

Muslims Face Increasing Discrimination, State Surveillance Under Trump

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US President Donald Trump received another setback last week when the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, located in Richmond, Virginia, ruled against the latest version of his Muslim ban. In its ruling, the court stated that the ban is “unconstitutionally tainted with animus towards Islam” and that its central purpose is “to exclude Muslims from the United States.” Despite the ruling, “Muslim Ban 3.0” will remain in effect while the Supreme Court considers the case.

The decision by the Fourth Circuit has been cautiously welcomed by Muslims, many of whom have endured prolonged separation from their loved ones as a result of the ban. The Muslim ban has always been a reactionary gimmick aimed at shoring up the most backward elements of Trump’s political base and whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria in the country. It was clearly designed to reinforce the bogus notion that Muslim-Americans and Muslim immigrants constitute a unique threat to “national security.”

The consistent, calculated attempt by Trump and his supporters to portray ordinary Muslims as potential security threats has had a devastating impact on Muslim-Americans, contributing to an increase in hate crimes against Muslims and fostering a general climate of fear and uncertainty within the community. There are also indications that the government is planning a further crackdown on the democratic rights of Muslims, with increased surveillance of Muslim communities in the works. Indeed, reports from around the country this month demonstrate how the US is increasingly becoming hostile territory for Muslims.

Earlier this month, the non-profit organization, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) released a report that showed a dramatic rise in incidents of harassment and violence against South Asians and Arabs. SAALT documented 302 of these incidents between November 2016 and November 2017, representing a 45 increase in the number of incidents recorded in the year leading up to the 2016 elections. Non-Muslim South Asians, including Hindus and Sikhs, are also targeted by racists in increasing numbers, demonstrating that sometimes a dark-skinned appearance is enough to invite insults and attacks from the bigots. According to the SAALT report, 20 percent of the perpetrators of the incidents of harassment and violence it recorded directly referenced Trump or one of his policies, indicating a strong link between Trump’s anti-Muslim vitriol and the uptick in attacks on Muslims and South Asians. The SAALT report reinforced the findings of the FBI’s latest Uniform Crime Report, which was found a 20 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims in 2016.

In addition to the rising incidents of harassment and violence against Muslims, there are signs that the federal government intends to ratchet up spying against the Muslim

community. Two weeks ago, *Foreign Policy* magazine obtained a draft report, produced by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) at the request of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in which the CBP recommends subjecting Sunni Muslim immigrants, including permanent residents, to long-term surveillance. In its report, the CBP declared that a broad range of Sunni Muslims are potentially “vulnerable to terrorist narratives,” based on so-called “risk indicators” such as being young, male and having origins in the “Middle East, South Asia and Africa.” Last October, it was also revealed that the DHS plans to collect social media information from all immigrants to the US, including permanent residents and naturalized citizens. The draconian measure would have a powerful and destructive chilling effect on Muslims throughout the US, forcing them to think twice before openly expressing their political views.

While the latest news from the DHS is ominous indeed, it should be pointed out that the assault on the democratic rights of Muslims began long before Trump came to power. This was underscored earlier this month when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) revealed that, in 2016, the Boston Police Department (BPD) used social media monitoring software to spy on the private conversations of Muslims. The BPD had a list of “trigger words” such as “ummah” (community) and “Muslim Lives Matter,” that activated the software. The BPD’s spying program was eventually discontinued, with no evidence that it prevented any crimes.

One might expect that the police, busy as they are hounding the working class and racial minorities, would have little time to engage in such activities. However, the BPD’s spying program is nothing new. In fact, it pales in comparison to the massive spying operation carried out by the New York Police Department (NYPD) in collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in the years following 9/11. In 2010, the Associated Press uncovered the existence of the NYPD-CIA spying program, which included the monitoring of Muslim students groups across 16 college campuses across the Northeast in 2006-2007. The Associated Press had also discovered that, for several years, the NYPD had been spying on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses, even sending informants to monitor sermons. Ordinary Muslims going about their daily lives had their license plate numbers recorded and faces photographed.

The use of paid informants by US authorities is particularly sinister. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is believed to have more than 15,000 informants on its payroll. It is known to recruit Muslims of dubious character for the purpose of manufacturing “terror plots” to ensnare vulnerable Muslims. The informants are trained to seek out young, impressionable, often unemployed and isolated Muslims known to have expressed “radical views.” After gaining their trust, including through favors such as providing money, the informants then bend over backwards to convince their targets to carry out an attack. In his 2013 book, *The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI’s Manufactured War on Terrorism*, investigative journalist Trevor Aaronson showed that only 1 percent of the more than 500 defendants charged with federal terrorism offenses in the decade following 9/11 were actually involved in terrorist activities. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the “terror plots” were entirely cooked up by the informants. One of the more infamous examples of this FBI tactic was the case of the Newburgh 4, which involved the entrapment of 4 deeply impoverished African-American from Newburgh, NY on bogus terrorism charges after an FBI informant gained their trust by providing both financial and emotional support to the vulnerable men.

The FBI is continuing to use informants, as demonstrated by the ongoing case of Samy

Hamzeh, a Muslim man from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Hamzeh, who believed that the Masons were involved in a plot to discredit Islam by supporting ISIS, was arrested in 2016 after he purchased two machine guns from a paid FBI informant who had previously been a trusted friend, allegedly for the purpose of attacking a Masonic center. According to his lawyers, Hamzeh is a “Palestinian Walter Mitty” who was manipulated and exploited by self-serving informants.

The use of paid informants by the FBI is revelatory in that it shows the determination of US authorities to exaggerate the threat posed by Islamic terrorism. If Muslim terrorists can't be found, they must be created. If one takes an objective look at the studies done on the attitudes and values of Muslim-Americans, it's difficult to conclude that they pose a danger to their non-Muslim neighbors. Muslim-Americans tend to reject the more retrograde aspects of Islam, preferring to conform to 21st century norms and values. For example, last year, the results of a survey by the Pew Research Center showed that, in contrast to white evangelical Christians, the majority of Muslim-Americans believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society. Another Pew survey showed that the majority of Muslims in the US support the right to an abortion in most cases. Interestingly, the Pew survey conducted last year found that 24 percent of Muslims raised in the US have left the religion altogether, no longer identifying as Muslim. Indeed, the only people talking about Sharia law in this country are the Muslim-obsessed bigots of the far-right, whose forces are known to engage in terrorist activities at much greater rates than Muslim-Americans and Muslim immigrants.

The increasing marginalization of Muslims in the US has been part of a continuous process, underway since 9/11. The process started under George W. Bush, was escalated by Barack Obama, and has intensified significantly under Trump's, whose open flirtation with fascism is bringing about a qualitative change in the lived experience of Muslim-Americans. The whipping up of anti-Muslim sentiment by the American ruling class has definite political aims. These include dividing the working class along racial and religious lines, building domestic support for US imperialism's wars and interventions in Muslim-majority countries, and cracking down on the democratic rights of all Americans in the name of “national security.” The tactics used against Muslims are also beginning to be utilized against non-Muslims, particularly against political activists. For example, the spying software used by the Boston Police Department against Muslims in 2016, was also used against Black Lives Matter protestors in 2014, and even against Boston high school students opposing austerity measures.

These are the methods of a ruling elite with nothing to offer working people other than growing inequality, poverty and endless war.

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