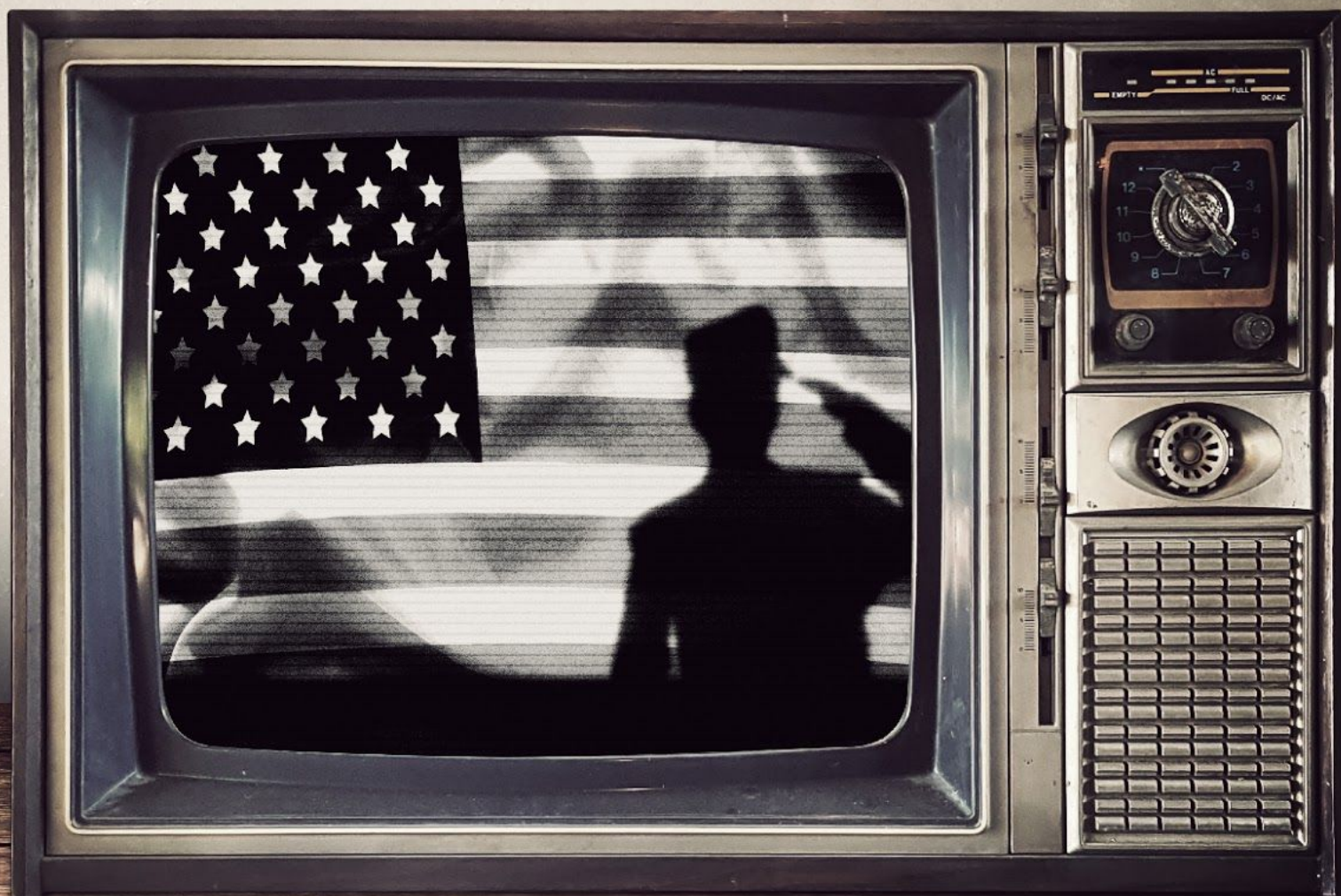




The Green Scare: Islamophobia, Foreign Policy, and the Making of American Identity

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Abstract

Governments have an incentive to exaggerate foreign danger or even manufacture it. Doing so strengthens the state's identity and facilitates the government's social control over its people. Toward these ends, after 9/11, the US government cast not only al-Qaeda but also Islam as America's enemy. This manufactured foreign policy of fear comes at a significant cost; not only does it adversely impact Muslims in the US and around the world, it also compels dangerous US interventionism, squanders the lives of American service members, depletes the American treasury, and it alienates the US from the values for which it claims to stand. Exposing the US's manufacturing of an "Islamic" enemy is, therefore, essential for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For Muslims specifically, it is imperative to understand the various agendas that motivate Islamophobia. This will not only allow them to distinguish Islam from misrepresentations of their faith, thus instilling confidence in their tradition, but will also provide them with a clearer understanding of the drivers of Islamophobia and how to best direct their efforts to counter it.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, Islam became a threat to the United States, or so it seemed. That night, President George W. Bush declared from the Oval Office, "Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts...Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America." By fundamentally linking American identity to danger, the president invoked the theme of this article: A state's identity is affirmed by the representation of danger through its foreign policy.¹

¹ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

This argument is provocative and somewhat counterintuitive and thus it requires some immediate elaboration. How could danger *affirm* or *define* a state's identity? Usually, a danger is seen as something that is *threatening* to a state. However, when considered from the perspective of a state's very essence, that is, its national identity, a danger is not a threat to it. The opposite is the case. The danger, whether it is real or just propagated, serves to reproduce and strengthen that identity. It follows, paradoxically, that a government has an intrinsic interest in articulating and representing danger to its citizens through its foreign policy.

With the tragic events of 9/11, but also before, Islam came to fulfill this function for the United States in particular, and for the West in general. The horrific acts on that day were perpetrated by al-Qaeda. With an already existing fertile ground of aversion to Muslims, the actions of al-Qaeda were subsequently easily projected on Islam in general. Not since the Red Scare of communism during the Cold War was there such a commonly perceived danger. The Red Scare was now replaced by the 'Green Scare' of Islam, and it too would serve to secure America's identity.²

Contribution and importance

Beginning with the foundational literature of the 1970s, scholars have done considerable work in the area of defining Islamophobia, tracing its historical roots, analyzing its societal manifestations, and discussing how it is shaping and is being shaped by the domestic and foreign policies of Western states.³ Within the realm of foreign policy, there have been studies on how Islamophobia facilitates an imperial project that involves

² Douglas Little, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

³ There are too many books and articles to cite, but an excellent overview, with annotations, is given in Rhonda Itaoui and Elsadig Elsheikh, *Islamophobia in the United States: A Reading Resource Pack* (Berkeley, CA: Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley, 2018), https://haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/islamophobia_reading_pack_publish.pdf.

controlling areas of strategic interest to Western states. A more specific discussion here is how an Islamophobic foreign policy serves the purpose of building and securing a state's identity. This latter discussion, arguably, was launched by Edward Said's famous 1978 book *Orientalism* and his work continues to influence scholarly analyses into the present.⁴ With this article, I aim to contribute to this scholarship. A central element will be the systematic presentation of rhetorical strategies that are used by the government to cast Islam as the US's enemy.

