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Islamophobia and State Violence

Lost in a State of Historical Amnesia

by SANIA SUFI

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The past month has been a troubling one for Muslims. The armed bigoted protests outside an Arizona mosque, the questionable police shooting of a young Black Muslim man, and continuing legislation grounded in religious and racial profiling all enhance a sense of social disenfranchisement for Muslims in America.

During the night of the anti-Muslim protests in Arizona, Twitter was afloat with conversation using the hashtag #NotMyAmerica. Both Muslim and non-Muslim advocates used the hashtag to distance the actions of the biker protestors from their version of an inclusive ‘multicultural’ America. The ideas behind #NotMyAmerica represent the country’s legacy as an all-inclusive, peaceful, socially progressive society in opposition to the hateful, ignorant, and xenophobic actions of the bikers. While the symbol of solidarity is well-intentioned, the thought processes associated with #NotMyAmerica problematizes the debate further. Such a perfunctory argument ignores the long history of state violence and repression in America which undoubtedly fuels Islamophobia in today’s post-9/11 age. Islamophobia cannot be reduced to the dysfunctionality of a few hundred individuals but rather must be critiqued alongside the American legacy of settler-colonialism, genocide, and institutionalized racism. While many scholars have already detailed the history behind American expansionism and the many groups it has victimized, a critique of Islamophobia within the broader context of state violence and repression is lacking.

Historicizing Islamophobia

Any discussion on state violence in the United States must begin with the pillaging, slavery, and colonization of the indigenous community. The first European settlers not only massacred indigenous people in large numbers, but they also worked towards institutionalizing such practices. It was not enough to simply brutally murder indigenous tribes and claim their land, early American democracy was in need of an ideological framework which would justify structural violence. America's 'founding fathers' thus claimed their right to occupied land based on the racial and intellectual superiority of Europeans, an argument rooted in power politics and control. Through their expansionist voyeurs, the colonists depoliticized the indigenous people through a series of laws and wars. The sexual violence of Native women, for example, illustrates one way in which European colonization was institutionalized. Systematic sexual violence is a tool of genocide, which the colonists utilized to project their control over Native women and land. Gender based state violence is not just a trademark of our past, but rather a continuation as many black women are also perpetually criminalized for their assault today. Violence towards Native women, and Native communities in general, is thus indicative of a state discourse founded upon the structural erasure of non-European bodies. Without its *raison d'être*, the expansionist American entity ceases to exist.

Although the histories of the Native Americans and Islamophobia cannot be homogenized, it is important to draw parallels regarding the common denominator of state violence present in each narrative. A gruesome CIA report released last year revealed the widespread torture of Muslims languishing in overseas detention centers such as Guantanamo and Bagram. The report, graphic to say the least, is shocking on a number of levels, but mostly because of the government's consent of such acts. State propaganda will continue to dismiss such reckless behavior. Those with a historical conscious in the indigenous narratives outlined above; however, will realize that the torture report and other violent activities represent a continuum of state warfare aimed to admonish any groups challenging its patronage.

Policy and Media

Legislation in the 1970s marginalizing Black communities continued the legacy of American state violence and racism. The FBI's then secret COINTELPRO, or counter intelligence program, authorized state agencies to spy on and intimidate Black activists and suppress political activities. COINTELPRO was not only instrumental in influencing anti-Black public opinion, but also in legitimizing the repression of Black political activities. Such policies representing unchecked authority and blanket surveillance are, again, symptomatic of state patronage. While legislation grounded in anti-Blackness still exists, the added layer of Islamophobia – couched in present-day language of 'national security' – further strengthens structural violence. Renewed vigor for the Countering Violent Extremism program, for instance, exemplifies the extent of anti-Muslim sentiment in present legislation. While advocates tout CVE as a community led effort, the program's method of assigning collective guilt to a group based on their religion falsifies such a claim. That CVE solely monitors the Muslim community legitimizes government profiling of racial and religious minorities. The state's ability to implement discriminatory legislation then poses the natural question: *what else is the government capable of with unchecked power?* CVE – and other counter-terrorism initiatives such as the Patriot Act and

NYPD intelligence activities – contribute to an increasingly Islamophobic society built upon centuries of structural violence. If we are to look in hindsight, CVE is a tattered script modeled off of COINTELPRO and other discriminatory legislation. Through its invocation of a radically divisive binary, CVE further isolates Muslim communities from an inclusive American context and thus possibly increases long-term security concerns. The continuum of such policies, whether COINTELPRO or CVE, should enlist attention towards the wider concern of politicized state violence.

