Muslims Prone to Homegrown Terrorism: Deconstructing the U.S. Government Discourse

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Abstract

To confront homegrown terrorism, the U.S. government adopted a discourse on which it based its policies. The latter ones fixate almost entirely on Islam, treat Muslims as suspects and encroach on their rights. In this article, we aim to question the legitimacy of the U.S. government's response to homegrown terrorism by assessing the U.S. government discourse. To that end, we proceed to a critical discourse analysis to uncover the key assumptions underlying this discourse, first. Then, we take a genealogical approach to identify the roots of such assumptions. At last, we use theological arguments and empirical data to evaluate the soundness of those assumptions. The results of the analysis revealed that the measures that encroach on Muslims' freedoms are illegitimate in that they derive from discourses based on flawed assumptions.

Keywords: homegrown terrorism, Muslims, US government discourse.

Résumé

Pour faire face au terrorisme local, le gouvernement américain a adopté un discours politique qui se fixe entièrement sur l'islam et considère les musulmans non seulement comme des suspects mais il viole aussi leurs droits. Cet article vise à remettre en question la légitimité de la réponse du gouvernement américain au terrorisme local en évaluant le discours du gouvernement des États-Unis. Pour ce faire, nous procédons, d'abord, à une analyse critique du discours pour découvrir les principales hypothèses qui le soulignent. Ensuite, nous adoptons une approche généalogique pour identifier les racines de ces hypothèses. Enfin, nous utilisons des arguments théologiques et des données empiriques pour évaluer la solidité de ces hypothèses. Les résultats de l'analyse ont révélé que les mesures qui empiètent sur les libertés des musulmans sont illégitimes dans la mesure où elles découlent de discours fondés sur des hypothèses erronées.

Mots-clés : terrorisme local, musulman, discours du gouvernement américain.

الملخص

بهدف مواجهة الإرهاب المحلى ، تبنت الحكومة الأمريكية خطابا تقوم عليه سياساتها بحيث تركز تقريبا كليا على الإسلام ، وتعامل المسلمين كمشتبه فيهم ، وتنتهك حقوقهم. هذه المقالة تشكك في شرعية استجابة الحكومة الأمريكية للإرهاب المحلي من خلال تقييم خطابها. وتحقيقا لهذه الغاية ، قمنا بتحليل نقدي لهذا الخطاب للكشف عن الافتراضات الأساسية التي يقوم عليها باستعمال نهج الأنساب لتحديد جذور هذه الافتراضات. أخيرا استخدما الحجج اللاهوتية والبيانات التجريبية لتقييم سلامة تلك الافتراضات ، خلصت المقالة إلى أن التدابير التي تنتهك حريات المسلمين غير شرعية لأنها مستمدة من خطابات قائمة على افتراضات معيبة.

الكلمات المفاتيح: الإرهاب المحلى ، المسلمين ، خطاب الحكومة الأمريكية.

Introduction

When facing security issues, the U.S. government framed policies that encroach on people's rights on several occasions. To confront homegrown terrorism, it has used preventive measures that target Muslims as it considers them the perpetrators of such phenomenon. As those policies are the implementation of an official discourse, we assess their legitimacy by analyzing the discourse itself. First, we uncover two of the significant assumptions that underlie it. Then, we trace their genealogy. At last, we assess the validity of the assumptions in light of theological and empirical data.

1. *Constructing Muslims as the 'Other' and as the Enemy*

In the post 9/11 environment, the official discourse in the United States tended to construct the Western world as 'Self' and represent the Muslims as the 'Other' and the enemy. This construction is generally referred to as the 'Us' versus 'Them' paradigm. First, the Bush administration framed foreign policy on the narrative of War on Terror in which liberal western democracies are fighting "the Axis of Evil". It pictured Americans as the "innocent victims" and the aggressors as "evil perpetrators". That provided the foundation for the labeling of Islam as 'evil'. Then, at home, there was a construction of an "Enemy within". The U.S. government perceived Muslims as a potential threat. It considered them as the enemy in the Global War on Terror and expected them to prove their loyalty.

