



Visibility as Resistance by Muslim Americans in a Surveillance and Security Atmosphere¹

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Based on ethnographic data on South Asian Muslims in Los Angeles and analysis of publications of the largest Muslim organization in North America, this article shows how Muslim Americans manage their hypervisibility in the post-9/11 security atmosphere, which has intensified after ISIS terrorist attacks at home and abroad. At the individual level, Muslim Americans try to distance themselves from the “Muslim” label, which associates them with “terrorists.” Instead, many self-categorize into the seemingly more favorable “moderate” identity, which could sometimes render Muslims politically passive. Contrastingly, Muslim organizations strive to construct a “Muslim American” identity that can allow Muslims to engage in mainstream politics by reframing Islam as compatible with American values. Theoretically, this article engages with the scholarship on security, surveillance, and visibility to show how the observed’s visibility is not always only repressive but can also be used to resist imposed categories. However, findings reflect how the racialization of Muslims and the security regime give these strategies a double edge—while providing some advantages, these do little to dismantle Muslims’ hypervisibility and the security atmosphere. Overall, findings shed light on the contemporary issue of Muslim identification—not just in terms of how others see Muslims but also how Muslims see themselves.

KEYWORDS: identity; Muslim Americans; racialization; security; surveillance; visibility.

INTRODUCTION

The post-9/11 terror-panic climate has irrevocably transformed Muslims from a relatively invisible minority in America to hypervisible suspects of terrorism. Although Muslim Americans have long been viewed as suspicious outsiders or an “Other” based on orientalist notions of Islam and the Middle East (Said 1979), 9/11 has amplified the fears, hostility, and suspicion toward Muslims as a national security threat (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Cainkar 2009). In response, the U.S. government has run heightened surveillance programs specifically targeting Muslim immigrants. For instance, from 2002 to 2011, the National Security Entry-Exit System (NSEERS) enforced foreign nationals from 26 Muslim-majority countries to be registered, fingerprinted, and photographed upon U.S. entry followed by annual reports to U.S. immigration agencies. Again, from 2001 to 2013, the New York Police Department and the Central Intelligence Agency—both state agencies with a history of aggressively spying on domestic political dissidents

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(Boghossian 2013)—maintained a secret surveillance program on Muslim communities in New York that monitored and analyzed their everyday lives, going as far as to recruit insiders of the community as informants (Apuzzo and Goldman 2011).

The increased surveillance of Muslims has helped create a climate of insecurity, fear, and suspicion that still organizes Muslim Americans' community life in many ways. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Muslim Americans in places with sizable Muslim communities became suspicious of their friends and neighbors being government infiltrates on the one hand and extremist sympathizers on the other (MACLC, CLEAR, and AALDEF 2013). Even after many of the post-9/11 surveillance programs ended, the fear of being surveilled did not perish, with President Donald Trump promising to create a database that will register and track all Muslims in the United States. Furthermore, the Federal Bureau of Investigation not only plans to continue using undercover informants to detect terrorist plots—programs that disproportionately target Muslims (Human Rights Watch 2014)—but also expand such operations to purportedly defend against the Islamic State or ISIS (Lichtblau 2016). Overall, the spate of ISIS terrorist attacks across the globe, the contentious national debates surrounding President Trump's "Muslim ban," and mass media coverage of Muslim-related conflicts depicting Islam as directly opposed to Western, Christian ideologies (Powell 2011; Silva 2017) have all added to the hypervisibility of this minority as "threats" and "outsiders" in American society—so much so that Islamophobia or "Islamophobic racism" (Love 2017) has been reported to have had reached 9/11-era levels in 2015 (Kishi 2016).

However, the targeted surveillance of Muslims has much broader social effects. "Muslim" not only connotes a religious identity but also operates as a racial category that homogenizes South Asians, Arabs, Middle Easterners, North Africans, and blacks, all of whom fall on a wide spectrum of physical appearance. It also includes "Muslim-looking" non-Muslims, such as Sikhs, Arabs, and Middle Easterners who are Jewish or Christian, even agnostics. As such, increased surveillance of "Muslims" not only puts Muslim Americans in danger but also members of a whole swath of categories. More broadly, surveillance security practices contribute to creating a vague yet diffuse "atmosphere," which organizes social and political relations around enemies, risks, fear, and anxiety, and can erode democratic values (Huysmans 2014:14).

Scholars of security and surveillance have long debated the effects of surveillance practices on civil rights and liberties (Ball, Hagerty, and Lyon 2012; Contemporary Sociology 2007; Deflem and McDonough 2015; Dunér 2005; Huysmans 2014; Lyon 2007). Most argue that increased surveillance practices violate citizens' fundamental democratic rights and privacy, and reinforce long-term social inequalities (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 2006; Huysmans 2014; Lyon 2003, 2007). A few others, however, point out the conflict of goals in ensuring security and defeating terrorism while maintaining human rights (Dunér 2005). Others have found that the increased claims of civil liberties violations since 9/11 reflect a culture of fear toward surveillance in general, not necessarily actual violations (Deflem and McDonough 2015). Regardless of these differences of opinion, however, few dispute that 9/11 has led to an increase of surveillance security practices or that these disproportionately target Muslims.

Yet, the post-9/11 era has been also called a “Muslim moment,” “a period of rising Muslim self-consciousness,” with Muslim leaders evaluating their group status in America and taking strategic steps to engage the community in mainstream society and politics (Chishti et al. 2003:10). Muslims have collectively mobilized against surveillance and racial profiling by building coalitions with other ethnic, civil rights, and immigrant advocacy groups to demand their rights and liberties as Americans (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). However, research on Muslim American mobilization has largely focused on organizational platforms. This article uses ethnographic data on South Asian Muslims in Los Angeles and content analysis of publications of the largest Muslim organization in North America to give a broader view of how Muslim Americans, as individuals and a collective, respond to their hypervisibility in ways they find to be relatively favorable in an overall adverse climate of heightened surveillance, security, and control.

