



What is Islamophobia? Race, Power, and the Roots of Anti-Muslim Discrimination

NOUR SOUBANI

Author Biography

Nour Soubani has a JD from New York University School of Law, and an MA in Middle East Studies from Harvard University. She works on international human rights law and the impact of national security on the civil rights of marginalized communities.

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Introduction

With rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States and Europe, there is an ongoing discussion about how it should be defined. Since Islam is not a race, some argue that it can't be called "racism." Others argue that the victims of "Islamophobia" also include people of color who may be perceived as Muslim, and so it fits into the category of racism. Still others say that, due to freedom of speech and expression, criticizing a religion should not be considered discriminatory. As these discussions are happening, the number of hate crimes against Muslims are growing, anti-Muslim legislation is being passed, and media narratives about Muslims persist on age-old tropes about Islam. All of these have been labeled in common discourse as Islamophobia.

The purpose of this paper is to serve as an introduction to understanding this term, through the different theoretical lenses that have been proposed by scholars in the field. These lenses help us to make sense of the various manifestations of Islamophobia—both structural and interpersonal—that have become normalized in everyday life and discourse, and to connect these manifestations to their historical roots. This paper looks at three lenses through which we can understand what Islamophobia is and how it functions in society: culture talk, the subjectification of Muslims, and race. These three lenses are not mutually exclusive; instead, they exist at the same time and work in tandem.

Culture Talk: Good Muslim, bad Muslim

In March of 2016, on the campaign trail, at a town hall in Wisconsin, then presidential candidate Donald Trump was asked by CNN correspondent Anderson Cooper, "Do you trust Muslims in America?" Trump responded, "Many of them I do [trust]... and some, I guess, we don't. We have a problem, and we can try and be very politically correct, but we have a major, major problem... This is a war."¹

¹ Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner, "'I Think Islam Hates Us': A Timeline of Trump's Comments about Islam and Muslims," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/>.

Trump represents a rapidly growing social and political movement of white supremacy,² becoming more visible by the increase in hate crimes and attacks against immigrants and people of color, the growing support for extreme right-wing politicians in Europe and North America and the trend of isolationist policies like Brexit and the Muslim Ban.³ But in his rhetoric and policy regarding Muslims—save for his hyperbolic tone—Trump actually falls in line with many before him. Whether through the continued surveillance of mosques and faith-based organizations or the “total and complete shutdown”⁴ of Muslims entering the United States through the travel ban in Trump’s first administration, Trump has posited, like many before him, that there is something about the Muslim community—both domestically and abroad—that poses a threat to American society. These narratives and policies haven’t changed over the past decades, although they have been activated more intensely at key points.

A prominent idea in Islamophobic discourse, reflected in a mainstream discourse made up of political speeches, state policies, and media narratives, is that there is a schism within the world’s Muslim population: between Muslims who are violent and those who are not; Muslims who are civilized and civically minded and those who are not; Muslims who are good and Muslims who are bad. During Trump’s first administration, then US Attorney General Jeff Sessions said, “We have a toxic ideology, hopefully very small within Islam; certainly most people, most Muslims don’t agree with this violent, jihadist approach.”⁵ His words echo those of former President George W. Bush, who declared, “The face of terror is not the true faith of

² A term used to categorize beliefs and ideologies that hold White people as inherently superior to all other racial backgrounds. White supremacy can appear in both overt forms—such as hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazi movements—and in more subtle or systemic ways, such as policies, institutions, or cultural norms that maintain racial inequality or privilege White individuals.

³ Booth Gunter and Ryan Lenz, “100 Days in Trump’s America,” Southern Poverty Law Center, April 27, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/20170427/100-days-trumps-america>.

⁴ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Donald J. Trump (1st Term), Statement by Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration,” The American Presidency Project, December 7, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/314221>; “User Clip: Trump’s Muslim Ban,” C-SPAN, December 7, 2015, <https://www.c-span.org/clip/campaign-2016/user-clip-trumps-muslim-ban/4737466>; Jessica Taylor, “Trump Calls For ‘Total And Complete Shutdown Of Muslims Entering’ U.S.,” *NPR*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/07/458836388/trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-u-s>.

