

ANTH412: Hypermarginality and Urban Health

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Surveillance in the United States: From the War on Drugs to the War on Terrorism

The War on Poverty, the War on Crime, the War on Drugs, and the War on Terrorism.

What are the consequences of framing social issues as a violent war that requires fighting and punishment? In particular, we often see that aspects of war efforts parallel the discourse and approaches taken during the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism. Thus, I aim to examine: 1). how do the War on Drugs and War on Terrorism (post-9/11) compare in terms of the domestic surveillance approaches taken during those periods and 2). what were the disproportionate impacts on communities, in particular, Muslim American ones? In exploring these questions, I apply the concepts of penalty/the logic of punishment to highlight the focus on increased funding for the police over social service provision, the body politic to analyze whose bodies require surveillance and control, and the criminalization of everyday life to explore the consequences of mass surveillance. Through these anthropological frameworks, I aim to demonstrate: 1). in the framing of the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism, citizens are portrayed differently based on their background; 2). in both wars, the criminalization of everyday life occurs, although the approaches to surveillance differ; 3). by relying on punishment to prevent terrorism, policymakers contribute to hypermarginality among Muslim American communities.

Post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts in the United States transitioned from focusing on external threats to internal threats after the 2005 London Underground bombing in the United

Kingdom. Soon after, the United States' counterterrorism efforts and media became hyperfixated on "radical homegrown terrorism" (Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, 873). To counter this threat, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local police departments developed expansive surveillance programs to monitor Muslim people in the United States with the ultimate goal of preventing future terrorist attacks. What processes and events led us to a place where an entire group of people become subject to state surveillance solely due to their actual or perceived religious identity? In our quest to answer this question, we turn to the war preceding the War on Terrorism: the War on Drugs.

During the War on Drugs, citizens were portrayed differently based on their background. Penalty is a form of governance in which social problems, typically addressed by the welfare state, are instead tackled through punitive measures (Hinton 2016, 278). In Ronald Reagan and other policymakers' eyes, welfare programs resulted in unproductive and undeserving individuals (Hinton 2016, 308). Indeed, by dismantling social programs, Reagan aimed to "hold back [the] jungle" (1981) in the name of "preserv[ing] domestic tranquility for 'traditional' Americans" (Hinton 2016, 308). Reagan's use of "jungle" invokes racialized images of "backwards" Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. During this time in the 1970s-80s, many continued to protest as part of antiwar and civil rights movements, among others, across the entire nation. Since the supposed foreign threat which the War on Drugs seeks to eliminate exists *within* certain communities, these communities must be contained. Without being able to "hold back" or maintain the separation of Black communities (primarily) from white communities, there will be prolonged violence and rioting; Reagan's belief reflects larger White insecurity about white people's displacement from their position within US society.

Consequently, the problems of the Black inner city will invade and spill into areas where there are productive, capitalist, and “traditional” American troops contributing to the right side of the war effort.

Similarly, in the War on Terrorism, Muslim American communities are cast as an internal threat requiring countermobilization in the name of preserving “peace” for Americans. In particular, counterterrorism efforts rely upon the trope of the “violent[, brown] Muslim male terrorist” as justification for why Muslim communities must be monitored, in line with the body politic framework (Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, 876). The body politic is the “regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies...in work, leisure, and sickness” (Scheper-Hughes and Locke 1987, 7). Central to garnering mass support for war efforts is the depiction of the oddly “clear” delineation between the players on either side of a war. In order to identify such a distinct enemy, Muslim Americans are collectively rendered as a homogenous group, in order to reduce cognitive load when casting them as the “other.” Frequently, the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” are used interchangeably (Joseph and D’Harlingue 2008, 236). Yet Arab people are part of one ethnic group originating from the South West Asian and North African (SWANA) region, and Muslims are adherents of Islam who come from many different ethnic groups and regions of the world (Sirin, Choi, and Tugberk 2021, 46). Thus, not every Arab person is Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab (Joseph and D’Harlingue 2008, 236). However, these nuances are buried in order to present an easy, racialized association to latch on to. The stereotypes derive from colonial discourse that contrasts Muslim people as “backwards” and “barbaric” Middle Easterners in relation to “Western, Christian *civilization*” (emphasis added) (Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, 876; Joseph and D’Harlingue 2008, 243). Thus, the word

