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Panethnicity revisited: contested group boundaries in the post-9/11 era

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Abstract

Existing theories of panethnicity in the USA concentrate on Asian Americans and Latinos, two umbrella groups that originally coalesced during the 1960s civil rights era. Although the role played by the state is recognized as central to panethnic development, we argue that the influence of this pivotal variable is contingent on historical context. Through a case study of emerging minority groups (Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans in the post-9/11 era), we re-examine the existing conceptualization of panethnicity at a time when the state plays a more punitive than compensatory role. Using a methodology that draws on a range of novel sources, we document the way that pre-existing ethnic, religious and national-origin labels have been reinforced instead of panethnic labels for the populations under study. Accordingly, we develop an updated conceptualization of group formation that incorporates historical context and the role of the state in the post-9/11 era.

Keywords

Panethnicity; ethnic boundaries; Middle Eastern; South Asian; Arab; Muslim

Introduction

The concept of panethnicity, or the grouping of multiple nationalities and ethnicities under a single label, made critically important contributions to the understanding of the social construction of group boundaries and racial formation (Omi and Winant 1986; Espiritu 1992). The existing conceptualization, however, is largely based on empirical studies of Asian Americans and Latinos, panethnic groups that consolidated in the immediate post-civil rights era, and hence may have limitations when applied to other groups in the contemporary historical context. Consequently, the field may suffer from a sample-selection bias that weakens the ability to determine the relative importance of the purported factors associated with panethnic group formation. Moving beyond this methodological limitation helps to clarify which factors are necessary and/or sufficient determinants of panethnicity.

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Post-9/11 research on Middle Easterners and South Asians, potential contemporary panethnic groups in the USA, indicate that we are not merely witnessing a replay of previous panethnic formations. The existing literature would predict the emergence of panethnic categories among Middle Easterners and South Asians, or even a larger social construction encompassing both. Each of these potential groupings shares internal commonalities that can foster panethnicity, and has been marginalized, racialized and demonized, especially after 9/11 (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009, 2011). Within this hostile climate, both populations have had incentives to mobilize and act collectively, while borrowing successful political strategies and tactics pioneered by Asian Americans and Latinos, and tapping into group-oriented legal opportunities and protections created by the civil rights movement. Despite these factors, the Middle Eastern and South Asian categories have failed to coalesce (see also Love 2009). In this paper, we pose the question: why have these panethnic categories not crystallized, either together, or independently? Through this case study, we hope to address broader theoretical questions regarding group formation.

Background of groups under study

The complexity of the populations under study calls for a brief background on Middle Easterners, North Africans and South Asians in the USA. Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) immigrants to the USA are diverse, representing many nationalities, ethnicities and religions. MENA itself consists of the twenty-two nations that make up the Arab League as well as the three non-Arab countries of Iran, Israel and Turkey. While Arab and Armenian immigrant pioneers were predominantly Christian, the post-1965 newcomers are predominantly Muslim. Although Muslim South Asian immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India are officially classified under the Asian American category, they share cultural and religious traditions among themselves, and have more in common culturally (religion, language, food and music) with Middle Easterners than with East and South East Asians (Leonard 1997; Shankar and Srikanth 1998; Kibria 2006). Furthermore, both Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans have experienced substantial post-9/11 backlash, and the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have further aggravated the situation, feeding stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against these groups (Gold and Bozorgmehr 2007; Jamal and Naber 2008; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Maira 2009; Abraham, Howell, and Shryock 2011).

Middle Eastern immigrants are one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse panethnic groups in America, yet they share cultural, linguistic and religious identities that cut across national boundaries. Generally, these immigrants identify themselves along national (e.g. Iranian, Israeli, Turkish), supranational or ethnic (e.g. Arab), or ethno-religious (e.g. Armenian, Jewish) categories (Bozorgmehr and Bakalian 2013). Most Arab immigrants accept the supranational ethnic label of 'Arab American', defined as people who share the Arabic language and culture. 'Arab American' is in fact not a panethnic label but a supranational ethnic label, like 'Chinese American' within the panethnic label of 'Asian American'. Similarly, while Muslim Americans are increasingly described as a panethnic group, they are in reality a multinational religious group, like Christians.

