

The Evolution of Islamic Racial Profiling in Times of Crisis: A comparison of three presidential administrations policies towards Muslims and Muslim-Americans under Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden

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ABSTRACT

Throughout nations' history, national security threats have often led to the erosion of civil liberties and the rise of discriminatory practices against minority groups. The United States is no different from past superpowers and has witnessed this discriminatory pattern repeatedly, with each national crisis bringing new challenges to its ideals of equality, justice and democracy. Our paper discusses the myriad ways that three presidential administrations: Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden have dealt with perceived national security threats tailoring on Islamophobia and the War on Terror.

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INTRODUCTION

9/11 and The Echoes of Pearl Harbor

The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 triggered a wave of fear and suspicion towards Japanese Americans. This culminated in the establishment of internment camps, a dark chapter in American history marked by mass incarceration based solely on ethnic background (Nader and Nayer, 2019). The hysteria and racial prejudice that fueled these actions serve as a stark reminder of how quickly a nation can compromise its values in the face of perceived threats.

The 9/11 Aftermath and the Rise of Islamophobia

Sixty years later, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon reignited similar patterns of discrimination, this time targeting Muslim and Muslim-American communities. The ensuing "War on Terror" brought about significant changes in national security policies and public attitudes (Hoffman, 2002).

Airport Security and Racial Profiling

In the wake of 9/11, airport security measures underwent a drastic overhaul. Racial and ethnic profiling became commonplace, with Muslim and Arab-looking individuals facing increased scrutiny. The public, prioritizing safety over civil liberties, largely accepted these measures without protest (Deflem, 2004).

The Concept of Islamophobia

The term "Islamophobia" gained prominence as a way to describe the prejudice, discrimination, and harassment experienced by Muslims and those perceived as Muslim, particularly in Western nations (Elliot, 2006). This phenomenon is rooted in a long history of Orientalist thinking, which portrays Muslims and Arabs as inherently different and incompatible with Western civilization.

The Institutionalization of Discrimination

The passage of the Patriot Act following 9/11 significantly expanded government powers, often at the expense of civil liberties. This legislation provided legal backing for increased

surveillance and profiling of Muslim-Americans and those perceived as Muslim or Arab (Harris, 2002b).

Racialization of Religion

Islam, as a religion, has become increasingly racialized in the post-9/11 era. This has led to a conflation of religious and ethnic identities, where individuals are judged based on a combination of factors including appearance, dress, language, and cultural practices.

Contemporary Challenges

Recent years have seen a continuation and, in some cases, an intensification of Islamophobic attitudes and policies. The implementation of travel bans targeting predominantly Muslim countries under the first Trump administration marked a significant escalation in institutionalized discrimination especially while traveling cross borders and entering the United States.

Research Focus

Given this context, there is a critical need to understand the experiences of those most affected by these policies and attitudes. Our research aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced by Muslim American women in airport settings, examining the intersection of racial profiling and Islamophobia through their perspectives. By studying these experiences, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of post-9/11 security measures and societal attitudes on Muslim American communities, particularly women who often bear the brunt of visible discrimination due to religious attire, i.e. the wearing of hijabs, veils and/or burqas.

Muslim American Resilience in the Wake of 9/11

The September 11 attacks profoundly impacted Muslim American communities, catalyzing a wave of solidarity and proactive engagement to counter misconceptions and prejudice. In the aftermath of this tragedy, Muslim Americans demonstrated remarkable resilience and commitment to their fellow United States citizens.

Community Outreach and Education

Muslim organizations swiftly mobilized to bridge the gap of understanding between their communities and the broader American public (Johnson, D et.al, 2011). The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a pre-existing non-profit, intensified its efforts to provide accurate information about Islam and combat negative stereotypes. CAIR's mission expanded to include:

- Conducting sensitivity training workshops for corporations and government agencies
- Encouraging interfaith dialogue
- Protecting civil liberties
- Empowering American Muslims
- Building coalitions to promote justice and mutual understanding

Humanitarian Response

Muslim Americans responded to the tragedy with compassion and generosity:

- Condemning the attacks unequivocally
- Contributing thousands of dollars to charities supporting attack victims
- Organizing fundraisers and support activities through student organizations like the Muslim Student Association (MSA)

