

Muslim American Dissent and U.S. Politics Before and After 9/11

Edward E. Curtis IV

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Thank you very much, Marie. It is a real pleasure to be here and to see so many friends and even some family members here in the audience today, including my father, from whom I get that long name, Edward E. Curtis IV. So, the third is right there in the flesh. Also, I'm really honored that my teacher and friend Ahmet Karamustafa is here today, and it's a pleasure to be with all of you. I also want to thank Debra Kennard for helping to arrange such a wonderful visit. I've had a wonderful day at Washington University and will be here tomorrow, and Debra's efforts made all of that possible.

No doubt you have heard this statement one place or another: "Everything changed after 9/11." In fact, it's become a political mantra in our national life. It is invoked to explain everything from war-making in foreign lands to the development of large departments like the Department of Homeland Security to the expansion of federal surveillance powers, both at home and abroad. Another of its uses in the past decade has been to draw special attention to the presence of Muslims in the United States. Scholars, analysts and policymakers have emphasized the unique nature of the threat posed either by or to Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era. On the one hand, the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, supported by many mainstream conservative and liberal politicians, have identified the radicalization of Muslim Americans as one of the greatest security threats faced by the U.S. nation-state today. On the other hand, civil libertarians, immigration activists, and progressives have decried the violations of Muslim civil rights in the course of prosecuting the War on Terrorism. Both of these rhetorical strategies mean to draw special attention to the post-9/11 Muslim American in order to attract media coverage, research funding, political allies, government appropriations, and so on. But both rhetorics are also a form of forgetting. A severing of Muslim Americans from their deep roots in U.S. history. Framing post-9/11 Muslim American life as an incomparable moment – "everything changed after 9/11" – framing it in that way impoverishes our national conversations, depriving us of the benefit of historical narrative, which offers a space of conversation where we might seek new ways of thinking about our present.

Now, I've been working, as Marie Griffith told you, over the past several years to recover the voices and activities of Muslim Americans from the colonial era until today. And much of my work has been geared toward both scholars and general readers alike. Like today's talk, my recent work seeks to engage people inside and outside the academy, the ivory tower, in discussions about the meaning of Muslim American history for contemporary times. Today, I

will focus on one key theme in Muslim American history: the belief that Muslim American dissent is a threat to national security. This is not a new post-9/11 theme. There are important similarities between pre-9/11 and post-9/11 state repression of Muslim Americans. For much of the 20th century, however, it was not Muslim immigrants but rather indigenous African American Muslims who were, from the point of view of federal authorities, the public and potentially dangerous face of American Islam. Now, I will outline two historical phases in which such suspicions of Muslim Americans arose and developed. The first phase is from the 1920s to World War II. The other phase is from after the War, after World War II, until the 1960s. I will then explain how, toward the end of the 20th century, the fear of Black African American Muslims was replaced with worries about mostly brown Muslim immigrants who had Asian American roots.

The parallels between earlier and later periods of state repression, of the state repression of Muslim Americans, are striking. We seem to be living in a new age of consensus, in which, like the late 1940s and the 1950s, a vital center has identified Islamic radicalism, or what is sometimes more politely called violent extremism, as an existential problem. I will conclude the presentation by arguing that, in combatting Islamic extremism at home, the state seems to have framed a large part of Muslim American political activity as a dangerous expression of extremism, just as it did in reaction to the growth of Islam among African Americans in the 20th century. By way of prologue, however, before we get too depressed, let me mention that it hasn't always been this way. One mistake that participants in the national discourse on Muslim Americans sometimes make is to assume that prejudice toward Muslims is unchanging, static. Now, to be sure, fears of Muslim beasts and monsters in North America are as old as the Puritans and other Europeans who brought such fantasies with them from the Old Country, and certain common features of Islamophobia, ideas about Islam and Muslims as violent, misogynistic and backward have remained potent throughout U.S. history. But our national discourse on Islam has been far richer than this.

