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# American Jihad: Understanding The Social Backlash Against Muslim Americans through the Context of Ethnotheatre

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## THE AMERICAN JIHAD

### Opening

Six actors standing at three music stands.

### Sam

When I moved to India for junior high, there were Hindu-Muslim riots going on. I remember seeing burnt cars on the road. I was really young, and I remember thinking what, what if my family was in that car. I was afraid because I had lived a sheltered life here in America. I was afraid and when I asked friends, neighbors, family about why this was happening, they always angrily said that it was the Muslims fault. And that we should blame the Muslims for what is happening. But it was hard for me to accept. Because this was after September 11th and I remember flying to and from India five times in the two years that I lived there. I remember feeling like I shouldn't be on the plane. Like everyone was blaming me for their anxiety. And as a twelve year old boy, I felt guilty. I felt guilty for making others anxious, even though I had not committed any crime. That's what Hindus were doing to Muslims and vice versa. I didn't understand how religious views hindered people's view of humanity. It took a toll on my identity because I didn't know how to fully accept Hinduism when I had seen so much hate in its actions. It wasn't until I came to America that I realized my frustration in India was rooted in the fact that there was no dialogue, but only hostile actions.

### Imam Mustafa

To be American is a matter of identity in relation to the place that you reside, the values that you carry in your heart. The identity is also connected to your religious reference that all earth is a creation of God and land is made to be a place to serve the lord. So it doesn't matter if you are in Mecca or in los Vegas (laughter). A person can carry his faith wherever he goes. . So I say very comfortably that I am American, meaning that it is my identity, as someone who chose to live here. The values that are practiced in this country goes along my values as a Muslim.

### Tanwir (ISU SENIOR)

First thing in my mind went to is culture. You follow the culture of what Americans are perceived to be as. What does that even mean then? Huh. What does it mean to be an American? O shit! Um....Well I love living here in this country. I considered myself an American. I was born and raised here. I went to school here. (whispers) Fuck that's a loaded question.

VICKIE (WHEATON STUDENT)

I used to hate Americans to be honest. I would say it. When I moved back here I like I hated America. I hate it. I hate Americans. I liked certain things. I liked having anything I wanted. That's how I felt here in a lot of ways. It was like you can have whatever you want.

Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

Having so many different backgrounds working together. Like us sitting here we're from completely different backgrounds but there's an open-mindedness. The country was created on freedoms.

Aalimah (U of I Senior)

To me being an American means freedom, and it means freedom to do whatever I want to do with my life, to have the opportunities that are given to me in this country would definitely not be given to me in a different country.

Islam's Role in America

IMAM MUSTAFA

Islam is the general umbrella of your understanding of life. It is a way of life. Muslims believe that every person needs to regulate his life in three dimensions:

your relationship with god, your relationship with yourself, and your relationship with people around you. So Islam comes and gives the basics of how you deal with these areas of these dimensions. Being an American is in relation to how you deal with people around you and how you deal with yourself. So and that part of your relationship with God you can do that anywhere on Earth, doesn't matter where you are. And the relationship where you deal with yourself, most likely you are able to handle that wherever you reside, it doesn't matter. So the references of the Holy Quran and the tradition of the prophet will not be an issue when it comes to spirituality or when it comes to salvage consciousness. But how we deal with others, here you will be acting on behalf of what your Islamic faith with tell you and then what people around you would see something different. It is only because I saw that there was a common ground between what I saw and Islam is as values are and between what made the first people who resided in this country and made the constitution here really connected to the values that makes the states unique as a country. It is because of this interaction I feel that Islam and being a US citizen go in harmony.

Vickie (WHEATON STUDENT)

I think about Islam much more intellectually than I used to. Maybe more in terms of what the basis in what they believe, in the basis for what they strive their lives like. To me I think about it and I think that they have values that are in some ways similar to Christianity and some ways different. I think they really uphold believing in one god, which is similar to my faith. I think they uphold the importance of prayer, which is also similar to the Christian faith. They have a holy book, they have... so I think about it in terms of what is different, but I also think that on a spiritual level, there is a point where I think that it is a religion is separate from myself. Its not something that I have any part of because I identify myself as a Christian and so other religions are not a part of me. If I believe that I have the truth, I'm identifying that others might not. So I think in a way that I would think about it, its easy to lump it with other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism. It is kind of in that category for me.

Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

Well with me, I guess with my background, I went to an Islamic private school for fourteen years back in Chicago. I was there my whole life so I was sheltered to some extent and it created my Muslim identity. This country was founded on freedoms and being an American you can be of any background and that's what's awesome here because you're an instrumental part of society regardless of what religion you

follow and whatnot. One of the projects we organized, the fast-a-thon, during Gandhi week and we had six or seven organizations working together. The funds that we raised went to the Horn of Africa, an organization that donated money to prevent poverty and hunger in Africa. It shows an example that you don't have to be from the same exact culture or religion to be part of society and work together.

Aalimah (U of I Senior)

Islam is not only my religion, but its just so much more. Its my entire world. It's the one thing that's been constant in my life since I was born. I feel extremely privileged to live here. And I love this country I will never leave it. This is home. And so even the fact that the time that we're living in now Muslims are looked at in a harsh way. The fact that I'm able to live in this country, have this conversation with you in a public place, in a university that I'm going to to better myself, to educate myself, so that I can work to become something, and you know become a part of society. That in itself is such a beautiful thing and that would not happen in other places. So I love America and I love my religion and over here they mix and I feel like that is an extremely powerful and beautiful thing.

TANWIR (ISU SENIOR)

It is a way of life. It is peace, and off of that it entails so much more where it comes down to, what we call our five beliefs. Praying five times a day, Fasting, haaj, giving money to the poor, I always forget the fifth one. I'm an asshole (laugh). It's what my parents taught me when I was a kid. Respecting one another. Doing acts of kindness. Being thankful for what you have and avoiding stuff like greed selfishness. I guess it comes down to the creed of every good religious belief. That's what resonated with me. Being thankful. But honestly I consider myself a bad muslim because there are so many things that I do wrong. And its funny because I was talking to someone about this the other day. I was talking about religion and I was like you know I'm a bad Muslim. I do things that are not allowed in my religion like drinking. And hes like stop stop, and this guys a philosophy major so , haha, and he said I wouldn't say you're a bad Muslim. You don't go out and rob people, kill people.

9/11

IMAM MUSTAFA

Safety is my issue. I am concerned that there are extremists in my community. I will be the first one to report them to the law enforcement agencies because if he does something wrong I'm going to be the first one paying the price and I'm not going to allow that to happen. We have a tradition from the prophets words that says the example of people who don't bother and those who bother is like the people who go into a ship. Some people sit on a deck and others sit on the inside. The others inside say why should we go up and get water to wash and shower. We'll just open a hole in the ship and get the water in. So, when those on the deck that let them do that then everyone will sink down.

Aalimah (U of I Senior)

I was actually getting ready in the kitchen, eating breakfast, and I don't think anybody was home, I think my parents had already left for work. And I went to school really close to my house, it was walking distance. So I was just chillen. And I remember was I pouring some cereal. My mom or dad had left the TV on like before they left. And it was the world news. And I remember some segment was coming on. I don't remember exactly what it was but it was something really dumb, like puppies or something. Or something that should really not be on the news. And So I'm watching this on the news and I'm twelve so I was like oh this is cute . And I'm like REALLY into it okay? So I'm watching this thing about puppies and I'm like oh this is so awesome. And I'm pouring my milk and all of a sudden they the stop the thing about puppies and they go to breaking news and they're like "oh one of the the world trade centers is on fire." Apparently a plane crashed into it. Blah blah blah. They didn't know anything right? And so they're just talking about that and there showing the footage and I am twelve years old and I really didn't realize, for some reason it really didn't register that there were people in the building. And so I'm like that so dumb. In my head I'm like what an idiot plane drier, not driver, whatever right? Haha pilot. Yeah. Why would they crash into a building, like you can't see that? I was like whatever, they'll fix it. It did not click at all what was going on, or that there were people dying. And so I'm getting annoyed because I want to watch the thing about puppies. So I'm waiting for them to back to the other thing. So I'm watching watching as I was watching it, like live TV. The second plane hit. And that's when I got really scarred.

