

I Am Not a Terrorist: Racial Profiling In a Post-9/11 World

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Abstract

Post-9/11 racial and religious profiling against Muslim-Americans, particularly those of Arab-descent, remains a significant social problem in the United States. Profiling to combat “terrorists” has public support and is continually used by government actors to violate the civil rights of Muslim-Americans of Arab descent and those “mis-targeted” as Arab and/or Muslim. This auto ethnographic case study outlines the author’s experience of repeatedly being mis-targeted as an Arab and/or Muslim-American and is informed by the intersectionality principle of feminist and critical race theories. The author’s experiences are juxtaposed with research documenting the experiences of Muslim-Americans of Arab-descent and implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: discriminatory profiling, terrorism, human rights, Arab, Muslim

I never intended to become a terrorist.

Responding to an open-casting call in Hollywood, California and selected for my “Mediterranean looks”, I stopped shaving my face at the casting director’s request that I have a full beard before filming. In the process I found myself exposed to and playing a different role in real life facing the insidious cultural realities of the post-9/11 United States—cultural realities which, as a non-Muslim, non-Arab, white male of primarily-European descent I was mainly unaware. In writing this case study I am keenly aware of my place as an outsider with (a) only a basic understanding Islam, and (b) a microcosm of experiences arguably similar to those faced by actual American-Muslims of Arab descent on a regular basis. In spite of this obvious limitation, my efforts are informed by the principle of intersectionality from feminist and critical race theories which lends support to the idea that diverse groups can and do at times share similar experiences (Cole, 2009; Hulko, 2013).

1. Introduction

Post-9/11 Institutionalized Attitudes American-Muslims

One month after al-Qaeda terrorists flew jetliners into New York City’s Twin Towers, the United States Congress passed legislation “To deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes.” (USA PATRIOT Act, 2001). Unfortunately in America terrorism has become increasingly and unjustifiably synonymous with the religion of Islam (Johnson et al., 2011). And for American-Muslims in the post-9/11 political and social environment the Patriot Act’s nebulous phrase “for other purposes” is distinctly nefarious. According to Hilal (2014) “Muslim Americans overwhelmingly perceive themselves to be the target of the War on Terror policies.” Smith (2010) reports that in America “Muslims worry deeply that such realities as the US Patriot Act, ‘Operation Green Quest’ (in which the government invaded homes and businesses of Muslims), profiling in airports and other public places and freezing the assets of Muslim charities represent a loss of Muslim civil liberties.” And the American Civil Liberties Union (“ACLU”) (n.d.) reports that the New York Police Department has targeted Muslims for discriminatory surveillance since 2002.

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Ironically although the majority of Americans sampled by Johnson, et al. (2011) condemn racial-profiling to prevent “crime”, they support racial profiling to prevent “terrorism”—even though terrorism, by definition, is itself a crime.

America’s intolerance of “others” is far from extinct, a fact underscored by the blatant and repeated denigration of American-Muslims in the Republican presidential-primaries (Nielson, 2012; Trump, 2015). Sadly such demonization of American-Muslims is not contained solely to the rabidity of delegate-driven political primaries. The ACLU (2011) condemned then-House-Homeland-Security-Committee-Chairman Rep. Peter King (R-NY) for using his position to “air the unsubstantiated allegation that Muslim-American leaders are uncooperative with U.S. counterterrorism efforts, both because the allegation is demonstrably incorrect and because it will only sow discord when national unity is most needed.” According to Council on American-Islamic Relations (2013), Rep. King (Chairman of the Sub-Committee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence) has for the past decade repeatedly labeled the Muslim-American community in general as hostile to the United States. After analyzing the Congressional Record of the 106th and 111th senate for depictions of Islam by Republican and Democratic senators, Coen (2014) determined that Democratic senators were more likely to depict Islam positively. President Trump’s “Muslim-ban” (Dabashi, 2017) lends further support—at least in the dominant societal discourse—to the idea of America’s institutionalized Islamophobia.

Awad (2010) found that American-Muslims of Arab-descent who had integrated into dominant American society actually faced increased levels of discrimination when compared to similarly acculturated Christians of Arab-descent. Abdulrahima, James, Yamouta, & Baker (2012) report similar findings of discrimination against American-Muslims. And Freij (2011) highlighted the increased discrimination and harassment against Arab-Americans post-9/11 and emphasized the need for cultural awareness and competency.

As I continued to let my beard grow in preparation for my film appearance, America’s post-9/11 institutionalized discrimination towards American-Muslims of Arab-descent suddenly became frighteningly personal.

2. Discussion

American-Arab/Muslim...Like Me

Aside from my family, friends, and close acquaintances, people who had never seen me without a beard assumed I was Arab and Muslim. A new acquaintance from Saudi Arabia continually expressed disbelief that I was not Egyptian or Syrian. On a summer legal tour my colleagues felt the need to explain that I was “not a terrorist” to security personnel when our group toured sensitive governmental facilities. Although on one level they were joking, their comments highlight the “outgroup” status (Hodson, Rush & MacInnis, 2010) of Arab/Muslims and this groups association with terrorism in the post-9/11 socio-political climate. Although people assumed I was Arab, my familial roots actually lead back to Europe.

My blue-eyed, reddish-brown haired father is primarily of Scandinavian descent and looks like his Viking forebears. My mother is of mixed-European ancestry and has dark eyes and dark hair. I inherited her coloring and, as I was coming to find out, her apparently Arab appearance. I remember a varsity banquet in high school when a local journalist asked my mother about her “son” when he was actually referring to my teammate—a political refugee from Iran.

