

EXIT EAST? The fight against US anti-Muslim racism

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Summary

Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher and Thea Abu El-Haj explore issues of citizenship particularly as it relates to Muslims in the United States. They explain how hate crimes and discrimination on Muslims have developed and offer examples of how educators and activists are responding to Islamophobia.

Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher y Thea Abu El-Haj exploran asuntos acerca de la ciudadanía, especialmente aquellos relacionados a los musulmanes en Estados Unidos. Ellas explican como se han desarrollado crímenes de odio y discriminación en contra de los musulmanes y ofrecen ejemplos de cómo educadores/as y activistas están respondiendo a la islamofobia.

Keywords: Islamophobia; citizenship; communities; solidarity



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Within the current anti-migrant milieu, the issue of migration from Muslim majority countries has become a flashpoint in sociopolitical arenas worldwide. Consequently, there are renewed questions regarding citizenship for Muslims communities living in the “West”. We understand citizenship to be the enacted everyday practices through which people forge a sense of belonging and engage as public actors in civic and political life within and also across borders, regardless of their juridical status. In the United States, conversations regarding citizenship are couched in language about borders, security, illegality, and terrorism along with the usual discourses around race, class, religion, and what it means to be an “American”. It is worth repeating that these are not new conversations; what is new is how these issues are being played out in an increasingly hostile environment for migrants across the world—particularly migrants from Muslim majority countries. Can these Muslims “assimilate”? Can they be “American”? Are they worthy of refuge?

“Plus que ça change”: The more things change, the more they stay the same

These questions and conversations about citizenship - particularly as they relate to Muslims - presume that Muslims are a newer population in the US and increasingly “a problem”. What is perhaps not acknowledged is that the Muslim presence in the Americas predates the US itself.³ Moreover, in the post-Cold War era, the US flipped from [supporting the Mujahideen](#) against the Soviets in Afghanistan, to positioning political Islam as the new enemy of democracy. Thus, while anti-Muslim sentiment—what is commonly known as [Islamophobia](#)—seems to be a recent phenomenon, in fact, Muslims have been discriminated against throughout the history of the US and prior, albeit in varying degrees (Mamdani, 2004). However, without a doubt, 9/11 was a watershed moment for Muslims in the US bringing them into the public eye in a way that was unprecedented, reinvigorating a narrative about Muslims and [Islam as incompatible with US values](#) and hence citizenship (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2010, 2015; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012, 2015; Maira, 2009).

Whereas following 9/11, the US had two presidents who gave lip service to the idea that, “[We are not at war with Islam](#)” (Bush) or that, “[The terrorists do not speak for over a billion Muslims who reject their hateful ideology](#)” (Obama); today, the surge in Islamophobia is fueled by the tweets and taunts of another president, who has clearly decided that we *are* at war with Islam since, “[Islam hates us](#),” and that all Muslims are the

³ Estimates suggest that between 15-30% of enslaved people brought to the Americas were Muslim.

same (and are therefore all potential terrorists). However, despite this shift in rhetoric, the policies under all three presidents have been more similar than many would like to admit. US military invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq; Bush's *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act* of 2001 (better known as the [USA PATRIOT Act](#)); Obama's covert drone wars against "terrorists" (where [any military-aged male in a strike zone is considered a combatant](#)) in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia; and of course, the recent executive order, titled, [Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the US](#), otherwise known as "[the Muslim ban](#)" have effectively fueled the public imaginary about Muslims, and about Islam in the US and elsewhere. All three presidents have used national security and the threat of "Islamic terrorism" as impetus and justification for their actions. These acts of government are a stark reminder that what we are witnessing today is not a radical break from the past: Muslim communities (as well as many other immigrant communities) have long been targeted by policies that threaten their access to basic civil, political, and human rights.⁴

During the post-9/11 period, hate crimes and acts of discrimination against Muslims have undoubtedly increased dramatically. The advent of social media during this period intensified narratives around the incommensurability of Islam with the US way of life and the trope of the Muslim terrorist. However, according to Pew Research (2017), [hate crimes \(including assaults, intimidation, vandalism\) against Muslims have now surpassed 2001 levels](#). This more recent surge in discrimination and hate crimes against a large cross-section of the US populace is noteworthy for three reasons: 1) it impacts all communities of color, as well as non-Christian religious groups and LGBTQ people, not just Muslims; 2) hate crimes and micro-aggressions have increased in frequency and severity, especially for Muslims; 3) the increase can be largely attributed to the words and actions of the 45th US president, who announced his candidacy along with public disdain for Islam in June 2015, and has [continued his tirade against Muslims and Islam](#) since then. This surge in anti-Muslim sentiment, rhetoric, and actions are mirrored by the [rise of the alt-right in Europe](#). These acts of discrimination, bias, and hate occur both within and outside of educational settings (see Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, Desai, 2015).