This article is important for both Muslims and non-Muslims, for it is not only the former that are affected. When a government exaggerates or manufactures danger, it comes with considerable costs for everyone. Abroad, it contributes to unjustified wars, substantial civilian casualties, as well as the loss of American soldiers and the squandering of the country's treasury. At home, it leads to hate crimes and discrimination, the tearing of the American social fabric, programs of mass surveillance, and biased policing.⁵ The effort to contribute to a cherished American identity of freedom and liberty through fear politics, in the end, alienates the country and its people from that very identity.

There is special relevance for Muslims in this article. They have found themselves facing a continuous onslaught of suspicions, accusations, and vilifications. Islamophobia creates feelings of degradation and humiliation among Muslims. In the worst cases, Muslims lose the ability or the will to differentiate between the public portrayal of their faith and its actual essence. They thus begin a process of alienation from their faith and their communities.⁶ For Muslims, it is imperative to understand all the various

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Two exemplary recent studies are Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012) and Nazia Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

⁵ Heidi Beireich, "The Year in Hate: Rage Against Change," *Intelligence Report*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2019/year-hate-rage-against-change>; Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming* (New York: Verso, 2014).

⁶ Omar Suleiman, "Exploring the Faith and Identity Crisis of American Muslim Youth," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, 2017,

agendas that promote Islamophobia. Only then will they be able to distinguish their faith from the mal-intended smearing of it and remain resilient and faithful. Specifically, it is important to recognize that Islamophobia is not merely the result of people disliking the Islamic faith (e.g., due to personal ignorance). Beyond this, Islamophobia, as argued in this article, involves a government-driven strategy with the intent to affirm the state's identity.⁷

In order to demonstrate this argument from the bottom up, it is beneficial to begin in the field of social psychology. It is here where we can learn about the fundamentals of how national identities come to be. To sustain these identities, I argue in a subsequent section, governments may well choose to engage in the exaggeration or even the manufacturing of danger. From there, I briefly sketch the historically fertile ground from which Islamophobia could be instrumentalized in US foreign policy and when the Green Scare of Islam came to replace the Red Scare of communism. In a subsequent section, I argue that as 9/11 caused the tragic loss of innocent lives, it also reified America's sense of national identity. I then lay out the fundamentals of an Islamophobic foreign policy rhetoric and conclude by discussing the continuation of this foreign policy into the present and the implications that follow, especially for Muslims.

The making of national identities

The making of national identities is rooted in the psychology of the individual. Theories in social psychology teach us that people innately and actively seek identification with groups. As William Bloom explains, "Every individual possesses an inherent drive to internalize—to identify with—the behavior, mores, and attitudes of significant figures in his or her

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/omar-suleiman/exploring-the-faith-and-identity-crisis-of-american-muslim-youth/#.Xk9hWUdKiUk>.

⁷ Similarly, Khaled Beydoun draws a distinction between "private Islamophobia" and "structural Islamophobia," with the latter being driven by the government. See Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 23–44.

social environment.”⁸ This drive is grounded in an individual’s inherent need for social relations, the need for well-being, as well as a need for security. These needs can be satisfied only in the presence of others, that is, in groups.⁹ Historically, belonging to clans, tribes, and other groupings has provided these functions.

In more recent centuries, however, a shift toward *national* identities emerged in Europe.¹⁰ Compelling factors were the emergence of large-scale war, the developments of urbanization and mass communication, and the gradual onset of industrialization. Also of crucial importance was that religious belief was significantly decreasing as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution delegitimized structures of divinely-appointed authority and demanded rationalist secularism. The creation of the nation-state answered to the spirit of the time and its accompanying nationalism provided a grand and mythical identity around which a large population could coalesce and pledge allegiance. Ever since, the identities of the nation-state have been reinforced through processes of socialization in which governments, schools, universities, and the media were primary agents.

As is the case for any group identity, the identity of a state is not defined in a vacuum. Rather, its identity is defined with an awareness of other states and their identities. “No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind,” Benedict Anderson explains, and thus there is a necessary juxtaposition of one’s own national identity to that of others.¹¹ This somewhat difficult argument is illustrated, for example, by reference to European identity. Scholars have shown how, historically, the construction

⁸ William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

⁹ Paul Kowert, “National Identity: Inside and Out,” *Security Studies* 8, nos. 2–3 (1998/99): 1–34.

¹⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983), 9–12.

of the “Turkish other” played an important role in defining European identity, or at least what it was not.¹²

American identity can be illustrated in a similar way. If Americans who came of age during the Cold War were asked what it meant to be American, one would hear, rather prominently, among their answers, “It meant not to be communist.” Again, one defines one’s own group in juxtaposition to another group. It is also in this relational quality of national identities that the desire for a positive national identity unfolds as well as the emotional attachment to one’s national identity.¹³ Through its foreign policy, the government can play a central role in producing citizens’ emotional attachments to their nation-state.

The production of danger

A national identity is the most fundamental dimension of any state’s existence and no state could exist without it. Its identity is its ideational foundation and it is also inherently functional. Giving a population a sufficient level of “we” and “us” feelings enables a government to govern the population. In other words, a collective identity facilitates social control and, therewith, a host of government functions. These include basic functions such as the collection of taxes, compelling citizens to adhere to the law, and also declaring war.

A state’s identity is not fixed, however. Rather, as we have seen, a state’s identity is a social construct and it is, by necessity, continuously

¹² Ivar Neumann, *Uses of the Other: The East in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹³ Lee Jussim, Richard Ashmore, and David Wilder, “Introduction: Social Identity and Conflict Resolution,” in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, eds. Lee Jussim, Richard Ashmore, and David Wilder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6; Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 251.

constituted and reconstituted in relation to other identities.¹⁴ When narrated in threatening terms, in terms of securitization, it produces a reinforcing effect on the ‘we’ feeling of the people and the state’s identity.¹⁵ As David Campbell explains, “the boundaries of a state’s identity are secured by the representation of danger integral to foreign policy” with “a notion of what ‘we’ are ... intrinsic to an understanding of what ‘we’ fear.”¹⁶

The identification of an enemy, in other words, serves a fundamental socio-political process within a society, namely the stabilization of its identity—“it is a way of ‘writing identity.’”¹⁷ Again, these arguments are well illustrated by reference to American identity. Scholars have argued that American national identity was strong when a danger presented itself during the Cold War when the government was securitizing the Red Scare of communism. With the conclusion of the Cold War beginning in 1989, however, Americans’ sense of their ‘Americanness’ declined.¹⁸

In the field of international relations, securitization is the process by which state actors transform a broad range of issues or actors into subjects of security.¹⁹ The concern is less on whether the securitized targets actually pose a danger, but rather how they become socially constructed as such. As summarized by Michael Williams:

In securitization theory, “security” is not treated as an objective condition but as the outcome of a specific social process: the social construction of security issues (who or what is being secured, and

¹⁴ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 9; Philip Schlesinger, “On National Identity: Some Conceptions and Misconceptions Criticized,” *Social Science Information* 26, no. 2 (1987): 219–64; Edward Shils, “Nation, Nationality and Civil Society,” *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1995): 93–118.

