

Ways & Means Transcript – S2E7 – Secret Life of Muslims

Emily Hanford (EH): Hi, everyone. Today's episode is the final one of our second season. We'll be back in the fall with Season 3. In the meantime, if you like what you're hearing, we could really use your help. You could write us a review on iTunes, or share a favorite episode on Facebook. Those are two things that will really help other people find us. Thanks so much, now on to the show. From Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. I'm Emily Hanford.

Mona Haydar (MH): These two guys were standing behind us and I'm clearly pregnant and we've got our two-year-old and this guy was like, "I wonder what she's hiding under there. I wish I could rip that fucking thing off her fucking head." You know, knowing that I could hear him.

EH: Mona Haydar is Muslim. She wears a hijab- a headscarf. Her husband, Sebastian, converted to Islam after he met Mona. The two live in New York City with their kids. Their oldest is a boy named Safi.

Sebastian Robins (SR): When Mona and I met, it was 2012. I mean, it's hard not to be corny and sentimental. You know, for me, it was really love at first sight. Islamophobia just wasn't the thing that it is today. I don't know if I would've converted as readily or as publicly now as I did then. I kind of experience these two different, like, cities when I go out now. Like, I spend most of the day with Safi, and the world is just this kind of like, friendly, you know, great place. And, going out with Mona, people are not shy about staring.

MH: Sebastian's like, "Oh, this is my wife, Mona!" People are, like, "Oh, nice to meet you, like, Muslim lady."

Reporter 1: The FBI now believes the massacre in San Bernardino was an act of foreign-inspired terrorism.

Reporter 2: Shootings in Paris in two or three locations.

MH: After San Bernardino and the Paris attacks, it was really intense.

SR: As soon as we heard about the event, there was hardly time to mourn before it was, like, bracing for the backlash.

MH: There was a significant rise in Islamophobic hate crimes.

SR: Yeah.

Reporter 3: Just this afternoon there was a fire at a mosque in southern California. It is the latest in a string of violence directed at Muslims.

MH: We didn't leave the house, for, I think, two or three weeks.

EH: Mona and Sebastian were afraid of being seen as a threat, or of someone attacking them. And it's true. Muslim-Americans are far more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators of it. Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means: the secret lives of Muslims in America, and the surprising ways in which hyper-vigilance about the possible threat of Muslim-American violence might actually be making all Americans less safe. The stories we're sharing this episode come from a project called "The Secret Lives of Muslims." You might've seen these short films on Fox, the USA Today Network, CBS Sunday Morning, or PRI's The World. The films provide an intimate look into the lives of Muslims living in the United States.

In the weeks after the 215 San Bernardino Massacre, Mona and Sebastian holed up at home watching T.V. coverage. The San Bernardino shooters were a Muslim couple, and every time Mona saw a photo of the wife in her hijab, she shivered. She knew she could be a target if she left the house. The Southern Poverty Law Center has found the number of anti-Muslim hate groups is on the rise, nearly tripling between 2015 and 2016.

David Schanzer (DS): I would ask President Trump, why haven't you spoken out against the wave of hate-crimes and anti-Muslim bigotry that has been escalating in the United States for over a year?

EH: This is David Schanzer, he's in the faculty at Duke, and runs the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. He says there are about 3 million Muslims living in the U.S.

DS: There are Muslim-Americans that are teaching our kids in schools, are doctors and nurses in hospitals, serving on police forces, and serving in our armed services.

EH: But, for the most part, we don't see those Muslims in our media. Instead, we associate Muslims with terrorism, even though acts of terrorism by Muslim-Americans are extremely rare in the United States. David Schanzer has been looking at this issue carefully for many years. For the last 8 years, he's tracked incidents of violent extremism in the United States and before he joined the Duke faculty, he worked for the Homeland Security Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. He was also an attorney in both the Defense Department and the Justice Department.

DS: Over 15 years, there've been about 220,000 homicides in the United States and only about 100 of those are attributable to al-Qaeda/ISIS-related extremism. Now, if you look at the media coverage, you would think that this form of violence was prevalent, it was affecting every single community in America, and that's just not the case.

Evelyn Alsultany (EA): When Timothy McVeigh bombed the government building in Oklahoma City in 1995, he was a white, Irish, Catholic man. There wasn't a move then to think that all white, Irish, Catholic men are potential terrorists.

EH: This is Evalyn Alsultany. She directs the Arab and Muslim-American studies program at the University of Michigan. Evelyn says we're primed to see certain kinds of people as violence, and it has a lot to do with Hollywood, and it's not new for Americans to think of Muslims as the bad guys. She studies how Muslims are portrayed on screen, and points to a book that's a landmark in the field. It's called "Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilified a People" by Jack Shaheen.