⁵ Anthony Zurcher, “What the Trump Team Has Said About Islam,” February 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38886496>.

Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."⁶ Bush's successor Barack Obama would later say, along similar lines, "It's very important for us to align ourselves with the 99.9 percent of Muslims who are looking for the same thing we're looking for—order, peace, prosperity."⁷ The worldview reiterated by each of these international power-holders is one in which Muslims can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are the Muslims represented by ISIS and its terrorist offspring. This group is ever-changing because the boundaries of who fits within it are subject to the whims of public opinion and state policy. On the other hand, there are the good Muslims, the ones who are hard-working and peace-loving—in other words, the ones who have progressed to modernity. The last statement by Obama symbolizes the implications of this binary between good and bad Muslims in US policy: as his words show, representatives of the Western nation-state have placed themselves in the position of allies to the “good Muslims” in the fight to overcome the bad ones.⁸

But what we call “mainstream discourse” here is not restricted to the words of politicians and their policies. The role of corporate media in perpetuating this narrative about Muslims is significant. As Evelyn Alsultany writes, “after 9/11, a strange thing happened: there was an increase in sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims on US television. If a TV drama or Hollywood film represented an Arab or Muslim as a terrorist, then the story line usually included a ‘positive’ representation of an Arab or Muslim to offset the negative depiction.”⁹ Alsultany calls this “simplified complex representation,” where on the outside, media narratives appear to be creating a nuanced representation of Muslims by portraying them as diverse and not monolithic. However, through the constant association of Islam and Muslims with violence and terrorism, through the use of “native

⁶ Bush's speech immediately following the attacks on September 11, 2001. See the full transcript: “‘Islam is Peace’ Says President,” The White House (President George W. Bush), September 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>.

⁷ Obama's interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria during a state visit to India. See the full transcript: “PRES OBAMA on Fareed Zakaria GPS,” CNN, February 1, 2015, <https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/02/01/pres-obama-on-fareed-zakaria-gps-cnn-exclusive/>.

⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Three Leaves Press, 2004).

⁹ Evelyn Alsultany, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media After 9/11: Representational Strategies for a ‘Post-Race’ Era,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013), 161–169.

informants,” or people who have left Islam to become outspoken critics of its barbarism,¹⁰ and through the selective explanation of context, both entertainment and news media outlets have contributed to the binary representation of good Muslims and bad Muslims.

These popular narratives are not only external, however. In some ways, they are internalized and replicated by Muslims themselves within the complex fabric of American Muslim identity and community. For an example, we can look to Khizr Khan, the Pakistani American father of the fallen United States army Captain Humayun Khan, killed in the Iraq War in 2004. Khizr and his wife Ghazala were given the stage at the Democratic National Convention in August of 2016, where he said,

Like many immigrants, we came to this country empty-handed. We believed in American democracy—that with hard work and the goodness of this country, we could share in and contribute to its blessings. We were blessed to raise our three sons in a nation where they were free to be themselves and follow their dreams.¹¹

Khizr’s words represent a sentiment echoed by many American Muslims post 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. He expressed appreciation for the American values of hard work, self-made success, and democracy and, in a nutshell, told the success story of an immigrant family that had fully assimilated into Americanness. The proof of their assimilation was in giving back to the nation. In fact, the Khans made the ultimate sacrifice of the life of their son. In an article studying the trends of Muslim charity-giving after 9/11, Sally Howell points out that many Muslims—faced with increased scrutiny of their communities—began to amplify this narrative of giving back. In Detroit, the founder of a new charity called the

¹⁰ One example is that of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali woman who left Islam after 9/11. Hirsi Ali wrote many books including *Infidel: My Life*, in which she argues that Islam is inherently incompatible with freedom and democracy. Hirsi Ali has been invited to speak on many mainstream media outlets, and her “insider status” as a former Muslim woman lent credibility to her narrative that Islam is violent toward women. Hirsi Ali’s success points to the ways that corporate media has specifically used Muslim women to advance the image of the “good Muslim.”

¹¹ “FULL TEXT: Khizr Khan’s Speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention,” *ABC News*, August 1, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-text-khizr-khans-speech-2016-democratic-national/story?id=41043609>.