¹⁵ Roberta Coles, “War and the Contest over National Identity,” *The Sociological Review* 50, no. 4 (2002): 589.

¹⁶ Campbell, *Writing Security*, 3, 73.

¹⁷ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 61; William Connolly, preface to the third edition of *The Terms of Political Discourse*, ed. William Connolly (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), xi.

¹⁸ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

¹⁹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

from what) is analyzed by examining the “securitizing speech acts” through which threats become represented and recognized. Issues become “securitized,” treated as security issues, through these speech acts which do not simply describe an existing security situation, but bring it into being as a security situation by successfully representing it as such.²⁰

The language employed by the US government after 9/11 exemplified this phenomenon. It was not simply a reflection of objective reality. Instead, it was and remains a deliberate rhetorical strategy composed of labels, mischaracterizations, and conflation. It was, in other words, a deliberately constructed representation that was designed to achieve a number of political goals. Among them were the rationalization and legitimization of the government’s ensuing foreign policy but, crucially, also the reification of America’s national identity.²¹ Toward these ends, it was not only the perpetrators of terroristic violence who came to be understood as a danger to America but also the broader group they were cast as being a part of—the Muslim community and Islam more generally.

The foundation for securitizing Islam

The securitization of Islam became most manifest in the aftermath of 9/11 but its origins, in fact, go back to the very beginnings of the country. It was in the 1630s that the Puritans came to the ‘New World’ and settled the Massachusetts Bay colony with the ambition to build “God’s American Israel.” They carried a “passionate fascination” for Palestine and the Middle East, but also had a “profound ambivalence about the ‘infidels’ ... who lived there.”²² Carried by much zeal, in the centuries to come, their descendants helped shape American identity, culture, and politics.

²⁰ Michael Williams, “Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 513.

²¹ Jackson, *Writing the War*, 2.

²² Douglas Little, *American Orientalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 9.

Meanwhile, the American experience with Islam occurred on two fronts: at home through the transatlantic slave trade (it is estimated that at least ten percent of all Africans who were enslaved and brought to the Americas were Muslim)²³ and abroad through journeys to the Holy Land and the Middle East for missionary purposes, in addition to tourism and trade. At home, slave owners were intent on eradicating the Muslim identity of slaves, which had lent the latter dignity and a command of resistance to oppression.²⁴ Abroad, American travelers came away with much amazement from biblical sites but they also returned with considerable amounts of apprehension and disgust about the land's native residents who were often seen as primitive, superstitious, and warlike vagabonds.²⁵

These impressions were translated into magazines, books, and art and they became the dominant imagery through which American diplomats and policymakers would look at supposedly backward Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, as the distinguished historian Douglas Little, wrote, "for statesmen from Thomas Jefferson to Theodore Roosevelt, the Muslim world constituted the very antithesis of John Winthrop's 'city upon a hill...'"²⁶ "It is impossible to expect moral, intellectual, and material well-being where Mohammedanism is supreme," President Theodore Roosevelt remarked in a private correspondence in 1907.²⁷

Thus, just as Europe had done for centuries, America defined itself apart from, and in juxtaposition to, Muslim identity. Among scholars of history and religion, the fundamental impact that Muslims historically had on the development of Western civilization is well known. Of particular significance are, of course, Muslim contributions to the Renaissance and

²³ Sylviane Diouf, "African Muslims and the Slave Trade," Historic London Town and Gardens, June 18, 2019, <https://www.historiclondontown.org/single-post/2019/06/18/African-Muslims-and-the-Slave-Trade>.

²⁴ Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Little, *Us versus Them*, 217.

²⁶ Little, 217.

²⁷ Elting Morison, ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952–1955), 698–99.

the Enlightenment.²⁸ Yet, these tended to be purposefully ignored or else rendered as largely irrelevant. As the political scientist and later president Woodrow Wilson was pondering the lineage of western governments, he tellingly left out the Muslim impact, writing:

In order to trace the lineage of European and American governments which have constituted the order of social life for those stronger and nobler races which have made the most notable progress in civilization, it is essential to know the political history of the Greeks, the Latins, the Teutons, and the Celts principally...²⁹

Notably, during the Roosevelt and Wilson administrations and for the two and a half decades that followed, the US was not involved in the Middle East. But despite the absence of noteworthy direct contact, Arab Muslims were often seen as dangerous as illustrated, for example, by the missionary Literature Secretary in the World's Alliance of YMCAs. In his 1926 book *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*, he writes:

The system [i.e., Islam] is, indeed, in essence, military. The creed is a war cry. The reward of a Paradise of maidens for those who die in battle, and loot for those who live, and the joy of battle and domination thrills the tribal Arabs. The discipline of prayer five times a day is a drill. The *muezzin* cry from the minaret is a bugle-call. The equality of the Brotherhood gives the equality and esprit de corps of the rank and file of the army. The Koran is army orders. It is all clear, decisive, ordained—men fused and welded by the fire and discipline into a single sword of conquest.³⁰

²⁸ Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Asadullah Ali, "The Structure of Scientific Productivity in Islamic Civilization: Orientalists' Fables," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, May 1, 2017, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/asadullah/the-structure-of-scientific-productivity-in-islamic-civilization-orientalists-fables/#ftnt_ref17.

²⁹ Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath, 1897), 2.

³⁰ Basil Matthews, *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Friendship Press, 1926), 41.

With the end of the Second World War, the Middle East took on strategic importance for the US, and Washington leaders sought to shape it according to their economic and geopolitical interests. Simultaneously, the US continued to hone its identity as distinct from Islam and define itself increasingly as a Judeo-Christian nation. Contrary to popular imagination, the notion of a Judeo-Christian nation is a relatively recent creation that gained popularity in the US during the Second World War.³¹ In the face of the Holocaust, it allowed the US to assume a stance of morality in the fight against Nazism and fascism, and in the Cold War that followed, it allowed the US to differentiate itself from the godless communism of the Soviet Union.

By defining the nation's identity as Judeo-Christian, Islam became explicitly otherized. This happened despite the theological fact that Islam is as much kin to either faith, if not more, as they are to each other. For example, whereas Jesus is revered as a God-sent prophet in Islam, he is rejected in Judaism. The Judeo-Christian alliance also happened despite the historical fact that, for centuries, it was decidedly Christians who persecuted Jews in Europe. This persecution, of course, culminated in terrible pogroms at the turn of the 20th century and ultimately in the catastrophe of the Holocaust in the 1940s.³²

Casting aside fundamental theological and historical discrepancies, America's self-ascribed identity as a Judeo-Christian nation had far-reaching political ramifications. In the beginning, of course, it facilitated the strong lobbying in America for the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine. Since then, continuous pronouncements by American leaders that the country is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition, were, expectedly, very welcomed by Jewish leaders. Moreover, since the 1967 War, Israel could count not only on American solidarity but also on

³¹ K. Healan Gaston, *Reimagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

³² Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

political and military cover in the face of Israel's continued violation of international law and illegal expansion onto Palestinian lands.