Theoretically, this article engages with the literature on security, surveillance, and visibility by showing how the observed’s visibility is not always only repressive. Rather, it can be used strategically to resist imposed categories, to some extent. Specifically, I find that the Muslim American community responds to its hypervisibility in the eyes of the U.S. state and society by strategically rendering certain aspects of themselves visible and invisible to the public. By so doing, Muslim Americans try to distance themselves from the “Muslim” label, which associates them with “terrorists.” Instead, many categorize themselves into the seemingly more favorable “moderate” identity, which, in the long run, could render Muslims politically passive. In contrast, Muslim leaders and organizations strive to construct a new “Muslim American” identity that can provide Muslims ways to actively engage in mainstream politics by reframing Islam as a religion compatible with American values. However, findings also reflect how the racialization of Muslims and the post-9/11 security regime give these identity-making strategies a double edge—for while these strategies provide Muslim Americans with some advantages in getting ahead, they do little to dismantle Muslims’ hypervisibility and can even serve to reinforce the security atmosphere at large. Overall, my findings shed light on the contemporary issue of Muslim identification—not just in terms of how others see Muslims but also how Muslims see themselves.

SURVEILLANCE, SECURITY, AND SUBJECTIVE FEAR

An insidious tool and outcome of increased surveillance practices is what Huysmans (2014) refers to as a security “atmosphere,” Altheide (2006) as a “politics of fear,” and Lyon (2003) as a “panic regime.” All three concepts describe a societal climate in which social and political relations are organized based on discourses of anxiety, insecurity, and fear of “enemies,” and the condition of the society is generally understood in terms of “terrorist threat levels.” In this atmosphere, “security as a practice” is driven by a political agenda and is more about *creating* enemies and fear than responding to them (Huysmans 2014:3). “Decision makers,” such as politicians and media personnel, promote and use popular beliefs and assumptions about “danger, risk, and fear, to achieve certain goals” (Altheide 2006:416). Foreign

policies, domestic legislations, surveillance measures, increased military intelligence, and mass media discourses all contribute to preserving a security mentality in which persecution of a threatening “other” for the sake of national security not only seems logical and acceptable but is also desired. An example Altheide (2006:415) gives is the Bush administration using existing mass-mediated discourses about “crime, victim, and fear” to convince Americans that the victims of 9/11 were killed by Iraq-aided Al-Qaeda, and that Iraq was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction to be used in further attacks in the United States, despite evidence to the contrary. Existing racial structures within the U.S. society, which for decades have homogenized Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims as a foreign and threatening “Other” (Love 2017; Omi and Winant 2015; Said 1979), helped paint Muslim Americans as the so-called “enemy within” who are supposedly in collusion with anti-American terrorist cells abroad (Rana 2011). Thus, the War on Terror to be waged in foreign lands came also to be fought *inside* U.S. borders.

In this kind of security atmosphere, the mass media helps to disseminate the political discourse against the alleged enemy (Altheide 2006). In the case of the United States, the media has helped to perpetuate the stereotype of Muslims as terrorist threats through its portrayal of Islam and its followers for decades, from even prior to 9/11 (Powell 2011; Shaheen 2001; Silva 2017). Since 9/11, it has even served as a “key force” in creating a cultural change where anti-Muslim fringe organizations have a rising influence on media discourses than mainstream pro-Muslim civil rights organizations (Bail 2012:857). Despite being fewer in number, fringe organizations have been heavily overrepresented in media discourses after 9/11 whereas mainstream civil rights organizations have been underrepresented (Bail 2012, 2015). As such, anti-Muslim messages from these previously obscure groups have now become mainstream discourses that shape popular understandings of Islam. However, even mainstream news organizations such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* cover Islam and Muslim-related news stories in ways that closely associate Muslims with fear, radicalization, and international terrorism (Altheide 2006; Powell 2011; Silva 2017). For instance, in exploring U.S. media coverage of terrorism, Powell (2011) finds a pattern that reiterates the “clash” between “the West” and “the East” or between the so-called “Christian America” and “the Muslim Other.” In cases where the terrorists are Muslim, media coverage moves from identifying the perpetrator as Muslim to making a connection to an international terrorist cell, the attacker’s motivation being a holy war against the United States. Contrastingly, if the terrorists are non-Muslim, the attacks are covered as isolated incidents, with the perpetrators being humanized as “mentally unstable,” “troubled” individuals whose shocked family members are then shown to condemn violence (Powell 2011:106).

Taken together, this politicized and mass-mediated security atmosphere induces a subjective sense of fear, insecurity, and anxiety that can lead to self-policing, regardless of whether there are civil rights violations. Cameron (2007:74) even likened the post-9/11 U.S. society with a Foucauldian panopticon, arguing that the United States’ War on Terror foreign policies helped to create a pervasive and

powerful national identity that is stranded in a “permanent war mentality,” which allows for the suspicion and persecution of Muslim Americans to ensure domestic security. This mentality is partly enacted through the citizens’ self-discipline to become—or at least appear to be—patriotic, which is publicly displayed in everyday life through a set of symbols and discursive strategies. Examples of this self-policing are people clarifying they are not “terrorists” and that 9/11 was a “horrific” event before critiquing U.S. foreign policies (Cameron 2007:74); journalists not asking politicians penetrating questions about war and security policies; news personalities invoking that security can no longer be taken for granted but be achieved through sacrifices (Altheide 2006:425); and civilians displaying U.S. flags and stickers with patriotic slogans on their front lawns, cars, and clothing (Dhingra 2007).

For Muslim Americans, self-policing comes in the form of everyday precautions, taken in apprehension of being perceived as threats, unwelcome outsiders, or anti-American. Most of the South Asian Muslim participants in this study fall into the racialized “Muslim” category because of their stereotypical “Muslim-looking” facial features and brown complexion. As such, they stand largely exposed to Islamophobic racism whose effects become particularly clear in the event of an Islamist terrorist attack. In these instances, Muslims are held collectively accountable and so feel obligated to loudly condemn terrorism. For if they do not, they run the risk of being perceived as terrorist sympathizers or of being accused of enabling terrorism by remaining silent. This Muslims-are-to-blame mentality is also institutionalized through government-run counterterrorism initiatives such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program, which places the responsibility on Muslims to weed out extremists from their midst. Launched in 2014, CVE purportedly aims to prevent U.S. residents from becoming “radicalized” and address the root causes of violent extremism by engaging community and religious leaders, law enforcement, healthcare professionals, teachers, and social service providers (Department of Homeland Security 2017). If any of them identifies “visible” signs of individuals from their community joining extremist groups or becoming terrorists, he/she is to take action by pinpointing that suspect to law enforcement authorities (Patel and Koushik 2017). In practice, these programs focus mainly, if not only, on Muslim communities, as evidenced by President Trump reportedly proposing to rename these initiatives to “Countering Islamic Extremism” or “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism” (Houry 2017).

