

Dearborn-Detroit Michigan: Ethnography of Faith and the U.S. Domestic and Foreign Policy Axis

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Abstract

The relationship between ethnic and faith communities in the United States and domestic forces relating to a converging and diverging social contract on the one hand, and US foreign, security and military policies in national, regional and global contexts on the other hand, constitutes the key focus of this paper and the ongoing research upon which it is based. Theories related to American ethnicity provide the theoretical framework for the discussion. These include Assimilationism, Ethnic Pluralism and Ethnic Conflict Theory. These theories help explain the prevalent narratives and assumptions concerning Muslims in the US. Ethnic and faith communities and groups have at times played significant and important roles in American national security and foreign policy. The power and influence of some ethnic and faith communities living inside the United States in relation to national security and foreign policies is well documented. These groups are overtly and covertly lobbying for national and foreign policy goals, creating a nexus and axis between domestic and foreign and national security policies. In the 21 century and in the post 9-11 world, the US administration's focus, lobbying and influence in ethnic and faith communities living inside the US in the service of its foreign, military and national security policies has been overlooked. Ethnic and faith communities in this new era and environment are at the center and core of this relationship.

Keywords: Dearborn-Detroit Michigan, domestic-foreign policy axis, ethnography of faith, Shia muslims, weaponization of ethnic groups.

1. Theoretical Framework

Hraba's work on American Ethnicity poses three theories on the subject. Assimilationism argues that ethnic and racial groups over time will eventually assimilate into the larger society creating what is sometimes referred by some as a "Melting pot" thus existing identities will no longer be of relevance or importance (Hraba, 1994). This perspective is helpful in understanding the prevalent narrative that frames being Muslim as a threat. This narrative limits dialogue and critical thinking to one dominant perspective.

Ethnic Pluralism argues that unlike the positions of assimilationists, existing ethnic or racial identities will remain important and influential in the process of change in different societies (Hraba, 1994). Ethnic Pluralism validates ethnicity. This perspective coupled with the "toolkit" concept sheds light on how Muslims can be seen as a tool rather than a threat in the interest of foreign policy (Stevenson, 2013). Multiple and varying ethnic and racial identities inside different cities and communities in the United States serve US foreign policy interests in different regions of the world. This paper highlights the prevailing restricted form which propounds that Muslims be part of a specific foreign policy toolkit in order to be part of the larger society otherwise they are viewed as a threat.

Ethnic Conflict Theory argues that unlike Assimilationism in changing societies varying ethnic and racial groups tend to compete for opportunities, wealth and power. This struggle for resources and power and influence by different ethnic and racial groups can lead to political, financial and even racial and ethnic conflict inside the U.S. Government and society. Given the fact that the US is home to many ethnic and racial groups competing for influence and power and position domestically and internationally the groundworks for contest and conflict is inherently already laid and present (Hraba, 1994). Ethnic

conflict Theory is relevant to this study since the prevailing narrative enveloping Muslims centers around fear and threats inherently leading to contest and conflict.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz spoke before an audience of almost 300 Iraqi Americans in the city of Dearborn Michigan on Feb 23, 2003 (Williams, 2003). Later on May 25, 2003 for the first time he delivered the keynote address at an assembly of Shia Muslims in the US, (UMAA) Universal Muslim Association of America's Second Annual Convention in the Washington D.C. area. The U S plan and policy for the invasion, occupation, nation and state building of Iraq was the main focus of these two sessions (Wolfowitz, 2003).

On Oct 27, 2013 a satirical website, *the National Report* fabricated a story stating that the city of Dearborn Michigan was enacting sharia law. The mayor of Dearborn Jack O'Reilly subsequently issued a denial stating that, "Dearborn has never been, nor will ever will be, under sharia law. We are governed by the U.S. Constitution, the Constitution of the State of Michigan and the City of Dearborn Charter ...the National Report's misguided attempt at humor furthers the goals of some people who have tried to suggest that the city of Dearborn is anti-American because our population includes residents who are Muslims" (*News and Events*, 2015).

The cities of Dearborn, Detroit Michigan and the Shia Muslim and Arab communities living there are a case study in this strategic axis which may be the unique contribution of this study to our understanding of ethnography and faith in US domestic and foreign policy and relations.

