

Islam as a Platform for Politics: The Post-9/11 U.S. Conservative Popular Security Discourse

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Abstract

Why, in the aftermath of 9/11, did a segment of the U.S. popular security experts, political elite, media, and other institutions classify not just al-Qaeda but Islam itself as a security threat, thereby countering the prevailing professional consensus and White House policy that maintained a distinction between terrorism and Islam? Why did this “politically incorrect” or counternarrative expand and degenerate into a scare over the country’s “Islamization” by its tiny Muslim population? Why is this security myth so convincing that legislators in two dozen states introduced bills to prevent the Shariah’s spread and a Republican presidential front-runner exclaimed: “I believe Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world as we know it”?

This analysis offers a framework that conceptualizes popular discourses as highly interested fields of political struggle, deepens the prevailing characterization of this part of the U.S. popular discourse as “Islamophobia,” and analyzes how it has functioned politically at the domestic level. Specifically, it examines how a part of the conservative elite and institutions, political entrepreneurs already involved in the ongoing culture wars, seized upon Islam in the emotion-laden wake of 9/11 as another opportune site to advance their struggle against their domestic political opponents, “the Left,” and the more progressive societal institutions and culture in general.

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Introduction

Why, in the aftermath of 9/11, did a segment of U.S. popular security experts, political elite, media, and other institutions classify not just al-Qaeda but the entire religion of Islam as a security threat, thereby countering the prevailing professional consensus and White House policy that maintained a distinction between terrorism and Islam? Then, why sometime around 2009 did this segment of U.S. popular security discourse on the topic of Islam degenerate into what we might call a “Green Scare,” following the historical “Yellow Peril” and “Red Scares” over perceived threats from the East?

According to this more conspiratorial and paranoid security narrative, the threat was no longer an external one from Muslim extremist groups abroad, but an internal one, christened “Islamization” by the country’s virtually invisible Muslim-American population, which was purportedly engaged in a “stealth jihad” to impose Islamic law upon the nation’s 300 million mostly Christian and secular citizens against their collective will. At the apogee of this scare, legislators in two dozen states introduced bills to prevent the spread of Islamic law, and a Republican presidential front-runner exclaimed: “I believe Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world as we know it.”

Offering a framework that conceptualizes popular discourses as highly interested fields of political struggle, this analysis deepens the prevailing characterization of this segment of U.S. popular discourse as “Islamophobia” by examining how it functioned politically at the domestic level. Specifically, it examines how a segment of U.S. conservative elite and institutions – political entrepreneurs who were already involved in the U.S. culture war – seized Islam in the emotion-laden wake of 9/11 as yet another opportune field to advance their ongoing struggle against their domestic political opponents, “the Left,” and the more progressive societal institutions and culture broadly.

Conceptualizing Security Discourse as a Platform for Politics

It seems that our first inclination is to explain any new complex social phenomenon as the newest manifestation of something old and familiar or, as the old adage says, as pouring new wine into old wineskins. The literature that has emerged on this popular discourse reflects this tendency, characterizing it as the “new McCarthyism,”¹ the “new face of discrimination,”² the “new Orientalism,”³ the “new anti-Semitism,”⁴ and so on, before finally forming a consensus around the term for a newest form of western xenophobia: Islamo-

phobia.⁵ But although this discourse's pejorative themes largely substantiate these characterizations, it also contains many prominent features of yet another "new" variant to a very old category of practice: politics.

To be clear, we are not dismissing the other more purely racist and xenophobic ideologies around which the literature has tended to close. All discourse is assembled during the process of what Mikhail Bakhtin described as *heteroglossia*, the combination of other existing statements and constructs.⁶ Therefore, we might assume that this post-9/11 popular discourse was produced this way, in a kind of bricolage, or by selecting elements of various ideologies. And this is exactly what we find. Proceeding in grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, we observe that this discourse exhibits themes in addition to those that might be categorized as the newest form of racism and xenophobia. In addition, these themes were distinctly political, even reflective of a specific American political ideology.

But we also find something else: The more specific and critical observation is how this discourse, located at the nexus of Islam and security, functioned as a field of political struggle and as a platform for politics. A survey of the Muslim-American leadership, conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) at the end of the post-9/11 decade, revealed its belief that this minority faith community was "being used as a political tool,"⁷ for "we are no longer considered a community as much as a platform."