That innocuous mistake about my mother’s nationality contrasted sharply with the strange manner of a customs official at the Los Angeles International Airport who checked my passport in our post-9/11 world even though I was clean shaven at the time. The man stared hard at me. He looked intently at my passport picture, scanned it, then held onto my passport and scowled at me again. The minutes ticked by. The crowd of disembarking international travelers waiting entry to the US grew increasingly large behind me. Still the border official refused to let me into my own country. I remember feeling a distinct impression that (a) he was looking for a reason to detain me, and that (b) he was bothered that I had an American passport. American-Muslims report similar feelings of anxiety when subject to post-9/11 government surveillance (O’Connor & Jahan, 2014).

The custom official then started to question me, but not with the usual interrogatories. Instead of asking about my declarations or travels he went off script and asked narrowly, “Do you pilot airplanes?” I stared at him incredulously. I had an American passport, I am an American citizen by birth, and I had just flown home to America after a three-week excursion abroad. Who or what exactly did he think I was? What was he attempting to goad me into? What was he contemplating next under his apparent color of authority? I felt annoyed, indignant, insulted.

Angry. Afraid. Breathing in I determined that yelling at this man in uniform and demanding he treat me with the respect due a fellow-citizen would only escalate what, given my background and life-experience to date, was a bizarre situation. Masking my emotions I responded evenly, “No, why do you ask? Is that something you think I should do?” He smirked, said something about “it’s just a question” and let me pass. For him that moment was over, but my emotions were hot. I could not recall ever experiencing something like that before in my own country. Yet as disturbing as my experience was, however, such enhanced questions or screening techniques at airports are not uncommon for Arab and Muslim men entering the United States (Ogbuagu, 2013) or those (such as myself) who are “mis-targeted” through racial and religious profiling as being Arab or Muslim (Kleinder, 2010).

That experience made me even more apprehensive about air-travel as my beard grew and my appearance (based on my Saudi colleague’s opinion) looked decidedly Egyptian or Syrian. When traveling I made sure to dress professionally in slacks, formal shoes, a collared button shirt and a sport coat. My theory was that by dressing professionally I would reduce any fears that I was somehow a security-threat. But when I actually went to the airport and acted as I normally do in airport security lines, I realized that when it comes to real world discrimination—the adage “clothes make the man” is merely rhetoric.

While standing in line I noticed that my fellow passengers-in-line kept looking at me. This fact in and of itself is not surprising given that people-watching is rather common in public places and I too engage in this pastime. What stood out to me, however, was (a) the number of people looking at me, and (b) the intensity of their stares. I also noticed that when I nodded in response to their stares, they would quickly look away but then turn to stare at me again. Admittedly, I do not know what they were thinking. Based on my bearded-appearance and my recent experience on the summer legal tour, however, I think it safe to assume that they thought I was Arab and Muslim. I remember one white-woman’s stare as being unrelenting. I noticed her looking at me unwaveringly and so I looked away. As she was in the front and to the side of me, she was still in my field of vision. I remember that her traveling companions had their backs to me and were facing in the direction of the line, but she was facing me. The line moved forward and she disappeared into the crowd placing their luggage on the x-ray belts and walking through the security machines. Then it was my turn to present my boarding pass and state issued ID to the scowling Transportation Security Administration (“TSA”) agent. He looked at me, looked at my ID and then snapped, “You need to shave your beard or get a new ID”. Granted, it is not unheard of for TSA agents to come across as short-tempered or even rude as they deal with thousands of harried air travelers oft-times annoyed at TSA’s presence. But in this case not only was that TSA agent’s order that I shave my beard unenforceable under the U.S. Constitution (U.S. Const. amend. I.), it was also evidence of institutionalized discrimination against Arabs and Muslims in the United States’ post-9/11 socio-political climate.

Arguably my experience by itself is only anecdotal. Yet during filming I was repeatedly paired with an actress of Arab descent who, like me, enjoyed acting as a hobby. In real life she provided Arab and Muslim-American cultural awareness and competency trainings to police departments, school professionals, as well as government officials and entities. She confirmed that (a) my experiences as a “mis-targeted” Arab-Muslim are common for the Arab-American and Muslim community, and (b) that the government’s discriminatory religious and ethnic profiling has led to civil rights violations in the Arab-American, Muslim community (J. Freij, personal communication, August 2011).

3. Implications for Practice

The marginalization of American-Muslims of Arab descent does not occur in a proverbial vacuum. Civil rights are interconnected, and the ready willingness of government leaders (such as Presidents, Presidential candidates and senior representatives of Congress) to continually denigrate the Arab-American-Muslim population as “terrorists” leads predictably to civil rights violations, institutionalized discrimination, and violations of the rule of law on the federal, state, and local level. Policy makers and human rights advocates have an ethical duty to combat discrimination and advocate for social justice on behalf of American-Muslims of Arab descent who are currently being pushed to the edge of society. It was Nietzsche who said, “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster”(as cited in Guinness, 2005). As the United States continues its campaign against “terror”, we must ensure that in the process it does not terrorize and oppress the rights of its own citizens. Now, during our watch and through (a) the elimination of bias in ourselves and our organizations, (b) public awareness campaigns, (c) targeted advocacy, and (d) effective use of social media and other means, we must eliminate the denigration of American-Muslims.

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