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AMERICAN BY FORCE, MUSLIM BY CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011 have weighed heavily upon Islam and Muslims in America today. This essay discusses three major concerns that have been adversely affected in the aftermath of the attacks: (1) the eternal security status orange, making travel in America seem like an experience under eminent danger; (2) a disregard for internal Islamic knowledge production in academic institutions and civil society; and (3) further deterioration and racism regarding who is Muslim and between Muslims. It is nevertheless hoped the unique contribution of American Muslims to global realities would not be thwarted.

Keywords: 9/11; America; feminism; Islam.

It's hard to believe that ten years have passed since the horrific terrorist attacks on US soil. After that first year, I made a concerted effort never to participate in any kind of oxymoronic "celebration" or "commemoration." What are we celebrating? What is more, I didn't understand why we kept coming around to this date, as if it—and sometimes only it—makes a difference. I was in denial. I thought if I just ignored it, it would go away. I confess I am astounded now, ten years later, by just how

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insidious this one date has become to everything related to the use of the word “Islam”—and not just in America. In this essay I will look at the state of Islam in America.

Certainly no one would blame the economic crisis on the September 11 attacks, but think about it. The attackers saw fit to destroy one of the symbols of western economy, the World Trade Center, and half a decade later, the economy has fallen almost in mimicry of the tumbling cinders of the towers themselves: down, down, down, with billowing smoke and debris with carcasses left in its wake. I do not wish to make more of this coincidence in light of other catastrophes, like two ghastly and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think most of these are obvious, needing no reminder. Instead I refer to some things which we may need our attention drawn to.

I remember that Tuesday. Since I do not listen to the radio in my car, I missed the breaking news on my way to the university. This time ignorance could have been fatal. After the initial shock and horror, reactions to the bombings took a vicious turn. For me, a visibly Muslim woman wearing *hijab*, the head scarf, friends and family were quick to recommend that I take off this dress of choice. Then, admittedly, I did become intimidated by the responses all around me in Richmond Virginia, so went into seclusion for a few days. This confirms that some women here in America were made to bear the backlash for acts participated in only by men who were also from some other country.

Why did I, a black woman from Maryland, have to worry? Like most Americans, I did not discriminate between Muslim Americans whether born abroad (or the next generations) and those whose relationship to the soul and the soil of America goes way back to the time of slavery 400 years ago. In the end, I honestly did not self-select this distinction. It was selected for me. As an Islamic Studies specialist and university professor, it seemed reasonable that I would participate at public events to disentangle this heinous act by a few extremists from Islam in general. Less than one percent of over 1.5 billion Muslims even agree with such acts; a smaller percentage actually commits them. So how does the world's second largest religion get held hostage by certain extreme actions?

For weeks, I agreed to every invitation to fora about Islam and September 11th. Even when I was tired or cranky, or just fasting for Ramadan, I participated. I participated out of love for things that are good and sacred. I was having a hard time with the idea that Islam was not considered by some to be among such good things. While I spoke out against terrorism, spoke up for Islam in general, and was subjected to harassment like other veiled women in the aftermath, I would learn that my opinion did not count, because I was not from the Middle East.

September 11th and its aftermath solidified the idea that Islam in America is only the Islam of foreigners. It did not help that the overwhelming response from these foreign Muslims was to apologize: over and over again. They uttered apologetic platitudes like “Islam is a religion of peace,” “Nowhere in the Qur’an, the Islamic holy book, is the killing of innocents permitted,” “The Prophet Muhammad began his mission in complete non-violence.” Although these are true, they did little to move us forward. Once I was excluded from being a legitimate spokesperson, I became an observer. There are three main observations I wish to comment on, ten years after September 11th: security, knowledge and race relations.

