I A Climate of Muslim American Hostility

1.1 Introduction

Current hostility toward Muslim Americans in the American sociopolitical context is high. Such hostility, though, is nothing new, with Muslims long having been portrayed as in opposition to an elevated, democratic, and modern “West.” The roots of modern-day Islamophobia in America extend all the way back to the foundations of the country, beginning with the antebellum Southern plantations, to which Muslims were brought as slaves (Beydoun, 2018, p. 49). The pervasive Islamophobia observable in the United States today is rooted in a long and complex history whereby Islam as a religion, as well as its adherents, have been constructed as inferior, barbaric, and warmongering (Beydoun, 2018; Esposito, 1999; Lajevardi and Oskooii, 2018; Said, 1979). While there have been significant demographic shifts in the group’s composition since their arrival in the sixteenth century, the marginalization of Muslim Americans has been manifest to different degrees for centuries.

Despite this long history of discrimination, there is particular concern over the status of Muslims in the United States today. In the wake of the murderous events of September 11, 2001, elites publicly linked Muslim Americans with the attacks. For example, President George W. Bush, visiting the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. less than a week following the attacks, remarked:

Like the good folks standing with me, the American people were appalled and outraged at last Tuesday’s attacks. And so were Muslims all across the world. Both Americans and Muslim friends and citizens, tax-paying citizens, and Muslims in nations were appalled and could not believe what we saw on our TV screens.
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These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it’s important for my fellow Americans to understand that. The English translation is not as eloquent as the original Arabic, but let me quote from the Koran itself: “In the long run, evil in the extreme will be the end of those who do evil. For that they rejected the signs of Allah and held them up to ridicule.” The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That is not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don’t represent peace.¹

Notwithstanding this warning, discrimination against Muslim Americans soared. Fifteen years later, during the 2016 presidential election, Muslims – both foreign and domestic – were once again at the forefront of the national discourse, garnering negative attention in part due to targeted attacks by policymakers. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle frequently attempted to remind the public that Muslims in America were intrinsically different to “ordinary” Americans. Republican presidential nominees called for the wholesale policing of Muslim American neighborhoods, advocated for a ban on Muslims entering the country, proposed a national Muslim database, and espoused the surveillance of mosques. This rhetoric was echoed by local legislators, with Republican Oklahoma state representative John Bennett publicly stating, “Muslims are a cancer that must be cut out of the American society.”² Meanwhile, the Democratic mayor of Roanoke, Virginia, sparked an outcry when he cited the internment of Japanese Americans as a basis for denying Syrian refugees entry to the United States.³

Hillary Clinton, the presidential contender who appeared the likeliest ally to the American Muslim community, failed to prove herself to fully be one. Despite shining the national spotlight on Khizr Khan, father of a fallen American Muslim soldier, she also reminded the American public of their differences. In a presidential debate on October 19, 2017 Clinton stated that American Muslims
were America’s “eyes and ears” on the front lines, characterizing their utility as being rooted in their ability to help prevent terrorist attacks. Rather than treating the community like any other group, by highlighting their differences and seeming knowledge about threats to the public, she merely reinforced their visibility.

At the time of writing, almost two decades after the September 11 attacks, it is perhaps unsurprising then that the public views American Muslims unfavorably. Polls conducted over the course of the 2016 presidential campaign demonstrated a rising tide of resentment against Muslim Americans. For example, a YouGov survey found that only 19% of Americans had very favorable or somewhat favorable attitudes toward Islam, contrasted with 61% of Americans who had very unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable attitudes. Additionally, Americans were not blind to the implications of this, with the same YouGov poll finding that approximately half of all respondents agreed that Muslim Americans were facing increasing discrimination. This is not to say, however, that Americans who believed Muslims faced high levels of discrimination agreed that such discrimination should be reduced. Rather, a majority of Republican supporters and nearly half of all Americans endorsed policies that negatively targeted U.S. Muslims.

