

Constructing the Terrorist Threat | A Lecture by Deepa Kumar

[Transcript]

Introduction

Deepa Kumar: For many Americans, the depths of anti-Muslim racism in the United States really sunk in after President Trump issued an executive order banning people from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States for a period of 90 days.

Donald Trump: Protection of the nation from foreign terrorists...

Kumar: And this sort of blatant association of all Muslims from these seven countries with terrorism was shocking to many people.

News Montage

- Chaotic scenes erupting at airports around the world...
- Protests all across the country...
- Denounced President Trump's temporary ban on travelers from seven mostly Muslim countries.

Kumar: Thousands of Americans actually flocked to airports across the country to register their protest. There were several lawsuits filed, and eventually the Muslim ban was overturned.

Now, the actor George Takei, who you might know from the original "Star Trek" series, he's been an outspoken critic of the way the Japanese Americans were treated during the Second World War.

George Takei: They herded us over to the stable area, and each family was assigned a horse stall, still pungent with the stink of horse manure, to sleep in. For my parents, it was a degrading, humiliating experience.

Kumar: What happens is that after the government of Japan dropped bombs on Pearl Harbor, all people in the United States of Japanese origin were blamed for this, right? And so, Japanese Americans were rounded up – over 100,000 of them, the vast majority of them American citizens – and they were put into these horrible internment camps, right? Because they were held collectively responsible for the actions of the Japanese government.

And Takei basically said, after the Muslim ban was passed, that this is the same thing that's being done to Muslims, to Muslim Americans, and to Muslims from these seven countries.

Takei: Registration of any group of people, and certainly registration of Muslims, is a prelude to internment. This is something that we cannot have happen again. It is dangerous, and it is a moral bankruptcy.

Kumar: Now, this happened even though, according to many studies, including one by the libertarian Cato Institute, people from these seven countries – Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Syria,

Yemen, and Libya – the people from these seven countries who have come to the United States, they are not responsible for even one terrorist related murder in the United States from 1975 to 2015, a 40-year period. And yet, President Trump insisted that they were security threats, they had to be banned, they had to be kept out of this country.

Trump: I'm establishing new vetting measures to keep radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States of America. We don't want 'em here.

Kumar: Now, I begin with this controversy because I think it sheds light on how the dehumanization of Muslims, how the dehumanization of people from the Middle East, from South Asia, and from North Africa, has been central to a particular story about American security, about American safety. And my talk is titled "Constructing the Terrorist Threat" not because political violence isn't a problem, but because the way we think about this violence, how we perceive this terrorist threat, is a socially constructed process.

And in an excellent book called "Policing the Crisis," you may know it, it's authored by the cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, as well as several others, in that book they argue that at various points in a society's history, it is prone to something that they call "moral panics."

They say, "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic – a condition, episode, person, or group of persons, emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values."

And Stuart Hall was actually studying the phenomenon of mugging in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. But in the 21st century, I think that we can analyze "terrorism" as a moral panic that has changed not just U.S. society, but in fact the entire world.

Trump: So, let me state this as clearly as I can. We are going to keep radical Islamic terrorists the hell out of our country.

Kumar: But what I'm going to discuss today is the question of how it is that when we think of this term "terrorist" the image that comes to our mind is that of brown men, right? Men from the Middle East, from North Africa, from South Asia. I'm going to look at what social processes and what power dynamics have been at work to create this overwhelming association of brown men with terrorism.

Associating Brown Men with Terrorism

Kumar: Now, if you do a Google search, go ahead and Google the term "terrorism," and click on what images come up. What you're going to find is that overwhelmingly it is of brown men. So, you will find images like this, for instance, or this, or this. This is the British Mohammed Emwazi, who was responsible for the Isis beheading of Western journalists and aid workers. In fact, this morning I Googled the term "terrorist," and overwhelmingly the images were either of fully masked men or of brown men with beards.

What I didn't find was this. This man, Robert Dear, was responsible for the Planned Parenthood shooting in Colorado Springs that killed three people and injured nine. I didn't find this. This is Dylann Roof, a white supremacist, a member of the neo-Nazi movement. He killed nine people in Charleston, South Carolina. And I didn't find this. Wade Michael Page, responsible for killing six people at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. He, too, is a white supremacist, as you can tell from the swastika symbol that's behind him. But all of these white men are not considered terrorists, even though the acts of political violence that they carried out involved killing innocent people, right? This is one of the dominant definitions of terrorism. So, even though they carried out the textbook definition of terrorism, they are in fact not considered terrorists.