In the US, however, it was Israel that was continuously portrayed as a victim, whereas Muslim Arabs were depicted as aggressors and villains by politicians, and this same stereotype filtered into film, literature, and pop culture.³³ The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict has thus continued to perpetuate anti-Muslim sentiment in America as well as the clash-of-civilizations narrative.

The Green Scare replaces the Red Scare

Although in America there has been a long history of ill-disposition towards Muslims and Islam, during the Cold War, American leaders were not shy to instrumentalize Islam and collaborate with so-called “Islamists” when it suited their needs. Early on in the Cold War, Washington leaders believed an “Islam strategy” would allow a bulwark against atheistic communism to be built. This, in turn, would ensure the US's geostrategic dominance in the Middle East as well as uninterrupted access to oil.³⁴

Thus, in 1953, the first year of the Eisenhower Administration, the US Information Agency invited more than three dozen Muslim scholars and civic leaders from mostly Muslim-majority countries to the US. The goal was the promotion of anti-communist agendas. Among the invitees was Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood's founder. A few years later, in January 1957, as Nathan Citino explains, the National Security Council “established a working committee on Islamic organizations that compiled a list of Middle Eastern

³³ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, Vintage Books, 1992); Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

³⁴ Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), 123.

and North African social, cultural, and religious groups such as Sufi brotherhoods,” which the US Information Agency could target with propaganda.³⁵

Not surprisingly, the Egyptian pan-nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser’s leanings toward Moscow were more than a thorn in the side of US leaders. Thus, they aimed at positioning the King of Saudi Arabia as an “Islamic pole of attraction,” perhaps even an “Islamic pope” in opposition to Nasser.³⁶ Communism didn’t take hold in Egypt, but later, in the 1970s, it did in Afghanistan and it was there that the most prominent collaboration between the US and “Islamists” occurred, namely with the *mujahedeen* who were instrumental in repelling the Soviet Union and who contributed to the communist superpower’s downfall a few years later.

Throughout the Cold War, it was communism that was the US’s enemy. It helped define what it meant to be American and contributed to the government’s authority and social control. Then, however, as the Cold War ended, and as the Soviet Union collapsed, a vacuum of fear emerged. It is illustrated well in a *Los Angeles Times* headline from September 30, 1991: “Cold War’s End Brings Enemy Gap.”³⁷ “For decades, opposition to the Red Menace has bound a fractious nation in common purpose,” the abstract of the article read. It continued, asking, “With that guiding principle gone, how will the US define its mission?”

The new enemy would come to be Islam, and the new mission for America would be to lead in a supposedly intensifying clash of civilizations. Throughout American history, the ground had been laid for viewing Islam as the enemy. And when about a decade before the end of the Cold War,

³⁵ Nathan Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud, and the Making of U.S.-Saudi Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 126.

³⁶ Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), 65–66.

³⁷ Paul Richter, “Cold War’s End Brings Enemy Gap,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-09-30-mn-2212-story.html>.

Iranian revolutionaries labeled America the “Great Satan,” such seemingly irrational hatred was now easily projected onto broader segments of the Muslim population, particularly in the Middle East. The task was taken up by the country’s intellectual elite. Foremost among them was the Princeton University professor of Near East Studies Bernard Lewis. In his famous 1990 article, *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, he argued:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.³⁸

The idea of a ‘clash of civilizations,’ as we have seen, has a long history, but it was through Bernard Lewis and like-minded elite figures that it became a paradigm in Washington’s policy-making circles. Islam, as articulated by Lewis and others, is “irrational” and an “ancient” rival. It is pitted against “*our* Judeo-Christian heritage” (italics added). Lewis briefly engages a list of possible causes that could have contributed to anti-American sentiment in Muslim countries. These include US imperialism, support for authoritarian regimes, and US support for Israel. For Lewis, however, they did not explain the roots of “Muslim rage.” For him, the explanation lay in the religion of Islam itself.

At Harvard University, Samuel Huntington built further on the arguments made by Bernard Lewis. In a 1993 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, an influential journal in Washington’s foreign policy establishment, he argued:

The great division among humankind and the dominant source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The

³⁸ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic* 266, no. 3 (1990): 60.

clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.³⁹

The most significant source of conflict, Huntington argued, would be between Western civilization and the Islamic civilization. Islam is prone to violence, Huntington said, and this was evidenced by Muslims being in violent conflict with a host of other peoples. This is the case especially “along the boundaries of the crescent-shaped Islamic bloc of nations from the bulge of Africa to Central Asia.” It is also true for “Muslims, on the one hand, and Orthodox Serbs in the Balkans, Jews in Israel, Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma, and Catholics in the Philippines.” “Islam has bloody borders,” Huntington concluded.⁴⁰

Expectedly, both the content and the rhetoric of arguments like Lewis’s and Huntington’s resonated with Washington policymakers. This intellectual elite was casting Islam as a danger, and they did so in seemingly scholarly and thus compelling ways. They were laying the foundation for filling the enemy gap that the government desired to fill. Moreover, Islam could fill the enemy role in even more formidable ways than communism did. The new enemy was not an ideology that was tied to a state, the Soviet Union, which could be subdued or just collapse, as indeed happened. The new enemy was a religion. It was here to stay.

Various events, chiefly in the Middle East and Africa, seemed to confirm the prophecies of Lewis, Huntington, and others. In 1998, for example, al-Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In 2000, the terrorist organization attacked the US warship *USS Cole* in the harbor of Aden, Yemen. In Palestine, the second Intifada was erupting. All the while, anti-American sentiment across the region was growing. And then came 9/11, seemingly the ultimate confirmation that Islam was at war with America. The Green Scare had replaced the Red

³⁹ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22.

⁴⁰ Huntington, 35.

Scare. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz declared shortly after the attack:

The American people breathed a sigh of relief when the Cold War ended a decade ago. [...] And there was a temptation to believe that this favorable circumstance was a permanent condition. On September 11th, America learned that it was not. The September 11th attacks have awakened us to a fundamental reality: [...] This threat is as great as any we faced during the Cold War.⁴¹

The US would now embark on the global war on terror, and President Bush also likened it to the Cold War, stating, “Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way, our struggle is similar to the Cold War.”⁴² It was a “civilization’s fight,” the president said, and as “as long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror.” Instead, it will be “an age of liberty, here and across the world.”⁴³ Thus, as the president said, rather than endangering America, the now seemingly manifest clash of civilizations, like the Cold War, was to reaffirm America’s moral purpose; it was also to bind the American people and reify the American national identity.