IMAM MUSTAFA

(laughter) Believe it or not, I was on a plane. I was on a united flight going to Dallas and at that time they had just allowed people to use their phones while taxiing. While we were on the plane we didn't know anything. Not after we landed and people started picking up the phone, the passengers started asking each other, "you know what happened and what happened?" So then a sheriff came out and made the announcement. It got really worse when I called my family and we used to live right here next to the mosque. And my wife told me about more than fifteen hundred people marching around the mosque with bats and chains and chanting slogans "go back home" and "go back where you came from" and we had right here in this mosque the police from 9 or 10 suburbs had to bring backup and swat teams and for three days it was monitored 24/7 fearing that someone....Not until the police started ticketing the protesters did the demonstrations really disperse. So I could not fly back so I rented a car and drove back to be with my family. You know at the time I had a couple of young children.

TANWIR (ISU SENIOR)

I was actually home sick. I didn't go to school that day. I was watching cartoons on channel 11. My mom called and I always let the machine pick up first. So she yelled at me. Come pick up the phone I knew something was going on in America and it wasn't all clear to me because it was all going so fast. She was like stay inside stay inside don't pick up the phone for anyone unless its family. I was just in a state of confusion. I knew something happened in New York with a building but everything was a blur. Then my aunt called me and she had a very different approach than my mother. I let the machine answer and she started freaking out. She was like go into the basement and don't talk to anyone. I realize now why she was panicked. The story everybody heard was Islamic terrorist. You know. That's the only memory I had of that day. I knew that it wasn't me. I knew that, even if it's in the name of Islam, it wasn't me. That couldn't be what I considered to be a good Muslim.

IMAM MUSTAFA

It was a phase of diffusing the fear and getting people back into normal life. It really shifted how we thought we did business as a mosque. I believe most of the Mosques in the US, 9/11 was like AD and BC. In a way that how Muslims viewed their role in the states prior to 9/11 versus how they see their role after 9/11. Prior to 9/11 minority was just in the business of surviving, 8 to 5 jobs, put food on the table, you know, this is a nice cool country. Numbers were growing but we were not paying attention to the civic life out there to really promote Islam as what it is. As they say, if you're not on the table, you're on the menu.

Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

When it happened I was in class, my social studies class actually. I got a call, like go to the office someone's here to pick you up and my sisters there like we're going home I'm here to pick you up. I was the first student to get picked up. The person that came to pick me up he was like my neighbor and so we used to carpool together and he's like yeah there's two buildings that just got bombed and I get home and I turn on the TV and my mom is watching TV as well and we saw what happened. For the rest of the week, our school was closed. With my school there's a mosque attached to it. And there was a lot of law enforcement protecting our mosque. During the early stages of the Afghanistan war, there was actually a big rock that was thrown into our window, it was a huge rock I still don't even know how it was like picked up or whatever, but it was thrown into our building and the window was completely shattered. I mean there was some retaliation in that sense. I guess it stems from what they were going through at the time. Apparently the one with the rock, his brother was actually deployed in Afghanistan and it was his way of getting his anger out. It doesn't justify it at all but it goes back to why it happened.

IMAM MUSTAFA

People love to talk about the effects, no one wants to talk about the causes. As an American, I feel that many of the wars happening around the world beyond our borders here in the US has a lot to do with our foreign policy this has been debated in the candidates running for presidency. Are we a police to go around the world every problem we should put our noses in it and take sides. Our foreign policy in the US for the past 50 to 100 years have been in support of regimes in the Muslim land that were dictatorships. And if you are a victim living in Egypt or Tunisia, why is all this spring going on? Everybody loves what America represents, but everyone tells you they don't like how they support our tyrants. This leaves a lot of space for people to use that as a means to go extreme and retaliation.

