



ISLAMOPHOBES

Growing Anti-Muslim Agitation in the U.S. Must Be Addressed

By Moustafa Bayoumi

In August 2008, my book *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* was published by The Penguin Press. A few months later, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. Despite my own delusions of importance as a writer, I must admit that there is no direct connection, but the facts are related nevertheless. Since my book is largely about how Arab Muslim Americans had survived the erosion of their civil rights after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the election of Obama, a constitutional lawyer and community organizer, is significant. His presidency seemed to promise a new era of racial justice in American politics, what many have called the arrival of a “post-racial” age in the United States. But in the years since Obama became president, Muslim Americans have witnessed something new and far from a nirvana of coexistence, namely the rise of an angry, populist movement across the nation that is opposed not just to the free exercise of their religion, but sometimes to their very presence in the country. How did this happen?

Before answering this question, it’s worth reflecting on what life for Muslim and Arab Americans was like under George W. Bush’s administration, the period that had inspired me to write my book. It’s no exaggeration to say that prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, Muslim and Arab Americans registered very little on the daily radar of most Americans. We were largely an invisible minority, and if Americans thought about us at all, they conjured angry overseas mobs, swarthy terrorists, or gluttonous oil sheikhs, in other words the stock pictures of the Orientalist imaginary. With a few exceptions, such as the 1998 film *The Siege*, contemporary American popular culture almost never represented us in America, let alone as Americans. If we were present, it was as relatively harmless and isolated individuals. The cross-dressing Corporal Klinger, played by Lebanese American actor Jamie Farr, on the TV show *M*A*S*H*

◁ Children reciting
a Ramadan prayer,
Dearborn, Michigan, Dec.
15, 2001. *Ed Kashi/Corbis*

was probably the best known Arab American on television, and if you asked someone to name a Muslim American, you would probably hear an answer either of Muhammad Ali, now comfortably celebrated, or Malcolm X, who was killed long ago. But after September 11, the idea that Muslims and Arabs were actually living next door became a major source of terrorist anxiety. Immediately following the attacks, vigilante violence skyrocketed against Arabs, Muslims, and anyone who resembled “a Muslim,” which generally meant brown skin or something wrapped around one’s head. Almost overnight, we had become a shadowy community to be afraid of.

The Bush administration helped fuel this anxiety. While it is true that six days after the terrorist attacks President Bush visited the Islamic Center of Washington, DC, where he spoke out against vigilantism and told the country that “the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam...Islam is peace,” the actions of his administration spoke louder than his words. The FBI had asked the public for help following the terrorist attacks and established a hotline for callers. Within just seven days, the Bureau received over 96,000 tips or potential leads from a nervous public. For weeks after the attacks, Attorney General John Ashcroft would announce the number of people arrested in connection with the investigation, which reached over a thousand, in what seemed like an obvious attempt to tell the American public that they were working the case hard, especially after having failed to thwart the attacks in the first place. As it turned out, none of those arrested after September 11 had anything to do with Al-Qaeda. (Zacarias Massaroui, the so-called twentieth hijacker, had been arrested on August 16, 2001.) In an October 2001 speech to the nation’s mayors, Ashcroft proffered the suggestion that terrorism was limited to immigrants to the United States. “Let the terrorists among us be warned,” he intoned. “If you overstay your visa even by one day, we will arrest you.” And in 2002, the government announced its new “Operation Tips” program, wherein it aimed to recruit letter carriers and couriers, utility company workers, cable TV installers, and others whose jobs provided access to private homes, as amateur spies who were to report “suspicious” activity to the government. Only after loud public opposition—since in this case it was not just the rights of immigrants, Arabs, and Muslims that were being violated—was the program cancelled.