9/11 and American identity

On the evening of the horrific events of 9/11, President Bush gave a somber address to the nation. It was brief but it laid the foundation for his future rhetoric. According to the president, the very reason for the attack was to target American values. “Our very freedom came under attack...

⁴¹ Paul Wolfowitz, “Building a Military for the 21st Century,” (prepared statement, “September 11, 2001: Attack on America,” House and Senate Armed Services Committees, October 3–4, 2001), https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/testimony_002.asp.

⁴² George W. Bush, graduation speech at United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, June 1, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

⁴³ George W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress and the nation, September 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world," he said.⁴⁴ A day later, surrounded by his national security team, the president declared similarly, "Freedom and democracy are under attack."⁴⁵

In a speech to a Joint Session of Congress on September 20th, President Bush elaborated on the terrorists' supposed motivations. "Why do they hate us?" he asked rhetorically and he answered, "They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."⁴⁶

Within a matter of days after 9/11, the Bush Administration had provided the country, its people, but also most of the national press and punditry, with an interpretative framework in which the acts of 9/11 were to be understood. It was simple and straightforward: The terrorists were "enemies of freedom" and they hated the American "way of life." Such language was not fortuitous. The terrorists' supposed hatred for America's identity echoed American leaders' rhetoric in regards to the Red Scare throughout the Cold War.⁴⁷

However, it was precisely this identity that was left unharmed during the Cold War and also now. On the night of the attack, President Bush explained to the American people:

Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America

⁴⁴ George W. Bush, address to the nation, Oval Office, Washington, DC, September 11, 2001, <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothetnation.htm>.

⁴⁵ George W. Bush, address from Cabinet following Cabinet meeting, September 12, 2001, <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911cabinetroomaddress.htm>.

⁴⁶ Bush, address to a joint session of Congress and the nation, September 20, 2001.

⁴⁷ Jackson, *Writing the War*, 47, 99.

was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.

While the foundations of America's "biggest buildings" were shaken, the "foundation of America" was left unharmed. Inadvertently and tacitly, the president would also acknowledge that the danger that presented itself was not only something that left American identity unharmed but, in fact, that it was something that was "making America." In his speech to the Joint Session of Congress, the president declared:

I ask you to uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here... Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time, now depends on us.

After the Cold War, in the 1990s, the feeling of a common national identity had declined among the American people.⁴⁸ Now, however, through a new danger, America found its mission again, as argued by the president. The "making of America" through danger was also well illustrated by the president's speech on October 17th in California, as he was preparing Americans for the coming global war on terrorism:

Our people are united; our government is determined ... I applaud the American people for your courage in a time of trial. We're living through a unique moment in American history. This is a time of rediscovery of heroism and sacrifice and duty and patriotism. These are core values of our country, and they're being renewed... Our forefathers would be proud, really proud of what they see in America today.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Huntington, *Who Are We?*

⁴⁹ George W. Bush, remarks at California Business Association Breakfast, Sacramento Memorial Auditorium, Sacramento, California, October 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011017-15.html>.

Again, it is through danger that the country was coming to “rediscover” its most fundamental values, its heroism and readiness for sacrifice, its sense of duty and patriotism. Through danger, these aspects of American identity are “renewed,” in fact so much so that even the founding fathers “would be proud.” Indeed, what followed after 9/11 was a tremendous surge in patriotism. It became manifest in members of a previously divided Congress being united and singing “God Bless America” on the stairs of the Capitol building, seemingly every government official and countless figures in public life wearing American flag lapel pins, flag sales soaring, ongoing chants of “USA” at sporting events and in so many other places and ways.⁵⁰

An Islamophobic foreign policy

Patriotism was at a high. For the government, there was thus an inherent interest in sustaining the perception of danger, and it would occur through the securitization of Islam. This happened through many thousands of speeches, interviews, press conferences, and press releases by an array of government officials and agencies. It is not the place here to engage in a comprehensive analysis of these materials; rather, the purpose is to identify key strategies of the government’s rhetoric. Toward this end, I will focus largely on President Bush. Contrary to what is often assumed about him, and in contrast to much of the national media and punditry, he was not openly or directly hostile against Muslims and Islam. In fact, the opposite was the case. At least initially, President Bush engaged in much differentiation as he disassociated Islam and Muslims from the “evildoers” of 9/11.

⁵⁰ Carol Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 2.

The enemy, so President Bush stated repeatedly, were the terrorists, not Islam. In his September 20th speech to the Joint Session of Congress, for example, the president stated:

I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It's practiced freely by many millions of Americans and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.

Similarly, in an early October radio address, the President declared, “Our enemy is not Islam, a good and peace-loving faith that brings direction and comfort to over 1 billion people, including millions of Americans ... Our enemy is the terrorists themselves and the regimes that shelter and sustain them.”⁵¹ In November, the White House hosted a Ramadan Iftar Dinner and at the occasion, President Bush remarked, “The terrorists have no home in any faith. Evil has no holy days.”⁵²

There are further examples in which President Bush drew a distinction between the terrorists and Islam. How then did the securitization of Islam occur? To begin with, the government could lean on the media. *The New York Times*, as the nation’s most prominent newspaper, for example, published headlines such as: “Yes, this is about Islam,” “This is a religious war,” “A head-on collision of alien cultures,” among plenty of others.⁵³ Given the media’s driving of a clash-of-civilizations narrative, coupled with the country’s historical negative disposition toward Islam, the government could rely on more indirect and implicit rhetoric for representing Islam as the enemy through its foreign policy. Three related

⁵¹ George W. Bush, weekly radio address, October 6, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_100601.html.

⁵² George W. Bush, remarks at iftaar, State Dining Room, November 19, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/text/20011119-14.html>.

⁵³ Ervand Abrahamian, “The US Media, Huntington, and September 11,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2003): 529–44.

strategies were employed: labeling, depoliticization, and conflation. In the following sections, I briefly discuss and illustrate each one.

The strategy of labeling

Labeling is an act of identifying and classifying a target group, for example, as friendly or hostile. Along with the label often comes the assignment of motives, characteristics, and values to the target group. Labels thus help the audience order and interpret who did what and why. As the target group is described in ways incompatible with the characteristics and values of the audience, labels also function to delineate an in-group from an out-group, securitize the out-group, and thereby affirm the identity of the in-group.⁵⁴

While President Bush initially distinguished between the terrorists specifically and Muslims generally, at the same time, he also engaged in language that nullified this delineation and solidified Islam as the enemy image. It was in “*Islamic countries*” (italics added), said the president, that there was “vitriolic hate for America.”⁵⁵ Over time, the president started to use the label “Islamic” even more, as in “Islamic radicalism” or “Islamic extremists.”⁵⁶ On one occasion, on August 10th, 2006, the President went so far as to state, “This nation is at war with Islamic fascists”—a term that had been popular for a while among Washington’s influential neo-conservatives.⁵⁷ It was an utterly nonsensical term as there is no historical nor ideological connection between fascism and Islam. The label

⁵⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), xv; Winkler, *Name of Terrorism*, 8; Michael Bhatia, “Fighting Words: Naming Terrorists, Bandits, Rebels and Other Violent Actors,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 8.

