

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

ISLAMOPHOBIA

Background

Islamophobia is a form of intolerance defined as “prejudice against, hatred or irrational fear of Islam and Muslims.” The general conflation of the cultures and beliefs of Arabs and Muslims has expanded the scope of Islamophobia to include prejudice against and fear of individuals of Arab descent.

Islamophobia challenges the diversity of American culture and society, proliferates misinformation and stereotypes, and fosters hostility and potential violence.

The Problem

Since 2001, Islamophobia has been on a steady rise, with a dramatic increase in hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims —or those perceived to be Arab or Muslim. It has resulted in Arab-baiting in elections (bigoted rhetoric against candidates of Arab descent), has become a political wedge issue, with candidates pandering to irrational fears of Arabs and Muslims, and has created public hysteria in opposition to the building of mosques and Islamic schools and community centers. Since 2010, several states have proposed legislation to ban Sharia, or Islamic law, as a means of safeguarding the American legal system from a fictional threat of being overtaken by Sharia. In 2011, House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King (R-NY) held hearings specifically targeting the American Muslim community on the threat of radicalization.

While Arab Americans and American Muslims are the targets of Islamophobia, this form of discrimination impacts everyone. Tolerance or progression of Islamophobia heightens the risk of discrimination against other racial, religious, and ethnic minorities.

Current Status

Congressional Discrimination

Since January 2011, Congressman King has held three hearings on radicalization within the American Muslim community. The political conversation following the 9/11 attacks was careful to point out that a peaceful religion had been “hijacked” by a fringe group and used for violence. Congressman King’s hearing, however, reoriented the conversation around a tone in which all Arab Americans and American Muslims should be viewed with suspicion. The hearings produced little to no evidence supporting his claims that the Muslim community is particularly prone to radicalization.

2012 Elections

Several of the 2012 presidential candidates have made Islamophobic remarks, including:

- Michelle Bachmann, who was the first GOP candidate to sign the “FAMILY FIRST” marriage vow, commits its signatories to “rejection of Sharia Islam and all other anti-woman, anti-human rights form of totalitarian control.”
- Herman Cain: “Based upon the little knowledge that I have of the Muslim religion, you know, they have an objective to convert all infidels or kill them” [3/21/11]
- “A reporter asked me, would I appoint a Muslim to my administration. I did say, ‘No. And here’s why. ... I would have to have people totally committed to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. And many of the Muslims, they’re not totally dedicated to this country.” [03/28/11]

- Newt Gingrich: “Nazis don’t have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust museum in Washington... We would never accept the Japanese putting up a site next to Pearl Harbor. There is no reason for us to accept a mosque next to the World Trade Center.” [08/15/11]
- Rick Santorum: “The Islamization of Europe that is already on the way and will visit these shores not too soon is a concern for us and something that we need to identify and we need to talk about and we need to fight with every ounce of our being.” [2/28/2009]

State Initiatives

- Early 2011 saw a wave of anti-Sharia campaigns and bills. To date, bills in 22 states have been proposed that promote an anti-Sharia and anti-Islam agenda. Most of those challenged in court have been found unconstitutional, violating the “establishment clause” of the First Amendment by unfairly singling out Muslims and Islam.

Community Discrimination

- The Southern Poverty Law Center has recorded a tripling of anti-Arab hate crimes between 2000 and 2008.
- Pastor Terry Jones, of Florida’s Dove World Outreach Center, planned “International Burn the Quran Day” for the ninth anniversary of 9/11. National outcry and appeals from military officials convinced Jones to stop his plans. Earlier this year, on March 20, 2011, Jones held a “trial of the Quran” at Dove World Outreach Center and found it “guilty of crimes against humanity.” He burned the Quran in the Center that day.
- The Cordoba Initiative’s Park 51 project, an Islamic community center planned for Manhattan, sparked anti-Muslim and anti-Arab outrage when it was first mentioned in the fall of 2010. Anti-Muslim activists, politicians, and some relatives of 9/11 victims claimed that the project was insensitive to victims of the attacks and to the American people. The debate brought what was a local zoning issue into the national media spotlight, with politicians and candidates around the nation weighing in on the issue prior to (and sometimes as a seeming platform of their) 2010 mid-term campaigns.

Key Recommendations

- Engage in a national public education campaign to refute Islamophobic myths including those driving the hysteria about Sharia, and shed light on the true character of the Muslim community in America.
- Hold candidates and public officials accountable for their rhetoric toward the American Muslim, Arab American, and South Asian American (MASA) community.
- Alert the public of instances of Islamophobia through action alerts and media outreach.
- Mount legal challenges to state and federal legislation targeting the MASA community.
- Advocate for changes in federal and state policies that promote or sanction racial and ethnic profiling.
- Support the End to Racial Profiling Act, which seeks to eliminate law enforcement policies that single out individuals or groups for heightened scrutiny and security procedures based on their national origin, ethnicity, race or religion.