In the pre-Civil War period, for example, the administration of President John Quincy Adams identified enslaved Muslim Americans, such as Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, as foreigners who were friendly to U.S. interests. His Secretary of State Henry Clay mistook these West Africans for Moors, or North Africans, and he argues that, by freeing and repatriating them to Morocco and other parts of North Africa, the young nation might be able to improve relations with the Barbary states against whom the United States fought their first foreign war. With Clay's approval, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima was feted up and down the East Coast by some of the US's most important citizens: people like David Walker, the author of *The Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*; the Tappan brothers, the great philanthropists; Francis Scott Key, who wrote the star-spangled banner; and Edward Everett, the man whose long speech was soon forgotten after Abraham Lincoln got up to give the Gettysburg Address.

So what happened? How did domestic Muslims go from being friendly foreigners to dangerous dissenters? At what point did domestic Muslims become a major threat to the American nation-

state? The origins of state Islamophobia for domestic Muslims emerged in the post-World War One period, when immigration laws such as the 1924 National Origins Act and the suppression of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association acted out the state's fear of physical and ideological pollution. This is the first of the two historical phases that I'm going to describe today. It lasted roughly from the 1920s through World War Two. State suspicion and repression of African American Muslims was initially fueled by the fear that immigrants of color were bringing political diseases like Bolshevism and Anti-Colonialism with them to the United States, and that this disease would spread among Black people. There was a lot at stake. Enormous federal, state, and local resources were committed to the perpetuation of Jim Crow segregation. As a result of all of these trends, terrifying predictions of America's people of color uniting with colonized people abroad put the growth of Islam among African Americans at the front of the federal government's surveillance and suppression agenda. To understand the scope of the threat, it is important to remember that, in the inter-war period between World War One and World War Two, Muslim American history was not as racially divided as it would become in the latter part of the 20th century. All Muslim Americans, with the exception of the very few Muslims who were white Americans, were racially oppressed in this period. Asian Americans, like Black Americans, did not succeed in fighting the legal discrimination against them until after World War Two. Before 1945, they were treated by the executive and judicial branches of the federal government as non-whites. They were defined in effect as non-whites by the National Origins Act, and, in at least one dramatic case, were subject to lynching.

The period between World War One and World War Two was one in which there was an alignment of interests among some Muslim Americans who viewed one another as fellow travelers in the fight against Jim Crow segregation and colonialism. This alignment of interests can be seen, for example, in the work of Muhammad Sadiq the first North American missionary of the Ahmadiyya movement. Now, doctrinal disagreements would later restrict the interaction of Ahmadi followers, or followers of Muhammad Sadiq, with other Muslim Americans, but in the early 1920s, those doctrinal or denominational squabbles did not yet exist in Muslim America. In 1922, Sadiq created a permanent mission along Wabash Ave. on Chicago South Side, pictured here. He also started the Muslim Sunrise, a newspaper that documents the emergence of the first Muslim American denominational body that was national in scope. This accomplishment was the result of Sadiq's strategy to target African Americans for conversion. Sadiq brought together teachings about the Qur'an and the Sunnah, or the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad, with post-World War One agitation by people of color for freedom. On the one hand, he emphasized the ecumenical appeal of Islam as a religion of social equality. Islam is for all. On the other hand, Sadiq argued that Arabic and Islam were part of an explicitly African past that had been taken from Blacks when they were enslaved. He endorsed the activities of Marcus Garvey and sought converts from Garvey's UNIA, and in this era, when the Ku Klux Klan rose to political prominence based on a combination of populism, white supremacy, and Protestant Christianity, Ahmad's appeal was a powerful message that convinced over 1,025 African Americans to convert to Islam from the years of 1921-1925. And here are four of them.

