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## Anti-Racism and Political Contagion From Save Darfur to Black Lives Matter

Hisham Aidi 07.2.2020

In hindsight, June 16, 2015 was a turning point, a date critical to understanding today's political tumult. That was the day Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president, theatrically descending the escalator at Trump Tower, then giving a rambling speech that linked illegal immigration, terrorism and the offshoring of American jobs. It was the moment when he introduced the phrase "Make America Great Again" and vowed to build a "great, great wall on our southern border." The media would focus on his derogatory remarks about Mexicans "bringing drugs, bringing crime." Trump's candidacy would cause an immediate spike in hate crimes and send political groups scrambling to join forces with—or distance themselves from—whichever group he targeted next. His following surged as he rode the wave of white nationalist backlash to immigration, failed wars and a Black incumbent.

Among the more intriguing developments in the wake of Trump's candidacy was the rise in anti-Muslim speech from Hispanic celebrities and public figures. Conservative Hispanic politicians had long argued that immigration reform was



People gather in front of Louisville City Hall during a protest against the deaths of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police and George Floyd by Minneapolis police, in Louisville, Kentucky, May 29, 2020.

Bryan Woolston/Reuters

stalling because of Muslim terrorists slipping through the southern border. For example, New Mexico Governor Susan Martinez had called for more security at the US-Mexico border in 2013, after Border Patrol agents found candy wrappers with Arabic writing. But Trump's brutal joining of the question of Hispanic migration with terrorism, of Islamophobia and Hispanophobia (long linked in French and English colonial thought, but not in the American imaginary) would unleash a torrent of anti-Muslim speech on Spanish talk radio and social media. Miss Puerto Rico Destiny Vélez tweeted that Muslims "terrorize innocent Americans," adding that, "Mexicans, Arabs, Jews and anything in between aren't the same thing." In August 2015, Ramon Escobar, a youngish Hispanic American diplomat who had handled State Department engagement with the Muslim world, ranted to a handful of journalists about his tour in Saudi Arabia, saying that in the Gulf's failed societies "it's always the will of Allah" and expressed outrage that Latinos were being associated with terrorism.<sup>[1]</sup> As the campaign unfolded, more prominent Hispanic politicians sounded off: Texas Senator Ted Cruz called for law enforcement to patrol Muslim neighborhoods while Florida Senator Marco Rubio denigrated

President Barack Obama for visiting a mosque in Baltimore. This rhetoric was aimed at distancing Latinos from Muslims, to signal that Latinos were not a national security issue.

Trump's candidacy and rise to office ultimately proved as politically cataclysmic as the events of September 11, 2001, generating unexpected animosities, alliances and bizarre new discourses. Thirty percent of Latinos ended up voting for Trump, while Hindu nationalists rallied behind his stances on terrorism and immigration. But Trump's ascent also precipitated much solidarity on the left, as groups mobilized against the Muslim ban and to **defend DACA**. Resistance to Trump also coalesced to produce wins for progressive candidates nationwide, including four women of color (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib) elected to Congress in 2018 who became known as The Squad. These victories occurred alongside a surge of hate crimes against Jews, Muslims and Hispanics, with a terrible mass shooting of Hispanics at a Walmart in Texas in November 2019. As groups integrate into the American political process, they often reflect the country's deep rifts, frequently manifesting in a split between those wanting to express solidarity or opposition to the Muslim other. Unsurprisingly, the Trump years have been characterized by a rise in Hispanic Islamophobia, including the tragic high-profile murders of Muslims by young Hispanics, most prominently of Nadra Hassanen in Washington, DC and Imam Maulana Akonjee and Thara Uddin at a mosque in Ozone Park, Queens.

In early 2005, I was a postdoctoral fellow at the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, trying to understand a social movement that was spreading rapidly across US campuses and cities, and eventually to France and Britain. The **Save Darfur movement** took off in early 2004—in circumstances not unlike the present moment—as a buffoonish, flailing Republican president ran for a second term against a lackluster Democratic candidate in a War on Terror context. I subsequently published an

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essay in *Middle East Report* titled “**Slavery, Genocide and the Politics of Outrage: Understanding the New Racial Olympics**” that sought to explain why of all

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the civil wars in Africa and humanitarian crises in the world, it was the mass violence in western Sudan that had gripped the American imagination. The answer, I argued, lay in the post-September 11 domestic political scene:

Unlike other hot spots across Africa, the Darfur tragedy reverberates deeply in the US because it is represented as a racial conflict between Arabs and indigenous Africans, because Sudan is where the “moral geographies” of black, Jewish and Christian nationalists overlap and because the Darfur crisis offers a unique opportunity to unite against the new post-Cold War enemy.

