

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

ISLAMOPHOBIA

Background

Islamophobia is defined as “prejudice against, hatred or irrational fear of Islam and Muslims.” The common conflation of the cultures and beliefs of Arabs and Muslims has expanded the scope of Islamophobia to also include prejudice against and fear of individuals of Arab descent.

While Arab Americans and American Muslims are the targets of Islamophobia, this form of discrimination impacts everyone. Islamophobia challenges the diversity of American culture and society, proliferates misinformation and stereotypes, and it fosters hostility and violence. Tolerance of Islamophobia heightens the risk of discrimination against other racial, religious, and ethnic minorities. In short, Islamophobia is unhealthy for American society, and damaging to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The Problem

Since 9/11, Islamophobia has been on a steady rise, with a dramatic increase in hate crimes against Arab Americans and American Muslims. 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 immediately after 9/11 to work closely with American Muslims, he made a point to pray at a mosque and repeatedly said that the United States is not at war with Islam.

However, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in Islamophobic rhetoric, which not coincidentally began around the time of Barak Obama’s first bid for presidency. Then, in 2010 the manufactured controversy over Park51 - which Anti-Muslim activists falsely termed it 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. To date, anti-Sharia and anti-Islam bills have been proposed in 29 states. Most of those challenged in court have been found unconstitutional, violating the “establishment clause” of the First Amendment by unfairly singling out American Arabs and American Muslims.

In 2011, Rep. Peter King (R-NY), then Chairman of the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, 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 all Arab Americans and American Muslims. The hearings, however, produced little or no evidence that the Muslim community in the U.S. is uniquely prone to radicalization - and no such evidence exists.

Also in 2011, the Associated Press published a series of stories revealing that the New York Police Department (NYPD) had engaged in a widespread, comprehensive spying operation against Arab American and Muslims in New York City. Police targeted institutions thought to be frequented by Arab Americans or American Muslims, which included religious organizations such as mosques and schools, as well as businesses and community centers. The NYPD used “terrorism enterprise investigations” against entire mosques to justify the surveillance of innocent people. In one particularly ironic instance, the NYPD kept detailed files on the sermons given by an influential

imam who repeatedly encouraged his congregation to cooperate with law enforcement and police investigations. He said that the NYPD wasn't anti-Muslim, and repeatedly preached that the NYPD would never do exactly what it was doing. During the 2012 presidential election 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.

Key Recommendations

- Engage in a national public education campaign to end Islamophobic rhetoric and myths including those driving the hysteria about Sharia, and shed light on the true character of the Arab Americans and American Muslims.
- Support the End Racial Profiling Act (ERPA), 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.
- Mount legal challenges to state and federal policies that promote or sanction racial and ethnic profiling.
- Hold candidates and public officials accountable for their rhetoric toward the Arab American and American Muslim communities.