

## **Black Religion, the Security State, and the Racialization of Islam**

As African American organizations like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Third World Women's Alliance, the Council on African Affairs, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) continually emphasized, the plight of racist governance in the United States was already linked to US practices of colonialism. In tandem, they emphasized that the long arc of anticolonialism among African Americans was just one subset of a global struggle to create self-determination among the victims of Western colonialism. The rising scale of US imperialism, in this context, played an increasingly central role. By the end of the Second World War, with the emergence of the United Nations, the United States turned its attention more fully to expanding both its global reach and control of foreign territories through private corporate hegemony in Latin America, Asia, and Africa through open brutal military might as well as through CIA operatives to overthrow democratic and nondemocratic governments around the globe – in other words, by any means necessary. Why did the United States pursue this foreign policy approach?

### **African American Islam, Federal Repression, and US Empire**

Between the years 1945 and 1960, no fewer than forty nations – comprising mostly non-White peoples colonized by European nations – rebelled against their conquerors and demanded their freedom, typically through violent, military action. These forty nations represented approximately 800 million human beings. Included in this number were the polities that would become Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Iraq, Iran, the Democratic

Republic of Congo, Kenya, and India. During the World War II years, the US economy had grown voraciously because of the rapid expansions of industries and consumerism based preeminently on cheap access to the natural resources located almost overwhelmingly in the regions colonized by Europe and the United States: petroleum, diamonds, rubber, uranium, copper, iron, tin, and aluminum. The nations that were fighting for independence from European colonialism had suddenly become exponentially more valuable in the eyes of the US government because of their natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

The United States did not claim to be fighting for imperial control over foreign lands, however. The message, crafted and perfected under Harry Truman's administration in the late 1940s, was that the United States was the leader of the "free world" (meaning White governments) and had to fight communism and other threats to democracy. The US intelligence state carefully elided the actual histories of structural oppression to which Third World movements (typically anticolonial) responded. When the US State Department and the CIA engaged with political Islam in Egypt, Iran, and Palestine, they consistently denied the political reality of Western imperialism while rationalizing murderous violence against Muslim polities and communists or their sympathizers throughout the Third World. Under the national security paradigm, Western imperialists branded rational resistance to US colonialism as hate-based fanaticism and extremist violence rooted in a bizarre racial constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Intelligence officials also applied to domestic subjects this paradigmatic strategy of eliding the material conditions of domination and describing resistance to a racist, colonial state as the consequence of racial psychology. To prepare its agents to surveil the Nation of Islam, the FBI headquarters created a training manual in 1955. Entitled *The Muslim Cult of Islam*, this monograph presented a specious history of African Americans in the urban North during the early twentieth century. It explained the religious leadership of founders such as Noble Drew Ali, Marcus Garvey, and Wallace Fard in derisive terms. And, most importantly, it catalogued

<sup>1</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 168–75.

<sup>2</sup> In the run-up to the overthrow of Iran's democracy, Western officials caricatured Iranian demands for greater fairness in labor conditions and sharing of oil revenues as ignorant natives resisting the enlightenment of European civilization. See Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

a host of differences between real Islam and the “Muslim Cult of Islam,” its term of preference for the Nation of Islam.

The FBI not only lacked any background in studying race and African American culture, but it also identified closely with the nation’s institutional structures of anti-Black racism. So, it should come as no surprise that the training monograph rationalized the repression of African American Muslims. The manual established three major points: (1) poor, mostly illiterate African Americans raced to the urban North during the early 1900s to pursue the American dream of material prosperity; (2) these Blacks failed to realize they simply lacked the proper education and cultural sophistication required for gainful employment and aspirational success; and (3) they began to resent the superior, successful White race. In fact, the manual claimed Black “demagogues” such as Marcus Garvey, Noble Drew Ali, Wallace Fard, and Elijah Muhammad compelled these miserable Blacks to blame their lack of success on the White race. The result was a viral anti-White racial hatred. The manual went on to characterize the essence of this “Muslim cult” as teaching hatred and violence. According to the FBI, it was quintessentially a religion of primitivism and thereby expressed the atavistic, pristine racial nature of African Americans. The true religion of these Black subjects, in other words, was not an acquired religion of Islam as practiced in the Middle East but an essentially limbic religion of primitivism that stemmed from the racial constitution of Blacks.<sup>3</sup>

