

# ”NICHOLAS, WE’RE AT WAR AND YOU NEED TO CHOOSE SIDES.”<sup>1</sup>

## Muslims as national and religious antagonists in HOMELAND’S narrative

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Every individual wants to be part of a community. To reach this goal of being included and to gain social rewards instead of punishments, one has to face the expectations of a community, as Habscheid states.<sup>2</sup> To be accepted into a community/society, we have to approve social norms, values and narratives.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a national discourse is not only relevant to society’s stability but underlines the importance of collective as well as individual identity building.

The US American identity after 9/11 focused especially on a stereotypically produced national enemy visualized in western imagination of Muslims and Islam. This defined Islam as an antagonism to the US nation built on Christian values, ignoring the different social groups within the state itself. Portraying Islam as a dominantly negative religion transported stereotypes regarding the representation of Muslims. These ideas expressed themselves in a nationally defined enemy mediated by modern media. In the US television series HOMELAND, these fears as well as a nationally constructed exclusion discourse have been addressed and discussed. This paper deals with the basic theories on national identity and analyzes the depiction of Islam as antagonism to US American Christian nationalism within the narrative of the television series HOMELAND.

### *Identity and Nationalism*

In general, it should be noted that identity building is a complex process that is collectively constructed through categories of norms and values of

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1 Homeland, 2.01 The Smile.

2 Cf. Habscheid, Stephan: Text und Diskurs. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2010, 75.

3 Cf. Anderson, Benedict: Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. London: Verso, 1993, 15–16.

the own culture. As Elias notes, the strengthening and deepening of the exclusivity of a national tradition is of particular importance to this process.<sup>4</sup> The differentiation of various groups enables a community to protect oneself from the "outside", which is connoted negatively. This delimitation and exclusion of other groups, often out of politically or economically reasons, should protect the own culture.<sup>5</sup>

The modern concept of the nation arose during the French Revolution and could be seen as a classic counter-concept to the noble community. A *nation* defines a group of people who develops the idea of a unity based on common language, history, traditions, culture and myths. Anderson refers to nations as imagined and constructed in the minds of a community. The idea of the nation as such is only made possible by the members of the group. They are delimited by objective criteria, such as politics or economic systems, but also by subjective, e.g. language or religion.<sup>6</sup> In particular, language is a central element of nation-building, which is used especially in a regional narrative tradition of myths, but also in the education policy. A basic understanding of these discursive nation narratives is the notion of origin in the settlement country. National identity is referred to as part of the collective identity and is characterized by the relationship to a community. A nation also must give exclusivity to its community. With this idea of a geographical, regional, religious, ethnical, linguistic defined area different social groups have been in- or excluded. As Jurt states, the principle of alterity is obviously essential for the consistency of imagined communities<sup>7</sup>. Smith also describes that nations build on ahistorical, romanticized narratives that construct images of a common history and identity with the aim to create a self-contained group.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas nationalism, as Lenhardt argues, promotes the idea of a cultural uniqueness combined with political power.<sup>9</sup> By that, the nation concept

4 Cf. Elias, Norbert: Die Gesellschaft der Individuen. Michael Schröter (ed.), Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987, 280.

5 Cf. De Cilia, Rudolf/Reisigl, Martin/Wodak, Ruth: The discursive construction of national identities. In: Discourse Society, Vol 10(2), London/Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage, 1999, (149–173), 65.

6 Vgl. Anderson 1993, 15–16.

7 Cf. Jurt, Joseph: Die Konstruktion nationaler Identität in Frankreich und Deutschland. In: Klaeger, Sabine / Müller, Markus H. (eds.): Medien und kollektive Identitätsbildung. Ergebnisse des 3. Franko-Romanisten-Kongresses (26.09. bis 29.09.2002 in Aachen) (= Beihefte zu Quo Vadis, Romania? 16). Wien: Praesens, 2004, (14–29) 28.

8 Cf. Smith, Anthony: Nationalism and Modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism. London: Routledge, 2000.