VICKIE (WHEATON STUDENT)

My parents are missionaries so I was in Nigeria at the time. I was more aware of the conflict in Jos in Nigeria. It's so interesting because the political conflict in Nigeria affects the religious groups there. Because it's instigated by something political going on, but it ends up looking like it's Muslim versus Christian. Which is very



interesting, because at the time of September 11th, we were going through a time where we were afraid of being attacked. Not attacked, but we couldn't have free reign outside because of the conflict going on so we were afraid people would climb over the walls because we are a missionary community. And they knew we were Christian. And it turns into a very hostile Christian versus Muslim atmosphere, where people burn down churches, people burn down mosques. And as soon as something happens, you blame the other side. And I remember distinctly a friend of ours had a Muslim friend who hid inside their house. It sounded so scary to me but I remember thinking, Yeah that's awesome! Get the Muslims in your house and save them. Hearing about it later, it felt like, oh this was on a huge scale of what was happening in America. How religious ties are immediately talked about to mask the political conflict. The questions become about what is the relationship between these terrorist groups and their religion and what is the relationship between America and faith.

## IMAM

I think we had issues nationwide. We started feeling the heat, nationwide, when the number of attacks were growing. I believe that there was an incident here in the mall. The woman who attacked the other woman was sentenced to do community service hours. But there were two things that were bothering us as a community. One was the set of laws that followed 9/11. From the patriot Act, the watch list of people on flights not to travel, 80 percent of it was for Muslims. Singling out, you know 'this is not prejudice or racism this is profiling'. There were a lot of areas that started bothering Muslims and making them feel as if they were second-class.

## Backlash

## TANWIR (ISU SENIOR)

I was at the grocery store with my mom. And at that time my mom wore a hijab. I think this was in eighth grade. We were at the grocery store. And there were some European women who were standing behind my mom. Just out of nowhere, they were just being snarky and making fun of my mom. Right behind her. And my mom was ignoring them and biting her tongue. She finally turned to them and confronted them and that lady was like, "you fucking terrorists, you fucking Muslim people". There were two women and one of them was holding the other one back and it became nasty really fast. The woman grabbed my mom's scarf and pulled her hair. She was screaming, "you don't need to wear the scarf." Watching that was disturbing, first how my mom had to go through that and also what was going

through that woman's mind that made her think that we were the devil's children. You know?

VICKIE (WHEATON STUDENT)

Fear, for sure. Fear of one another. We fear each other. I mean. I look at a person and I feel a certain thing. Depending on the way they carry themselves, depending on what their race is. I'm automatically putting filters up. And that person is doing it to me. I mean it's impossible not to. It's a part of who somebody is.

Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

We identify ourselves as Muslim and American as well and it was like an attack on both. It was like an attack on Muslims who wanted to live a more moderate life. Both my mom and sister they cover their head, they both wear the hijab. There was this one time we were driving down and we're stopped at a red light. It was me my mom and my sister. An this guy he's in a huge pick up and he rolls down his window and starts yelling "Take that shit off take that shit off!" And cussing them out.(beat) My neighbor approached my mom and asked her if we were part of the Taliban. (laughs). And she was like no we're normal people. I mean obviously there were people that were curious at the time.

IMAM MUSTAFA

Everyone was talking about us but we were not talking about ourselves. Everyone was paint us with all kind of names and faces and we were not doing much to change that picture. The only way we can survive as a minority is to go out an engage let no fear stop you from practicing your rights as a US citizen. So it was a matter of fading out from this fear and thinking positively as to see where do we go from here. Many of the protesters were from a neighborhood around here. We went and opened up a food pantry in that neighborhood. So the same people who came and marched, later on saw Muslim males and females giving them food, just to show that we are here as your neighbors, as your brothers and sisters. So I think when people don't know you, they can assume anything of you, but when people know you...

