

DONNA AUSTON

Project Advisor, Brooklyn Historical Society, Muslims in Brooklyn

◆ In mid-December 2014, tens of thousands of protestors converged on the streets of Manhattan, emanating from a massive meetup at Washington Square Park to protest the ongoing epidemic of police killings of African Americans — a problem with a long history that had once again been placed on the national radar. That August, an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, had been killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri. The tragedy had sparked more than two months of daily protests in the St. Louis suburb. In the immediate aftermath, St. Louis residents took to the streets to express their outrage and grief (in addition to the shooting itself, Brown's body was left on the street in the August heat for more than four hours after he was gunned down). The police response was harsh and swift — tear gas, rubber bullets, and tanks were deployed against civilians in an American residential neighborhood. As news of the killing and subsequent police reaction to the demonstrations spread, largely via social media, protests began to take place in other cities across the country, including New York City, where the July killing of another African American civilian, Eric Garner, by NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo had generated its own share of public outrage after the fatal encounter was captured on video and widely circulated on the internet.

The killings of Brown and Garner brought a renewed vigor to national debates on race and law enforcement, including a range of practices — shootings, beatings, and other forms of state violence, racial profiling, and invasive surveillance and detention practices directed toward Black people and other minoritized communities. A noteworthy, if chilling, fact about the Ferguson protests and the police response that has largely remained unmentioned in discussions about the subject: The military-grade equipment used by the local police against protesters was acquired through a special federal government program that distributed military gear from the U.S. armed forces to local law enforcement agencies.

One group of protestors among the many thousands gathered in Manhattan that day in December carried a banner with a bright-red stop sign printed in the center, along with two demands written in all-capital letters: “(Stop) Stop & Frisk” & “(Stop) Warrantless Muslim Surveillance.” The banner was held by three women wearing hijabs, or headscarves, who were flanked by a contingent of marchers whose clothing and signage identified them as Muslims — primarily African American and Latinx believers who took to the streets that day to voice their concerns about the various ways their own communities are vulnerable in relationship to law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels.

The banner referenced two contentious policing policies that represented national trends that had been shaping government engagement with American Muslims, and Black and Latinx communities for decades. Stop and frisk, a

controversial policy based on a 1968 United States Supreme Court ruling (*Terry v. Ohio*), allows for police to briefly detain individuals based on “reasonable suspicion” of criminal activity — a criterion that allows for a lower legal standard than the more commonly presumed probable cause required for the securing of arrest warrants as a measure to safeguard protections against “unreasonable searches and seizures” granted by the Fourth Amendment. Stop and frisk has come under fire from activists, legal advocates, and members of the broader community as a mechanism that enables legalized racial profiling. Data continues to confirm that Black and Latinx communities are disproportionately affected by the practice.

The second item, warrantless Muslim surveillance, made reference to the New York City Police Department’s infamous Demographics Unit. According to the limited available public information, the unit was created by the Department immediately after the September 11 2001, terrorist attacks for the purpose of gathering covert, widespread intelligence on Muslim communities in and beyond the New York City metropolitan area. Under this initiative, mosques, Muslim-run schools, restaurants, businesses, Muslim student associations, and other Islamic institutions in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania were subject to police surveillance under the imperatives of counterterrorism and national security. The program was carried out in secret until exposed by journalists in 2012. It was officially dismantled in 2014, but according to a New York Times report published in April of that year, concerns remain that the data collected continues to create risks for Muslim communities. Coalitions of civil rights and legal advocacy groups filed suits against the NYPD in New Jersey, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, resulting in settlements that required changes to department policy to prevent similar events from occurring again.

Both stop and frisk and warrantless Muslim surveillance provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of Muslims in the U.S. during the so-called war on terror. Inflammatory rhetoric used by the media and politicians that associates Muslims with terrorism, and deep-rooted fears among non-Muslims, have not only led to a steady increase in the number of reported hate crimes against Muslims across the country but also have resulted in government and law enforcement policies that systematically profile American Muslims. This trend did not begin with the September 11 attacks, but the tragic events of that day have provided justification and served as a catalyst in the escalation of this state of affairs.

