



Islamophobia in American Society, Culture, & Politics

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Introduction

Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon that exists in various spheres of US society. The purpose of this short article is to help provide a basic historical analysis of Islamophobia to better understand what Islamophobia is and how it manifests in the present political and social context. It is important to mention here that manifestations of Islamophobia are very much influenced by localized geopolitical, cultural, and social factors. As such, Islamophobia is a contextualized phenomenon, and it may manifest differently in various contexts (Canada, France, UK, etc.). As the purpose of this article is to provide an introduction to Islamophobia, for the sake of brevity, the discussion will focus primarily on the US context.¹

A number of academics, think tanks, and intellectuals have developed various definitions of the term. For the purposes of this exploration, Islamophobia refers to a type of racism that “sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam...that inform and construct thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other.”² Islamophobia manifests in both public and private spaces, or as Beydoun observes, structurally and privately.³ Structural Islamophobia can be understood as the ways in which Islamophobia has been sanctioned and legalized by the state. In other words, it is how state power has been able to use legislation, policy, and programming to subordinate and oppress Muslims and vilify Islam. The ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis undergirds structural Islamophobia, which is sanctioned through the securitization of the Muslim subject. Private Islamophobia is the fear, mistrust, and violence enacted on the Muslim subject by private actors. These private actors can be individuals or institutions that are not directly associated with the state. The following sections theorize and discuss

¹ For a more detailed discussion and comparative analysis of Islamophobia in differing contexts please see: Arun Kundnani’s *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* and Todd Green’s *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*.

² Allen, C. (2010). *Islamophobia*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.

³ Beydoun, K. (2018). *American Islamophobia: Understanding the roots and rise of fear*. Oakland: University of California Press.

manifestations of structural and private Islamophobia, which will help explicate lived experiences of Islamophobia in the present context.

Structural Islamophobia: Islamophobia Critical Race Theory and the Law

Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon that originated after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center Towers in New York City (9/11). Rather, Islamophobia is one of many iterations of an enduring legacy of racism in America. One essential theoretical framework that can be employed to better understand this phenomenon is critical race theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that explains racism as existing through relationships of power, which aim to preserve the regime of white supremacy while subordinating peoples of color. Within this paradigm, race is understood to be socially constructed. In other words, terms such as ‘white’ and ‘black’ do not refer to individual or group identity. Rather, they indicate “a particular political and legal structure rooted in the ideology of White European supremacy and the global impact of colonialism.”⁴ One of the primary concerns of CRT is to understand the relationship between law and racial power. The law, as argued by critical race theorists, is a tool that is wielded to maintain racial hierarchies. As such, racial categories that are at the supposed ‘lower rungs’ of the social order are targeted, subverted, and punished through the legal system. Critical race theorists also maintain that racism is embedded in society and that it is a persistent feature of society.⁵

What is meant by racism being embedded in society is that it appears normal to those in positions of power and privilege and it is not perceived as something that is abnormal or aberrant. Hence, assumptions of the superiority of privileged races are so rooted in the political, legal, and educational cultures of society that they are almost unrecognizable. Racism being a persistent feature of society implies that it

⁴ Taylor, E. (2009). The foundations of critical race theory in education: An introduction. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings, *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Routledge, p. 4.

⁵ Marx, S. (2008). Critical race theory. In L. Given, *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods: Vol. 1* (pp. 163-167). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

cannot easily be removed. When the legal system perpetuates racial inequalities, racism becomes institutionalized and systemic; thus, eliminating racism becomes a daunting task that requires struggle and mass mobilization. Through this theoretical framework, it is argued that the law is a tool that has been used to perpetuate racial inequality. Considering the case of Muslims and Islamophobia in the Trump era, legislation like the “Muslim Ban” is simply an updated version of older laws that have been used to ban Muslims from the public spaces of American society.