South Asians in the USA are an even more rapidly growing group that is religiously, linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous (Kibria 2006). The predominance of Islam is a source of both commonality and division, as many South Asians from almost exclusively Muslim countries identify along religious lines (i.e. Afghans, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis). While Asian Indians make up the largest segment of the South Asian American population (Kibria 2006), the small Muslim component identifies with the other Muslim countries in the region (Leonard 1997).

Muslims in the USA are an even more complex population, hailing from countries all over the world, although mainly from the Middle East, South East and South Asia, and Africa. Furthermore, African American Muslims and other American converts (i.e. whites and Latinos) are conspicuously absent from the contemporary usage of the Muslim label. Although spared much of the immediate post-9/11 backlash, these groups have increasingly been tied to the threat of so-called 'homegrown terrorism'. Moreover, the essentialized use of this religious label implies that all American Muslims are devout and observant, and hence privileges religion over nationality. In fact, many Muslims in the USA are secular, cultural, or even nominal Muslims, and identify more strongly with their national origin than with their religion (Bozorgmehr and Bakalian 2013). It is also assumed that immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries are all Muslim, but this is not the case. Often arriving as political refugees and exiles, many non-Muslim ethno-religious minorities (most prominently Christians and Jews, but also other smaller groups) have emigrated to the USA from predominantly Muslim countries.

Literature review

We draw from the most widely used model, in which the unit of analysis is at the group rather than at the individual level (Espiritu 2012). While panethnicity does not necessarily occur on a subjective individual basis, it is more likely to occur through mobilization and organizations that cut across various ethnic groups within the broader umbrella group.

The initial catalyst for panethnic group formation is often external racialization, which has the potential to create a latent group boundary around two or more existing ethnic groups. Racialization is defined as 'the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). It is often punitive (i.e. discrimination, host hostility and anti-group violence), but can also be based on positive incentives (i.e. the ability to collectively achieve benefits, protections and civil rights from the state, and/or political power). For example, external factors that were instrumental in developing Asian American panethnicity include violence against the group, outsiders' perceptions of Asians as 'foreigners', racial designation ('lumping') as an official legal minority by US government agencies, and eventual eligibility for affirmative action and other set-aside programmes (Espiritu 1992; Espiritu and Ong 1994; Min 2006).

Along with racialization, panethnicity must involve multi-group mobilization and collective action (Okamoto 2014). Lopez and Le Espiritu (1990, 200) define panethnicity as 'the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities that are often seen as homogenous by outsiders'. Okamoto (2003, 813) defines

panethnic mobilization as ‘the public action of people from two or more national-origin groups to express grievances or claims on behalf of the collective, panethnic group’. For instance, Asian American umbrella organizations were instrumental in spearheading a collective agenda through electoral politics, activism and social service organizations (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2014).

Several independent variables can influence whether multi-group formation will occur, and if so, to what degree. These are culture (norms and values, religion, language, etc.), class (socio-economic status) and geography (proximity and shared space) (see Lopez and Le Espiritu 1990). The more overlap and commonality, the greater the chance that panethnicity will materialize. Although Lopez and Le Espiritu assert that both internal cultural factors and structural factors are important, they conclude that the structural factors are more salient in the development and success of panethnic groupings (e.g. race for Asian Americans) (see also Okamoto 2014).

As is the case with most socially constructed categories, panethnicity is inherently unstable and fluid. Therefore, it can be forged or dismantled depending on historical circumstances. Most contested and fragile in the initial stages of group formation, panethnicity can become institutionalized through codified categories, widely used labels and promotion by vested interests. Nonetheless, even established panethnic groups are continuously in flux, often along internal ethnic fault lines (e.g. the ambiguous status of Pacific Islanders within the larger “Asian American and Pacific Islander” category). Contestation can become more acute when the state and/or society take a punitive role towards subgroups within the panethnic umbrella. Under such circumstances, some groups may choose to disassociate from the targeted populations, and therefore from the broader umbrella grouping as well. This strengthens boundaries between subgroups, thus fracturing potential panethnic consolidation.

