, a decision Kitchener never forgot.

Many Muslims fought and died in the service of Britain in two World Wars. But with British power declining relative to that of the US in the latter part of the 20th century, 'the UK's richer understanding of the Islamic world has been lost', leading to 'the same dangerous and simplistic discourse as the United States'.

From the relatively subtle understanding of Islam and the Muslim world came the othering and abuse of its followers in the monochrome 'war on terror'. Osborne names those in politics and journalism who benefitted from this coarsening of understanding, believing 'the think tank Policy Exchange dismantled the British approach to tolerance'. Its first chairman, Michael Gove, also happened to be a favoured Murdoch son, but Osborne identifies its key figure as Dean Godson, a former *Daily Telegraph* colleague. The author writes:

Godson came from a family with a tradition of interest in Cold War intelligence work, propaganda and covert action. His father Joseph Godson was Labour attaché at the United States embassy in London in the 1950s and used his influence to promote the interest of the pro-US

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<sup>3</sup> Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust is Over; We Must Rise from its Ashes* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008)

wing of the Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> At one stage, he was part of a plot to expel Aneurin Bevan from the Labour Party.<sup>5</sup>

Osborne writes:

From 2005 onwards, [Dean] Godson seems to have been on a mission to rip up the counter-terrorism strategy adopted by successive British governments. He promoted the new approach to Muslims through research papers, seminars and, not least, media muscle.

He adds:

For Policy Exchange, the UK was one of a band of states, led by the US, that were engaged in a mortal battle against a set of deadly foes dedicated to a project to destroy Western civilisation.

Osborne guides us through what followed in the Birmingham school Trojan Horse affair, Quilliam, Prevent, the 'Grooming Gangs' saga and the fate of the Muslim Tory party chair, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. It is a distressing catalogue of cynically cultivated bigotry, much of it based on outright fabrications.

His section on France, with its very different imperial involvement with Islam and the Muslim world, is instructive not only in itself but in comparison with that of the US and the UK. Much of it was new to me and I'm not competent to evaluate its worth. But with 60 pages of footnotes, a helpful timeline and nine pages of recommended further reading, there is plenty of scope for reader evaluation of this section as well as the book's overall content, analysis and conclusions.

In his chapter, 'Huntington's Bloody Borders', Osborne includes stories of some of the victims of Muslim demonisation during the so-called 'war on terror'. He opens it with this mea culpa:

As a lobby correspondent, I often travelled with the press party which

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<sup>4</sup> In 1976 Joseph Godson set up the Labour Committee for Transatlantic Understanding, receiving funding from NATO. (See David Ostler, 'New Labour, New Atlanticism: US and Tory intervention in the unions since the 1970s' in *Lobster* 33, Summer 1997.)

Dean's older brother, Roy, was a close associate of Bill Casey, President Reagan's director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Roy headed the National Strategy Information Center set up by Casey, where he worked with British academic and founder member of the Social Democratic Party, the late Dr Stephen Haseler. According to *Village Voice* journalist James Ridgeway (August 4 1987), Roy was 'an important figure in the Iran-contra funding scandal'.

He is married to Christine, the daughter of Gaitskell union and Labour NEC ally and leader of the Durham Miners' Association, Sam Watson. He hosted visits to the United States of British trade unionists to Washington DC in the 1980s. (See 'Anglo-American union exchanges linked to Irangate scandal', in *Tribune* September 30 1988.)

<sup>5</sup> Ed. Philip M Williams, *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell 1945-56* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983) pp. 339-41.

accompanies the prime minister on overseas trips. At press conferences with foreign leaders, the local press corps would sit on the left: docile, serious-minded, attentive. The British press corps sat on the right: anarchic, boisterous, contemptuous.

It took me rather too long to understand that British reporters were not the lords of misrule we fancied ourselves to be. We paid no price for our mild, cowardly heresies and studied irreverence. The schoolboyish mayhem was a boorish manifestation of privilege. For us, a courageous piece meant offending a politician who might complain to our editor. In many of the countries I visit, a courageous piece by a local reporter means writing a story that could lead to their disappearance, torture and death.

Osborne goes on:

We British journalists weren't publishing heretical or difficult material. Our stories fitted an approved official narrative. We ignored the rich complexity of the world – there wasn't time to deal with it. We divided it into good people (us) and bad people (them).

This was necessary professionally because it provided a compelling narrative for readers, giving them a reason for an interest in events in a faraway part of the world. But it was also important for morale because it enabled us to sustain the myth, greatly cherished by Western reporters, that we were fighting a virtuous battle for truth and freedom.

In describing the real world Osborne could not avoid once the blinkers of lobby journalism were removed, he sees political realities those of us on the Left have long known. But in *The Fate of Abraham* he has done more than acknowledge his earlier shallowness of view: he has shown how Western thinking and actions about Islam have been beset by the intellectual and moral error of seeing it in monochrome Cold War terms.

Osborne is not here as explicitly critical of Israel and its supporters as he might have been. Leaf through the gatherings of the Jonathan Institute brought together by Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>6</sup> before the collapse of the Soviet Union and there you will see outlined the 'terrorism' script for much of what has led to endless war ever since.

I'm sure more knowledgeable readers will have their detailed criticisms of such an ambitious and wide-ranging work. But for me he has achieved a great deal by writing clearly and engagingly about a past in a way that helps us

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<sup>6</sup> Ed. Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson) 1986.

engage more practically with the present.

For this is an exercise in healthy disillusionment, a process long overdue for many of us in our distressed island nation. The misconceptions which Johnson and his Islamophobic and bigoted allies promote – he as Churchill, Priti Patel as Canute fending off the alien waves – need to be deconstructed so we can better see and celebrate the real virtues of decency, truth, fairness and justice which we on the Left uphold.

As Osborne well demonstrates in this fine book we are not the sole possessors of these virtues. But in the present crisis of corruption, conflict and decadence we are the best placed to champion them.

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