Vox

Islam isn't a race. But it still makes sense to think of Islamophobia as racism.

Orientalism, the ancient brand of hate behind today's anti-Muslim attitudes, explained.

By Jenée Desmond-Harris | jenee.desmondharris@voxmedia.com | Feb 2, 2017, 9:30am EST

A young woman holds a sign (with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.) during a massive protest against President Trump's travel ban outside of the U.S. Consulate in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on January 30, 2017

Iranian actress Taraneh Alidoosti is the star of the Oscar-nominated film *The Salesman*, but as **Al Jazeera reports,** she's planning to boycott the Academy Awards ceremony in protest of Donald Trump's **executive order** temporarily banning immigrants from seven Muslim-majority nations, including Iran.

Why? "Trump's visa ban for Iranians is racist," she tweeted Thursday.

> Trump's visa ban for Iranians is racist. Whether this will include a cultural event or not,I won't attend the **#AcademyAwards** 2017 in protest **pic.twitter.com/CW3EF6mupo**
>
> — Taraneh Alidoosti (@t_alidoosti) January 26, 2017

She's not the only one who characterizes it this way. Trump's statements about Muslims and proposal of what he called "Muslim ban" during his campaign, combined with his remarks about Mexican immigrants, inspired a wide consensus that it was fair **to call him a racist**.

Now that a ban on immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries is a reality, this criticism of his administration has deepened. It's a rallying cry for activists and a concern of critics for whom the policy flies in the face of what they would like to think are modern American values.

But supporters of the executive order resist the application of the "r-word" here, saying that even if the order *did* explicitly target Muslims, that still wouldn't be racist. After all, they argue, Islam is a religion, not a race. Muslims include people from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds — including many from countries affected by the ban whose national origins would fall under the "white" category on the current US Census if they were allowed in.

To understand why, despite all this, it makes sense to talk about anti-Muslim bigotry — both as expressed by the Trump administration and in general — as a kind of racism, you need to know about the roots of Islamophobia, and about how racial categories can shift with the political winds.

The roots of anti-Muslim hate: Orientalism

"Pre-9/11, the predecessor of Islamophobia was called Orientalism," said **Khaled Beydoun**, a law professor at the University of Detroit who also works with UC Berkeley's Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project. "That was the system that mothered Islamophobia; it feeds and provides many of the same stereotypes, systems of fear, and caricatures."

Orientalism, as explained by the eminent Middle East scholar Edward Said, who first developed the concept in his **groundbreaking book** of the same name, is essentially the cultural and historical lens through which the Western world perceived, defined, and "otherized" the East, and particularly the Muslim Middle East.

Beydoun said this centuries-old worldview "stereotyped Muslims as civilization threat and menace" long before it was dubbed "Islamophobia." In his view, the anti-Muslim hate and bigotry that has been the topic of many public conversations over the past decade in the

West is really just "essentially an extension of the fear and vilification of not only Muslims but everyone perceived to be Muslim that's been taking place for centuries."

This, according to Beydoun, has "brought about the conversion of Islam from religion to race, which as a result spawns popular perception of Muslims as exclusively Arab, and in turn blinds many from seeing Islam as a multiracial and ethnic faith group, of which black Muslims rank as the biggest group in America."

Even though many American Muslims are black, and the former head of the largest Muslim organization in the US was a **white woman**, the bigotry of Orientalism doesn't always pay attention to these details. That means centuries-old biases against Arabs haven't had to change much to evolve into today's anti-Muslim attitudes — they've just been refreshed and relabeled.

Ignorance and confusion mean contemporary anti-Muslim hate isn't actually about religion

"When you're Arab and Muslim, the categories can get conflated," said **Maytha Alhassen**, a doctoral candidate in the department of American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California who has family roots in Syria and Lebanon. "When I've spoken to media, there's been a distinct interest in looking at Islam as 'those brown people from over there.'"

She said **the many stories of Sikhs — who practice a religion totally separate from Islam — targeted in anti-Muslim attacks** seem to provide an additional indication that this brand of hate is not as focused on an understanding of Islam as a religion. Instead, these actions are carried out against those who are perceived as culturally and ethnically "other."

Alhassen said she's not even a fan of the term "Islamophobia," in part because the "neurolinguistic programming" that comes from putting together "Islam" and "phobia," is part of how people try to defend their sentiments about people who practice Islamic traditions. "Anti-Muslim hate," and "anti-Muslim rhetoric" are better. But, she said, "I like to be specific … if we're talking about that 'brown other' that also could be Muslim, I use 'Orientalist.'"