The Save Darfur movement started on college campuses to counter pro-Palestinian agitation. When Students for Justice in Palestine would bring Israeli refuseniks to speak, the American Anti-Slavery Group founded by Charles Jacobs—who would also launch Save Darfur—would respond by bringing Sudanese “lost boys” to speak about Arab racism. Jacobs was also the founder of The David Project, which monitored Middle East Studies departments for alleged anti-Israel prejudice and funded the film *Columbia UnBecoming*, which claims to document incidents of bias in that university’s Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures.

To show how these three American nationalisms—evangelical, Jewish and Black—overlapped in Sudan, I highlighted three frontiers: the colonial and Huntingtonian so-called faultline between Africa and the Arab world that ran through Sudan; the urban periphery where competing conceptions of the Middle East co-existed uneasily and where Latino immigration was leading to fears of ethnic succession; and finally the US-Mexico border where Hispanic migration had led to Minuteman vigilantism and to Samuel Huntington’s warning of a “demographic Reconquista” and a backlash from whites fearing “replacement.”

The current protest movement against police brutality—unfolding during a horrific pandemic crisis that has exposed and deepened societal fissures—clearly differs from the Save Darfur movement. For starters, the current protest is against American state violence, specifically the recurring spectacle of police cruelty against Black men. Black Lives Matter is not calling for military intervention, and in fact has an anti-colonial facet. Save Darfur activists, on the other hand, would often chant “Out of Iraq, Into Sudan.”

Since the COVID-19 crisis began in February, the global war on terror seems to have faded away; the war on the new “invisible enemy”—and the Trump administration’s hapless response—have dominated headlines. The absence of a Muslim bogeyman seems to have created space for new alliances and coalitions, as the establishment foreign policy hawks have receded from view. Another difference is that while, in 2005, some older Afrocentrists (like the late comedian Dick Gregory) supported Save Darfur, the majority of Black (and minority) leaders steered clear of the movement. Save Darfur ended up being a largely white movement led by a Jewish-Christian coalition. Jewish organizations, which agitated on campuses in the mid-2000s, have been relatively silent in recent years, perhaps because their policy objectives have been achieved. The Department of Education has moved to sanction and deny Title VI funding to a number of Middle East Studies programs deemed biased, the US embassy has been relocated to Jerusalem and Israel is moving to annex additional Palestinian territories.

The current movement, under the aegis of Black Lives Matter, is multi-ethnic and multi-racial, and while it has inspired protests globally, it is focused domestically on police violence and reparations. If Trumpism was a response to the humiliation of failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (it is no coincidence that the Minuteman Project began patrolling the southern border days after the Abu Ghraib story broke) then Black Lives Matter is protesting the militarization of urban policing resulting from those same unending wars. The decades of counterinsurgency abroad have boomeranged back home with the expansion of mass surveillance under Obama and the continuation of the Pentagon’s 1033 program that has transferred \$7.4 billion of surplus military equipment



(such as armored vehicles and rifles) to law enforcement departments nationwide.

In February 2015, *The Guardian* broke a story about a “black site” operated by domestic law enforcement in Chicago, echoing the secret detention facilities used by US defense and intelligence agencies to interrogate and torture prisoners overseas. The militarization of policing may have been newsworthy in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 after the death of Michael Brown at the hands of the police, but it barely registered in 2012 when then-Mayor Pete Buttigieg **shared** a *New York Times* article titled “With Green Beret Tactics, Combating Gang Warfare” with the comment: “Interesting use of counter-insurgency tactics to address gang violence.” Nor was much made of Minnesota Governor Tom Waltz’s recent claim that the unrest made American cities look like Baghdad or Mogadishu.