Although there have been some improvements in relations between Muslims and the West, I mark a few personal downward spirals since that date. For one thing, I travel a great deal and it seems to me, each time I enter US airport security, that the terrorists have won, because now I cannot pass any flight—whether for an hour or for two days—without having my entire body subjected to a search, scan, and/or pat. This always starts with my head and that head scarf. “We are at security alert level orange,” the loudspeaker announces. I wonder, what will it take to move us out of that level? I cannot imagine how we would dismantle the present system in order to remove this constant assertion of imminent danger or constant threat. As I travel elsewhere in the world, nowhere am I subjected to the same intense level of harassment called “security.” Shoes, scarf, the waist of my pants and my entire body are subjected to search. In other words, apparently since September 11th America is the most threatened place to live and travel. I am concerned not only for the end of terror but also for the return of peace—and not just its semblance as symbolized by airport security, the Patriot Act and the Islamophobia of the Tea Party. What is even more discouraging is how we seem to have accepted this as our new norm. This level of alert surely keeps us all in a heightened state of alarm. This means the terrorists have won: we live and move as if we are in a state of imminent danger, we live in terror, and they need not do anything more; we do it to ourselves.

The aftermath of September 11th was a major impetus behind my early retirement from US academia. I believe that knowledge and learning are altruistic goals to be pursued in hopes of improving what it means to be a human being. As a religious person, I also think that our knowledge should grow in accordance with our devotion to God. After September 11th it is clear: the potential for growth of knowledge *within* Islam is either insignificant or counterproductive to US policy, foreign and domestic. On the one hand there has been an exponential increase in the study of geopolitics of the Muslim World as confirmed

by a proliferation of university positions in political science, history and anthropology. On the other hand, positions in departments of religion and philosophy are disappearing.

For any religion to remain vibrant, tolerant and accessible to the plurality of human communities, its knowledge base must constantly transform from within. Each new era brings challenges of unprecedented proportion demanding new, more nuanced paradigms. No significant institutional or financial support from American academia and US think tanks is lent to the growth of ideas *in Islam*, only to unveiling past ideas or present ideologies. The growth of Islamic feminism is one such paradigm shift—an articulation with deep roots in the source texts that then branches out across the planet. This new knowledge is evident everywhere except in America, where Islamic feminist theory is made secondary to further case studies of national and international women’s movements. While acknowledgment that gender is a significant category of thought, which challenges untenable constructs of past Islamic traditions to create new and dynamic living traditions for a more creative future, is on the rise all over the Muslim world and in Europe, America lags behind.

The title of my essay stems from one last realization since September 11th: the prevalent notion that Islam in America is foreign. As I mentioned, foreign Muslims spend a lot of time apologizing for the ills of a few. Unfortunately, US Muslim-to-Muslim relationships have deteriorated in terms of racial configurations. After September 11th immigrant Muslims recoiled from being treated as second-class citizens. Some of us who descended from slaves had been telling them that this has always been a problem.

After September 11th “American by force, Muslim by choice” was my way of saying that while everyone in America comes from somewhere else—except Native tribes—most Americans trace their origins to voluntary migration. Only African Americans came to America forced here against their will. Even President Obama, a product of a foreign-born father from Africa and a US-born Irish descended mother, can claim this choice in his identity. Although he and I both descend from African fore-parents, my fore-parents (coincidentally from Moorish Muslim background) came here against their will. They didn’t come to get a higher degree of education; they didn’t come for better medical treatment; they didn’t come for greater economic opportunity. They didn’t come to the land of the free, the home of the brave. They came from freedom and were put into bondage. Now, we cannot go back. Once we became interlocked hybrids, there was no place for us to go back to. As descendants of slaves, we lost our African roots only to replace them with roots born in the skies and ground of our new enforced location in North America.

There are two typical reactions to my statement “American by force” which reminds me how little people think about this immigration distinction. For the first, an example suffices. At a forum in Qatar, a young white guy said, “**No one** is American by force.” In one sentence he attempted to annul centuries of black slave labor forced to these shores after surviving the horrific trans-Atlantic slave trade route. There was no sign stretched across the pier when slave ships pulled in to announce “America: love it or leave it.” Surely we would have gladly left then!

The other reaction is sometimes quite vicious by Muslim immigrants, those who come to the USA because they wish to come. “If you don’t like it,” they say, “then you should leave.” There is nothing in my statement that says what I like or dislike. I am American by force and it is the American part of my hyphenated identity that goes with me wherever I go, even if I were to change passports. Even if I attempted to take up citizenship elsewhere (I’ve lived abroad four times, making this infinitely clear), I will never leave aside the hybridism of identity. I can no more escape the American part of my hyphenated title, than I can erase the color from my skin. I will always be American because my options to be something else were taken away once my fore-mothers were raped by white owners and my blood line was further blended with other black, native-American and white lines throughout my past. We became something altogether different from African and in this we become very particularly American.