Placing Muslims as their own surveillors not only paves the way for sowing further mistrust within Muslim communities but also preserves the broader societal atmosphere of surveillance and security. Furthermore, if a terrorist attack does occur, it seemingly justifies the blaming of Muslims as they have either “failed” to “adequately spy” on their community members or have “enabled” the attack by not reporting relevant information to law enforcement authorities. The onus to prove themselves “innocent” or “unthreatening,” thus, falls on individual Muslims, that, as will be shown, they strive to do—sometimes by silencing their religious identities in public altogether or by presenting themselves as “good,” “moderate” Muslims. However, these strategies are double-sided—on the one side, they provide Muslims with some protection in times of heightened Islamophobia, but on the other side, they silence Muslims and render them politically passive.

VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY AS COMPONENTS OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

In exploring the possibility of autonomy and democratic resistance in a society where virtual surveillance technologies are seemingly ubiquitous and citizens are often not even aware of being surveilled, Huysmans (2014) makes two observations that hypothetically allow for individual acts of resistance even in the absence of collective mobilization and large-scale formal protests. First, the relative lack of awareness and absence of large-scale protests against surveillance does not imply acceptance. Second, the surveilled can also surveil the “watcher” (Huysmans 2014:139)—meaning, the watcher who is supposedly in the position of power because of controlling visibility and information can be watched by the very people they are watching through the use of easily accessible surveillance technologies. However, even in this reversal of positions, visibility is conceptualized as largely disciplinary—as something that belongs to another and that can be used as a tool to exert power over the surveilled.

This article explores another aspect of visibility and power—that which comes from strategically controlling one’s own visibility. As Brighenti (2007:325) cautions, “being watched” should not be misunderstood as “passive behavior” because watching involves both “seeing and being seen,” and simultaneously affects both “the observed and the beholder.” How one wants to be seen and therefore shapes their visibility through social interactions (Goodwin 1996)—that is, become noticed, manage attention, and use certain symbols to be perceived in a desired way—can determine, to some extent, the nature of the relationship between their visibility and power. In short, while visibility can serve as a form of social control, it can also serve as a means to achieve social recognition and empowerment (Brighenti 2007), and can even be a necessary component of resistance (Gordon 2002). From this view, one’s visibility can be managed to resist an unwanted way of being seen or an imposed identity category. For Muslim Americans, visibility as empowerment and recognition suggests that these individuals can strategically use their visibility to highlight specific aspects of themselves to be positively perceived, and potentially be accepted, in the mainstream American society.

However, the invisible is an intrinsic component of the visible in that what is visible has meaning only in relation to what is invisible (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Invisible or repressed social identities carrying stigma shape the visible ways in which one manages their presentation of self through interactions (Claire, Beatty, and Maclean 2005; Goffman 1959, 1963). Thus, the invisible layers need to be penetrated to understand the visible dimension of a subject or social event. Yet, strategic invisibility does not equate to privacy (Bennett 2011; Stalder 2002). Unlike privacy where the individual separates oneself from the environment, invisibility (as conceptualized in this article) is a way in which one manages how one is favorably visible in the environment. The subject recognizes that they are embedded in the social power dynamics and thus strategically renders some aspects of themselves invisible to gain leverage in society.

For example, as will be shown, the participants recognize that they are in a relatively weak position in society because of their “Muslim” identity and thus, when

among people outside their religious and ethnic groups, they avoid interactions that may expose them to the stigma attached to their religion. This strategy could be analytically viewed as a “weapon of the weak,” in which the relatively powerless in society often have to seek indirect, seemingly passive or conformist ways to defy the dominant group because an all-out confrontation would jeopardize their daily existence (Scott 1985). The participants’ use of invisibility, thus, is deeply embedded in the power structure of the existing security atmosphere. Overall, this article explores the relationship between the scholarship on surveillance and security—which studies the subject’s visibility as a way toward pervasive social control—and that on visibility and power—which provides a way to understand how the subject’s visibility could also be used to assert agency in achieving recognition and empowerment.

DATA AND METHODS

This research was conducted as part of a larger case study in Los Angeles on South Asian Muslims—who comprise the largest group among foreign-born Muslims in the United States (Pew Research Center 2017)—to explore how global geopolitics shape everyday identity work. The data presented come mostly from participant observation and in-depth interviews of 30 Muslim Americans of Pakistani (15), Bangladeshi (10), and Indian (5) background conducted between 2015–2016. This time frame has been particularly useful as Muslims were once again thrust into the spotlight, with several ISIS terrorist attacks taking place both at home and abroad, and populist politicians using inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

I used ethnic and religious organizations in college campuses to establish contact with key gatekeepers who then referred me to their friends, families, and acquaintances in various areas across Los Angeles, which has one of the largest South Asian and Muslim populations in the country. As such, many of the participants are college students or recent graduates. Using semistructured interview questions and guided conversations, I asked the participants about a range of topics geared toward understanding if, when, and how their “Muslim” identity became salient in their everyday lives. In so doing, I hoped to gain a broad yet detailed view of their daily lives while avoiding taking their “Muslim-ness” as a continuously salient form of self-identification for granted—a “trap,” which Brubaker (2013:6) calls “methodological Islamism.” Topics included their friends, families, and colleagues; everyday routines; workplaces and other regularly visited spaces; their favorite TV shows; the news; hobbies; parents’ concerns about raising children; food and clothing preferences; families back in the homeland; opinions on politics; religious practices; thoughts about spirituality, gender, and sexuality; future aspirations; and so forth. In their responses, I explored how and what categories the participants used to describe themselves and others. During participant observation, I noted how they presented themselves in various contexts as they interacted with different groups of people.

Although my South Asian Muslim upbringing and fluency in Bangla, Hindi, and Urdu gave me an in-depth understanding of the cultural norms, thus enabling

me to capture the sometimes unspoken nuances of their interactions, my “insider” status was not always secure but was one that I had to achieve over time. As I grew familiar to the participants, I was invited to community gatherings, organizational events, and private get-togethers. My interactions with them also became more informal. I hung out with some of them at restaurants, accompanied them on shopping trips, watched movies, and ate dinner at their homes with their families. As will be discussed later, this fluidity of my positionality revealed a divide between the participants’ public and private interactions, which in turn reflected their precarious collective position as a perceived “outsider” group despite being U.S. citizens and self-identifying as “Americans.”