All battling forces meet on such "platforms," namely, on fields of opportunity, which are often shaped or prepared expressly for that purpose. Moreover, the literature contains a great deal of material that rigorously shows how an emerging public discourse about a new or enhanced topic of societal importance can be seized upon as yet another opportune discursive battlefield within the broader, ongoing cultural struggle.⁸ In the case of Europe's 1990s environmental security discourse, for instance, Maarten Hajer observed how this discourse – ostensibly about "acid rain" – functioned as such a "stage" upon which a deeper cultural struggle could be waged *as* "a field of profound 'cultural politics.'"⁹

A central observation of prominent social philosophers was the notion that discourse about a topic – whether the economy, the environment, or security, or another segment of society – often functions politically or in the service of political interests. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, saw such interestedness as the core "logic" and "energy" in all cultural practices, even if it masqueraded as disinterestedness.¹⁰ The aim of all discursive or "symbolic" struggle, as he termed it, was to advance a group's ideology or naturalized vision of a particular hierarchical social order "that is best suited to their interest."¹¹

The very terms that we use to describe agents of discourse reflect the consensus that discourse is a field of political struggle. The literature, for example, describes the “advocacy network” that defends a cause,¹² the “epistemic community” that seeks change in a specific area of policy,¹³ and the “discourse coalition” that coalesces around and advances a set of storylines to achieve its interests.¹⁴

Bourdieu’s key observation was that he saw that the broad array of social fields functions as “a space of play and competition in which the social agents and institutions ... confront one another in strategies aimed at preserving or transforming this balance of forces.”¹⁵ Even scientific discourses, he observed, function as “the social mechanisms which ensure the maintenance of the established order”¹⁶ and are “conducted in the name of specific interests.”¹⁷

Security Politics: The Politicization of the Post-9/11 Popular Security Discourse

In the decade following 9/11, five peculiar features of the discourse suggested that Islam and its adherents have been seized by some as an opportune platform for politics.

The Politically Incorrect, or Counternarrative

In the traumatic, emotion-evoking moment of 9/11, many civil society leaders publically opposed the “Islam is peace” frame officially articulated by President George W. Bush, although it reflected the reigning consensus among professionals in the government’s security apparatus, in the social science academy, and prevalent among prominent journalists. As the decade progressed and 9/11 was subsumed by another traumatic moment – the “Great Recession” – this resistance discourse did not subside. In fact, just the opposite happened: Speech that conflated Islam with danger was increasing in the realm that Bourdieu called “popular,”¹⁸ that part of society outside the more official and scientific establishment.

To grasp *why* this counternarrative was gaining prominence, it is useful to examine the social function of such speech. All counternarratives are inherently political. In the terms of Antonio Gramsci, they are a form of subversion of the established social order, a struggle against the dominant societal ideology (doxa), and a “conception of the world and life” that stands in opposition to the “official” one.¹⁹ They are counterhegemonic,²⁰ in the sense that alternative narratives function strategically as an element of the counterculture, cultural struggle, cultural politics, resistance, or, perhaps a more familiar term,

culture war. Michel Foucault also viewed the practice of counternarrative, or “counter-memory” – the production of resistant “subjugated knowledges” – as fundamentally political. All such discursive constructions, he concluded, were set “against the institutions” that housed the more legitimate, formal, or scientific discourses.²¹

Similarly, Bourdieu would have viewed this particular counternarrative as one of the many rival “schemes of classification”²² wielded by marginalized or *dominated* producers who “have to resort to subversive strategies.”²³ It was within this context of cultural struggle or domestic politics that he made frequent references to “the establishment” and its relatively marginalized challengers, whose ideology is “outside ‘legitimate’ culture” or “outside the ‘establishment,’ external to official culture.”²⁴ The challengers, he observed, engage in the practice of “counterculture” by using “strategies of heresy”²⁵ as discursive weapons in their attempts to unseat the establishment through cultural productions that are distinct, or distinctly unorthodox²⁶ – to reject it “in a movement of pure negation”²⁷ – to subvert that system by challenging it with “the politically unthinkable,” “taboo,” or, in the popular vernacular, the *politically incorrect*.²⁸ Again, as was the case with Gramsci and Foucault, Bourdieu saw all such “heretical discourse” as ultimately counterhegemonic or as part of cultural struggle seeking to “produce a new common sense.”²⁹

Thus, for these prominent social philosophers, all counternarratives are inherently political because they function not as pure descriptions about the world, but as political acts driven by highly interested constructions.

The Counternarrative’s Exclusive Political Place

Second, by the mid-point of the post-9/11 decade, this counternarrative was clearly housed *entirely* in one political place. Some scholars contended that the popular counternarrative regarding Islam broadly “cuts across party lines.”³⁰ But in its most contentious form, that of the “Green Scare,” it did not. Toward the latter part of this decade, *only* Republicans were supporting the Islam(ization) counternarrative and, with few exceptions, only Democrats were opposing it. By the mid-term elections of President Obama’s first term, one’s position on the Sharia as a mortal threat to the nation became a recognized identifier of political affiliation – a feature that *Politico* captured in a headline: “GOP litmus test: sharia opposition.” All of the front-running GOP presidential candidates, except Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, and Chris Christie, were, to varying degrees, behind this Islam(ization) threat discourse. Rather noticeably, it was *entirely absent* in the speech of key Democrats.³¹

