

Q & A: The Rise of Islamophobia

Hariri Center staff interviewed Mr. Arsalan Iftikhar about the Human Rights challenges facing Muslims in the United States today. From bullying to hate crimes, Mr. Iftikhar paints a clear picture of parochialism toward Muslims using statistics and data. He postulates that the ongoing bias toward Muslim Americans does not allow them the space to engage in fruitful discourse around Islam and human rights.

*Mr. Iftikhar is an international human rights lawyer, founder of TheMuslimGuy.com and senior fellow for The Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University. He is author of *Scapegoats*, which President Jimmy Carter called “an important book that shows Islamophobia must be addressed urgently.”*

1. In your book, *Scapegoats*, and in your media commentary, you are outspoken about the challenges facing Muslim Americans. What are some of these issues?

I am quite concerned about the increase of bullying against young Muslims in the United States today. One tends to see spikes in bullying against Muslim students after major terrorist attacks like the Boston Marathon bombing, the San Bernardino office shooting, or the Orlando nightclub shooting. I am not sure how one can expect members of the Muslim youth community in general to contribute to a wider discussion around the rejuvenation of Islamic discourse when they are constantly under this kind of pressure. Those kinds of rejuvenation discussions require a healthy environment for discussion, debate, and education in Islam. When they are basically spending a disproportionate amount of energy defending something as basic as their identity as Americans, how can we expect them to rise to the challenge of engaging in a real discussion around Islam and human rights?

The *Washington Post* in 2016 reported²²² on a survey of young Muslims that found that nearly one-third of Muslim students from third to twelfth grade

in California said that, “they had experienced insults or abuse at least once” because of their Islamic faith. Similarly, this survey also found that at least one in ten Muslim students stated that they have been physically harmed by a classmate because of their religion, and the same figure (10 percent) felt that a teacher had mistreated them because of their Muslim identity in the past. To reiterate—if Muslims feel their identity is under attack, then they are just going to go into defense mode, rather than pushing the envelope in terms of engaging in creative discourse for Islam.

According to another survey conducted in California, *Newsweek* reported²²³ in October 2017 that Muslim students were “twice as likely” to be bullied as non-Muslim students in general. This found that over one-fourth (26 percent) of Muslim students surveyed stated²²⁴ that they had been victims of cyber-bullying at some point in the past. Another 57 percent of Muslim students polled admitted that they had seen their peers make disparaging comments about Islam or racist statements about Muslims online. Finally, nearly 40 percent of young Muslim females reported having their *hijabs* (or headscarves) yanked off their heads.

Since many of the bullied young Muslim students in America are born in the United States, I am concerned that we are going to have an entire generation of young Muslims who are native-born citizens of this land feeling like strangers in their own country because of the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bullying. Can we expect such a psychology to give rise to creative, exciting discourses around Islam and the challenges of the day? It is not impossible—and certainly, when there are challenges, a lot of creative energies must be forced to emerge—but it does make it harder for the community at large.

2. What policies do you think need to be implemented, from a federal or state level, in the United States vis-à-vis Muslim Americans?

With the rise of Islamophobia across the United States, I earnestly believe that state and federal prosecutors

²²² Donna St. George, “During a School Year of Terrorist Attacks, Muslim Students Report Bullying,” *Washington Post*, last updated June 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/during-a-school-year-of-terrorist-attacks-muslim-students-report-bullying/2016/06/14/1b066a44-3220-11e6-8758-d58e76e11b12_story.html?utm_term=.0402ef2d7415.

²²³ Beatrice Dupuy, “Muslim Children Twice as Likely to Be Bullied, New Report Finds,” *Newsweek*, last updated October 31, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/more-half-muslim-students-are-bullied-new-report-finds-698023>.

²²⁴ Deepa Bharath, “53% of Muslim students surveyed in California say they’ve been bullied over religion,” *Orange County Register*, last updated October 30, 2017, <https://www.ocregister.com/2017/10/30/53-of-muslim-students-surveyed-in-california-say-theyve-been-bullied-over-religion/>.

need to do a better job prosecuting hate crimes²²⁵ against Muslims and Islamic institutions across America in a more vigorous manner. We often see bias-motivated attacks against Muslims not being prosecuted as hate crimes, even though it is quite easy to see the strong possibility of a bias motivation in many of these cases.

According to a 2016 report²²⁶ from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the number of assaults against Muslims in the United States “easily surpassed” the modern peak reached after the 9/11 attacks, with 127 reported victims of aggravated or simple assault in 2016, compared to 93 reported victims in 2001.

In September 2015, twenty-two-year-old Iranian-American engineering student Shayan Mazroei was brutally murdered by self-described white supremacist Craig Tanber outside a Southern California bar. During the court proceedings it was revealed that on the night of Mr. Mazroei’s murder, the white supremacist’s girlfriend confronted²²⁷ the young Iranian engineering student, spitting on him several times and calling him an Arab and terrorist before luring him into a back alley, where her white supremacist boyfriend stabbed him in the chest killing him.²²⁸

The lead prosecutor in this case, however, decided not to prosecute the murder as a hate crime because he thought it might compromise his ability to win a murder conviction.

