

# ON THE FRONT LINES: AMERICAN MUSLIMS AND THE WAR ON TERROR

ABDULLAH AL-ARIAN & HAFSA KANJWAL

## INTRODUCTION

An often-overlooked element of the United States-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) concerns the impact of the war's domestic policies on American Muslims. In the face of global practices that have included rendition, torture, black sites, military occupation, and drone strikes, the fate of American Muslim political, social, and religious life may appear mild by comparison. Nonetheless, the mass securitization of the Muslim community in the U.S., coupled with the criminalization of free speech, and the targeting of community leaders and institutions by law enforcement agencies, collectively demonstrate that U.S. domestic policies represented a crucial component of the broader Global War on Terror and served to advance many of its most notable goals.

The domestic response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 signaled a major escalation in state securitization policies toward American Muslims. However, it is worth noting that many of the practices which came to be identified with the

post-9/11 era, including mass surveillance, curtailing of free speech rights, harassment of community leaders, indefinite detentions, and so on, had roots in earlier periods. As American imperial engagement in the Middle East region assumed a more prominent place in the post-Cold War foreign policy agenda, U.S. officials grew increasingly concerned over possible domestic opposition to American intervention in the region. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, law enforcement agencies monitored American Muslim statements concerning the decision to send U.S. military forces to roll back Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. Then, following the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993, the community's activism on behalf of Palestine became subject to increased scrutiny and harassment, particularly as American Muslims voiced deep concerns over the acceleration of Israeli colonization of Palestinian land in the wake of the unending "peace process".

These political developments were bolstered by

the emergence of a robust Islamophobia industry that sought to depict Muslims in the U.S. as a fifth column that threatened American values, suggesting that they should be subject to intense scrutiny and surveillance. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed into law an immigration bill that included counterterrorism measures which threatened to erode civil liberties and constitutional rights. By 2000, over two dozen immigrants, nearly all of them Muslim, were imprisoned under the law, which allowed “secret evidence” to be admissible in immigration proceedings to detain individuals indefinitely. That same year, in one of the most high-profile senate races in the country, Hillary Clinton returned more than \$50,000 in political contributions by American Muslim organizations after her Republican opponent referred to the donations as “blood money” (Murphy, 2000).

Rather than signify a break with an idealized past, the post-9/11 era in fact ramped up approaches and practices that had already been well underway. As we aim to demonstrate in the course of this chapter,

*the Global War on Terror has had a dual impact on American Muslims: on the one hand securitizing the community’s longstanding social, political, and spiritual commitments under the guise of combatting terrorism, and on the other hand establishing incentivization schemes to develop emerging leaders and institutions whose political priorities and ethical*

*values are more likely to fall in line with those of U.S. imperial interests.*

these strategies have had the added effect of making the American Muslim community a front line in the Global War on Terror.

## SECURITIZING AMERICAN MUSLIMS

In 1990, George H. W. Bush declared a “new world order” that put the Cold War rivalry with the now fallen Soviet Union in the past and heralded the emergence of American hegemony across the globe. Before long, security agencies would declare “international terrorism” the foremost threat to U.S. interests and reconfigured state policies to confronting it directly. In the aftermath of 9/11, the alarmist voices within government, policy think tanks, and media argued fervently in favor of an all-out strategy to combat terrorism on a global scale, and emphasized that the United States itself was not immune from the tentacles of international terrorism. They maintained that civil liberties protections would need to be lifted in order to empower state officials to deal with the threat of terrorism in the U.S. (Kertzer, 2007).

Many of the policies pursued in the early months after 9/11 targeted American Muslims directly. The USA PATRIOT Act, passed by Congress in October 2001, vastly expanded surveillance powers and eroded civil liberties in unprecedented ways. Thousands of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries living within the U.S. were subject to interviews by federal agents and required to enroll in a national registry. Mosques and Islamic centers were targeted for infiltration by FBI informants while leaders of Muslim institutions were subject to

interrogation. American Muslims also endured discrimination, hate crimes, and media harassment, spurred on in part by the bellicose tone of public officials whose comments cast the entire community in a suspicious light.