In fact, far-right-wing groups are responsible for more killing of people in the United States than Muslim American citizens or residents. When the Department of Homeland Security produced an intelligence report on the threat posed by the white far-right-wing in this country in the early months of the Obama presidency, the reaction from conservatives was so hostile, it was so vitriolic, that the report was repudiated. And the unit that produced it within DHS was actually effectively blocked from doing any further monitoring of these far-right-wing white supremacist groups.

Rachel Maddow: That final report was never released. The lead author of the report later said that in response to the uproar, the Department of Homeland Security not only didn't release the report, they also diverted resources away from even studying the problem of homegrown right-wing extremists and their threat of violence.

Kumar: And I think what this shows is that who is considered a terrorist threat is very much a political process. It is not an objective designation, rather it is a socially constructed process. And in fact, there are two very different frames used to cover violent acts. When one is a white perpetrator, there's one kind of frame, and when one is a Muslim or is brown, there's another kind of frame.

So, if you are white and you commit an act of violence, usually the causes of violence are explained as something internal to the person. They have a psychological problem or they had life circumstances that were difficult or what have you.

But if it's a Muslim that commits violence, then it is automatically explained as the cultural proclivity of all Muslims to be violent, right? Muslims, because they follow Islam, are prone to violence, and they're driven to commit such acts. We need no more explanation than that to explain why they did what they did.

And the response, of course, is to wage war on all of these people, to dehumanize all of them. This is what the French philosopher Albert Memmi meant when he talked about something called "the mark of the plural." What he meant is that acts of racialized others are seen as being generalizable to entire groups, while as those of whites are limited to the individual.

So, in my talk today, I will outline how the racialized terrorist threat was produced in the United States, how it became dominant, and how a moral panic around terrorism was produced and continues to be sustained. So, let's begin by trying to get a sense of how Americans think about terrorism.

Misunderstanding Terrorism

Kumar: Now, Gallup has been asking people since about 2004 how much of a threat they think international terrorism represents. You'll see that in 2004, 82% of Americans thought that international terrorism was a critical threat, and another 16% thought it was important. So, we're talking about 98% of Americans who think that international terrorism is a huge problem. And then you go up the years, come all the way up to 2016, not much has changed. We're still around 97% who think that it is either critical or important.

And so, the next question is, is this fear of terrorism valid? Does "terrorism," as it is understood today, that is as the political violence perpetrated by Muslims and Arabs. And by the way, I don't agree with this definition, but let's just accept that definition for now and ask, how much of a threat do jihadi terrorists, as they are known, how much of a threat do they pose to the American public?

Now, since 9/11, the number of Americans killed in the U.S. by jihadists is 95. Now, this is a very modest number. I don't mean to downplay these deaths. Every death is a tragedy, but it is certainly a very modest number compared to the proportion of the hype.

In fact, people who study terrorism statistics in a dispassionate way have argued that you're more likely to die from a bolt of lightning hitting your head, or from drowning in the bathtub, than you are from dying at the hands of a jihadi terrorist.

Internationally, I got the figures from the U.S. State Department, which maintains these figures. And as of last year, the total number of Americans killed internationally due to terrorism is 15. In other words, jihadi terrorism does pose a threat, but it is a very, very limited threat.

Now, to truly grasp the significance of these figures that I've just given you, let's actually look at the leading causes of death among Americans. This is from the Center for Disease Control, which lists the top 10 causes of death. You'll notice that terrorism, as it's defined by the U.S. government, actually doesn't even make it onto this list. Instead, the leading causes are heart disease, cancer, accidents, diabetes, and so on. And we might ask the question, why are trillions of dollars spent on the War on Terror and not on the things that actually kill Americans in large numbers?

So, now we know the number of terrorism-related deaths, but a related issue is the number of attacks that have taken place since 9/11. Marc Sageman is a longtime counter terrorism consultant. He worked as a CIA operations officer, and he advised actually various branches of the U.S. government on the War on Terror over his long career.

And in his book, titled "Misunderstanding Terrorism," he studies the number of attacks as well as the number of serious plots that have taken place not just in the U.S. but in all of the West. And by the West he means the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, and so on. What he studies is the number of plots, serious plots, as well as the number of attacks in a 10-year period in the entire West. And these are plots or attacks that were done in the name of the global neo-jihad.

So, he looks at the terrorism statistics. What does he find? Well, he finds that the number of terrorist plots and attacks from 2001 to 2011 was 66, and it involved a total number of 220 individuals in the West all the way from Australia to Canada. This number, 220 individuals, divide that by 10 because this is a study that was conducted over 10 years. Every year there are 22 new perpetrators of either attacks or are involved in plots. Now, Sageman estimates that there are 25 million Muslims in the West, and if we divide 25 million by the 22 new perpetrators of political violence each year, what we get is that less than one Muslim per million per year in the West participates in political violence. And yet the dominant explanation is that it is the culture of Islam that leads people to carry out violence.