Over two hundred years before President Trump instituted a “Muslim ban” that barred Muslims from seven Muslim-majority nations entry into the US, Muslims were legally prevented from becoming American citizens. As Beydoun observes, “the courts prohibited Muslim immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens from 1790 to 1944. During this span, Muslim identity, by law, was viewed as contradictory with American citizenship.”⁶ Hence, Muslim immigrants were categorized as an enemy race. What this entailed was that ‘Muslims’ as a race were considered threatening and unassimilable to American values and society. It was during this era that systematic attempts were made, through the Naturalization Act of 1790, to keep the fledgling nation of America ‘white’ and Christian. As such, citizenship was restricted to ‘white’ Christian races and races deemed to be non-white were excluded. Therefore, until 1944, the ‘Muslim race’ was considered non-white. This original ban on Muslims demonstrates clearly how race was, and continues to be socially constructed, as a prerequisite for ‘whiteness’ was Christianity. In other words, the Naturalization Act of 1790 is an example of how the law was able to determine whiteness, and consequently, those to be precluded from obtaining citizenship. Arabs who practiced the Christian faith could have been considered ‘white,’ whereas Muslim Arabs formed the block of what was considered an enemy race that was threatening to the culture and value system of America.⁷ Over two centuries later, we are witnessing a revised version of this ban on Muslims.

⁶ Beydoun, K. (2018). *American Islamophobia: Understanding the roots and rise of fear*. Oakland: University of California Press, p. 47.

⁷ Ibid.

One of the cornerstones of Donald Trump's presidential campaign was his dedication to bringing about major change to the political establishment in America. This entailed doing away with political correctness, while pandering to the savage racist attitudes held by his base of supporters. Within a week of taking office, Trump signed an executive order denying Muslims from seven Muslim-majority nations entry into the US. Executive Order 13769, titled "Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry into The United States," also commonly referred to as the "Muslim Ban," was enacted on January 27, 2017. The intended purpose of the ban was to prevent terrorism by modifying processes related to the issuance of visas. As such, the executive order suspended entry of foreigners from Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. Furthermore, the US Refugee Program indefinitely suspended Syrian refugees from entering the country and limited the total number of refugees to 50,000 for 2017.⁸ Executive Order 13769 was challenged by the courts, which led to an amended version of the ban, Executive Order 13780. This version of the ban was also challenged by the courts. Eventually, in its third formulation, Presidential Proclamation 9645, the ban was upheld by the Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision. Thus, the Trump Presidency, like previous administrations in the context of the War on Terror, has legalized the targeting of Muslims through Islamophobic legislation.

The 9/11 attacks during the presidency of George W. Bush and the ensuing War on Terror that resulted ushered in a number of draconian laws, which overwhelmingly targeted Muslim Americans. Under the guise of preserving national security interests, legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act was enacted, which compromised a number of fundamental rights. Under provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act the state was permitted to: monitor ethnic and religious groups; detain indefinitely non-citizens who were suspected of having ties to terrorism; search and wiretap without probable cause; arrest and hold a person as a "material witness" whose testimony might assist in a case; use secret evidence (not granting the accused access to the evidence); put to trial those designated as "enemy combatants" in military tribunals instead of civilian courts; and deport non-citizens based on guilt

⁸ Elsheikh, E., Sisemore, B., & Lee, N. (2017). *Legalizing othering: The United States of Islamophobia*. Berkeley: Haas Institute.

by association. As a result of these provisions, thousands of Muslims in the US were rounded up and detained unjustly, had their fingerprints taken, were deported, and/or were racially profiled. Furthermore, a number of charitable organizations were closed or unable to continue operating because Muslims feared being investigated if found donating funds to these charities.⁹ The USA PATRIOT Act is an example of how the law has been used as a tool to police specific ethnic, religious, and cultural communities through practices of pre-emptive punishment.

Preemptive punishment involves legally punishing people before they have committed any crime or wrongdoing. Race is central to the concept of preemptive punishment, as it is undergirded by the assumption that *they* are not like *us*. Such a situation, where suspension of the law (i.e., stripping away fundamental basic human rights) becomes the law, can be described as one where there is a proliferation of ‘camps.’¹⁰ Camps are spaces that authorize the “suspension of law and the creation of communities of people without ‘the right to have rights’...camps are places where the rules of the world cease to apply.”¹¹ The danger of camps and the logic that underlies these spaces is that they normalize the violence enacted by the state as actions associated with the law and therefore legitimize and sanitize them. Preemptive punishment has frequently occurred through programming aimed towards countering violent extremism (CVE). Since 9/11, CVE programs have flourished in cities across North America and Europe. These programs, though not explicitly targeting Muslims, have misidentified thousands of young Muslims as potential terrorist threats, some as young as four years old.¹² Traditionally, the US Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) CVE program closely resembled programs like *Prevent*, based out of the UK, as well as other European models. However, under the Trump administration the program took on a new character. According to Kundnani and Hayes,

⁹ Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and representation after 9/11*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

¹⁰ Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt.