She said she'd use that term in particular to describe the sentiments in Trump's executive order, including references to keeping out people who commit "honor killings" or

persecute individuals based on sexual orientation and gender. These stereotypes are what she calls "classic Orientalist tropes."

People who are "white" now might not be later

Today, **the "white" category of the US Census** is available to "a person having origins in any of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." Many Muslims, including those from countries targeted by Trump's recent executive order, would check that box.

But that shouldn't be the end of the debate about whether attitudes and policies toward people in this group can be "racist."

History proves that the set of people who get to be categorized as "white" in America is heavily informed by various immigrant groups' popularity, not biological differences.

According to a timeline published as part of the ***Race: The Power of an Illusion*** series, when immigration to the US from Southern and Eastern Europe increased in the late 1800s and early 1900s, many of the new arrivals worked low-paying jobs, were clustered in urban ghettos, and were seen as "not quite white." In fact, Germans, Greeks, Irish, Italians, and Spaniards have all — either legally or as matter of public opinion — **been excluded from the "white" category** at some point.

As political priorities change, American racial definitions adjust right along with them.

So, for example, people of Mexican birth or ancestry were "white" until the 1930 census snatched that privilege back. Since then, their status — white or Hispanic — **has flip-flopped several more times**, all depending largely on whatever the current thinking was about their role in labor or immigration.

Similarly, courts **went back and forth** in the early 20th century about whether people from Japan were white, finally deciding in 1933 that they weren't, based on "the common understanding of the white man." (Sounds really official, huh?)

And what it took to be "black" **once varied** so wildly throughout the country (from one-quarter to one-sixteenth to the infamous one drop of African ancestry) that people could actually change their legally recognized races by crossing state lines.

Then suddenly, in 2000, the government decided that Americans could be more than one race, adding options to express this to the census. In other words, one day you had to be a

single race in the eyes of the government, and the next day you could be as many as you pleased.

With these constant changes, it's hard to make the case that the concept of race is anywhere near stable or to see the current census categories as the decisive factor in whether anti-Muslim attitudes are racist or not.

Alhassen has researched how people from the Middle East and North Africa ended up under the "white" category in the first place. Long story short: The 1790 Naturalization Act gave naturalization to free whites. So the way people argued for citizenship or eligibility for citizenship was to prove their whiteness. Some cases went all the way up to the Supreme Court and set the standard. One argument — known as the **"cradle of civilization" argument** — was that people who came from the region where Christianity and Western civilization originated should be deemed white. It worked.

But Alhassen has also been involved with a movement to change this categorization. As a result of this movement, **the Census Bureau is currently taking into consideration** the views of people of Middle Eastern and North African descent who have told the Census Bureau they don't want to be categorized as "white" any longer.

Why don't they? Because it doesn't describe their experience. "Federally, we are white, but when you're from the Middle East and North Africa, one of the few times you realize that is when you're filling out these fed forms applying for schools. I don't have the social protection of being white," Alhassen explained.

It's unclear whether the Census Bureau will get behind these changes and, if so, whether the Office of Management and Budget will approve them in time for the 2020 Census. But if the change takes effect, plenty of people who are considered white right now won't be in three years.

That, according to Alhassen, would make sense because "these communities do not feel like they're white." And the perception of experiencing racism — both in individual anti-Muslim attacks and now, in the policies of an administration with close ties to white nationalism — is a big part of that.

OPINION | MICHAEL P. JEFFRIES

Ferguson must force us to face anti-blackness

By **Michael P. Jeffries** , November 28, 2014, 10:46 a.m.

Demonstrators held lighted signs spelling out "Black Lives Matter" during a protest in Boston. (REUTERS)

"Black lives matter" has replaced "Hands up, don't shoot!" as the mantra of those protesting for justice in Ferguson and throughout the country. The simplicity of the phrase is a national shame. Among protesters' implicit demands are freedom, respect, and dignity for black Americans, but those ideas seem light years away in a country where black people are killed and those responsible give interviews on national television with "a clear conscience."

Institutionalized racism and white supremacy are toxic for all people of color. But the "black" in "black lives matter" calls our attention to a related, but distinct, force that produces more deaths like Trayvon Martin's and Michael Brown's: Anti-blackness.