Admittedly, the Obama administration made an effort to avoid sticking to this construction. Reflecting such an effort are President Obama's statements in his Cairo speech in June 4, 2009. He said:

The sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam…The attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. This has bred more fear and mistrust.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration framed the Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) policy that still considers Muslims as the 'Other'. In the "Strategic Implementation Plan," the president discursively constructed 'the Self' as a "facilitator, convener, and source of information," and 'the Muslim Other' as ones who could "readily identify the problems as they emerge" (2011, p. 3). For the sake of political correctness, the President not only constructed the Muslim 'Other' as "partners" but also he avoided to refer to them as Muslim but as "local". In fact, the 'local partner' narrative was indirectly contributing to the othering process.

1.1. Genealogy

The Othering process or 'Us' versus 'Them' paradigm rests on the creation of social group categories. It is commonly made through an emphasis on differing characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and religion. Generally, it victimizes a minority group on the basis that their culture represents a threat to the rest of society.

In the U.S. government discourse, the othering process uses and extends Orientalist constructs. To trace back the genealogical roots of the Orientalist cultural discourse, we draw on Edward W. Said's understanding of orientalism. He defined orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1978, p.1). He studied the ideas that became embedded in Western culture. He showed that the development and use of representation of the Orient in the European context were not faithful to the "natural depictions of the Orient" (p.21). These representations or rather mis-representations, considered as objective in the Westerners' mind, have developed into stereotypes. The West has made the Orient its 'Other'.

In a similar process, the Western countries regarded the Muslims as the 'Other'. They produced

false descriptions of Islamic cultures. They based their representation of Muslims and Islam on preconceived stereotypes devoid of justification. To refer to this western tendency to anti-Muslim sentiment, E. Said had not used the term 'Islamophobia' but helped a lot in the awareness of the phenomenon.

In addition, the U.S. government depicted Muslims as the enemy. After the collapse of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the USA generated a new enemy frontier. The need of an enemy was necessary for the Americans to claim their superiority. They re-imagined Muslims during that period as enemies while they used to consider them allies against Communism before the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

The academia adopted this idea through rhetoric of "clash of civilizations*"*. This expression stems from a 1990 article entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage" written by Bernard Lewis, professor of history at Princeton University. In this article, Lewis claimed that the clash was rooted in the classical Islamic view whereby two opposing forces divided the world namely the House of Peace (Islam) and the House of War. According to him, such view led to consider any civilization outside Islam as the enemy. Lewis's "The Roots of Muslim Rage" appealed strongly to Professor Samuel Huntington. In 1993, the latter wrote "The Clash of Civilizations?" presenting his hypothesis of clash of civilizations. For him, the conflict that existed between the West and the Communist bloc is then between civilizations.

Media coverage and the society popularized the negative image of Muslims and manifested an intensive tendency at demonizing Islam. Then, the U.S. government promoted this demonization of Islam to nurture a politics of fear that legitimated the expansion of security measures. With the events of 9/11, Islam and Muslims had been 'othered' even more. There was a regain of interest for the idea of the "clash of civilizations" especially between Islam and the West. The neoconservatives have intensified this discourse. For them, terrorism was a product of Islamic culture. As they held many of the offices related to counter-terrorism in the early years of the War on Terror, their discourse had contributed to U.S. Islamophobic measures. For example, Lewis was a key advisor on the Middle East to the George W. Bush administration.

1.2. Assessment of the Underlying Assumption

To analyze the US government discourse, we uncover the key assumption underlying it and we assess it on several aspects.

