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Countering the Islamophobia Industry: Toward More Effective Strategies

Symposium Report and Analysis

November 2017

Executive Summary

On September 25 – 27, 2017, The Carter Center (Center) convened an experts’ symposium to better understand the rising tide of Islamophobia in Europe and the United States and devise a strategic and sustainable response. Twenty-nine experts, including scholars, journalists, civil society actors, and religious leaders from seven countries participated in the symposium. The experts gave much needed clarity to the causes, forms, and manifestations of Islamophobia, and provided recommendations toward developing more effective strategies for the countering of Islamophobia by individuals, civil society, governments, and the media. This report summarizes the deliberations and outcomes of the symposium, and concludes with strategies for reducing the stigmatization of Muslims worldwide.

Islamophobia in Focus

Institutionalized anti-Muslim discrimination and Islamophobic hate speech have increased dramatically in recent years. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), almost 900 bias-related incidents against minorities occurred in the first 10 days after President Trump’s election; the total number of anti-Muslim hate groups grew 197% from 2015 to 2016.¹ This has

¹ “Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election,” Southern Poverty Law Center, November 29, 2017. <https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election#antimuslim>. For comparison, the SPLC recorded 1,863 incidents between November 9, 2016 and March 31, 2017, meaning that 46% of hate incidents recorded during a five-month period occurred within ten days of the 2016 presidential election. For recent statistics on the dramatic growth of anti-Muslim hate groups in the United States, see the SPLC: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/anti-muslim>

been accompanied by a proliferation of anti-Sharia protests and rallies, and the legitimization of anti-Muslim hate groups like ACT! For America.² According to a recent report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes in the first half of 2017 spiked 91% over 2016.³ In May of 2017, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security warned that white supremacist groups had already carried out more attacks than any other domestic extremist group over the last 16 years, and were likely to carry out more attacks in the future.⁴

The same worrying trend is occurring in Europe. According to *Collectif Contre l'islamophobie* in France, anti-Muslim physical attacks on people increased 500% in the first six months of 2015; 400% increase in attacks on Muslim places of worship; and 100% increase in verbal assaults.⁵ Belgium's Muslim community has also experienced stigmatization and harassment. Human Rights Watch reports that Belgium's counterterrorism response unfairly stigmatizes Muslims and that "at least six of the government's newly adopted laws and regulations threaten fundamental rights" of Belgian Muslims.⁶ Belgian police have reportedly carried out several hundred raids, stops and searches, and have implemented various laws that treat Muslims as second-class citizens. Some prisoners accused or convicted of terrorism-related offenses remain in prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes for up to 8 or 10 months.⁷

Islamophobic laws that discriminate against Muslims are also becoming more common. There have been various attempts to ban the Muslim veil recently in Georgia, U.S., and the Netherlands. After a backlash from concerned citizens, Georgia lawmakers abandoned the bill.⁸ The Dutch ban was debated in November of 2016 and sought to outlaw in public spaces such as schools and hospitals face-coverings worn by some Muslim women.⁹ The number of laws aimed to counter

² President Trump spoke at an event in October 2017 hosted by the Family Research Council and attended by the director of ACT! For America, both designated as hate groups by the SPLC. Michael Edison Hayden, "Trump Tells Hate Group Americans 'Worships God,' Not Government," *Newsweek*, October 13, 2017.

<http://www.newsweek.com/trump-tells-hate-group-americans-worship-god-not-government-684399>

³ "CAIR Report Shows 2017 on Track to Becoming One of Worst Years Ever for Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes," Council on American-Islamic Relations, July 17, 2017. <https://www.cair.com/press-center/press-releases/14476-cair-report-shows-2017-on-track-to-becoming-one-of-worst-years-ever-for-anti-muslim-hate-crimes.html>

⁴ Jana Winter, "FBI and DHS Warned of Growing Threat From White Supremacists Months Ago," *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/14/fbi-and-dhs-warned-of-growing-threat-from-white-supremacists-months-ago/>