“terrorism” evokes racialized images of Muslim and/or Arab people who by the very nature of their identity are fundamentally “un-American.” Due to this association, white people are never collectively identified with terrorism despite the terrorism committed by members of their racial group (Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, 876). Consequently, the racialized discourse contributes to the progression of enhanced surveillance against Muslim American communities.

To continue laying the groundwork for post-2000’s surveillance, we turn back to the War on Drugs, when police resources and surveillance capabilities were built up at the expense of social service provision. Through the dismantling of the Posse Comitatus Act, which originally prevented the military from aiding in civilian law enforcement duties, the military could now provide “access to military bases, research, and equipment” to local police departments (Cooper 2015, 1190). War missions rely upon efforts to gather intelligence against and to monitor enemies, requiring sophisticated tools. With police departments now armed with advanced resources, the surveillance of bodies further encroached into everyday life. Key to the logic of punishment is the enhanced surveillance of communities within the spaces in which they live, play, and work. As a result, the criminalization of everyday life began. Due to the belief that high-rise, high-density, and low-income housing in urban areas lead to the concentration of crime, rather than addressing the material conditions that lead to crime, cities decided to install “security cameras in playgrounds, lobbies, and corridors” (Hinton 2016, 298). The “omniscient surveillance” aimed to act “as a powerful deterrent against criminal behavior” (Hinton 2016, 288), but more accurately turned community spaces into warzones. The militarization of the police and intense spotlight on controlling inner city spaces highlight the lengths to which the

state will go to in order to punish the people whose life conditions represent symptoms rather than causes of problems.

As seen during the War on Drugs, the criminalization of everyday life carries over into the War on Terrorism. In an analysis of 113 legal intake forms submitted from 2006-2010 by Muslim Americans residing in the greater Los Angeles area, Alimahomed-Wilson reveals that the most common topics the FBI questioned individuals on were regarding their personal religious beliefs, mosque attendance, travel, and participation in political organizations (2019, 881-2). For example, regular attendance at one's local mosque and being a member of Students for Justice in Palestine would elicit strong FBI scrutiny. However, if these activities were switched to attending a church, traveling to Germany to visit family, and being an NARAL Pro-Choice America member, these characteristics would not garner FBI attention. As such, Alimahomed-Wilson argues that "every day, normal behavior[s] become...suspicious [only] when practiced by US Muslims, which [otherwise] would [be] unremarkable for ordinary white Christians" (2019, 884). The FBI has legitimized that there is a direct correlation between one's religious expression, personal beliefs, and terrorism—but only in the case of Muslim people. Thus, Muslim people are a threat requiring social control and surveillance, as indicated by the body politic framework. Furthermore, rather than addressing social issues of concern for Muslim American communities and bettering their access to resources, the state chooses to punish these communities for supposedly fostering terrorism. The state persists in isolating Muslim American communities from state institutions and ultimately fails to tackle the root causes of issues.

While physical hardware was utilized during the War on Drugs, the increasingly-emboldened police state shifts to utilizing more personal and human (though not

