

Behind the Irvine 11 Case: The Potential Hostility of "Mainstream" American Culture toward Islam

Introduction

The Irvine 11 decision is one of the most controversial cases of the twentieth century. Some believe it symbolizes a further loss of voice in political issues for American minorities, especially the Muslim community. In this essay, the course of Irvine 11 will be reviewed in the context of the history of Arabs and Muslims in the United States, especially in the aftermath of 9-11, to explore the fear of Islam that has characterized mainstream America for decades. It will explore how this bias and discrimination, reflected in public policy, has affected the credibility of the government and the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States to varying degrees.

Background: Irvine 11 controversy

In 2010, a student protest at the University of California, Irvine, generated widespread attention and discussion related to the Muslim community. On February 8, 2010, eleven students, represented by UCI student Osama Shabaik, rose from their seats during a speech by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) and shouted, "Propagating murder is not free speech!" and other declarations to protest Israel's destruction of Gaza in the Gaza war (Majeed). The protesting students were then led away from the scene by police. Following the protest, the 11 students who participated in the protest, along with the Muslim Student Union involved, were disciplined by UCI for disrupting speech and were later charged and convicted of misdemeanors. This decision sparked debate over whether it was fair to bring criminal charges against the students after they had already been disciplined by the university and whether Muslims face more "unfettered speech" in the United States than other religious groups.

History: Orientalism, Israeli Affinity and Islamophobia

Before further discussing the implications of the case, an analysis of the role of Muslims and Jews in American culture is necessary. Orientalism was first coined in 1987 by Edward Said

in his book *Orientalism* to describe the prevailing condescending attitude of Western scholars toward Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies (Mamdani, 2005). Through Orientalism, Western scholars have been able to construct an illusory relationship between the West and East and West. In this system, the Western world is used as the rational, civilized, and advanced in contrast to the ignorant, barbaric, and backward East in order to highlight the superiority of Western civilization.

The prevalence of Orientalism in the United States has widely influenced its views and perceptions of the East for nearly a century, and one of the most influential groups in this regard has been the Arabs and Muslims. Arabs have long been portrayed as "savage foreigners," and they have generally been portrayed negatively in the media, including Hollywood films, highlighting their exotic qualities as "bearded savages. Accordingly, Arab women appear on the screen and in the media as "seductive belly dancers" and "victims of religious oppression" stereotypes, which also influence people's perceptions that Arabs and Muslims are not part of the United States and are invading outsiders. In the aftermath of 9/11, vigilance against Arabs and Muslims reached another peak. It was also from this time that Islamophobia became further prevalent in the United States. The title of "terrorist" was forced on every Arab and Muslim, and they were subjected to suspicion and hate speech above all other races (Jamal & Naber, 2008). The original cultural disapproval and fear of Muslims was transferred to the real world through terrorist attacks and gave a more "legitimate" reason to discriminate against the Muslim community.

Conversely, the United States' modern-day attachment to "great power" has made it more tolerant of Israel and the Jews behind it than the "exotic" Muslims. This history goes back to the Vietnam War, when even though the media reported that the United States had won a breakthrough victory in Vietnam in a "powerful modern war", the illusion of a "great power war" fizzled out as the battle lines grew longer and longer (McAlister, 2019). Thus, this fear of a weakened war effort led the United States to find a sense of identity in Israel. As Israel

triumphed on the battlefields of the Middle East with rapid warfare, Americans saw in it the war power they had longed for. Likewise, the mainstream, predominantly white Christian Americans, began an affinity movement toward Israel in the context of the multiple dichotomies of U.S.-Vietnam, Israel-Arab states, Christianity/Judaism-Islam, and West-East. Jews, who share a more similar religion with them, became a better ally than Arab Muslims, whom they viewed as enemies and outsiders (McAlister, 2019).

Debate on Irvine 11: Free Speech and Differential Treatment

The most hotly debated topic in the Irvine 11 case was whether the students' protest was free speech protected by the First Amendment; and whether the charges against the students were aggravated by their status as Muslims.

In the case's ruling, the district attorney found that the students' attempts to disrupt the event and interrupt Michael Oren's speech were improper. It argued that the students' conduct was not protected by the First Amendment's free speech protections because it attempted to prevent the speech from proceeding with a lawful meeting (Jolly et al., 2011). Following the protest, a UCI campus spokesperson said at the meeting that if one has an objection to a speech, the proper way to go about it is to leave the lecture hall, not to try to stop the speaker (Paz, 2015). This action undoubtedly deprived the rest of the audience of the right to hear the point of view and the speaker's right to speak freely.

