



# The 9/11 Generation: Life in the Surveillance State

Sunaina Maira

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**Since the attacks of 9/11, the banner of national security has led to intense monitoring of the politics of Muslim and Arab Americans. Young people from these communities have come of age in a time when the question of political engagement is both urgent and fraught.**

Since the events of September 11, 2001, Muslim and Middle Eastern communities have increasingly been viewed through the prism of national security, and young Muslim, South Asian, and Arab Americans in particular have become objects of heightened scrutiny and surveillance. The U.S.-led global War on Terror has defined Muslim youth as objects of the counterterrorism regime, based on the presumption that young people are a cohort that is vulnerable to “radicalization” by Islamist movements and so they are increasingly in the crosshairs of intelligence agencies. The racialization of Muslims and Middle Easterners as terrorists is not new, however; there is a long history of constructing the Muslim and Arab as the “enemy” of the U.S. state, given its strategic interests in the Middle East during the Cold War and its enduring alliance with Israel. Post-9/11 repression also extends the imperial state’s policies of surveilling and containing radicals or leftist “subversives,” especially during wartime and the Cold War.

### **The 9/11 generation**

My new book, *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror*, is an ethnographic study of the forms that politics takes for South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American college-age youth in Silicon Valley who have come of age in the post-9/11 era. It examines the range of political critiques and identifications among South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth and

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explores the new, cross-racial alliances forged through civil rights and antiwar activism in northern California. The identities of these youth have been shaped by the racial and religious profiling of Muslim and Arab Americans under the [PATRIOT Act](#), which has continued under the Obama administration, with Islamophobic and anti-Arab discourse persisting in the U.S. mainstream media. The politics of Muslim Americans, more than that of any other religious group, are viewed as necessary to surveil and contain. This constitutes the “new order of War on Terror” under the Obama regime, which relies on mass surveillance, clandestine cooperation between law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and programs that police political and social lives ( see [Deepa Kumar 2012](#)). Repression in the domestic War on Terror often remains invisible, however, for it is conducted through covert means, such as the use of undercover FBI informants, infiltration, and entrapment.

Youth politics is a central target of the counterterrorism regime as the religious and political “radicalization” of youth variously defined as Muslim, Middle Eastern, Arab, Afghan, or South Asian has come to represent a threat to Western, secular, liberal democracy and to U.S. military and economic interventions. The framework of securitization defines Muslims as always a potential threat to U.S. homeland security and views this generational cohort as bedeviled by disaffection, cultural and political alienation, and psychological and social maladjustment. Muslim and Arab American youth, in particular, are viewed as susceptible to indoctrination and recruitment by Islamist movements, that is, as ripe for becoming enemies of the state. Muslim youth are also perceived as being vulnerable to “self-radicalization,” as in the case of the Chechen youth charged with the Boston marathon bombings in 2013. This is also a gendered form of surveillance as young Muslim males have been the major focus of counterterrorism programs, but young Muslim women are also,

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increasingly, objects of surveillance, especially in the wake of incidents such as the San Bernardino shootings.

The focus on “homegrown terrorism” was ratcheted up after the July 7, 2005 bombings by British Muslims in London and occurred in tandem with shifts in U.S. wars and counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. In 2007, Senator Joe Lieberman, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, held a series of hearings on the “homegrown threat of violent Islamic extremist terrorism,” focusing almost exclusively on Arab and Muslim Americans and dwelling on the role of the Internet in fostering Islamic “extremism”; in 2011, hearings on radicalization were also held by Congressman Peter King ( [see American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2008, 39](#)). Yet strikingly, the very real threat posed by white supremacist organizations and right-wing paramilitary movements is not at the center of debates about “homegrown” extremist violence, despite events such as the Oklahoma City bombings of 1995.