Panethnic group formation is also a form of boundary dynamics. Okamoto (2014, 2) defines panethnicity as ‘the process through which multiple ethnic groups relax and widen their boundaries to forge a new, broader grouping and identity’. In this way, she points to the shifting and layered nature of panethnicity, which is attributed to external and structural factors. The multiplicity of possible affiliations and identities allows for the contraction and expansion of the ethnic boundaries in mobilization efforts. When new boundaries do not solidify and become established, but retain overlapping and contested lines, panethnic formation does not occur in the traditional sense.

Application to the case study

Like Asian Americans and Latinos, both Middle Easterners and South Asians have been subjected to external pressures through stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, hate crimes and bias incidents. The groups have been further racialized by a string of punitive post-9/11 government initiatives and actions (see Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). Middle Easterners and South Asians have important cultural commonalities (language, religion, geographical origin) and structural similarities (immigration history, geographical

concentration in the USA, relatively high socio-economic status, generation, US census racial classification as white).

In terms of racialization, hate crimes and discrimination against members of these groups are well documented (see Jamal and Naber 2008; Shryock 2008; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009, 2011; Maira 2009; Tehranian 2009; Abraham, Howell, and Shryock 2011; Rana 2011). These and other studies have also catalogued the devastating state policies and initiatives that have targeted Middle Eastern and South Asian men since 9/11. Broadly conceptualizing backlash as scapegoating, bias incidents and hate crimes, as well as government initiatives (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009), it is clear that non-Arabs and non-Muslims (e.g. Sikhs, Iranians, Turks, Armenians) have also suffered. It is important to note that most government initiatives targeted immigrants from Arab and predominantly Muslim countries specifically. For example, soon after 9/11, 5,000 young men from countries where Al Qaeda had a presence were called in by the attorney general for 'voluntary' interviews. At the same time, the visa granting process for men from Arab and Muslim countries was slowed down. However, two government initiatives targeted non-Arabs as well: the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) and the required special registration with the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The NSEERS dragnet included non-Arab countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran and Pakistan. Similarly, while the INS special registration programme originally targeted Arab and Muslim men, it was eventually extended to include Iranians (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009).

In terms of societal discrimination, Pew's 2011 survey of Muslim Americans found that over half of the respondents reported greater difficulty for Muslims living in the USA since 9/11. Only a negligible percentage reported life getting easier since 9/11. Almost half reported personal experiences with discrimination or prejudice within the year before they were surveyed (Pew Research Center 2011). Unfortunately, there is no such survey of Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans more generally.

Like the Asian American example used by Lopez and Le Espiritu (1990), Middle Easterners in the USA are culturally heterogeneous, speaking a variety of languages (e.g. Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Hebrew) and practising a wide range of religions (e.g. Shiite and Sunni Islam, Christianity, Judaism). Similarly, South Asian Americans use a variety of languages (e.g. Hindi, Urdu, Bengali) and practise many religions (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam). As noted above, however, cultural similarities and differences figure more prominently in the identificational dimension of panethnicity, rather than the organizational dimension. Thus, this diversity is not necessarily detrimental to the emergence of panethnic solidarities (see also Love 2009).

Middle Eastern Americans also share similar structural commonalities with Asians, with the important exception of race (Lopez and Le Espiritu 1990). They generally have high levels of education, partly because many arrived as foreign college students and elite exiles. They are also largely entrepreneurial or employed in professional/managerial occupations (Gold and Bozorgmehr 2007), the two most successful modes of economic incorporation for immigrant groups (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Middle Easterners are also highly

concentrated in a few states (California, New York, Michigan, Washington, Maryland, Virginia, Illinois) and converge in metropolitan areas (Los Angeles, New York, Detroit, Washington, DC, Chicago). In terms of generation, only Armenians and Arabs have been in the USA long enough to have more than three generations represented. Other Middle Eastern groups (Iranians, Turks, Egyptians, etc.) are relative newcomers whose second generation is coming of age. Concerning racial breakdown, while Middle Eastern groups are officially classified as white by the US census (Samhan 1999; Gualtieri 2009),¹ there is a wide range of phenotypes among this population.

