



Targeting Muslim Americans in the Name of National Security

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Years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the daily lives of American Muslims continue to be affected by the anxieties and policies those attacks unleashed. Because so many of their fellow citizens see them as both physically threatening and culturally inferior, Muslim-Americans endure regular expressions of hostility at their jobs and in public spaces. They are also the target of government policies aimed at securing the country from another terrorist attack.

Every single day in U.S. airports, for example, Muslim Americans are treated as dangerous. Quite a few men have been told they are on a No-Fly List when they attempt to check in for flights; and women who wear the hijab or other religious clothing are often stopped and searched by Transportation and Security Administration agents. Such government actions are not only a problem for the people affected; they also convey the broader message that Muslims are a threat to national security and require careful monitoring and surveillance.

I interviewed 48 South Asian and Arab Muslim Americans about their experiences pre- and post-9/11 in Chicago and the Dallas/Ft. Worth area between 2009 and 2012. My research on many aspects of this issue shows, because of the association of Islam with terror, violence, and the oppression of women, Muslims in the United States bear a heavy burden. They feel constantly compelled to prove that their national and religious identities can co-exist harmoniously.

Prejudice against Muslims in America

Social scientists have made several attempts to measure trends in public views about Muslims in the United States.

- According to the Pew Research Center, Americans' favorable rating of Islam dropped from 40% in 2001 to 30% in 2001.
- A 2005 survey by the Council of American Islamic Relations found that one fourth of Americans held anti-Muslim attitudes and believed negative stereotypes about Muslims. Roughly 25% of respondents thought Islam is a religion that preaches hatred and violence; 60% were not very knowledgeable about Islam (only 2% claimed to be knowledgeable); and a little over a third of respondents described themselves as indifferent/confused/neutral about Islam and Muslims.
- A 2010 study by the Public Research Institute reveals that 45% of Americans believe Islam and American values are incompatible.

Because discrimination against Muslims can be considered a form of racism, it is also interesting to look at trends in public support for racial profiling since the terrorist attacks of 2001. According to a Gallup poll, <https://scholars.org>

before those attacks only about one-fifth of all Americans supported racial profiling by law enforcement. However, in a 2004 Gallup poll, 31% of the respondents agreed that some racial profiling of motorists was justified on roads and highways, while 45% supported it at security checkpoints at airports. In 2010, a CBS News poll found a slight decrease in support for profiling (with only 37% of Americans in favor), yet more than a third of Americans were in favor of the use of racial profiling at airports.

Surveillance Practices in U.S. Airports

Before the attacks on September 11, 2001, security in U.S. airports was contracted out to private companies. In November 2001, the U.S. Congress created the Transportation and Security Administration, making this federal agency responsible for airport security. That agency now has a budget of \$7.4 billion and 55,600 full-time employees. In turn, the Transportation Security Administration established a program called Screening of Passengers through Observing Techniques, which trains agents to identify passengers who are behaving in what has been defined as a suspicious manner. The federal government's Terrorist Screening Center also assembled and continues to maintain a No-Fly List.

My research shows that these innovations at U.S. airports have led to many American Muslim men and women being treated with suspicion. The Department of Homeland Security claims the No-Fly List contains 21,000 names on it. In addition to the No-Fly List, airlines are required to provide the Transportation and Security Agency with personal information about every passenger. This Secure Flight List is then compared to the No-Fly List. Short of that, according to a 2011 report by the Pew Research Center, 52% of Muslims feel they are singled out by the government's anti-terrorist initiatives with 21% feeling singled out by airport security.

How Muslim American Men and Women Experience Heightened Surveillance

The majority of the Muslim men I interviewed were made aware that they were on lists calling for heightened government surveillance only at the airport. When they tried to get their boarding passes for flights they had booked, they were then interrogated by a Transportation Security agent. If they were allowed to proceed to their flights, their persons and possessions were searched at the security line and often once again at the gate. Muslim American women reported that they were treated unfairly and unequally as they passed through airport security. Women wearing the hijab could expect to be stopped for special searches at the security gate, although none of those I interviewed were informed that they were on any government watch list.

Even now, more than thirteen years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, pervasive surveillance by government and suspicion or outright prejudice from their fellow citizens has the effect of silencing the Muslim Americans I interviewed. These men and women have come to understand that, as Muslims, they are likely to be associated with terrorism. They censor themselves and avoid talking about politics or religion. Even though all citizens in a democracy have such rights, American Muslims live daily with the worry that they are presumed dangerous and disloyal, a threat to both national security and American cultural values.

Read more in Saher Selod, "Citizenship Denied: Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post-9/11." *Critical Sociology* (2014); and "Criminalization of Muslim American Men in the United States," in *The Immigrant Other: Lived Experiences in a Transnational World*, edited by Rich Furman and Alissa Ackerman (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).