### **Racial, religious and political profiling**

The homeland war on terror has increasingly focused on monitoring and prosecuting ideological and religious beliefs of Muslim and Arab Americans, not just terrorist activities, so this is a form of political, not just racial and religious, profiling. This strategy of pre-emptive prosecution and preemptive surveillance mirrors the doctrine of “pre-emptive war.” One problem with ideological profiling and the criminalization of beliefs is that political dissent is increasingly fragile and risky, especially for Muslim and Arab American youth. Despite this repression, youth in the 9/11 generation have mobilized in response to the War on Terror and the experience of collective profiling has, inevitably, politicized Muslim, South Asian, and Arab Americans. It has propelled new, cross-racial

coalitions based on shared experiences of Islamophobia and racism. New cross-ethnic categories have emerged, such as AMSA (Arab, Muslim, and South Asian) and MESA (Middle Eastern and South Asian), as Muslim and Arab Americans became engaged in or led civil rights campaigns and antiwar organizing. For example, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Network Group, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee have all led national civil rights efforts, in addition to numerous grassroots groups and coalitions, for example, the Arab Resource and Organizing Committee (AROC) and the Asian Law Caucus in the San Francisco area, in which youth have been involved. Progressive-left campaigns against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and drone wars in Pakistan have also involved Muslim and Arab American activists and connected Muslim and Middle Eastern communities to overseas homelands, U.S. war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the U.S.-backed occupation in Palestine.

There has also been a major push to engage in interfaith coalitions, focused on Muslim-Jewish-Christian dialogue and outreach, on the one hand, and in transnational solidarity activism, on the other. Campaigns have linked communities with shared experiences of police violence and surveillance, for example, during the Black Lives Matter movement and the Ferguson 2 Gaza campaign. So the racial profiling by the state has provoked new forms of racialization and affiliation on the ground, even if some of these are not entirely new but recreate earlier forms of cross-racial and international solidarity.

### **The surveillance state**

The surveillance and counter-radicalization regime that has emerged in the U.S., as well as in the UK and Europe, is increasingly preoccupied with Muslim youth cultures and with cultural codes that presumably signify “radical dissent”

and “youth alienation” (see Kundnani 2014). Obama’s domestic War on Terror drew on counter-radicalization practices in Britain in a transnational circuit of ideas and policies that focused on surveilling and entrapping Muslim American youth, through programs such as *Countering Violent Extremism*. While the emergence of ISIS/ISIL may have somewhat reconfigured this, it has long been the case that vocal critics of Israel were associated with “terrorist” movements and subject to surveillance. It is important to note, as Arun Kundnani has observed, that the template for the War on Terror was manufactured in the 1980s to demonize those resisting U.S. hegemony and U.S. allies in the Middle East, particularly Israel.

In the current moment, as my research demonstrates, Palestine solidarity activism is a fraught terrain where youth have to contend with surveillance, censorship, including on college campuses, as well as harassment, allegations of anti-Semitism, smear campaigns, and blacklisting by right-wing organizations such as David Horowitz’ Freedom Center and Canary Mission. At the same time, this encounter with the exceptional lockdown on open discussion of Palestine-Israel leads to a process of what I call “Palestinianization,” that is, a process of politicization and racialization that is endemic to U.S. national culture given unconditional U.S. support for Israel and the power of the Israel lobby. Palestine solidarity is also a unifying hub for Muslim, South Asian, and Arab American youth and activism.

I consider surveillance a technology of disciplining and managing racialized populations within neoliberal capitalism. The culture of surveillance highlights the tension that emerges between the police state’s repression and exceptionalist notions of U.S. democracy and “freedom” in the War on Terror. This tension is deeply felt by those who experience the brunt of policing and the



curtailment of freedom in their daily lives. Nearly all the young people I spoke to as part of my research talked about the climate of permanent surveillance and the chilling effect it had on understandings of what it meant to be “political” and also “social.” Arab, South Asian, and Afghan American youth have to self-consciously regulate, or re-narrate, their social and political lives, including on social media. Given the state engages in warrantless wiretapping, monitors private emails and Facebook, and infiltrates mosques and activist groups with undercover informants, it is not just not those who are involved with formal political organizations who have reason to be anxious and self-conscious about their identities and sociality.