⁵⁵ George W. Bush, news conference on the state of war, October 11, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bush_text101101.html.

⁵⁶ See, for example, George W. Bush, remarks at the National Endowment for Democracy, Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, DC, October 6, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

⁵⁷ George W. Bush, remarks upon arrival in Wisconsin, Austin Straubel International Airport, Green Bay, Wisconsin, August 10, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/08/20060810-3.html>.

did, however, have a strong impact on the psyche of the American people as it reminded them of totalitarian Second World War enemies and their own country's virtuous fight. Now it was al-Qaeda, according to President Bush, that sought a "totalitarian *Islamic* empire" (italics added).⁵⁸

The label "Islamic" was consequential indeed. In effect, President Bush and his administration now ascribed and confined the enmity not only to a terrorist group but projected it onto Islam in general. As the Middle East historian Juan Cole explains, "Putting 'Islamic' in front of another word implies that it is intrinsic to or characteristic of the Islamic religion..."⁵⁹ The term "Islamic," as Cole explains further would be "analogous to the term 'Judaic.'"⁶⁰ One would, however, not speak of "Judaic extremists" when talking about militant settlers in the Palestinian territories but rather about "Jewish extremists."

Similar were the terms "Islamists" or "Islamism" which now have become ubiquitous. A sober definition of these terms explains that Islamists are carried by the ambition for Islam to matter in the making of public policy.⁶¹ This ambition is certainly not unique to Muslims but also held by Christians, for example. This ambition is considered to be legitimate for Christians and others; however, coming from Muslims, it is all too often considered not only illegitimate but akin to extremism or even terrorism. The 9/11 Commission, which was established to examine the origins of the attacks and give future recommendations, for example, stated in its final report, "Islamist terrorism is an immediate derivative of Islamism."⁶²

⁵⁸ George W. Bush, speech, Capital Hilton Hotel, Washington, DC, September 4, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060905-4.html>.

⁵⁹ Juan Cole, "Islamophobia and American Foreign Policy Rhetoric: The Bush Years and After," in *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, eds. John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 130.

⁶⁰ Cole, 130.

⁶¹ Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2011), 2; Guilian Denoux, "The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam," *Middle East Policy* 9, no. 2 (2002): 61.

⁶² National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: Cosimo Reports, 2010), 562.

Indeed, terms like “Islamists,” “Islamism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic radicalism,” “jihadism” and others became part of the everyday political lexicon. In effect, all these terms are in the public perception more or less equal to Islam and, as Edward Said had written, they were also equal to “everything-we-must-now-fight-against, as we did with communism during the Cold War.”⁶³ Politicians thus used these labels tactically, knowing their negative charge and that they invoked an immediate sense of threat and danger.⁶⁴ With these terms, the identity and motivation of groups like al-Qaeda were projected on to Islam.

The strategy of depoliticization

The strategy of depoliticization builds on the strategy of labeling. Whereas labeling identifies the target group and assigns a set of characteristics to it, the strategy of depoliticization aims at denying that group any political and historical context for its doings. Whatever violence “Islamists” were engaging in is not to be seen as related to the history of Western imperialism in Muslim lands, for example, or to the ongoing Western support for repressive regimes in Muslim countries. Instead, the motivation for ‘Islamist’ violence are to be sought in the target group’s identity, culture, and ideology.⁶⁵ The strategy of depoliticization is thus, at times, also described as a strategy of ideologization.

The Bush Administration’s strategy of depoliticization is best illustrated by the president’s famous question after 9/11, “Why do they hate us?” This question can be understood as a forensic one, demanding a historical and

⁶³ Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xix.

⁶⁴ Stephen Beale, Oliver Sterck, Thibaut Slingeyer, and Gregoire Lits, “What Does the ‘Terrorist’ Label Really Do?,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 5 (2019): 520–40.

⁶⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, “The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency,” *London Review of Books* 29, no. 5 (2007): 5–8; James Der Derian, “In Terrorem: Before and after 9/11,” in *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, eds. Kenneth Booth and Tim Dunne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 102.

political investigation into the motivations of al-Qaeda. For Bush, however, it was a rhetorical question and the answer was a given: al-Qaeda attacked America because of the latter's virtues, because of the American way of life, and because America epitomized freedom and liberty. As the president explained, terrorists "have a common ideology, and that is they hate freedom and they hate freedom-loving people."⁶⁶ The terrorists hate America, according to the president. "It must bother them greatly to know we're such a free and wonderful place," he said.⁶⁷

On many occasions, government officials linked the terrorists' supposed ideology with the evil ideologies of the 20th century. "We have seen their kind before," the president said. "They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century... [T]hey follow the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism..."⁶⁸ These analogies and ascriptions of ideology had emotionally potent effects on the American people, but they distracted from the specific *political* context that al-Qaeda was operating from. Precisely this distraction was the Bush Administration's ongoing goal.

The government's depoliticization and ideologization campaign misled the American people. As horrendous as al-Qaeda's acts were, according to the group's senior leadership, it wasn't American culture and identity they were at war with; rather it was US foreign policy that they took issue with. In contrast to the government's proclamations, some critical scholars and journalists did argue this point. Among the most notable was Peter Bergen, one of the US's leading terrorism specialists. Having studied al-Qaeda intensely and also having interviewed Osama bin Laden, Bergen, like

⁶⁶ George W. Bush, press conference with Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri, September 19, 2001,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext1_091901.html.

⁶⁷ George W. Bush, speech to US attorneys, November 29, 2001,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bush_text112901.html.

⁶⁸ Bush, address to a joint session of Congress and the nation, September 20, 2001.

President Bush, was interested in the question, “Why do they hate us?” In a 2006 *MSNBC* news broadcast, he summarized his findings:

[Osama bin Laden] never talks about our freedoms, Hollywood, Madonna. You know feminism, homosexuality, the drug and alcohol culture in the West. He never talks about our culture as a reason for attacking us. And in fact, in one of the most recent statements he made, he said, look, I didn’t attack Sweden, meaning that it is not—I’m not attacking liberal permissive societies. I’m attacking the United States for its foreign policies, and obviously when I say that, I’m not saying that he is in any way justified, but that that is his rationale.⁶⁹

Some of the foreign policies that Osama Bin Laden had condemned the US for included the continued American military deployment in Saudi Arabia, the support for the Saudi, Egyptian, and other regimes, the support for Israel to the detriment of the Palestinian people, and the US’s continued bombing of Iraq.⁷⁰ None of these complaints represent ideological or religious motivations. Instead, they represent political grievances. America was attacked not because al-Qaeda was opposed to the American way of life as the president and his administration tirelessly claimed, but because of opposition to American foreign policy toward Muslim-majority countries.