Interfaith Initiatives

To foster understanding and unity, Muslim communities:

- Invited the public to informational meetings about Islam
- Welcomed other religious groups to mosques during Ramadan
- Distributed educational materials to universities and the public

Advocacy and Legal Support

As discrimination cases rose, Muslim organizations stepped up their advocacy efforts:

- CAIR documented and litigated civil rights violations, handling 2,652 cases in 2008 alone
- Provided legal assistance to Muslim Americans facing discrimination

Public Education Campaigns

Muslim organizations launched extensive public education initiatives:

- CAIR and MSA distributed books, films, and organized lectures nationwide
- These efforts aimed to illuminate the impact of 9/11 on Muslim communities and dispel misconceptions

Through these multifaceted efforts, Muslim Americans sought to convey a clear message: the actions of the 9/11 hijackers did not represent their community or their faith. Their response demonstrated a commitment to American values of pluralism, civic engagement, and mutual understanding in the face of adversity (Kleiner, 2010).

Growing Population and Awareness

- Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S., with estimates of 2-7 million Muslims (5% of the population)
- Increased public interest in Islam after 9/11, with Quran sales rising and mosques holding open houses

Perceptions of Discrimination

- About 40% of American Muslims believe the U.S. is "fighting a war against Islam"

- Many Muslims felt "politically voiceless" regarding the war on terror
- Some polls appear to show that Muslim Americans view negative treatment as a reason to strengthen Islamic identity

Government Policies and Civil Liberties Concerns

- The Patriot Act raised concerns about violations of constitutional rights:
- Freedom of speech, religion, and association
- Due process protections
- Potential for guilt by association
- Critics argue broad surveillance wastes resources and alienates communities

Calls for Cooperation and Understanding

- Muslim Americans seen as key to defeating extremism within the U.S., i.e. homegrown terrorism
- Advocates urge government to work with Muslim communities rather than using "draconian tactics"
- Public officials, like Colin Powell, emphasized religious pluralism

Debate Over National Security Approach

- Civil rights community criticized overreach of government powers
- Calls to publicly debate the concept of a "war on terrorism"
- Concerns about racial profiling labeling Muslims as "suspected others"

The post-9/11 era has presented challenges for Muslim Americans, balancing national security concerns with civil liberties protections. While the Muslim population continues to grow, many in the community feel unfairly targeted by government policies. Advocates emphasize the need for greater understanding and cooperation between the government and Muslim Americans to effectively address extremism while upholding constitutional values.

The Obama Administration Approach to Islamic Profiling

Shifting the Paradigm

- Rejected "terrorism-mongering" tactics of the Bush era
- Sought a "new beginning" with Muslims worldwide
- Emphasized mutual respect and common interests

Smart Power Strategy

- Prioritized political, cultural, and economic engagement over military force
- Utilized a full range of diplomatic tools
- Created the Office of Special Representative to Muslim Communities

Domestic Outreach

- Supported religious freedom for Muslims in the U.S.
- Engaged with Muslim institutions through roundtable discussions and conferences
- Aimed to rebuild trust with Muslim and Arab American communities

International Engagement

- Delivered landmark speeches in Ankara and Cairo
- Directed NASA to include Muslim world outreach in its mission
- Focused on dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation

Potential Benefits

1. Improved relations with Muslim-majority countries
2. Enhanced domestic security through community cooperation
3. Reduced alienation of Muslim Americans
4. More targeted and effective counterterrorism efforts
5. Potential for increased cultural and scientific exchanges
6. Possibility of defusing tensions and preventing radicalization
7. Opportunity to leverage Muslim American talents in diplomacy and national security

While the Obama administration's approach showed potential for improving relations and security outcomes, it's important to note that some controversial policies from the previous administration continued in modified forms. The long-term impact of these changes would depend on consistent implementation and further development of these strategies in subsequent years.