Beyond anti-Islamophobia: Developing anti-racist, anti-imperialist education

Educators and activists have been responding to this increase in Islamophobia through educational interventions, such as workshops about Islam to highlight the religion's virtues, or encouraging individuals to "make a Muslim friend", or displaying posters with women wearing US flags as hijabs. Unfortunately, these interventions do not tackle the issues of racism and imperialism that actually undergird Islamophobia. Rather—while

⁴ Even prior to 9/11, both the Reagan and Carter administrations had their own "Muslim boogymen" whom they used to galvanize public fear to support their policies against Muslim countries and communities. Carter's ban on granting Iranian visas was different from the current Muslim Ban; however, Regan's failed proposal for Muslim internment was quite similar to the Muslim ban and in fact more extreme.

perhaps well-intentioned—these approaches are founded on a thin understanding that the root of Islamophobia is simply misinformation about “true Islam.” More perniciously, these efforts reinforce the idea that there are “good Muslims” (who are just like the rest of “us”) and “bad Muslims.” This suggests that if we can recognize the distinction, we might include the former, and exclude the latter, from our society.

In a broader political context that demonizes Muslims as some kind of alien humans who are violent, oppressive, and more, [banal multiculturalism](#) (the sharing and celebrating cultural diversity) can feel like an important corrective (Abu El-Haj, 2002). In fact, Muslim groups are at the forefront of these interventions. The problems with the banal multicultural approach are numerous: It foregrounds an ethic of “tolerance” for diversity and pluralism, which on the surface seems a positive virtue, but in actuality is an inadequate response to structural racism. Moreover, in stressing the idea that “good Muslims” are just like the rest of “us”, who may practice their religion differently, but who do not question the basic goodness and virtue of the US, this approach leaves no room for productive conflict and dissent. Banal multiculturalism requires Muslims (or any minoritized group) to conform; further, it encourages characterizations of any political critique of the “Western world” as disloyal and potentially dangerous. Finally, too often, education about “true Islam” glosses over the vast diversity of Muslim communities, both within the US and across the world. Obscuring this diversity feeds a [clash of civilizations](#) discourse that there is a fundamental fight between the “West” and the “Muslim world.”

What is needed is a shift from educating *about* Islam to critical engagement *with* systemic racism embedded in US national and international policies. These relations at home and abroad need to be made visible and understood. Social Studies is a clear venue for such an endeavor but currently, it teaches a [white-washed perversion of US and world histories](#), leaving little room for engagement with the limits of American exceptionalism. Seventeen years into the most recent US military invasions and interventions in numerous Muslim majority countries, a generation of students remain ignorant to the devastating [effects of these ongoing wars on children and families](#) in too many places. Rather than more workshops about what Muslims *really* believe, children *and* adults in the US need systemic and serious education about the racism Muslims face within the “West”⁵, and the effects of imperial policies on lives across many Muslim countries.

Hope is in the new solidarity

The silver lining to this otherwise dismal picture is that, as we are witnessing an attack on civil liberties and human rights, we are also seeing a concurrent [growth in activism and solidarity across groups](#). For example, there were no notable demonstrations following the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act; contrast that with the scores of

⁵ We acknowledge that racism against Muslims does not only occur in the West but also many other countries in the world, for example, China.

demonstrations following each of the iterations of the Muslim ban. Thus, in parallel to the increased animosity towards Muslims, there is also growth in support for Muslims the likes of which have not been seen before. This can be partially attributed to the collective disdain for the current president by White liberals and their awakening to Islamophobia. Furthermore, there is a clear generational shift among young people who recognize that there is no hierarchy in oppression, and that solidarity is the best way forward.

Muslim youth are no exception to the current wave of activism and solidarity. In the midst of a [study](#) we are leading in collaboration with Arshad Ali, Michelle Fine, and Roozbeh Shirazi, we are seeing echoes of these broader shifts in terms of young Muslims' self-perceptions and attitudes toward their rights, citizenship, and feelings of belonging. Often taunted and told to "go back to your country", these youth—the children of immigrants and US citizens—are willing to speak up more than previous generations of Muslim immigrants. They have come to recognize themselves as people of color and hence are showing more solidarity with various marginalized and minoritized groups (POC, LGBTQ, etc.). They are also more cognizant of Whiteness, and of issues of colonialism and imperialism worldwide.

Many youth today recognize the [limits of the Islamophobia framework](#) and how it impacts their own sense of citizenship and belonging. Instead they see the ways in which their stories are entangled with the legacy of, and struggle against, US imperialism⁶. As such, we are witnessing a proliferation of anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements led by youth from Muslims communities who are demanding recognition as full citizens and fighting for justice within and across affinity groups and national borders. Exit east? No, the Muslims are here to stay.

⁶ By U.S. imperialism we mean the range of strategies of global dominance this country leverages that are characterized by explicit and more invisible forms of power exercised through economic, military, cultural, and politics means (Boggs, 2003; Gregory, 2004; Khalidi, 2004; Maira, 2009)

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