9 Cf. Lenhardt, Gero: Ethnische Identität und sozialwissenschaftlicher Instrumentalismus. Ethnizität — Wissenschaft und Minderheiten. In: Ethnizität — Wissenschaft und Minderheiten. Eckhard J. Dittrich/ Frank-Olaf Radtke (ed.), Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990, (191–213) 192.

and further nationalism became central movements of statehood and nation building in modern times.<sup>10</sup> Nationalism combines an ideology that exaggerates the features of one's own ethnic community as something absolute.<sup>11</sup> Gellner states, that both the concept of a nation and the commitment to it are normative ideas. „Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation“.<sup>12</sup> And this is the ambivalent part of this discursive concept: The same cultural, ethnical and religious background is necessary to be recognized as part of a community.

### *Muslims as national and religious antagonists in HOMELAND'S narrative*

The collective American historiography of the last twelve years is not as coherent as in the beginning, but nationalism, ethnicity and religion are still central components of the social discourse after 9/11. The definition of the discursive position as a U.S. American nation thus takes on categories and exclusion strategies. A key element here is the problem of vulnerability within the own country. Contrary to the historical development of other nations the U.S. had not to deal with the violent intervention of external forces for at least over 200 years. After the American Revolutionary War, the British–American and Mexican–American War, the (military) demarcation of the country's borders has been completed (at least outwardly). Internal conflicts, such as the Civil War, are not part of the collective memory addressing (military or violent) interference from the nation's outside.

Furthermore, we should not forget that the United States of America are (all-encompassing almost an entire continent) a country, that is characterized by complex and interwoven social structures. Essential in the newer development of a collective memory are the attacks of terrorist groups on the country itself. The attack of 9/11 breached the security of the nation and thus distributed (in accordance with the tactics of terrorism) instability and insecurity.

10 Cf. Dittrich, Eckhard J./ Radtke, Frank–Olaf: Der Beitrag der Wissenschaften zur Konstruktion ethnischer Minderheiten. In: Ethnizität — Wissenschaft und Minderheiten. Eckhard J. Dittrich/ Frank–Olaf Radtke (Hg.), Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990, (11–37) 21.

11 Cf. Schubert, Klaus/Martina Klein: Das Politiklexikon. 4., aktual. Aufl. Bonn: Dietz 2006. In: <http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/lexika/politiklexikon/17889/nationalismus>, (24. July 2011).

12 Cf. Gellner, Ernest: Nations and Nationalismus. 2. Aufl., Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 6–7.

While these exclusion strategies were strongly differentiated at the beginning of the 2000s, this discourse broke down into racially and religiously stereotyping over time. And again it should be noted, that even a collective discourse does not include the entire society. But there are discursive tendencies in a society that are politically relevant. These collective tendencies favor a particular stereotyped construct of Islam and terrorism as two categories of this national antagonism discourse, that (despite all efforts to separate these categories and diversify) became more closely integrated. Now religion (here both Islam and Christianity are addressed) is depicted as a static and unchanging constant in a political power discourse. In particular, Islam is represented increasingly problematic and often negative in western contexts. These depictions often do not differentiate between culturally or historically shaped phenomena and the religion itself. Especially the US American social discourse that combines a re-definition of an American national identity with stereotypical racial and religious exclusion strategies is picked up and reinforced in the television series *HOMELAND*. So, these nationally defined and visually excessive representations of Islam are constructed through the modern medium of television, supporting a social discourse with powerful images.

It is shown, that central societal processes are addressed in the narratives of television series. *HOMELAND*'s storyline deals with the main character Brody, a soldier, who was held captive by al-Qaeda as a prisoner during the last Golf war. He was turned by the enemy, converted to Islam and now, after his return to the US, is a threat to national security. Within this narrative, Islam is constructed as an unknown, foreign religion with a great potential of political instability. Further this discourse synthesizes, that within this suspicious religious system, the concept of an enemy could be found easily. As Al-Arian states, "all the standard stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are reinforced, and it is demonstrated ad nauseam that anyone marked as 'Muslim' by race or creed can never be trusted"<sup>13</sup>. This conclusion subsequently establishes inclusion/exclusion categories central to a national identity building process that leads to only one finding: religion and race as central categories of exclusion. This narrative discourse is not only addressing contemporary social and national elements but also religious conflict potential. The representation of Islam and Muslims in the visual conception of *HOMELAND* represents, within all three seasons down to the present day,<sup>14</sup> a national and religious exclusion discourse that increasingly visualizes Muslims (besides corrupt and power-hungry politicians) as antagonists. Essential in this concept of a national and religious enemy is the starting point of national identity.

