Intersections of Muslims and Surveillance

Surveillance of minoritized groups has been foundational in the history of the United States. In its earliest forms, surveillance manifested as slaveholders and slave patrols monitoring the actions of enslaved people.[1] Among the enslaved were the first Muslims to arrive in what would become the United States, brought through the Atlantic Slave Trade from North and West Africa.[2] Under slavery, these Muslims were unable to openly practice their religion, leading to a historical record that overlooks their presence. In the early 19th century, the first professional police forces further reinforced racialized surveillance by enforcing Black Codes and regulating the conduct of enslaved people.[3] In this way, surveillance in the U.S. developed through systems of racialized distrust and control. Following the abolition of slavery, surveillance mechanisms remained intact, adapting and emerging in new institutions such as immigration and federal intelligence agencies. They would later serve as means of controlling various radical and activist groups. In the 21st century, surveillance methods from the past have become the basis of counterterrorism practices which most often target Muslims.

While the United States has a unique historical and cultural context, it is not alone in its racialization of Muslims. The concept of global racialization refers to the similar narratives about Muslims that exist in many nation-states, despite different circumstances. For instance, Muslim immigration to Britain increased following World War II, driven by labor needs amid the country's postwar recovery. Over time, immigrant groups faced resistance and legislators were pressured to limit "colored" immigration, reflecting a shift toward racialized anxieties.[4] In China, Uyghur Muslims have been subject to mass surveillance, forced assimilation, and detention.[5] Despite their deep historical roots in the region, Uyghurs have been portrayed as a threat to national unity and stability. The global impact of 9/11 further intensified this trend, as Muslim identity became increasingly framed as a threat to national security.

In response to this perceived threat, many countries have significantly expanded the powers of their intelligence agencies.[6] In the United States, one of the most consequential pieces of legislation was the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism). This act expanded the government’s ability to gather intelligence, conduct surveillance, and monitor financial

---

[1] Campbell, James. *Crime and Punishment in African American History*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
[2] Diouf, Sylviane A.. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479844470.001.0001
[3] Campbell, James. *Crime and Punishment in African American History*.
[4] PUGH, MARTIN. *Britain and Islam: A History from 622 to the Present Day*. Yale University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmd859w.
[5] Bakali, Naved, and Farid Hafez. 2022. The Rise of Global Islamophobia in the War on Terror : Coloniality, Race, and Islam. Edited by Naved Bakali and Farid Hafez. Manchester: Manchester University Press,. https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526161765.
[6] Open Society Foundations. “Ethnic Profiling in Counterterrorism Since 9/11.” *Ethnic Profiling in the European Union: Pervasive, Ineffective, and Discriminatory*. Open Society Foundations, 2009. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27116.7.

transactions, among many other things.[7] Counterterrorism powers have become increasingly broad and discretionary, such as stop-and-search powers and the ability to arrest individuals without a warrant on suspicion of involvement in terrorism.[8] Over time, the required standard of suspicion has lowered, leading to disproportionate attention paid to religion and national origin. For example, stop-and-searches of Britons of South Asian descent increased fivefold after the July 2007 attempted bombings in London and Glasgow.[9]

High-profile government actions aimed at combating so-called "Muslim terrorism" have left a lasting imprint on the public, resulting in a misinterpretation of the religion's nature and a damaged social perception of people who practice Islam. After those responsible for the 7/7 bombings in London were identified as Muslims, media representation of Muslims became predominantly related to international conflicts and terrorism.[10] Canadian Muslims have expressed that all aspects of their Muslim identity, such as their name, clothing, and country of birth, make them a target for extra surveillance.[11] Interviews with British South Asian Muslims reveal feelings of being increasingly treated by non-Muslims as 'one-of-them' and being defined in generic negative terms rather than as individuals.[12] This stigmatized feeling of 'other-ness' has been exacerbated by the Global War on Terror, but, evidently, has roots far in the past.

---

[7] Haque, M. Shamsul. "Government Responses to Terrorism: Critical Views of Their Impacts on People and Public Administration." *Public Administration Review* 62 (2002): 170–80. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3110188.

[8] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. 2012. "Securitized Citizens: Islamophobia, Racism and the 7/7 London Bombings." *The Sociological Review* (Keele) 60 (4): 715–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02130.x.

[9] Open Society Foundations. "Ethnic Profiling in Counterterrorism Since 9/11."

[10] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. 2012. "Securitized Citizens: Islamophobia, Racism and the 7/7 London Bombings."

[11] Nagra, Baljit, and Paula Maurutto. "Crossing Borders and Managing Racialized Identities: Experiences of Security and Surveillance Among Young Canadian Muslims." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*41, no. 2 (2016): 165–94. https://www.jstor.org/stable/canajsocicahican.41.2.165.

[12] Hussain, Yasmin, and Paul Bagguley. 2012. "Securitized Citizens: Islamophobia, Racism and the 7/7 London Bombings."