The triple-murder of three American Muslim students at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in February 2015 is another high-profile murder that was never classified as a hate crime. They were brutally executed in their own home by their forty-six-year-old neighbor, Craig Hicks, who was arrested for the triple murder of twenty-three-year-old Deah Barakat, his wife, twenty-one-year-old Yusor Mohammad, and her sister nineteen-year-old Razan Abu-Salha.

The murderer, Craig Hicks, once allegedly shared²²⁹ an anti-Muslim screed on social media, writing, “When it comes to insults, your religion [Islam] started this, not me. If your religion [Islam] kept its big mouth shut, so would I.”

Although most people agreed that this was clearly an anti-Muslim hate crime, the murderer’s wife bizarrely suggested that this brutal triple murder was simply because of a long-standing parking dispute between her husband and the three young Muslims whom he murdered in cold blood.

Those are merely two examples of bias-motivated crimes against Muslims that were never legally classified as hate crimes within the American judicial system. Therefore, as a matter of policy (and common sense), it is incumbent on state and federal prosecutors to use their discretionary prosecutorial powers to charge crimes against Muslims and Islamic institutions as bias-motivated hate crimes. As long as hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs and/or South Asians are only prosecuted as common crimes, racist criminals will be emboldened to continue these hate crimes with relative impunity.²³⁰

3. **There has been a trend toward populism in the United States. Would you say this has affected Muslim Americans—and if so, what would you advise opinion formers more widely to do?**

All minorities and people of color have been negatively impacted by the rise of white supremacist ultra-nationalism during President Donald Trump’s administration. In terms of policy, I believe that policy makers (city, local, state, and federal) have an increased responsibility to further improve protections on minority houses of worship, especially synagogues, temples, and mosques. As anti-Semitism and Islamophobia continue to grow with the rise of neo-Nazi white supremacists in the United

225 According to the FBI, “[a] hate crime is a traditional offense like murder, arson, or vandalism with an added element of bias. For the purposes of collecting statistics, the FBI has defined a hate crime as a ‘criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.’ Hate itself is not a crime—and the FBI is mindful of protecting freedom of speech and other civil liberties.”

226 Katayoun Kishi, “Assaults against Muslims in U.S. surpass 2001 level,” Pew Research Center, last updated November 15, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>; Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Information Services, “About Hate Crime,” 2016, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016/hate-crime>.

227 Scott Moxley, “Wrongful Death Trial Begins for Orange County White Supremacist’s Stabbing of Iranian American,” *Orange County Weekly*, last updated October 24, 2017, <https://www.ocweekly.com/orange-county-jury-hears-competing-arguments-over-who-is-liable-for-iranian-americans-murder-8517276/>.

228 “The Life and Death of Shyan Mazroei,” *Now This*, <https://nowthisnews.com/videos/news/the-life-and-death-of-shyan-mazroei>.

229 Matt Knight and CNN Wire, “Three Muslim students shot to death in apartment near UNC Chapel Hill,” WTKR, last updated February 11, 2015, <http://wtkr.com/2015/02/11/three-muslim-students-shot-to-death-in-apartment-near-unc-chapel-hill/>.

230 In the United States, hate crime penalties differ by state but the punishment generally has the effect of maximizing penalties for criminal conduct.

States today, we have seen an uptick in attacks on Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh houses of worship.

In August 2012, a white supremacist named Wade Michael Page walked into a Sikh gurdwara (temple) and slaughtered six congregants in a cold-blooded act of domestic terrorism.²³¹ A few years later, in April 2014, another white supremacist killed three people at a Jewish community center in suburban Kansas City and later told²³² a newspaper that “I wanted to make damned sure I killed some Jews or attacked the Jews before I died.”

In terms of Muslim houses of worship, according to CNN,²³³ there were at least sixty-three publicly reported attacks against mosques in the United States between January 2017 and June 2017 alone. According to those numbers, that equates to at least two mosques attacked every week in the first six months of Trump’s presidency compared to fifty-five attacks in all of 2015.²³⁴

With this increase in attacks on minority houses of worship, it is imperative for policy makers to ensure adequate law enforcement protections for them around the country. Additionally, state attorneys and federal prosecutors need to use their prosecutorial discretion to amplify felony charges against individuals who attack minority houses of worship by adding a hate crime indictment to their charge sheets. This would automatically multiply prison sentences for those people convicted of bias-motivated violence and hopefully deter some attacks on minority houses of worship in the future.

If that sort of policy is taken seriously, then the energies that are deployed by Muslims to simply protect their basic rights under the American constitution can be diverted to wider concerns, like discussions on what the Islamic tradition might be able to contribute to society through the engagement of the human

rights discourse. But what I see instead is the strong possibility that Muslim Americans will see the human rights discourse as simply “not applicable”—that their fundamental rights are being questioned, and that the same human rights discourse that is meant to protect those rights is simply not being applied fairly to them.