To complement the ethnographic data, I used, in a limited capacity, organizational documents published by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) from 2001 to 2016. The documents included annual reports released at ISNA conventions as well as the organization’s flagship bimonthly magazine, *Islamic Horizons*, which had a readership of more than 200,000 in 2006, making it the most widely distributed Muslim periodical in English. As organizations have been found to manage and sustain group identities through carefully groomed platforms (Yildiz and Verkuyten 2013), the ISNA documents provided insight into Muslim Americans’ collective use of visibility strategies. Furthermore, they allowed me to observe if similar visibility strategies were used by Muslim Americans across ethnicities and geographical locations as opposed to being unique to the South Asian Muslim community in Los Angeles. As such, I focused on the publications of ISNA because it is the largest, most active, and commonly known Islamic organization in the United States, with its members coming from diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds.

Because of its bimonthly schedule, the number of *Islamic Horizons* issues was considerably large for qualitative analysis. To make the scope much more manageable and still serve the study’s purpose, I selected 10 magazine issues based on the content of the issues’ front covers, which indicated their main concerns. The topics explored were the legacy of African American Muslims; the role of faith communities/organizations against anti-Muslim bigotry; New York Police Department spying on Muslim Americans; the role of Muslim community leaders in responding to Muslim American needs; how to talk about shari’a law to non-Muslims in the context of rising Islamophobia; the role of Muslims in the U.S. presidential election; embracing diversity and transcending differences within the Muslim community; the role of Islamic schools in developing Muslim American identity; the Syrian refugee crisis; and hate crime law in the context of the three Chapel Hill Muslim murders. I specifically selected these issues because they appeared to focus on the Muslim American community’s identity concerns across different spheres, from national politics to interpersonal communication.

LEADING EVERYDAY LIVES AS HYPERVISIBLE “MUSLIMS” IN A SECURITY ATMOSPHERE

The participants’ interviews revealed not only the effects of a surveillance security atmosphere on their daily lives but also that they were cognizant of their being

monitored. For example, Tabassum, a Pakistani American who had recently graduated from college, recalled when her brother was consulting a map with his friend at a gas station as they were planning to go on a road trip that week. While getting their tires changed, they were pointing at the map, marking out the routes they would be taking. Two days later, an FBI agent came to Tabassum's home asking for her brother because someone in the neighborhood reported "suspicious behavior about him potentially planning something dangerous." Tabassum explained that while she herself is not "Muslim-looking" because of her fair complexion and the absence of a hijab, her brother's and his friend's facial features, especially the friend's beard, rendered them close to the stereotypical Muslim image. As such, Tabassum believes that their merely consulting a map was perceived as possibly planning a terror attack.

Again, some participants remain fearful of being perceived as "too Muslim" or of being surveilled by "government spies" because of their association with other Muslims. For example, a few years after 9/11, the Bangladeshi immigrant family of another college student, Lamia, had relocated to a predominantly white neighborhood from a suburb known to have a large Muslim population, and where they had lived for almost a decade. Her parents own a small business and feared that by being seen as close to Muslims, they would be suspected as terrorists and lose customers or, worse, sent back to Bangladesh. Even now, her parents decline invitations to attend prayers at their previous local mosque when friends and neighbors from their old neighborhood call on Eid, the biggest Islamic festival. Sometimes, her parents refuse to even answer phone calls from old friends, who, in light of 9/11, they consider to be "too Muslim." A number of other participants also showed reluctance to talk about religious topics on the phone in fear of being tapped by the government.

The participants' awareness of being monitored led many of them to modify their visibility in public, but in ways they believed contradict stereotypes about Muslims. For instance, Adeena is a Bangladeshi woman who has been living in Los Angeles for almost 30 years. She wears a burka (an outer garment covering from top of the head to the ground) when stepping out of the house. Despite her teenage daughters (none of whom wear religious covering) urging her over the years to wear bright colors, Adeena always opts for mute, neutral colors such as white, black, and brown to blend in with the crowd as much as possible. However, one day, not long after the ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Adeena donned her usual black burka to go shopping before suddenly taking it off. Instead, she brought out a pink hijab. At her daughter's surprise, Adeena explained, "If I wear black, people stare at me longer. They notice me more." In Adeena's view, black is too closely associated with stereotypical images of "oppressed," "conservative" Muslim women in foreign lands such as the Middle East. In contrast, she finds pink to be a color that presents a friendlier and more open image. By wearing pink instead of black, Adeena hoped to distance herself from the stereotype and make herself visible as a friendly, open, empowered Muslim woman.

Similarly, Anwar, a Pakistani American, was at a mall with his parents and younger brother one day when his mother unwrapped a piece of candy while walking by a line of stores. She threw the wrapper at a nearby trash container but

missed, with the wrapper falling on the floor. She did not stop to pick it up but had walked past. However, Anwar's father suddenly stopped on his tracks, turned around, and asked Anwar's mother to pick up the wrapper and put it inside the container. Baffled, Anwar's mother asked why he was making this a big deal. His father then asked, "Do you realize what you just did?" Anwar's mother replied, "No. What did I do?" To which he replied, "You just dropped trash on the ground." Anwar's mother, now slightly annoyed, asked, "OK, why did you stop us all for that?" Anwar's father then explained: "Remember you are wearing a hijab. Everybody around you is looking at you and saying that you are Muslim. And if you litter, they are going to say bad action, headscarf, and they are immediately going to equate those two together. Negative, negative, Muslims are bad. That's how easy it is for people to judge us. So we have to be role models to show others this is who we are, these are the actions that we do, and this is how we behave, and then you be the judge." Anwar's mom then appeared to understand her husband's point as she walked back a few steps to pick up the candy wrapper and put it carefully inside the trash container. Although Anwar's mother was not initially aware of her hypervisibility as "Muslim," once she was made aware, she consciously tried to subvert the stereotype attached to her religious identity by making herself visible in a positive light.

Distancing from the "Muslim" Category by Separating the Public from the Private

Even though the participants are not constantly aware of their "Muslim" identity, that their "Muslim-ness" could be viewed negatively is ingrained in how they interact differently in public and private spaces. The common experience of leading lives as "Muslims" in a largely Islamophobic social context has led to a shared understanding among the participants in that they generally do not talk about religion and relevant topics when in unfamiliar and non-Muslim company. Rather, individuals adopt various strategies to make themselves visible in ways that distance them from the "Muslim" identity in public. Those wearing explicit markers of faith, namely the hijab, are exceptions to this strategy as they are automatically "marked" as "Muslims." However, as most of the participants in this article do not wear the hijab, I leave those observations to be discussed elsewhere.