While the immediate aim of these policies ostensibly was to uncover potential terrorist cells operating within the American Muslim community, their broader objectives concerned silencing dissenting viewpoints and neutralizing political opposition at a time when the U.S. was launching large scale invasions of two Muslim-majority countries and pursuing a strategy of regime change and combating terrorism throughout the world, impacting primarily Muslim populations. The chilling effect produced by these anti-terrorism policies irrevocably altered the landscape of American Muslim communal life. From ritual worship and charitable giving to public advocacy and political engagement, anti-terrorism policies spared no element of the community's basic functions and activities.

In 2014, an Intercept investigation based on leaked documents revealed that federal authorities had been spying on a number of prominent American Muslim figures that included an attorney, a political lobbyist, an academic, and leaders of two of the most prominent American Muslim civic organizations going as far back as 2002 (Greenwald and Hussain, 2014). Indeed, soon after 9/11 the FBI and the Department of Justice began systematically targeting a number of American Muslim leaders and institutions for prosecution in high-profile terrorism trials. The 2003 arrest and subsequent trial of Sami Al-Arian, a university professor, Palestine activist, and civil rights advocate sent shockwaves across the American Muslim community due to his prominent role in promoting civic engagement, lobbying, and

electoral politics. In 2004, authorities brought terrorism charges against the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development (HLF), the largest American Muslim charity, and arrested five members of its staff. Following a retrial in 2008 after prosecutors initially failed to convict the charity, the HLF officers were sentenced to up to 65 years in federal prison, despite the government never providing any evidence that the charitable donations were used to fund violence.

The fallout from the HLF case continued well beyond the trial. In an unorthodox move, the Department of Justice released the names of 246 unindicted co-conspirators, normally kept anonymous due to the fact that uncharged entities have no means of defending themselves against serious allegations such as support for terrorism. The list of names included several of the most prominent American Muslim organizations, from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). The intentions behind leaking the names were clear: to cast a cloud over the entire community, delegitimizing its institutions and treating its members with suspicion. Similarly, the 2005 case against Ali Al-Tamimi, a Virginia-based imam sentenced to life in prison for allegedly providing a fatwa (religious opinion) to some community members regarding the ongoing U.S. military action in Afghanistan, contributed greatly to the chilling effect among American Muslims, as imams across the country feared their words could be used to put them in prison. In this way, the early years after 9/11 became notable for the mass targeting of American Muslim leaders and institutions. While some organizations were criminally charged in highly politicized cases, others shut down due to government and public pressure, and many others were forced to shift their limited resources to defending themselves against the cloud of

suspicion, greatly impacting their ability to serve the increasingly vital needs of community members.

In the next phase of the domestic war on terror, law enforcement agencies seeking to justify the exorbitant material resources and permissive legal terrain they enjoyed began to rely increasingly on paid informants to entrap unsuspecting Muslim youth into terror plots that those federal authorities would then foil. In fact, according to a 2015 study, more than half of all alleged terrorism cases involved the use of paid informants who were usually responsible for concocting the plots in collusion with the FBI (Norris and Grol-Prokopczyk, 2015). Sensationalistic media coverage of the most high-profile cases almost never made mention of the fact that these terrorist conspiracies were the work of FBI informants. Instead, stories of foiled terror plots like those of the Newburgh Four or the Fort Dix Five provided cover for the continued stigmatization of American Muslims.

*The wholesale targeting of American Muslims through the prism of the GWOT had a cascading effect whereby traditional forms of protection in the form of the community's leadership and institutions safeguarding its rights were marginalized, paving the way for the predatory policing embodied in the community's infiltration by law enforcement agencies.*

Over time, this disciplinary function was internalized

within segments of the community to such a degree that it became represented in newfound ethical commitments and political priorities, producing new community spaces and institutions that reflected the profoundly destabilizing realities of the post-9/11 era.