One of the common misconceptions about Islam and Black America is that it started and remains a movement that is primarily attractive to men. The photographic evidence from Muslim American and other periodicals, in addition to the rolls of converts and their female names, indicate something much different: that the appeal of Islam was to both men and women. This is a particularly telling picture for another reason, too: we see African American women combining the African American vernacular and religious traditions, the kinds of pacts that you might see on Sunday morning just a few blocks from here in predominantly or historically African American churches, with Asian veils of one kind or another.

Now, Sadiq was only one of several foreign-born Muslim missionaries and political activists who sought African American religious converts or political allies in the 1920s. There were others, including Dusé Mohamed Ali (he was the founder of the *African Times and Orient Review*) and Satti Majid. Satti Majid established Muslim organizations or led groups of both foreign and African American Muslims in New York, Detroit and Pittsburgh, and you see here the Arabic one – this shows the utility of foreign archives to understand religion and politics in the United States. If it were not for Satti Majid archive in Khartoum, Sudan, we would not know about this period of American religious history. So here we have the Kaireen brothers, and pictured in front of them is the great religious guide, alshaykh Satti Majid, shaykh Satti Majid, shaykh al Islam fi ‘amirka (the sheikh of Islam in America), and this is taken in a certain region of Cairo called Maamad. So, this is Satti Majid, and then finally, we have Noble Drew Ali, or Timothy Drew. He was a Muslim missionary, but he was American-born, born in North Carolina, taking on the name Noble Drew Ali after he became a Muslim and created the Moor Science Temple in the 1920s in Chicago.

The formation of American Islam as a simultaneous religious and political response to colonialism and racism only accelerated in the 1930s, and I’m throwing a lot of names and pictures at you mostly to get across the point of how widespread and yet little-known today was the formation of various Muslim communities among African Americans in the interwar period and why its widespread nature – why it makes sense that its widespread nature would then lead to a response from the federal government was very scared about the growth of Islam among black Americans. In 1930, W.D. Fard Muhammad, a person of color whose background remains contested, founded the Nation of Islam, an organization influenced by the Moor Science Temple. A year later, 1931, Mohammad Isuldeen, who’s not pictured, the former James Lomax Bay, went to Cairo, Egypt, and studied Islam under the auspices of the Young Men Muslims Association, like the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) for Egyptians. Isuldeen came back to the U.S. in 1938 and established the Edain ul Allahim Universal Arabic Association -- the “religion of our God” universal Arabic association, which is an African American Sunni Muslim organization along the east coast. Then in 1937 Wali Akram, depicted here, formerly a leader of the Ahmadiyyah movement who was converted by St. Louis sheikh Ahmad Din in the 1920s, created a Sunni mosque in Cleveland. By 1939, Daoud Ahmed Faisal, who had connections to Muslims from the middle east and to African American converts had rented a brownstone in

Brooklyn for his international, interethnic Sunni mission on state street. Then in 1943, all of these Sunni organizations convened at the all-Muslim and Arab convention in Philadelphia to form the united Islamic society of America.

The FBI viewed the transnational ties and diasporic consciousness of black Muslim Americans as truly dangerous especially as thousands of African Americans, Muslim or not, put their hopes in the messianic prophecy that the empire of Japan would liberate them from the cage of American racism through a direct military invasion of the west coast. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, black Muslims, black Jews, advocates of black immigration to Africa, and pan-Asian solidarity declared their public support for Japan, a fellow “colored” nation. A Japanese national, Major Satokata Takahashi, formed a “development of our own” group to galvanize such feelings in Detroit, Chicago, and here in St. Louis. Several African American leaders appropriated Takahashi’s ideas: for example, Mittie Maud Lena Gordon, a former member of the Garvey Movement, created the peace movement of Ethiopia in 1932. The PME called for the return of Black Americans to Africa while also advocating for the war objectives of Japan. As the dream of a Japanese invasion spread in the early 1940s, the U.S. government arrested African American leaders suspected of stoking such feelings. Among the 25 leaders charged with sedition was Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. Here, female members of the nation of Islam, followers of Elijah Muhammad, wait outside of the federal courtroom in 1942 while the government is requesting a continuance in their sedition case. They wouldn’t win that sedition case, but they did convict Elijah Muhammad of draft evasion, for which he served a prison sentence in Milan, Michigan. The prosecution of pro-Japanese Muslim American leaders such as Elijah Muhammad represented what I think is the height of the first phase of the larger story of federal repression of Muslim Americans in the 1900s.