EA: And, in that book, he watches almost a thousand Hollywood movies starting in the late 1800s until 2000. And he shows, he basically says that out of this almost-thousand films, that he would classify 50 of them as even-handed in their representation of Arabs and Muslims and 12 as positive. So, if we think about that number, that we've been watching Hollywood movies from the beginning of Hollywood cinema that have portrayed Arabs and Muslims in stereotypical ways, it is no wonder that it is easy to make the assumption that all Arabs and Muslims are strange, or terroristic, or threatening in some way.

EH: This perception is something Evelyn understands personally. She saw how it affected her own family.

EA: My father was from Iraq. He was a Shia Muslim from Najaf in Iraq and he came to the U.S. in the 1960s. My father, even for a while, he changed his name from Kamal to Ken. And I remember when I was 6 years old, hearing him say "Ken" for the first time, and I started laughing. I was just cracking up, at six years old. "My dad's not Ken! Ken's Barbie's boyfriend! Why is my dad calling himself Ken?"

EH: When people asked where he was from, her dad would say "Turkey" and her step-mother would lie about where she was from, too. She would say Spain rather than Colombia.

EA: And, I later realized that when they would say Iraq AND Colombia, people would inevitably make comments about terrorism and drug-dealing. People would ask them, you know, "Oh, well, how do you make your money?" Assuming that they must have some kind of drug-dealing or terrorist ties. And, so, to avoid all of that, they would, they had this alternate story about where they were from.

EH: And much of the issue Evelyn and others argue, stems from the movies.

EA: And so, I think that these movies, in a sense, have primed audiences for over a century, really, in seeing Arabs and Muslims as, in the earlier movies, exotic and strange. And then, increasingly over time, as violence and as threats to national security.

Ahmed Ahmed (AA): Should I say anything? Ahmed Ahmed take one.

EH: Ahmed Ahmed is a Muslim-American actor. He's featured in the Secret Lives of Muslims project.

AA: I played a terrorist in the movie "Executive Decision". I played a terrorist on the sit-com Roseanne. In a film called "Steel Sharks", I played this evil Persian submarine commander. All my lines are like, "I'll kill you in the name of Allah!", you know, or like, "Off with their head! Your time has come, American." You always see the same guys at every audition. You can head the actor in the audition with the door shut, you know, "I'll kill you in the name of Allah! I'll kill you! Ahhh!" and the door opens up and the guy's like, "Thank you very much for having me in. Hope to get the part. See you on set." You know, there was never the Arab friend, never the Arab doctor and ER, they never had, like, the guy like me. I'm about as American as you come. I called my agent one day and said, "Don't call me for these terrorist parts anymore." And the phone stopped ringing.

EH: This was the 1990's. Ahmed got tired of being typecast as the Muslim terrorist, so he gave up looking for acting roles and decided to try stand-up instead, and he became a successful comedian.

Announcer: The very funny Ahmed Ahmed!

AA: And my parents are practicing Islam-

EH: And then, 9/11 happened. As a Muslim-American, he was reluctant to be up there on stage. That same week, though, his mentor, Mitzi Shore, an American comedy club owner told him he couldn't hide, told him he really needed to get out there on stage. That it was important to keep on talking about being Muslim in America.

AA: Mitzi said, "I'm gonna open the club this Friday. You have to go on and talk about being Arab." So, my opening joke was, "Well, my name really is Ahmed Ahmed. I had nothing to do with it. Just telling you so you don't follow me out to my car after the show." I got to the airport, man. I checked my bags in, the guy said, "There are your bags?" I said, "Yes, these are-" "Did you pack them yourself?" I said yes, and they arrested me. I had a woman come up to me one night after a show and said, "Are you really a Muslim?" I said, "Yeah,". She said, "You're wearing a nice suit and you have a smile on your face." And I was like- The impressions that America's getting, the negative impressions of Muslims, it's not good. I get profiled all the time. If you Google my name, Ahmed Ahmed, there's a guy from Egypt who pops up, who's a terrorist, who kinda looks like me. He's a lot shorter with the mustache. He looks like a porn star, actually. But he has all these aliases he goes by, and the first two are Ahmed Ahmed and Ahmed the Egyptian. I'm like, "I gotta find this guy, 'cause he's ruining my life. They all think that I'm him." And then it dawned on me- maybe he's in the Middle East Googling me like, "Hey, bro, look. There's this comedian in America who's using my name." Like, random Arabs walk up to him, "Bro, you're so funny! I saw you on YouTube! Tell me a joke!" He's like, "I'm not a comedian!"