Well, if that were really the case, why is it that less than one in one million are driven to this form of political violence? In fact, it is figures like these that lead the sociologist Charles Kurzman to write a book called "The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists."

The fact of the matter is that a form of cultural racism has become so dominant in the West that all Muslims have been held responsible for the actions of the tiny, tiny minority. If we were to apply actually the logic that's applied to Muslims on white people, then we would have to say that because people like Robert Dear or Michael Wade Page or Dylann Roof carry out acts of political violence, all Christian males are dangerous, and they should be surveilled by the authorities, and we should put them in jails or what have you. And yet we don't do this. This is not the logic that we apply.

Sean Hannity: Will prominent Muslims denounce and take on groups like Isis, Hamas, and condemn, and also fight against, their unthinkable acts of terrorism?

Kumar: Every time there is a plot or an attack carried out by Muslims in the West, all Muslims are asked to take responsibility for these attacks. They're asked to denounce these attacks. They're asked to apologize for these attacks.

And so, because of the actions of a tiny minority, large numbers of Muslims have been placed on no-fly lists for absolutely no good reason. Muslim communities have been infiltrated and spied upon by the FBI, by local law enforcement agencies. There are agents who have been sent into mosques, into community centers, even to spy on children's sporting leagues.

And make no mistake, this sort of targeting doesn't begin with Trump. It has existed both under the Bush and the Obama administrations, which is what paved the way, I would argue, for Trump's Muslim ban. So, how do we explain this? Less than one in one million.

Creating Racialized Others

Kumar: Why then is there such a culturally dominant attitude that Muslims are violent? Well, there is actually a long history in the U.S. of creating racialized others who have served as a threat as a way to justify policies and as a way to reproduce unjust economic and political systems.

Now, we could begin all the way with Native Americans, who were considered savages. These savage Indians, as they were called. Why? Because they fought to keep their lands, and they failed to just hand it over to the white Anglo settlers.

Here's an image of two Native American men attacking a white woman. And, by the way, the rescue of white women becomes an excuse for genocide. There are movies like this one called "The Savage" that was made in 1952, which carries these themes forward even into the 20th century.

And we might also say that similar processes were at work with African slaves, who were dehumanized and then turned into property. And, from then on, any effort by the slaves to free themselves was seen as threats to the southern plantation system. And so, any slave or any slave revolt was seen as a threat and had to be put down.

We might also look at how the Chinese, who were brought into this country to do all sorts of dangerous work that nobody else wanted to do, like building the railroads, were denied citizenship because they were seen as representing a threat to the American way of life. They were called the Yellow Peril. This is an 1899 editorial cartoon with the caption: "The Yellow Terror in all his glory." And cartoons like this with captions like this appeared in respectable newspapers like the New York Times, the Washington Post, the L.A. Times, and so forth.

Even people who today are considered white, like the Irish, like the Italians, and so on, went through a period of racialization and othering.

But the whole point of this short history is really to understand that the process of turning people into a race, a threatening race at that, has been central to the foundation of the U.S., the consolidation of capitalism, and the growth of U.S. power on the global stage. And the War on Terror, really, is only the latest example of this process, and it relies on anti-Muslim racism and the moral panic of the terrorist threat as a way to justify military intervention around the world and reshape U.S. society internally. And the media, of course, play no small part in keeping the threat of terrorism alive.

The War on Terror

Kumar: The group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, or FAIR for short, has documented repeatedly the contrived FBI plots, that is these are terror plots that the FBI is the prime mover, they recruit vulnerable individuals, they buy the bombing materials, they make the plots, they make the plans, and so on. What FAIR has shown is that repeatedly these sorts of FBI sting operations are actually reported by the media simply as ISIS plots.

This was actually a map that was provided by a former CIA deputy director who went on CBS This Morning in 2015. And he referenced this map as evidence of recently unraveled ISIS plots. Of course, what he omitted to mention is that every single one of these was created with the assistance of the FBI, and none actually posed an actual threat. Some of you may be surprised to learn this, this may be the first time that you've learned of FBI sting operations. So, let me just

state that the FBI routinely sends undercover agents or it sends informers into Muslim communities, African American communities, and so forth, to recruit people to carry out acts of terrorism.

A book by the investigative journalist Trevor Aaronson, who studied 500 terrorism prosecutions since 9/11, showed that over half of these involved agent provocateurs, that is either agents or informants who went into communities with the explicit purpose of entrapping vulnerable individuals. Aaronson, based on this study, concludes that through the use of its 15,000 informants, and by the way a lot of these informants are criminals themselves, the FBI creates terrorists out of individuals who otherwise would not have turned to political violence.