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Ethnic Groups: American History and Domestic and Foreign Policy

The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 set the first legal standard for ethnic groups living inside the United States in terms of their social contract with the state and American society and polity on the one hand and U.S. foreign and military policies on the other hand. It was a year marked by preparations for war with France when the United States was overwhelmed by fear and anger. The Federalist controlled Congress passed the Acts and President John Adams signed it into law. These acts consisted of four laws:

- An Act to Establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization (Naturalization Act)
- An Act Concerning Aliens
- An Act Restricting Alien Enemies
- An Act for the Punishment of certain Aliens.

The law increased residency requirements for U.S. citizenship from 5 to 14 years and empowered the President to imprison or deport aliens perceived to be “dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States” and “restricted speech critical of the government” (*Primary Documents in American History*, 2017). The internment camps of Japanese-Americans during WWII are a recent reminder of this wartime nexus between ethnic groups living inside the U.S. and the conduct of foreign and military policies.

In “The Erosion of American National Interests”, Dr. Samuel Huntington (1997) argued that “diaspora populations living in

the United States can be a source of spies” and “influence the actions and policies of [the United States] and coopt its resources and influence to serve the interests of their homeland.” This argument frames ethnic groups in the context of being a threat, promoting fear of the other and directs questions of doubt, concern and mistrust towards ethnic differences.

2. Ethnography of Faith

Ethnography, the study and systematic recording of human cultures explores cultural phenomena among different populations (*Ethnography*, 2017). Ethnography of faith, may involve qualitative research methods which include fieldwork and “deep immersion,” namely living and communicating with a specific ethnic, faith, or cultural groups from the perspective of collecting data based on participation, observation and “hanging out with the people in their own social, cultural, economic and political setting and homes” (Gajaweera, 2015). This research is based on three trips to Dearborn and Detroit, Michigan from 2014 to 2016 as a faculty member from the University of Tehran, Faculty of World Studies to live amongst and interact with the people in their own communities to investigate the religious and ethnographic lives of the Shia community in the post 9/11 environment in the United States.

The research involved:

1. Observation and participation
2. Interviews
3. Library and archival data available in local libraries, museums and research centers.

3. Tool or Threat

The results indicate that two sets of concurrent forces, centrifugal and centripetal, affect the lives of Muslims in general

and Shia Muslims in particular living in the United States. These will be the focus of this paper. One set of forces argue in favor of denationalizing and delegitimizing Muslims including Shias as Americans through a narrative and allegations of lack of patriotism and anti-Americanism. A concurrent force promotes assimilation, to “nationalize and civilize” by creating and promoting a framework for civic Shia and Islam particularly among the youth while simultaneously foreboding “the threat and fear of *Sharia* law and ‘Islamic terrorism’”. These particular narratives revolve around a limited choice between either being a ‘tool’ aligned with US foreign policy, or being perceived as a threat. The dichotomy of either being a US foreign policy tool or being looked upon and treated as a threat has greatly impacted US social, psychological, political, economic, and security domestic affairs with clear implications for national security and foreign policy planning and executions. US Muslims have become objects caught in the midst of foreign policy goals. Focusing on these two contrasting as well as paired forces which have engaged and overwhelmed the lives of Muslims and Shias living in the United States in the post 9-11 world will hopefully increase our knowledge of this changing and critical dynamism.



Displaying a Swiss army knife and the American flag on its cover, in *America's Foreign Policy Toolkit, Key Institutions and Processes*, Charles Stevenson of Johns Hopkins University (2013) has written about the presidency, congress, and the shared toolkit of the two branches of the U.S. administration.

The toolkit was described as including: 1) diplomatic, 2) economic, 3) military, 4) secret intelligence, 5) homeland security and 6) international institutions as instruments. The section titled “External Influence on Uses of the Toolkit” names “Ethnic and identity /affinity” groups. The research states that there are “85 groups or organizations representing 38 ethnicities that conduct lobbying activities” in the United States (Stevenson, 2013). Presidential addresses directed at Muslims during the previous three administrations set the tone for domestic and foreign relations with Muslims.

4. Three Presidents, one Theme: State of Fear and Fear of State

On September 20, 2001, nine days after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C., President Bush spoke before a joint session of Congress in an address closely watched by the American people inside the United States and people and policy makers across the globe. “On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country...,” he 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.... **Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.** From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime” (Transcript of President Bush's Address, 2001). The narrative promoted a stark choice between being an American or with America, and American policies in its “war on terror” globally and domestically, or being labeled as being with the terrorists and their sympathizers in the post 9/11 era especially for residents the United States.