EA: I don't think there's anything inherently wrong in portraying Arabs and Muslims as terrorists. The problem is when we rarely see them in other contexts.

EH: This is Evelyn Alsultany again, the woman who studies how Muslims are portrayed on screen. She says there's an awareness among film-makers and T.V. producers that Muslims are being stereotyped, and they're trying to change things.

EA: I basically find that writers and producers are trying to make an effort to diffuse the stereotype, but that the various methods that they're using, for example, the most popular method, is including a patriotic Arab-Muslim American in the cast, or in one or a few episodes of a T.V. drama that's about Arab and Muslim terrorism and that doing that does not make a difference in terms of how audiences are perceiving Arabs and Muslims.

EH: Evelyn's colleague at the University of Michigan, Muniba Saleem, has done research trying to determine whether T.V. viewers who see Muslims in violent roles are more likely to support things that specifically target Muslims- policies like domestic surveillance of American Muslims, or war against Muslim countries.

EA: And, she has found that there is a connection. That the more news one consumes- and, same with entertainment media, where you are watching Arabs and Muslims in violent roles, the more likely you are to support policies that are repressive towards Arabs and Muslims. And, conversely, she found the more positive images you consume- or even neutral images- the less likely you are to support those kinds of policies.

EH: Everyone is susceptible to this kind of thinking, including the law enforcement agents whose job it is to protect Americans, including Muslim-Americans from harm. Khalid Latif works for the NYPD and he's Muslim. Here he is from the Secret Life of Muslims project telling the story of how he became a victim of anti-Muslim stereotyping by police.

Khalid Latif (KL): I was 24 years old when I started working at the police department as a Muslim chaplain and the uniform in and of itself just commands a lot of respect. Everyone's calling you "sir." You have men who are twice your age who stop everything to salute you. There was times I walked in the bathroom, guys were standing at urinals, they would turn around and salute me. Like, "Guys, don't do that." But that's because I'm in a uniform, right? I still have the realities of not in a uniform, where I get pulled over, been asked do I actually own my car, did I steal my car. When I engage in conversation and show my police credentials, show my badge, the tenor changes quite drastically. One day, I was asleep in my bed, one of my friends was staying over, he came into my room and he said, "Hey, the FBI is here." Two agents came into my living room, I got them seated, I said "You know, what is it that you really want from me?" And they said, "Look, you're just too good to be true, and we want you to know that we're watching you."

EH: In other words, the FBI agents were giving Khalid Latif a warning: that if he was working as an undercover terrorist, or a terrorist sympathizer in the NYPD, he should remember they had their eyes on him. As far as Khalid knows, the only evidence the FBI had to make such statements was that he was Muslim.

DS: Evidence is one thing, but the suspicion based on prejudice and based on stereotypes, you know, has no place in our law, whether it be our airports or by the police officer, or by the FBI.

EH: This is David Schanzer again, the terrorism expert at Duke. This year, his Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security released a new report, their eighth annual, on Muslim-American terror suspects and perpetrators. The report indicates terrorist attacks by Muslim-Americans accounted for less than 1% of all murders in America last year.

DS: Our American-Muslim population came for the same reasons that people have been coming to this country for many centuries; to escape persecution, to live the American dream and our population here, over time, has become extremely assimilated. They do well in the economy, they are highly educated. So, our population really plays an important role in fighting against radicalization.

EH: But he says the ways Muslims are being stereotyped in the United States may actually cause some people- those who are already feeling disenfranchised or who have mental problems- to become terrorists.

DS: This minority group is really suffering right now. The people on the margins of society, hearing these messages, that might actually make them more radicalized. So, I fear that this anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim bigotry could actually make us less safe here in America.

EH: David does point to a bright spot in all of this, one that can counteract prejudice. It's called community policing and it isn't new. The idea is that, rather than focusing on just arresting law-breakers, police officers also work to build a trusting relationship with the people they serve. They host town meetings, or conduct surveys, to find out what the community's concerned about, they mingle with kids at school events, they invite the neighbors to police department open houses. Through this kind of regular, face-to-face contact, police get to know the people they're policing, and that builds trust both ways. David says two things happen as a result. Police get to know Muslim-Americans as human beings, not stereotypes. And people in the community are more likely to report a rumor that a terror group may be trying to recruit within that community.

