

## Racialized Surveillance: Muslim Americans and the War on Terror

Saher Selod

Associate Professor of Sociology

Simmons University

In the United States, the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks led to a rise in surveillance by the state as a result of the policies put into place in the War on Terror. These policies were sold to the American people as a way to prevent another terrorist attack from occurring on US soil. But what these policies have done is unfairly targeted innocent Muslims by associating them with terror. In this talk, I want to address how surveillance practices rely on a racialized understanding of Muslims as a threat to national security. It is through this association of Muslim foreign nationals as well as radicalized Muslims within US borders that fuel policy in the name of national security. It is the state, fellow citizens and Muslims themselves who participate in surveillance, resulting in the further racialization of Muslims in the name of national security that impacts how Muslim Americans experience citizenship in the United States. The national security policies are an example of how racism against Muslims became institutionalized in the United States.

Immediately after the terrorist attacks, several laws were passed that initially targeted Muslims. Louise Cainkar chronicles some of these policies in her book, Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11, which includes mass arrests, FBI visits and interrogations of Muslims, and visa holds for Muslim immigrants and noncitizens<sup>1</sup>. The National Security Entry Exit Registration System, also known as NSEERS, required Muslims noncitizen men over the age of 16 who came from 25 countries, to register with the state. This registration included having their fingerprints taken, undergoing an interrogation and having their photographs taken as well. Of the 25 countries, 24 of them were Muslim majority, reflecting how the state marks a religious identity as one of the primary characteristics of the

potential to commit acts of terror. Another policy that was put into place was Uniting and Strengthening America through Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism, also known as the USA PATRIOT Act, which was signed into law by President Bush on October 26, 2001. This Act gave the federal government more surveillance capabilities than it had prior to 9/11. For example, the USA PATRIOT Act provided the state with the capacity to conduct searches of property without the owner's knowledge, allowed the FBI to conduct searches of emails and telephone calls without a warrant, permitted indefinite detentions of immigrants and non-citizens, and increased funding for the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center. The increased ability of the state to surveil its population has reached far beyond Muslims as the sole target, but Muslims have definitely felt the impact of these laws. In my research on Arabs and South Asian Muslim Americans, I show how surveillance by the state, fellow citizen result in Muslims participating in their own surveillance. This surveillance is not only racialized and further racializes Muslims, it is also gendered.

Interviews conducted between 2009-2012 in Chicago, Illinois and in Fort Worth, Texas with Indian, Pakistani, Palestinian, Syrian, Jordanian, and Lebanese Muslim American men and women, reveal the ways that South Asian and Arab Muslim Americans experienced racialization because of their religious identity. I define racialization as the "process by which bodies become racial in their lived realities because of biological and/or cultural traits as a result of the interaction and cooperation between ideologies, policies, laws, and social interactions that results in the denial of equal treatment in society" (Selod, 23). One can see the process of racialization via laws that target Muslims as a threat to national security because of the association of Muslim with terrorism.

My interviews, chronicled in my book Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror, reveal that one of the ways the state surveils Muslim Americans is in airports<sup>ii</sup>. Airports are borders where security became federalized after the terrorist attacks. This was done with the creation of the Transportation and Security Administration, known as TSA, which is housed under the Department of Homeland Security. In one of the chapters, *Flying While Muslim*, I show how the Transportation and Security Administration utilizes lists from the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center to match names of passengers, exposing them to hyper surveillance in airports. The Muslim men I interviewed told me they were unable to get their tickets from the self-check in kiosk and were notified that they needed to speak with a TSA agent. Once they went to the ticket agent, they were interrogated about their travel and eventually were given a ticket that had "SSSS" marked on the ticket. The four Ss indicate that the passenger's name matched a name on the Secondary Security Screening Selection list<sup>iii</sup>, a list that derives its names from one of the FBI's Terrorist Database Lists. Once in the security line, they were pulled out of the line and had their bags and bodies searched, even if they did not make the metal detectors go off.<sup>iv</sup> Finally, these passengers were often times called up at the gate after being surveilled at the ticket counter and the security line, because the passenger list for each flight is checked against the Selectee List.

The Selectee List provides a lot of insight into who the government chooses to surveil as a potential threat via terrorism, especially during this time period of 2009-2012. As NSEERS targeted Muslim noncitizen men, my interviews also show that Muslim men who were the ones who were told they were on a TSA list. Muslim women who wear the hijab, on the other hand, were subjected to random searches at the security line. Muslim women told me they were stopped and searched at the security line by TSA officers even when they did not make the metal

detector go off. Airports in this way become sites of racialized surveillance, a space where Muslim men and women encounter hyper surveillance that is incited by their religious identity. In her book Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness, Simone Browne reveals how airports have always been racialized spaces where Black women have been targeted for security by having their bodies and hair subjected to searches.<sup>v</sup> For Muslim men and women, this act of searching their bodies in front of their fellow passengers racializes them as a threat. I call this performing security because it is a symbolic act that makes visible security practices while simultaneously racializing Muslim bodies. This is done to make some passengers feel secure and safe, highlighting the privileges of citizenship that are tied to one's race. Thus, the act of security in airports is a racializing act when it unfairly targets people because of their race and other racialized identities, in this case a religious one. Muslim Americans who are stopped and searched just because they are Muslim do not enjoy the privileges of citizenship when they are made to feel they are watched so that their fellow passengers are made to feel safe and protected.

