“I Am Checked, Therefore I Am”: A War on Terror and Muslims in Airports Since 9/11

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ABSTRACT

Since the 9/11 attacks in New York, Muslim identity has become both highly visible and under critical scrutiny. International airports have become a place in which the war on terror is enacted on daily basis. The stringent security measures associated with international travel since 9/11 continually seek to conflate being Muslim with being a terrorist, to underpin discursively constructed definitions of terrorism. The fears generated by these representations of Muslims sanctions the attrition of civil liberties. This strategy of panic created by Western governments, beside the media frenzy, then fosters a general complacency in their societies. This article argues that further actions taken to implement and authenticate such strategies of panic produce a system of dogmatic control and a system of misrepresentation of Muslims in particular. Specifically, the introduction of Scanning Machines in airports, as a tool in the war on terror, instils the notion that the enemy is identifiable. Muslim identity is not pronounced based on what the Muslim truly is, but based on this mechanism of classification for further and extra checking: “Muslim checked, therefore the Muslim is.”

Keywords: airport, war on terror, Islam, representation of Muslims.


Kata-Kata Kunci: bandara, perang melawan terror, Islam, representasi Muslim.
A consequence of 9/11 is that airports have become the site for a particular mode of cultural interaction, and for the testing of identity for many people around the world. Anecdotes of people undergoing security checks and extensive or even quirky forms of interrogation have become rife as airport procedures are seamlessly integrated into the lives of people from all parts of societies. Increasing queues, prolonged immigration procedures, being publicly stripped of shoes and articles of clothing are just some of the new experiences at airports, but which almost all accept as inevitable and necessary.

Airports also became the site for intense feelings and association with terrorism. It is the first chapter to The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (2004, 1-7), where a fiction-like account of the movements of the hijackers of the morning of 9/11 is illustrated. Titled “We Have Some Planes”, the chapter, in details, narrates the movements of the hijackers Mohammed Atta and Abdul Aziz al-Omari at Portland Airport. “Atta and Omari boarded a 6:00 A.M. flight from Portland to Boston’s Logan International Airport.” The narrative following this statement focused on the hijackers’ movements, conversations, checking in, and procedures through security checkpoints. The exhibition of details to how the hijackers manoeuvred their way to board the planes creates multi-fictional images that generate questions and in the same time project answers about airports. In a way, as many people do experience travelling and airport procedures, especially when travelling to the United States, even well before 9/11, an intense focus on airport became inevitable.

The airport became an institutional reference to the war on terror. That says that the fight against terrorism started from an airport and ends there. The attacks were located well in the shadow of the identity of these hijackers without projecting causes and consequences for the attacks. The treatment of Muslims within this context paradoxically casts them simultaneously within essentialist and performative conceptions of identity, which provides an interesting twist on the Cartesian meditation “I think, therefore I am”.

“I am checked therefore I am”. Within this mechanism, airports became a sphere of politico-cultural existence, which appears to function according to its own rules. It is a world where power-struggle takes place, and which may be seen as a microcosm of the tensions in the socio-political climate created by 9/11. Any new reports about terror attacks or threats lead directly to heightened security in airports the severity of which are related to an intensity of media coverage. Violence, as a mode of information and entertainment, is a viable commercial product for the media (Schmid 1992 in Drakos & Gofas 2006, 720). In
effect, media and terrorism seem to be embroiled in a “symbiotic relationship” that creates an “upward spiral of violence” (Wilkinson in Drakos & Gofas 2006, 720). Immediately after 9/11, the media in the United States played a major role in foregrounding the threat to the nation. Therefore, there became an intense relationship between media releases, media coverage, and security at airports. This is not the main concern of this article but I shall offer an overview of this argument, which facilitates understanding of further parts of this article.

Although the atrocities of the 9/11 attacks were conducted by individuals acting in the name of Islam, Muslims as a whole became the signifiers of any potential threat (Roy 2002 & 2004). The Zeitgeist of the post 9/11 era was transformed from a concept into action and from action back to being a concept, and consequently produced a mode of horror from the day the attacks occurred which lasts to the present date. The battle lines were drawn in that historical moment of 9/11. A major part of the Western world was convinced that those who attacked America and challenged its supremacy, while being terrorists exhibiting sophisticated aerospace technologies, they are mainly Muslims. The resultant media jubilations were coupled with a calling for indiscriminate retaliation, and that it should happen immediately.