¹¹ Razack, S. (2008). *Casting out: The eviction of Muslims from western law & politics*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, p. 7.

¹² Kundnani, A. (2014). *The Muslims are coming: Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic War on Terror*. New York, NY: Verso.

*Whereas the UK government and EU policymakers have recently gone to great lengths to rebrand their CVE policies as addressing extremism in all its forms, the Trump administration has emphasised a focus on “radical Islam.” The idea of renaming the DHS’s CVE program as “Countering Radical Islam” or “Countering Violent Jihad” was floated by Trump transition officials. Almost all of the CVE grant recipients under the Trump administration have been law enforcement entities while funding for Muslim organisation and organisation tackling white supremacist violence has been cut.*¹³

In other words, under the Trump administration, all pretense of CVE programing being ‘objective’ and addressing violent extremism beyond the lens of race and culture was dropped. Furthermore, Muslim organizations that could potentially better address issues of violent extremism within their communities were sidelined. US policy related to national security and countering terrorism under the Trump administration, as well as previous administrations, is underscored by the assumption that ‘terrorism’ is a form of ‘Otherness’ that is a foreign import brought into the borders of the state through the Muslim subject. The nationalist subject is seemingly absolved from the threat of violent extremism as funding addressing extremism at the hands of white supremacists was deemed unnecessary. This was the case, despite the fact that white supremacy remains a far more serious threat to the national security of the US than individuals who commit acts of terrorism in the name of Islam. According to recent studies, from 2008 to 2016, the number of domestic terrorist acts by far-right extremist groups (most of whom were white supremacists) more than doubled those of Muslim extremists.¹⁴ Furthermore, from 2011 to 2016, only twelve percent of terrorist attacks in the US were committed by Muslims; more than half of the attacks during this period were committed by white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and other far-right groups.¹⁵

¹³ Kundnani, A., & Hayes, B. (2018). *The globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies: Undermining human rights, instrumentalising civil society*. Amsterdam : The Transnational Institute, p. 11.

¹⁴ Neiwert, D. (2017, June 21). *Reveal News: Article*. Retrieved from Reveal News: <https://www.revealnews.org/article/home-is-where-the-hate-is>

¹⁵ Kearns, E., Betus, A., & Lemieux, A. (2017). *Why do some terrorist attacks receive more media attention than others?* Atlanta: Georgia State University.

Legislation such as the USA Patriot Act, the DHS's CVE programming, and other forms of structural Islamophobia reinforce the notion of the Muslim 'Other.' In essence, structural Islamophobia creates legitimate spaces where the Muslim subject is cast outside the nationalist space and the suspension of due process and equal rights becomes the rule and not the exception. This type of 'Othering' further legitimizes Islamophobia that is enacted by private actors. Having described structural Islamophobia and its manifestations through legislation, policy, and programming enacted by the state, we now turn to discuss private Islamophobia and its manifestations.

Private Islamophobia: Menacing Muslim Men, Oppressed Muslim Women, and the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim Dichotomy

Private Islamophobia, like structural Islamophobia, needs to be explicated in order to understand how and why Muslims are constructed as 'Other.' Acts of intolerance, bigotry, and bias at the hands of private individuals and institutions are undergirded by certain assumptions and preconceived notions of Muslimness and Islam. A fundamental work, which has greatly contributed towards present-day understandings of how and why Islamophobia manifests in US society is Edward Said's *Orientalism*. According to Said, Orientalism is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the 'Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'"¹⁶ Said noted the presence of Orientalist thought in the works of European scholars, artists, and academics throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Through analyzing canonical European literary works from this era, Said observed the existence of misrepresentations, oversimplifications, and binaries that constructed the West as being diametrically opposed to the East. Said argued that Orientalists viewed the East or the "Orient" as being overly sensual, primitive, and violently opposed to the West. According to Said, these views of the Orient perpetuated a constant ensemble of images and stereotypes that completely ignored the actual diversity across the Orient. These views of the Orient became