4. **On the media front, what are the challenges you see for Muslim Americans? How should they be addressed?**

It is important to note that most US media coverage on Islam and Muslims today occurs through a primarily “religio-security” lens. Unlike other demographic groups in America, we often see meta-narratives about Muslims that perpetuate the myth that Muslims are a monolithic entity. For instance, stock photos of Muslims used in media stories usually depict either women in headscarves and/or men with long beards, thus perpetuating a stereotype that Muslims are somehow inately different or foreign from the general population.

The media’s double standard on defining terrorism is also a major issue that Muslims face today. The most recent example is the March 2018 serial bomber in Austin, Texas who targeted primarily African-Americans, trying to instill terror among the city’s African-American population. However, when a twenty-three-year-old conservative Christian white man was found to be the serial bomber, even Texas Governor Greg Abbott fell short²³⁵ of calling him a terrorist. Strangely, we also saw many media outlets try to make excuses for the white serial bomber by pushing humanizing narratives about him being a nerdy young man who came from a “tight-knit, godly family,”²³⁶ which would never happen if the bomber were a Muslim.

In a March 2017 piece²³⁷ for the *Washington Post*, researchers from Georgia State University pointed to

231 “Sikh Temple Killer Wade Michael Page Radicalized in Army,” Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2012/sikh-temple-killer-wade-michael-page-radicalized-army>.

232 “Kansas City JCC Shooter Sentenced to Death,” *Jerusalem Post*, last updated November 11, 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Kansas-City-JCC-shooter-sentenced-to-death-432637>.

233 Nancy Coleman, “On average, 9 mosques have been targeted every month this year,” CNN, last updated August 7, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/20/us/mosques-targeted-2017-trnd/index.html>.

234 Christopher Ingraham, “American mosques — and American Muslims — are being targeted for hate like never before,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/08/08/american-mosques-and-american-muslims-are-being-targeted-for-hate-like-never-before/?utm_term=.08dc7ac45e03.

235 Megan Cerullo, “Texas authorities waffle on ‘terrorist’ label for Austin bomber,” *NY Daily News*, last updated March 21, 2018, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/texas-authorities-waffle-terrorist-label-austin-bomber-article-1.3888730>.

236 Twitter Post, *New York Times*, March 21, 2018, 2:53 PM, “The Austin bombing suspect was a quiet, “nerdy” young man who came from a “tight-knit, godly family,” said Donna Sebastian Harp, who had known the family for nearly 18 years,” <https://twitter.com/nytimes/status/976532172344561665>.

237 Erin M. Kearns, Allison Betus and Anthony Lemieux, “Yes, the media do underreport some terrorist attacks. Just not the ones most people think of,” *Washington Post*, last updated March 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/13/yes-the-media-do-underreport-some-terrorist-attacks-just-not-the-ones-most-people-think-of/?utm_term=.f9ab61d090d6.

an exhaustive study on media coverage of terrorism²³⁸ that highlighted this double standard against Muslims. According to their research, they found that American news media does “not cover all terrorist attacks the same way” and that they give “drastically more coverage” to attacks by Muslims compared to non-Muslims. This study found that between 2011 and 2015, Muslims perpetrated only 12 percent of terrorist attacks, but they received nearly half (44 percent) of the media coverage of terrorist attacks even though 88 percent of terrorist attacks at the time were predominantly committed by white Christian men.

5. You have mentioned in different ways that the Muslim American community needs role models—sometimes you have mentioned Muslim figures overseas. What sort of leadership qualities do you think they need, particularly in the arena of promoting the upholding of fundamental rights?

Regardless of whether you label them “role models” or “leaders” or “mentors” or any other terminology you may use, I think it is essential that people seek out experts within these fields. For example, a religious scholar is not a human rights lawyer and a human rights lawyer is not a religious scholar. If a person is searching for spiritual guidance, they should probably turn to someone who has credibly established normative religious training in their background. On the other hand, if people are searching for social or political

leadership, they should probably turn to civic leaders who specialize in those areas, and not to people from the religious pulpit.

In the age of social media, we can listen to diverse voices on a myriad of topics affecting our global community today. Since the nexus of international law, UN [United Nations] treaties, and each country’s own constitution will differ, anyone who is interested in human rights issues should seek out civic leaders who specialize in that field within the context of their specific country or region. At the end of the day, any believer in fundamental human rights will protect the rights of every single human alive, especially those who have different races, religions, ethnicities, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds from their own.

In terms of policy recommendations *for* Muslim Americans—and to a large extent, for Muslims who live as demographic minorities writ large, and even perhaps for Muslims more generally—credible, established, normative religious training is crucial for rooted answers when it comes to religion. Likewise, credible training is necessary for understanding the human rights discourse. If we have people who can marry the two—or a group of people who can pool their expertise—then we have something very exciting. But all of that is going to be stunted in some way, if Muslims are constantly being pushed into firefighting for their basic rights, as established by the American constitution and the laws of the countries in which they live.

²³⁸ E.M. Kearns, A. Betus, and A. Lemieux, “Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?” *Justice Quarterly*, Forthcoming, via SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2928138> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2928138>.