The widespread surveillance, profiling, and detention, much of which occurs extrajudicially— i.e., outside the normal boundaries of constitutional protections that regulate due process for individuals accused of crimes — has not resulted in significant prevention of violent terrorist acts, and is eerily evocative of similarly dark periods in American history, such as the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. An entire demographic has been targeted and proactively

criminalized on the basis of faith identity, and regarded as suspicious on the basis of everyday behaviors such as where or how often they attend prayer or otherwise participate in activities at their chosen house of worship, whether they are active in Muslim-associated religious or cultural groups on their college campuses, or whether they patronize businesses owned by other members of their faith community.

There has been remarkable consistency in the enactment of such policies across political parties and presidential administrations. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has enacted legislation and programs that have not only targeted American Muslims but also have had direct repercussions and impacts on Americans of all backgrounds, such as the use of military tanks on suburban streets in the American Midwest. In 2002, the Bush administration enacted the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), a program that required male, non-U.S. citizens over the age of 16 entering or residing in the U.S. from Muslim-majority countries that included Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, Morocco, Indonesia, and Pakistan to undergo a registration process with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that included photographing, fingerprinting, and an interview. NSEERS was partially suspended by the Obama administration in 2011, with the complete removal of the program's framework and its data terminated in 2016. No known terrorist convictions have resulted from the program.

In late October 2001, the Patriot Act was passed by Congress and signed into law — a piece of legislation that considerably weakened many of the protections contained in the Bill of Rights by allowing, among other things, searches of business records and the practice of indefinite detentions and lowering the legal barriers that prevent law enforcement from engaging in widespread wiretapping and other “routine” eavesdropping activities against civilians. During Obama’s tenure, this trend continued under programs such as the Countering Violent Extremism Grant Program, an initiative of the Department of Homeland Security promoted as a joint government–civil society effort that provided funding for civic and nonprofit groups to “prevent radicalization.” Although a laudable goal on the surface, it is one that, as journalists, civil liberties groups, and community advocates have noted, singles out Muslim Americans as likely prospects for increased radicalization, thereby continuing the cycle of profiling, surveillance, and criminalizing of an entire faith community, with lasting repercussions for all Americans.

During the contentious 2016 presidential campaign, Islam and Muslims were at the center, with anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric from many of the candidates that painted Muslims as a particular security risk and contributed to an increase in harassment and hate crimes that continues to affect Muslim Americans. The most memorable example, perhaps, is Donald Trump’s campaign promise to enact a Muslim ban — a measure that would effectively prohibit immigration to the United States by Muslims from specific countries. After Trump was elected president, he moved to make good on this promise.

In January 2017, Trump signed an executive order that effectively prohibited immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The measure was successfully challenged by civil liberties groups on the grounds that it discriminated on the basis of religion, but it was later allowed to stand with certain modifications, most notably the addition of North Korea, Venezuela, and Chad, and the removal of Iraq and Sudan from the list.

The reconfigured “travel ban,” as it is sometimes referred to in public discussion, is one example of the ways that anti-Muslim racism and discrimination have continued to be endorsed as official government policy. Three years later, the Trump administration announced it would be adding six more nations to the restricted list, including Nigeria, Tanzania, Sudan, and Eritrea, all countries with significant or majority-Muslim populations. This policy highlights one of the ways that anti-Black racism frequently overlaps with Islamophobia to justify profiling practices that negatively affect Muslims in the U.S. and around the world. While issues of domestic law enforcement and national security are often understood to be separate concerns, in practice they often converge with compounded negative effects on minoritized communities, regardless of religious affiliation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Donna Auston is an anthropologist, writer, and public intellectual whose body of work focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, protest and social movements, media representation, and Islam in America. When these essays were written in 2019, she was completing her dissertation, an ethnography of Black Muslim activism and spiritual protest in the Black Lives Matter era, at Rutgers University.