Huda Clinic described the thought process behind the departure from traditional modes of giving, including giving abroad:

We looked around and we thought, we have been here for a while and we are very comfortable now. Our mosque is established, we are raising our children as Muslims and sending them to Muslim schools. We are a part of the mainstream. But we haven't really done anything for the larger society. We are using the generosity of this country to make a good life for ourselves, but we need to do something to give back. I wanted us to be excellent citizens, not just good citizens.¹²

While they were doing their best to be excellent citizens, however, American Muslims were also experiencing visits from federal agents, who asked donors questions about where their money went, why, how it was being used, whether they were giving internationally, whether they knew where and how their imam had trained. This climate of interrogation had a “chilling” effect¹³ on the activities of American Muslims, who began to turn their attention to “safe” domestic charities and projects that served the larger American society.¹⁴

So, how can we understand these intersecting representations and narratives about Muslims as we attempt to define Islamophobia? Where do they come from and what do they mean? Mahmood Mamdani first introduced the concept of “good Muslim, bad Muslim” in his paper: “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” In this, he argues that “the implication is ... whether in Afghanistan, Palestine, or Pakistan, Islam must be quarantined and the devil must be exorcised from it by a civil war between good Muslims and bad Muslims.” What Mamdani calls “Culture Talk” is the assumption that “every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and [culture talk] then explains politics as a consequence of that essence.”¹⁵ Culture Talk defines the essence of Islamic culture as violent and terroristic, thereby explaining horrific acts such as

¹² Sally Howell, “(Re) Bounding Islamic Charitable Giving in the Terror Decade,” *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law* 10 no. 1 (2011): 35–64.

¹³ “Terrorism Finance Laws Undermine American Muslims’ Religious Freedom, Says ACLU,” ACLU, June 16, 2009, <https://www.aclu.org/news/terrorism-finance-laws-undermine-american-muslims-religious-freedom-says-aclu>.

¹⁴ Howell, “(Re) Bounding Islamic Charitable Giving in the Terror Decade.”

¹⁵ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.

9/11 and all other similarly violent attacks carried out by Muslims. Such attacks are not just acts of terrorism, but rather reflect a core value of terrorism within Islam, a lack of regard for human life, and an essence inherently at odds with Western “culture.” If we think about Mamdani’s argument in the context of the examples discussed above, these portrayals of Muslims, whether they are self-represented or imposed, all draw on the idea that there is a positive, “safe” way to be Muslim and another, inexplicably violent version. The emphasis here is on values—by pledging allegiance to Americanness, Muslims can emerge from whatever is inherently different about Islam. Ironically, however, even those Muslims who have made the ultimate sacrifice of life for the nation through military service cannot be fully accepted into the imagined community of Americans, which we will discuss in the next section on subjectification. The foundational belief that Islam, by its very nature, is harmful, however, is what both underlies and enables the policies that systematically target Muslims and widespread social bigotry towards Muslims.

The roots of the cultural argument can be traced to the works of two other authors, Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. In 1990, Lewis, an orientalist British-born American historian published an opinion piece in *The Atlantic* called “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” In it, Lewis first describes the principles of church, state, and the separation between them as fundamentally Christian ideas and then places Islam in opposition and rivalry to these. He writes, “The struggle between these rival systems has now lasted some fourteen centuries. It began with the advent of Islam in the seventh century, and has continued virtually to the present day.”¹⁶ Lewis argues that for the last few centuries, the “West” and Christendom have been “winning,” leading Islam and Muslims to experience multiple waves of loss: “The loss of domination in the world, to the advancing power of Russia and the West; the undermining of [Muslim] authority in his own country through an invasion of foreign ideas and laws and ways of life and sometimes even foreign rulers or settlers, and the enfranchisement of native non-Muslim elements.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic*, September 1990, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>.

¹⁷ Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage.”