The mainstream media's negative caricature of Muslims also echoes the institutionalization of anti-Muslim fervor. Fear Inc., a report compiled by the Center for American Progress, revealed that seven think tanks channelled \$42 million dollars to public figures, media organizations, and politicians who perpetuate Islamophobia. The report not only highlights the increasingly growing bigotry in media, but also paints a broader, complex picture about the influential role of NGOs in political decision-making. The power and influence that NGOs, often referred to as the missionaries of state power, hold over legislation once more alludes to Islamophobia as organized violence. Discrimination inherent in the intricate matrices of policy, law enforcement, and the corporatized media all point to Islamophobia as nothing short of a disabling of Muslim political agency.

War on Terror

There is, indeed, a direct line connecting American Empire and Islamophobia. To the American eye; however, the second-class status of the non-American Muslim often blurs that line. The lack of 'ethics', 'progress', and 'education' perceived in the traditions of the Muslims of Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq allows them to be conquered by American exceptionalism. Such chauvinistic nationalism adds a double layer of discrimination and further complicates the discourse on Islamophobia. In 2003, RAND Corporation published a report titled Civil Democratic Islam with recommendations on how to 're-structure' the intellectual and religious attitudes of the Muslim world along secular and liberal lines, or in accordance with American geopolitical interests. This, and other attempts by Western regimes to politically intervene in the Muslim world, reveals a hierarchy in which the Islamic ethos is to be politically isolated. Through its invocation of the superiority of secularism and liberalism, Western state discourse is able to admonish Muslim political institutions for their failure to assimilate to the politics of secular modernity. The intellectual framework of Empire, therefore, allows for a hierarchical and orientalist discourse through which the colonization of Muslim minds and institutions is made legitimate. In light of such political manipulation, some questions to be asked are: *How is the state able to meticulously dismantle and weaken Muslim institutions and identities abroad? And how does post-9/11 US foreign policy affect racialized minorities on the domestic front, including Muslims?*

What made Malcolm X's analysis of state violence and racism in the US remarkable was his recognition of its application outside US borders. In his approach to internationalize the Black struggle for liberation, Malcolm unearthed a deeper understanding of state racism and its challenges. Contrary to other civil rights leaders, Malcolm believed that racism and other forms of discrimination in America were inextricably linked to the suffering of those in the Global South and vice versa. Torture techniques employed in the War on Terror, for example, were also

used by law-enforcement agencies in US urban centers such as Chicago. The city's police is infamous for its widespread torture of individuals, mostly black males, a tactic also employed in Guantanamo by the same law-enforcement officers. US entanglement in a belligerent and hubristic foreign policy, then, is perhaps rooted in state terror much closer to home. The torture of Black and Muslim bodies shows the complexity and interconnectedness of state violence and the War on Terror. Both forms of systemic inequality serve the interests of Empire; which should compel conscientious minds to interrogate the multiplicitous face of state violence.

The US is able to stifle the political agency of Muslims not simply because of a history of settler-colonialism, genocide, and racism, but because of its institutions rooted *in* them. Empire's lifeline relies on the structural inferiority of the non-White "other". Whether the "other" represents a black or brown face makes no difference, because the intellectual architecture behind institutionalized injustice remains the same. This does not mean the unique histories of genocide, slavery, and racism should be compartmentalized together; indeed, each has its own socio-political factors. However, each layer of discrimination builds upon the common root of state violence. Thus, to boast of an America as the bastion of multiculturalism is to be in a state of historical amnesia. Such disillusioned nostalgia serves as a reminder of how deeply state propaganda influences the American milieu. State policing is a common practice rooted in ideology. To call it into question is to critique state power. And that, is where the core of discourse on Islamophobia lies.