¹⁶ Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 2.

essential tropes of the Muslim subject in the Western imaginary. Said's work, though it predates a number of other studies examining anti-Muslim racism, continues to be foundational. As Kumar notes, a number of Orientalist myths continue to endure in dominant Western discourse about Islam.¹⁷ These include the notion that Islam is a monolithic religion that perpetuates gender-based discrimination, that Muslims are incapable of reason and rationality or democracy and self-rule, and that Islam is an inherently violent religion. In the context of the War on Terror, a number of these tropes have been reconfigured to become the image of the dangerous Muslim man and the imperiled Muslim woman.

The War on Terror was not merely a war in retaliation of the 9/11 attacks. It was a war that had no clear timeline, no specific target, and was against an enemy that was not clearly defined. It was a war that divided the world in diametrically opposed binaries in which you were either "with us" or "against us." With this simplistic logic, the 'Self' and 'Other' were formulated as distorted mirror images of one another. The instigators of the War on Terror were imagined as proponents of freedom, democracy, and liberty. The 'Other' was primitive, violent, and oppressive. According to Razack, "three allegorical figures have come to dominate the social landscape of the 'war on terror' and its ideological underpinning of a clash of civilizations: the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman, and the civilized European."¹⁸ Hence, in the context of the War on Terror, Muslim men were portrayed as violent and misogynistic; Muslim women were understood as disempowered damsels in distress in need of rescue from their oppressive beliefs and cultures; and Western nations were perceived as the antithesis of an archaic religion and culture embodied by Islam and Muslims. Western nations exemplified the ideals that Muslim cultures were incapable of possessing. These tropes have been circulated and perpetuated in news media, popular cultural representations of Muslims, and have made their way into public and political discourse surrounding Muslims and Islam.¹⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan there was continuous media footage of Afghan women being liberated from their

¹⁷ Kumar, D. (2012). *Islamophobia and the politics of empire*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

¹⁸ Razack, S. (2008). *Casting out: The eviction of Muslims from Western law and politics*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, p. 5.

¹⁹ Gottschalk, P., & Greenberg, G. (2008). *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the enemy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

oppressive culture. Republican and Democrat politicians alike celebrated the violence of the War on Terror under the guise of advocating women's rights. Feminist groups like the Feminist Majority, which represented over 220 human rights and women's organizations in the US and worldwide,²⁰ supported the War on Terror, endorsing the tropes of the 'imperiled Muslim woman' who needed to be saved from the 'dangerous Muslim man' and her supposedly barbaric violent culture.²¹ However, in the process, as Morey and Yaqin point out, "the voice of the 'Third World' woman herself [was] effectively silenced, evacuated from an argument that [was] about her but in which she [was] seldom invited to participate."²²

When looking at popular cultural representations of Muslims, Shaheen has noted over a thousand films throughout the 20th century that have degrading portrayals of Muslims,²³ many of which reinforce Orientalist myths of the eroticized, oppressed Muslim female subject, and violent, primitive, and barbaric Muslim male. These stereotypes continue to exist in the post-9/11 context with films like *The Kingdom* (2007), *Iron Man* (2008), *Body of Lies* (2008), *The Dictator* (2012), *Argo* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014), as well as in popular television dramas including *24* (2001-2010, and 2014) and *Homeland* (2011-2018). These forms of popular media provide an endless supply of the recurring tropes of the dangerous Muslim man and imperiled Muslim woman. The dangerous Muslim man is most often framed as a terrorist intent on the destruction of Western civilization who has hatched an extensive terrorist plot with the potential of killing hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent civilians. These terrorists will employ biological warfare, nuclear weapons, or other weapons of mass destruction to achieve their aims. Muslim female characters are routinely represented as oppressed or passive figures in these popular cultural representations that are

²⁰ Thobani, S. (2010). White innocence, Western supremacy: The role of Western feminism in the "War on Terror." In S. Razack, M. Smith, & S. Thobani, *States of Race: Critical race feminism for the 21st century* (pp. 127-146). Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.