Typifying this solidarity was GOP presidential frontrunner Herman Cain, who advanced the counternarrative in a March 21, 2011, interview with *Christianity Today*. “Based upon the little knowledge that I have of the Muslim religion,” Cain said, “they have an objective to convert all infidels or kill them.” He then went on to describe the subversive “attempt to gradually ease sharia law and the Muslim faith into our government.”³² The interviewer at *Christianity Today*, a central identifying institution of the religious right, tacitly affirmed his political incorrectness by asking simply: “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

Among members of Congress, *only* Republicans propagated the counternarrative and the related Sharia conspiracy. When Representative Peter King (R-NY) chaired the House Homeland Security Committee hearings in 2011 on Muslim American radicalization, for instance, only the Democrats were united in their criticism of this event, and only the Republicans defended it. Similarly, only the Republicans in the group led by Representative Michele Bachmann (R-MN) wrote letters to government offices alleging that “Muslim Brotherhood operatives” had “penetrated” the U.S. government and even Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s staff.³³ And in another typifying anecdote, only the religious conservatives in the House Capitol Ministries made anti-Muslim statements, supported the Islam(ization) of America conspiracy theory, or supported anti-Muslim groups.³⁴

At the state level, virtually only Republican legislators introduced nearly eighty bills in almost two-dozen state capitals to safeguard the Constitution from the Sharia. Only four Democrats (from Alabama, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Kansas) joined the widely publicized conservative-led legislative initiative to restrict judges from consulting the Sharia in their rulings, despite the facts that state judges are already prohibited from overriding American law and that the vast majority of voters in their states did not even know a Muslim. Because these bills had no relevance in their own states, these lawmakers evoked fear by pointing toward the nation’s largest Muslim community, located in faraway Dearborn, MI, charging that judges there privilege the Sharia over the Constitution. The reply of Dearborn Mayor Jack O’Reilly (D) was revealing: “These people know nothing of Dearborn,” adding that these conservative legislators “just seek to provoke and enflame their base for political gain.”³⁵

The counternarrative on Islam(ization) also enjoyed significant solidarity among some of the more politically active members of the religious conservative elite. Typifying this countercultural segment was the Oak Initiative, a coalition of Evangelical and Pentecostal clergy founded to be “salt and light” in the time of America’s crisis and “greatest threat to its continued existence.”³⁶ In

2010, it produced a video featuring former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence General “Jerry” Boykin, who was in high demand in the latter part of the post-9/11 decade for his reliably politically incorrect characterization of Islam. In this video, the retired general met their expectations by saying: “Those following the dictates of the Qur’an [are] under an obligation to destroy our Constitution and replace it with shari’ah law.”³⁷

His position so impressed James Dobson, whose radio show *Focus on the Family* was an iconic outpost of the religious right’s cultural struggle, that he hosted Boykin *ten* times. On his February 17 and 18, 2011, programs, as well as his January 3 and 4, 2012, programs, Dobson took his audience’s eyes off of real family-related spiritual issues to let the always politically incorrect Boykin scare his sizeable national audience. With characteristic graveness in his voice, the retired general revealed what tens of thousands of professionals across dozens of institutions comprising the American security apparatus were clueless about, namely, how the Muslim Brotherhood is currently entering “phase four” of its five-phase plan to take over the United States.

In what seems to be her observation of this discourse’s exclusive political place, Shiela Musaji, editor of *The American Muslim*, stated that it was “the GOP,” as opposed to some other segment of society, that had “declared war on American Muslims.”³⁸

The Green Scare’s Advantageous Political Timing

Third, we have noted how this discourse dubiously increased or became more structural as distance from the catalyzing event was gained, and even when Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair was downplaying the threat from Muslim extremism before Congress.³⁹ But after Barack Obama became president in 2009, and especially ahead of the 2010 mid-term elections, the Green Scare over “Sharia” or “Islamization” exploded in conservative popular security discourse. At the height of the ensuing hype, an August 19, 2010, TIME poll revealed that 62 percent of American citizens admitted not knowing a single Muslim.⁴⁰ And yet this near invisibility did not assuage the fear in staunchly conservative Oklahoma. By this juncture, the conservative elite’s now-national counternarrative on Islam(ization) was apparently so convincing that 70 percent of Oklahomans voted for the “Save Our State” amendment that attempted to contain the purported nefarious attempt by Muslims to Islamize their state.⁴¹