1.2.1. Theological Arguments

The Othering process is based on the allegation that an incompatibility between Western and Islamic values exists and that Muslims cannot cope with the former ones. To assess this assumption, we take three core American values, namely democracy, freedom and justice and we evaluate whether they are compatible with Islam's true teachings. First, at the outset, Islam has always advocated a democratic form of government. Indeed, some Islamic principles are in tune with a democratic system. One of those principles promotes dialogue, consultation and community consensus. It holds that the decisions are the most appropriate ones when they are made jointly and after discussions of issues. In many ways, this type of governance is a model of democratic process. In the Holy Qur'an, the Surah "Ash-Shura", which means consultation, shows clearly the endorsement of a democratic government.

And those who answer the Call of their Lord [i.e. to believe that He is the only One Lord (Allah), and to worship none but Him Alone], and perform *As-Salat* (*Iqamat-as-Salat*), and who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation, and who spend of what We have bestowed on them. (42: 38)

And those who, when an oppressive wrong is done to them, take revenge. (42:39)

Second, freedom is a valued principle in Islam. The idea that Islam restricts freedom comes from the cases of some countries where the political regimes confuse the religion of Islam with oppressive political and dictatorial rule. Islam's teachings uphold personal freedoms. Islam guarantees even freedom of

religion. The surah Al-Ghashiah states that there shall be no compulsion in religion.

You are not a dictator over them – (88:22)

Save the one who turns away and disbelieves. (88:23)

Third, the Qur'an stresses absolute justice on more than one occasion. A significant illustration is the verse "Allah loves the just" (49:10). Another one is the verse in the Surah "Al-An'am":

And come not near to the orphan's property, except to improve it, until he (or she) attains the age of full strength; and give full measure and full weight with justice. We burden not any person, but that which he can bear. And whenever you give your word i.e. judge between men or give evidence), say the truth even if a near relative is concerned, and fulfil the Covenant of Allah. This He commands you, that you may remember. (6:152)

1.2.2. Empirical Data

Muslims in the USA are making efforts to fight the Othering process they experience. They manifest a willingness to be integrated in the U.S. society and to make their religion be part of the mainstream. Some of their actions and initiatives show efforts at interfaith participation, cultural engagement and civic activism. The activities of the youth programs are an illustration. In February 2010, the first Purple Hijab Day took place in the USA. Then, it became international and annual. During such event, women gave purple headscarves. Muslim Students Associations have organized the nationwide Ramadan Fast-a-Thon on campuses across the country. During such an occasion, non-Muslims are invited to join their Muslim classmates in fasting, in sharing a special meal to break the fast (*iftar*) and in accompanying prayers. In addition, Muslim college students are devising ways to reach out to their local communities as a whole. For example, Georgetown University's Muslim Chaplaincy offered a "Muslim Alternative Spring Break" trip for the first time in March 2012. During that trip, selected undergraduate students led by their campus Imam travelled to Parkersburg, West Virginia for charity and interfaith activities.

Moreover, the development of American Muslim organizations that fit into the American cultural environment rather than standing against it proves that the incompatibility West/Islam is based on an unfounded prejudice towards Islam and its followers. Some Muslim-based organizations had supported interfaith engagement. For example, the United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance devotes a whole part to interfaith activism in its website. It states that:

America as one nation, endeavoring to create one family through interfaith understanding. We promote racial and religious harmony through religious institutions, projecting an image of America as a world leader who stands up for the human rights for all communities.

Furthermore, through the message of the mosque leaders, mosques are open to the idea of involvement in the American society. Indeed, there is a strong willingness on the part of these mosque leaders to encourage worshippers to integrate in the American society, including its politics. Most of them express the view that Muslims should participate in American public life. According to Ihsan Bagby and his colleagues, already in 2000, when they interviewed 416 mosques, 77 percent of the mosque leaders "strongly agree" that Muslims should participate in American "institutions," and 72 percent "strongly agree" that Muslims should participate in the "political process" (2001, p. 32). Ten years later, when they interviewed 524 mosques, over 98 percent of mosque leaders agreed that Muslims should be involved in American institutions; and 91 percent agreed that Muslims should be involved in politics (2012, p. 4).