⁵ "Outbreak of Islamophobia acts according to the CCIF," *Le Figaro*, July 1, 2017. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2015/07/01/97001-20150701FILWWW00330-flambee-des-actes-islamophobes-selon-le-ccif.php>

⁶ For the complete report, "Grounds for Concern: Belgium's Counterterror Responses to the Paris and Brussels Attacks" visit <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/11/03/grounds-concern/belgiums-counterterror-responses-paris-and-brussels-attacks>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lindsey Bever, "After outcry, Georgia Lawmaker abandons bill that would have banned Muslims from wearing veils," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/18/after-outcry-georgia-lawmaker-abandons-bill-that-would-have-banned-muslims-from-wearing-veils/?utm_term=.19ffa84f44a7

⁹ "Dutch politicians debate ban on Muslim headwear," *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2016.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/dutch-lawmakers-debate-ban-muslim-headwear-161123194112854.html>

“creeping sharia” has also been on the rise; fifteen anti-Sharia bills have been enacted on the state level in the United States since 2010.¹⁰

Defining the Islamophobia Industry

A central task of the symposium was to develop a preliminary definition of Islamophobia and mark out its historical, structural, and political contours. Experts agreed that Islamophobia is, at root, a form of institutional racism. It is not just hate speech, or even hate crime. As one expert, a professor and activist, put it, “talking about Islamophobia only as it relates to violence is like talking about racism only as it relates to the KKK.” Islamophobia is structural and systematic, embedded in the media, law, and public policy. According to symposium experts, as well as many academics and journalists, Islamophobia is designed to legitimize the global North-South power divide, the economic exploitation embedded in neo-liberal economic policies, and silence the racial, ethnic, or religious other.¹¹

Like racism, Islamophobia produces various forms of racial exclusion and structures of inequality. Symposium experts concluded that Islamophobia served to legitimate colonial policies in the Middle East in the past and an aggressive foreign policy and the “War on Terror” in the present. Islamophobia became particularly acute in public discourses in Europe as social movements among immigrant and minority populations seeking greater inclusion and political representation came to the fore in the 1960s and 70s. In the French case, according to an expert on Islam in Europe, the idea of *laïcité* (separation of church and state) was transformed into anti-Muslim sentiment during this period and used to justify banning of religious public displays, like the *niqab*.¹²

Islamophobic sentiment and policy intensifies primarily in response to electoral politics, not only terrorist incidents.¹³ However, the relationship is dialectical. Media bias and double-standards when covering terror incidents breeds anti-Muslim sentiment, which is then activated during election cycles; fear-mongering by election candidates primes the pump for the sensationalizing

¹⁰ “Anti-Sharia Law Bills in the United States,” Southern Poverty Law Center, August 8, 2017.

<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/08/anti-sharia-law-bills-united-states>

¹¹ See, for example, Carl W. Ernst, “Introduction: The Problem of Islamophobia,” in *Islamophobia in America: The Problem of Intolerance*, ed. Carl W. Ernst (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-20; Lawrence Davidson, “Islamophobia, the Israel Lobby and American Paranoia: Letter from America,” *Holy Land Studies*, Vol. 10., No. 1 (May 2011), pp 87-95; Wajahat Ali, Eli Clifton, Matthew Duss, Lee Fang, Scott Keyes, and Faiz Shakir, “Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America,” Center for American Progress, August 2011, <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia.pdf>; for a recent example of how the Islamophobia industry and the ‘alt-right’ silence Muslim voices, see Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “The Making of Islamophobia Inc.,” *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/16/the-making-of-islamophobia-inc/>

¹² For the history of Islamophobia in France and its connection with the management of working-class resistance, see Nick Riemer, “The Roots of Islamophobia in France,” *Jacobin*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/burkini-ban-islamophobia-valls-france-secularism-islam>