Leading up to this point, a prominent segment of the conservative elite was working hard to advance the Green Scare. During the run up to the 2010 mid-term elections, Republican presidential frontrunner Newt Gingrich, writ-

ing in the conservative commentary *Human Events*, shifted the threat axis from the strategic crisis in American manufacturing, energy, education, structural deficit, and other critical topics to Islamization via “stealth jihad” – the non-violent but surreptitious strategy used by America’s Muslims to replace the Constitution with Sharia. In a speech to his base at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), he exclaimed: “I believe Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world as we know it.”⁴² Also during the campaign, he and his wife Callista produced a film on the existential threat of Islamization – *America at Risk: The War with No Name* – in which he warned his fellow citizens about the unspecified and ambiguous “radical Islamists” inside the country who were threatening “to impose an extraordinarily different system on us” and to “replace American freedom with Sharia.”⁴³ Other conservative elites followed suit. In his bid to unseat President Obama, the conservative Catholic Rick Santorum described “creeping sharia” as a “huge issue” and “an existential threat.”⁴⁴

Political Frame Bridging: Linking “Enemies Foreign and Domestic”

Fourth, such speech on Islam as a security threat began to function as a platform from which a segment of conservatives could perform even more direct political struggle; specifically, the explicit linking of the conservative movement’s newest foreign enemy, “Islam,” with its older domestic enemy, the Left, in the grand conspiracy to Islamize the nation. When evangelist Billy Graham, for example, talked about Islam in terms of “barbarians beating at our gates from without,” in that same sentence he linked that threat to the “moral termites from within,” a phrase that his audience understood as denoting progressivism in general.⁴⁵ This feature emerged in Pat Robertson’s April 28, 2006 *The 700 Club* program, during which he said that Islam “is not a religion of peace” and then used that segue to engage the more familiar domestic enemies: “the American left,” which needs to “wake up” to the danger that Islam presents.⁴⁶

By the tenth anniversary of 9/11, this practice of linking enemies foreign and domestic – the phrase featured in the U.S. Oath of Office to ensnare traitors – had become commonplace among many of the more rightist conservative cultural warriors. In March 2011, popular FOX News Channel host Glenn Beck linked his domestic enemies to his newest foreign enemy, warning that the United States and other nations of the West are “being divvied up” by the “uber left” and the “Islamicists.”⁴⁷ During a June 2011 event hosted Brigitte

Gabriel of ACT! for America, Erick Stakelbeck, the Christian Broadcasting Network's "terrorism analyst," explained that "the Left sees Islam as an ally and Western Civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition is the enemy" and they (Islam and the Left) "have a shared hatred for this country."⁴⁸

Many members of the religious conservative political elite followed suit. In his 2011 speech at the American Enterprise Institute, Gingrich began by advancing the Islamization of America scare: "Stealth jihadis use political, cultural, societal, religious, intellectual tools . . . to replace Western civilization with a radical imposition of Shariah."⁴⁹ Then, linking enemies foreign and domestic, he added: "The left's refusal to tell the truth about the Islamist threat is a natural parallel to the 70-year pattern of left-wing intellectuals refusing to tell the truth about communism and the Soviet Union." At Christian Zionist leader John Hagee's Cornerstone Church in Texas, Gingrich spoke in highly euphemistic terms that his religious conservative audience clearly understood in terms of the ongoing culture war: "[I am] convinced that if we do not decisively win the struggle over the nature of America," that the nation will become "a secular atheist country, potentially one dominated by radical Islamists and with no understanding of what it once meant to be an American."⁵⁰

During her presidential run, founder of the House Tea Party caucus Michele Bachmann remarked in an interview on conservative radio's popular *The Mike Gallagher Show* that she found political utility in framing a conspiracy between the infiltrating foreign enemy and the traitorous, disloyal domestic ones: "It seems like there is this common cause that is occurring with the left and with radical Islam . . . It's frightening to think how the left in this country . . . is throwing in with common cause with these radical elements of Islamic extremism."⁵¹

This practice of linking two otherwise incongruent frames, such as the threatening enemies outside the nation's borders to those inside, is known among social movement theorists as "frame bridging" and is a common political movement strategy.⁵² This particular strategy is similarly common to some conservatives in Muslim-majority countries. Fundamentalist Islamic movements, for example, link the local "insufficiently Islamic" regime and all who adhere to modern liberal values and cultural institutions – "the near enemy" – with foreign nations thought to be surreptitiously plotting to secularize their culture – "the far enemy" – in order to delegitimize the former.⁵³ This practice among conservatives worldwide finds its political economy in the fact that the boundary between inside and outside, as well as self and other, is in constant flux, especially in this era of globalization.⁵⁴ Therefore, constant watchfulness is required to secure the collectivity's boundaries, which are al-

ways conceptualized as being located at the interface between the good self and the dangerous political and religious others.⁵⁵

The Green Scare's Nonevidentiary Basis

Fifth, the notion that the Green Scare construct was a political strategy seems to be further substantiated by its non-evidentiary basis. We stated above that the political nature of counternarratives stems from their tendency to reject the dominant culture with a kind of pure negation. The oppositional narrative that undergirded this particular construct was enacted through such moves, in that it was constructed and maintained by *excluding* key realms of information or evidence that official and professional security analyses are compelled to include. In other words, the Shariah scare was empirically unsustainable because it had little basis in fact.

