

How the “War on Terror” Became a War against Muslim Americans

Following 9/11, Islamophobia became increasingly apparent in the United States (US) political sphere. To understand why this project pursues several questions:

- 1) Was Islamophobia’s rise within the US determined equally by policy and public opinion, or was one factor more influential?
- 2) What exacerbating effects did the transfer of power from Bush to Obama to Trump have on Islamophobia?
- 3) How effective was the Republican Party’s use of Islamophobia in galvanizing electorate support?

The George W. Bush Era

Bush’s Meeting with Clinton

- Clinton warned Bush that Osama Bin Laden represented the US’s number one security threat.
- Bush ignored Clinton’s warnings because he thought a non-state actor would not have the resources to threaten US territory.

Post-9/11 Domestic Policy

- 9/11 humiliated US lawmakers and security agencies since the hijackers were foreign citizens who legally entered the US on temporary visas.
- This security failure rationalized controversial policies, including the Patriot Act (2001), which:
 - 1) expanded the surveillance capacity and subjective power of law enforcement
 - 2) installed counterterrorism measures within federal agencies
 - 3) increased the penalties for terrorist crimes, and allowed the government to monitor, detain, and
 - 4) deport Muslims without due process.

Perspectives from Byron Horner, 9/11 Witness

- “9/11 had a profound psychological impact on Americans’ sense of safety and wellbeing.”
- “9/11 did cause feelings of us versus them, and was not unifying for Americans who practiced Islam or Muslim immigrants.”
- “Terrorist groups like inner-city gangs track and recruit individuals who feel lonely, isolated, and experience grievances, they have their methods to share the injustice they feel with a [supposed] religious focus, and claim members will be rewarded in the afterlife.”
- “The excuses for the Iraq war have now been discredited” and are viewed as “opportunistic for Middle Eastern geopolitics and oil.”

Perspectives from Ethan Taubes, Former Asylum Lawyer

- Before 9/11, “America prided itself on welcoming immigrants... however, the legitimate reaction to the terrorist bombing...put security on steroids in defining who a terrorist was.”
- “The reach and scope of what a person had to do to be considered providing material support and aiding or abiding someone had no reasonable exceptions...For example, the FARC in Columbia would stop people on a highway and say give me your credit card, confiscate people’s farms, and cars, under the threat of death.” Initially, these actions would make an asylum applicant ineligible based on the material support provision of the Patriot Act.
- “With time, laws were shaped, and exceptions were developed. By 2012/2013, the excesses of this law [the Patriot Act] had been domesticated.”

Mobilizing the Public for War

- Bush’s rhetoric primed the US public for the Iraq war.
- Initially, Bush separated “good” Muslims from “bad” Muslims.
- However, the administration’s desire to depose Hussein’s regime in Iraq overrode the moral imperative to differentiate Islam from the acts of Al-Qaeda.
- Bush casts “terror” as a by-product of Al-Qaeda hating American “freedom.”
- The FBI reported that anti-Muslim hate crimes rose from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 incidents in 2001.
- In 2003, the Pew Centre found that only 51% of Americans viewed Muslims favourably.

Vanessa Aase, Department of History, Supervised by Dr. Wender, Director of the Religion, Culture and Society Program, March 22, 2023

The Barack Obama Era

Obama’s Pragmatic Re-Calculation towards the Middle East

- Obama’s maintained the Patriot Act yet separated the “good” war (Afghanistan) from the “bad” (Iraq).
- Obama recalibrated US resources to drone strikes to avoid casualties in Iraq.
- The new threat of ISIS in 2014 led Obama to re-intensify the “war on terror.”
- Obama’s administration oversaw the successful location and assassination of Bin Laden.

Obama’s Identity

- Some Republicans depicted Obama as Muslim and, therefore, “un-American” and “associated with terrorism.”

2008 Election

- Republican nominee John McCain unknowingly participated in the othering of Obama by commenting that he wasn’t an Arab, “He [was] a decent family man and citizen,” which normalized Islamophobia.

Tea Party Movement

- After the 2008 financial crisis and the electoral victory of Obama, the conservative populist movement, the Tea Party, emerged with anti-Obama campaigns alleging Obama was Muslim.