Now, of course, every time there is a foiled terror plot, one that is instigated, planned, and carried out by FBI agents or informants, the media are all over it because this makes for good television, or at least it makes for high ratings. It makes for television with high ratings.

The point I'm making is that the media, various terrorism experts, politicians, military generals, ex-generals, and so on are central to maintaining the moral panic. And every two months or so, the FBI announces yet another high-profile arrest of a Muslim terrorist suspect, keeping the U.S. on its War on Terror footing and sustaining the multibillion dollar homeland security industry.

Next question, why does this happen? Because the War on Terror is very useful for the elite in this country. Because just like the Cold War and the fear that was generated at that time around a nuclear attack, which won the consent of the American public for U.S. policies both abroad and domestically, today the War on Terror does the same.

Trump: In the 20th century, the United States has defeated fascism, Nazism, and Communism. Now a different threat challenges our world, radical Islamic terrorism.

Kumar: It gives the U.S. the ability to maintain its dominance and hegemony on the global stage and to make changes internally as well in the United States.

And so, the next part that I'm going to focus on is the historic context from which the terrorist threat emerges.

The Terrorist Threat Emerges

Kumar: So, prior to the 1970s, it might surprise you to learn that there was no such thing as a terrorist threat in the United States. Acts such as hijacking of U.S. planes or kidnappings did in fact occur, but the people who were responsible for such acts were not called terrorists, and the acts themselves were not consistently labeled as terrorism.

Instead, according to Lisa Stampnitzky, these people were called bandits, rebels, guerillas, or later urban guerillas, or revolutionaries, or insurgents. They were not called terrorists. Another study finds that those who were involved in hijackings or bombings of commercial aircraft were described as air pirates or sky pirates or hijackers.

A study conducted by Remi Brulin of presidential speeches before the 1970s shows that the term “terrorism” or “terrorist” was rarely if ever used, and when it was used there was no consistency in terms of how it was actually used.

This is not true of France, the United Kingdom, Israel, and South Africa where, in fact, there was a developed vocabulary around terrorism because all of these countries had experienced national liberation struggles against colonial rule. Keep in mind that after World War II, several countries from India to Algeria, would wage successful anti-colonial struggles and win independence from colonial powers.

Now, of course, those fighting for freedom were called terrorists. In fact, Nelson Mandela was considered to be a terrorist, a designation that the United States honors all the way up until 2008. So, it gives you an idea of how one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter.

Like I said, there was no systematic discourse of terrorism in the U.S. prior to the 1970s. So, in other words, at this point, terrorism was understood as a tactic that could be used by anyone – allies as well as enemies. And it was not yet seen as a cultural proclivity of some racialized groups. Let me show you Mike Wallace on this.

Mike Wallace: The fact is that innocent people die from terror whoever the terrorist. The Jewish independence fighters, trying to hasten the exit of the British from Palestine and to intimidate the Arab population there, bombed bus stops and office buildings, railroad, trains, and shopping crowds. The fighters of Stern and Irgun took a toll of innocent victims that ran into the hundreds.

Kumar: So, there you have it. Mike Wallace is comparing the terrorist tactics used by Jewish militants to the terrorist tactics used by Palestinian militants. But, by the late 70s, these sorts of comments are very few and far between in the U.S. media, and overwhelmingly, the association of Muslims and people from the Middle East with terrorism is the frame that starts to get dominant.

In fact, the New York Times index didn't even include terrorism as a significant category before 1972. One study of the New York Times found that, in 1971, there were zero articles that dealt in any substantial way with terrorism. However, by 1985, that figure had risen to 785.

So, what is it that precipitates this shift so that by the late 70s and into the 1980s, bombings, hijackings, kidnappings, hostage takings, would be melded together to create a new and threatening actor, the terrorist?

The Munich Olympics of 1972

Kumar: The first significant factor was the Munich Olympics of 1972. At these Summer Olympics, the Israeli Olympic team was taken hostage and eventually killed by a Palestinian group called Black September. And this was broadcast live by the global media, that were already gathered for the Olympic Games, to an estimated 900 million viewers worldwide.

Now, the analysis shows that there were many terms used to describe the perpetrators of violence. Terrorist was certainly one of the terms used, but so were criminals, mad men, murderers, and so forth. In fact, this is what Nixon said. He said they were outlaws who would stop at nothing to accomplish their goals.

At any rate, after the Munich incident, there was a UN General Assembly meeting that was held to discuss and to define terrorism. What is terrorism? How do we understand it? Now, as you might imagine, the representatives from the newly decolonized nations would argue that it was legitimate for people who were fighting for national independence, who were fighting for self-determination to use whatever means necessary, including violence, to win their independence.