The divide between the public and private became apparent during fieldwork when I was triangulating interview data with ethnographic observations. On most occasions, I had formally interviewed the participants before spending time with them in more unstructured settings. I used the interview sessions not only to introduce myself as a researcher and derive responses but also to create rapport with the participants, which later enabled me to ask for referrals. During the interviews, I usually asked the participants to walk me through an average day of their week. I hoped their responses would give me insight into what tasks, places, and people the participants deemed relevant to their daily lives. I was still an unfamiliar "outsider" in the field at that stage, with only my "Muslim-sounding" name and physical appearance indicating to the participants my religious and ethnic background.

In many of the interviewees' descriptions of their daily routine, I noticed that although the participants described their day in intricate detail, they hardly mentioned observing religious practices. This was the pattern for even those who wore religious markers (such as the hijab and the *Zulfiqar*, a pendant only Shi'a Muslims wear) as well as for college students whom I knew were active in Muslim student groups on campus. Participants also appeared indifferent about social and political issues that existing surveys had found to be important for Muslim Americans, instead providing aloof responses such as "I don't know." Overall, it appeared as if their religious identity was not relevant to their lives at all.

However, as I began to make myself more familiar to the participants, I observed how their "Muslim" identity implicitly shaped many aspects of their daily routine. For instance, in addition to mundane topics such as dating, weekend plans, concerns about classes, rivalries within their communities, family disputes, and so on, participants also shared their views on different Muslim-related issues ongoing not just in the United States and their homelands but also in places such as Syria and Palestine. In most cases, religion seemed to be a natural or taken-for-granted part of their lives—a way in which they organized their activities and interactions without dispensing much thought. Instead, they appeared to be more actively concerned about course grades, paying rent, finding employment, raising children, marriage, interactions at the workplace, and so forth.

The following description gives a sense of what such an average day, filled with the participants' mundane preoccupations, looks like. The day would begin with one preparing for work—making breakfast, packing lunch, wearing appropriate clothes for the day ahead. Students would rush from their dorm rooms to their back-to-back classes and study sessions from morning till noon while professionals would commute to their workplaces. At around noon, some participants preferred to have lunch by themselves or call their families to know how their day has been, whereas others would meet up with friends or coworkers. For office workers, the second half of their day would resemble the first. For college students, afternoons would usually include campus organizational meetings, errands, and study sessions before heading back to their dorms in the late evening. At home, dinner is usually family time with the television playing either the news or South Asian soap operas in the background. In the college dorms, dinner would usually consist of home-cooked meals prepared and delivered in Tupperware by mothers over the weekend, to be microwaved when needed, and enjoyed while watching sports, Netflix, or TV shows such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Gossip Girl*, *Friends*, and *Scandal* with roommates.

And yet, my ethnographic observations gave me a different view of their routine that brought to light the latent salience of their Muslim identity. For example, as individuals dressed up for their day, some consciously selected clothes that would enable them to offer prayers between their schedule, usually during lunch or between classes. Women wore "modest" clothes, such as full sleeves, jeans, or long dresses, whereas men wore trousers instead of shorts. Some of the organizational meetings that students attended on campus were Muslim student associations or Palestinian human rights organizations. Some students were *zabihah* and thus ate only halal food (i.e., food permitted by Islamic dietary restrictions), making microwaved home-cooked dinners most cost-effective and convenient. Several

college-going participants have known their roommates long before coming to college through their families and community mosque, or have found each other through Muslim student organizations on campus.

Again, several participants refrained from drinking alcohol because it is haram (forbidden) according to Islamic dietary restrictions. This posed a problem as drinking is embedded in American culture as a form of casual socialization. Whereas some participants avoided situations involving alcohol altogether, some others, like Rashed, an aspiring Pakistani American filmmaker looking for work, had to find creative solutions to “fit in” without drawing attention to his religious identity. According to Rashed:

I would be one of the earlier people to arrive and I would go to the kitchen, pour myself a glass of coke and just grab on to the glass for the rest of the evening, ha, ha! And then when people ask me if I am drinking, I am like, “Yeah, I got a drink!” Because I didn’t want to have that conversation like, “Oh, you don’t drink? How come?” “Religious issues.” “Oh really? Who are you?” “I am Muslim.” “Oh. OK, cool.” What does that conversation change? If you learn that I am a Muslim, that doesn’t change anything. Only that now, you closed yourself off to me. And I feel like I won’t be able to connect to people. So sometimes I pretend to be hyper, like I am drunk, and having fun.

All this is not to say, however, that the participants never subscribe to the Muslim identity label. As the next section will show, rather than forsaking the “Muslim” category altogether, the participants qualify themselves as “moderate” Muslims when their religious identity needs to be addressed in public. In contrast to the lone “Muslim” label, which connotes “terrorists,” the “moderate” Muslim category supposedly indicates positive values of peace and hard work shared by all Americans. In so doing, the participants attempt to draw an explicit boundary between them and Islamist extremists.

Being “Moderate” Muslims

Today, “moderate” is a contentious word carrying both religious and political meanings. Scholars, media personalities, bloggers, and political commentators from both liberal and conservative aisles use it to interpret Muslims in relation to Muslims’ views on Western democratic values and Islamic terrorism (Rabasa et al. 2007). However, “moderate” could mean devout to some and liberal to others, thus leading to endless debates on who exactly are “moderate” Muslims as opposed to “radicals” and “extremists” (Ibrahim 2016; Rabasa et al. 2007; Rashid 2011). For example, while the West largely views Wahhabis as “extremists,” Saudis generally deem Wahhabism as “moderate” (Hubbard 2016). These labels become all the more powerful because of the consequences they carry. A call for a more “liberal” interpretation of Islam could be seen as “radical” and thus enforce punitive measures, as has been the case in Saudi Arabia (Hubbard 2016). Conversely, women choosing to cover themselves based on notions of freedom and empowerment could be viewed as “extremist,” as has been the case in France with regard to the niqab (a religious covering showing only the eyes) and the burkini (a modesty swimsuit covering all but the face, hands, and feet) (Rubin 2016). Some argue that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim because there is a moral vacancy within the religion itself

(Rizvi 2014). Whereas, others argue that the word is meaningless to describe ordinary followers of a peaceful religion (Manzoor 2015).