The manual also aimed to assure readers that the White race was innocent of antipathy or wrongdoing toward Blacks. Instead, it was the delusion of African Americans that created their irrational hatred of the White race. The bureau, in fact, described African Americans as childlike in their lack of intellectual capacity, inventing an illusion of White oppression to mask their own inferiority. In this narrative of history, there was no such thing as White racism or anti-Black violence. Even the nation’s system of racial apartheid was rendered invisible. And African Americans who dared to issue a critique of institutional racism were merely misguided, nurturing a primitive religion of hate and violence by spinning fantastic tales of racial oppression in an effort to mar the blameless innocence of the White race.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Preface to report on “Muslim Cult of Islam,” i–ii, available from [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm), part 1 (accessed September 28, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> FBI, “The Muslim Cult of Islam,” p. 37, [http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation\\_of\\_islam.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/nation_of_islam.htm), part 1 (accessed September 28, 2013).

The FBI headquarters also wanted field agents to understand what constituted authentic Islam and so devoted considerable attention to that subject. The manual asserted that *true Islam* had nothing to do with politics but was a thoroughly *spiritual* religion of peace and brotherhood. Employing language that could have been lifted from any Christian social gospel tract, the FBI manual reiterated throughout that in contrast to the fake “Muslim cult of Islam,” real Islam was based on teaching universal divine love for all and universal “brotherhood” among all peoples. As the rising tide of civil rights agitation spurred the Nation of Islam to emphasize its message of economic, social, and political liberation, federal agents only intensified their propagandistic claims that the so-called cult was a hate-based political movement merely masquerading as a religion.<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1960s, the US intelligence state had militarized its repression of African Americans. In 1967, the Los Angeles Police Department became the nation’s first to adopt Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), under guidance of the FBI. The New York Police Department quickly followed suit. This militarization rapidly exacerbated the already violent tensions between the nation’s police departments (typically all-White) and African American activists. The Black Panther Party (BPP) is perhaps most notable for opposing police brutality during this era. In what became a permanent pattern of anti-Black violence, White police officers routinely killed unarmed African Americans with impunity. Because White state and federal officials refused to protect Blacks from this murderous activity and protected the killers from prosecution, the BPP organized armed defense against state violence and harassment. The organization also sought to expose the repressive tactics of the security state and end police harassment against all civilians. This armed resistance instantly drew a full-scale response from the FBI, which immediately targeted BPP activists throughout the country. Even the unarmed activism of African Americans – particularly of the hundreds of Black Student Unions that mushroomed on college campuses – became chief targets of FBI infiltration and repression. By 1967, the Justice Department directly ordered the neutralization and destruction of these movements. And every form of political activity that African Americans executed in the United States – from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s nonviolent civil disobedience to the youth activism of SNCC to that of the Revolutionary Action Movement – all were engaged by the intelligence state as threats to national security. Every action they performed was deemed not merely

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

illegitimate or criminal (these activities, including those of the BPP, were legal and, in theory, protected by the US Constitution) but also an instance of anti-White hatred that threatened the internal security of the United States. From the perspective of the FBI, activities of racial rebellion demanded the utmost vigilance of the intelligence state.<sup>6</sup>