VICKIE (WHEATON STUDENT)

If you think about America as a white protestant nation, that's kind of where it began. If America is a mixing bowl that has that in it, its got the white protestant thing, then you've got other cultures coming in and being mixed into that. I mean we identify ourselves as American. At the same time I struggle, because I think about Asian-Americans, and Indian-Americans. I think it's difficult for a lot of them to say yes I'm an American because you say no I'm Asian-American, or Indian-American. Because you're constantly being asked "No, where are you really from?" Why do I think the Anglo-, you know, white is more American? I don't think I do, but maybe I do. I don't know if I do but I think maybe I do. Without even thinking about it truly. And yet I think of an African American person as being an American, I don't think of them being African. But they've had a longer history of integration I guess. With everything that's happened, we're not even allowed to question that they're American, whereas with Asian Americans...I think its still primarily whites, Hispanics and blacks, is what I understand from it, but I don't know if that's necessarily true still.

ADIL

Muslims were put in that spotlight, like before it was like they were a part of society, no one really knew about Muslim identity. With September 11<sup>th</sup> we were jolted into the spotlight and it became incumbent on the Muslim to become more known in society. So there were a lot of interfaith events that went on. We had, at our mosque, numerous interfaith events and we used to go to interfaith events at churches and what not. It opened up a lot of dialogue. Because obviously, the attacks were under the name of Islam in that sense that, like, the attackers were Muslim, but it wasn't a testament of what Islam truly is, so it was our job to dispel that and I think that it kind of led to a better understanding of Islam and knowing what Islam is really about.

Civil Jihad

Aalimah (U of I Senior)

I was in seventh or eighth grade. And we had to write papers on controversial topics so mine was about euthanasia. And this other girl's was Islam. I don't know how this is a controversial topic, but okay. She did her paper on Islam, whatever. So we also had to get up at the end of writing our papers and give a mini presentation on it. It was so obvious that this girl hadn't done any research at all. And so she gets up

there. And she shows the picture of the Kabbah. In Saudi Arabia, Muslims go every year to this pilgrimage called haaj, and every Muslim is only required to do it once in their lifetime. The Kabbah is a tiny structure, its not that big. It's a symbol for god's throne on earth. It's the direction all Muslims pray in. And so they'll go for whatever ritual is done there. So she puts up this picture of the Kabbah. And she's just like, yeah Muslims pray to this black box. I'm not even joking. I'm not even joking. That's literally what she said okay. And I'm like what? I'm just like okay. I'm like that so freaking weird. I'm looking around and im like...first of all no ones even paying attention so like, im pretty sure no one even caught that, but I was so offended. So I was looking around and I'm like o my god theres already all of this crap about Muslims on the news and now she's going to tell people that we pray to black boxes. And like what the hell you know? So she keeps on talking. The next thing that she does. She shows a picture of bloody people. And then she's like yeah Muslims go to Iraq to vote for Saddam Hussein with their blood. Hahaha. And I was like WHAT is going on right now. Like is this real life? And she keeps on going and I'm like this is ridiculous. So she finishes and then she says (in mocking voice) any questions? So I raise my hand and she calls on me. And I stood up, I stood up. And I was like "I don't have any questions but I have some comments." And then I just went off I don't remember what I said but I got super sarcastic. I was like I'm Muslim and I didn't go to Iraq to vote for Saddam Hussein with my blood. Also that black box is called the Kabbah it represents god. Muslims pray to god not black boxes. It was ridiculous and then for the rest of the day people kept coming up to me and they were like (mocking voice) "OMG I heard what happened with you and Nicole and we're totally on your side" And I was like okay? This isn't like a fight but cool thanks. I guess it was a big deal. But now everyone in that class knows that Muslims don't pray to black boxes.

Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

I guess people do approach us at those events, especially when that dialogue is ongoing. People approach us and they try to justify, or prove to everybody that we were at fault as well when it came to September 11ths and that Islam is a religion of evil and terror. And also this all kind of goes back to the movement of Islamophobia.

