



Why American Islamophobia is Getting Worse- and What Can Be Done to Fight Back

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Beginning shortly after taking office, President Donald J. Trump issued a series of Executive Orders that civil rights advocates say were intended to fulfill his campaign promise of a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” Pushback was immediate, as protesters gathered by the thousands to denounce the “Muslim Ban” as racist and unnecessary. Meanwhile, reactions in immigrant communities ranged from anger to fear as the “Ban” came amid harsh enforcement actions conducted by the Department of Homeland Security. As lawsuits against the Executive Orders wound their way through the courts, reports spiked about hate crimes directed against Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans – including street harassment, arsons and bombings, three murders, and other violent attacks.

Although in the spotlight right now, Trump’s Executive Orders are just the latest in a long line of federal policies and programs aimed at Muslim Americans, all justified by the false stereotype that they are a uniquely dangerous group. In addressing this kind of Islamophobia, advocates must take stock of the history of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination in the United States and understand the potential of new coalitions involving these communities and other groups struggling for civil rights.

A New Low

U.S. Islamophobia is not new, and so-called counter-terrorism policies have discriminated against Arab and Muslim Americans for decades. Examples include Operation Boulder in the 1970s and Reagan administration planning in the 1980s for a potential Arab American internment camp in Louisiana. In the 1990s, legislators made weak assurances to civil rights advocates that the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act would not set up programs singling out Arab or Muslim Americans. Nevertheless, in the twenty years since that statute was enacted, Islamophobic discrimination has been endemic in U.S. “counter-terrorism” efforts. After 9/11, suspects captured abroad or in the United States were designated as “unlawful enemy combatants” only when they fit a “Middle Eastern” profile. Such racialized designations were also used to justify the CIA’s torture program, targeted assassinations by unmanned aerial vehicles, and of course the patently discriminatory surveillance of Muslim American communities by law enforcement. State legislatures have also taken up “Sharia Ban” statutes and administrative agencies have continued to promote programs that subject Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans to unwarranted scrutiny. All such efforts continued through the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, and there is no sign they will end anytime soon.

Still, the Trump administration’s effort to carry out a Muslim-focused travel ban and accompanying raids on immigrant communities signal a new low in the long saga of U.S. Islamophobic policymaking. Simultaneously, the courts have consistently narrowed the grounds on which civil rights advocates can prove that

discriminatory measures affect entire groups of people.

The Racial Dilemma for Advocates

Civil rights advocates fighting measures against Muslims and Middle-Eastern Americans must choose either to use the language of race and racism or to avoid highlighting racial issues. Most advocacy both before and after 9/11 sought to highlight the inherent American-ness and aspirational White racial identity of Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans. Assimilation strategies have been front and center – teaching English, conspicuously displaying the U.S. flag, serving in the armed forces – backed up by formal lawsuits and complaints demanding religious freedom and arguing that negative stereotyping in the media is un-American. Arab and Muslim Americans have thus often sought to follow the path of Italian, Greek, and Polish Americans toward full assimilation into a “White” ethnicity.

Recently, advocates have increasingly turned to a different approach – aligning Arab and Middle Eastern American struggles for civil rights with the campaigns for justice of Asian, Black, Latino, and Native American communities. This approach almost always includes direct discussion of racism amid efforts to build alliances with the Movement for Black Lives and immigrant rights groups.

Towards A New Civil Rights Era?

Successful political advocacy usually depends on coalition building. Even during the “War On Terror” era a decade ago, various federal and state civil rights agencies encouraged Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian American organizations to join cross-community coalitions. Nevertheless, organizations representing different ethnic communities tended to remain largely independent – in part because of worries about sharing scarce resources and in part because foundation benefactors rarely encouraged coalitions and some groups worried about ties to stigmatized ethnic partners.

In fact, civil rights advocates do not universally perceive Islamophobia as a form of racism – something that affects communities based on physical appearance. Moreover, because Middle Eastern Americans often still aspire to gain “White” racial status, leaders and grassroots community members alike may remain reluctant to embrace a “people of color” status. Nevertheless, the main reason advocates are hesitant is that civil rights claims of racial discrimination exhibit insufficient clout in mainstream debates, courtrooms, and administrative decision-making. Without the prospect of clear victories, Middle Eastern American advocacy organizations are reluctant to take on risks from pan-ethnic coalition building. Yet without such coalitions, it is hard to advance civil rights protections in the current period of heightened Islamophobia.

If somehow a new wave of coalition building occurs, it might achieve sufficient gains to change the incentives for all groups involved. Whether or not this happens, struggles against Islamophobia are among the most important bellwethers for robust civil rights protections in the United States. Islamophobia has recently grown to a dangerous degree, encouraging hate crimes and new forms of discrimination. If such trends continue to spiral out of control, American civil rights protections writ large will surely falter for everyone.

Read more in Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, (New York University Press, 2017).