The FBI also began cultivating an unprecedented number of informants in African American neighborhoods, reaching a maximum of over 7,400 by 1972. These informants were instructed to report anything that might be used to prosecute Blacks for subversive activities. This largely amounted to prosecuting, intimidating, harassing, and detaining under arrest individuals exercising their constitutional rights of free speech and free assembly. Surveillance included tapping phones, bugging homes and workplaces, and assigning plainclothes officers to trail political targets.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond this, the FBI began to leverage its infiltration of numerous activist organizations to create violence through the use of agents of provocation. The result was an epidemic of fatal violence and the destruction of otherwise civil activist networks. At one point, the FBI operated its own Ku Klux Klan organization with more than 230 members under the leadership of an FBI operative. In addition, the bureau, in coordination with local police departments, employed intensive programs of psychological disruption and trauma by bankrupting targets with bail and legal fees for repeated incarcerations (typically on false charges), destroying marriages, and transforming coalitions of trust into volatile crucibles of discord and mayhem.<sup>8</sup>

The federal government's efforts to repress Black activists also launched an exceptionally effective initiative: *mass incarceration*. By arresting, detaining, and imprisoning – often for years or decades – Black activists and those in their social and activist networks, the US security state soon normalized the hyper-surveillance and criminalization of African Americans. It is no exaggeration to say that in the age of the so-called civil rights years, the criminalization of racial Blackness reached an apogee as a function of the intelligence state. It is equally important

<sup>6</sup> Memorandum RE CounterIntelligence Program Black Nationalist Hate Groups Internal Security, Director of FBI to FBI Field Offices, August 25, 1967, U.S. Department of Justice, F.B.I. file 100-448006, “(COINTELPRO) Black Extremists.”

<sup>7</sup> *US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans*, Book III, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, The Use of Informants in FBI Domestic Intelligence Investigations*, 230–40, 251.

to note the parallel between the US engagement with African American Muslims domestically, who issued a critical assessment of racial power in the United States and abroad, and US policy toward foreign Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran. Iran is an especially significant instance to consider, as it was there that the CIA for the first time overthrew a democracy in 1953. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the FBI characterized US Muslim targets of repression as uniquely prone to fanaticism, violence, and anti-White hatred. As the United States began to engage with stateless actors in the Middle East during the Cold War, federal intelligence agencies began to identify Muslims by employing the rubric of atavistic violence.<sup>9</sup>

Intelligence agencies emphasized the psychological proclivity of Muslims both within and beyond the United States as fanatical and hate-based. Criminalization and incarceration accompanied US actions abroad as well. For instance, the United States (collaborating with Britain) overthrew Iran's democracy in 1953 and installed a monarch, the "shah." The CIA also installed a regime of torture, anticipating populist dissent against the militarized puppet government. Policing dissent in Iran involved criminalizing protest, arresting and detaining social activists, and using legal repression to disrupt and undermine efforts to challenge the state. For the next twenty-five years, Iranian dissenters organized to oppose Western imperialism in Iran and the overthrow of their democracy. As this culminated in armed resistance and violent demonstrations against a military government, US officials increasingly resorted to the specific grammar of terrorism to represent political Islam. Distressingly, the Iranian Revolution was largely a revolt against widespread torture that the CIA had instituted to thwart dissent against US imperial interests.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2012), 169–75.

<sup>10</sup> Darius M. Rejali, *Torture & Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994). The US government's racialization of global Islam was by no means uniform or surgically even. It was, rather, a historical formation rooted in specific political interests, pragmatic imperatives, and often serendipitous alliances. The governing force behind US engagement with global Islam, however, was nevertheless the consonant aim to expand US control over foreign states and the global movement of natural resources like petroleum. So, by the late-1970s, for instance, Carter's administration had established robust military support for Afghanistan's Islamist resistance to Soviet influence. That strategy would lead to US support of the Taliban and the retention of key actors like Osama bin Laden as a CIA asset. This occurred simultaneously with the growing racialization of Islam as an anti-Western, racial threat. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