In fact, they would go even further, and they would say that the violence that is used by colonial nations to put down independence movements, that is terrorism. So, the idea of state terrorism was put forward by these newly independent countries. Needless to say, colonial and former colonial countries had a very different view of political violence and terrorism. In fact, the British and Israeli representatives to this 1972 UN General Assembly argued very strongly against the idea of state terrorism and the idea that a state could actually be considered a terrorist.

Where did the U.S. fall? It fell somewhere between these two positions. But a number of things would happen between 1972 and '79 that would cause the U.S. to shift its position, and key among them was the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979

Kumar: In 1979, the Iranian people overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah in a popular revolution involving large sections of the Iranian population. He was a U.S.-backed dictator, so he fled to the U.S. And when the Iranians asked for him to be sent back, so that he can be tried for his many crimes, the U.S. refused to extradite him. As a response to this, students took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, and they took a few dozen Americans hostage for a period of 444 days.

News Reporter: The American hostages were blindfolded, handcuffed, and marched out on the U.S. Embassy's front steps by the revolutionary students.

Kumar: Now, this received extensive daily media coverage in the United States. On television, it was Day 1 of the hostage crisis, Day 2 of the hostage crisis, and so on. In fact, it became a nightly ritual. And some of the images that Americans were inundated with were images of Iranians marching in the streets, U.S. flags being burned, tearful interviews with families of the hostages, and images of hostile and irrational Iranians. In fact, President Jimmy Carter called the hostages "victims of terrorism and anarchy."

Jimmy Carter: They and all others must know that the United States of America will not yield to international terrorism.

Kumar: And in his book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said argues that this extensive coverage of the hostage crisis was actually key to shaping how Americans would view the Middle East. In

particular, he argues that Iran was presented as a militant, dangerous country, and exactly the opposite of the U.S. – anti-American to its core. And a very strong “Us vs. Them” rhetoric was beginning to take shape at this point. Good vs. Evil, Us vs. Them.

And people who've analyzed the representation of the Iranian Revolution show how Iranians were largely dehumanized in media coverage and presented as these irrational mobs filled with some sort of inexplicable hatred for the United States. And, of course, absent from this discussion, almost entirely absent from this discussion, is historic context. Why did the Iranians do what they did? Now, I can't go into very much detail, but I'll just hit the highlights.

In 1953, the U.S. deposed a democratically elected leader of Iran, a man by the name of Mohammed Mosaddegh. And they replaced him with the Shah, a U.S.-friendly dictator. Why? What was Mosaddegh's crime? Well, he dared to nationalize the oil industry in that country because he wanted to use the oil profits for the benefit of his own people rather than to line the pockets of British oil companies and American oil companies. And well, that will not do. He had to be deposed, and so he was.

Now, the Shah who replaced Mosaddegh then ruled with an iron fist. He dissolved all political parties except his own. All dissenters, in fact, were severely tortured. Savak, which was the secret police of the Shah, they were trained by the CIA, would ruthlessly torture political dissenters.

So, the 1979 revolution was really a response to all of this and was carried out by workers, students, the intelligentsia, religious minorities, and so on – all of whom had genuine political grievances against the U.S.-backed Shah. But rather than represent the political reasons why Iranians participated in this revolution, we instead see this.

This is the cover of Time in 1979. You see a muezzin leading a call to prayer. And if you study this image for a little bit, this is not what Tehran looks like. This city appears to be out of the Middle Ages, maybe the 10th century, the 12th century. All you have are mosques and minarets. But by depicting Iran in this way, the story that's being told is that this revolution represents a yearning to go back to the Middle Ages. It is a rejection of the Shah, who is the representation of modernity, and instead it is a cultural yearning to reshape society in line with the goals of militant Islam as the title suggests. And so, Islam constructed here becomes the opposite of everything the U.S. stands for.

But interestingly and ironically, just as Islam is being turned into the opposite of the United States, the very same year, 1979, the U.S. actually begins to offer training and funding to the Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan who would fight a proxy war with the Soviet Union.

These people, who are known as the Mujahideen, are being recruited, armed, trained, and funded by the U.S. and its allies in the region. And in fact, Osama bin Laden is actually toured all over the Middle East by the CIA to recruit for the Mujahideen. And in a speech that he gives in 1985, Ronald Reagan actually refers to these people, the Afghan Mujahideen, as freedom fighters. And the film “Rambo III,” which is made in 1988, is dedicated to the brave Afghan Mujahideen fighters. What we have here is a complex and contradictory process, what Mahmood Mamdani refers to as “good Muslim, bad Muslim,” where those who further U.S. interests, those who are on

the side of U.S. interests, are cast as "good Muslims" whereas those who oppose it are "bad Muslims."