Other law enforcement policies played out similarly. On September 11, 2002, the government began a program of “Special Registration” that required non-immigrant men from twenty-five Muslim-majority countries to register their whereabouts in the country. Then, there was heightened immigration enforcement that directly targeted Arab and Muslim communities, the deployment of spies and informants in the community, warrantless wiretaps, the abuse of the material witness statute (keeping people in jail longer than they should have been), microscopic examination of Muslim charities, and more. All of these policies were corrosive on the human level for Arab

and Muslim Americans, ultimately breaking down all trust between people as well as alienating the communities from law enforcement.

Almost all these programs fueled the media for years after the September 11 attacks. And as we were transformed from invisibility to hyper-visibility, we now occupied that zone in the American imagination traditionally reserved for enemies and subversives. But, the random acts of vigilante violence notwithstanding, the new focus on us didn't translate into grassroots movements of opposition during these years. Why should it have? The Bush administration was announcing to the public that it was taking care of the supposed threat we posed so they didn't have to. The only time the American public became highly agitated about a related issue was when, in 2006, the Bush Administration proposed selling the management of major American shipping ports to Dubai Ports World, a company based in the United Arab Emirates. After having been told for years by their government that Arabs and Muslims were to be feared, the American public decided this was a contradiction too big to bear. The outcry was loud and obnoxious, and Dubai Ports World eventually sold their American port management business to AIG.

With this new-found scrutiny came an almost complete lack of understanding of the texture of our lives. What often took its place was the most simplistic stereotyping of Muslims or an almost willfully ignorant knowledge about Islam, even from top government officials. Dale Watson, the FBI's top intelligence official during and after the terrorist attacks, was asked if he could describe the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. "Not technically, no," was his response. Just prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, even President Bush reportedly had to be schooled on the elementary fact that that practitioners of Islam fell into two main sects. We Muslims and Arabs were constantly talked about, but rarely heard from, and the discussions about us were shallow, presumptuous, and dangerous. Since few Americans had any real knowledge about Islam or the Arab world, gross generalizations and bigoted statements flew easily and unchallenged across the airwaves.

"He's An Arab"

I decided sometime in 2004 that I would attempt, in my own small way, to counteract this terrible and growing tendency towards dehumanizing Arab and Muslim Americans by writing a book. I sought to fill the emptiness of the stereotype with the stuff of human life, and the best way to do that, I surmised, was to ground my research in a specific geography and with a particular group of people. I chose to write about Brooklyn, New York, home to the largest number of Arab Americans according to the 2000 U.S. Census, and where I live. I also chose to write about primarily young Arab Muslim Americans in their early twenties, since it seems to me that to be young

and figure out your place in the world is already difficult, but to be young and figure out your place in the world with a growing hostility from society around you is even more trying. I had a sense of the kind of stories I wanted to write about. They were the ones I was hearing from friends and occasionally reading about, but I didn't go specifically looking for the stories that ended up in my book. Instead, I visited mosques and community centers, talked to friends and had them ask their friends, consulted with lawyers, and put the word out that if anyone wanted to tell me a story, I would offer a sympathetic ear. Writing the book became my own journey through twenty-something Arab America.

What I discovered was a generation that took its responsibilities to represent itself very seriously. This was particularly true among the more devout Muslims. Pious Muslim women told me repeatedly, for example, that wearing a headscarf was not done solely for reasons of religious virtue but was also motivated by the need to represent themselves and not let others represent them. The headscarf became a symbol of religious pride and an opportunity for non-Muslims to ask the young women questions about the faith, and many had developed an index of answers to the questions. I found a lot of anxiety among young Muslim men in particular regarding their own employment prospects. They worried, not without reason, that all the negative sentiment expressed towards Muslims and Arabs would narrow their chances to land jobs. I also heard about a few blatant acts of vigilante violence, but many more people underscored to me the support they had from neighbors and friends.

Then there were stories about the government. After the September 11 attacks, Arab and Muslim communities in and around Brooklyn felt besieged by the various government policies and law enforcement initiatives that singled them out. Lawyers complained to me about the difficulties they had finding clients in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. I interviewed one young Syrian American woman whose family was detained for three months after the attacks and then were just as suddenly released. The father of another young Palestinian man had been arrested in a sting operation and was sitting in jail awaiting deportation, so the young man had been forced to assume a new role not just in life, but within his family too, and so on. Other researchers were making similar findings. One 2006 study by the Vera Institute on Arab American communities and policing after September 11 found that "although community members also reported increases in hate victimization, they expressed greater concern about being victimized by federal policies and practices than by individual acts of harassment or violence."