Notable here is also the work of the 9/11 Commission, chartered with the preparation of a “full and complete account of the circumstances surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.” It would be reasonable to expect that the Commission would engage in a comprehensive and thorough forensic investigation of the attack’s causes. It did not, however. The eminent historian Ernest May worked with the

⁶⁹ Peter Bergen, interview by Chris Matthews, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, MSNBC, December 1, 2006, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/10819762/ns/msnbc-hardball_with_chris_matthews/t/hardball-chris-matthews-jan-th/#.XelHCehKjcs.

⁷⁰ Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London: Weinfeld and Nicholson, 2001), 242.

9/11 Commission and he acknowledged later on that its report “skirts the question of whether American policies and actions fed the anger that manifested itself on September 11...The commissioners believed that American foreign policy was too controversial to be discussed... [W]e compromised our commitment to set forth the full story.”⁷¹

The depoliticization of so-called Islamist actors is, of course, not limited to 9/11 and al-Qaeda. Indeed, 9/11 made it easier to continue the ideologization of an array of other militant-Islamist actors, including the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah. According to President Bush, Hamas and Hezbollah hate America and Israel because America and Israel are “ardent defenders of liberty.”⁷² While it is true that both Hamas and Hezbollah have a military wing that has committed acts of terrorism, it is false to claim that these acts were rooted in some fanatical anti-freedom ideology. Both Hamas and Hezbollah emerged in reaction to continued Israeli expansionism and aggression.⁷³ Any such political context, however, tends to be denied or depicted as baseless.

As the government is providing false narratives about unreasoned hate of “Islamist” actors, these are richly complemented by the nation’s mainstream media. For both, what is to be blamed is an ideology that originates somewhere in Islam. In the influential *Wall Street Journal*, for example, one could read that “barbaric culture had declared war not because of our policies but for what we stood—democracy and freedom.”⁷⁴ While there is an enemy image established for the American people, and while the government profits from the fostered patriotism, the American people are, in fact, severely misled. There is a political and a historical context that can help explain the violence that is committed, and without

⁷¹ Ernest May, “When Government Writes History,” *New Republic*, May 23, 2005, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64332/when-government-writes-history>.

⁷² George W. Bush, address to members of the Knesset, the Knesset, Jerusalem, May 15, 2008), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/05/20080515-1.html>.

⁷³ Ayoob, *Many Faces*, 19; Robert Pape, *Dying to Win* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁷⁴ Norman Podhoretz, “Israel Is not the Issue,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2001.

giving it due consideration, American foreign policy risks continuing to generate extremism rather than abate it.

The strategy of conflation

The strategy of conflation builds on the strategies of labeling and depoliticization. Whereas the latter two strategies identify the target group, ascribe it a set of characteristics, and ensure that the group's motivations are seen as unfounded hatred as opposed to having any political or historical context, the strategy of conflation seeks to link individuals who share similar characteristics with the object of concern. In concrete terms, whereas labeling and depoliticization are geared toward ensuring that the danger is associated with Islam, conflation aims to present actors as a “monolithic threat,” regardless of their distinct political motivations.⁷⁵

On 9/11, the US was attacked by a single group, al-Qaeda. What followed afterward, however, was not a war only on al-Qaeda, but a *global* war on terror. As President Bush emphasized in his September 20, 2001 speech to Congress and the American people, “Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them.” The President went on to explain that “there are thousands of these terrorists in more than sixty countries.” These terrorists, the president said, were housed in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia; that is chiefly in Muslim-majority countries, and now he was about to launch a “crusade” in those countries.

The threat that was posed by al-Qaeda, in other words, was projected across the regions in which the majority of Muslims reside. Terrorists were conflated with governments, and various terrorist groups were conflated with each other. As President Bush explained in a graduation speech he gave on June 1, 2002 at West Point Academy, the enemy now consisted of “shadowy terrorist networks” and “dictators with weapons of mass

⁷⁵ Abdeselam Maghraoui, “American Foreign Policy and Islamic Renewal,” *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 164, July 2006, 4, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr164.pdf>.

destruction [who] can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.”⁷⁶ The message that the American people received was simple enough: There were a lot of terrorists and a lot of dictators in Muslim-majority countries and what they all had in common was that they hated America.

One of the most consequential conflation the government manufactured was linking al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the American people did not see any association between the two. When asked who was responsible for the attack only 3% of Americans mentioned Iraq or Saddam Hussein. By 2003, however, this had changed. Now 69% said they thought it at least likely that Hussein was involved in the attacks.⁷⁷ The Administration knew very well that there was no connection between the two, but it had worked continuously on establishing this association in the perception of the American people.⁷⁸ Most illustrative here was perhaps President Bush’s September 2002 assertion that “you can’t distinguish between al-Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror.”⁷⁹

The Bush Administration also conflated different “Islamist” groups with each other, most notably al-Qaeda with Hamas and Hezbollah. In a speech to the Israeli Knesset on May 15, 2008, President Bush declared, “Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah and Hamas will be defeated, as Muslims across the region recognize the emptiness of the terrorists’ vision and the injustice of their cause.”⁸⁰ Earlier he had explained how these various groups were supposedly linked: “The Shiite and Sunni extremists are different faces of the same totalitarian threat. Whatever slogans they chant, when they

⁷⁶ Bush, graduation speech at United States Military Academy.

⁷⁷ Dana Milbank and Claudia Deane, “Hussein Link to 9/11 Lingers in Many Minds,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2003, 1; Linda Feldmann, “The Impact of Bush Linking 9/11 and Iraq,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 14, 2003, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0314/p02s01-woiq.html>.

⁷⁸ Joe Wilson, *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2004).

⁷⁹ George W. Bush, remarks to reporters, September 25, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060915-4.html>.

⁸⁰ Bush, address to members of the Knesset.

slaughter the innocent, they have the same wicked purposes. They want to kill Americans, kill democracy in the Middle East, and gain the weapons to kill on an even more horrific scale.”⁸¹

While al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah have all engaged in violent acts to promote their causes, they are also very different from each other, both in scope and in political motivation. For example, while al-Qaeda has a transnational strategy, Hamas’ and Hezbollah’s engagement has been territorially very restricted, and they came into being in response to continued Israeli expansion. It is by ignoring such differences that the US came to conflate all armed struggle as terrorism, even when it was a reaction to brutal foreign occupation. The Bush Administration was continuing to build a monolithic Islamic enemy and the representatives of this enemy, Bush explained further in his Knesset speech,

... accept no god before themselves. And they reserve a special hatred for the most ardent defenders of liberty, including Americans and Israelis. And that is why the founding charter of Hamas calls for the “elimination” of Israel. And that is why the followers of Hezbollah chant “Death to Israel, Death to America!” That is why Osama bin Laden teaches that “the killing of Jews and Americans is one of the biggest duties.” And that is why the President of Iran dreams of returning the Middle East to the Middle Ages and calls for Israel to be wiped off the map.⁸²

Whatever effort President Bush had made initially to distinguish al-Qaeda from the religion of Islam, he also engaged in so much conflation that, in effect, the distinction was rendered futile. Inevitably, the American people’s perception that al-Qaeda had many like-minded Muslim actors across the Muslim world was confirmed, as was their clash-of-civilization worldview. “Jews and Americans have seen the consequences of

⁸¹ George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 23, 2007, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070123-2.html>

⁸² Bush, address to members of the Knesset.

disregarding the words of leaders who espouse hatred,” the president said further in his speech.⁸³ Muslims were the makers of these “consequences.”