2. Constructing Muslims as Prone to Radicalization and Violence

After the attacks of 9/11, the U.S. government has associated Islam with violence. This narrative implies that Muslims are prone to radicalization and violence. Concretely, the U.S. policymakers do not state openly that Muslims are violent but by qualifying as "peaceful" and "non-violent" Muslims who have not taken the path to violence, they

implicitly consider that the ordinary state is violence. This was the case of George W. Bush. For instance, in the National Security Strategy of 2006, he used "peaceful" Muslims to refer to those who are not using violence. The document states, "We will continue to support political reforms that empower peaceful Muslims to practice and interpret their faith" (2006, p.11).

Then, the Obama administration viewed Muslims as suspects and considered certain Islamic traditions conducive to extremism. Still, for the sake of political correctness, the association of Muslims and Islam with violence was subtler. The researchers Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik's analysis of the Counter Violent Extremism shows that it situates the source of terrorism, in general and homegrown terrorism in particular, within Muslim communities (2017).

Moreover, the US law enforcement agents tended to consider any form of civil and political activism among Muslims as extremism and so as an indicator of radicalization that leads to terrorism. They based their policies on the religious conveyor belt model of radicalization. Even if this model had been rejected by academia, the U.S. government has embraced such theory and still looks at religious signs as indicator of radicalization and it focuses on Islam.

Furthermore, the Judicial Watch revealed in a special report that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Pentagon provided training sessions that presented Muslims as agents of aggression and allegorized the Islamic religion to the death star (2015). This explains why the government suspected and scrutinized Muslims just because of their religious identity.

2.1. Genealogy

To trace the genealogy of this discourse, we go back to the time when terrorism has been associated with religion. This construction was made through the emergence of Islamic terrorism discourse. To have a global perspective, we look at William F. Shugart II's analysis of the modern history of terrorism. He studied the different groups that had been given the label of terrorism and classified them. According to him, three categories of violent actions have been labeled terrorism. The first appeared after the end of World War 2; separatism motivated it. The second was present from around 1960s until 1989. Anti-Western views motivated it. The third took place after the Cold War. In this case, terrorism evolved into a religion-based violence (2006). In fact, it started to take shape before the end of the war. Some Muslims groups fought against the oppression of the rulers and other Muslim groups supported them in their resistance. Examples of turbulent events across the Middle East throughout the 1970s and 1980s are the Munich Massacre and the Iranian hostage crisis. They involved a high number of victims and a risk for the interests of the West. To make their resistance effective, these groups were fighting in the name of Islam. This made terrorism evolve from political violence to religion-based violence.

The discourse centralized on Islam as it is considered the source of that violence. It presumed causal link between religion and violence and implies that violence is inherent in Muslim societies. Some researchers have nurtured such discourse. For instance, Huntington's ideas claimed that Islam is violent. In his work, he stated, "Islam has bloody borders" (p.34).

Then, the actions of violence involving Muslims provoked a rapid expansion in neo-Orientalist scholarship. For example, the American scholar Mark Juergensmeyer made an interpretation of the phenomenon of terrorism by relating it to religion. In *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2003), he identified 'Islamic Terrorism' as a specific mode of political violence that was increasingly taking on a new transnational character.

2.2. Assessment of the Underlying Assumption

2.2.1. Theological arguments

The underlying assumption of this discourse is that Muslims are prone to violence because of their

religion. Islam as a religion does not promote violence. First, the Qur'an preaches peace. It stresses dialogue and moderation, not violence and radicalism. Several Quranic verses expound this clearly. For example, the Surah At-Tawba gives the directions how to interact with the enemy or unbelievers. One of the verses says, "If your enemy inclines toward peace, then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God" (8:61). Another example is the Surah Al-Mumtahina

God forbids you not respecting those who have not fought against you for religion's sake, and who have not driven you forth from your homes, that ye should act righteously and justly towards them; verily, God loves the just! (60:8)

God repeats, "do not aggress", multiple times. Only if attacked, one is permitted to fight back. If the other party refrains from aggression and offers one peace, Muslims are told to stop fighting. It prohibits aggression and allows fighting only in self-defense.