Racism is a combination of prejudice, discrimination, violence, and institutions that reproduce racial inequality and injustice, regardless of intent. Our schools, neighborhoods, and criminal-punishment system actively privilege whites at the expense of people of color, even when the rules governing these systems are racially "neutral." Anti-blackness entails all this and more. It is not simply about hating or penalizing black people. It is about the debasement of black humanity, utter indifference to black suffering, and the denial of black people's right to exist.

Focusing on anti-blackness rather than just racism is sure to make some people uncomfortable. A recent study finds that the word "black" is more closely linked to stereotypes and negative emotions among white people than the phrase "African-American." This not only demonstrates that thinking and talking in racial, rather than ethnic, terms has political implications, it shows that the mere idea of "blackness" generates disdain. If talking about racism is polarizing, talking about anti-blackness is completely taboo.

But America needs to face the truth. How does thinking in terms of anti-blackness help us move forward?

First, anti-blackness more accurately captures the dehumanization and constant physical danger that black people face. The "anti" in "anti-blackness" is denial of black people's right to life. Black humanity is desecrated in plain view, as Mike Brown's dead body laid uncovered on the street for four and a half hours before being unceremoniously hoisted into an SUV. Brown is described as "it" and "a demon" in his killer's testimony, and killing black people is all too frequently rewarded, as

George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in defense of their actions, and Wilson remains employed. Martin and Brown's deaths are proof that for black people, walking home is risking one's life. Akai Gurley's death is proof that entering a dark stairwell is risking one's life. Marissa Alexander's failed invocation of "Stand Your Ground" laws is proof that black self-defense is an oxymoron. In the most basic sense, black people are not safe.

Second, as [Ta-Nehisi Coates](), [Patrick Sharkey](), and others emphasize, the problems poor black American communities face are problems of a different kind, not scale, when compared to other disadvantaged groups. They are: the overlay of class and race segregation, persistent unemployment, the near complete absence of social mobility across generations, wildly disproportionate punishment and incarceration, and pulverizing social isolation. Sociologically speaking, black suffering has no parallels in contemporary America, but it is not regarded as a national crisis. Anti-blackness captures this erasure of black life and the collective refusal to acknowledge the injustice.

Third, anti-blackness has political implications far beyond standard American conceptions of race. It is tied to white supremacy, but it is not only practiced by white Americans. Anti-black ideologies are adopted on continents half way around the world, [as black labor is abused and black migrants and workers are regarded as social pariahs](). Within the United States, courageous thinkers like Junot Diaz who belong to non-dominant ethnic groups are increasingly attuned to the ways anti-blackness and color privilege [echo through their communities](). Many who engage in anti-blackness are aware of the ways racism shapes and constrains their lives, but awareness does not prevent them from engaging in anti-blackness themselves.

And finally, when well-meaning people shy away from discussing anti-blackness, they cede the discussion to people like Rudolph Giuliani, [who suggest that black people are exterminating themselves,]() and "black crime" is the root cause of black suffering. Anti-blackness is already part of the public discourse. We saw and heard it in the dehumanizing [anti-Obama posters and slogans]() during the presidential elections in [2008]() and 2012. We can read it in the comments section of articles about Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, and on Twitter, as everyday citizens mock "Hands up, don't shoot!" by [tweeting](), "Pants up, don't loot!" We can no longer ignore anti-blackness. We must name it, and meet it with equal force.

Calling attention to anti-blackness does not diminish the oppression that other groups face, nor does it produce petty competition over which groups have suffered the most injustice. It is simply speaking the truth. Protesters know this, and their loud and unabashed condemnation of anti-blackness has fueled their fire and increased solidarity, as demonstrations are carried out by people from all backgrounds and walks of life. Chants of "black lives matter!" have not weakened the critique of institutional racism; they have strengthened it. And if we are to survive, they must grow louder.
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- [Opinion | Susan E. Reed: Ferguson protests should end]()

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TeenVOGUE
Colonialism, Explained

November 2017
By Jamila Osman

Available at: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/colonialism-explained

MPI/Getty Images

Colonialism is defined as "control by one power over a dependent area or people." In practice, colonialism is when one country violently invades and takes control of another country, claims the land as its own, and sends people — "settlers" — to live on that land.