The inclusion of South Asians in an existing panethnic group makes their case particularly complex. Lopez and Le Espiritu (1990) distinguished Indo-Americans (Asian Indians) from Asian Americans, and as such, do not subsume South Asians under the Asian American category. However, this group has increasingly been incorporated into the Asian American category (e.g. the US census). Yet, just as South Asian Americans have their own cultural commonalities, they have distinct structural commonalities that set them apart from other Asians (e.g. geographical concentration on the East Coast, newer generational status, relatively low rates of self-employment) (Kibria 2006).

In sum, despite the presence of many of the causal determinants of panethnicity identified in the literature, the analysis above indicates that we have not yet witnessed the emergence of Middle Eastern or South Asian panethnic labels. Instead, we have witnessed the reinforcement of the pre-existing supranational ethnic label of Arab American and the pre-existing religious label of Muslim American, as documented quantitatively in the following section.

Methods, data sources and findings

Based on the literature on panethnicity, we examine quantitative indicators of group formation with regard to our own case study. We examine societally designated labels – that is, those used by the media and those used by the public at large. In terms of panethnic mobilization, a key indicator is the establishment of umbrella organizations, particularly ones that are recognized by the state (e.g. by giving the organizations legal status as a registered non-profit or political organization). Another indicator is the role of ‘thought leaders’, intellectuals who give scholarly legitimacy to a potential panethnic grouping. The establishment of academic ethnic studies programmes along panethnic lines confirms the importance of this factor.

In order to document the range of labels and categories applied to this complex population, we utilized four different data sources covering the pre- and post-9/11 periods: (1) a list of tax-exempt non-profit organizations; (2) a comprehensive index of articles published in three major national newspapers; (3) a listing of scholarly books published; and (4) an enumeration of relevant Web searches. By drawing from this broad and novel range of sources, we are able to assess how different labels applied to the groups under study have

¹This may change with the proposed creation of a ‘Middle Eastern or North African’ category in the race and ethnicity question(s) on the 2020 US census. The Census Bureau is currently considering testing this category in the 2015 National Content Test.

become accepted and reified by community-based organizations, print media, the scholarly community and the public at large.

We examine the emergence of ethnic umbrella organizations by conducting a search of ethnic and religious non-profit organizations that cover the full spectrum of groups under study. The National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), compiled by the renowned Urban Institute, is the most comprehensive database of tax-exempt non-profit organizations. The NCCS works closely with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to include all local and national organizations that file for tax-exempt status. We searched the database of US-based organizations using unhyphenated labels (e.g. Arab, Muslim, Iranian, Pakistani). We omitted organizations that were clearly not related to the populations under study. Finally, we divided the resultant list by rule date (i.e. the date an organization receives its recognition of exemption from the IRS).

There are many more Muslim organizations than any of the other categories ($n = 394$, Figure 1). This is partially because many mosques have filed as tax-exempt non-profits with the IRS. The next largest number of organizations are Arab ($n = 118$). National-origin categories like Iranian ($n = 101$) and Turkish ($n = 104$) also had surprisingly numerous organizations, but many of these are locally based professional associations.⁵ There are only fifty-eight South Asian organizations, and even fewer Middle Eastern ones ($n = 18$). The combined Arab and Muslim category is not listed because there were no organizations in the database with this label in their title (see Figure 1). The bars in this figure report the total number of organizations in existence at the time of research, and each bar is internally divided to indicate in what period the organizations were founded.

By dividing the organizations between those with rule dates of ‘2000 and Before’ and ‘2001 and After’, we see that even a decade after 9/11 there has been little organizational development for the Middle Eastern category, and only slightly more along South Asian lines (Figure 1). On the other hand, Muslim American organizations, which were already quite numerous before 9/11, proliferated afterwards. Surprisingly, the number of Arab American organizations did not grow nearly as much as the Muslim ones. The number of national-origin organizations (i.e. Iranian, Turkish, Afghan, Pakistani) also grew. A chi-square test shows that the distribution of non-profits established before or after 9/11 differs significantly by ethnic and religious categories. In sum, when the populations under study form organizations, they do so more along narrower ethnic and religious lines (Arab and Muslim, respectively) than along South Asian and Middle Eastern panethnic lines (Figure 1). This is partly because non-Arab Middle Easterners (i.e. Iranian, Turkish) tend to form nationality-based associations, rather than join others to form panethnic Middle Eastern organizations. The same applies to Afghans and, to a lesser extent, to Pakistanis in relation to the South Asian category. Therefore, groups subsumed under Middle Eastern and South Asian categories are opting for religious, ethnic and national organizations over these panethnic ones, even after 9/11 – an important indicator of panethnic contestation.