Again, some use “moderate” to favorably distinguish Muslims from jihadists, whereas others use it derogatively to condemn Muslims who refuse to support their coreligionists against a global enemy—“the West.” For example, while American political commentators perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as “radical Islamists” based on its hostile view toward the United States, jihadists condemn it as “moderate” for rejecting global jihad and embracing democracy (Leiken and Brooke 2007). Thus, “moderate” as a category is inextricably tied to the global phenomenon of Islamic terrorism and has come to be understood in contrast to the categories “radicals” and “extremists.” Simplistically, “moderate Muslims” generally refers to those who adhere to secular ideals such as democracy and freedom, gender equality, separation between mosque and state, just governance, and the vehement denunciation of violence (Rabasa et al. 2007). In contrast, “extremists” or “radicals” are understood as those Muslims who believe in an “Islamic state” and condone violence as a means to establish it.

According to these discourses, the participants could all be categorized as “moderate” Muslims. They are all in favor of democracy as practiced in the United States because they view it to be in accordance to the *shura* or the egalitarian political system in the Koran. Although critical of the United States’ foreign policy toward Muslim countries, they do not view the United States to be contradictory to Islamic values of freedom, social justice, and equality. Instead, they view American democracy as an example of just governance in compliance with Islamic ideals. Furthermore, all participants vehemently reject violence in the name of Islam. More importantly, the participants themselves used the term *moderate* to describe themselves in ways that reflected the general discourse surrounding the label. For example, when I asked Nazia, an Indian American college student about her religious upbringing, she said:

I would say it was kind of moderate. They [her parents] are not very conservative in the sense that I have to sit at home or they never followed the very strict rules, I guess. I don't know how to describe this. They are not liberal in the sense that they don't drink, and they don't let me drink. They have been very open-minded, especially after moving here [her parents came to the United States 10 years ago from India]. They have been more open to differing ideas. For example, different social issues. They are OK with me having a different point of view on certain things. More like open with the idea of me being independent.

Although Nazia uses the word *moderate*, she does so in relation to her own interpretations of “conservative” and “liberal.” Her parents are “moderate” because they are “not very conservative,” which she gauges in light of their attitude toward gender roles and implementation of Islamic rules in the household. Yet, at the same time, she does not think her parents are “liberal” as they strictly follow some Islamic regulations, like the restriction of alcohol and dating. Despite coming “closer” to religion on her own in college, Nazia goes on to say later in her interview that her religiosity tends to align with her parents, meaning that she too falls within her understanding of a “moderate” Muslim.

However, the label “moderate” is not accurate description or indicator of the participants’ religiosity. Although the participants overwhelmingly describe

themselves as “moderate,” their religiosity reflects the heterogeneity of the Muslim population and challenges the idea of a Muslim monolith. For example, while some participants regularly observe all five prayers, dietary and clothing regulations, and gender relations, their political views could be described as liberal progressive in that they espouse feminist ideals and support gay rights. Others are symbolic believers but have strict views against homosexuality based on religious beliefs. Again, some participants pray every day but consume alcohol and engage in premarital sex, both of which are forbidden according to Islamic scriptures. Many women wear liberal Western clothing but eat only halal food. Some wear the hijab but do not pray regularly, whereas some are not *hijabi* but wear modest clothing and try to pray five times a day. A few self-identify as gay or bisexual but still pray and read the Koran regularly. However, almost all participants, even those who do not practice Islam in their everyday lives, claim to be “culturally” and/or “politically” Muslim—meaning, they want social justice for all Muslims, even if they no longer spiritually identify with the religion.

In general, the participants colloquially use the label “moderate” to mean “not extremist” or “not terrorist.” This became clear in my interview with Tahira, a Bangladeshi American engineering major. In the excerpt below, Tahira describes herself as “moderate” to distinguish herself from Islamist terrorists, whom she views to be reinforcing Islamophobic stereotypes.

Tahira: When I see those things on the news I definitely feel angry. It’s making people who think Islam is a violent religion... it helps their case. It shows them like, O look, they blew this up; how can you say this is a peaceful religion? We are trying so hard to convince people that Muslims are not terrorists. There is a small minority who are... who does violent things, but our religion doesn’t teach us to do that. When those kinds of things happen, I get angry at the people who view our religion as violent but angrier at the people who actually did it. If you [referring to the terrorists] are Muslim, why don’t you understand that our religion doesn’t teach these things? So why are you making people view it like that!

Me: You say “we.” Who are “we”?

Tahira: Like, normal, moderate Muslims.

However, Mamdani’s work (2002, 2004) points to the slippery slope in using categories such as “moderate” and “extremist.” He argues that doing so shifts the cultural discourse from talking about terrorists and civilians to differentiating between “good Muslims” from “bad Muslims.” Such talk further entrenches the perceived link between Islam and terrorism in that it presumes terrorism as an “essential” characteristic of Muslims—those who have rejected this violent inclination and embraced secularism are the “good Muslims,” whereas the terrorists, or the “bad Muslims,” are expressing Muslims’ so-called characteristic tendency to inflict violence upon “the West” (Mamdani 2002:766). This binary also implies that the “good” or “moderate” Muslims who are rejecting terrorism are not being their “authentic” selves, and so should be always watched in case they give in to their “essentially” violent character.

My interview with Amir, a Pakistani American college senior, addressed the burden that the “moderate-extremist” categorization places upon Muslims to not only distinguish themselves from “bad Muslims” but also stress on the similarity

they share with other—that is, non-Muslim—civilians. For example, when I asked Amir, a Pakistani American college student, whether he would describe himself as a “moderate” Muslim, he appeared offended. “Uh, what do you mean by that? Who is a moderate Muslim?” he asked. “I don’t know. I am not sure. What do you think?” I replied. He slightly shook his head and said:

See, I think that word [*moderate*] is problematic. It’s like saying there are good Muslims and then there are bad Muslims and we have to be like, “Oh no, we are the good ones. We are just like you [non-Muslim Americans]! We believe the same things you guys do!” It’s as if the burden is on us to show them that we are not like the terrorists you see on TV blowing up things.

Despite these problematic aspects, describing oneself as “moderate” nonetheless has some instrumental value, especially in times of extreme Islamophobic tensions. Muslim Americans then have to either explicitly differentiate between them and the attackers or be in danger of being perceived as potential terrorists or, worse, exposed to Islamophobic attacks (Benchemsi 2015). However, to convincingly make their case in such moments of crises, Muslim Americans have to carve their visibility as “moderates” incrementally over time. Furthermore, being publicly perceived as “moderates” even on an everyday basis carries the benefits of being (at least conditionally) accepted by peers and coworkers. This dilemma of Muslims having to use a double-edged sword to procure a relatively more favorable or safer position in society reflects the embeddedness of Muslim Americans in the United States’ racialized power structure.