Within two weeks of Donald Trump’s election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) detailed a rise in the instances of harassment and intimidation faced by stigmatized groups, with many perpetrators invoking the name of the incoming president (SPLC, 2016). The SPLC (2016) identified hate incidents involving Muslims—or those perceived to be Muslim—as composing 6% of the total recorded. The SPLC (2016) report detailed some of these incidents, including, for example, a man at a Chicago hospital reportedly telling a Muslim woman: “Fuckin’ sand-nigger. Thank God Trump is now president. He’s gonna deport your terrorist ass” (SPLC, 2016). Muslim women wearing the hijab became particularly vulnerable to assault (Dana et al., 2018; SPLC, 2016), while many Muslim Americans
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reported being questioned about their patriotism, purportedly due to an assumed incompatibility between their Muslim and American identities.7 Furthermore, the report found that the incidences of hate crimes had risen drastically, with those targeting Muslims doubling between 2015 and 2016.8

When Trump assumed his presidency in 2017, the climate of fear and intimidation only worsened. On January 27, in one of his first acts in office, Trump signed Executive Order 13769, barring citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States. Nicknamed the “Muslim Ban,” two more versions of the order were issued on March 16, 2017 and September 24, 2017.

There is a great deal of evidence demonstrating that American Muslims are aware of and distressed by their negative representation within mainstream American society. A Pew (2017) report found that three-quarters of U.S. Muslims agreed that “there was a lot of discrimination against Muslims.” In the wake of the 2016 presidential campaign, Arab and Muslim Americans reduced their online visibility and retreated from public life [Hobbs and Lajevardi, 2019]. They also reported heightened levels of anxiety and increased experiences of discrimination [Kalin and Lajevardi, 2017]. And, with the War on Terror and more recent incidents of terrorism in the U.S. and abroad ushered in by ISIS, conditions appear to have worsened further for the American Muslim community [Calfano, Lajevardi, and Michelson, 2019].

As the 2016 campaign season and the first year of Trump’s presidency unfolded, American Muslims found they were no longer facing just micro-aggressions, but rather a heightened risk of physical harm. The Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR), the nation’s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, received 3,358 bias reports from U.S. Muslims in 2014; 3,786 in 2015; 4,282 in 2016; and 2,599 in 2017. In July 2017, CAIR released a quarterly report demonstrating that the number of hate crimes against U.S. Muslims in the first half of 2017 had increased by 91% compared to the same period in 2016 [CAIR, 2017]. This was particularly striking as civil rights organizations were in general agreement that 2016 had been
the worst year thus far for anti-Muslim incidents. The CAIR (2017) report details that of the 946 reports of potential bias incidents it received between April 1, 2017 and June 30, 2017, 451 contained an identifiable element of religious discrimination – in this case, anti-Muslim bias. While at the time of writing the 2018 FBI Uniform Crime Reports for hate crimes against Muslims has yet to be released, it can nevertheless be seen that there were 273 reported incidents of anti-Muslim bias in 2017. FBI statistics offered on bias incidents against Muslims should be viewed with caution, however, given there is likely a great deal of selection and underreporting underlying such figures.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Muslim community’s distrust of the FBI has been high for some time, stemming from before the 9/11 attacks, and growing markedly in the intervening years due to surveillance programs and prolonged detentions. Muslim Americans are generally unlikely to turn to the FBI given that the organization is one of the entities perceived as causing them considerable harm. This is evidenced by the fact that of the 2,599 anti-Muslim incidents reported to CAIR in 2017, 270 were perpetrated by the FBI, which is only three incidents short of the total number of anti-Muslim incidents the FBI reports for that calendar year. Other organizations, such as SAALT (South Asians Leading Together) and CAIR, have released reports indicating that 2017 and 2018 saw rises in anti-Muslim incidents (CAIR, 2018; SAALT, 2017). Even more troubling for the prospects of Muslim American inclusion is evidence that the anti-Muslim rhetoric espoused by President Trump has been associated with increased anti-Muslim hate crimes across the country (Müller and Schwarz, 2019).