The social consequence of this kind of government scrutiny was what I was mostly interested in documenting, and it was fascinating to hear stories from Arab American shopkeepers about the support they received from their neighbors, or to witness the

active involvement of human rights advocates in the affairs of the community, or to hear about churches and synagogues that were pursuing interfaith efforts to get to know their Muslim neighbors better. In the face of government repression bearing down on an essentially vulnerable community, active resistance was found among key elements of American civil society, operating with integrity and sometimes very effectively to counteract the rampant scapegoating.

And so it seemed reasonable to believe that the civil rights of Arabs and Muslim Americans would again be if not completely restored, at least not made into a political football to score easy points with by the time Barack Obama was elected president. After all, at the Democratic National Convention of 2004, Obama (then a Senate candidate) had spoken out unambiguously for the civil rights of Arab Americans. "If there's an Arab-American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties," he said to wide applause. And by 2008, the American public was growing tired of George W. Bush, who was serving out his second term, and of the wars overseas. The government's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina signaled to many that the administration was arrogantly out of touch with the needs of its people, and the sudden near collapse of the banking system translated into a loss of confidence in Republican economic policies. Change was in the air.

Then again, just being Muslim or Arab American became a major political issue in the 2008 presidential election. John McCain, the Republican candidate for president, tried to dress down a woman at a Town Hall meeting who said she couldn't "trust" Obama because "he's an Arab." McCain responded by saying, "No Ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with," as if being a decent family man is the opposite of being an Arab. Meanwhile, the Obama campaign, which had moved two women in hijab out of camera during a campaign stop, called the repeated allegation that Obama was a Muslim a "smear," as if being a Muslim was the equivalent to being a criminal. Still, I was optimistic that these could be chalked up to the dying breaths of political opportunism at the expense of Muslim Americans.

Boy, was I wrong, and not just because the Obama administration has followed, and in many cases even expanded, the same harmful policies as its predecessor on civil rights issues. Under Obama, the government has relied more on its dubious use of spies and informants within the Muslim American community, authorized the killing of an American citizen without due process through its now common tactic of drone strikes, deported unauthorized immigrants at far faster rate than George W. Bush, grown the surveillance state massively, protected its own legally questionable actions by invoking the State Secrets Act, and much more.

Although the Obama administration speaks in a far less aggressive rhetoric when implementing these terrible policies, the popular climate since 2008 for Arab and

Muslim Americans has nevertheless neither improved nor stayed the same but has gotten precipitously worse. Polling data bears out the change. Just weeks after the terrorist attacks, 39 percent of Americans harbored negative feelings toward Muslims according to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll conducted in October 2001. Surveys in recent years repeatedly show that that number has climbed to around 50 percent. Opinions are one thing, actions are another, and in the last few years in the United States, a right-wing anti-Muslim activist core has mobilized against a perceived “Islamic threat” on American values and the American system in ways they hadn’t prior to 2008. Legislation has been introduced in more than two dozen states prohibiting the use of Sharia law (sometimes referred to simply as “foreign law”) in state courts, and the Republican National Platform of 2012 contains almost identical language. Kansas recently signed its bill into law, even though there is no known case of a Kansas judge basing a ruling on Sharia and in the American legal system the Constitution necessarily takes precedence over any other law. But much of the anti-Muslim agitation is about phantom threats anyway.