Lewis's op-ed was the impetus for Huntington's piece three years later, published in *Foreign Affairs*. In "The Clash of Civilizations?" Huntington takes Lewis's theory to the extreme. He writes, "Civilizational identity will be increasingly important in the future and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another."¹⁸

Lewis and Huntington outline two interrelated theories of culture and its role in the relationship between the "West" and "Islam." Huntington's view is more extreme, framing Islam as being in perpetual conflict with the West: the "Green Peril" that was Islam became analogous to the Red Scare during the Cold War.¹⁹ But Lewis argues that "fundamentalism is not the only Islamic tradition... there are others... before this issue is decided there will be a hard struggle."²⁰ Much like more recent political discourse, Lewis argues that, in this situation, the West needs to support the "good" Muslims against the "bad" ones.

Subjectification of the Muslim

In 2015, Senator Ted Cruz introduced the Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act. Cruz emphasized the need to "call the enemy by its name," echoing sentiments of a larger effort to counter Islamic extremism. After the bill failed to pass into law, Cruz would unsuccessfully reintroduce the bill three more times in 2017, 2020, and 2021.²¹ American Muslim analysts, advocates, and activists argued that "criminalizing the Muslim Brotherhood is widely viewed as a

¹⁸ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

¹⁹ Akan Malici, "The Green Scare: Islamophobia, Foreign Policy, and the Making of American Identity," Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, June 23, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-green-scare-islamophobia-foreign-policy-and-the-making-of-american-identity>.

²⁰ Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage."

²¹ "US Congressman makes fourth bid to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist group," *Middle East Monitor*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211105-us-congressman-makes-fourth-bid-to-declare-the-brotherhood-a-terror-group/>.

means to shutter US Muslim society.”²² The Muslim Brotherhood, an organization founded in Egypt in 1928, has been tied to the founding of important American Muslim institutions and organizations, including the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America, and the Muslim Students’ Association, among others. CAIR’s Director of Government Affairs Robert McCaw wrote, “The US Islamophobia network and its political allies are pushing this designation to create a new era of religious McCarthyism where being an American Muslim or an advocacy organization pushing back against anti-Muslim rhetoric is enough to disqualify you from civic participation.”²³

The case of the controversial terrorism designation points to a number of important mechanisms of Islamophobia at work. The first is the connection between a foreign organization and American Muslims, tying an enemy abroad to one within the nation’s borders. The second is the way that the public narrative on Islam, Islamic violence, extremism, and radicalization, is used to reinforce and enshrine public policy and vice versa. Finally, the bounds of who fits into the targeted Muslim identity are flexible—expanded and constricted to achieve political, social, and economic purposes. Through these three factors, we can understand the subjectification of the Muslim figure.

Leti Volpp, in an essay written just one year after 9/11, argued that the rapidly increasing violence against Arabs and Muslims in the aftermath of the attacks could be explained through the racialization of those who appear to be “Middle Eastern or Muslim into the category of terrorist and their removal from the category of citizen.”²⁴ According to Volpp, this racialization happened on multiple levels. The increase in racial profiling resulted in the rounding up of over 1,200 non-citizens on the basis of terrorism; none of the individuals arrested were

²² Engy Abdelkader, “Criminalizing the Muslim Brotherhood Helps Dictators and Hurts Americans,” *Huffington Post*, May 19, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/criminalizing-the-muslim-brotherhood-helps-dictators-and-hurts-americans_us_58dbfe84e4b0cb23e65dc488.

²³ Siraj Wahab, “Trump set to designate Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group,” *Arab News*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1490321/middle-east>; Blake Hounshell and Nahal Toosi, “CIA Memo: Designating Muslim Brotherhood Could ‘Fuel Extremism,’” *POLITICO*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/cia-memo-designating-muslim-brotherhood-could-fuel-extremism-214757/>.

²⁴ Leti Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist,” *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002).

actually associated with terrorism but they were nonetheless detained and, in many cases, deported. The Migration Policy Institute reported that “media reports and evidence strongly suggest that suspicious and anonymous tips—based purely on ethnic and/or racial stereotypes—[motivated] the bulk of arrests.”²⁵ So, racial profiling on both interpersonal and structural levels contributes to the creation of a suspect and criminal Arab Muslim character.