TANWIR (ISU SENIOR)

The word jihad has been strung out and completely used in the wrong terms. Because jihad simply meant struggle whether it mean the struggle for survival or

struggle for your faith. Go back a little, I remember distinctly being taught in Muslim school, when prophet Mohammed said jihad was meant for survival because other tribes were attacking them. So he came up with these rules you don't hurt women, you don't hurt children, and you don't hurt nature. You know? So that's what was imprinted in my head. So when people use jihad to talk about 9/11 I remembered realizing that that was not the way it was supposed to be used. What the media is feeding the people, that's not the jihad.

## IMAM MUSTAFA

There were a lot of area that started bothering Muslims and making them feel as if they were second-class. The other one was the cause to block any muslims to build any mosques to worship. If you add to that the ground zero mosques and the burning of the holy qurans in florida, there were many mosques who were trying to get a permit to build a religious institution to worship god, now it has become an issue. It wasn't just some neighbors who might be concerned about traffic issues. It has become a movement. Media publicized. 'Look how many mosques are being built, they're trying to implement shari allah, they're growing in big numbers. They're bringing fear into the Muslim presence. Which really is very hurtful on one side and challenging that you cannot face someone's fears if someone is forced into fearing you because he is ignorant of you.

## Future of Islam

### Mushir (MUSLIM Student ASSOCIATION LEADER)

There are a lot of people who haven't met a Muslim and have this idea, as pastor Terry Jones said, a work of Satan. But when there are more pastor Terry Jones out there, there should be more Muslims out trying to better the lines of communication and bettering the ideas that are going into people's heads. I guess getting rid of that prejudice and not judging people because they're Muslims right off the bat. I guess that's easier said and done when the media is bombarding you. I guess at an individual level, not to say anything to say something that they don't know about. If they've never met a Muslim they have no right to call them a Terrorist. I think the thing that hurts me the most is when people are ignorant.

### TANWIR (ISU SENIOR)

When I was in the eighth grade and we were talking about the red scare during the communism. My teacher was teaching and she stopped and she talked about how America is going into a green scare. And that always struck me. Even though we've come such a long way as a country and as people in general in this world, but at times we can be stupid. That's what I'm afraid of, people taking out a group of people, Muslims in general, and saying that they're wrong.

Aalimah (U of I Senior)

Well...I don't see this issue of targeting Muslims going away anytime soon. I guess in my lifetime or my children's lifetime it will be a stigma. Or it will still be around. Or at least until the government picks on someone else. I mean everyone has their turn right? I mean the Japanese had their turn, the Jewish people had their turn. It's just my turn right now. And I happen to be alive in this time period.

VICKIE (WHEATON STUDENT)

I don't believe that 9/11 was the blockade to the reconciliation, but i do think it was resistance. I mean I think we are trying. As we are trying still to reconcile what happened between us and our African American brothers. We're still being accused and guilty of being racist. I think inside of us we view others with fear, and we shouldn't ignore the feelings that we have, we should acknowledge what we feel and question why we feel that way. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done.

IMAM MUSTAFA

Let the people know who you are. Be out there speaking of what you are and the truth of Islam. The people who hijacked the planes at 9/11, they hijacked Islam first. So there is a responsibility of the Muslim community to present the real picture of Islam out there.

SAM

Last month, Shaima Alawadi was found in her home in San Diego beaten with a tire iron. There was a letter next to her body that said, "Go back to your country you terrorist". Shaima's death really broke my heart. It wasn't fair what was done to her, and it was frustrating to know that her assailant didn't understand that this was her country. This was where she belonged. This is where her beliefs belonged. Unfortunately, Shaima falls into the number of thousands of violent attacks on Muslims. It seems as if there is an endless cycle of hate in this country and in this world really. And its because we don't make the effort to try to understand one another, so instead we just try to control everyone around us. This is part of our struggle, to come in turns with who we are. However, our struggles do not define us, how we deal with those struggles does. By having a conversation you combating ignorance. This is the only way we can achieve that freedom. What does it mean to be an American? This...

(motions between the audience and himself)

This is what is means to be an American.