

## Tearing Down the Wall of Fear

Karim A. Hassanein

“Today we are living once more in a period that is psychologically susceptible to witch hanging and mob baiting... as citizens, we must fight in their incipient stages, all movements by government...that seek to limit the legitimate liberties of any of our fellow citizens.” Wendell Wilkie, 1942.<sup>1</sup>

Two brothers have just arrived in America. After living an expatriate life in the Middle East and Africa for the majority of their lives, they are overjoyed to finally be back in their home country. American citizens both, they are on their way to university to get the education that will prepare them for life in the ever-changing world. Of American and Egyptian parentage, one of the brothers is darker than the other, black hair, deep brown eyes, while the other takes after their mother: blue eyes, brown hair, fair skin. They share similar features, body language, and the same last name. As they proceed towards immigration, talking excitedly about the future that awaits them, airport security approaches. Taking no real notice they continue walking and talking. Suddenly, a hand on his arm, the darker brother is tersely stopped. “If you would just come with us,” says an officious security officer and, as the fairer brother stands frozen in shock, the dark-skinned, black-haired brother is carted away for questioning.

Why? Was it his name? Possibly, but why not stop the other brother if they share the same name? Is he on a list of suspected Al Qaeda operatives? Possibly, but highly

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Willkie, *Saturday Evening Post*, The Case for the Minorities, 27 June 1942.

unlikely as the son of a United Nations diplomat recently graduated from a private American school in Egypt. Is it because he fits the profile and his brother doesn't?

Bingo. The young American boy on his way to college, with no terrorist affiliations whatsoever and no desire to form any has been singled out because he fits the terrorist profile: Muslim name, Arab features, dark skin, dark eyes, a beard and a half-dozen stamps in his passport from Middle Eastern countries. The security officer figures he looks right, or rather, he looks *wrong*. We'd better pull him in.

That scenario, the one I just laid out, scares me. And it should scare you, too. Almost 60 years ago, on December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the 56 member nations of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Today, some 188 member-states of the UN have agreed to the principles set forth in the UDHR and most countries have incorporated its principles into their constitutions. In the decades following this declaration, an ever-growing number of international treaties, declarations, covenants and laws have evolved to protect the five primary categories of human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural – rights that are universal and inalienable, not because we have adopted them into our policy-making and governing processes, but because we are human beings.

Racial, ethnic and religious profiling threatens the cultural rights that are guaranteed by all signatories to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966. This covenant effectively guarantees and celebrates cultural diversity as a right to which all people are entitled, including the right to a cultural identity and the right to choose the cultural community to which one wants to adhere.

I believe it is of the utmost importance to the wellbeing of humankind that we defend the right to be different and embrace our cultural diversity because quite simply, we *are* all different. Human cultures are tremendously varied. Social customs and religious traditions differ from country to country, village-to-village, and even within neighborhoods. Within each culture, there exist certain beliefs or customs that another culture would find strange, even abhorrent. Reactions may vary from awkward co-habitation to outright violence. In some instances, simply the color of a person's skin creates a wall of fear, and due to stereotyping or simple ignorance this fear leads to such gross violations of human rights as slavery, apartheid, workplace discrimination and to the quasi-sanctioned practices of racial, ethnic and religious profiling.

Proponents of profiling assure us that it is just a tool, a useful, if controversial, method that assists *us*, the good guys, in catching *them*, the bad guys, with the result that we will *all* be more secure. Do you think the dark-skinned brother detained by airport security feels *more* secure knowing that he has been profiled as one of *them*? The civil and cultural rights to which he is entitled, to which *all* people are entitled under international law, are being trampled, side-stepped and abused in the name of national security for the good of the people, a people from whom he has been temporarily disenfranchised based simply on his looks.

Post 9/11 America is yet another fear-tinged period of time in American history when disregard for civil rights are being justified in the name of national security. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941, the American president, protecting Americans from Japanese spies on home soil, signed Executive Order 9066, giving the army the power, without warrants, indictments or hearings, to arrest every

Japanese-American on the West Coast. Over 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans were rounded up, forced to leave their homes, belongings, in essence their lives, and deported to 'relocation centers'. In degrading the entire Japanese population by treating them all as enemies, spies, and traitors, the American Government undoubtedly created a group of disillusioned, frustrated Japanese who, rejected by the country that they had once called their home, and stripped of their birthrights as American citizens, could become the "fifth column" that the government so feared.

Sixty years, World War II and the Cold War have passed since the government sanctioned the ethnic profiling of Japanese-Americans. In the new war, the War on Terror, the government has again heightened our fear of those who are different. Despite President Bush's statement to Congress in February 2001 that racial profiling is "wrong and we will end it in America", the government, *including the president himself*, has effectively sanctioned the profiling of non-white ethnic/religious groups in the United States; Arabs, Arab-Americans and Muslims. In the hours following the 9/11 attacks, the Department of Justice carried out the largest detention of a group of people based on national origin since the internment of the Japanese-Americans. Thousands of men were imprisoned -not one of whom has been publicly charged with terrorism. In June 2003, the Bush administration released a set of guidelines titled, *Regarding the Use of Race by Federal Law Enforcement Agencies*. While forbidding the use of racial profiling by federal law enforcement officials it does not cover profiling based on religion, religious appearance or national origin nor provide a method for enforcement. Doubly flawed, the guidelines are not legally binding and contain a major loophole. The standards expressed within the guidelines "do not affect current Federal policy" in relation to "efforts to

defend and safeguard against threats to national security.” In essence, profiling is permissible, even advisable, as long as it is in the interest of national security.

How can profiling ever be beneficial to the security of our multiracial and multicultural nation? Many immigrants persecuted or marginalized in their home countries for their religious beliefs or ethnic origins have been lured to the United States by the promise of freedom and a better life, only to find themselves under scrutiny and persecuted by the very country that offered them asylum.

Singled out, targeted and harassed by police, profiling can forever destroy a community’s sense of trust in the American government and justice system. Results of a 2004 Amnesty International study on racial profiling by law enforcement agencies in the U.S. confirmed the severe social implications resulting from racial profiling: distressed individuals, disconnected communities, and diminished domestic security capabilities. Victims of profiling reported humiliation, depression, anger, and fear as a direct result of this U.S. government policy. For a nation that calls itself democratic and exports freedom – humiliation, fear and depression seem out of place. Yet the truth is that profiling generates not only these emotions but also diminished trust in law enforcement officers and a severance of civilian-police cooperation. If there is no trust, there can be no collaboration, even to the point that in the event of a crime, victims will be reluctant to turn to law enforcers for help. Does profiling make us more secure? Of course not. Profiling creates an atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and persecution. It perpetuates ignorance.

Profiling of race, creed, or ethnicity is a downward spiral that, if not addressed, will destroy the fabric of global unity and peace. In today’s highly-charged climate, our

leaders are silently allowing the rift between cultures to widen rather than encouraging tolerance and acceptance of diversity. It is the duty of every freedom-loving human being to join in the battle against bigotry, to nip the age of intolerance in the bud, and to educate ourselves about the blessings of diversity.

## Bibliography

1. American Civil Liberties Union, Sanctioned Bias: Racial Profiling Since 9/11, February 2004.
2. Amnesty International, Threat and Humiliation, Racial Profiling, Domestic Security, and Human Rights in the United States, 2004.
3. United Nations, General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966.
4. United Nations, General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Res. 217A (III), 3(1) GAOR Res. 71, UN Doc. A/810.
5. Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States, 1980. New York; Harper and Row Publishers.