Frequently, “Suspicious Activity Reports” are used as part of a state apparatus that has ordinary citizens reporting on one another in a way that propels implicit bias. Through state-funded programs like Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and other counter-radicalization policies, people in communities—both Muslim and non-Muslim—are asked to identify “suspicious” behavior and report it to law enforcement. The problem is, what law enforcement describes as potentially suspicious includes physical indicators like growing a beard, wearing hijab, wearing traditional clothes and activities such as being politically outspoken, pro-Palestinian, attending the mosque, and/or reading holy scripture. Through community partnerships, the state then trains everyday people to recognize these characteristics as being associated with the potential for extremism or violence. In this way, we can see that the everyday activity of Muslims *and* their physical appearance is criminalized, making it so that just *being* Muslim is a problem.²⁶

In typical cyclical fashion, waves of Islamophobia resurface alongside significant global events. Similarly, in the first three months following the Hamas attack of October 7th, 2023, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) recorded a 180% increase in complaints of Islamophobia, including cases of anti-Palestinian censorship, doxing, and discrimination.²⁷ A plausible line of argument holds that

²⁵ Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist.”

²⁶ Aziz Huq, “Concerns with Mitchell D. Silber & Arvin Bhatt, N.Y. Police Department, Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat (August 2007),” Brennan Center for Justice, August 30, 2007, <https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Justice/Aziz%20Memo%20NYPD.pdf>.

²⁷ Sanya Mansoor, “Anti-Muslim hate in US rises since 7 October but advocates praise community resilience,” *Guardian*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/03/october-7-israel-gaza-islamophobia>.

while anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian discrimination are often conflated, the former finds its origins in the latter.²⁸

The second layer of Volpp's analysis relates to Mamdani's concept of Culture Talk, and draws on the pervasive influence of Orientalist tropes in Western discourse.²⁹ Edward Said conceptualizes Orientalism as a "master discourse of European civilization that constructs and polarizes the East and West... [and] serves not only to define those who are the objects of the Orientalizing gaze, but also the West which is defined through its opposition to the East."³⁰ As we have discussed, this underlying theory of difference *creates* and positions Muslims as the other. The final layer in her analysis involves the manipulation of citizenship as a tool of inclusion or exclusion. Here, "citizenship" is not limited to formal legal citizenship. Instead, it includes four interrelated dimensions: formal legal status, rights, political activity, and identity. Citizenship as identity stands for the ideal of inclusion and exclusion, or the ties between citizens that form an imagined community or network of membership. Theoretically, it would follow that formal citizenship status and rights guarantee identity as well. That is, if one is a naturalized or born US citizen, they have the same protections as other US citizens, and are treated as such. The problem, however, is with the intervention that scholars call *interpellation*.

Interpellation was first introduced by Louis Althusser. Althusser, describing how ideology creates subjects in society, writes:

...ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals, or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday

²⁸ See: Moustafa Bayoumi, "Decades of spying and repression: the anti-Palestinian origins of American Islamophobia," *Guardian*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/article/2024/may/23/islamophobia-us-palestine-history>.

²⁹ Said refers to Orientalism as a discourse. He writes, "I have found it useful here to employ Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." (Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978).)

³⁰ Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist."

police hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’... the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by ‘guilt feelings,’ despite the large numbers who ‘have something on their consciences.’³¹

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon also describes this process of interpellation from the perspective of a Black man who has been racialized:

Look, a Negro!

I came into the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world and then I found that I was an object in the midst of objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded with nonbeing... But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled and the movements, the attitudes, the glances from others fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by dye.³²

The process of interpellation begins when, through profiling, state power identifies the Muslim and “calls out” to him. Then, he becomes the “subject of ideology—here, the subject of nationalist ideology that patrols borders through exclusion.”³³ As a result, the Muslim subject falls outside of the bounds of “Americanness” as a national identity and, because of this, is also excluded from the protections of other dimensions of citizenship, including rights and safety.

This mechanism explains why and how the civil liberties of Muslims in the United States are threatened. While advocates argue that measures like CVE, entrapment,

³¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation) (1970),” in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 204–222.

³² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto, 2008).

³³ Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist.”

social media monitoring, immigration policy, and other forms of profiling are unconstitutional,³⁴ all of these measures rely on the notion that Muslims do not fall within the category of “citizen.”