Now, the period after World War II was somewhat different, and for me, it constitutes a second phase of the state repression of African American Islam, one that culminated in the extensive counterintelligence operations against the Nation of Islam and other Muslim groups in the late 1960s. As in the first phases of state repression of African American Islam, the FBI and other agencies feared that Black Muslims would become allies of Africans and Asians in the struggle against U.S. interests in the Cold War. Also like the first phase, there was a concern that African American Muslims would lead domestic resistance to Jim Crow. So, what was different about the second phase?

For one, African American Islam became what was likely the greatest source of resistance, or at least symbol of resistance more generally, to U.S. foreign policy in the developing world, especially in Vietnam. Before World War II, the Nation of Islam, for example, was just one of many African American institutions to oppose what they considered to be European colonialism, but now, in the post World War II period, it became the premier expression of such protest. Second, the Nation of Islam emerged, at least for a period, as a preeminent challenge to the liberal promise of the Civil Rights Moment. That’s why Martin Luther King, Jr., singled out the Nation of Islam for treatment in his 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” During the second

phase of state repression, there was another difference. Federal agencies experimented with new approaches to neutralizing the power of African American Islam. One of the government strategies, for example, was the denial of First-Amendment protections to Muslim prisoners. The Justice Department argued that, since the Nation of Islam was not an authentic religious movement but rather a “cult” that operated as a political organization, its followers in prison did not have the right to meet and conduct religious services. By redefining Islam and its leader as a cult and a cult leader respectively, the government could avoid the messiness of legal protection for religious expression.

Now, making out the NOI to be a cult turned out to be rather difficult in federal courtrooms, for the government. But they did win in the court of public opinion. Another key aspect of the FBI’s campaign against the NOI was its commissioning and selective public release of sociological scholarship that depicted Black Muslims as ethnically confused. In the early 1960s, the Bureau commissioned a full-length monograph on the NOI, copies of which can be found today in declassified FBI file on the movement. Among the many arguments that the unnamed scholar of the movement made was that African American identification with Islam represented a pathologically dysfunctional association of Black Americans with a foreign culture. Mainstream media echoed these claims, framing Black Muslims as persons who had adopted a false sense of ethnic identity. The Black Muslim appropriation of Asia and Allah did not jive with most Black and White Americans’ racial and religious assumptions. When Black Americans depicted themselves as oriental divines or Muslims, Jews, Hindus, spirit mediums, they were seen as having betrayed their real Black heritage. They were deluded fakes. The real Muslims of America, according to most, were the immigrant Muslims. In the 1950s, a large percentage of immigrant Muslims was Syrian Lebanese. And like their Christian compatriots, folks like the family of the current mayor of the city of St. Louis, they became regarded as white ethnics. Their immigrant Islam, in contrast with African American Islam, was viewed as a healthy expression of American ethnic identity. Why? Because, as sociologist Will Herbert argued, it was fine for foreign religious to retain their religious practice as part of their ethnic identity so long as they assimilated to other American values. In fact, it was laudable for them to do so because they were able to retain their religious traditions, and they showed just how free the United States was during the Cold War. You could practice whatever religion you want. But the flip side of that argument was that those indigenous Americans who chose freely to associate with a foreign religion, a religion that was not perceived to be part of their *a priori* culture, they were denying their true roots as Americans.