humane) approaches to surveillance during the War on Terrorism. Not only is surveillance focused on visible expressions of “Muslimness” but also on the day-to-day spaces in which Muslim people inhabit. According to a 2006 New York City Police Department (NYPD) report on domestic radicalization, spaces such as “mosques...cafes, cab driver hangouts[,] student associations [and] book stores” are prime “radicalization incubators” (Silber and Bhatt 2007, 22). Clearly, these common spaces are painted as extremist hotspots solely when Muslims congregate in these areas. Based on this reasoning, in their codified surveillance strategy, NYPD utilized techniques such as sending undercover police officers (who demographically matched the community) to analyze community sentiments at hookah bars, having student informants note what other students say at Muslim Student Association meetings on college campuses, and parking outside of mosques to photograph attendees (Shamas and Arastu 2013, 10-12 & 40). Nearly 250 mosques were mapped in some way in the New York City area (Shamas and Arastu 2013, 12). With the aim of foiling future enemy attacks on home soil, these methods parallel reconnaissance efforts taken during wars. In this case, an entire religious group is presumed to be an enemy requiring the use of espionage against. Typically, information is collected about citizens when it is believed that they are in some way involved in a crime. However, the NYPD believes that simple membership in a religious group is evidence of the *intention* to commit a crime. Muslim communities are marked as “ticking time bombs,” where it is only a matter of time before someone becomes radicalized and plans to commit terrorism. No longer is it a question of if, but *when*. Thus, the NYPD’s surveillance strategy presumes criminality based on one’s religious activity without any evidence of *actual* criminality. Most damning though is that none of the intelligence efforts led to a “*single* criminal lead [emphasis added]” (Shamas and

Arastu 2013, 2). Instead, NYPD's surveillance program polarizes and destroys sacred support spaces and community relations.

Consequently, casting Muslim people as subjects deserving of corralling and monitoring marginalizes Muslim communities. Embodiment is the way our bodies serve as the "site of individual experience, social expression, and the inscription of structural relations" (Krieger 2001, 672; López 2021, 12). Part of embodiment is that people embody inequality differentially (López 2021, 12). In the case of Muslim Americans, being the object of mass surveillance takes a toll on the body. In one survey of 350 Arab and Muslim Americans post-9/11, based on self-reported symptoms, 61.9% of participants met the criteria to be diagnosed with clinical depression (Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader 2009, 404). Furthermore, participants who "believed their lives were negatively changed after 9/11...reported significantly higher levels of PTSD" than those who did not (Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader 2009, 407). While there are various factors contributing to the situation, we must recognize the impact of everyday surveillance. In one survey study with 12-18 year olds, the teens and young adults reported that "they were being *surveilled*, talked about, or suspected in public spaces because of their perceived religious background [emphasis added]" (Sirin, Choi, Tugberk 2021, 47). In addition, about 84% of participants "reported experiencing one or more acts of discrimination during the previous 12 months...in a public setting *because they are Muslim*" (emphasis added) (Sirin, Choi, Tugberk 2021, 47). Yet not only are Muslim Americans marginalized from their neighbors and peers but their own religious community as well. Indeed, the surveillance programs transformed "religious spaces, intended to provide a haven for...congregants to forge bonds and support networks, into...a space" where suspicion marks every interaction (Shamas and Arastu 2013, 18), thus

“ruin[ing these] spiritual sanctuar[ies]” (Fadel 2021). A lack of support and hinderance of community relations leads to isolation and disconnection from the broader community, exacerbating health risks and presenting as various health conditions—akin to an “oppression illness” amongst Muslim Americans (Singer 2004, 17).

The roots of the War on Drugs stretch all the way into the War on Terrorism. By employing war imagery and language, entities seek to distinguish between select groups in the war, justify the necessity of mass monitoring, and to punish communities. Yet these actions further hypermarginalize Muslim Americans in the United States, even more so post-9/11. The militarization of the police, the authorization of enhanced surveillance against US residents, and positioning of those resources and gazes against BIPOC bodies are a natural outgrowth of the synergy the logic of punishment, racialized discourse, and “othering” of citizens in order to contain a foreign influence. While here I applied anthropological frameworks strictly to the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism, other domestic surveillance programs that occurred during this time frame (e.g. FBI surveillance of civil rights leaders) and preceded it (e.g. internment of Japanese Americans during WWII) should be analyzed for a more holistic understanding of the evolution of US surveillance against US residents. As evident, the genealogy of these wars begins even earlier in US history. Ultimately, despite the War on Terrorism and War on Drugs having broadly impacted different groups in the United States, the parallels between the wars demonstrate that we are more connected than we seem.