13 Al-Arian, Leila: *Homeland*, TV's Most Islamophobic Show. Salon. December 15, 2012. Retrieved December 16, 2012. [http://www.salon.com/2012/12/15/tvs\\_most\\_islamophobic\\_show/](http://www.salon.com/2012/12/15/tvs_most_islamophobic_show/), (28. August 2013).

14 This article was written in autumn 2013 at the beginning of season three.

The two main characters of the series are Carrie Mathison, a bipolar CIA agent, and Nicholas Brody, a war veteran, who converted to Islam and also maintains contacts with terrorist networks. Carrie received the information that an American prisoner of the war had been turned in an Iraqi prison. As Nicholas Brody returns to the United States after eight years of captivity, Carrie suspects him to be this national threat. Despite the video surveillance of his entire house Carrie cannot confirm her suspicions — in contrast to the audience, which already saw at the end of the pilot episode that Brody was lying about the exact circumstances of his captivity. Thus, the credibility of his character and his motivations are brought into question.

### *Exclusion categories*

Further on, the viewer is granted insight into the innermost part of the character of Nicholas Brody in a scene in the second episode. While he previously was depicted as unstable and traumatized, this scene shows him at peace with himself while sweeping the floor in his garage just before sunrise. This scene is interrupted by memory flashbacks of his captivity. At that time he saw his Muslim captors during morning prayers. Back in the present, he washes his hands, spreads a carpet on the floor of the garage and begins to pray. Now the viewer realizes that Nicholas Brody has converted to Islam during his captivity. Strictly speaking, this should have no impact on the evaluation of the character, but this is not the case. It has been suggested that something was wrong with Brody all along and by visualizing his conversion this image of suspicion is supported. Due to the categorization of national enemies in US American society, the revelation that Nicholas Brody is Muslim in this moment of the narrative is central. National enemies are portrayed as enemies of freedom, democracy and the western way of life. Furthermore, within *HOMELAND*'s narrative, they are primarily associated with the geographical area of the Middle East (with the exception of Israel) and the religion Islam. This combination of racism, as there is hardly any distinction between different ethnic groups, and stereotypical ideas of religion is now being implemented in the visual conception of *HOMELAND*. People from the Middle East are almost automatically portrayed as Muslims and are represented primarily engaged in prayer or in terrorist plots. In addition to that, this visual representation meets stereotypical ethnic ideologies of the western conception of orientalism.<sup>15</sup>

15 Edward W. Said: *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London/New York: Penguin Books, 1995, 273.

In a confrontation between Nicholas and his wife Jessica, it is revealed that he had converted to Islam. Jessica seeks evidence of his confession and finds the Quran and shouts towards her husband:

"These are the people who tortured you. These are the people who, if they did find out Dana and Xander were having sex, would stone her to death in a soccer stadium."

(She tosses the Quran on the floor)

"I thought you put this crazy stuff behind you. I thought we were getting somewhere. [...] I married a U.S. Marine, this... this cannot happen. You have a wife, two kids, you are a congressman in the running to become vice-president. It cannot happen, you get that, right?"<sup>16</sup>

It can be argued that in this scene stereotypes are reproduced that are not content of the series itself. I absolutely assume that these statements do not represent the opinion of the producers in any way. However, this dialogue and the representation of Islam in *HOMELAND* in general relies on Islamophobic social discourses and show them as accepted parts of the US American reality, without really breaking with them.

Furthermore, Muslims in *HOMELAND*'s narrative are represented as assimilated people, who are not obviously Muslims. Nevertheless, they are suspected to interact with terrorist groups and in some cases they really do. Of central importance to this depiction is the character of the journalist Roya Hammad, who one day appears in Nicholas Brody's office to bring him greetings from terrorist leader Abu Nazir. She explains that their families were friends since they were forced to flee from Palestine in 1947. This statement is not only implying that an escape from Palestine is related to an anti-western attitude, but also puts forward the assumption that assimilation happens only superficially. "Nicholas, we're at war and you need to choose sides."<sup>17</sup>

Rarely exceptions of this stereotypical depiction of Islam and Muslims give a positive or neutral presentation of Islam. One positive portrayal is Rafan Gohar, the Imam of a small community in Washington DC, who calls for justice after two praying men were killed in his mosque. However, this is not awarded to him for political reasons. Within this scene the narrative is breaking with standard stereotypes of a negative discourse, making it clear that the categories of good and evil cannot be so easily assigned, because the political leadership of the country is corrupt, manipulative and only interested in their own power expansion.