Nadine Naber, in her article “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming,” writes that, after 9/11, there was a new “subject” created by mainstream discourse on Islam—discourse made up of federal government policies, corporate media, and think tanks—that constructed what she calls the “Arab/Muslim/Middle Easterner” as an enemy of the state residing within the state. Attached to this constructed category are the physical or outward characteristics of name, skin color, dress, and nation of origin. Naber argues that the post 9/11 targeting of Muslims, manifested in government policies, media narratives, and interpersonal violence, is the result of not only—as Mamdani describes—the othering of Muslims from a cultural perspective. Instead, it is the “interplay between two racial logics: cultural racism and nation-based racism.”³⁵

Cultural racism aligns with the ideas of Huntington and Lewis: it perceives a clash between cultures in which Muslim cultures are both unchanging and backwards and regressive. Naber quotes Minoo Moallem: “religion [here] was considered as a key determinant in the discourse of racial inferiority.”³⁶ In other words, it is religion itself that makes Islamic culture inferior. On the other hand, nation-based racism is tied to the nation and its borders, physical and imaginary. Through the lens of nation-based racism, we can understand how those who fit into the “Muslim” category, both within and without the nation’s borders, have been treated as enemies of the nation and as threats to its security. Most immediate and long term consequences of the War on Terror were related to national security concerns—the US invasion of Iraq and the securitization of Muslim communities domestically are two examples.

³⁴ Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, “Countering Violent Extremism,” Brennan Center for Justice, March 16, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/countering-violent-extremism>.

³⁵ Nadine Naber, “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!’ Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11,” in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse University Press, 2007), 276–304.

³⁶ Naber, “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming.”

Although this enemy subject identity could most clearly be seen as attached to Muslim Arab immigrant men who were the targets of surveillance, detention, and deportation after 9/11, the category itself continues to have flexible boundaries and, in practice, it includes pro-Palestinian advocates, Arab Christians, Iranian Jews, Latinos, women, and more. To Muslims living in the West, or those who have witnessed or experienced Islamophobia firsthand, a question that may come to mind is: who, then, counts as “Muslim?” In the aftermath of 9/11 for example, many Sikh Americans were targeted by Islamophobic violence—as in the case of the 2012 mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin.³⁷ Arabs, or those perceived to be Arab, even if they are not Muslim, also face racial slurs and demands to “go back to your country.” In this way, the “potential terrorist” subject identity is arbitrary, and collapses multiple different identities within it.

Islamophobia and race

Outside of the recent history of the term Islamophobia, it is important to look at the historical roots of anti-Muslim sentiment and the construction of the Muslim identity as the “other,” which did not begin after 9/11, nor immediately before, nor even within the last few decades. When we do that, we can begin to deconstruct how the othering of Islam was also a mechanism of racial discrimination. In this final discussion on Islamophobia and race, we will look at the deeper historical roots of the phenomenon in order to understand how the Muslim is a figure that has been racialized through the expansion of empire.

Junaid Rana, in his piece, “The Story of Islamophobia,” complicates the history of Islamophobia and its association to religious hatred, in order to place the concept within the history of race as well. “For many scholars in Europe, discrimination is defined in terms of xenophobia and prejudice, whereas scholars in the US have long argued for the importance of talking [about] race and racism.”³⁸ The central question here is whether religious-based discrimination overlaps with race and how. In fact, many of the definitions and conversations around the term

³⁷ “Gunman, six others dead at Wisconsin Sikh temple,” *CNN*, August 5, 2012, https://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/05/us/wisconsin-temple-shooting/index.html?hpt=hp_t1.

³⁸ Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” *Souls* 9, no. 2 (2007): 148–161.

Islamophobia do not include race or racism, instead explaining it as a form of cultural prejudice. In the previous two sections, we defined Islamophobia in two dimensions: first, we discussed the dimension of cultural discrimination that includes religion within culture; then, we discussed the dimension of the creation of an enemy subject, which has to do with both the outward and the inward. Now, we will add the dimension of race.

