ANTI-ARAB AND ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY

Background

Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry challenges the diversity of American culture and society, proliferates misinformation and stereotypes, fosters hostility- in some cases violence, and stigmatizes an entire community. We understand today’s anti-Muslim bigotry as partly rooted in anti-Arab bigotry, which classifies individuals based on their national origin and political views. What began as xenophobia directed at individuals with origins in the Middle East morphed into anti-Islamic sentiment that targets an entire faith. Polling conducted by AAI in 2015 found that 30% of Americans harbor unfavorable views of Arab Americans while 37% held unfavorable views of American Muslims. The lowest favorable rates were found among Republicans, who gave Arab Americans a 34% favorable rating and American Muslims a 25% favorable rating. In contrast, Democrats gave Arab Americans a 51% favorable rating and American Muslims a 44% favorable rating. With millions of people holding unfavorable views of Arab Americans and American Muslims, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry - and society’s tolerance of it - heightens the risk of hate crimes and hate speech being directed at our community. In the immediate wake of 9/11, the FBI reported an increase in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hate crimes by 1,600%. Hate crimes against Arab Americans and American Muslims have never returned to or dropped below their pre-9/11 rate, and spike after widespread media coverage of terrorist attacks. For example, in the months following the tragic terrorist attacks in San Bernardino, California and Paris, France, hate crimes against Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim significantly increased.

The Problem

Since 9/11, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry has remained a consistent phenomenon, resulting in a dramatic increase in hate crimes against Arab Americans, American Muslims, and those perceived to be Arab or Muslim. The political conversation following the 9/11 attacks was initially careful to point out that a peaceful religion had been appropriated by a fringe group and used for violence. In particular, then-President George W. Bush went out of his way to work closely with American Muslims, even making a point to visit a mosque and repeatedly emphasize that the United States is not at war with Islam.

In 2010, the manufactured controversy over Park51 - which Anti-Muslim activists falsely termed the “Ground Zero Mosque” (it is neither strictly a mosque nor at Ground Zero) - became a political wedge issue, with candidates pandering to irrational fears of Arabs and Muslims. The campaign against Park51 led to copycat campaigns across the country against the construction of new mosques, Islamic schools and community centers, alleging that they represent a grave threat to American freedoms.

In 2011, Rep. Peter King (R-NY), then-Chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, convened three hearings to investigate the threat of “radicalization” within the American Muslim community. The hearings marked an important turning point in the national conversation by casting suspicion on an entire community. The hearings produced little or no evidence that the Muslim community in the U.S. is uniquely prone to violence - as no such evidence exists.

Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry surfaced as a defining feature of presidential campaigns during then-Senator Barack Obama’s first run for President in 2008. Over the course of his initial bid, President Obama’s opponents blatantly asserted that his family’s connections to Kenya, his middle name “Hussein,” and his upbringing brought his allegiance to the United States into question. Our nation’s first African American President again faced the same anti-Muslim baiting during his second run in 2012. A number of candidates - namely Michelle Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum- engaged in blatant and reprehensible Arab-baiting, all of whom received national media coverage.

In February of 2015, the FBI took an important step in improving its criteria for hate crime reporting by
including separate classifications for Hindus, Sikhs, and Arabs, in an effort to better track hate crimes committed against various communities.

With the 2016 presidential primaries nearing their conclusion, several candidates have continued to not only perpetuate, but escalate the distasteful use of bigotry based on race, ethnicity, or religion as a campaign pitch. Some of the leading candidates for president have advocated for draconian measures that would profile Arab Americans and American Muslims. Donald Trump advocated for a complete ban on Muslim immigrants and falsely claimed that Arab Americans were cheering in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Senator Ted Cruz, who called for law enforcement to “patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods” following the terrorist attacks in Brussels in March of 2016, has said he wears that proposal as a “badge of pride.”

These views and the consequences they evince will come to the forefront as presidential candidates debate U.S. foreign policy and national security ahead of November 2016, especially given the rise to power of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL). Public officials and media figures continue to propagate a message of hatred and fear based on broad, incorrect generalizations. While this climate is not entirely unprecedented, the frequency with which instances of bigotry are occurring in recent sessions of Congress is troubling.

The practice of utilizing hateful or bigoted speech targeting Arabs, Muslims, or other minority communities has real consequence, both socially and politically. Policies unfairly victimizing Arab or Muslim citizens, from close U.S. Allies barring them entry under the Visa Waiver Program if they had recently visited or were dual citizens of certain countries to increasingly stringent measures to deter Syrian refugees from accessing the U.S. emerged at the beginning of 2016. For more information on these issues, please refer to AAI’s Issue Brief on the Anti-Refugee Backlash. Similarly, programs that are encouraged by an atmosphere of fear are discussed in AAI’s issue briefs on Post-9/11 Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Surveillance, and Countering Violent Extremism.

Key Recommendations

• Support the End Racial Profiling Act (ERPA) (H.R. 1933), introduced by Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) and Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), which seeks to eliminate law enforcement policies that single out individuals or groups for heightened scrutiny and security procedures based on their national origin, ethnicity, race or religion.

• Congress should address and support the passage of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act (H.R. 4603) introduced by Rep. David Cicilline (D-RI) in order to prevent those convicted of hate crimes from having access to firearms.

• Mount legal challenges to state and federal policies that promote or sanction racial, ethnic, and religious profiling.

• Engage in a national public education campaign to end anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry, rhetoric, and myths including those driving the hysteria about Sharia, and shed light on the true character of Arab Americans and American Muslims.

• Hold candidates and public officials accountable for their rhetoric against all communities.

• Have elected officials sign AAI’s Pledge to Combat Bigotry to uphold civil discourse, not engage in bigotry, and speak out against those who do.