

Rethinking Islamophobia

Adaptation of article by Khaled Beydoun, AlJazeera.

"Why is a Black woman on your book cover?" asked a South Asian woman, after I finished speaking at an event in Michigan. The woman asking the question was a Muslim, as was the young lady pictured on the cover of my book, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear*, showing the misunderstanding about how Muslim identity is seen and misunderstood, outside and even within Muslim-American communities.

The narrow racial perception of Muslim identity is a vital part of the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. Today, Islamophobia in the United States is powered by popular views and state policy that help white supremacy.

While race and racism are central to understanding Islamophobia, there are more aspects to consider. Islamophobia is based in an **Orientalist** narrative from before modern American racism, and the War on Terror that made Islamophobia part of our national law and policy.

Islamophobia is more than just "hatred of Muslims," or "fear or dislike" of the religion and its followers. This definition of Islamophobia makes discrimination against Muslims seem irrational or something that is only done by individuals. Rather, we need to understand the role of the government, its' agents, and its policies to understand the complexity of Islamophobia in the United States.

Islamophobia is also a part of our law and it is intended to discriminate. Because these ideas are part of our law, it allows discriminatory policies to take place using the idea that Muslims are assumed to be a terror threat, and that Islam is uncivilized and must be challenged or changed to fit what is generally considered 'normal' or 'acceptable' to the public. To understand this definition and the new framework for understanding Islamophobia, we must understand how all the different parts of society, from racism and **bigotry**, to law and policy, influence the ideas of everybody exposed to the American Islamophobia that we see today.

Tracing the history of Islamophobia

In 2015, I started on the project of redefining Islamophobia, during a time when clear bigotry and violence against Muslims in the United States was encouraged by (then candidate and now president) Donald Trump. My search for a new definition was motivated by America's history of perceiving the Muslim identity and faith as foreign, or 'other.'

Until 1944, Muslims were viewed as a distinct racial group that was considered "non-white." This narrative reemerged after the 9/11 attacks, which led to the Islamophobia we see today, with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the start of the War on Terror. But the distorted narratives and misrepresentations popularized after 9/11 that steer Islamophobia today are first, rooted in Orientalism.

A new definition and framework

Ultimately, Islamophobia is based on the assumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and unassimilable - which is strengthened by the belief that to identify as Muslim is to have a tendency for terrorism. There are 3 parts to understanding this new framework for Islamophobia. 1- private Islamophobia; 2- structural Islamophobia, and; 3- dialectical Islamophobia.

Private Islamophobia is the fear, suspicion, and violent targeting of Muslims by individuals. Craig Hick's murder of the three Muslim-America students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 2015 is a clear example of private Islamophobia, as are attacks on mosques or people who appear to be Muslims (which also includes individuals perceived to be Muslim such as South Asian Americans or Sikhs).

Structural Islamophobia is the fear and suspicion of Muslims by government institutions. Laws like the US PATRIOT Act, Countering Violent Extremism, and the campaigns to pass anti-Sharia legislation are some examples of structural Islamophobia.

Third, dialectical Islamophobia refers to how structural Islamophobia shapes and propagates views or attitudes about Islam and Muslims. This includes everything from our law, to misrepresentation in Hollywood, to violent attacks on Muslims and those wrongly perceived as Muslims. This definition of Islamophobia requires understanding it within the American context, the diversity of its victims and the country they call home.

Orientalism: "Orientalism," as defined by Edward Said, is the Western attitude that views Eastern societies as exotic, primitive, and inferior. Basically, an Orientalist mindset puts the Western (European/American) world at the center and views the Eastern world as "the Other."

Bigotry: intolerance toward those who hold different opinions from oneself.