For the analysis of newspaper articles, we examined information from Pro-Quest, which has emerged as a leading database for print media. We focused on the archives of *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, widely considered to be the top

national newspapers. The inclusion of *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* was vital to our research because these two metropolitan areas are home to the largest and most diverse Middle Eastern, South Asian and Muslim American populations in the country.²

When conducting the text search, choosing specific search terms presented some challenges. We used more specific terms such as ‘Arab American(s)’, ‘Muslim American(s)’ and so on to avoid articles covering groups outside the USA. These searches resulted in manageable numbers of articles corresponding directly and accurately to our case study. We divided our search between the time since 9/11 and an equivalent time period before. We used 11 April 2013 as the endpoint for the post-9/11 period in order to avoid the deluge of articles using the ‘Muslim American’ label after the Boston Marathon bombings (15 April 2013). Since this endpoint fell eleven years and seven months after 9/11, we used the same time period for the pre-9/11 phase.

Figure 2 summarizes the results and trends, which indicate substantial increases in the use of Arab, Muslim and national-origin categories after 9/11. While use of the ‘South Asian American’ and ‘Middle Eastern American’ labels also increased, their growth was small and their numbers remained relatively negligible. Again, a chi-square test showed that the percentage of articles published before or after 9/11 differs significantly by ethnic and religious categories.

Next, we examined the use and reification of these ethnic and religious labels and categories in scholarly book titles published before and after 9/11 (1989–2000 and 2001–2012). Although we would have also liked to include articles on these populations, there is no central database that covers all scholarly journal articles. Furthermore, many journals are not searchable electronically, and even for those that are searchable, not all are identifiable through platforms like Google Scholar. Therefore, we chose to limit our search to books published by university and scholarly presses. Using Google Books, one of the most comprehensive searchable compilations of book titles available on the Internet, we looked for all book titles and subtitles about the groups under study.

We charted the number of major scholarly books for selected ethnic, religious and combined categories from 1989–2000 and 2001–2012 (see Figure 3). Results show that the number of books using the ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American’ labels in their titles was higher than other categories before 9/11, and noticeably increased thereafter. Furthermore, after 9/11, the largest categories for book titles were ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American’. A negligible number of books used the ‘Middle Eastern American’ category in their title either before or after 9/11. The panethnic ‘South Asian American’ category was also under-represented when compared with the religious ‘Muslim’ label and ethnic ‘Arab’ label. While numbers for the two periods did not vary in this category, the books published after 9/11 were more focused on South Asian Muslims than those published before. These data indicate the relative prevalence of the ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American’ labels, as well as the coinage of the combined ‘Arab and Muslim American’ label, in scholarly

²ProQuest is the exclusive provider of *Los Angeles Times* archives (and this newspaper restricts LexisNexis searches to the last six months only), further accounting for our decision to use this comprehensive database.

production since 9/11. The temporal differences within each category, however, have to be interpreted more cautiously, because the differences were not found to be statistically significant, most likely due to the very small n values.

In order to gauge the use of these labels by the general public, we employed the new and innovative tools provided by Google Trends. This platform provides the average Web volume for all terms searched through Google since 2004. Through Google Trends, users are able to view graphs showing search trends over time in various cities and countries around the world. We narrowed our own search to the USA. The results are reported numerically on a scale of 0–100, with 100 representing the peak search volume.

From 2004 to 2012, the ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American’ labels had the highest average Web search volume (Figure 4), followed by the ‘Iranian American’ and ‘Turkish American’ national-origin labels. Once again, the ‘South Asian American’ and ‘Middle Eastern American’ labels were used least frequently. This indicator is generally consistent with our other findings, as well as with our overarching argument that the ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ labels and categories have become ingrained in and reified by a variety of segments of American society.

