

An Anti-Muslim Narrative Has Shaped Policy for Decades. The Travel Ban Will Make It Worse.

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The Supreme Court of the United States yesterday upheld President Donald Trump's decision to institute a ban on immigrants, refugees, and visa holders from **five majority-Muslim countries** yesterday in a 5-4 decision.

The ruling did not come as a surprise to me.

I'm a lawyer, educator, and Muslim woman who focuses on racial justice. My work is all about interrupting the process of dehumanization that leads to crimes against humanity on marginalized groups. I'm devastated about the Supreme Court's decision, but we saw this coming.

I often hear good-hearted people say that certain incidents are "un-American" or don't represent "their America." But suggesting this ban is unique erases our nation's ugly history of anti-Muslim sentiment, one that sits within a larger picture of systematic racism against many other groups.

The "travel ban" — a term that sanitizes what is in fact a **Muslim ban** — is the latest in a series of policies that have targeted Muslims inaccurately seen as agents, or agents-in-waiting, of a dangerous foreign "ideology" that **needs to be eradicated**. These anti-Muslim narratives are sponsored by a **million-dollar industry**, pushing rhetoric like the takeover of **"sharia law" in America** through "think tanks" like the Center for Security Policy that provide fodder for conservative commentators like Newt Gingrich. Islamophobia is not simply interpersonal hatred or fear. It is a system of bigotry that identifies and targets those who are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim, no matter what their race or country of national origin.

If all Muslims are potential terrorists, then, the argument goes, we must be allowed to spy on "them" to keep "us" safe. The US government has tapped phone lines and other forms of communication and **sent informants** into Muslim student groups and mosques, and added **"suspicious" Muslim infants** (and others) to no-fly lists. They created the Countering Violent Extremism programs that ask teachers and medical professionals to **report to the government** any American Muslim teenagers they encountered who were sullen, withdrawn, and/or exploring their identity with regards to faith.

Suspicion of Muslims guides our foreign policy: Teenagers and other civilians across the Middle East have been killed or seriously injured by **US drone strikes and bombs**.

Due to the decades-long War on Terror, US drones have **killed civilians at weddings** and taught young children to fear the sky. And civilians living in at least five of the countries that are on the Muslim Ban list have been or are currently on the receiving end of **US bombs and airstrikes**. The US justifies this violence based on the narrative that all Muslims are inherently prone to “terror” and that civilian casualties are just the price we need to pay for national security.

Our nation denies the Muslim men still being **held at Guantanamo Bay** — men who were never charged with a crime — the right to a trial. When Trump was elected, progressives everywhere feared he would implement a “Muslim registry,” a policy that already happened after 9/11 when some immigrants from 24 majority-Muslim countries were **required to register and regularly check-in** with government officials. The program, called the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, or NSEERS, helped the government fine, arrest, and deport Muslims. Today, Muslims are among those that ICE rounds up for deportation. This past Ramadan, Somali Muslim immigrants were hindered from freely practicing their faith while detained in an **ICE facility in Florida**.

These government initiatives, taken together, have impacted Muslims from all different backgrounds, as well as those who are perceived to be brown and foreign enough to possibly be Muslim. They have sent a message that treating us with violence is acceptable. This narrative is clear to the American public, with hate crimes now surpassing **post-9/11 levels**.

Islamophobes have also attacked non-Muslim **Middle Easterners and Africans** and **West Indians** and **Latinos**. They have targeted **Sikhs** and **Hindus and Christians**. As the choice of countries included in the travel ban highlights, those who are not Muslim but are in close proximity to Muslims are also targeted and harmed by Islamophobic policy. The effect is a racist policy that has more to do with the color of one’s skin than the religion they practice.

The Supreme Court’s decision will make life much harder for Muslims across the world

In the last 15 months, I’ve fielded phone calls from Muslims temporarily detained at airports, connected elderly women and young organizers to rapid response legal support, and seen the pictures of my friends’ family members who are now blocked from seeing their relatives again. I’ve seen the human toll of this ban, and the picture is ugly.

Many Muslim Americans, whether from the five banned countries or elsewhere, are hesitant to leave the US for fear of not being able to return. Others wonder when or if they’ll ever be able to see their relatives from these countries again. This ban has split parents from children, wives from husbands, and extended family from each other and interrupted the lives of students, medical patients, and working professionals who cannot enter. There is fear that the ruling could create loopholes that our ruthless administration could use to re-define citizenship for all who are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim.

The narratives we use matter greatly. The national security apparatus that relies on the story that brown and foreign Muslims are the greatest threat to American ideals operates so smoothly because we as a nation choose to believe in it. Its natural culmination is the idea that a **“complete shutdown”** of Muslims entering the United States is necessary to keep us safe. With the Supreme Court’s stamp of approval, our political leadership has bought into this scam.

I am dismayed thinking about the increased impact this will have on **Muslim women**, who are already the most visible targets of Islamophobia, on Muslim children, who face bullying from even their **schoolteachers**, and on the Muslim men who are so often painted as savage and monstrous.

Islamophobia will not stop when Trump leaves office. The rhetoric that justified the enslavement of Africans, **the first Muslims on these shores**, will continue to back the bigotry entrenched in the system for decades to come. For now, what we can do is continue to work to change the narratives that dehumanize and to fight the policies that indiscriminately harm.

We have been down this road before. So while this is America, this is not the country we have to be. This is not fulfilling the promise of America.

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