The war on terror, or as Pervez Musharraf (2006, 1999) called it, “a war against shadows”, produced an ultimate truism that there is a terrorist out there who is ready to kill at any time. It is through this perception that the post 9/11 is delineated and the preliminary outcome of the war on terror resulted in the production and reproduction of terrorism in various forms (Ahmad & Barsamian 2001). The unique manner of this war produced a ‘system of panic‘ which applies to both ‘sides’ of the conflict: the accusers and the accused or the attackers and the attacked. Later, this system began to signify the spirit of the age, one in which hatred and confrontation started to dominate the relationship between the West and their ‘others’. Notably the solution offered to purge terrorism was to simply decimate the terrorists. The sheer size of the global operations required to eliminate these terrorists was driven by social and politically motivated fear. This territory of fear and concepts such as kill and destroy, dominated the debate in the aftermath of 9/11.

Originally, the kick-start of this campaign could be located in George W Bush’s speech before a joint session of Congress in September 2001. He urged, ‘The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it and destroy it where it grows.’ He added, ‘Some speak of an age of terror. I know there are struggles ahead and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them.’ Furthermore, in a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, Bush delineated the future, “As long as the United States of America is
determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror. This will be an age of liberty here and across the world.” Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger advocated the killing in this way, ‘There is only one way to begin to deal with people like this, and that is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing (Eagleburger 2001).” Anne Coulter (2001) urged carpet-bombing:

This is no time to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack [...] We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We were not punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. And this is war.

This mode of ‘American judgment’ was transposed into action by the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) followed by that of Iraq (2003). However, ten years on, the war on terror has just ended on one of these two major military fronts with the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. With the Taliban being resurgent, the military rhetoric of the war on terror seems to take backseat.

The core aspect of the post-9/11 zeitgeist, as Bush maintained, was to create an age of liberty across the world. Ironically, the first victim of this War on Terror seems to be the American people, in ways, which embroiled them in panic. The wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq actually increased the threat to the United States and caused Americans to withdraw into introspective debates about their own legitimate rights to use the very force they had been calling for in the days immediately after 9/11 (Aldalala’a 2011). Robert Gilpin concludes that George W. Bush’s costly and reckless war against Iraq has resulted in the greatest threat to the security and wellbeing of the United States since the US Civil War. The invasion of Iraq has significantly exacerbated dangerous social, cultural, and regional fissures in US society (Gilpin 2005, 5).

Kathleen Moore has also illustrated that in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the slogan “United We Stand” materialised virtually overnight on car bumpers, storefronts, and suit lapels across the US. This slogan is particularly resonant when we consider it alongside the growing Muslim community in the US—are they part of, or apart from, the unity to which the bumper stickers refer? For many Americans, the growth of these Muslim minority populations in “the West”, and in the US in particular, generated increasing concern about how they could settle in what considered the heart of Western civilisation and the world’s pre-eminent superpower. In the minds of many American policymakers and opinion shapers, the looming ‘age’ of Muslim American communities represents a potentially grave security threat. For some, it represents a challenge to the supposed racial and

The ‘Muslim Terrorist’ thus becomes classified: the enemy is without doubt is Muslim fanaticism, Muslim Jihad, Muslim terrorism, and consequently the Muslim. The urgent need for classifications, definitions, and in some cases, the criminalisation of the Muslim figure has intensified across the world and became an effective rhetorical tool in the War on Terror (Hitchens 2007; Wright 2007). In the emergent discourse of this period, the Muslim figure became a dense and inseparable symbol of this violence and aggression. The airport remained chiefly the site where direct practice of this identification is taking place.

The Study of Terrorism

Since 9/11 attacks, the subsequent, rigorous debate on terrorism assumed an alarming scale with an almost hyperactive attention to defining terrorism. The melodrama of this produced far more questions about terrorism than answers. Perhaps the problem is that studies of terrorism are actually creating more questions for which quantifiable answers remain evasive. Yet, 9/11 in effect triggered a double-edged phenomenon: the first is the basic need to define terrorism and consequently the second was to find those terrorists and punish them. The latter was easy: as all the hijackers and the attackers were of Muslim origin.

Therefore, the first element followed because of the second. The definition of terrorism became an operation, or a practice, rather than a debate raised in academia, journals, TV screens et al. Retaliation by the U.S. and its allies, with the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq, were the first steps towards consolidating these understandings of terrorists within a specified discourse. The inverse of first targeting the terrorists, and then setting about defining them, calls on the logic of power rather than the intellect, to derive meaning.