And I bring this up because the roots of Islamophobia in the U.S. lies not so much in a misunderstanding of Islam, or in a kind of blanket demonization of all Muslims, but rather in the political, economic, and geo-strategic interests that the U.S. has in the region, particularly the flow of oil. So, all these caricatures and stereotypes are driven by these political and economic interests.

The Clash of Civilizations

Kumar: Now, I talked about the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis as one pivotal event that helped shaped the language of terrorism in the U.S. Now, I want to turn to another pivotal event, or I should say two pivotal events. And these are conferences that are organized by the Jonathan Institute.

So, the Jonathan Institute, which is headed by Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, held a conference in 1979 in Jerusalem and another one in 1984 in Washington D.C. And at both these conferences, there are dignitaries and politicians and high-level officials from countries around the world who are brought together to shape the language of terrorism. And in fact, the Jerusalem conference was explicitly framed as an intervention to change the international discourse on terrorism.

For Israel, it was about getting the West to see the enemies of Israel, the secular nationalist PLO, as enemies of the West overall. And there were two new narratives that people were introduced to at this 1979 conference. One, that the Soviet Union was the key sponsor of terrorism. It doesn't matter whether this is true or not, but this is the context of the Cold War, and so associating terrorism with the Soviet Union served as a way to turn the West as a whole against terrorism. The second argument is that terrorism is an attack on civilization.

So, you see this language of colonialism, this idea that the civilized world is being attacked by these barbarians, by these savages, being introduced into this conference. By the way, this language goes back to the late 18th and 19th century when this idea of the white man's burden to civilize and to vanquish the barbarians comes into being. This was brought back in 1979, and it's from here that this idea of "Clash of Civilizations" actually begins to be developed.

Bernard Lewis, who is a professor at Princeton University, penned an essay that actually became quite popular. It's called "The Roots of Muslim Rage." And in it, Lewis argued that Muslims are not driven by political grievances, apparently. They are driven by this trans-historic and almost irrational rage against the West.

And here, by the way, is the cover of the Atlantic magazine, in which Bernard Lewis' article appears. You see the stock image of the angry, bearded, turbaned man. The red veins in his eyes are the American flag. And actually, scholars who have studied Jewish stereotypes say that there is a lot of overlap between anti-Arab and anti-Jewish stereotypes. This is a stereotype of Jewish men. You see the hook nose, the scheming hands, the evil smile, the beard, the kippah, the misshapen spine, the bulging eyes, and so on.

But it is for a political scientist by the name of Samuel Huntington to really develop this concept. And then he writes a book, “Clash of Civilizations.” And this is widely read by people in policy circles as well as those outside. What is his argument?

Well, in a nutshell, Huntington argues that in the post-Cold War world, that is after the collapse of the Soviet Union, conflict between nations is no longer going to be driven by politics. It is going to be driven by culture. According to him, the world is characterized by seven or eight civilizations. Each would have developed uniquely with their own culture. And as a result of that, conflict, he says, is inevitable. And the way he puts it, he creates a very “Us vs. Them” mentality.

He says, “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic ... cultures.”

So, in other words, he presents this idea that the West is modern. It's democratic. It appreciates liberty and democracy and apple pie and granny and furry slippers and all things wonderful, whereas the East is this static, barbaric, misogynistic place.

And Hollywood plays a big part in this process of dehumanization.

Hollywood

The Fury (1978)

- White Man: Regular luncheon for two.
(interrupted by gunfire & Muslims attacking the beach)

To Live and Die in L.A. (1985)

- White Cop: Right there, fella!
- Muslim Man: Death to Israel and America and all the enemies of Islam!
(the Muslim man detonates a suicide bomb)

Kumar: Jack Shaheen's comprehensive analysis of hundreds of Hollywood films shows that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes, in fact, saturate our media.

Death Before Dishonor (1987)

- Trailer Narrator: Sent to a land of political chaos...
- White Man: Tell your terrorist friends this: Don't get us mad.
- Trailer Narrator: They attacked his Embassy, kidnapped his commanding officer, assassinated his men.
- White Woman: This isn't your war.
- White Man: It is now.

True Lies (1994)

- Muslim Man: I, we, are all prepared to die. With one turn of that key, two million of your people will die instantly.
- White Man: What key?
- Muslim Man: That key! Who's taken the key?

Kumar: Now, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it is this kind of cultural work that contributes to the construction of the racialized terrorist threat so much so when the Oklahoma bombing happens in 1995, immediately Arabs and Muslims are blamed.

News Montage

- The attack came without warning. And according to a U.S. government source, told CBS News that it has Middle East terrorism written all over it.
- The attack in Oklahoma City appears to have a familiar mark.
- This was done with the attempt to inflict as many casualties as possible. That is a Middle Eastern trait.
- The fact that it was such a powerful bomb in Oklahoma City immediately drew investigators to consider deadly parallels that all have roots in the Middle East.