²¹ For more on gendered Islamophobia please see: Juliane Hammer's "Center Stage: Gendered Islamophobia and Muslim Women" (in Carl Ernst's *Islamophobia in America* volume); and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

²² Morey, P., & Yaqin, A. (2011). *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and representation after 9/11*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 179.

²³ Shaheen, J. (2001). *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people*. New York: Olive Branch Press.

willing co-conspirators, and in some cases active participants in planning and carrying out terrorist plots.²⁴ This is possibly a sign of ‘progress,’ one may suppose. There are some exceptions to the archetypal portrayals of the dangerous Muslim man and imperiled Muslim woman in popular cultural representations of Muslims. However, these exceptional cases are generally represented through the ‘good Muslim/bad Muslim’ dichotomy.

Thus, another dominant framing of Muslims in the context of the War on Terror is that of the ‘good Muslim’ and ‘bad Muslim.’ According to Mamdani, political and media discourses dichotomize Muslims into two camps. ‘Good Muslims’ are “modern, secular, and Westernized” and ‘bad Muslims’ are “doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent.”²⁵ These political and media discourses advocate that good Muslims are modernized and adapt to a globalized world. ‘Bad Muslims,’ conversely, are anti-modern and destructive. They require policing and need to be put into place through military action. The War on Terror is therefore being waged against the ‘bad Muslims.’ Local Muslim populations are assumed to be ‘bad Muslims’ unless they are able to prove themselves to be ‘good Muslims.’ Within this formulation, ‘good Muslims’ are supportive of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and all other targets of the War on Terror. Furthermore, they are supportive of, and possibly involved in, the securitization of Muslim populations through CVE programming. ‘Good Muslims’ cannot be critical of the War on Terror and must unquestionably support US foreign policy. ‘Bad Muslims’ may not necessarily be violently opposed to the West but simply choose not to adopt a Westernized identity.

Visualizing markers, particularly in popular cultural representations of Muslims, are essential for delineating ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims.’ The ‘good Muslim’ will typically be Western, educated, have an American or British accent, will be of a lighter complexion, wear westernized clothing, and is portrayed in relationships with Westerners. Often they need to be even more Westernized than a westerner to legitimate their ‘good Muslim’ credentials. ‘Bad Muslims’ are

²⁴ Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and representation after 9/11*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

²⁵ Mamdani, M. (2004). *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror*. New York, NY: Three Leaves Press, p. 24.

typically represented with a foreign accent, wear eastern style clothing, and are darker skinned. If they are men, they will wear beards, if they are women they will often wear a *hijab* or *burqah*.²⁶ Understanding the relationship between visual signifiers of Muslimness and the ‘good Muslim’/‘bad Muslim’ dichotomy is essential for understanding Muslims’ and non-Muslims’ experiences with Islamophobia. For example, a number of Sikh men have been harassed, attacked, and abused on the basis that they appear to be Muslim due to wearing turbans. Furthermore, studies have indicated that Muslim women, when wearing a visual signifier of Muslimness like the *hijab*, have experienced differences in attitudes, mostly negative, amongst their peers compared to when they were not wearing such garments.²⁷

Conclusion

Islamophobia is not a post-9/11 or Trump-era phenomenon. Rather, it is a systemic form of racism that represents one of the many strands of racism that are embedded in American society and has a historical legacy that predates many current political and social tensions. Muslim experiences with structural and private Islamophobia prior to and in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Trump Presidency become more comprehensible when understanding concepts in CRT, Orientalism, the archetypes of the dangerous Muslim man and imperiled Muslim woman, as well as the ‘good Muslim’/‘bad Muslim’ dichotomy. These concepts are useful frames for developing holistic, contextualized, and informed understandings of Islamophobia.

²⁶ Gottschalk, P., & Greenberg, G. (2008). *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the enemy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

²⁷ Bakali, N. (2016). *Islamophobia: Understanding anti-Muslim racism through the lived experiences of Muslim youth*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.