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## Islamophobia: A Bipartisan Project

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When the *New York Times* ran [its story](#) [1] on Obama’s “kill list,” showing the president poring over names of people to potentially assassinate in drone strikes, it sparked a controversy. The content of that controversy was not over this extraordinary revelation about Obama’s use of power but rather over the leaking of state secrets, which Republicans accused him of doing to bolster his re-election campaign. Some liberal commentators (at *Salon*, *The Nation* etc.) were rightfully horrified and condemned such activity. But the Democrats—and much of the liberal establishment—remained silent.

Deep in the *Times* article, another shocking revelation that hasn’t received as much attention as the “kill list” is the Obama administration’s effort to erase the deaths of some innocent victims by categorizing “all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants.” This excludes them from the civilian casualties count, allowing the administration to claim that civilian casualties have been minimal. All Muslim men in “combat zones” in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen have been presumed to be terrorists, and therefore worthy of death, simply for being of “military age.”

How did we get to a place where innocent Muslim men can be killed with impunity around the world with little public outcry? The short answer is that Muslims have been long been constructed as “terrorists” upon whom righteous terror can be rained. The image of the Muslim enemy in the US is not new. While Hollywood and television play a key role in conveying that image to the public, they did not create it. The “Muslim enemy” is inextricably tied to a long history of US imperialism.

## **The US and the Middle East**

After World War II, the United States began take control of the Middle East from France and Britain. In so doing, all forces that stood in the way of US hegemony were cast as enemies, using the language of Orientalism developed in Europe. (I discuss this in greater detail in my book, [\*Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire\*](#) [2].)

Through much of the 1950s and '60s, secular Arab nationalists and leftists who failed to cooperate with this US agenda were seen as stooges of the USSR or as “terrorists.” The latter image intensified with the birth of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its use of armed struggle. The PLO was coded as “terrorist” because of the close relationship between the United States and Israel.

Following the infamous incident at the 1972 Munich Olympics in which a group of Palestinians took Israeli athletes hostage and murdered them, the Nixon administration launched “Operation Boulder,” giving law enforcement agencies *carte blanche* to investigate Arab immigrants and Arab American citizens in search of connections to “terrorist” activities related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, a violent act committed in Munich by a handful of Palestinians became the basis on which all Arabs were designated as “suspicious”; the process of racial profiling had begun in earnest.

The “Arab terrorist” morphed into the “Islamic terrorist” after the 1979 Iranian revolution. When US embassy personnel were taken hostage in Iran for 444 days, the crisis generated daily front-page and headline news that effectively associated Islam with terror. Ayatollah Khomeini became the personification of all things evil, and all things Muslim. The Middle East henceforth would be seen through the lens of “Islam,” a distorted construction of the religion and the people who practiced it.

Under President Jimmy Carter Iranians were targeted, but it was for Reagan to take this much further through his counter-terrorism policy. He issued a secret National Security Directive designed to create a network of agencies that would prevent “terrorists” from entering or staying in the US. One program by the Alien Border Control Committee called for mass arrests of immigrants from Iran and from Arab nations. During the first Gulf War, in 1991, the elder Bush launched a surveillance program against Arab Americans, which Bill Clinton would take to an entirely new level with the passage of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), a precursor to the PATRIOT Act, which, among other things, made it legal to deport immigrants based on secret evidence.

## **Post-Cold War Politics**

The 1990s witnessed a decade between what professor and Middle East expert Fawaz A. Gerges refers to as the “confrontationists” and the “accommodationists” in the American foreign policy establishment. The confrontationists argued that Islamism was the new post-cold war “Other” and that the United States needed to confront and challenge this adversary in the “clash of civilizations” that was to follow. The key ideologue leading this charge was Bernard Lewis (a close associate of the neocons), who penned his views in 1990 in a now-famous [\*essay\*](#) [3] titled

“The Roots of Muslim Rage,” in which he raised the alarm about an impending “clash of civilizations.” Samuel Huntington then popularized this concept in an essay titled “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs*, followed by a book with the same title (minus the question mark). Huntington put forward the thesis that in the new post–cold war era, conflict would be characterized by cultural differences between various civilizations. He named about seven or eight such civilizations, arguing that the Islamic civilization was among the more dangerous threats to the West.

This view was reflected in a slew of other articles. Journalist Judith Miller [argued](#) [4] in *Foreign Affairs* that US policymakers should not try to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Islamists because there was a consensus among all Islamists to defeat the West. Confrontation, rather than co-optation or dialogue, was the only way to thwart this new enemy. Daniel Pipes, Martin Indyk (who served on Bill Clinton’s National Security Council), Jeane Kirkpatrick (a one-time Democrat turned dogged cold-warrior Republican) and others added their voice to this chorus. The “clash” thesis was not a partisan position; confrontationists belong to both political parties. The difference between the accommodationists and confrontationists was not over the goal of US hegemony; it was about strategy and rhetoric. During the 1990s, the accommodationist line dominated in Washington. The Bush *père* and Clinton administrations sought to win over Muslim-majority countries by appealing to universal values and, under Clinton, free market policies.

Domestically, however, the hysteria against Muslims mounted during this period. The fear generated by the attempted bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 ensured that in 1995, when white right-wing Christian terrorist Timothy McVeigh bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, Arabs and Muslims were immediately blamed. Congress passed AEDPA in 1996. In short, even before the events of 9/11, the groundwork had been laid for the legalized targeting of Muslims and Arabs.

### **The “War on Terror” Decade**

The events of 9/11 brought this legal apparatus in line with the foreign policy establishment. Barely had the ashes settled from the Twin Towers when loud proclamations that “Islamic terrorists” represented existential threats to the United States began to echo in the public sphere. From then on, US policy was geared towards “keeping Americans safe” from Muslim “evildoers.” The “clash of civilizations” rhetoric became the ideological basis for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as domestic attacks on Muslims and Arabs.