Thus, it was that the West was able to react with haste, as it described rather than defined terrorism. Therefore, over the last 10 years a discourse emerged on how to deal with the concept of terrorism. Michel Foucault’s study of discourse focused on an analysis of madness, and attended to the creation and projection of the voices of the insane. Foucault found that literary texts were one of the rare places where their voices might be heard. He started to think about how madness as a category of human identity is produced and reproduced by the various rules, systems, and procedures in a society. These create and separate it.
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from ‘normalcy’. Such systems form what he called ‘the order of discourse’, or the entire conceptual territory on which knowledge is formed and produced. Discourse in this sense is a total field or domain within which language is used in particular ways. This domain is rooted in human practices, institutions and actions. Thus, the discourse on madness in modern society is anchored by institutions such as ‘madhouses’ and in practices such as psychiatry. Discursive practices make it difficult for individuals to think outside them—hence they are also an exercise of power and control (Loomba 1998, 38-39).

The discourse constructed around the study of terrorism is located in the dialectic between the urgency to defeat terrorism and the dilemma over the proliferation of terrorist activities. The first breed the second and the second recycles the first. The war on terror became the platform where the link between answers and questions are formulated. Yet, the voice of the alleged terrorists could be clearly heard as it is projected by the very nature of the threat they allegedly pose. The voice of the terrorist and thus the definition of such terrorist, including al-Qaeda, has been institutionalised through consequent media, academic, political, cultural debates. Such intensive debates on fighting terrorism influenced Airport representational manifestations. The war on terror decisively created both the space and the system to raise the profile and the identity of terrorists. The understanding of an act of violence as a terrorist strike, be it individual or minimal in scale, only furthers their cause and impacts on everyday life. Accentuating the needs of terrorists is a media war: their recognition that the media infiltrates to the very heart of a nation’s households and shapes the daily lives of people is perceptive. With that in mind, the ‘presence of terror’ actually exceeds media debate to become a residual institutional order of the everyday. Based on that premise, studies of terrorism, however, focus on what terrorism does, and not what it is. To date, although there have been countless attempts to define terrorism, discussion remains focused on what terrorism does rather what it is. Bruce Hoffman (1998) said:

Terrorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political. It is also ineluctably about power: the pursuit of power, the acquisition of power, and the use of power to achieve political change. Terrorism is thus violence -- or, equally important, the threat of violence -- used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim. With this vital point clearly illuminated, one can appreciate the significance of the additional definition of ‘terrorist’ provided by the OED: ‘Any one who attempts to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation’. This definition underscores clearly the other fundamental characteristic of terrorism: that it is a planned, calculated, and indeed systematic act.
This article argues that coercive intimidation is more likely to be permanent. Within this landscape of intimidation, the concept ‘terrorism’ becomes a psychological and emotive refuge for, and within, the processes of interrogations at Airports. Martin Amis (2008, 76) tells:

In July 2005 I flew from Montevideo to New York - and from winter to summer - with my six-year-old daughter and her eight-year-old sister. I drank a beer as I stood in the check-in queue, a practice not frowned on at Carrasco (though it would certainly raise eyebrows at, say, the dedicated Hajj terminal in Tehran’s Mehrabad); then we proceeded to Security. Now I know some six-year-old girls can look pretty suspicious; but my youngest daughter isn’t like that. She is a slight little blonde with big brown eyes and a quavery voice. Nevertheless, I stood for half an hour at the counter while the official methodically and solemnly searched her carry-on rucksack - staring shrewdly at each story-tape and crayon, palpating the length of all four limbs of her fluffy duck.

Terrorism in the post 9/11 period has become a frame of mind and one which is most prevalent in the institution of the airport. The airport has evolved into the particular site where the discourse of terrorism is put into practice. It is explained by the increasingly time-consuming security measures, and it is practiced by the sheer pressure it imposes on the material realities and identity construction of a significantly large group of people – namely Muslims.

The discourse that emerged in association with this accompanies a mode of intimidation in Western societies which stems from the very fact that their own governments continue to develop evermore surveillance apparatuses. As these become a prominent sign on the contemporary landscape, society also becomes more resigned to this. The confrontational manner and the excessive searches at airports in effect spread more fears than it calms. The collective consciousness is crammed with dense terms and loose meanings, such as Islam, Jihad, Muslims, Middle Easterners, Arabs, Pakistanis - these are all identity markers invoked to fill the space assigned to the elusive definition of terrorism. Current studies of terrorism do not consider the means and causes underpinning actions of terror; they are studies of identity and the (negative) markers of cultures. Zygmunt Bauman argued that in modern societies racist imaginaries need professional organisation, leadership—and experts (Zygmunt 1997 in Tuastad 2003, 592). Scanning machines that strip the inner bones of Muslim women and men at airports are a manifestation of this ‘mechanised professionalism’. Technology rides over cultural considerations to classify, degrade, humiliate, and criminalise Arab and Muslim travellers, and of course beyond that- it insidiously saps their very human existence.
**The Apparatus of Hatred and the Production of Enemy**