Supporters of the protest, like the students who chanted the slogan "Propagating murder is not free speech" at the protest, believe that the court's decision was unjust and fear that the move is stifling the right of communities of color to speak about politics. Supporters argue that the Irvine 11 were convicted of misdemeanors in large part because of their Muslim identity (Paz, 2015). In the wake of the protests, Salam Al-Marayati, president of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, criticized the local sheriff's department for its double standard and argued that prosecutors were selectively interfering then with speech they did not like (Paz, 2015). Similarly, Cecillie Surasky of the left-wing Jewish Voice for Peace argued that Muslims are subject to

harsher speech censorship than Jews and that Muslims face less leeway than Jews when it comes to the Middle East in the United States (Jewish group supports Muslim activists who heckled Oren). In response to the protesters' comments, the local prosecutor argued that the Irvine 11 disciplinary action did not involve the politics of the Palestinian conflict and that it was not the protesters' comments that violated the law, but rather the attempt to disrupt the meeting (Paz, 2015). However, the ruling is still considered to have a negative impact on future protests by students of color.

Discussion: The distrust of the law among minorities, and religious incomprehension

The controversy over the Irvine 11 case reflects the distrust of minorities, such as Arab Muslims in the United States, of mainstream media influenced by underlying orientalism in recent decades, and this skepticism has been further reflected in a distrust of national policies and laws. Following the outbreak of war in the Middle East, U.S. pro-Israel policies led to the isolation of a large number of American Muslims who were not recognized as American citizens on the one hand and faced cultural ostracism on the other (McAlister, 2019).. The inequality propaganda of the government and media over the past decades has led to a gradual skepticism of the law among Arab and Muslims in the United States. And in the aftermath of 9/11, tensions between the government and Muslims have intensified and mistrust between the two sides has grown. The FBI has taken Arab American Muslims "more seriously than other races" and, accordingly, Middle Easterners in the United States have faced increased inequality (*The convert* (2012)). The historical aspect of the Irvine 11 decision is controversial because it is somehow evidence that the government is more harsh in dealing with Muslim-related cases and that Muslims face more unfair treatment. Even though the ombudsman explained after the case that the verdict had nothing to do with the students' political views, this does not offset the distrust of the judiciary that has accumulated over the years among Muslims in the United States (Paz, 2015).

It is also worth considering why this mistrust has not been alleviated since the last century, or why Orientalism has not been effectively suppressed. Historical, political, and religious reasons may all be among the root causes of the problem, and of the many, religious reasons are well worth discussing. Before going any further, it is important to establish that "mainstream American society" is still dominated by white Christianity. Even though Arabs and blacks, as well as many more minorities, have become more active in the mainstream media in recent years, there are more complex historical reasons why American society is still dominated by white Christians. This has led to a more mainstream acceptance of values based on Christian morality and thus to the establishment of a Christian-dominated ideology. Under this system of thought, the mainstream culture prefers cultures and ideas that are close to the Christian worldview, and those that deviate from it are blamed as enemies and invaders. This is also one of the origins of Orientalism in a way, namely the antagonism between Western-Christianity and Eastern-other religions. Thus, when confronted with the issue of the Palestinian-Israeli war, Muslim Palestine, which has long been seen as an invader, appears more distrustful in the face of Jewish Israel, which is more closely aligned with Christianity. Although the West has had a long history of persecution of Jews, the divide with the Jews is not worth mentioning in the face of the more "alien" Muslims.

Conclusion: Counterterrorism that points to citizens

The controversy over the Irvine 11 case is the result of mutual distrust between minority groups such as American Arabs and Muslims and mainstream society. This result is a combination of Orientalism, religious incomprehension and, in the aftermath of 9/11, hostility toward Arabs and Muslims in general in mainstream America. post-9/11, fear of Muslims has left all Arab and Muslim Americans facing the same charges, and when government agencies target a particular group with an unequal ideological approach, the public questions the credibility of the government. the resultant backlash. Thus, in the Irvine 11 case, "free speech" no longer refers to the students or the ambassador's statements, but rather as a question to the local

security authorities regarding whether minorities still have the same right to free speech as the mainstream, despite years of prejudice.

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