The war on Iraq, however, did not go the way the neocons wanted it to. Instead of greeting US forces as liberators, the Iraqi people resisted and rejected US hegemony. During his second term, Bush moved away from “hard” power and toward winning “hearts and minds.” But by the end of his second term, the failing occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as an economic crisis of proportions not seen since the Great Depression—meant that it was time for a changing of the guard. Obama was voted into power by an electorate disgusted by the hubris and arrogance of the Bush regime. The ruling elites also gave him their blessing, hoping to put a friendlier face on US imperialism. The Democrats were ready to take on this role.

In January 2007, a leadership group on US-Muslim relations headed by Madeleine Albright, Richard Armitage (former deputy secretary of state under George W. Bush) and a number of academics produced a [document](#) [5] titled “Changing Course: A New Direction for US Relations with the Muslim World.” The document, which received high praise, argued that distrust of the United States in Muslim-majority countries was the product of “policies and actions—not a clash of civilizations.” It went on to argue that to defeat “violent extremists,” military force was necessary but not sufficient, and that the United States needed to forge “diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural initiatives.” The report urged the US leadership to improve “mutual respect and understanding between Americans and Muslims,” and promote better “governance and improve civic participation” in Muslim majority countries. The report’s call to action stated that it would be vital for the next president to reflect these ideas in his/her inaugural speech and to reaffirm the United States’ “commitment to prohibit all forms of torture.”

Barack Obama has proven brilliantly effective at embodying such a posture. In one of his [first speeches, in Cairo](#) [6], Obama rejected the “clash of civilizations” argument, emphasizing the shared common history and aspirations of the East and West. Whereas the “clash” discourse sees the West and the world of Islam as mutually exclusive and as polar opposites, Obama emphasized “common principles.” He spoke of “civilization’s debt to Islam,” which “pav[ed] the way for Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment,” and acknowledged Muslims’ contributions to the development of science, medicine, navigation, architecture, calligraphy and music. This was no doubt a remarkable admission for an American president, but one that Obama clearly saw as vital to bolstering the United States’ badly damaged image in the “Muslim world.” Indeed, this speech marked a significant rhetorical shift from the Bush era; a shift to the language of liberal imperialism and liberal Islamophobia.

The key characteristics of liberal Islamophobia are the rejection of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, the recognition that there are “good Muslims” with whom diplomatic relations can be forged and a concomitant willingness to work with moderate Islamists. Liberal Islamophobia may be rhetorically gentler but it reserves the right of the US to wage war against “Islamic terrorism” around the world, with no respect for the right of self-determination by people in the countries it targets. It is the “white man’s burden” in sheep’s clothing.

“The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan,” Obama once said. Since taking office, he has embraced and expanded Bush’s second-term policies. He has deployed 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, expanded the war into Pakistan, tried to bully Iraq into granting an extension of the US occupation (which failed), carried out drone attacks and “black ops” in Yemen and Somalia and participated in the NATO-led war in Libya.

Domestically, Obama has continued Bush’s policies of torture, extraordinary rendition and preemptive prosecution. American Muslims continue to be harassed and persecuted by the state. Obama has even gone further than Bush in several ways, not only by securing the power to execute US citizens suspected of ties to terrorism without so much as a trial but also by signing the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which, among other things, allows the military to detain indefinitely without charge “terror suspects” who are US citizens. His 2011 “counter-

radicalization” [strategy document](#) [7] elicits the help of Muslim American teachers, coaches and community members, who are to be turned into a McCarthy-type informant system.

Yet liberal Islamophobia does not target all Muslims. It acknowledges that there are “good Muslims.” The report heaps praise on Muslim Americans who have cooperated with the state arguing that “we must counter al-Qa’ida’s propaganda that the United States is somehow at war with Islam” and instead affirm that “Islam is part of America, a country that cherishes the active participation of all its citizens, regardless of background and belief. We live what al-Qa’ida violently rejects—religious freedom and pluralism.” Obama added that “our rich diversity of backgrounds and faiths makes us stronger.” This is the modus operandi of liberal Islamophobia: to roundly reject Islam-bashing—and then proceed to institute proposals that target Muslims

When Representative Peter King held his McCarthy-style hearings in March 2011 to determine the extent of “Muslim radicalization” in the United States, he was rightly criticized by liberals. However, that August, when Obama institutionalized this process through his “counter-radicalization” strategy, there was nary a peep.

At the end of the day, the fear of “Islamic terrorism” is manufactured to grease the wheels of empire. [Statistics](#) [8] show that Americans are more likely to die from lightning strikes and dog bites than an act of terrorism. In the ten years since 9/11, a [comprehensive study](#) [9] shows that of the 150,000 murders in the United States, eleven Muslim Americans were responsible for the deaths of thirty-three people (besides themselves). Yet, this did not stop King from starting yet another hearing on Muslim American “radicalization” in June 2012.

[Complaining](#) [10] that his earlier efforts had been “vilified by the politically correct media, pandering politicians and radical groups” King [squawked](#) [11] that his efforts were intended to “protect America from a terrorist attack.” While his anti-Muslim racism is thoroughly disagreeable, he is not incorrect when he [states](#) [10] that this is a “nonpartisan” issue and “of serious concern to national security and counterterrorism officials in the Obama administration.” Indeed. King is simply continuing what is a bipartisan policy with a long history. The mistake that progressives make is to focus on the most rabid Islamophobes, while giving liberal Islamophobia a pass. Whatever form it takes, racism should be called out for it is.