Following the 9/11 attacks many Americans incomprehensibly asked of themselves “Why are we hated?” and “Why were we attacked?” In Gilpin’s analysis (2005, 19), there were two prominent and differing positions in answer to these questions. The first being that the United States is hated for what it is; that is because of its huge successes and the failure of the terrorists. The second answer is because of what it does; that is, it is hated owing to its policies, especially those seen as the arrogant policies of the Bush administration.

Gilpin maintains that the most widely accepted explanation for the 9/11 terrorist attack and opposition to the United States has frequently been labelled the ‘Clash of Civilisation’ thesis. Although few in the United States would use this precise phraseology, many Americans have accepted this idea, first put forward by Bernard Lewis that the United States was attacked and is hated for what it is rather than what it has done. Gilpin explains the implication of this interpretation of Islamicist terrorism is that anti-American terrorism arises from a failed Islamic civilisation, is inevitable, and cannot be prevented through any attempt to resolve Muslim suspicions or criticisms of the United States and the West (Gilpin 2005, 5).

The concept of ‘hatred’, being central to the thesis of Western responses to 9/11, has anchored the encounter and ways of confrontations between the West and the Muslims world. The rationale behind the ‘hatred toward the West’ imposed further limitations with regard to the visibility of Muslim existence. The banning of the veil in France and Belgium, the prohibition of Minarets in Switzerland, and the introduction of ‘Bone-Scanning Machines’ in British and other airports are part of the domain within which the production of identity became evident. In the age of mass migration, and with the increasing illusive threat of terrorism, which is deployed in political and electoral agendas across Europe, Muslims become increasingly visible as a source of concern and threat.

However, as the case is difficult for these Muslims to vanish, the impulse thus is to manufacture a Muslim who could be like ‘us’- with an identity that can be assimilated within that of Europe. That is, to nurture a ‘civilised’ Muslim, on the premise that this would curtail the possibility of their random acts of hostility and violence against the West. I argue that Muslims location in airport represents a trajectory of European historical attitude towards its minorities. The history of Europe is a factory where hatred and loathing was produced. Pankaj Mishra (2009) concludes, “this expectation of identity suicide has a rather grim history in enlightened Europe. Voltaire burnished his credentials as a defender of reason and civility with attacks on “ignorant” and “barbarous” Jews,
who, as slaves to their scripture, were, “all of them, born with raging fanaticism in their hearts”. Accused of mistreating their women and proliferating with devious rapidity, and goaded to abandon their religious and cultural baggage, many Jews in the 19th century paid an even higher cost of “integration” than that which confronts Muslims in contemporary France.

The Muslim population today is not invited or coerced to assimilate with the host population, but asked to vanish. However, within this premise lies the problem of the West. The lack of an enemy, at any stage of Western history would affect the very fabric and spirit of its existence. European leaders, such as Tony Blair, Jose Aznar, and Silvio Berlusconi, who stand arm-in-arm to support Bush’s War on Terror and the invasion of Muslim lands, constructed the debate on Islam and Muslim people in the West in a language of firepower. In a continuing vocabulary of blunder and hatred, Europe continues the process of bringing Muslims to their knees.

This process is fully institutionalised; new laws and legislations, a form of *lois scélérates*, were introduced to combat terrorism. Most famous of which is the Patriot Act in the United States, which was signed by President Bush in October 2001; also the Terrorism Act 2006 and the Counter-Terrorism Bill 2008 in the UK; the 2006 Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism. The axiom of all these Acts was pre-emptive: extending state authority in particular areas, for example, criminalisation, asset freezing, detention, and stop-and-search practices.

An apparatus of institutionalised force, which results in mechanisms, which work to single out and criminalise Muslims, implements these laws. The functionality of laws as an apparatus of hatred emphasises a discourse of location: the Airport in this case, where the resonance of all Anti Terrorism Acts is most in evidence: interrogation, scanning and in some cases detention, became the praxis on which this historical encounter is played out on a daily basis.