Now, despite this disinformation and the negative media coverage of the NOI as an embodiment of false ethnicity, the organization achieved success as perhaps the most prominent Black Nationalist organization of the late 50s and early 60s. In addition to opposing the Civil Rights Movement, the NOI created what historian Penny Von Eschen called “a space – for the most part unthinkable in the Cold War era – for an anti-American critique of the Cold War.” Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X lauded the rise of independent Muslim-majority nations, and sought

to become allies of third-world Muslim leaders, especially Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt, who had successfully faced down the invasion of British, French and Israelis during the Suez Crisis of 1956. After Malcolm X separated from the Nation, he became even more politically radical. Perhaps the most prominent American advocate of pan-Africanism, Malcolm wondered aloud whether he should recruit a group of freedom fighters to oppose the overthrow of Congolese leaders Patrice Lumumba. But there was no more effective symbol of domestic and international political resistance to U.S. power than Muhammad Ali. Ali, a hero to many people of color and leftists around the world, was seen as a fifth column – the enemy inside the walls – by the U.S. government, which sought to blunt his rising popularity by convicting him in 1967 of draft evasion. It was by then a familiar way of dealing with troublesome black resistance.

In the second half of the 1960s, in the height of U.S. troop commitment in Vietnam and the rise of young Black Power organizations such as the Black Panthers, the federal government also adopted even more aggressive techniques to deal with the Nation of Islam. Its weapon of choice was the counterintelligence program better known as COINTELPRO. Though the FBI has long run surveillance on the nation, COINTELPRO represented an escalation of government interference. This was the pinnacle of the second phase of state repression of African American Islam. It was also the high-water mark of pre-9/11 fears about the Muslim threat to the American nation-state.

Counterintelligence operations included the placement of agents inside an organization, often within its leadership structure, the spreading of dissention and the planting of false information. Cutting its teeth first on the new left, white hate groups and the Communist party in the early 1960s, COINTELPRO expanded its operations in 1967 to “Black Nationalist” groups. This category of COINTELPRO included 360 separate operations, becoming the second-largest area of all domestic counterintelligence operations. The Nation of Islam was perhaps the most popular target of all the Black Nationalist groups. In 1968, for example, the FBI’s field office may have begun a campaign to install W.D. Mohammed as an Elijah Muhammad successor, writing in one declassified memorandum that Wallace was “the only son of Elijah Muhammad who would have the necessary qualities to guide the Nation of Islam in such a manner as would eliminate racist teachings. Whether the FBI’s paper support for W.D. Mohammed translated into operational support inside the Nation is not yet known, but we do know that, under his leadership, the Nation of Islam became a downright patriotic organization, with flags waving in the mosques. Here you see the American flag, something that you would have never seen in a NOI office in 1975, right here on this desk.

What are the parallels with our era, the post-9/11 era? After all, the public face of Muslim America has changed since the 1960s. It is no longer represented by bow-tied black men hawking copies of *Muhammad Speaks*, or by the beautiful, semi-naked body of Muhammad Ali. Despite the fact that the largest single ethnic, racial group of Muslims in the United States continues to be people of African descent, the stereotypical Muslim is now brown, rather than black. What changed? What explains the shift? It wasn’t the Nation of Islam. While the original

nation became a Sunni organization under the leadership of Imam W.D. Mohammed, it changed its name several times. Minister Louis Farrakhan recreated a version of the Nation of Islam in 1978 that continued to follow Elijah Muhammad's teachings. He was able to attract thousands of followers, and a million or so men showed up in 1995 at a march he led in Washington, D.C., proving that Minister Farrakhan and his message still had relevance to religion and politics in the United States. It wasn't the Nation of Islam, so much, that changed; it was the government, which no longer saw the NOI, the Nation of Islam, as a major threat.