Across the country, anti-sharia bills are being introduced in state legislatures, with the aim of prohibiting state courts from considering foreign, international, or religious law – such as Islamic law (sharia) – in its decision-making. Between 2010 and 2017, 201 anti-sharia bills were proposed across 43 states, with 14 of them being enacted (in Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana,
Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas]. During this period, Texas and Mississippi each introduced 20 different bills in their state legislatures. As the SPLC writes:

[o]ne of the most successful far-right conspiracies to achieve mainstream viability, the mass hysteria surrounding a so-called threat of “Sharia law” in the United States is largely the work of anti-Muslim groups such as the American Freedom Law Center and ACT for America (ACT), an SPLC-designated hate group.¹¹

June 2017 saw “anti-sharia” rallies organized by ACT for America – a nonprofit, right-wing activist organization – being held in 28 cities across the country, attracting white nationalists, armed right-wing militias, and neo-Nazis. Despite such hysteria, strong and ample safeguards against the application of foreign law in U.S. courts in fact already exist. For example, the Establishment Clause of the Constitution requires that laws be passed in a secular fashion and not by religious authorities, since no religious tradition (e.g. sharia law) can be established as the basis of laws applying to all people.¹²

There was an unexpected glimmer of hope for Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, with public opposition high after the first Muslim ban executive order was announced. Tens of thousands of protesters descended upon airports and landmarks across the country, chanting slogans such as, “no hate, no fear, refugees are welcome here.” Solidarity against the ban also manifested in 350,000 individuals donating $24 million to the American Civil Liberties Union in a 24-hour period. Leading politicians from both parties responded publicly and critically against the ban, painting it as at odds with American norms of egalitarianism and democracy, while numerous challenges to each of the orders were filed in courthouses across the country, as widespread opposition to the ban mounted. Research has even found that individual-level public opinion shifted against the ban, particularly among high-American identifiers (Collingwood, Lajevardi, and Oskooii, 2018),
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and remained so almost a year later (Oskooii, Lajevardi, and Collingwood, 2019).

Moreover, the 2018 midterm elections saw two Muslim women of color elected to the U.S. House of Representatives: Rashida Tlaib (Michigan 13) and Ilhan Omar (Minnesota 5). In the November 2018 general election, Tlaib won 84.2% and Omar 80.59% of the vote in their respective districts. Their election challenged the trope of “modest” Muslim women, and though the two were met with anger and disdain by some in the House, as well as by some members of the public, they also gave voice and descriptive representation to Muslims across the country.

This, then, is the sociopolitical context in which this book is situated. While Muslim Americans certainly appear to be confronting a rising tide of discrimination, anecdotal evidence is not enough. In response, this book attempts to unpack three overarching questions. First, to what extent do Muslim Americans face discrimination by legislators, the media, and the general public? Second, how do Muslims view themselves as a group within the U.S. sociopolitical context? Third, what would it take to reduce discrimination against American Muslims? Through addressing these questions, the book aims to provide a multidimensional account of hostility toward Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era.

In the chapters that follow, a myriad of quantitative methods – including survey experiments, field experiments, and textual analysis of media transcripts – are employed to examine whether discrimination by elected officials, the media, and the general public inhibits Muslim inclusion in American democracy. The evidence shows that American Muslims are viewed negatively by the public, portrayed negatively by the media, and treated negatively by political elites. In investigating whether this treatment has gone unnoticed by their community, the book shows that Muslims are in fact well aware of their exclusion from the American polity. Since citizenship is not required in order to be considered part of this group, for the purposes of this book, I use the terms “Muslim Americans,”
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“Muslims in America,” “U.S. Muslims,” and “American Muslims” interchangeably. Finally, the book assesses whether interventions could shift both the general public and Muslims toward having more favorable attitudes to the American Muslim community.

While I do not posit that any one of my empirical tests is sufficient in itself to provide concrete evidence of widespread discrimination against Muslim Americans, I do contend that combined they provide overwhelming evidence of bias in each of the domains examined. These findings have stark implications for the quality of Muslim American participation and representation in American democracy.

I.2 WHO ARE U.S. MUSLIMS AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE? DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS

With an estimated 1.6–2.1 billion adherents globally, Islam constitutes the second largest religion behind Christianity. It is also the fastest-growing religion in the world today, with the Muslim population forecast to increase by 35% in the next 20 years. Pew estimates that, as of 2017, there are 3.45 million Muslims living in America, but it is difficult to determine the true size of the Muslim American population as the U.S. Census does not track religious affiliation, and some estimates go as high as 12 million people.