Recall how *Focus on the Family* radio hosted Boykin, one of the Green Scare's popular proponents, so many times. On the last program mentioned, founder and host Dobson played to this fear-evoking strategy by asking the retired general: "What do you see in store of us in this tired old world?" Boykin did not disappoint. "Let me say I have six grandchildren and three of them are females; and I must tell you, I am greatly concerned about the day coming when they will be wearing burqas. That's how serious I consider this threat."⁵⁶ Instead of offering an empirical check on Boykin's views, Dobson, his son, and co-host LuAnne Crane tacitly advanced them: "We cannot stick our heads in the sand," they exclaimed, pretending that this threat does not exist. And yet this is exactly what these three individuals did overnight between the first and second interviews as well as between when the interviews were recorded and broadcast.

Like all of the aforementioned members of the conservative elite, they evidently did not attempt to empirically validate Boykin's story. At that very time, a plethora of online reports revealed that the country's Muslim population is expected to increase from a mere 0.8 percent in 2010 to 1.7 percent by 2030.⁵⁷ The most basic fact-check would have revealed why none of the professionals in the nation's security apparatus were advancing this scare: The vast majority of Muslim Americans are, to quote the title of the extensive Pew Research Center report, "middle class and mostly mainstream." Moreover, only a mere 4 percent of that tiny populace is classified as "very conservative."⁵⁸ From these facts, *Focus on the Family* could have performed the easiest of calculations to show its national audience that in 2030, only one in every 6,000 Americans – 0.00017 percent of the populace – *might* believe that wearing a burqa is a religious obligation. Such a miniscule force could hardly

impose a radically different ideology on us, as Gingrich and other prominent conservative culture warriors were claiming.

In a similar vein, all of these conservative elites were quick to exclude the vast amount of relevant open-source literature that would have contextualized this supposed threat to the homeland from the tiny portion of Muslim Americans who were very conservative and at greater risk of radicalization. At the apogee of the scare, for instance, readily available reports revealed that only eleven of the 150,000 murders in the United States during the entire post-9/11 decade were committed by Muslim Americans and that virtually none of them were involved in the 1.4 million violent crimes and almost 100,000 forcible rapes that took place *each year*.⁵⁹

Another instance of this type of threat analysis was the conservative Center for Security Policy's June 21, 2011 report: "Shariah Law and American State Courts: An Assessment of State Appellate Court Cases." Released with much fanfare, it pinpointed fifty rulings from courts in twenty-three states that ostensibly proved the "creeping sharia" conspiracy. Yet in his analysis, Brayton wrote:

Let me make this as clear as I possibly can: This report is not merely badly researched and badly prepared, it is an outright fraud. No one who actually reads the rulings could reach anything but the opposite conclusion from the one they intend to foster. Nearly every single case they offer argues against their conclusion. Now let me prove that assertion.⁶⁰

He went on to show how the first five cases actually demonstrated the opposite of the report's claims. In the Michigan case, Brayton noted, "Not only did the court not apply Sharia law, they explicitly rejected any such application and did so precisely on the grounds that doing so would violate the rights of the woman who filed the suit. And this is offered as evidence of creeping Sharia."

Similarly, in its counter-report, "Nothing to Fear: Debunking the Mythical 'Sharia Threat' to Our Judicial System," the American Civil Liberties Union characterized the claims of Sharia infiltration as "wrong" and "based both on misinformation and misunderstanding of how our judicial system works." It added: "There is no evidence that Islamic law is encroaching on our courts." On the contrary, it stated that the court cases cited as purportedly illustrative of this problem "actually show the opposite: Courts treat lawsuits that are brought by Muslims or that address the Islamic faith in the same way that they deal with similar claims brought by people of other faiths or that involve no religion at all."⁶¹

And, recall Dearborn mayor O'Reilly's categorization of the sharia-ization scare as politically motivated. The sponsors of the 2010-11 wave of state anti-sharia legislation could not cite any empirical evidence to justify the legislation they were introducing with so much publicity.⁶² When pressed by curious reporters at the state capital, for instance, Senator Gerald Allen (R-AL), sponsor of Alabama's anti-sharia legislation, was unable to offer any examples of such attempts in Alabama courts or even to define it. "I don't have my file in front of me," was all that he said.⁶³ State Representative Leo Berman (R-TX) justified his anti-Sharia bill *in Texas* by mentioning the far-removed city of Dearborn. "The judges in Dearborn are using and allowing to be used sharia law," he said, but gave no examples from his own demographically unique state. When challenged by a well-read reporter, all this conservative lawmaker could say was that he had "heard it on a radio station." "*Isn't that true?*" he asked.⁶⁴