The First Trump Administration Approach to Islamic Profiling

The Trump administration's approach to Arab American and Muslim American relations was characterized by several controversial policies and statements:

1. Travel ban: One of Trump's first major actions was implementing a travel ban that initially targeted several Muslim-majority countries. This became known as the "Muslim ban" and went through multiple iterations before being upheld by the Supreme Court.
2. Anti-Muslim rhetoric: Trump made numerous statements viewed as anti-Muslim during his campaign and presidency, which increased concerns about Islamophobia.
3. Increased surveillance: There were concerns about increased surveillance and monitoring of Muslim communities under Trump's administration.
4. Shift in counterterrorism focus: The administration moved away from Obama-era outreach efforts to Muslim communities and refocused counterterrorism efforts more narrowly on "radical Islamic terrorism".
5. Rise in hate crimes: There was an uptick in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents during Trump's presidency, which many attributed in part to his rhetoric.
6. Policy changes: Various policy changes impacted Muslim and Arab Americans, including stricter vetting for visas and refugees from certain countries.
7. Polarization of views: Public opinion on Muslims and Islam became more partisan, with Republicans more likely to hold negative views compared to Democrats.
8. Community response: Many Muslim and Arab American groups increased their political engagement and activism in response to Trump's policies.
9. International relations: Trump's approach strained relations with some Muslim-majority countries while strengthening ties with others like Saudi Arabia.

The overall impact was a deterioration in relations between the administration and many Muslim and Arab American communities, marked by increased tensions, legal challenges, and political mobilization in response to Trump's policies and rhetoric. However, some supporters of Trump argued his policies were necessary for national security.

The Biden Administration Approach to Islamic Profiling

The Biden administration has taken several actions related to Muslim and Arab American rights and terrorism threats:

1. Ending the "Muslim ban": One of President Biden's first actions was to revoke the Trump-era travel bans that primarily affected several Muslim-majority countries.
2. Countering domestic terrorism: The administration released the first-ever National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism in 2021, which aims to address threats while protecting civil liberties. It specifically mentions racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists as a key threat.
3. Shifting focus: The administration has moved away from primarily focusing on Islamic extremism to also emphasizing the threat of domestic terrorism, including white supremacist groups.
4. Improving community relations: There have been efforts to rebuild trust with Muslim and Arab American communities through outreach and inclusion initiatives.
5. Enhancing traveler vetting: The administration has worked to improve traveler screening systems while aiming to avoid unfair profiling.
6. Addressing global terrorism: The State Department continues to designate foreign terrorist organizations and individuals under Executive Order 13224, which allows for sanctions against terrorist groups.
7. Cybersecurity focus: The Department of Homeland Security has made cybersecurity a top priority, which includes protecting critical infrastructure and investigating malicious cyber activity regardless of the perpetrators' backgrounds.
8. Afghanistan withdrawal: The controversial withdrawal from Afghanistan has impacted the U.S. ability to gather intelligence on terrorist threats in the region, leading to debates about how to address potential risks.

While the administration has taken steps to protect civil liberties and improve relations with Muslim and Arab American communities, it continues to face challenges in balancing security concerns with individual rights.

Conclusion

Under national security guidelines and perceived threats, the United States government can persecute and use the machinery of the government to detain, arrest and even deport individuals it considers a threat. After 9/11, the Patriot Act opened many avenues for the spy security apparatus of the U.S.A. to monitor and gather intelligence about both U.S. citizens and foreign citizens living in the United States. Most notably, the National Security Agency was granted broad surveillance and spy powers not seen and utilized since the Cold War. Among the three Presidential administrations- Obama, Trump and Biden- all of them have re-signed and reauthorized the Patriot Act. With Trump winning the Presidency again in 2024, it remains to be seen if his administration will continue his first administration policies or if he will instead focus his administration efforts on other policy areas, namely immigration, Ukraine, Israel-Gaza or domestic economic concerns such as trade wars and tariffs. As it appears clear, during the first few months of his presidency, the second Trump administration seemed to focus on detaining and deporting undocumented and/or illegal immigrants from up to 36 countries and including South and Latin America, particularly from Venezuela, El Salvador and other South American and Latin American countries (Reuters, 2025). In addition, President Trump also has signed an Executive Order targeting countries in Africa (Reuters, 2025). President Trump does not seem interested in a second "Muslim ban," rather his efforts in the Middle East appear to be more in line with his personal and national financial interests, doing business deals in Dubai, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Perhaps it is not surprising that President Trump has reverted to his previous business roots and decided it is better to make deals with perceived enemies and do business with them rather than waste money, time and effort to use them as scapegoats. This may also be the Trump

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