It is the second part of the formula which is the more provocative from my perspective. I have heard one too many stories about Muslims who, prior to September 11th, had erased their Islamic identity in an effort to fit into America in order to be made-over as white and mainstream. Then, with the terrorist bombings, they either had some kind of “holy awakening” or were no longer able to reach the ultimate olive branch of togetherness and blend into the melting pot, because their Islam was forced back upon them. At the best end of this, those who were forced to be Muslim again were also empowered by their re-discovery of Islam. These have become the primary beneficiaries of the post-September 11th “can’t we all just get along?” promoters. African Americans never pretended to melt into a pot called American. Nevertheless, we are the most authentic Americans because we are uniquely made here. At the same time, the greater majority of us who are Muslims can trace this voluntary movement and claim it as equally unique.

Meanwhile—Obama’s presidency notwithstanding—America is still riddled with racism. What has become poignant since September 11th, however, is just how much racism there is between immigrant Muslims and African-Americans. When Muslim immigrants seek entry into America, they want to show that they are just like white mainstream America. Yet,

in these times of global politics, American citizenship requires radical pluralism—a pluralism born out of what it takes to be fully human, which is acceptance of all others as also fully human; especially those who are different from yourself. We are not all the same; but we are all equally deserving of dignity and equally responsible for treating all others with the same dignity we deserve. After September 11th, my naïveté and idealism shifted radically to embrace this complex world order which I came to love as a necessary part of maturation and human decency.

I remember one forum after September 11th where organizers asked “What should Muslims do now?” I thought the question was absurd. I said, “Muslims should do the same as we were doing before.” That was based on my ignorant assumption that Muslims were living in accordance with the ethical principles of our faith and the responsibility of our citizenship. I learned, however, that many Muslims were either trying to separate from the wider American community or were attempting to integrate to such an extent as to erase what distinguished us. Now I am more adamant that Muslims must live fully integrated lives in our civil society, to which they should contribute and transform on the basis of the highest ideals taught as part of our Islamic tradition. September 11th taught me the meaning of this active citizenship.

It is responsible citizenship which also takes into consideration the unique opportunities offered by being American while challenging anything that limits, distorts, or destroys the beauty of civic honor. No matter who commits an act of terrorism—it is unacceptable. No matter how many Muslims commit acts of terror, each of the perpetrators must be held accountable—but *only* the perpetrators, not all Muslims collectively. Muslim and non-Muslim alike must keep our sense of civil responsibility on the path to resist all acts of gross violence—no matter who the perpetrators.

I am still hopeful that Islam as a living tradition will become more familiar to non-Muslims, not just in America but globally. By that I mean Islam as an open system, reflecting changes from within and without, that builds upon the core values and principles. We must challenge any narrow-minded paradigms that limit the greatest possible reach of Islam. Today that reach must accept equally all people whether Muslim or not. This includes the promotion of new knowledge to transform the basics into their present-day realities and future possibilities. Of course, this includes the promotion of Islamic feminism, for it challenges the age-old definitions of both feminism and Islam in order to contribute to the growth of each.

Finally, I am hoping for the rainbow nation of Islam in America to become the standard, in order to overcome both internal racism and the

external pressure to limit Islam to some foreign thing. The growth of Islam in America still proceeds at a staggering rate, and American Muslims are at the forefront of some of the greatest ideals created in the name of its own vitality. We are the home of Muslim hip-hop, birth place of Islamic punk and of Islamic-based queer Muslim organizations. We are the home of progressive and inclusive mosques and lady imams. As Americans, we have something to contribute to Islam almost in direct reflection of the ways Islam has contributed to our lives as Americans.

I admit the best I can hope for is still what I hoped for before September 11th: that each of us live in respect of others; that we grow in knowledge and humility, and that we act with the best that is within us to bring out the best in those whom we encounter. This is what I learned as a result of my dual citizenship status, as both American and Muslim.