In conclusion, these features of this popular security discourse suggested that more was going on here than merely the newest form of xenophobia. From these five angles, it appeared that the old familiar "Great Game" of politics was in play on the newest field of opportunity. In other words, many of this discourse's features suggest that a segment of the conservative movement's apparatus of power seized upon Islam as yet another platform for politics. In positing this, we are relating the structure of political ideology to agency as manifested in strategies of political action or expediency. Here we use the Bourdieuan framework of habitus, the "durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world."⁶⁵ Habitus relates the structural contexts, such as ideology, to the more agentic, strategic enactment of political interest and struggle in a particular field.⁶⁶

The five observed features of the discourse presented herein suggest that this was a political act motivated both by structure and agentic interest and catalyzed by the broader context of significant political opportunity.⁶⁷ It is a practice or strategy shaped by conservative ideology at the more profound level of worldview or identity and by utilitarian political expediency, namely, seizing this opportunity to advance the political self and/or the political movement more broadly. In other words, the established habitus or strategies of action of these agents establish their commitment to the ideology of social conservatism; they were already part of the American conservative apparatus of power before 9/11. Their speech and acts after 9/11 reflect the perceived political opportunity to incorporate Islam within their broader set of topics deemed to be useful in advancing the political self and the broader movement.⁶⁸

The Role of the U.S. Conservative Culture War Apparatus

This practice of “security politics” was evidently judged so useful that it spread from the cultural elite and became institutionalized across the broader American social conservative apparatus of power. Moreover, those conservative institutions most involved in advancing their domestic political struggle on the platform of Islam were not those of the more rightist fringe, but rather were the conservative movement’s central identifying institutions: its vanguard magazines, newspapers, television other broadcast media, and publishing houses. All of these institutions were created specifically to advance the conservative culture war.

The National Review

On the day after President Obama’s June 4, 2009, address from Cairo to all Muslims – a speech of historic proportions designed to quell the “war on Islam” master grievance narrative that had become dominant in Muslim communities worldwide⁶⁹ – the prestigious conservative commentary magazine *The National Review* published “Making Believe: Obama’s speech was deep in fable, short on fact.” Its content antagonized the conservative movement’s enemies – foreign and domestic, religious and political, and specifically Islam and the Left – by describing the speech as “warmed-over leftist dogma sprinkled with a fictional accounting of Islam and its history.”⁷⁰ Islam, it countered, “isn’t a religion of peace with a legacy so overflowing with achievement in science, philosophy, and the arts,” as the president claimed. In this way, the article functioned as something akin to a minority party’s rebuttal to a State of the Union address, an institutionalized occasion for domestic politics.

In addition to the article’s more explicit or direct political content, *The National Review*’s selection of the spokesperson for this speech act had a more implicit counterhegemonic function: to delegitimize the broader, more progressive societal regime of truth or authority. We would have expected that this iconic institution would commission an authority with internationally respected credentials in Islamic affairs who could have better argued why the United States was not at war with Islam, and then gone on to demonstrate the conservative leadership alternative by articulating a more George Kennan-like grand strategy for both American-Muslim relations and the containment of violent extremism ideology. Instead, the magazine’s commentary was offered by Andrew McCarthy, whose only capital was his established track-record of security politics – again, using the latest news related to national security as a platform

to engage in politics. His strategy manifested itself in such politically performative titles as “The President Stands with Sharia.”

The article was no anomaly, for the magazine’s politicization of security news related to Islam in the post-9/11 decade flows from its mission ever since its inception: to politicize every topic of national importance. In its own advertising kit, this “Bible of American conservatism”⁷¹ touts its distinctive position to the right of the political ideological spectrum, designed to produce not balanced but rather “conservative news, commentary, and opinion.” Organized in 1955 by conservative intellectual and icon William F. Buckley Jr. to counter progressive leanings in the more legitimizing societal institutions, *The National Review* has been characterized in the literature as “not simply a journal of opinion but a political act.”⁷²

The Washington Times

Also after this speech, on June 9 another iconic U.S. conservative institution, *The Washington Times*, carried this seemingly non-sequitur headline: “America’s first Muslim president?: Obama aligns with the policies of Shariah-adherents.” Bypassing the strategic importance of this historic foreign policy initiative and the opportunity for a well-reasoned criticism of the new administration’s approach, this central identifying newspaper of the conservative movement delved into crude, tabloid-like politics. “There is mounting evidence that the president not only identifies with Muslims, but actually may still be one himself,” the article stated. The editors had not made a mistake; the article’s author, Frank Gaffney, was the newspaper’s signature security expert, and they had published some 1,400 of his articles.⁷³

This particular article was representative of the conservative newspaper’s broader instructions to its columnists: Politicize opportune security events or topics that it published as news. In Gaffney’s case, he delivered a plethora of similarly politically performative articles, such as, on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, “‘Islamists’ tipping point: Obama impotence signals opportunity for Shariah” and earlier, during the lead up to the mid-term elections, “Courting Shariah: Kagan supported Islam at Harvard but not the U.S. military” (June 21, 2009) and “Obama’s ‘teachable’ Shariah moment” (Aug. 17, 2010).