Contested group formation in the post-9/11 era

The complex and variegated dynamics of post-9/11 group formation can be understood in terms of layered group identity. It is possible for individual ethnic groups to fit entirely within a broader umbrella grouping, which is consistent with the panethnic formation of Asian Americans and Latinos. It is also possible for large clusters to overlap, like when an ethnic group occupies two or more spaces, as is the case of Sikhs. Moreover, boundaries can be contested, shifting and dynamic. We see elements of these characteristics in the post-9/11 era. What we do not see, at least up to this point, is the emergence of a dominant panethnic construction, like Middle Eastern or South Asian American. Therefore, we now revisit the existing conceptualization of panethnicity and highlight the role played by the state in different historical contexts.

While Asian American and Latino panethnicity emerged during the post-civil rights era, the Middle Eastern and South Asian American cases are evolving in the post-9/11 era of global and domestic terrorism. These two different contexts are important in determining the different roles played by the state, and its effects on group formation and ethnic mobilization. At a time when the state is more likely to play a compensatory role vis-à-vis disadvantaged minority groups, umbrella groups can assertively determine their own boundaries, and national-origin groups have more incentive to be subsumed under these broad panethnic groupings. When the state targets specific groups along pre-existing ethnic and religious lines, it becomes much more difficult for these groups to challenge these imposed categories and boundaries, and national-origin groups have a disincentive to enlist in a broad panethnic umbrella.

In our updated conceptualization of group formation, historical context is the independent variable, the role of the state vis-à-vis minority groups is the intervening variable, and group

formation is the dependent variable (Figure 5). Different historical contexts result in different state responses towards minority groups. In the post-civil rights era, the state took on a more compensatory role, by passing civil rights laws and creating set-aside programmes, affirmative action and entitlements for disadvantaged minorities (Ong 1999). In the post-9/11 era, the state has played a more punitive role through the passage of discriminatory policies and initiatives that target scapegoated minorities (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). In response, in the post-civil rights era, minority groups such as Asian Americans and Latinos engaged in assertive mobilization along panethnic group lines, following in the footsteps of African Americans (Lopez and Le Espiritu 1990; Okamoto 2014). As Okamoto (2014, 42) explains, ‘an emerging main goal for social movements was to gain recognition for stigmatized or new social identities that reflected the shared histories and struggles of group members’. In the post-9/11 era, the impacted groups have engaged in what we refer to as defensive mobilization based on pre-existing ethnic and religious categories, which are reified by the state (e.g. Arabs, Muslims, Iranians, Sikhs). Ironically, even this defensive mobilization owes its existence to the opportunity structures put in place by the civil rights movement, hence the broken arrow between these two outcomes (Figure 5). Our model is dynamic since the role of the state and group formation have an interactive and bidirectional causal relationship, as the two-way solid arrows indicate (Figure 5).

The panethnicity literature has emphasized the ‘lumping’ role played by the state and society in the creation of umbrella group labels (e.g. Asian Americans, Latinos). However, it is important to distinguish between the role of government and the role of society at large. These two are not always the same, especially in times of crisis, when minorities frequently become scapegoats. While governmental targeting usually singles out specific groups for reprisals through legislative initiatives and policies, members of the host society are more likely to engage in indiscriminate stereotyping and scapegoating. For instance, the mistaken association between turban-wearing Sikhs and Osama Bin Laden led to the scapegoating of this religious group immediately after 9/11. In fact, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man, was the first person murdered in a 9/11-related hate crime. Despite ongoing profiling and discrimination, the Sikhs were not specifically targeted by post-9/11 government initiatives, since they are neither Arab nor Muslim. Through mobilization, Sikhs themselves have worked tirelessly to challenge misguided associations with terrorism by clarifying their distinctive religion and culture (Mishra 2013). At the same time, they have forged partnerships and coalitions to show support for targeted groups, especially Muslims. Although societal discrimination has failed to differentiate between Muslims and Sikhs, governmental targeting has been much more focused. Thus, while Arabs and Muslims have also mobilized after 9/11, and continue to do so, they have not managed to challenge these starkly defined labels, associated with punitive government initiatives.