Above all, the majority's view on Muslims as a marginalized group is central to the narrative. This is partially differentiated, but again transports

16 *HOMELAND*, 2.01 The Smile.

17 *HOMELAND*, 2.01 The Smile.

previously apprehended racial and religious stereotypes. It is interesting to observe that Saul Berenson in particular argues racist. When the CIA is looking for illegal money transfers of the terrorist network, he analyzes the situation and notes that traditionally nomadic cultures have used jewelry to transport wealth. He also categorizes potential suspects by racist standards. This behaviour is criticized, but accepted.

Saul: „We prioritize. First the dark-skinned ones.“

Max: „That's straight up racial profiling.“

Saul: „That's actual profiling. Most al-Qaida operatives are gonna be Middle Eastern or African.“<sup>18</sup>

In season three his everyday racism and religious discrimination is presented as a central element of the narrative. When the young analyst Fara appears in the CIA, she is discriminated because she wears a headscarf. Saul Berenson complains to a colleague that he had asked for an expert to help him on a mission and was sent a young Muslim woman. He formulates his anger directly:

“You wearing that thing on your head is one big ‘Fuck you’ to the people who would have been your co-workers, [...]. So, if you need to wear it, if you really need to ... which is your right, you better be the best analyst we've ever seen.”<sup>19</sup>

This scene exceeds the mostly latent Islamophobia of the characters within the narrative and criticizes Islam as religion directly. The religious clothing and by that the religion itself is addressed as an unacceptable political statement that's furthermore socially unacceptable since the renewed terrorist attacks within the narrative. By that, he national exclusion process — implying the question: who is a threat for our community/nation — does not concentrate only on ethnicity, but on religion too. By that, *the Muslim* — a personalized category of an ethnic group, but especially a religious community — is portrayed as a threat to the U.S. American nation.

## Conclusion

Summarizing, the confession to Islam is used as an indicator for terrorism in the narrative of *HOMELAND*, whereby a particular image of a religious enemy is constructed. The categories *Islam* and *terrorism* are stereotyped and reduced to a minimum in the narrative of *HOMELAND*. In particular, the visual aesthetic discourse — intentionally or not — embodies this problematic, stereotypical construct. The apprehended uncertainties of contemporary

18 *HOMELAND*, 2.04 New Car Smell.

19 *HOMELAND*, 3.02 Uh... Oh... Ah....

western societies are picked up in *HOMELAND*'s narrative confirming, to some degree, racist and religiously constructed national exclusion discourses. One problem here is that no distinction is made between the different categories of ethnicity, nation and religion. We now see that discursive development of a religiously and nationally constructed enemy concept after 9/11 established various negative depictions of Islam and Muslims especially in nationwide television. This reflects the diverse contemporary national identity re-building process that has been transformed into television narratives such as *HOMELAND*. Thus, the emergence of a visual media discourse, that followed and reinforced political interests, reflect central societal developments. In conclusion, social discourses transform into television narratives such as *HOMELAND* and demonstrate the relation of nationalism, ethnicity and religion.

### *Summary*

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#### "NICHOLAS, WE'RE AT WAR AND YOU NEED TO CHOOSE SIDES."

Muslims as national and religious antagonists in *HOMELAND*'s narrative

The US American identity after 9/11 focused (among other things) on a stereotypically constructed national enemy, visualized in the western imagination of Muslims and Islam. This resulted in an overall negative depiction of Islam in the broader discourse of US American (Christian) nationalism. In particular, the visual conception of Muslims shown after 9/11 is closely related to the collective memory culture of this date, as well as a politically constructed image of a political enemy. The antagonists in the narrative of the television series *HOMELAND* are Muslim terrorists and power-hungry politicians. The apprehended uncertainties of contemporary Western societies are channeled in *HOMELAND*, confirming to some degree racist and religiously constructed identity exclusion discourses.

KEYWORDS: Nationalism; Religion; Identity; Islam; Antagonism; US American; Television series;