¹³ One obvious example of this trend is the manufactured “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy in 2010. See Justin Elliot, “Whatever happened to the “ground zero mosque”?” *Salon.com*, December 31, 2010, https://www.salon.com/2010/12/31/park_51_a_look_back/

of terrorism. Islamophobia, like racism, is a political tool utilized by an industry. According to a recent analysis by CAIR and University of California—Berkeley’s Center for Race and Gender, it is currently a \$208 million small, tightly networked group of donors, organizations, and misinformation experts design to advance certain political interests.¹⁴ In the United States, Islamophobia serves the interests of hardline pro-Israeli networks, right-wing political forces that instrumentalize Islamophobia at the ballot box, the military-industrial complex, right-wing apocalyptic Christian groups, and Arab authoritarian regimes in the MENA region that rely on Western military intervention and the “War of Terror” to legitimize their rule and silence critics.¹⁵

Islamophobia in Law and Policy and the Problem of “CVE”

Multiple experts discussed the alarming increase in Islamophobia at the level of law and public policy over time, especially in the period after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Policies premised on an imagined domestic Muslim threat (as opposed to the threat from al Qaeda) were institutionalized through the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the 2001 PATRIOT Act, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), and Countering Violent Extremism programs.¹⁶ In Europe, similar expansive surveillance programs, like PREVENT in the United Kingdom and ongoing state of emergency provisions in France, have institutionalized Islamophobia to an unprecedented degree and, according to French Muslim religious leaders, legitimized thousands of raids and mosque closings across Europe. According to a French expert on Islamophobia, “In France, a moderate Muslim is a Muslim without Islam.” In the United States, the Trump administration’s thinly veiled efforts to institute a ban on Muslims entering the United States only emphasize a worrying trend that has been ongoing for almost two decades.

With increased structural Islamophobia, freely and openly expressing Muslim identity maximizes the probability of surveillance and private violation.¹⁷ The implementation of CVE programs has tended to conflate terrorism and religion. Symposium experts agreed that, in addition to being inherently reductionist, such an outlook has proven to be an ineffective tool in rooting out violent extremism. While perverted interpretations of religious texts might serve as a motivational factor

¹⁴ Halima Kazem, “Funding Islamophobia: \$206m went to promoting ‘hatred’ of American Muslims,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/20/islamophobia-funding-cair-berkeley-report>

¹⁵ For a detailed network analysis of the connections between these groups and the Islamophobia industry in the United States, including donor affiliations, see Cory Saylor, “The U.S. Islamophobia Network: Its Funding and Impact,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 100-118. For the role Islamophobia plays in Christian Zionist apocalyptic thinking, see also Steven Fink, “Fear Under Construction: Islamophobia Within American Christian Zionism,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 27-43.

¹⁶ For an example of the post-9/11 security landscape and its intentional and indiscriminate targeting of Muslims, see Hatem Bazian, “National Entry-Exit Registration System: Arabs, Muslims, and Southeast Asians and Post-9/11 “Security Measures,”” *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 82-98.

¹⁷ Ibid. See also Yaser Ali, “Shariah and Citizenship—How Islamophobia Is Creating a Second-Class Citizenry in America,” *California Law Review*, Vol. 100, Issue 4 (August 2012), pp. 1027-1068; Khaled A. Beydoun, “Islamophobia: Toward A Legal Definition and Framework,” *Columbia Law Review Online*, Vol. 116 (November 2016), pp. 108-125.

for some perpetrators, examining violent extremism primarily through the lens of religion deflects focus from more foundational push and pull factors responsible for radicalization. This is confirmed by the Center's own research. Of the more than 600 Daesh recruitment videos coded by the Center for dozens of variables, we have found that only 7% use explicitly religious or theological justifications for joining Daesh. Most videos recruit by emphasizing the glory and glamour of warfare, criticizing Western military intervention in the Middle East, and advancing political and social arguments about the provision of social services or the ability to practice Islam freely.

In addition to being misdirected, CVE programs are also discriminatory. They have narrowly focused on Muslim communities, despite the greater danger, in the U.S., of white nationalist domestic terrorism. According to a symposium participant with extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Muslim communities in the United Kingdom, the U.K.'s *Prevent* program engenders self-censorship among British Muslims. Muslim youth are disciplined to avoid controversial topics and criticism of the state for fear of being targeted, a situation that seriously erodes political rights and inhibits Muslim political engagement. Finally, the inept handling of CVE programs in the West and sensationalizing of terrorism, and Islam, for political gain have poisoned the well for prevention programming. It also has driven a wedge between Muslim communities in the West, who tend to see CVE as discriminatory measures that rob them of their rights while Muslim communities in the MENA region, who are the primary victims of terrorism, may see an acute need for CVE programming.