Nor is the putative threat of Sharia law usurping the Constitution the only anti-Muslim agitation in the American public sphere. Legislators actively promote the idea that Muslim Americans are fifth-column infiltrators, poised to take over the country in the name of Islam. This past summer, five Republican lawmakers sent a letter to the Justice Department claiming their “serious security concerns” of the “deep penetration in the halls of our United States government” by the Muslim Brotherhood. (Other Republicans dismissed the allegation for what it is: ludicrous.) Peter King, a Republican congressman from New York and chairman of the Homeland Security Commission, held five public hearings about radicalization in the American Muslim community, even though all the serious social science on this question—from the Pew Research Center, the Rand Corporation, and the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security—shows that American Muslims overwhelmingly reject extremist ideology.

And today’s anti-Muslim mobilization is not confined solely to politicians. A cartoonish pastor of a fringe church in Florida garnered international headlines when he sought to burn the Koran on the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He was talked out of his actions by the secretary of defense, but proceeded to perform his heinous action at a later date. A cable television channel aired a show, *All-American Muslim*, about Muslims in the Dearborn, Michigan area that soon became controversial. Right-wing conservatives alleged that the show was propaganda because—and here’s the rub—the show didn’t include the extremist point of view, as if the only point of view that qualifies as authentically Muslim is the extremist one. Such is the worldview of Islamophobes today. The controversy caused two corporate sponsors of the show, Lowe’s and Kayak.com, to pull their advertisements. Anti-Muslim activists

led by Pamela Geller, an anti-Muslim blogger and populist demagogue, funded a campaign to place advertisements on public transportation that many interpret as being hateful and anti-Muslim. The ads read: “In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad.” And a proposed Islamic cultural center, to be located in downtown Manhattan and modeled after the 92nd Street Y, a Jewish cultural center in New York, was transformed by a very vocal anti-Muslim crowd into “the Ground Zero Mosque,” though it was neither a mosque nor at Ground Zero. On September 11, 2010, a large demonstration of thousands of people opposing the center was held in Lower Manhattan, with many of the demonstrators carrying signs with statements like “What Would Jesus Do? Have His Throat Slit by Mohammed,” and shouting “No Victory Mosque” in unison. Nor is this the only Islamic center in the country that has faced resistance. In fact, opposition to mosque construction has now occurred in at least half the states in the country, as reported by the American Civil Liberties Union.

Fear, Inc.

Something has changed in America. When my book was published, it was rare to see large numbers of Americans on the streets protesting Muslim Americans exercising their right to practice their religion. In the last couple of years, however, we have seen raucous anti-Muslim protests around the country, from Tennessee to New York, California to Michigan. In the minds of many, it seems, a new narrative has taken hold, one that operates more along the lines of culture than through the threat to national security. Acts of cultural and religious expression, and even just the ordinary activities of Muslim Americans, have now become suspicious on another level beyond imminent violence. Just being Muslim is now seen as a threat to the very culture of America.

And so we return to the question regarding the origin of this change. Is this new populist agitation against Muslim Americans the logical outcome of a decade-long “war on terror” that shows little sign of ending? Is it due to the dogged persistence of Orientalist clichés that never seem to die but multiply into new formulations? Is it because of a few high-profile arrests of Muslim American terrorism suspects in the United States in recent years? Is it a consequence of an American foreign policy that depends upon demonizing its overseas enemies? And has this demonization of Muslims abroad travelled back, like a chicken coming home to roost, to American Muslims? Or is the rise of populist anger at Muslim Americans pushed by a small group of right-wing ideologues who wish to goad the United States’ population to the right of the political spectrum for specific foreign policy goals—often connected to American intervention in the Muslim-majority countries and support for Israel’s policies against the Palestinians?

The Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank in the United States, has supplied good evidence for this last answer. In August 2011, the center published *Fear Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobic Network in America*, which argues that the rise of Islamophobia in the United States is connected to “a small, tightly networked group of misinformation experts guiding an effort that reaches millions of Americans through effective advocates, media partners, and grassroots organizing.” The report actually identified the key players in this Islamophobic network, as well as the more than \$40 million paid out by seven foundations over ten years to support their detestable mission. While there is likely some truth to this reason, and all of the reasons, I think many miss the bigger picture. *Fear, Inc.*, for example, makes a convincing case, but it also assumes that people can be directed to act by the network and not by their own desires or for their own reasons.