**The Scanning Machines and the Fight for Dignity**

The airport became the categorical characterisation of the realities and conflicts since 9/11. The airport is the site that exhausts and interrogates identities. It is no longer merely a place of arrival or departure, or at least in the practical sense, it is a site on which identities are mapped out and reinforced. It is an institution that enacts political metaphors and a temporal embodiment of the rapid changes taking place in world affairs. Interactions in the airport are characterised by lived experiences and the
historical comprehension of ‘otherness’. Furthermore, airports became particularly associated with 9/11 as the September attacks superseded all other terrorist attacks. This event has redirected understandings and definitions of terrorism and has institutionalised the airport as a major icon within the discursive practices of socio-political hegemonies.

Yet, as ‘the’ Muslim became a dense and inseparable symbol of violence and terror in the post 9/11 period, one question remains: what does a Muslim look like? The answer remains hostage to various interpretations, especially while it is governed by a range of imperatives pertinent to particular societies and cultures. At the airport, the definition of a Muslim becomes seemingly straightforward: A figure is not elusive; it is simply the Muslim, a Muslim, who is recognizable through discursive imagery. The Muslim figure is constituted by pre-conceived ideas, which merge with realities based on a set of beliefs and discursive knowledge about ‘the’ Muslim most notably inscribed by representational discursive realities and practices before and after 9/11. The singling out of a Muslim for extra interrogation at the airport is not coincidence. It is the ‘difference’- there is an ingrained metaphorical assumption that a Muslim is different to all others, a difference that has been established by the rhetoric of the war on terrorism and enhanced by its discourse.

Airports are a site of encounter, which evokes sterile memories for both the Muslim and his interrogator. In an incident at Manchester Airport in March 2010, two Muslim women were barred from boarding their flight to Pakistan after they refused to undertake a full body scan. Possibly, if this incident was not taken within the context of the war on terror, it might remain simply technical and/or personal. Nevertheless, within the context of increased security to fight a specifically envisaged terrorist source, these women symbolise a process, a system, within which there is a power struggle with the aim of intimidation on both sides. For the Muslim it is a matter of existential dignity, self-preservation: I am not a criminal- I am not a terrorist. For Airport authorities, it is a matter of survival too: bone-scanning machines for preventing death. Therefore, the logic of the scanning machine illustrates how the Muslim figure is now an expression of Western post 9/11 consciousness. The Muslim existence in the or in an airport predates his or her arrival there. The problem embedded within this encounter is that each party- the airport authorities and Muslims are interdependent and essential to the rhetoric of the war on terror.

The new scanning system became a stark manifestation of this rhetoric. Following the attempt by Nigerian student, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 as it approached Detroit in December 2009, security at airports in the United
States and worldwide was again tightened. This has affirmed and intensified the point that terrorism is methodological. Such happenings re-invent the images of 9/11 and more so they re-introduce the entire struggle and suffering of Muslims that followed 9/11. The airport experience for many Muslims thus remain the site where their awareness of their existence is heightened as signifiers of immanent and permanent threats. The security checks in airports and the excessive interrogation of selected Muslim travellers deepens the rift between the Muslims and the rest of the world.

The reaction of Muslims to the incident in Manchester Airport was one of protest and outrage. Some Islamic scholars have forbidden Muslim travellers from passing through full body scanners at airports because they violate religious rules on nudity. The Fiqh Council of North America issued a fatwa warning Muslims that “It is a violation of clear Islamic teachings that men or women be seen naked by other men and women,’ read the order.” Such reactions are, in themselves, part of the institutionalisation of camp-like struggle.

In 2004, the prominent Italian intellectual, Giorgio Agamben (2004), wrote an article in Le Monde, in which he announced his refusal to travel to the United States and in further protest cancelled all the courses he was invited to teach there. All the same, it wouldn’t be possible to cross certain thresholds in the control and manipulation of bodies without entering a new bio-political era, without going one step further in what Michel Foucault called the progressive animalisation of man which is established through the most sophisticated techniques. A Muslim at an airport is thoroughly checked and questioned: Perhaps tongue-in-cheek a Muslim could argue: *I am checked, therefore I am*. This implies that the process of interrogating, checking and the classifying of a Muslim constructs him or her as an identifiable object for Western consciousness whereas, for a Muslim, it creates an existential visibility but with a mechanised introspection. The body for the Muslim turns into a signifier of his or her “being”— “Human Being?” The “being” is dogmatically projected while the “Human” rests within the boarders the classifying the Muslim as a threat.

Therefore, “I am”: the airport remains a site where dignity of the ‘Human’, in the Age of terror, remains, overall, embroiled in the traditions of power-struggle. The War on Terror thus inherently remains a total war on human dignity and the number one victim is the Muslim, not necessarily in the body itself, but in the core conceptual nature of the Muslim.
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