Conversely, in the post-civil rights era, some groups mobilized to be included in official categories conferred by the government, because of the advantages entailed. Asian Indians are a case in point. Classified as white in the 1970 US census, this highly diverse group organized to be counted as a distinct racial category. In response, the Census Bureau placed them under the Asian American category in the 1980 census. Subsequently, other South Asian groups (Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans) were also subsumed under the label of Asian American as write-in options under the ‘Other Asian’ category on the census. The

case of Asian Indians corroborates our argument that when panethnicity is advantageous, groups organize to be included under this umbrella. This case is also consistent with our argument that history is a critical factor in group dynamics and that panethnicity is layered and contested.

In the post-9/11 context of crisis, impacted groups have tended to defensively mobilize along lines created by negative government targeting. When South Asian groups are targeted as Muslims, they have come to protectively mobilize along religious lines, bringing them closer to Middle Eastern Muslims, a group with which they culturally and religiously have much in common (Leonard 1997; Maira 2009). The shifting ethnic and religious positioning of South Asians, according to the demands of different historical epochs, reflects the role of assertive versus defensive mobilization in determining panethnic versus subgroup-specific boundaries and formations (see Figure 5).

A shift from a defensive position to assertive mobilization in response to a newly conducive opportunity structure can be seen in the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War and the subsequent redress movement of the 1970s. The original act was ethnic-specific, and indeed created divisions among Asian ethnic groups in the USA (e.g. the Chinese statement, 'I am not Japanese'). But in the civil rights era, Asian Americans embraced the history of internment and reinterpreted it as an extreme example of broader anti-Asian hostilities (Chan 1991; Maki, Kitano, and Berthold 1999). However, after 9/11, Arabs and Muslims immediately mobilized (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). In response to punitive targeting by the state, and drawing on the opportunity structure created in the civil rights era, pre-existing group labels (e.g. Arabs, Muslims, Iranians) were used as the bases of defensive ethnic and religious mobilization, which in turn further crystallized these ethnic and religious boundaries.

Discussion and conclusion

Following the existing literature on panethnicity, we have taken an institutional approach (e.g. organizational) to the subject, rather than a more subjective identificational one (e.g. ethnic identity-based). When the state, the most powerful institution in the land, defines the boundaries of group formation, it creates a set of potential commonalities and shared incentives and/or liabilities with important consequences for the emergence of panethnicity or lack thereof. Even when a panethnic designation does emerge, enduring subgroup solidarities continually contest the broader group identification, as is evident in the history of Asian Americans and Latinos. The ambiguity inherent in panethnic labels serves as an important reminder that these are externally imposed legal-political constructs that do not necessarily correspond to individual identification.

Based on the literature, we would expect Middle Eastern and/or South Asian panethnic categories to have arisen, especially in response to severe post-9/11 backlash against these populations. These two groups share similar cultural traits and have been subjected to similar structural pressures as other major panethnic groups such as Asian Americans. Given the relatively smaller population size of these groups in the USA, they should have even more of an impetus to organize collectively.

We operationalize panethnicity to include the labels used by non-profit organizations, the media, academia and the public at large. Our methodology incorporates new metrics that capture modern informational practices anchored in the Internet, something that did not exist as a mass medium in previous decades. Using a variety of underutilized sources, this study documents the post-9/11 salience of the two most widely used categories of ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim American’, instead of the less commonly used ‘Middle Eastern American’ and ‘South Asian American’ panethnic categories.

Given the evidence, we propose an updated model of panethnic group formation that pays close attention to the varying roles played by the state in different historical contexts. When the state targets selected minorities during a time of international crisis or war, the impacted groups (e.g. Arab Americans and Muslim Americans) at best can engage in defensive mobilization based on the categories imposed by punitive state policy. Similarly, other groups within the panethnic umbrella organize themselves to contest the indiscriminate application of these labels to them. For instance, after 9/11, Iranian Americans have further emphasized their national origin over their Middle Eastern or Muslim affiliations, and Chaldean Americans have done the same to disassociate from Arab Americans more generally. Therefore, groups that emerge in such an era do so on different terms than those that arose in the civil rights era, a time when the state engaged in compensation for disadvantaged official minority groups. Although the current opportunity structure continues to be conducive to ethnic mobilization and claims making, this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for panethnic group formation. We do not deny that panethnicity is applicable under certain conditions, but we believe that our findings modify the concept. An approach that takes boundaries into account may allow for a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of the layered and contested nature of group formation (see Alba and Nee 2003; Wimmer 2013).