DS: You know, I think, if we treat Muslim-Americans like everybody else- we treat them with fairness and respect, then you can actually get help on the things that worry you. What are the things that worry you? Our young people who are radicalizing and could, you know, go buy a handgun and start shooting in a crowded area, and that's what we're trying to stop. And I think if you treat people with respect and normality, you build trust and hope that if somebody has a suspicion that some individual's headed in the wrong track, that they'll come to you and point them out.

EH: David's research shows that community policing done right has a lot of potential to build much-needed bridges between the Muslim community and law enforcement. But it suffers from a lack of resources: not enough staffing, training, or money to run the programs properly.

Some Muslim-Americans are doing what they can to diffuse stereotypes on their own. Remember Mona and Sebastian, the couple we heard from at the beginning of the podcast? After the San Bernardino terrorist attack, where one of the shooters wore a headscarf like Mona, and she was afraid to leave the house?

MH: We just, we felt that we had to do something to, like, you know, replace some of that trauma with love and connection. We were like, "How do we get people to talk to us?" Right. And so, it was like, "We bribe them with doughnuts!"

SR: I kind of had this idea of, like, Lucy in her, like, lemonade stand, the psychiatrist thing, this very homemade thing. We took our son with us, we took my mom's dog with us, like, three big boxes of coffee and three-dozen doughnuts.

MH: So many people were like, "Don't do it! You're basically putting a bulls-eye on yourselves."

SR: We set up, and there was kind of this little inhale of, you know, what's gonna happen?

MH: Do you guys want some doughnuts?

SR: The very first person, this kid, walked up and he said, "I just want you to know, I'm Muslim, and I think what you're doing is really cool, you know?" And I just felt this, like, this kind of tingle.

MH: And the very next woman walked up to us with eyes full of tears saying, "I'm so sorry for what your community is having to suffer through right now."

Woman 1: Give you a hug!

SR: Alright! A lot of people come up and say, "I don't really know what to ask, but, um, can I have a doughnut?" And it's like, "Yeah, you could have a doughnut." You know and-

MH: Some people really asked you, like, "Where's the Muslim?"

SR: "And I'm like, oh, yeah, right here." "What should I ask you?" Like, "Oh, well, ask us about our son. We're trying to potty-train him. Ask us about potty-training, ask us about, you know, the Red Sox."

MH: That exchange meant everything. Nice talking to you guys. It was a lot of curiosity and a lot of joy. After that very first day that we went out, I posted just a picture of us standing in front of the signs and said, "Keep your heads up, Muslims of America." Friends kept sharing it and then their friends shared it, and eventually it just went crazy-viral. NPR was calling me and, like, the Boston Globe and Huffington Post and Pupil Magazine and Al Jazeera.

Reporter 4: Mona Haydar wants to fight fear with free doughnuts and dialogue.

MH: The #AskAMuslim- it's still going on. At college campuses, and at functions and events all over the country. You know, people will just set up Ask a Muslim. It's that magic connection that I want to be the lasting thing from Ask a Muslim.

Woman 2: That's your dog?

MH: Yeah, that's Ven Ven

Woman 2: Aw, that's sweet!

EH: Thanks to our friends at the Secret Life of Muslims project, Vox, and the USA Today network. The series is produced by Seftel Productions. Josh Seftel and Reza Aslan are executive producers. You can see the video versions of the stories we featured on our website, waysandmeansshow.org. David Schanzer is a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke, you can find his studies on violent extremism and community policing at his website, the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. Evelyn Alsultany's latest book is "Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11". She's the co-founder of the Arab and Muslim-American Studies Department at the University of Michigan. Thanks to Mona Haydar and Sebastian Robins, Ahmed Ahmed, and Khalid Latif for sharing their stories. Also, special thanks to the Duke podcast "Glad You Asked" for their help with this episode. Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones, and Karen Kemp. It's mixed by Johnny Vince Evans. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

MH singing: I still wrap my hijab. Wrap my hijab. Wrap my hijab. Wrap, wrap my hijab Keep swaggin my hijabis, swag-swaggin my hijabis. Swaggin my hijabis, swag-swaggin my hijabis. Me and my hijabi ladies, we was born in the eighties. So pretty like the Euphrates and party like some Kuwaitis. Deeper than some diplomas, current like some hot yoga; takin' back the misnomers and teleportin' through trauma. Teleportin' through trauma. Teleportin' through trauma.

I been stackin' my karma. Nefertiti, no drama; Make a feminist planet. Women haters get banished. Covered up or not don't ever take us for granted.

EH: Oh, and this song? It's called 'Wrap My Hijab' and it's the very first single from Mona Haydar. That's it. See you next time.