Second, Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) set up a tradition of peace through his sayings and deeds. The Prophet said there is no excuse for committing unjust acts: 'Do not be people without minds of your own, saying that if others treat you well you will treat them well, and that if they do wrong you will do wrong to them. Instead, accustom yourselves to do good if people do good and not to do wrong (even) if they do evil'"(Al-Tirmidhi).

2.2.2. Empirical Data

There is no empirical evidence indicating that American Muslim communities hold radical ideas. In fact, Muslims in general stand against violence. Polls show that Muslims in the USA do not support violence. We give the findings of two reliable polls, namely the Gallup Poll and the Pew Research center. In 2010, Gallup asked two questions: "Is targeting and killing civilians by the military justified?" and "Is targeting and killing by individuals or small groups justified?" can be justified. These questions were asked to US Muslims, Protestants, Catholic and Jewish. For the first, American Muslims were the only religious group that a majority opposed targeting and killing civilians by the military. For the second, they were the religious group that resolutely opposed "targeting and killing by individuals or small groups".

The Pew research Center carried two surveys, one in 2007 entitled "Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream" and another in 2011 entitled "Muslim Americans: No signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism". Both of the surveys show that, in general, Muslim Americans reject extremism.

Furthermore, some scholars have measured homegrown terrorism cases involving American Muslims. They study the scope of the actual involvement of American Muslims in terrorist attacks. Most of them claim that there is an overestimation. One of the academic publications, a report entitled "Muslim-American Terrorism in the Decade Since 9/11," written by Charles Kurzman, David Schanzer and Ebrahim Mosa, professors and members from the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, concludes that the numbers are not sign of a surge of terrorist violence by Muslims. According to the findings, the number of American Muslims accused of involvement in plots or attacks has decreased (20 in 2011, 26 in 2010 and 47 in 2009). In addition, the report states that there was no murder in 2011 that resulted from extremist violence by Muslims in the United States (2012).

Similarly, Charles Kurzman's 2014 report, entitled "Muslim-American Terrorism in 2013," shows also a steady decline over the past decade in suspects and perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the United States (2014, p.2). Another of his reports, "Muslim Americans Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016", shows a decrease of 40 percent in the number of American Muslims associated with violent extremism in 2016, as compared with the previous year (2017, p.2).

Like Charles Kurzman, Risa Brooks, a professor of Political Science, argues that the scope of the threat is minim. In her analysis "Muslim

'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat?" she concludes:

Muslim homegrown terrorism does not at present appear to constitute a serious threat to [Americans] welfare. Nor is there a significant analytical or evidentiary basis for anticipating that it will become one in the near future. It does not appear that Muslim Americans are increasingly motivated or capable of engaging in terrorist attacks against their fellow citizens and residents. (2011, p.10)

Conclusion

In this article, we assessed the US government response to homegrown terrorism by examining the discourse itself. We focused on two aspects of this discourse. The first is the tendency to view Muslims as the 'Other' and the enemy. The second is to consider them prone to violence. We used theological and empirical data to assess the assumptions underlying such discourse. Concerning considering the Muslims as the 'Other', our findings show that this Othering process is overlooking commonality between the Western values and Islamic ones. Concretely, Muslims in the USA. show willingness at integration. Concerning viewing Muslims as prone to violence, our findings show that the principles of Islam stands against violence. Concretely, Muslims in the USA do not support extremism and violence. After analysis, we conclude that the US government based its response to the alleged threat of homegrown terrorism on flawed assumptions that have little or no evidentiary basis. Because the US framed policies based on these unsound allegations, those policies are deemed faulty. In fact, the US government is reproducing past discourses. The latter have become discursive foundations that become entrenched in the American mind. To uproot this tradition would be challenging.

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