The history of FBI repression against African American Muslims under a national security paradigm and that of US engagement with international Islamist movements bore other parallels, including the charge of being prone to violence. The FBI had begun in the 1930s to caricature African American Islam within the United States as anti-White hatred and fanaticism enlivened by the inability of Blacks to rationally assess their material plight. Supposedly, this led Black Muslims to promote violence against the White race. This was the putative basis for their designation as a national security threat. By the 1960s and 1970s, intelligence officials were branding Muslims abroad as violent terrorists motivated by hatred – nonstate actors attempting a fanatical political objective through illegitimate violence. This created a powerful metonymic association that was immeasurably intensified as political Islam became increasingly common, most notably following the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s. As a result, the very grammar of terrorism and religion in the United States became rooted in the mythos of terrorists as Muslims and of Muslims as terrorists.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1970s, US legislators first became aware of these tactics of counterintelligence repression in both domestic and international domains. They were shocked and alarmed, and they soon established an unprecedented investigation into the nation's entire intelligence complex. The single most important effort to make US intelligence operatives accountable to legal oversight was the US Senate "Church Committee" investigation of 1975–1976. Named for US Senator Frank Church of Idaho, who chaired the committee, it was created as an immediate response to the Nixon Watergate scandal. It quickly came to light, however, that the Justice Department's FBI, the CIA, and other institutions within the intelligence community were violating constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and protections. The most notable of these was the FBI's Counterintelligence Operation (COINTELPRO). The Church Committee hearings slowly revealed how this program engaged US citizens using

<sup>11</sup> As one example of the efficacy of this association, the Boy Scouts of America's "Explorers" program in the early 2000s began training thousands of young people in "counterterrorism" methods to prepare them for future jobs as law enforcement officers. Equipped with compressed air guns as well as conventional (i.e., real) firearms, gas masks, and protective body gear, the young Scouts engage and neutralize actors dressed in Middle Eastern attire. "This is about being a true-blooded American guy and girl," described one local Sheriff in Imperial County, California, where some of the training exercises took place. The Explorers program worked closely with and under the sponsorship of the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI. Jennifer Steinhauer, "Scouts Train to Fight Terrorists, and More," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2009.

tactics created to neutralize and destroy foreign entities. In deliberate disregard for the US Constitution, the FBI employed a range of methods to implement psychological warfare, personal intimidation, destruction of social and familial networks, violent provocation, illegal detentions, and even political assassinations.<sup>12</sup> As a result, US Congress passed the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Act of 1978, which articulated specific protocols to ensure that US citizens enjoyed constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and protections from government surveillance, threats, and harassment.<sup>13</sup> The goal was to preserve the imperatives of both national security and civil liberties. At the time, federal legislators hoped that the nation would never again experience the unbridled reign of obtrusive surveillance, unrestrained repression, and the cycle of violence that had been implemented in the name of national security against the activism of African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics as well as White political movements. In the wake of these hearings, the Justice Department repeatedly emphasized that COINTELPRO had been formally dismantled and that the bureau had ceased such operations as early as 1971.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The Hughes–Ryan Act of 1974 was the very first legislation that created accountability for the intelligence community. This required the US president to report all covert activity to select members of US Congress within a certain time period. The law resulted from disclosures of US covert military action kept hidden by official, falsified military reports. This resulted after the 1972 and 1973 hearings of the Senate Armed Services Committee investigated covert military operations in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam in the early 1970s. Loch K. Johnson, “The Church Committee Investigation of 1975 and the Establishment of Modern Intelligence Accountability,” *US National Security, Intelligence and Democracy: From the Church Committee to the War on Terror*, ed. Russell Miller (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38–44.

<sup>14</sup> John M. Crewdson, “Ex-Operative Says He Worked for F.B.I. to Disrupt Political Activities Up to ‘74,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1975. Anthony Lewis, “A COINTEL Story,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1976. The FBI’s counterintelligence operatives came to public light in 1974. By that time US Attorney General William Saxbe claimed that the program had been disbanded as of 1971.