From Bush to Obama to Trump

After 9/11, Islamophobia became embedded deeper and more pervasively in America’s foreign policy institutions, its legal institutions, and its media organizations than ever before. Islamophobia in the US became institutionalized and normalized. For the government, the representation of Islam as the enemy served a continuous reification of the American identity and it facilitated the continuation of the deeply entrenched bipartisan imperialistic agenda.

Nevertheless, when Barack Obama succeeded George Bush, many Muslims placed much hope in the new president. The hope resulted from Obama’s personal background and the promise of change in his campaign. It was strengthened further by his much-noted speech in Cairo, Egypt, just a few months after he assumed the presidency. His aim, he said there, was, “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world... one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive.” Instead, Obama emphasized the “overlapping” history between the East and the West, that America and Islam share “common principles” and “common aspirations.”⁸⁴

With the Obama Administration, the language in the war on terror indeed became more cautious. His actual foreign policy, however, turned out to be more of the same. In fact, in some ways, it was even worse as the American people could see the US escalating the war in various Muslim majority countries. The US was “still threatened by terrorists,” Obama explained and these arise from “a common ideology,” he explained further,

⁸³ Bush, address to members of the Knesset.

⁸⁴ Barack H. Obama, “A New Beginning,” June 4, 2009,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>.

“a belief by some extremists that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West, and that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause.” “Of course, this ideology is based on a lie, for the United States is not at war with Islam.”⁸⁵

The fact, however, was that America *was* in a conflict with Muslims and had been for many decades. A few years prior to Obama’s Cairo speech, in 2005, Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in the Bush Administration, also gave a speech in Cairo and she acknowledged, “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”⁸⁶ The US had indeed been stoking authoritarianism across the Middle East for decades, but for the US Secretary of State to acknowledge it publicly was remarkable.

Indeed, since the mid-20th century, the US aggressively manipulated Muslim-majority countries to serve its geostrategic and economic interests. It overthrew the democratic government in Iran. It supported repressive and authoritarian regimes across the region. It exploited the differences between Middle Eastern countries against each other. It also engaged in harsh sanctioning policies towards various Muslim-majority countries and brought tremendous suffering to the people of those countries. It supported Israel’s expansionism to the detriment of the Palestinian people and it did so much more that was and continues to be harmful to Muslims. Contrary to what Rice promised in Cairo in 2005, the US did not take a different course in President Bush’s final years. Also, the presidency of Barack Obama brought no fundamental change.

⁸⁵ Barack H. Obama, remarks at the National Defense University (National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, May 23, 2013), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

⁸⁶ Condoleezza Rice, remarks at the American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>.

With the accession of Donald Trump to the White House, the representation of Islam as the enemy reached a new low point. Even during his presidential candidacy, Trump called “for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on.”⁸⁷ A few months later, he stated, “I think Islam hates us. There’s something there that—there’s a tremendous hatred there... There’s an unbelievable hatred of us.”⁸⁸ Upon assuming the presidency, Trump issued by executive order what came to be known as the “Muslim Ban,” temporarily suspending entry into the US of all people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

There was no danger emanating from any of these countries. In response to Trump’s executive order, the CATO Institute tallied up the numbers from 1975 to 2015 and found that not a single American on US soil has been killed by a citizen of any of the countries featured in the ban.⁸⁹ Facts did not matter, however. Islam continued to be the enemy.

Conclusion and implications

It is indeed a simple fact that no American had been killed by a citizen from any of the countries featured in the Muslim Ban. Yet, all too often this is not known to the American people. What is also very often not known is the fact that al-Qaeda and ISIS have killed far more Muslims than Christians or Jews. Finally, there is a fundamental lack of knowledge about the US’s history in the Middle East and the decades-long adversity and havoc it has brought to the people of the region.

⁸⁷ Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner, “‘I Think Islam Hates Us’: A Timeline of Trump’s Comments about Islam and Muslims,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>.

⁸⁸ Johnson and Hauslohner, “I Think Islam Hates Us.”

⁸⁹ Alex Nowraseth, “Little National Security Benefit to Trump’s Executive Order on Immigration,” The Cato Institute, January 25, 2017, <https://www.cato.org/blog/little-national-security-benefit-trumps-executive-order-immigration>.

This ignorance is among the reasons why it is so easy for the government to engage in fear politics and depict Islam as the enemy. Regrettably, as Nazia Kazi writes, “A public that has been taught not history but nationalism can accept simplistic explanations about *them* hating our freedoms....”⁹⁰ An accompanying illiteracy in current international politics combined with superficial mainstream media that also profits from fear politics makes the task even easier for the government. This is a rather discouraging conclusion and the question of where to go from here remains.

While the explicit Islamophobia of the Trump Administration may dissipate with a new president, the deeply entrenched Islamic enemy image among the American people will persist. Political actors will thus continue to cast Islam as a danger to America with the ongoing fundamental goal of leveraging the nation’s identity. It is also important to understand that another central goal of their Islamophobia is to prevent Muslims from acquiring political and societal influence. Current political elites fear that this influence would interfere with the imperialistic US foreign policy in the Middle East. Toward this end, therefore, the rhetorical strategies of labeling, depoliticization, and conflation will continue.

Understanding what is driving the US’s Islamophobic foreign policy signals the road ahead for Muslims. Most importantly, those Muslims who have felt a sense of alienation from their faith because of the continuous onslaught against it must recognize that Islam is not the problem. Islam stands for justice and beauty, as it always has and always will. For all Muslims, furthermore, it is important to recognize that the othering of Muslims and Islam in the service of national identity formation is at the center of Islamophobic efforts within the national and foreign policy arena.

⁹⁰ Nazia Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 114.

To tackle this problem at its core, Muslims must acquire increased political and societal influence. It is imperative to vie for a more prominent role in the public square and to seek positions of political decision-making and leadership, locally as well as nationally. Alongside efforts to restrain misguided and Islamophobic foreign and domestic policies, there must be efforts to rectify the clash-of-civilizations narrative. Muslims must seek stronger representation in the capital's influential think tanks. Muslims should also aspire to stronger representation in the social sciences and humanities of academia, and in primary and secondary education institutions across the country. Additionally, Muslims should strive for more presence in the country's media, film, and art industries.

Muslims, in other words, must increasingly assume the role of authorship in our political, social, and cultural worlds. These efforts are underway and must continue with vigor. It is in these ways that Muslims will be able to discharge their divine duty to bring rectitude to the societies they live in.