On June 4, 2009, President Obama in Cairo, Egypt gave a speech which was billed as an address to the Islamic world at large and “a new beginning”:

I am also proud to carry with me the goodwill of the American people, he stated, “and a greeting of peace from Muslim communities in my country: assalaamu alaykum. We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate...Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims. 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...I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles– principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings...

I know, too, that Islam has always been a part of America's story. The first nation to recognize my country was Morocco. In signing the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, our second President John Adams wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims." And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars, served in government, stood for civil rights, started businesses, taught at our universities, excelled in our sports arenas, won Nobel Prizes, built our tallest building, and lit the Olympic Torch. And when the first Muslim-American was recently elected to Congress, he took the oath to defend our Constitution using the same Holy Koran that one of our Founding Fathers– Thomas Jefferson– kept in his personal library...

And finally, just as America can never tolerate violence by extremists, we must never alter our principles. 9/11 was an enormous trauma to our country. The fear and anger that it provoked was understandable, but in some cases, it led us to act contrary to our ideals... So America will defend itself respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law. And we will do so in partnership with

Muslim communities which are also threatened. The sooner the extremists are isolated and unwelcome in Muslim communities, the sooner we will all be safer... (Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo, 2009).

This duality in terms of security, politics and narrative of identity have dominated the first and second decades of the 21st century up to now, creating an axis and nexus between the domestic and global environments based on fear and force. This narrative directed towards Muslim communities framed a person's identity in terms of faith, citizenship and civic life in the United States as a choice between **two extremes** in the context of what was described as a "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) during President Bush's era, and later called "Overseas Contingency Operations" and "Network of Violent Extremists" during President Obama. While the narrative and umbrella terms for policies and politics changed, the underlying factors continued and have remained constant.

The outcome of the abovementioned political climate is the "fear of force and force of fear" in everyday lives inside and outside the United States and Europe. A state of fear and terror emanating from terrorist acts, along with the fear of state, culture of surveillance and virtual and physical threats directed at citizens, non-state actors and the public at large have become two sides of the same coin of religious and civic life especially for Muslims. It was against this background that on Feb 3, 2016, President Obama for the first time during his presidency travelled to Baltimore, Maryland and spoke at the Islamic Society of Baltimore where unlike the Cairo speech he focused on Muslims in America and their fears and anxieties. Obama began by speaking about immigrants and the mosque as an "all American story". He thanked Muslims for helping to build the nation by serving their communities in all walks of life as patriotic Americans including in security and armed forces. He also spoke about how Islam has always been part of America,

how the founders sought to protect all faiths and how many Muslims brought from Africa were Muslims.

Now, this brings me to the other reason I wanted to come here today. I know that **in Muslim communities across our country, this is a time of concern and, frankly, a time of some fear.** Like all Americans, you're worried about the threat of terrorism. But on top of that, as Muslim Americans, you also have another concern -- and that is your entire community so often is targeted or blamed for the violent acts of the very few... The Muslim American community remains relatively small --several million people in this country. ... We're one American family. And when any part of our family starts to feel separate or second-class or targeted, it tears at the very fabric of our nation...

But what is also true is, is that there is a battle of hearts and minds that takes place -that is taking place right now, and American Muslims are better positioned than anybody to show that it is possible to be faithful to Islam and to be part of a pluralistic society, and to be on the cutting-edge of science, and to believe in democracy... It's why we will continue to partner with Muslim American communities- not just to help you protect against extremist threats, but to expand health care and education and opportunity- (applause)- because that's the best way to build strong, resilient communities... And here, I want to speak directly to the young people who may be listening. In our lives, we all have many identities. We are sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters. We're classmates; Cub Scout troop members. We're followers of our faith. We're citizens of our country. And today, there are voices in this world, particularly over the Internet, who are constantly claiming that you have to choose between your identities- as a Muslim, for example, or an American. Do not believe them. If you're ever wondering whether you fit in here, let me say it as clearly as I can, as President of the United States: You fit in here, right here. (Applause.) You're right where you belong. You're part of America, too (Applause). You're not Muslim or American. You're Muslim and American (Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo, 2009).

The Washington Post compared and contrasted President Obama's Cairo and Baltimore speeches the next day on Feb 4, 2016 concluding that he had "sought to repair the increasingly frayed relationship between American Muslims and their fellow

citizens... at a time of **growing fear and division** in the country. The President often sounded like a concerned parent, worried for the country he leads. Obama's speech took on the tone of a history or civics lessons at times as he sought to allay the fears of those who do not know Muslims or say that Muslims are less patriotic than other Americans. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that roughly half of the public says that at least some Muslims are anti-American, and about 11 percent said that "almost all" U.S. Muslims are anti-American" (Jaffe, 2016).