The state also includes citizens to participate in racialized surveillance of Muslims in America. They do this through programs like "If You See Something, Say Something" that encourages private citizens to be on the lookout for suspicious and potentially dangerous behaviors. These campaigns are located on busses, train stops, and broadcasted at airports. Private citizens are not given information on what constitutes suspicious behaviors but are encouraged to report activities based on their own perceptions of what this may be. Many of the South Asian and Arab Muslims I interviewed told me they felt surveilled by their fellow citizen. One participant shared with me that a neighbor came over right after 9/11 and asked to see if she and her family were making bombs in her basement. The neighbor's husband was a police officer and my interviewee felt she had to comply. It is the act of watching, observing and

surveilling Muslim men and women that are simultaneously triggered by a racialized religious identity (the association of Muslim's bodies with terrorism) but also continue to produce a racialized Muslim by marking Muslims as suspect publicly. Because Muslim women who wear the hijab are easily identifiable as Muslim, they are often targeted for citizen surveillance. I found this to also include surveillance of them culturally, meaning that they were policed for transgressing "Western norms" because the hijab is associated with misogyny, submission, and control of women's bodies. In addition to being told to "Go back home!" because of the assumption that they were not American, some were also approached by strangers and told they were free in the United States and could take off the hijab or that they were no good to society. Muslim men were not as easily identifiable by strangers as Muslim, but their colleagues, co-workers, and fellow students who knew they were Muslim questioned them about their loyalty to the United States. One of my participants told me that his professor asked him in front of the entire class about whether or not he traveled to India over the weekend after a terrorist attack occurred there, implying he was involved. We can see how citizens participate in this at airports as well, as there are countless examples in the American media of passengers reporting their fellow Muslim passenger as suspicious simply because they identify (and in some cases misidentify them) someone as Muslim and therefore a potential threat. Rather than dismiss or even dispel this form of racial profiling by fellow citizens, airlines often comply with this request and remove Muslims from airplanes. Thus, citizens play a crucial role, in the racialized surveillance of Muslims as they are able to enact power over them via this surveillance.

The Muslims I interviewed for my book reveal that they also participate in monitoring their behavior in response to this hyper surveillance they encounter. The individuals I spoke with mentioned how they changed their behavior in public spaces so that they do not appear suspect.

From wearing brighter colored hijabs to avoiding discussion of religion or politics with co-workers, the Muslim men and women I spoke with were aware of the gaze on their bodies and wanted to avoid or interrupt it in any way they could. Not chronicled in my book is a surveillance program that President Obama put into place more recently, Countering Violent Extremism. CVE provides federal grants to various organizations that are interested in stopping radicalization in their communities. This program has overwhelmingly targeted Muslim communities, including the Somalian community in Boston under the Youth and Police Initiative Plus Program. Through this program Somalian youth are recruited to participate in surveillance of their own community by local law enforcement because of the assumption that they are prone to radicalization. CVE grants have been awarded to police departments, police unions, Muslim organizations, hospitals, universities and non-profit organizations, revealing the multiple sites that surveillance can occur. CVE is one of the ways policed departments are incentivized to participate in the War on Terror.

Simone Browne writes “Racializing surveillance is not static or applied to particular human groupings but does rely on certain techniques in order to reify boundaries along racial lines, and in doing so, it reifies race” (pg. 17). While she looks at how surveillance of Black bodies dates back to slavery, her point is relevant to the experience of Muslims in America. Surveillance of Muslims is a racialized project. The institutionalization of surveillance because of the War on Terror was triggered by the association of a Muslim identity with terrorism. As a consequence, it has strengthened the racial boundaries around citizenship. Many Muslim Americans were treated as if they were not citizens prior to 9/11 based on other factors like skin tone, accent, national origin and cultural attributes, but the institutionalization of laws and policies that surveil them has put them in a more precarious place. A consequence of the

racialization of Muslims who are American, is their status as citizen has become more precarious. They are not able to enjoy the privileges that citizenship should afford, because of their racialized religious identity in addition to their racial identity. In the current sociopolitical context where nationalism is heightened and anti-immigrant sentiments soar globally, for South Asian and Arab Muslim Americans the boundaries of citizenship have become more apparent and the protection they should afford weakened.

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<sup>i</sup> Cainkar, Louis A. *Homeland insecurity: the Arab American and Muslim American experience after 9/11*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Selod, Saher. *Forever suspect: Racialized surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Also known as the Selectee List.

<sup>iv</sup> The interviews were conducted before the widespread use of body scanners in airports. At the time of the interviews, metal detectors were still the primary technology used to scan bodies.

<sup>v</sup> Browne, Simone. *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Duke University Press, 2015.