The newspaper’s other security expert, Daniel Pipes, followed suit with articles like “‘Rushdie rules’ reach Florida: Obama endorses privileged status for Islam” (Sept. 20, 2010), “Obama: ‘I have never been a Muslim’” (Sept. 7, 2012), “Obama: My Muslim Faith” (Sept. 11, 2012), and so on. On the ninth anniversary of 9/11, the newspaper published an article by three of its other

security experts: “Second Opinion Needed on Sharia: Our Political Establishment Wears Blinders and Ignores the Threat” (Sept. 14, 2010).

Such politicization of Islam in the post-9/11 decade by this other iconic conservative institution was similarly characteristic. Although *The Washington Times* (on its website) claims to be “a full-service, general interest” newspaper, it was founded as a counterhegemonic institution, the centerpiece of a “news counterestablishment” to offset the more progressive influence of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and other major dailies.⁷⁴ In an appropriately titled May 16, 2007, editorial, “Times Challenges Worldview of Elites,” the newspaper even described itself as the “vanguard of a media insurgency.”⁷⁵ For Francis Coombs, its post-9/11 managing editor, the newspaper’s mission was never *pure* knowledge but *political* knowledge. “Journalism is war,” was his oft-repeated motto in the newsroom.⁷⁶

The Muslim American leadership’s idea that they and their faith had become a platform for politics was also evident in the main two conservative publishing houses. For instance, in 2006 the official White House and institutionally dominant “Islam is peace” frame was advanced in *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (HarperCollins). But later that year, Regnery Publishing brought out a book with a distinctively heretical, counterhegemonic title: *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion*. Recalling the terms from Bourdieu, Regnery’s strategy entailed “a movement of pure negation.” Specifically, what HarperCollins’ author – the farther Left and former Catholic nun Karen Armstrong – had excluded from her work, Regnery’s author – the farther Right and Catholic deacon Robert Spencer – *used for his entire text*.

To facilitate this mode of cultural struggle, Regnery even developed its trademarked “The Politically Incorrect Guide” series with titles sure to please the conservative audience, such as Spencer’s *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (2005), *Religion of Peace? Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn’t* (2007), and *The Complete Infidel’s Guide to the Koran* (2009); conservative commentator Michelle Malkin’s *In Defense of Internment: The Case for Racial Profiling in World War II and the War on Terror* (2004); and Christian Broadcasting Network Erik Stakelbeck’s *The Terrorist Next Door: How the Government Is Deceiving You about the Islamist Threat* (2011). Like so many individual conservative elite, Regnery also engaged in the highly political act of linking the conservative movement’s newest foreign enemy with its traditional domestic rivals with titles like David Horowitz’s *Unholy Alliance: Radical Islam and the American Left* (2006). This man, for whom Spencer works, is a well-known culture warrior in his own right.

These politically performative titles are characteristic of this publishing house's durable strategy. Regnery has been a central identifying conservative institution ever since its early post-war productions, publishing such seminal works as Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) and thousands of books since then that have challenged the more progressive subculture. Thus, in addition to politicizing the opportune topic of Islam during the post-9/11 decade, Regnery never abandoned its other platforms of cultural struggle, producing in the same decade such McCarthyesque works as Horowitz's *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2007) and *Radicals: Portraits of a Destructive Passion* (2012), both about liberals.

Other conservative publishers also engaged in this mode of cultural struggle. In 2010 alone, Encounter Books published two of Andrew McCarthy's politically performative titles: *How Obama Embraces Islam's Sharia Agenda* and *The Grand Jihad: How Islam and the Left Sabotage America*. The second book's jacket noted how the global jihad movement "has found the ideal partner in President Barack Obama, whose Islamist sympathies run deep."

FOX News Channel

On the July 29, 2010, edition of the conservative cable television show *FOX & Friends*, the main topic printed prominently on FOX's on-screen banner was: "Honor killings on the rise: Group launches campaign to end Muslim murders." Hostess Gretchen Carlson introduced her guest expert as "a woman named Pamela Geller" who is "a blogger for AtlasShrugs.com and the executive director of Stop the Islamization of America." Without any discussion of topics related to Islam, she deployed the classic bait-and-switch by pointing out how Geller had also "co-authored a new book *The Post-American Presidency: The Obama Administration's War on America*," as FOX's camera slowly panned across Geller's politically antagonistic book. With the security issue related to Islam now forgotten, Carlson then adroitly shifted to domestic politics by asking Geller: "Alright, what are the issues that you are tackling, not only in this book . . . but also in this billboard campaign?"

Two days later, *FOX Business* produced Geller to discuss yet another topic for which she also has no credentials: the British Prime Minister's description of Gaza as a "prison camp." And again the host shifted immediately to domestic politics by introducing Geller's above-mentioned book.