Now, 15 years after Save Darfur, American power and prestige are vastly diminished. In 2005, the neo-cons calling for intervention in Sudan were in part vexed by China’s access to Sudan’s oil, as well as Beijing’s refusal to isolate the regime of former Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir. (Stephen Spielberg famously withdrew as adviser to the Beijing Olympics because of China’s Darfur policy.) Today as Chinese-American relations are in free-fall, China has surpassed the United States as Africa’s biggest trade partner and Trump allegedly appealed to Chinese President Xi Jinping for help in the upcoming election.

But the parallels and continuities between Save Darfur and the current movement are striking—the three frontiers are still politically relevant. At his inaugural speech, Trump warned that “places like Afghanistan are safer than our inner cities.” The president is still intrigued by comparisons of Islam’s “bloody borders” with the southern US border and continues to link the two, as

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when he threatened to designate Mexican drug cartels terrorist organizations, or when he placed Venezuela on the updated Muslim ban list because the Maduro government was **allegedly granting** Venezuelan passports to Hezbollah militants.

Prima facie, the president's fascination with the inner city may appear less comprehensible than his obsession with the southern border; but these two frontiers are critical to understanding his persona. Trump's America First worldview, we are told, is rooted in Jacksonian nationalism, which harks back to Andrew Jackson, the notorious slave-owning and slave-selling president and architect of the Indian Removal Act, whose portrait currently hangs in the Oval Office. In his well-regarded *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (2002), Walter Russell Mead describes the Jacksonian tradition as the honor-based, Scotch-Irish ethno-nationalism of the American frontier, a folk community hostile to elites, immigration and international law, which believes the United States should deploy ruthless military power whenever threatened. In an aside, Mead argues that despite their white supremacist roots, Jacksonian values had a major influence on African American culture in the south and also in the gang culture of inner cities which have re-created "the atmosphere and practices of American frontier life."<sup>[2]</sup>

Few would think of Trump as a blend of hip hop and Jacksonian swag, but a case could be made. Trump was an icon in hip hop culture for decades, a symbol of ostentatious wealth, his name mentioned in some 300 rap lyrics. As Charles Blow of *The New York Times* wrote, the Queens-born real estate magnate rose alongside the genre in 1970s New York watching "the moguls it made, the bravado it brandished. He liked it, envied it, aped it." And for all his disdain for poor minorities, soon learned "how to assert white privilege and emulate black power."<sup>[3]</sup> In fact, Trump weaponized New York city's hip hop culture, appropriating—in Blow's words—the "coarser side" of Black culture to build a blustering populist brand that propelled him to the country's highest political office. It is ironic that as gangsta rap declined in the mid-2000s (making way for

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a gentler, more up-lifting Kendrick-Drake sound), its echoes can still be seen in the Oval Office and among populist strongmen elsewhere. Consider Brazilian leader Jair Bolsonaro, who has a coterie of MAGA-hat-wearing rappers who compose lyrics in support of his reactionary platform. Still, it is worth emphasizing that in the United States (and Brazil) the hip hop community turned overwhelmingly against Trump once he was in the White House.

As during the Darfur crisis, the Muslim grocer in the inner city is still a source of contention. In November 2005, liquor stores in Oakland owned by Muslim immigrants were vandalized (one store burnt down, and an employee kidnapped.) In 2015, following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson outside a store owned by an Indian immigrant, a **boycott** was organized of immigrant-owned stores. Anger at the figure of the Muslim grocer has surfaced again since the death of George Floyd, when it emerged that the call to the police was made by an employee of a Palestinian-owned grocery, prompting more calls for boycotts as well as attacks against Middle Eastern and South Asian-owned businesses in a range of cities. The debate continues among African Americans on the merits of solidarity with Arab/Muslim organizations. In 2005, Arab and Muslim activists were focused on lobbying the US Census Bureau to add a new MENA (Middle Eastern and North Africa) minority status category that would allow Americans from the region to claim non-white identity, and thus qualify for various civil rights protections (including special status as potential hate crime victims) as well as benefit from affirmative action policies. An energized Black-Palestinian left emerged in 2014 speaking of a Gaza-Ferguson nexus, but a self-described school of Afropessimism continues to be wary of forming solidarities, especially with the Arab world where these critics say “anti-blackness” is “foundational.”