Kumar: So-called terrorism experts all over the media saying that this has the marks of Arab terrorism, Muslim terrorism, and so on, even though it was Timothy McVeigh, a white Christian man, who carried out this attack that killed 168 people.

But it's 9/11, really, that cements the association between Arabs, Muslims, and terrorism. I'll give you a few examples.

The film "American Sniper," for instance, presents Muslims as savages, as demonic, and completely lacking in humanity. In fact, the only purpose, it seems, to have Muslims in this film is so that the main protagonist, the sniper, can actually shoot at them.

American Sniper (2014)

(the white male sniper shoots a Muslim boy)

- White Soldier: [expletive], that was gnarly.

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

- White Man: How do you like Pakistan so far?
- White Woman: It's kind of [expletive] up.

Kumar: Another film is "Zero Dark Thirty," which reproduces all the stereotypes of Muslims. The film is actually set in Pakistan, and it relies on the wholesale demonization of Pakistani people, who by the way are constantly referred to as "Paks."

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

- White Man: If bin Laden is at the end of this rainbow, is the Pak military with him?
- White Woman: The question isn't, are the Paks protecting bin Laden? The question is, would he allow himself to be protected by the Paks?

Kumar: And this is really not dissimilar to previous racist epithets like "Gooks" and "Japs." Excuse me for using these vile terms, but I think it's important to understand that these sorts of terms have a history. And this film is so terrible that even ordinary men who are standing at a market, for instance, are seen as suspicious. Why? Because they whip out their cellphones, and we assume that they're calling to inform on the CIA. In fact, the only way to be brown and not to be a villain in this film is to be unflinchingly loyal to the Americans as one character is, the translator.

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

(the Muslim translator speaks to two Muslim men)

- Muslim Translator (to white men): They said white faces don't belong here. If they don't move, shoot them.

Kumar: "Good Muslim," right? The one who sides with the U.S.

Now, I saw "Zero Dark Thirty" at a theater in New York City, and to be honest I was really stunned by the responses from the audience. They were really quite visceral and quite racist and sort of jingoistic in the attitude.

And in fact, Twitter was full of these sorts of comments. "Zero Dark Thirty makes me want to shoot at Arabs with assault rifles." "Just saw zero dark thirty. Arab guys on the bus making me nervous, should I water board him? Is that racist?" "I wanna go shoot brown people now while wearing night vision goggles, just because of how b.a. zero dark thirty was." These are the sorts of comments that you see in the Twitter-sphere. So, the media really play a huge role in shaping our imaginations and in spreading anti-Muslim stereotypes.

But I do want to say, though, that not all films are this blatant. Some, in fact, are far more sophisticated. Take the case, for instance, of a show like "Homeland." This show is much more nuanced than films like "Zero Dark Thirty" or "American Sniper." But nevertheless, it helps to propagate an "Us vs. Them" mentality or the "Clash of Civilizations," as we see in this poster from season four.

The background is a sea of nameless, faceless, women in black, a stock representation of Muslim women as oppressed, as lacking in individuality, as lacking in agency, lacking in the ability to act meaningfully upon the world. But, because we don't see their faces, there's also something a little bit threatening about them, right? They look like they pose a threat. And here is Carrie Mathison, the protagonist, who stands in the middle. She, of course, represents the American nation, and, in case that's not obvious to you, she's wearing a blue dress, a red scarf, and her face is white. So, there we go. Red, white, and blue.

The Costs of Dehumanization

Kumar: Now, we make the shift from entertainment to news. This is Newsweek, a cover from 2012. You see the very familiar image of angry, turban, bearded men, driven, as the title says, by Muslim rage. This is an irrational, cultural rage that is apparently not based on any real political grievances. You see that apparently even children are driven by this hatred so much so they take

up arms. The article that the cover refers to, "Why They Hate Us: The Roots of Islamic Rage," is by Fareed Zakaria, who's a big media personality, and by the way was a student of Samuel Huntington's at Harvard University.

And so, this argument gets reproduced again and again. And if even children are demonized in this way, is it any wonder that when Americans are presented with studies that show that hundreds of thousands of innocent people have been killed by the U.S. in the War on Terror, there is so little sympathy for them, right?

And make no mistake about it, none of us benefit from this state of affairs. The Carceral State and the National Security State does not keep us safe. We, the 99%, as the Occupy Wall Street movement put it, pay a price. We pay a political price, and we also pay an economic price.

A study by the Watson Institute at Brown University finds that the U.S. has spent close to five trillion dollars as of 2016 on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, as well as on homeland security. Five trillion dollars. Very few of us know this figure, and very few of us ask questions about whether this is worth it.