### IMPACT REWARDED

The impact of the GWOT on American Muslim leaders and institutions has been instrumental in enabling an atmosphere of fear and criminalization. Combined with media attacks and a rising Islamophobia industry, Muslims were positioned as the new domestic (and foreign) threat. Not only did the prosecution of the organizations and individuals mentioned above impact those who were directly targeted, but it also cast a broader net of suspicion across the breadth of the American Muslim community, which one could argue was the purpose of such targeting in the first place. Those who were singled out were intended to serve as an example to the rest: in order to survive in the American political landscape, American Muslims had to moderate their political stances and fall in line with established political discourses. As a result, leaders and institutions were either silenced or forced to self-police in order to protect their interests in the broader American political landscape and ensure that they would not be targeted.

The GWOT led American Muslims to be increasingly perceived through the lens of securitization and contested political loyalties. One had to prove one's patriotism by buying into the American exceptionalism project or risk being seen as an enemy of the state. This disciplining effect led to a politics of pragmatism. Instead of critiquing the GWOT, the extension of the national security state and surveillance of American Muslim communities,

and the expansion of American imperialism across the Muslim world, American Muslim leaders and organizations spent most of their energies focusing on combating societal Islamophobia that arose in the wake of 9/11. They created or further expanded a number of initiatives and organizations that were meant to help the broader community better understand 'true' Islam, and also to help American Muslims assert their sense of civic belonging in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> While these initiatives might have contributed to combatting misinformation about Islam and Muslims, they largely avoided articulating the state and American imperialism as the largest purveyor of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism globally, and also domestically. Emphasis was instead placed on a smaller group of right-wing foundations and groups that promoted anti-Muslim discourses (Ali et al, 2011). A liberal veneer of discourses of tolerance and American Muslim model-belonging pervaded the public sphere, with limited analysis of structural oppression and historical reckoning of state violence and persecution.

Meanwhile, establishment think tanks and institutions, such as the RAND Corporation, carefully crafted the boundaries of what acceptable American Muslim political formations the U.S. should engage with and amplify, focusing primarily on "liberal and secular Muslim academics and intellectuals, young moderate religious scholars, community activists, women's groups engaged in gender equality campaigns, and moderate journalists and writers" (Rabasa, 2007, p.xii). The emphasis on the cultivation of a "moderate Muslim" became reminiscent of centuries-old civilizational campaigns in which Western colonizers could "tame" Muslim subjects without accounting for the violence that undergird such projects.

Subsequently, for American Muslims, there became very little room to confront the abuses of the

GWOT and American imperialism, and the most negatively impacted were largely reliant on non-Muslim institutions and civil rights groups for support. The idea of a principled or ethical political engagement became increasingly undermined, especially as a number of individuals and institutions utilized the securitization of Muslims to advance their own careers or effectively serve as native informants, accommodating the logics of empire and the national security state to serve as interlocutors with or representatives of the Muslim community.

Elsewhere, we have called these individuals "professional Muslims": figures whose career trajectory in an atmosphere of Islamophobia and the GWOT relies largely on the utilization and profession of some part of their Muslim identity. They were, in many respects, the counter to those leaders and institutions that were targeted in the weeks and months after 9/11 for their critical stance toward American empire. Professional Muslims emerged through a variety of avenues: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives, mainstream media talking heads, State Department-sponsored tours that sent prominent American Muslims to the Muslim world, dinners hosted by the White House and other government agencies, as well as an incorporation of American Muslims into the defense and security structures of the U.S. (The Brennan Center, 2019). This trend became especially evident during the Obama presidency. The message to the rest of the Muslim community was clear: one could be a "player" in shaping American Muslim politics and civic belonging if one was willing to make huge compromises and abandon core issues. Those who were able to do this were then rewarded by being deployed as the "representatives" of the community at large (GPA). Furthermore, not only was a particular American Muslim subjectivity constructed for domestic