Countering Islamophobia: Developing Sustainable and Strategic Responses in the Media, Education, Advocacy

The media is a pernicious source of Islamophobia, and continues to traffic in the stigmatization of Muslims and Arabs. Muslim community leaders active in the field who participated in the symposium recommend training Muslim religious leaders and youth in media literacy and political advocacy for effective policy change. One expert, an activist and a participant in the Center's PVE workshops, equips Muslim youth in France with media tools to becoming active producers of their own stories. This work seeks to reclaim the narrative of Islam from a biased media that tends to stigmatize Muslims as alien others. His trainings explore alternative media, participatory journalism utilizing social media, and public protest. A media studies professor at University of Maryland emphasized the need for communities to be proactive rather than reactive in their fight against Islamophobia, utilizing traditional and social media, humor and advocacy to reclaim narratives. This has included billboard campaigns and Twitter hashtags that undermine the stigmatization of Muslims as 'un-American.'

Intersectional and intercommunity approaches are key for a pragmatic and long-term reduction in Islamophobia. Reclaiming media narratives is not enough. Religious and community leaders must engage in the public arena using inter-religious collaboration, public campaigns, advocacy, and education initiatives to participate in shared struggles for social justice. This point was emphasized

by an expert and community activist from New York. She related her community's experience with police surveillance of Muslim communities in New York City after 9/11 and noted that many activists speaking out on behalf of the city's Muslim community were non-Muslim—Jewish groups, LGBTQ activists, and African American and Latino community leaders. In return, this prompted the Muslim community to work with Latino and African American communities to change stop-and-frisk policing and to engage on other social justice issues. She encouraged all symposium participants to form similar coalitions and engage in political advocacy: to register voters and draft political candidates, propose laws, foster educational campaigns in schools and community events, encourage cultural exhibits and museums devoted to Muslim American history, and push for public service campaigns on diversity and cultural competency training for social service and educational professionals.

A professor of media studies noted that terrorism was a word rarely used in the U.S. media until the 1980's. Such narratives are difficult to dislodge; terrorism remains almost exclusively associated in the United States with violence perpetrated by Muslims. Islamophobia will only be reversed through consistent and strategic engagement by civil society actors and activists committed to human rights for all.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Developing effective responses to the rise of Islamophobia has been at the core of the Center's project to prevent violent extremism from its inception. The Center has devoted resources to understanding and combatting Islamophobia. To raise awareness on this serious issue, the Center also released a press statement condemning the rise of Islamophobia. In parallel, the Center has been working with religious and community leaders in the United States, Europe, and North Africa to raise awareness about Islamophobia, and to build capacity within communities to resist all forms of extremism.

Following are conclusions of the Symposium. The Center hopes they will help governments, civil society actors, and individual citizens combat Islamophobia.

- Islamophobia is not a Muslim issue, it is a *human rights issue*. Civil society groups and all concerned citizens must speak forcefully and consistently against violations of the civil and human rights of Muslims.
- Incidents of Islamophobia must be documented, and Muslim communities must be made aware of their rights.
- Existing bodies of law that enshrine civil and human rights should be used as tools to combat Islamophobia. These include U.S. Constitution and similar foundational laws in other countries, international conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN treaties on religious freedom, freedom of expression and prohibition of discrimination.

- The establishment of coalitions among groups that fight religious-based discrimination, racism, misogyny and other forms of discrimination and marginalization is likely to be an effective strategy in reversing the tide of systemic Islamophobia and systemic racism.
- It is discriminatory and counterproductive to use the national security as an excuse for singling out and isolating Muslim communities.

The rise of Islamophobia is an affront to our common humanity and our constitutional principles. When fundamental human rights are protected, societies thrive. When communities are silenced systematically and excluded from the political process and basic rights are denied, all people suffer.

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