A year later on May 21, 2017, President Trump travelled to Saudi Arabia in his first foreign trip where he stated he was making history by opening a Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology – "to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism...."

This is not a battle between different faiths, different sects, or different civilizations. This is a battle between barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life, and decent people of all religions who seek to protect it. This is a battle between Good and Evil... but the nations of the Middle East cannot wait for American power to crush this enemy for them. The nations of the Middle East will have to decide what kind of future they want for themselves, for their countries, and for their children. It is a choice between two futures -- and it is a choice America cannot make for you. A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and extremists. Drive them out.

Drive them out of your places of worship.
Drive them out of your communities.
Drive them out of your holy land, and
Drive them out of this earth (CNN, 2017).

President Trump issued a message on the occasion of the Holy Month of Ramadan on May 26, 2017. "On behalf of the American people," he said, "I would like to wish all Muslims a joyful Ramadan... as you observe the Ramadan traditions of

charity, fasting, and prayer. May God bless you and your families.” President Trump not only did not mention Muslims in The United States but forcefully reiterated his trip to Saudi Arabia and the “Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology” which was to “stand with our partners against terrorism and the ideology that fuels it.” In 2016 he declared, “I think Islam hates us” (Blumberg, 2017). In contrast, President Obama’s 2016 Ramadan Statement emphasized that, “As Muslim Americans celebrate the holy month, I am reminded that we are one American family... I stand firmly with Muslim American communities in rejection of the voices that seek to divide us” (*The White House President Barack Obama*, 2016).

5. Manufacturing Fear

The nexus of domestic politics and foreign, security, and military policy in the post 9/11 world to a large extent has brought about a paradigm shift in the American social contract in the 21st century. Brian Michael Jenkins of the Rand Corporation and West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) argued in *Fifteen Years on, Where are we in the War on Terror?* that America's frightened, angry, and divided society remains the country's biggest vulnerability. The United States is better organized and equipped to combat terrorism, but its citizens remain fearful. The United States' frightened, angry, and divided society remains the country's biggest vulnerability. Progress in degrading Al-Qaida’s capabilities or dismantling the Islamic State is almost completely divorced from popular perceptions. Rather than appeal to traditional American values of courage, self-reliance, and sense of community, our current political system incentivizes the creation of fear (Jenkins, 2016). As Islam and Muslims are framed and defined within the context of US policy goals, fear and threat have become the prevailing narrative. W.E. Dubois argued in 1903 in *the Souls of Black Folks* whether it was possible for blacks to be treated

justly as Americans without hatred and discrimination. This question is now relevant for Muslims living in the United States (Dubois, 2008).

6. Historical Pattern: Muslims: 21st Century Blacks in America?

One theme which has remained dominant and continuous in the language and narrative of the domestic and foreign, security and military policies of the United States' administration and polity regarding Islam and Muslims both citizens and immigrants, is the notion that that the burden of proof of loyalty, patriotism and citizenship is on the Muslims. They are to prove that they are not terrorists or do not support terrorism and "violent extremism "and are not seeking to establish sharia laws in their respective communities." Presumed guilt, continuous unrelenting accusations and anxiety and fear of state on the one hand, paired with the state of fear and anger towards atrocities committed in the name of Islam on the other hand, has fundamentally brought about a paradigm shift in terms of identity politics and the politics of identity in the 21st century. The shift unfolds as the prevailing narrative of what it is to be a Muslim is defined by an energy and security driven industrial complexes and interests.

7. Dearborn-Detroit Michigan

The city is named after Henry Dearborn (1751-1829) a doctor from New Hampshire that joined the American Revolution and served as militia leader and a military commander and general during the War of Independence, a member of the House of Representative (1795-1797), and Secretary of War (1801-1809), as well as a Major General of the U.S. Army during the War of 1812 (Henry Dearborn) (*Henry Dearborn*, n.d.). In the late 19th and early 20th century, immigrants from Lebanon and the Levant settled in the area which has come to be known as the Beirut of North America (Hassoun, 2005). In his Feb, 3, 2016,

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speech at the Islamic Society of Baltimore, President Obama spoke about the contributions of Muslims working in the Ford Motor Company factories. The city of Dearborn Michigan is the home of Ford Motor Company.