2010 Midterms

- Political scientist Dr. Farid Senzai argued that some Republicans use an “anti-Muslim strategy.”
- Eighty-five Republican members of Congress elected during the 2010 midterms used anti-Muslim rhetoric to garner votes.
- Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann attempted to gain popularity by accusing Muslim federal workers of posing a security concern to the government.
- Illinois Representative Joe Walsh stated during a 2012 town hall meeting that Muslims threatened the US because they were killing Americans weekly.
- Both candidates were reelected in the midterms because of their Islamophobia.
- In 2010, Fox News reported that 24% of its viewers believed Obama was not born in the US.
- A 2013 Gallup poll found that 94% of Fox viewers identify as Republican.

2012 Election

- The number of voters who believed Obama was Muslim rose from 12% in October 2008 to 17% in July 2012.
- The GOP’s perceived association with or tolerance of Muslims is a liability.
- 51% of Mitt Romney’s supporters said Obama’s religion made them less likely to vote for him.
- Trump gained popularity by spearheading the “birther movement” in 2011, which reignited fears that Obama was not an American citizen.



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The Donald Trump Era

Trump’s “America First” Policy

- Trump de-escalated US involvement in the Middle East to focus on power rivalries with Russia and China.
- Trump intensified Obama’s drone wars to neutralize al-Qaeda and ISIS.
- Despite its human rights violations in Yemen, Trump signed a \$350 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia.

Trump’s Campaign

- Trump campaigned for “the people” against “the elites” who were “undermining” popular sovereignty.
- Trump championed the “silent majority” who faced foreign and religious enemies (e.g., Mexican migrants; Muslim immigrants).

Equating Islam with Terrorism

- Trump used rhetoric that equated Muslims with terrorists.
- In ad hominem attacks, Trump often employed xenophobic and anti-Muslim sentiment to silence political opposition.
- Trump renamed the Countering Violent Extremism program the Countering Islamic Extremism program to target Muslims.

The Muslim Ban

- Trump’s rhetoric sought to link fears of Muslims with concerns about immigration by conflating the two as equally undesirable.
- The ban applied to Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, and Syria.
- Following court challenges, a second symbolic Muslim ban was issued on countries with low US immigration.

“The Trump Effect”

- The normalization of Islamophobia produced the “Trump effect.”
- Trump’s rhetoric incited his followers to commit socially unacceptable behaviour (i.e., racialization, discrimination, and physical assault).
- The Democracy Fund Voter Study Group found that 16% of Americans want to deny Muslim Americans voting rights, and 47% agreed with visa restrictions against Muslims.
- *The Washington Post* (2019) reported that hate crimes increased by 226% in locations where Trump had hosted rallies.

Normalizing Relations

- Trump’s mediation of the Abraham Accords (2020) normalized relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.
- Trump later garnered Sudan’s signature by removing Sudan from the “state sponsors of terrorism” list, the second Muslim ban, and providing a \$1.2 billion loan.
- Trump worked with Muslim nations to strengthen Israel to satisfy his Christian pro-Israel supporters.



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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CHANNEL/GEORGE W. BUSH PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY PHOTO/PAUL MORSE

Findings

- After 9/11, Muslim Americans went from “invisible” to hyper-visible citizens since the law scrutinized their loyalty, identity, and religion.
- Bush initially separated Islam from al-Qaeda; however, expanding the “war on terror” created a perception that Muslims were antithetical to American values.
- Laws and rhetoric fuelled intolerance with the aid of pre-existing biases towards those who differed from white Christian notions of Americanism.
- Obama’s multiracial identity reinvigorated racial and religious voting preferences since his identity threatened the political status quo.
- Bush-era policies created a political landscape in which 51% of Republicans disclosed that Obama’s “Islamic” faith factored into their voting preferences.
- Muslims disproportionately experienced political bigotry from some Republican Party candidates, despite representing 1.1% of the US population; also, Asian Americans (i.e., Sikhs) experienced discrimination post-9/11 due to their misperceived identity as Muslim.
- The Republican “othering” of Muslims under Bush was weaponized against Obama and then re-introduced as an electoral strategy by Trump.
- Trump’s Islamophobic and anti-immigration sentiment garnered support and silenced political opposition by equating “otherness” with inferiority, deviancy, and danger.
- Trump’s presidency incited hate crimes since his followers viewed their actions as justified by Trump’s Islamophobic rhetoric.



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