Given that the Trump White House has flatly opposed the Census request, these young anti-racism activists from Arab and Muslim backgrounds have turned their energy to countering police violence and surveillance as well as addressing the image of the anti-black Muslim shop-owner. Multiple **initiatives** have been launched by Middle Eastern and North African Americans—scholars and activists—most recently “Arabs For Black Lives” that attempt to mediate between Muslim grocers and their patrons by providing training in cultural



difference, de-escalation and support for these merchants to “go green” and carry produce in lieu of liquor and junk food. The generation that was in high school during the Darfur crisis has now come of age. But there remains a political gulf between this younger generation of woke Muslim activists, who are eager for acceptance into BLM and similar coalitions, and who are harshly critical of the much-maligned grocer—sometimes speaking of them as settlers and exploitative colonists—and the older generation (among them the shop-owners) who do not understand the difference between a Becky and a Karen, and do not see why they should be criticized for selling the alcohol and tobacco products their customers demand. Ironically, some of this local opposition leads Muslim grocers to relocate to Hispanic neighborhoods, where immigrant merchants selling such products have been less likely to draw criticism. Despite the Islamophobic rhetoric from political hopefuls, a recent poll shows that among whites, Blacks and Hispanics, Hispanic Americans score the lowest on the Islamophobia Index, with Hispanic Americans five times more likely to hold favorable opinions of Muslims than negative ones (51 percent versus 10 percent).[4]

In my 2005 essay, I concluded by observing that the topic of racism in North Africa and the Middle East has long been dominated by external interests and actors and marked by official suppression of all discussions of the region’s legacies of slavery and racism. But even in the mid-2000s, one could see the emergence of an anti-racism discourse in the Middle East, enabled by the internet. That process has accelerated. The final sentence called for a celebration and mobilization of Afro-Arab identity against tired Arab nationalist narratives and colonial separations.

Since the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, and especially with the passage of Tunisia’s anti-racism law in October 2018, social media abounds with Afro-Arab activists and new collectives. These Black Arab voices run the gamut from socialist pan-Africanist feminists who quote Angela Davis to Afrocentrists who quote John Henry Clarke and his theory of Arabs overrunning Africa, a discourse last

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heard during the Save Darfur moment. The past is preface.

Geopolitically, much has changed—and not changed. The Sudanese strongman Omar Al-Bashir was toppled by a protest movement and is in prison awaiting an International Criminal Court trial for war crimes committed in Darfur. Yet Sudan is still in America's crosshairs. The mass violence in South Sudan has not resonated with the American public, but the new Sudanese regime is still under heavy pressure from Washington to recognize Israel in exchange for a lifting of sanctions—coercion that could derail Sudan's transition. Brand activism continues as well. Save Darfur drew celebrities and corporate actors, as companies began selling Darfur underwear, video games and Timberland boots. Today retail companies are scrambling to capitalize on Black Lives Matter. Walmart has pledged to stop locking up so-called multicultural hair products in display cases and BAND-AID has released new bandages in different skin tones.

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In conclusion, it is worth recalling that before America's grand "awakening" of 2020, there were protest movements in Sudan, Lebanon, Chile, Algeria, France and Spain centered on exclusion and state violence. It is exhilarating to watch a protest movement against state brutality, white supremacy, colonial memory and Trump-inspired racist contagion spread around the world. But it is not clear that an American-style anti-racism can counter racism in societies elsewhere, with their own race regimes and constructs. More importantly, it is worth noting that a backlash to the current protests is in the offing. This counter-movement could easily attempt to unify a polarized nation with time-honored tactics of division and distraction: by smashing current links of solidarity and directing the collective anger and bereavement caused by American policy failures toward a domestic or international other, be that Iran, Venezuela, Sudan or mosques in America, as happened in 2005.

Plus ça change...

\* Read Aïdi's 2005 article for *Middle East Report* here, "[Slavery, Genocide and the Politics of Outrage: Understanding the New Racial Olympics.](#)"

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## Endnotes

[1] Author's notes from the event.

[2] Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001) p. 237.

[3] Charles M. Blow, "[Trump, 'He's Like a Rapper,'](#)" *The New York Times*, June 22, 2018.

[4] Dalia Mogahed and Azka Mahmood, *American Muslim Poll 2019: Full Report*, ISPU (April 29, 2019).

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