

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.

Trump's statements about Muslims and his idea of what he called a "Muslim ban" during his campaign, combined with his remarks about Mexican immigrants, led many people to think that it was fair to call him a racist. But because Islam is a religion, not a race, many argue that this "Muslim Ban" cannot be considered racist.

To understand why it makes sense to talk about anti-Muslim bigotry as a kind of racism, you need to know about the roots of Islamophobia, and about how racial groups can shift as politics change.

The roots of anti-Muslim hate: Orientalism

"Before 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. [Orientalism] feeds and provides many of the same stereotypes, fears, and **caricatures**."

Orientalism, as explained by Middle East scholar Edward Said, is the cultural and historical **lens** through which the Western world perceived, defined, and "otherized" the East, and more specifically, the Muslim Middle East.

Beydoun said this centuries-old worldview "stereotyped Muslims as a threat to our civilization and a menace" long before it was named "Islamophobia." In his view, the increased anti-Muslim hate and bigotry that is being discussed is really just "an extension of the fear of not only Muslims, but everyone *perceived* to be Muslim, that's been taking place for centuries."

This, according to Beydoun, has "led to the shift of Islam from religion to race, which as a result has led to the 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."

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

"When you're Arab and Muslim, the categories can get mixed," 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 seems to prove to that this type of hate is not focused on an understanding of Islam as a religion. Instead, these actions are carried out against those who seem to look culturally and ethnically "other."

Alhassen said she's not even a fan of the term "Islamophobia," in part because the putting together "Islam" and "phobia," is part of how people try to defend their ideas about people who practice Islamic traditions. Anti-Muslim hate," and "anti-Muslim rhetoric" are better terms.

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 [the "Muslim Ban"], would check that box.

But history proves that the set of people who get to be categorized as "white" in America is heavily influenced by the immigrant groups' popularity, not biological differences. As politics change, American racial definitions change 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 much throughout the US (from one-quarter to one-sixteenth to even one drop of African ancestry) that people could actually change their legally recognized race just by crossing state lines.

Currently, 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. "Legally, we are white, but when you're from the Middle East and North Africa, one of the only times you realize that is when you're filling out forms for schools. I don't have the social protection of being white," Alhassen explained.

If the change takes effect, plenty of the 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 in the policies of an administration with close ties to **white nationalism** — is a big part of that.

Predecessor: a thing that comes before another.

Caricatures: an offensive and exaggerated image or description of a person or thing

Lens: A way of thinking that influences how you perceive something

White nationalism: defining a region by white racial identity and that promotes the interests of whites exclusively, usually at the expense of people of other backgrounds (Synonym: white supremacy)