This pattern persisted. FOX would raise some opportune event or condition broadly related to Islam to our horizon of visibility, produce Geller as an authority, and then immediately shift the main content of the discussion from

security to domestic politics. On the July 1, 2013, edition of FOX's *Hannity*, for instance, FOX ignored thousands of more authoritative voices on the topic du jour and selected Geller, who reliably described Obama as "consistently on the side of jihadist Islamic supremacist regimes."⁷⁷

As was the case with conservative commentaries, newspapers, and publishing houses, this iconic identifying institution of the American conservative movement was using opportunistic news related to Islam – "honor killings on the rise" or a British politician's description of Gaza as an Israeli-run, state-size prison camp – as the explicit platform to implicitly advance the politically subversive frame: "The Obama administration's war on America?" And, just like these institutions, FOX's main function was counterhegemonic. Based on extensive interviews of several hundred past and present FOX employees, *Rolling Stone* characterized the station as "a giant soundstage created to mimic the look and feel of a news operation, cleverly camouflaging political propaganda as independent journalism."⁷⁸

Sean Wilentz, a Princeton historian and author of *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (Harper Perennial: 2009) characterized the entire FOX News Channel set of programs as "devoted 24 hours a day to politics" under the guise of "the news."⁷⁹ A former deputy of FOX's chairman Roger Ailes described the network as "a political campaign, a 24/7 political campaign."⁸⁰ Media scholars have similarly noted that "[t]he genre of news offered important and necessary 'cover' for the [FOX] network, helping to thwart charges of propaganda or partisanship."⁸¹

This practice of security politics was representative of the strategy across the entire conservative apparatus of power. Thousands of articles advancing the conservative security counternarrative related to Islam, including the panic over the purported Muslim American plot to Islamize America, appeared on the pages of such mainstream conservative magazines as *American Spectator* and *Human Events*, conservative newspapers like *The New York Sun* and *The New York Post*, conservative cable television sites like the Christian Broadcasting Network, as well as such newer more fully ultraconservative e-magazines as *WorldNetDaily* and *Pajamas (now PJ) Media*.

In each instance, the nexus of Islam and security functioned merely as the platform to present a counterhegemonic narration of the conservative movement's traditional domestic political enemy. In other words, when we broached the thin outer shell of any of these threat assessments purportedly about the newest foreign enemy – Islam or Islamization – there was nearly always this non-sequitur, political mass at the center. This mass consisted of a segment of words, phrases, or sentences that functioned politically and explicitly sought

to delegitimize some aspect of the conservatives' domestic political rivals, such as the Obama administration, the Democratic Party, their intellectual rivals in the more progressive academic establishments, the Left in general, or the more progressive societal politics of truth and secular culture more broadly.

Conclusion

What shall we take away from all of this? Clearly, far more was going on in the popular American counternarrative regarding Islam in the post-9/11 decade than protecting the nation from a new security threat, as its proponents would have us think. Similarly, as the decade progressed it seemed increasingly clear that this tendentious discourse was motivated not merely by genuine fear of a foreign religion and its local adherents, or by "the racism du jour," as prominent works in the literature had concluded.⁸² In addition to these characterizations, it seems that we might make room for politics. The distinctly political features of this discourse across the more entrepreneurial segment of the country's social and religious conservative elites as well as the movement's central identifying institutions, all long known for their counterhegemonic function, suggest that this discourse also functioned politically. Specifically, this more entrepreneurial and rightist segment of the conservative movement seized the nexus of Islam and security as the newest opportune platform to advance its longstanding cultural struggle.

Endnotes

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15. Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation*, 70, 76.
16. *Ibid.*, 51.
17. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993), 9.
18. Bourdieu, *Language*, 91, 188.
19. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers and London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 189.
20. Societies are filled with such discursive and non-discursive structures that reflect political struggle. This was the basic axiom of the social, observed by Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Manuel Castells, and others. For example, see Wacquant (2008, 268). In this paper, in keeping with what is not convention, when one of two competing ideologies enjoys a degree of dominance – that is, when it becomes normative within the key legitimizing societal insti-

tutions – then we denote the other as “resistance.” See, for example Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997) and Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 2d ed. (London: Verso, 2001 [1985]). To derive a term from Gramsci, when one political ideology is “subordinate” to another, then we can say it is “non-hegemonic” (Gramsci, *Selections*, 20). To represent this political bloc’s cultural struggle against the more progressive outside, we stick with convention and use the term “counterhegemonic.” Counterhegemonic struggle, then – as conceptualized here – is merely cultural struggle by the less dominant political movement. And, here, we are specifically examining a subordinate U.S. political bloc’s discourse on the topic of Islam after the attacks on the homeland by al-Qaeda on “9/11” 2001. It is the features of this new discourse that suggest that it functioned as yet another opportune field for counterhegemonic struggle – as yet one more platform among many that movement’s broader strategy of cultural struggle.

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