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the American Muslim Civil Leadership Institute, based out of the University of Southern California. (<https://crcc.usc.edu/events-and-training/amcli/>) as well as the Islamic Networks Group ([www.ing.org](http://www.ing.org)).

consumption; it was also meant to serve as a model for Muslims around the world--a civilizational projection that ironically a number of American Muslim leaders were all too eager to endorse (al-Marayati and Hathout, 2014).

One of the primary issues that professional Muslims and a number of other Muslim organizations compromised most heavily on was the struggle for Palestine. Seen as being out of step with the American "mainstream", various American Muslims made attempts to normalize Zionism and Israeli settler-colonization for American Muslim audiences (Saeed, 2020). Subsequently, a compromised position on Palestine became a ticket for more opportunities in the policy and media world (Salaita, 2020). In this fashion, the politics of respectability created by the disciplining effect of the GWOT's policies attempted to cement new leaders and institutions capable of redefining issues at the core of American Muslim identity.

### CONCLUSION

Two decades after the Global War on Terror, American Muslim institutions and leaders remain confined within its binaries and projection onto the

world. Nevertheless, the recent Black Lives Matter protests as well as the broader Palestine solidarity movement have made some inroads into the American Muslim community, forcing it to contend with its recent handling of questions of race and empire. There are small glimmers of hope; however, the overwhelming mode of engagement still relies on a respectability politics whereby a minority community has to prove its sense of belonging and benefit to the nation. If long established activists were targeted for their activism, large segments of the Muslim community have been led to believe that their purchase into the American exceptionalism narrative will protect them. This has been proven to be simply not the case, as it is clearly not how anti-Muslim racism operates. It seeks to demobilize Muslim agency and create suspicion or doubt about those Muslims who do not fall in line. This in turn creates an environment where members of the Muslim community itself are policing and mainstreaming the political demands of the community. In this manner, American imperialism remains untouched, taking on new iterations overtime.

### WORKS CITED

al-Marayati, S. and Hathout M. (2014) Let Islamic Reform Start in America, Wall Street Journal

Ali, W. et. al. (2011) Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America, Center for American Progress, <https://www.american-progress.org/issues/religion/reports/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/>

Greenwald, G and Hussein, M (2014) Meet the Muslim-American Leaders the FBI and NSA Have Been Spying On, Intercept

GPA, American Muslims, GPA Publications. <https://publications.america.gov/publication/1298-2/>

Norris, J.J. and Grol-Prokopczyk, H. (2015) Estimating the Prevalence of Entrapment in Post-9/11 Terrorism Cases, Journal of Criminal Law

and Criminology, 105: 3, 2015, 673.

Kertzer, J.D. (2007) Seriousness, grand strategy, and paradigm shifts in the "war on terror," International Journal (Vol. 62, Issue 4), Autumn 2007, Sage Publications Ltd. (UK), [https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA173188287&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00207020&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=nysl\\_oweb&isGeoAuthType=true](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA173188287&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00207020&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=nysl_oweb&isGeoAuthType=true)

Murphy, D.E. (2000) Mrs. Clinton Says She Will Return Money Raised by a Muslim Group, New York Times

Rabasa, A. et. al. (2007) Building Moderate Muslim Networks, RAND Corporation

Saeed, S. (2020) Do American Muslims Still Care About Palestine? Medium, <https://medium.com/@SanaSaeed/do-american-muslims-still-care-about-palestine-e12bf69df3bc>

Salaity, S. (2020) The Muslim Zionists, <https://stevesalaity.com/the-muslim-zionists/>

The Brennan Center (2019) Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs are Bad Policy, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/why-countering-violent-extremism-programs-are-bad-policy>