After settling down towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Arab and Lebanese merchants and workers at Ford Motor Company began to establish mosques, houses of worship, schools, markets, shops, community centers, morgues, and other institutions of life in a new land. Gradually, Arabs and Muslims from other parts of the world, particularly Shias from Iraq, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf countries, Pakistan and Iran began to settle in the area. These large and diverse ethnic groups in Dearborn and Detroit created the basis for an axis and nexus between the government's military, security and foreign policy, particularly wars, reconstruction and nation-building in the 21st century.

8. Historical Pattern: “Weaponization” of Ethnic Groups

The deployment and employment of ethnic and faith groups residing inside of the United States or being “weaponized” in the service of military, security, and foreign policy goals of the administration has a long and tumultuous history. The U.S. Administration adopted a policy in 1942 and entered into a bilateral agreement with the government of Mexico to allow Mexican migrant workers to enter the United States “because of the absolute need as a war measure” as the U.S. secretary of state put it. This was to free U.S. citizens to participate in WWII. From 1961 till 1980 the U.S. policy of welcoming “Cuban immigrants” to “weaponize” them in order to overthrow Fidel Castro's government is well documented. During the 1980's Nicaraguan exiles in Central America were “weaponized” against the Sandanistas as “Nicaraguan Resistance” or “Contras” (Dominguez, 2006).

The impact and influence of this “weaponization” amongst Muslim and Shia residents of the United States in general and Dearborn-Detroit area in particular has been extensive and ongoing. Thus it was not surprising when in Feb 23, 2003 in the city of Dearborn, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz spoke to an audience of nearly 300 members of the Iraqi-American community. He stated: “Since the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, the policy of the U.S. government is that Saddam Hussein and his regime must go.” He spoke of the critical decisions that lie ahead regarding the future of Iraq and addressed Americans with roots in Iraq and more recent immigrants who were not yet citizens: “You have a stake in Iraq's future.” Wolfowitz asserted that when Hussein is gone, there will be “an urgent need for your talents. For those of you who would like to work with the Department of Defense in the reconstruction of Iraq and in assisting Iraqis in the building of free institutions, there are a number of ways you can help.” Wolfowitz stated Iraqi Americans could be hired as temporary civilian employees or independent contractors for the U.S. government (Williams, 2003).

“We're also making arrangements for Iraqi Americans and others to be employed by contractors to serve in areas such as translating and other specialized functions,” he noted.

He invited some in the audience to become members of the U.S. military by joining the reserves. “This will take advantage of your professional skills in a wide variety of areas, while also capitalizing on your understanding of local languages and culture,” Wolfowitz said.

In addition to accelerating their U.S. citizenship, he said, military service would protect their civilian jobs while they're mobilized and they would have the same rights, privileges and benefits as any American serving in the military (Williams, 2003).

Wolfowitz added that, they could join the Free Iraqi Force—the Iraqi opposition groups. “We’ve launched a program to train free Iraqis to support military operations inside Iraq,” he noted. “If war becomes necessary, the Free Iraqi Force will be integrated with U.S. forces to serve as guides, translators and experts on civil affairs. After a conflict, the skills and local knowledge of those forces will help to rebuild Iraq.” Wolfowitz announced that training had begun at a military base in Hungary, and the force was open to Iraqis around the world. “You can help improve public understanding by telling your story in Iraq, in America and around the world,” in addition Wolfowitz emphasized, “you can help the American people understand what the stakes are here” (Williams, 2003).

9. Conclusion

Historically, ethnic communities have played significant roles in meeting US foreign policy goals. Shia Muslims are a small but growing minority of the US population, however they have been thrust into the center of contemporary 21st century foreign and domestic politics as objects caught in the midst of foreign policy goals. Two seemingly diametrically opposed forces impacting Muslims simultaneously, have engaged and overwhelmed the lives of Muslims and Shias living in the United States in the post 9-11 era. A centrifugal force draws them away from their place as citizens by delegitimizing Muslims as Americans and another centripetal draws them in to meet US Foreign policy goals along with presumed guilt unless they meet expectations as part of the foreign policy “toolkit.” These forces and narratives both revolve around fear as a central theme and a limited choice between either being a “tool” aligned with US foreign policy, or being perceived as a threat. Both stark choices involve fear as part of the narrative. Further research is needed to study the

impact of these policies on the US population at large and on Muslims and Muslim communities in particular and how these populations are affected.

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