Homeland politics are another important factor that may adversely affect the rise of panethnicity. Groups that originate from a specific world region invariably have vivid memories of historical and contemporary conflicts with other groups from that region. Such tensions may be attenuated over time (length of residence and generations) in the USA. However, without an external domestic incentive for groups to set aside historical differences and work together, panethnic group formation is less likely. For example, Japan’s historical aggression against Korea and China negatively affected relations between immigrants from these countries in the USA. However, in the context of the civil rights era, Asian Americans worked to suppress these conflicts for the greater good of panethnic group interests. As Okamoto (2014, 51) explains: ‘[I]t was not until *after* discriminatory legislation had been eliminated and civil rights legislation had introduced new opportunities that activists began building an Asian American movement based on fighting racial oppression and inequality’ (original emphasis).

In the case of Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans, ethnic, religious and national conflicts are ongoing and remain an acute concern for these communities. This is perhaps best exemplified in the dual mission of Middle Eastern and South Asian American community-based organizations to deal with both foreign policy and domestic civil rights issues. The current climate of war, terrorism and international crisis further exacerbates

conflicts among these groups (e.g. Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Arabs and Israelis, Pakistanis and Indians), while punitive domestic policies give little incentive to override such differences. Domestic group formation is historically contingent and should not be viewed in isolation from the international context.

In terms of generalizability of our case study, the post-9/11 dynamics are reminiscent of the experiences of German Americans during the First World War and Japanese Americans during the Second World War. As the USA plays an increasingly decisive role in international affairs as a global superpower, other diaspora populations might follow in the footsteps of scapegoated minorities like Germans, Japanese and Middle Easterners/South Asians. Beyond the USA, other neoliberal Western countries are even more likely to play a hostile role in singling out minority groups, who are increasingly making claims on such states. We believe that our theorizing of the effects of punitive state policy on group formation can contribute important insights into the ability of a variety of groups to mobilize under difficult conditions. As such, our updated framework may in fact be more exportable than the existing conceptualization of panethnicity.

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Figure 1.

Number of US-based non-profit organizations by ethnic and religious categories and rule date.

Note: Numbers derived from a search of National Center for Charitable Statistics databases, which include data on tax-exempt nonprofit organizations that file with the Internal Revenue service. The rule date is the date the organization received its recognition from the IRS. The percentage of organizations that were established before or after 9/11 differ by ethnic/religious categories, χ^2 (7 df, n = 899) = 44.88, $p < .0001$.

Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics Database (NCCS) 2012.

Figure 2.

Numbers of articles using selected ethnic and religious labels in major national newspapers, before 9/11 (10 February 1990 to 10 September 2001) and after 9/11 (11 September 2001 to 11 April 2013).

Note: The difference before and after 9/11 is statistically significant, χ^2 (8 df, $n = 6,389$) = 506.30, $p < .0001$.

Source: ProQuest National Newspapers Premier 2013.

Figure 3.

Numbers of scholarly books on selected ethnic and religious categories* by period of publication (1989–2000 and 2001–2012).

Note: The difference before and after 9/11 is not statistically significant, χ^2 (6 df, $n = 65$) = 4.9081, $p = .5557$. The Turkish American category and specific South Asian American categories (Afghan, Pakistani) are not listed because there were no scholarly books published on these groups.

Source: GoogleBooks 2012.

Figure 4.

Average Web search volume of selected ethnic and religious labels, USA, 2004–2012 (0–100 range).

Note: Data are only available since 2004. 100 would signify peak search volume.

Source: GoogleTrends 2012.

Historical Events/ Political Context	Role of State vis-a-vis minority groups	Group Formation
Post-Civil Rights Era (1960s)	More Compensatory than Punitive (Civil Rights laws, set-aside programs, affirmative action, entitlements for minorities)	Assertive Mobilization of disadvantaged minorities along panethnic group lines (Asian Americans, Latinos)
Post-9/11 Era (2001-present)	More Punitive than Compensatory (backlash against specific minorities, USA PATRIOT Act, government initiatives)	Defensive Mobilization of targeted minorities along pre-existing group lines (Arabs, Muslims, Iranians, etc.)

Figure 5.
An updated model of group formation.