What replaced it? The transnational Muslim American terrorist is, of course, now the primary focus of domestic counterintelligence. This was largely a result of 9/11, though the FBI and other agencies were already at work trying to blunt the threat of Islamic terrorism before then. Their concern took place amidst the larger phenomenon of Islamism, or political Islam, which flowered in the 1970s as a religious and political response to repressive governments in Asia and Africa and to U.S. foreign policy. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, foreign policy analysts, think tanks and politicians interpreted Ayatollah Khomeini's consolidation of power in the Revolution to be a new trend. The trend was the emergence of Muslim militant groups and governments bent on opposing the United States and its allies for religious reasons. In one sense, these analysts were right to fear an increasing threat to U.S. power abroad emanating from groups that based their political platform on Islamic ideas and symbols. In this era of global religious revival, many Muslim political parties and activist groups organized around Islamic themes and institutions, oftentimes because they lived in politically repressive countries where the government did not allow for freedom of assembly, association or speech in other venues.

The reaction of the U.S. government to this may be surprising. Both the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan saw opportunities to advance U.S. interests by allying with some of these Muslim resistance groups and their Muslim American supporters. Thus, President Carter convened a meeting on December 5, 1979, at which the National Security Advisor Brzezinski, and twelve leaders of various Muslim American groups, met to discuss how they might bring about a peaceful resolution to the Iranian hostage crisis. President Reagan and the U.S. Congress, as is well known, hailed the Islamic resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, providing support via the CIA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. What is less known is that the Reagan Administration also allowed and encouraged interested Muslim Americans to contribute to the efforts of the Afghan mujahidin via what was called the Jihad Fund of the Muslim Students Association.

These alliances between the U.S. and the Islamist groups were alarming developments for scholars and policymakers and politicians who saw their own interests as inherently opposed to those of the Islamists. For the opponents of Islamism, Islam was in and of itself a form of terrorism. For example, in the late 1980s bestseller *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that the "world of Islam" had invented terrorism in the Middle Ages and, even in the modern world, remained "medieval" in its outlook. In addition,

he claimed, Islam at its very heart was antidemocratic and intolerant of diversity. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union finally came to an end in 1991, such stereotypes of the “Muslim as enemy” became even more prominent among U.S. foreign policy makers. Throughout the 1990s, Harvard professor and former National Security Council official Samuel P. Huntington popularized the thesis that conflict in the post-Cold War era would occur along religious and cultural lines. Huntington argued that Islamic and other non-Western civilizations were fundamentally irreconcilable with Western civilization. He claimed, “The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”

U.S. presidents in the twenty-first century could not afford to be this simplistic and prejudicial. The governments of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama adopted a different rhetoric toward Islam than Huntington. They attempted to incorporate and co-opt Islam in the name of U.S. interests. “Islam is peace!” declared George W. Bush on September 17, 2001. “Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country,” he said. Similarly, Barack Obama proclaimed in his 2009 address in Cairo, Egypt, that, “Islam has always been a part of America’s story.” Rather than reject Islam outright, both presidents attempted to legitimize forms of Islam that were either apolitical or political accepted. At the same time, both Bush and Obama used classic, COINTELPRO techniques from the 1960s to discipline Muslim American political activity. For example, the Bush Administration determined internally that it could wiretap its own citizens without judicial or legislative oversight. It detained material witnesses who were not granted the right of *habeas corpus* and rounded up 1,200 people in the frightening days after 9/11. Muslim American charities that provided nonmilitary aid to organizations designated as terrorist groups, groups such as the Palestinian party Hamas, were raided and shut down. The U.S. barred foreign Muslim scholars such as Tariq Ramadan from attending professional meetings or speaking on American soil. The Justice Department and the U.S. Army respectively falsely accused lawyer Brandon Mayfield and Captain James Yee of aiding terrorists, though the names of both men were later cleared.

President Obama’s Administration has largely continued the Bush-era policies. Guantanamo Bay has remained open. The American mosque remains a primary site of domestic counterintelligence. The deportation of foreign nationals has actually increased. Obama personally ordered the assassination of two U.S. citizens, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, who produced speeches and web materials in support of al-Qaeda. We will never know whether they were guilty of committing terrorist acts because they were killed by drones, an act that many civil libertarians saw as a violation of their Constitutional guarantees of due process and trial by jury. More recently, the White House gave its support to the National Defense Authorization Act, which allows the Executive Branch to detain foreigners and perhaps Americans accused of “substantially supporting terrorism” indefinitely without trial. On the domestic side of counterterrorism policy, the Obama Administration outlined what it has dubbed

the “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.” One of the primary sites for implementation of this plan is supposed to be the American public school, where teachers and students are going to be trained to identify potential terrorists. People who, according to National Security Council official Quentin Wiktorowicz, use the word “infidel,” they defend Osama bin Laden, and they watch extremist videos.