As the U.S. Religion Census shows, Muslims are concentrated in a few select states. On average, U.S. states have 54,945 Muslims, with only eight states where Muslims compose more than 100,000 residents. U.S. Muslims mirror the rest of the population in a number of socioeconomic dimensions. Regarding education, for example, 30% of the U.S. population holds either a college or postgraduate degree, compared to 32% of Muslims in America. Higher education is more pronounced among Muslim immigrants, with 38% holding a college or postgraduate degree. Muslims in America also mirror the rest of the population with regards to income, being equally as likely as other Americans to report household incomes of at least $100,000 (24% of Muslims in America compared to 23% of...
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Nevertheless, there are important variations within the Muslim group that should be taken into account. Twenty-nine percent of foreign-born Muslims make incomes of $100,000 or more, while U.S.-born Muslims are much more likely to earn lower incomes than the American population as a whole: 45% of the U.S.-born Muslim population earns less than $30,000, compared to 32% of the wider American public.

Moreover, while 42% of Muslim Americans were born in the United States, many others are recent arrivals, with Pew estimating that 32% of Muslims arrived in the country after the year 2000. Among foreign-born Muslims, 56% arrived in the country after the turn of the century, with only 1% arriving prior to 1970, 3% arriving between 1970 and 1979, 6% arriving between 1980 and 1989, and 11% arriving between 1990 and 1999.

There is a great deal of racial and ethnic diversity within the U.S. Muslim population (Dana and Barreto, 2019), with no single racial or ethnic group constituting a majority. Using Census categories to look at racial identification among the population, Pew finds that 41% of all U.S. Muslims identify as White, 20% as Black, 28% as Asian, 8% as Latino, and 3% as other. Certain racial and ethnic groups are more likely to be born in the United States than others. For example, Muslims grouped into the white and Asian categories are more likely to be foreign born (45% and 41%, respectively) than their Black or Latino counterparts (11% and 1%, respectively).

Racial, ethnic, and national origin backgrounds play important roles in shaping individuals’ experiences, with many Muslim Americans occupying a number of intersecting identities, each of which attracts discrimination. For example, though African Americans constitute one-fifth of the entire U.S. Muslim population, a much larger proportion of Black Muslims born in the U.S. (two-thirds) say they have not always identified as Muslim. Moreover, U.S.-born Black Muslims are more likely to agree that it has become harder in recent years to be Muslim in the United States. In fact, American-born Black Muslims interpret discrimination on the basis of religion...
and race at high and nearly equal levels, with 96% saying there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in America, and 94% saying there is also a lot of discrimination against Black people in the country. By contrast, 49% of the U.S. Muslim population overall claim there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims in America.25

The space that Black Muslims occupy within the broader Muslim community cannot be overstated. The presence of Black Muslims within the Nation of Islam movement and behind leaders like Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan was a critical component of the Civil Rights movement. While little systematic empirical research exists about the subgroup, it is clear anecdotally and from robust qualitative scholarship that the U.S.-born Black Muslim population experience inclusion and discrimination differently than their counterparts. It should be acknowledged that this is not something this book directly tackles and is therefore an important avenue for future research.

Another reason that U.S. Muslims are an important group in terms of research is that they constitute a significant proportion of the population in swing states. Despite discrimination, Muslims have remained a relevant group in American politics. More than one million Muslims are registered to vote, and have done so in numerous elections since 2001 despite being viewed as “election year outcasts” [Barreto and Dana, 2010; Zoll, 2008]. Mosques have played an increasingly important role in ensuring that Muslims are engaged in politics, and a 2011 report by the Islamic Society of North America found strong evidence that political participation by Muslims had grown markedly: in 2000, only 18% of U.S. mosques reported that their core social service function was in the area of “community organizing, social issue advocacy” and “voter registration” (Bagby, 2012); by 2011, this had risen to 44% (Bagby, 2012).

Muslims will likely become increasingly relevant in U.S. political contests and discussion in key battleground states. Pew’s population projections indicate that the number of Muslims in the U.S. will rise from 3.45 million in 2017 to 6.2 million in 2030.26 During this time, Pew forecasts that the Muslim share of the U.S.