There were two great waves of colonialism in recorded history. The first wave began in the 15th century, during Europe's Age of Discovery. During this time, European countries such as Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal colonized lands across North and South America. The motivations for the first wave of colonial expansion can be summed up as God, Gold, and Glory: God, because missionaries felt it was their moral duty to spread Christianity, and they believed a higher power would reward them for saving the souls of colonial subjects; gold, because colonizers would exploit resources of other countries in order to bolster their own economies; and glory, since European nations would often compete with one another over the glory of attaining the greatest number of colonies.

Colonial logic asserted that a place did not exist unless white people had seen it and testified to its existence, but European colonists did not actually *discover* any land. The "New World," as it was first called by Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator and cartographer, was not new at all: People had been living and thriving in the Americas for centuries.

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Yet, in many history books, Europe's expansion is remembered as exploration, and the men who helmed ships that landed in foreign countries — and proceeded to commit violence and genocide against native peoples — are remembered as heroes. One of these men, an Italian explorer named Christopher Columbus, even has a federally recognized holiday to honor him. Columbus *thought* he was on his way to Asia, but found himself in the Caribbean instead. The first indigenous people he came across were the Taíno, who accounted for the majority of people living on the island of Hispaniola (which is now divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic). They had a highly evolved and complex culture. But this did not stop Columbus from claiming the island and its inhabitants for Spain. By 1550, a mere 58 years after he first landed on the island, what was once a thriving culture and community was severely decimated by European diseases and the brutality of a newly instated slave economy.

The second wave of colonial expansion began during the 19th century, centering around the African continent. In what is called the Scramble for Africa, European nations such as Britain, France, Portugal, and Spain sliced up the continent like a pie, creating arbitrary borders and boundaries, and claiming large swaths of land for themselves. These artificial borders split cultural groups, resulting in fierce ethnic tensions that have had devastating ramifications throughout the continent. Indigenous political, economic, and social institutions were decimated, as were traditional ways of life, which were deemed inferior.

Among the most brutal of colonial regimes was that of Belgium under King Leopold II, known as "the Butcher of Congo." His well-documented acts of violence against the Congolese people resulted in an estimated 10 million deaths. Belgium, like a lot of the white Western world, can directly attribute much of its wealth and prosperity to the exploitation and deaths of indigenous people of color.

The treatment of the indigenous people on the land now known as the United States is just as horrifying. The primarily British Europeans who settled here — just like the Europeans who settled in Africa and the rest of the Americas — overall did not care that there were people already living on the land. The majority did not want peace and harmony between cultures; they wanted the land for themselves. They did not want to share the abundant resources; they wanted to generate wealth to fill their own pockets. Most had no respect for indigenous cultures or histories; they wanted to enforce their own instead. These colonizers did not care that land was considered sacred and communal. Most believed that everything, including the earth, was meant to be bought and sold.

The Europeans who first settled along the East Coast of the United States believed it was their Manifest Destiny, or God-granted right, to claim territory for themselves and their posterity. As they spread across the entirety of the continental U.S., they pushed the indigenous populations — who had lived on and tended to the land for millennia — farther and farther west. Native Americans were moved to reservations — parcels of land that were barren and far from economic opportunities. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson, hailed by President Donald Trump and commemorated on the U.S. $20 bill, signed the Indian Removal Act, which led to the forced removal, relocation, and mass death of thousands of indigenous people. In 1838, the Cherokee were forced west by the U.S. government, which seized control of their land. Forced to walk thousands of miles, an estimated 4,000 Cherokees died on what would later come to be called the "Trail of Tears." This historic loss of lives, land, and culture has led to what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, social worker and professor, describes as historical trauma — intergenerational emotional and psychological damage.

The legacy of colonialism continues to manifest in obvious ways: Many of the world's poorest countries are former European colonies. Walter Rodney's groundbreaking book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* makes the claim that poverty on the continent can be traced back to European exploitation of African resources. In the United States, those living on reservations experience extraordinarily high poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and suicide rates.

In less obvious ways, the violence of colonial thinking continues to shape the trajectories of countries that were once colonizers too. Colonizers believed the world was theirs for the taking, saw the masses of people as disposable, and believed that nothing mattered more than the currency in a white man's pocket. As the world's top 1% continue to hoard the majority of the earth's resources, and the unending quest for profit trumps the needs of the majority of people, it becomes clear that colonialism is not just a relic of the past.

Wherever colonialism has manifested in the world, from across the Americas to every corner of the African continent, it has been met with a fierce struggle of resistance. Throughout history, indigenous peoples have risen up and successfully overthrown colonial powers, demonstrating that while colonizers could steal land and resources, they could not take the dignity of a people determined to be free.