But *how* do participants make themselves visible as “moderates”? I found that they tend to do so by largely remaining silent about their political views in public, underlining their preference to keep indications of their “Muslim-ness” inside the private sphere. In the current sociopolitical climate, expressing political opinions or critiquing the U.S. media and foreign policies as biased against Muslims could not only reinforce their perceived “otherness” but also expose them to anti-Muslim backlash. Muslim-related politics thus are usually discussed in intimate, informal places where “Muslim” is the “normal, default, taken-for-granted” “unmarked” category (Brubaker et al. 2006:211).

For example, the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle was a main topic of conversation in intimate social gatherings at home, indicating that the participants were keeping informed about mainstream U.S. politics. Conversations ranged from Donald Trump’s anti-Muslim views and Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy in the Middle East to Bernie Sanders’s vocal support for Muslim Americans. In contrast, I was talking with Faizah, a Bangladeshi American, one day when I learned that she was going to go watch a movie with some friends. I asked if I knew those friends as she had introduced me to some of them earlier. She replied, “No, I don’t think so. They’re my white friends.” I asked what movie she was planning to watch. She replied, “*Pitch Perfect 2*.” I laughed, saying I would not have thought her to like “sugary teen movies.” Smiling, Faizah said, “Of course! I am not gonna go watch *American Sniper* with them!” When I asked why not, she said, “It’s too political. I don’t ever talk about politics when I am with them.” The movie Faizah referred to, *American Sniper*, was a biographical movie that had come out the year before about an American

marksman in the Iraq War with the highest number of kills in U.S. military history. Faizah, however, used the title to refer to all political movies concerning wars in the Middle East, a hotbed of geopolitics between “the West” and “the Muslim world.” Movies such as this might trigger discussions about Islam or Muslims and put Faizah on the spot, a situation she wanted to avoid when with her “white” friends. As such, Faizah chose to watch a movie from an apolitical, “safe” genre that highlights commonalities with her friends, such as their similar taste in pop culture. Here, “white” is implied to mean “non-Muslim” and “non-South Asian” as I later learned that this group of friends included Latinos as well.

If political issues did come up when among friends from outside their religious-ethnic communities, many participants opted to listen quietly to gauge others’ views of Muslim-related issues, even if the conversation was not directly about Muslims. For instance, at a group study session during student government elections at a college campus, two members from opposing student political parties brought up the ongoing debate surrounding Palestinian and Israeli rights, a contentious topic that had created divisions within the campus community. The three Muslim students who were there did not contribute to the discussion although I knew from my conversations with them earlier that they were well informed about the ongoing debate and had already decided to vote for the party supporting Palestinian rights.

However, the strategy to remain distant from political issues in public renders the participants politically passive. For instance, even if the college-going participants were to encounter Islamophobic interactions, their parents have advised them to “never get in fights” and “just walk away.” Parents also instruct their children not to engage in political organizations, instead stressing the importance of education and building a stable career, preferably in a science, technological, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field. The common mind-set among parents is that the children can enter politics when they are “ready”—meaning, professionally successful with social recognition and status.

Constructing “Muslim American”

Visibility strategies to appear “moderate” are also practiced by Muslim organizations, such as ISNA. However, in contrast to the strategies at the individual level, being visible as “moderate” is part of the organizations’ larger project to construct a “Muslim American” identity that would allow members to actively participate in American public and political life. By portraying Islam as a peaceful and moderate religion that is compatible with American values, Muslim leaders aim to establish an “American” brand of Islam that can overcome the limitations of political passivity and pave the way for Muslims’ engagement in mainstream U.S. politics.

“Constructing Muslim American identity” is one of the most recurring and extensively covered themes addressed in the *Islamic Horizons* issues. These publications frequently include columns penned by Muslim scholars, educators, and activists who address the need to construct a Muslim identity specifically for the U.S. context, one that would highlight the compatibility between Islam and American

values. For instance, a Muslim leader and educator writes, “Muslim Americans should accept and Islamize those cultural symbols and traditions of mainstream culture that do not contradict Islam.”

The growing number of Islamic schools, which offer an alternative to public schools, is a key way through which Muslim leaders aim to inculcate a “Muslim American” identity. In their view, public schools do not help parents wishing to raise their children as Muslims—“at best they will ignore” that dimension of the children’s identity. In contrast, Islamic schools claim to teach students basic cognitive skills, such as math, as well as how to become “better Muslims” and “God-conscious Americans.” Students are supposedly taught “universal” values of freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. From this view, Islam is a religion that promotes peace, pluralism, intellectual freedom, and tolerance for all—the same core values in the American ethos of freedom and democracy.

Islamic schools are thus spaces that construct and distinguish an “American” brand of Islam—one that is “moderate” and tolerant (as opposed to religiously and politically extremist), respectful of freedom and pluralism (i.e., equal human rights for all), and in favor of democracy (as opposed to dictatorship and military autocracy). Efforts at defining an “American” Islam based on these characteristics indicate how Muslim leaders are trying to differentiate the Muslim American community from other Muslims abroad, especially those in the politically turbulent and nondemocratic Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. One of the magazine issues alludes to this difference by saying, “Transplanting a specific response to the colonialist threat in Muslim countries is not appropriate in the American context” and that “Islamic schools must foster a healthy God-conscious identity that is compatible with America’s pluralistic culture.” Furthermore, Islamic schools claim to act as “buffers against extremism” by inculcating in their students an interpretation of Islam specifically for the American context.

Pluralism has been one of the main aspects emphasized in the community’s effort to establish an “American” brand of Islam. For example, ISNA is aware that the Muslim American community is embedded in the racially charged political sphere in the United States, and that that has produced fissures among different Muslim groups. Partly because of these contested group boundaries, ISNA has sometimes struggled to present a unified front, which would presumably highlight its compatibility with America’s pluralistic multicultural ethos. For instance, ISNA has usually downplayed the racial tensions that have historically existed between immigrant and black Muslims. Then, after years of silence, ISNA made a hugely publicized gesture to “bridge” the divide between black and immigrant Muslims by publishing an *Islamic Horizons* issue showcasing African American Muslims. An overall aim was to project ISNA’s image as a tolerant, multicultural group that is unified against Islamophobia.