Maybe there is another motivation. Perhaps this rising populism has less to do with Muslim Americans specifically and more to do with the changing demographics of the United States. Put another way, perhaps the anger directed at us is at least as much a symptom of a general malaise that some Americans feel about their changing fortunes and dwindling stature as it is about specific foreign policy objectives or a kind of classical anti-Muslim bigotry. The phantom fears surrounding Muslim America may be driven by an anxiety held by an older, white, and Christian America that is nervously confronting the end of its majority in American politics. And the fact that this populism rises to prominence after 2008, that is to say after the election of Barack Obama, is no coincidence. Obama is also a symbol to them of the beginning of the end of their historic privileges.

Actually, their fears are not unfounded. In 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that in 2042 the population of the country would be majority minority, that is to say, white Americans would now constitute less than 50 percent of the population. (Currently minorities account for about 37 percent of the population.) In some ways, we are almost already there. The Census Bureau revealed in July 2011 that more than half of the babies born in the country belonged to current minority groups and, in October 2012, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a study showing that Protestants now account for less than half of the population—as opposed to forty years ago when they made up about two-thirds of the nation.

The racial, religious, and ethnic transformation the United States has been experiencing since the immigration laws changed in 1965, when the door was opened to non-European immigrants, is indeed profound. In some ways, this transformation is even more significant to an American identity based on whiteness than the end of slavery or the end of segregation in the United States. Those watershed moments in American history meant that the majority lost much of its ability to impose its will on a minority. This time, however, the concept of a majority in society will itself become outdated.

Even though Muslim Americans account for somewhere between 1-2 percent of the population, our oft-remarked upon and exaggerated difference from the majority matters to those who worry about the disappearance of an America they feel they know. Maybe this is why we repeatedly hear the fears that Muslims are taking over America, an impossibility considering our numbers and influence. The fact that it is far more socially acceptable to express negative opinions about Muslims than virtually any other racial, religious, or ethnic group, also suggests that much of the hostility directed at us could be a displacement for general feelings of impending usurpation from a position of privilege. What else explains the strange and enduring allegation that President Obama is actually a Muslim, a belief that has more than doubled since 2008, from 16 percent to 34 percent, among Republicans? There is almost certainly an implied racial coding going on here. It's another way of saying that the African American Obama is not one of "us," and "Muslim" becomes a stand-in for many kinds of otherness.

We don't have to take the idea of a "white America" too literally here either. Race and racial thinking is the long tragedy of the American drama, and any talk of white identity may invoke older images of hoods and burning crosses. But that's not how the current anxiety about losing a place of privilege in the nation expresses itself today. It's more a feeling of social melancholy expressed in many ways, from anti-immigrant movements like the Minutemen to the rise of the Tea Party, and frequently channeled on Fox News. Behind the anger, one often hears a pervasive sense of loss. When a Muslim community on Staten Island wanted to build an Islamic Center in 2010, they met with opposition from their neighbors and the mournful feeling that the old America was slipping away was expressed by one protestor who said, "We just want to leave our neighborhood the way it is—Christian, Catholic."

The Atlantic magazine recognized this cultural anxiety about the changing demography in the United States when it published an article in 2009 called "The End of White America?" The article quotes sociologist Matt Wray, who studies whiteness in America today: "Following the black-power movement, all of the other minority groups that followed took up various forms of activism, including brown power and yellow power and red power. Of course the problem is, if you try and have a 'white power' movement, it doesn't sound good." The article continues: "The result is a racial pride that dare not speak its name, and that defines itself through cultural cues instead—a suspicion of intellectual elites and city dwellers, a preference for folksiness and plainness of speech (whether real or feigned), and the association of a working-class white minority with 'the real America.'" Anti-Muslim populist agitation—politically permissible in ways that mobilizing against other minorities simply isn't—adopts similar characteristics that likewise work to build a culture of pride

in that same white, Christian America that now feels anxiously under siege. These include suspicions of a “politically correct” elite (that is, in this case, forcing Muslims onto average Americans), a direct alignment of Christian with American values, and a sense that this populist vanguard is the last, best defense of the “real” America.