One obstacle to understanding the racialization of Muslims is the vast diversity of the Muslim community in nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, and dress. Because of this, Muslims cannot be grouped into one racial category against which racism is perpetuated. Muslims include Blacks, Arabs, Southeast Asians, Whites, and more, whereas traditionally race has been discussed as a Black/White binary. At the same time, policies that racially profile Muslims do so in a way that begs the question: what *does* make up the racial figure of the Muslim? And, how do we move from the Muslim as a religious figure to the Muslim as a racial figure? If we are considering only religion, a Muslim is one who practices the religion of Islam. But, when we take into consideration the element of power, the figure of the Muslim exists in multiple simultaneous dimensions. Traditional European notions of religion classify it as essential, bounded, and universal through time and space—that is, unchanging. Following that perspective, religion is separate from other systems and dynamics; it is confined to the spiritual. However, as Talal Asad argues in his essay *Genealogies of Religion*, when studying religion, we can understand it as being fluid and connected to what happens in the societies it functions in.³⁹ So, because the concept of religion can and should be studied through specific historical frames that construct it, it can also be studied as historically tied to the concept of race.

It is helpful to first expose the gap where religion can be interjected into the history of race. The concept of race as we know it today did not emerge “until the rise of Europe and the arrival of Europeans in the Americas... Even the hostility and suspicion with which Christian Europe viewed its non Christian others, the Muslims and Jews, was a rehearsal for racial formations, since these antagonisms

³⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 53.

were religiously interpreted.”⁴⁰ Although the exclusion was similar to what we call racism today, race and religion were two separate categories at this point.

The development of race as a category is tied to the expansion of the European imperial project. When the Europeans sailed to the New World, where they “discovered” indigenous peoples who not only worshiped differently, but looked and acted differently as well, they began to discuss what constituted “the family of man”—who belonged and who didn’t. Whoever was outside of this “family,” whose bounds were drawn by White Europeans, could be enslaved and used for economic gain. Interestingly, these notions of difference that European explorers relied on have their roots in religious discrimination against Muslims and Jews. When it came to Muslims, too, “the early sources of racism derived from imperial projects based in religious ideology. For European capitalism to expand, a religious other was created in the Islamic rivals of the Turks and Moors.”⁴¹

Anti-semitism can also be understood as an early form of racism. Howard Winant writes,

The Jews were the early “outsiders” of premodern Europe. In the Crusades Jews were as fiercely assaulted as Muslims and a series of expulsions drove the survivors from most of the later imperial powers as they were consolidated as nation-states (in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and as imperial ambition dawned. The Inquisition founded in 1229, came by the sixteenth century to embody fairly racial anti-semitism with its renewal of persecutions against conversos or *novos cristos*. Now it was no longer the Jew’s beliefs, but his or her essence, as depicted in the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre*, that was seen as unredeemable; thus even conversion was not acceptable: only expulsion or extirpation would generally suffice.⁴²

To better understand this, we can study what happened with Jews and Muslims who converted to Christianity during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. Even after conversion, the laws that determined the place of converts in society heavily emphasized the purity of blood. In Spain, “the notion of blood purity

⁴⁰ Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia.”

⁴¹ Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia.”

⁴² Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (Basic Books, 2002), 41.

reinscribed a consciousness of *castas* in which a social hierarchy of status claimed a pure Hispanic genealogy as coveted above mixed or tainted heritage—often associated with color and physical description, but not exclusively, and clearly of religious difference.”⁴³

When discussing the racialization of Islam and Muslims, it is imperative to spend time on the figure of the Black Muslim, who is at the intersection of generations of iterated racism based on both race and religion. On the one hand, as we will see, Islam clearly made its mark on Black identity. On the other hand, experiences of Blackness have also served to develop understandings of the socio-political reality of Islam and Muslims in America. Dr. Sherman Jackson, in an essay on “Islam, Muslims, and the wages of racial agnosia in America,” argues that the role of racism must actually be considered an element of society that should be factored into the *wāqi‘*, or reality, of America. He criticizes those who argue, using traditional sources, that “Islam simply does not and cannot ‘do race’”⁴⁴ and argues that, on the contrary, there is no way of understanding Islam in America effectively without race.