Now this counterterrorism strategy for public education comes very close to turning the United States into a paranoid society in which rebellious teenage boys are mistaken for terrorists. But, rather than debating whether or not this or any other technique is particularly effective in combatting terrorism, the question I want to leave you with is this: Is there a way, in the midst of our war on terrorism, to carve out more public space for Muslim American dissent and dissent of all kinds? The government’s new consensus on terrorism has helped to convey the message that, if you support certain Muslim political parties or groups in Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Iran, and the list goes on, you should expect that, at the least, you will be put under surveillance. If you say publicly that you support al-Qaeda, you should expect that the government will find a way to silence you by whatever means practicable. For many Americans, that may be an acceptable and even laudable restriction on free speech. But where does it end? Should support of Hamas or the Muslim brothers or the Taliban be suppressed in a similar way?

We have got to find a distinction between political dissent and terrorism. Dissent of various kinds can too easily be mistaken as the threat of violence or as violence itself. It’s happened before. When the state overreacted to the growth of Islam among Black Americans in the twentieth century. At that time, many Americans, not just the government, saw the Nation of Islam and other Black Muslim groups as crazy, hateful and dangerous. One can see how the government would be frightened about African American Muslim support for a Japanese invasion in World War II, but, in retrospect, does anyone really think that such support amounted to a real advantage for Japan in the war? In the 1960s, was the Nation of Islam truly on the verge of leading a violent revolution against the U.S. government? There’s simply no evidence to support these assertions.

Today, if we open our national dialogue to include a greater variety of Muslim American and other dissenting views, I would predict that once again many Americans will be offended what they hear from their fellow citizens. Perhaps some Muslim missionaries will dream, as they did in the 1980s and 1990s of converting all Americans to Islam, something that’s very hard to say in public. Perhaps others will defend Iran’s nuclear program. But you can be sure that the first people to challenge such views will be other Muslim Americans. That is exactly the kind of openness that we need. Defining dissent as unacceptable speech structures a national discourse on Islam in America that constrains Muslim American civic engagement and limits the political imagination of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Instead, we should bring this and other forms of religious and political dissent into the public square. Now, doing so effectively requires the art of conversation making. And an engaged academy can help to craft these conversations away from

the hot light of 24-hour news cycles and political debate. Academic institutions such as the Danforth Center can make public space for innovative, inclusive and even daring discussions about impolitic topics. Unlike most mainstream media discussions, academic dialogues can artfully avoid demonization of the religious other, of whatever religious affiliation. In our time and space, such discussions must address the subject of Islam and Muslims in U.S. politics. Tens of millions of Americans, perhaps over 100 million Americans, hold strong opinions about the Sharia, about the Qur'an, about the Prophet Muhammad, and millions of them worry that Islamic religion fuels terrorism. Millions of other Americans, both Muslim and non-Muslim, explain Muslim terrorism not as the inevitable outcome of Islamic religion but instead as an understandable, if destructive, reaction to U.S. foreign policy. Now, bringing all of these people together to have a sensible conversation is as hard as it sounds. And one of my admittedly modest ideas for furthering this discussion is to ask academics, policymakers and community members to look again at the American past.

Muslims are not foreigners in U.S. history. Revisiting our Muslim ancestors from American history provides a space in which Muslim American dissent and contemporary fears about Islam might be safely explored, more deeply understood, and radically reimagined. Even if we come to little agreement, by talking about our shared past, we also conjure a world of shared significance. Thank you very much.