At the very fringes, an explicit “white power” movement does in fact exist in the United States, and according the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks domestic hate groups, “white power” and other right-wing extremist groups have grown “explosively” in recent years. In 2000, the SPLC monitored 602 hate groups. It now tracks 1,018, almost double the number. They expanded most quickly, the SPLC notes, after the election of Obama, and while not all of these organizations are “white power” groups, many of them have expanded their focus to include Muslims as another despised minority. In August 2012, white supremacist Wade Michael Page opened fire at a Sikh Temple, killing six, and although no definitive motive has been determined for his rampage, it’s likely that Page was motivated by his hatred of non-whites. With their distinctive style of dress and dark skins, Sikhs, of course, have suffered many anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States since 9/11.

The Browning of America

The “white power” movement is only the most extreme example of a narrative of discomfort between an older version of America and a new multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith America, but the fretful sentiment is commonly found among large swaths of the population. The best evidence for this, particularly when considering attitudes toward Muslim Americans, is found in a 2011 study co-produced by the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute titled *What It Means to Be an American: Attitudes in an Increasingly Diverse America Ten Years after 9/11*. The study polled 2,450 adult Americans on a variety of pressing political questions surrounding immigration and identity, and the results are intriguing, particularly because the study took age, education, and political leaning into account. While it was not solely concerned with American attitudes towards Muslims, the study did ask many questions about American attitudes to Islam, and it quickly becomes obvious that suspicion of Muslims divides along political and generational lines. (The study did not quantify responses by race.)

According to the poll, older Republicans specifically, not the public generally, are the most predisposed to be suspicious. Less than half of the Republicans surveyed held favorable views of Muslims, compared with about two-thirds of the Democrats, and younger Americans (18-29 year olds) had twice as much social interaction with Muslims compared to their seniors. Nearly two-thirds of Republicans say that the values of Islam are at odds with American values and that trust in Fox News correlates

highly with negative attitudes about Islam. Significantly, the number of Republicans that perceives a conflict between American values and Islam (63 percent) is in the same ballpark as Republicans who also see immigrants generally as threatening American customs and values (55 percent). Through its many questions, the poll confirms the view that those holding the most ardent anti-Muslim attitudes come mainly from a very specific, generally older, and highly conservative segment of the population, precisely the ones who would feel most threatened by the browning of America.

It may not seem so, but this is ultimately good news. For one thing, the current generation of younger Americans, the most religiously and ethnically diverse in the nation's history, tends to be less opposed to Muslim Americans than their senior counterparts, though 23 percent of younger Americans still bewilderingly believe that American Muslims are trying to establish Sharia law in the land. While it's always possible that people's opinions change as they age, the overall trends in the survey strongly suggest a society of more rather than less inclusion.

More important in the short run is the recognition that we don't have to assume a "clash of civilizations" confrontation every time a conflict with Muslim Americans arises. We can and should be thinking about politics in context, and that means thinking carefully and deeply about what the cleavages in American society currently are and from where they derive. We need not believe that large numbers of Americans are and will forever be opposed to Islam and Muslims.

But the bad news is not absent either. Anti-Muslim agitation is a political reality in the United States today, and it needs far more attention than it is currently being given. It's also entirely reasonable, unfortunately, to expect more resentment, elevated anxiety, and the increased possibility of violence in the years to come, as the demographic changes in the country become even more evident. If and when more violence arrives, the challenge will be the same as it was with the September 11 attacks. We shouldn't rush to judgment, we shouldn't look for easy scapegoats, and we shouldn't blame an entire religion or race for the actions of a few. What we need to invest in, now and in the future, are more complex ways of thinking about American society and better ways of achieving a society that provides justice for all. And when that day comes, *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?*, instead of being about current affairs, will become a book about history.