As for the “Muslim American” identity, the main goal of this category is to embed Muslims more firmly in U.S. civic and political life. Rather than shrinking to the private sphere as Muslim individuals have been shown to do, ISNA uses the “Muslim American” platform to encourage its readers to actively engage in local and national politics. For instance, an issue of *Islamic Horizons* encouraged readers to engage in policy discussions and lobby for availability of halal food in fast food

franchises instead of silently consuming vegetarian alternatives. During presidential election cycles, issues of *Islamic Horizons* inform its readers on how each candidate's platform impacts the Muslim community, encouraging them to actively participate in the elections. Each year, ISNA sends envoys to meet political leaders in Washington to reinforce the image of Muslim Americans as a politically engaged constituency that is peace-loving, loyal, and law abiding. Moreover, to foster political awareness among the Muslim American youth, ISNA, with other Muslim organizations, arranges annual Islamic youth conferences, scholarships, and internships that train young Muslims on how to gain leadership roles in their lives, engage with politics in Washington, forge coalitions, and advocate for civil rights.

Muslim American leaders also encourage readers of its publications to voice their opinions on international politics concerning Islam and Muslims. Each issue of *Islamic Horizons* usually has two political sections: "Politics and Society," which covers topics of domestic politics that ISNA thinks Muslim Americans should pay attention to, and "The Muslim World" or "Around the World," which covers Muslim-related issues abroad, in places such as China, Palestine, Libya, Myanmar, France, and Australia. By spotlighting Muslim-related global issues, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, and advertising charities to raise funds for such causes, ISNA aims to foster the platform that "Muslim Americans"—although distinctively "American" and "moderate"—are nonetheless part of the *ummah* or a global community of Muslims. One objective of such a platform is to allow Muslims in America to actively participate in Muslim-related issues in foreign places without running the risk of seeming "un-American."

Furthermore, leaders urge Muslim individuals to strategically utilize their visibility to promote a positive image of Islam, dispel ignorance about the religion, and represent "Muslim Americans" by providing guidance through ISNA's publications on how to do so on an everyday basis. For instance, one magazine issue focused specifically on how Muslim Americans should talk about shari'a law, a topic that continues to stoke nationalist and Islamophobic fears in many parts of America, instead of remaining silent in fear of a backlash. The magazine provided information to readers about parts in the shari'a that highlight democracy, equality, and freedom—values compatible with the U.S. constitution.

CONCLUSION

This article tells the story of how Muslim Americans, a racialized and hypervisible minority that has been historically perceived as "outsiders" in the United States, have to resort to finding ways to be seen favorably by mainstream society, using resources from a largely adverse climate of heightened security and control. This security atmosphere, which targets "Muslims" as "national security threats," has not only prevailed since 9/11 but has also intensified in recent years because of domestic and global terrorists attacks by ISIS, and rising levels of Islamophobia, particularly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle (The Bridge Initiative 2016). However, the effects of the "Othering" and targeted surveillance of "Muslims" spill over to a wide range of other religious and ethnic categories, which have

been homogenized through processes of racialization for decades. Even more broadly, the construction of “Muslims” as the “enemy within” serves to reinforce a security atmosphere where social and political relations are based on discourses of insecurity, fear, anxiety, and suspicion, and can eventually lead to self-policing, profiling, civil rights violations, erosion of democratic values, and long-term inequalities.

In this environment, Muslim Americans, at both individual and organizational levels, strategically render some aspects of themselves visible and invisible to the public in efforts to resist against negative stereotypes imposed on them. At the individual level, many Muslim Americans try to distance themselves from the “Muslim” identity category by largely relegating religion to the private sphere and striving to avoid any indicators of their “Muslim-ness” in day-to-day public interactions. However, if the need to publicly address their religion does come up, such as in the event of an Islamist terrorist attack, they do not forsake their “Muslim” identity altogether but qualify themselves as “moderate” Muslims. Making oneself visible as “moderate,” in turn, involves self-policing on an everyday basis that includes avoiding political conversations and highlighting apolitical similarities with other Americans.

At the organizational level, Muslim leaders also deploy visibility strategies to appear “moderate,” but with the goal to insert Muslims into mainstream U.S. politics as active participants. They strive to do so by constructing a “Muslim American” identity category, using organizations such as ISNA and Islamic schools. “Moderate” is but one component of this identity category, which overall aims to establish an American brand of Islam that is compatible with American values of freedom, multiculturalism, and democracy. In this project, Muslim American community leaders, educators, and organizations aim to on the one hand “Islamize” the components of mainstream American culture that do not contradict Islam. On the other hand, they present tenets of Islamic belief, such as shari’a law, in an “Americanized” fashion. Based on this identity platform, religious and community leaders urge Muslim Americans to advocate for Islam and demand for their rights as “Americans.”

Some results of mobilization using this identity platform have been seen recently in the public stage, with young Muslim Americans campaigning for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination cycle, Muslim Americans—especially women—taking an active role in the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, and Muslims joining mass protests against Trump’s Muslim travel ban. Future research would need to assess the extent to which this community-wide effort to construct a “Muslim American” identity has been successful in organizational coalition building, civic engagement, political participation, and the empowerment of individual Muslims in daily life.

However, these identity-making strategies have a double edge. Appearing as apolitical, peace-loving “moderates”—although useful in distancing from terrorist attackers in moments of crises and getting by with peers and coworkers in daily life—serves to politically silence Muslims in the long run. And the organizations striving to find ways of acceptance in mainstream society as “Americans” by emphasizing the compatibility between Muslim and American ways of life could be viewed as

being largely conformist to the disciplinary power of the security regime. This double-sidedness of Muslim Americans' visibility strategies reflects both the precarious position of Muslims in the United States as well as the pervasive force of the post-9/11 security atmosphere.

Finally, this article presents both a theoretical lens and an empirical account for understanding Muslims' identification processes since 9/11, and, more recently, after the 2016 U.S. presidential election as Americans grapple with questions of race, religion, and nationalism. The labels "Muslim," "moderate Muslim," and "Muslim American" are too often taken for granted, with calls for a "Muslim ban" from one side, and civil rights marches carrying pictures of a *hijabi* clad in an American flag on the other. The findings of this article provide insight into how these labels are the outcome of ongoing everyday struggles of being Muslims in America.

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