In 2012, the stunning investigation by Associated Press of the NYPD’s surveillance program revealed that “mosque crawlers” and undercover informants, called “rakers,” (generally Muslim or Arab themselves), had been deployed to ferret out suspicious Muslim and Arab Americans, including students and youth, “monitoring daily life in bookstores, bars, cafes, and nightclubs” in “suspect neighborhoods”; this was part of a “human mapping program” in cooperation with the CIA and drawing on Israeli surveillance techniques, with a reach extending beyond New York state (Associated Press 2012, 5). The NYPD also infiltrated the Occupy Wall Street movement and Palestine solidarity rallies. The revelation of this infamous “demographics unit” sparked the first mainstream discussion of surveillance since 9/11, which increased with the revelations by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden’s expose in 2013 of mass surveillance by the NSA and CIA. Some youth at campuses that had been surveilled by the NYPD used social media, including Twitter, and subversive humor to challenge this secret program; the Yale MSA created a Facebook page, “Call the NYPD,” with photos of Muslim college students

holding signs declaring, “I am a . . . Blonde, Call the NYPD” (cited in [Khabeer and Alhassen 2013](#), 308).

## **Surveillance effects**

The social and cultural registers through which surveillance becomes a part of daily life are what I describe as *surveillance effects*, through which surveillance becomes normalized, even as it is resisted. Surveillance effects shape political culture and also ideas of selfhood. Many youth are aware that they are the exemplary objects of surveillance, because they fit a racial, religious, political or national profile. Law enforcement agencies, such as the New York City Police Department, have used behavioral models of “radicalization” based on profiles of youth subcultures, including markers such as clothing, religiosity, and activism (see [American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2008](#), 39). This surveillance of everyday life has inevitably alienated many Muslim Americans even further while creating more distrust and divisions within targeted communities.

In a surveillance state, many engage in self-regulation and self-censorship because they believe that they must sacrifice their freedoms for the sake of defending the nation, and that “national security” is, indeed, their own security. Some Muslim Americans engage in self-surveillance or the surveillance of others, hoping to avoid profiling or prove they are patriotic, “good” Muslim citizens. Yet my research also uncovered “surveillance stories” about life in the everyday of surveillance that demonstrate that the surveillance regime also provokes the opposite effect, producing challenges to intelligence-gathering and tactics of counter-surveillance that enable survival. Youth who negotiate these tensions expose the contradictions that animate life in the post-9/11



security state, and the fragility as well as the radical possibility of living life as the “enemy within.”

## **The culture wars**

Surveillance is key to the post-9/11 culture wars, focused on Islam, gender, race, and nationalism. In my book, I argue these culture wars are also *racial wars* and *class wars* as they rest on racial and class struggles and fissures in U.S. society. These culture wars have evolved since the Cold War and in the “new Cold War,” as well as the many hot wars waged by the U.S. from Iraq and Afghanistan to Pakistan and Yemen. Trump’s presidential campaign and election has inflamed the culture wars, and brought renewed attention to the already existing fault lines of race, class, and religion with the nation. As Americans debate the horrifying possibilities of a “Muslim registration,” some may not be aware that this actually already occurred in the U.S. with the Special Registration targeting Muslim immigrant men after 9/11 and that mass surveillance was intensified under the Obama administration. The generation that came of age since 9/11, especially those from communities targeted in the War on Terror and from immigrant communities, were already aware of the “white rage” and extremism that existed within the U.S. and that has now provoked shock and horror among those critical of Trump’s racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny. There is much to be learned from the stories of the 9/11 generation.

Image via [Coco Curranski/Flickr](#).

**Sunaina Maira is Professor of Asian American Studies, and is affiliated with the Middle East/South Asia Studies program and with the Cultural Studies Graduate Group. Her research and teaching focus on Asian American youth**

**culture and the politics of cultural production as well as political mobilization and transnational movements challenging militarization, imperialism, and settler colonialism. She is the author of *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* and *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire After 9/11*. She co-edited *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America*, which won the American Book Award in 1997, and *Youthscapes: The Popular, the National, and the Global*. Maira's recent publications include a book based on ethnographic research, *Jil [Generation] Oslo: Palestinian Hip Hop, Youth Culture, and the Youth Movement* (Tadween), and a volume co-edited with Piya Chatterjee, *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (University of Minnesota Press). Her new book project is a study of South Asian, Arab, and Afghan American youth and political movements focused on civil and human rights and issues of sovereignty and surveillance in the War on Terror. Maira launched a new section on West Asian American Studies in the Association for Asian American Studies and coedited a special issue of the *Journal of Asian American Studies* on Asian/Arab American studies intersections. She has been involved with various civil and human rights campaigns and antiwar groups in the Bay Area and nationally.**

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