I pointed out, earlier in my talk, some of the main killers of Americans in this society. These are largely health related, people dying from heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and so forth. Imagine if we redirected the trillions of dollars that are spent on the War on Terror to creating a free healthcare system, one that would offer preventative care so that people don't get diabetes, so that people don't die from heart disease, and so on. That would truly bring down the death rate in this country.

Suicides are one of the top ten ways in which Americans die. Tens of thousands of people, particularly white, middle-age, working class people, have been committing suicide in large numbers since 1999. And researchers who study this phenomenon call these "deaths of despair." And they put it down to the fact that these people don't have good jobs, have lost good jobs, and therefore can't sustain meaningful family relationships. And because they've lost hope, they kill themselves. And by the way, a percentage of these are also returning veterans, who, when they come back, don't have the support structures necessary to start living meaningful lives again. Now, imagine if we could use these trillions of dollars spent on the means of death and destruction abroad to create good jobs for people so that ending their lives doesn't become a choice, doesn't become a rational choice, for so many tens of thousands of Americans.

But our imaginations have been constrained by a system that creates moral panics and focuses our attention on racialized threats.

Last Week Tonight (HBO)

- John Oliver: Sinclair has a daily, must-run segment called the Terrorism Alert Desk. That is right. They report on terrorism every single day whether there is something major to report on or not, which means that sometimes the updates contain things like this.
- Fox 25 News Anchor: Mayors in 22 French towns are ignoring a High Court's ruling that says banning "burkinis" is illegal. More than 30 towns initially outlawed the swimwear worn mostly by Muslim women. From the Terrorism Alert Desk, I'm Michele Marsh.

- John Oliver: That is not about terrorism. It's just about Muslims. By that definition, terrorism is anything a Muslim does.

Kumar: And we all pay a social cost for this. When one group of people are dehumanized, not only are their lives damaged, but we all suffer for it. As James Baldwin once put it, "whoever debases others is debasing himself," or as the labor movement put it, "an injury to one is an injury to all." So, what can we do about this?

Conclusion

Kumar: Now, I began by talking about the dehumanization of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In the 1980s, it may surprise you to learn that the U.S. government actually apologized to Japanese Americans for the shameful treatment that was meted out to them during World War II.

Ronald Reagan: We gather here today to right a grave wrong. More than 40 years ago, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living in the United States were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in makeshift internment camps. This action was taken without trial, without jury. It was based solely on race, for these 120,000 were Americans of Japanese descent. For here we admit a wrong. Here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.

Kumar: Now, some people have argued that this is because Japanese Americans were integrated into U.S. society and showed that they were good, loyal U.S. citizens, and so forth. But in reality, it was only after Japan had actually ceased to be a threat to U.S. interests on the global stage that such an apology was possible. And I think that's an important lesson here for us in this, which is that groups of people are turned into racialized threats when there are larger political and economic agendas at work.

What are some of these agendas in the Middle East, North Africa, Central and South Asia? Well, the U.S. has multiple geostrategic interests in the region, but one of them is oil. The region holds one of the greatest supplies of oil in the world. And oil, as we know, drives the world economy.

And so, while the effort by Muslim Americans to become model citizens, to educate the public about Islam and its message of peace, to foster interfaith dialogue, while all of these are useful in terms of dispelling stereotypes, ultimately, if we don't address the root causes for the rise of the Islamic terrorist threat, which is located within the political economy, then we will make little progress in the fight against anti-Muslim racism.

But we must begin by humanizing the people who have been dehumanized. We must educate ourselves on how racism has been fundamental to reproducing unjust and unequal systems, all the way from the settler colonial project to slavery, Jim Crow, the War on Drugs, and the War on Terror. The War on Terror, as I said earlier, has replaced the Cold War as a means that allows the U.S. to intervene militarily around the world, to strengthen its global dominance, and to squash dissent at home, while expanding the Carceral State and the National Security State.

Now, I began my talk by talking about the protest against the Trump Muslim ban. Thousands of Americans showed up at airports, from New York to San Francisco, to send a message of resistance and to say that Muslims are welcome in this country. And it is because of such protests that the Muslim ban was eventually ruled against.

I think we need to continue to build such protests. We need to rebuild an anti-war movement. And out of these protests and activity, we need to build stable and permanent grassroots organizations that can mobilize millions of people to resist and dismantle a system that the majority of us do not benefit from.

In fact, we need to reclaim the vast resources of the world for the vast majority of people in the world. And I think that a vision of creating a just, democratic, and fair society where all human beings, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, are treated with the respect they deserve and are given the resources to lead meaningful lives. That is a vision that I think that all of us should share, and that is a vision that I think that needs to animate us in the years to come.

Thank you.

[END]