Emerging from a context of imperialism that cast North African Muslims as the enemy other to White Christendom, the tropes of threatening Muslims were replicated by slave owners in the colonies, who saw Muslim slaves as representative of a larger civilizational battle. In fact, African Muslims were referred to as “Moors,” likening them to the Arab Muslim enemies of Europe. And because many enslaved African Muslims were literate, slave-owners especially feared them because of their ability to mobilize resistance among slaves. In fact, this *is* what happened: Muslim slaves led rebellions across the Americas.

The history of Muslim rebellion against enslavement in the Americas dates back to 1522, when enslaved Muslims of Wolof origin revolted in Santo Domingo, twelve years after the formal commencement of the transatlantic slave trade. Three centuries later, enslaved Muslims in Bahía, Brazil would

⁴³ Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia.”

⁴⁴ Sherman Jackson, “Islam, Muslims, and the wages of racial agnosia in America,” *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2011): 1–17.

organize an uprising that would become the last major slave rebellion in Brazilian history.⁴⁵

The trajectory of racialization through Black Muslim identity continues. Fast forward to the early 1900s, Black Muslim identity continued to evolve through the teachings of Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple of America. Ali instructed his followers on the identification as “Moorish Americans” in an attempt to free them from American racism by attaching to an ethnic category which they already felt connected to through religion. Not only were they not able to escape racism, and still unable to penetrate the confines of American Whiteness, but the Moorish Science Temple was among the first targets of institutionalized profiling through surveillance by the FBI.

Black Muslim identity continued to evolve and to weave together religion and race, as well as to receive the backlash of racial and religious profiling. Through the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad preached that Islam was at the core of Blackness. Malcolm X, too, connected his community’s experiences being Black with their experiences being Muslim. However, the racialized landscapes of the United States did not realize religion as a factor when it came to anti-Black racism. In fact, the Nation of Islam was heavily investigated as a part of the FBI’s COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program), along with other Black organizing institutions like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other organizations deemed subversive. The layering of Blackness, Muslimness, and the anti-imperial project laid out by the Nation and its contemporaries, all combined in its characterization as a target. As Rana writes, “the context for the success of Islam in the African-American community... had much to do with economic displacement during the Great Migration and Great Depression, and the structural obstacles that prevented access to resources from organizations such as the Christian (read white) church and labor unions. For many in the Black community,

⁴⁵ Margarita Rosa, “Du’as of the Enslaved: The Malê Slave Rebellion in Bahía, Brazil,” Caribbean Muslims, February 4, 2018, <https://www.caribbeanmuslims.com/duas-of-the-enslaved-the-male-slave-rebellion-in-bahia-brazil>.

Islam offered liberation from race through religious difference and the idea of multiracial egalitarianism.”⁴⁶

Conclusion

As the far-right increasingly occupies the halls of power across the Western world, there are many discussions on rising Islamophobia in the West, where it comes from, and how to stop it. My hope with this paper is to show that Islamophobia is both structural and interpersonal, that this cycle between the two dimensions, which has deep historical roots, has served to create an image of the Muslim as both a racial and religious enemy. The implications of this go far beyond the theoretical; as we have seen many times before, the consequences can be fatal.⁴⁷

To understand Islamophobia through the lenses of Culture Talk, subjectification, and race is to also see these three discourses at work in the targeting of other groups in the current American context. The category of “Muslim” has been defined by power relations, and therefore over time has included the immigrant, the terrorist, the African American, the Latino, and many more. At the same time, the Latino is called a criminal, the African American a thug, and the immigrant

⁴⁶ Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia.”

⁴⁷ Islamophobia has been explicitly linked to the killings of six Muslims in a mosque in Quebec City, Canada (2017), fifty-one Muslims in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand (2019), four members of a family in London, Canada (2021), a six-year-old boy in Chicago, US (2023), and a worshiper in a mosque in La Grand-Combe, France (2025), just to name a few incidents among many. See: Jonathan Montpetit, “Quebec City Mosque Shooting,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/quebec-city-mosque-shooting>; “Executive Summary,” Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019, November 26, 2020, <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/the-report/executive-summary-2/executive-summary>; “Statement on the Third Anniversary of the London Family Attack,” Government of Canada, June 6, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/combating-islamophobia-canada/media/statement-london-family-2024.html>; Marlene Lenthag, Kailani Koenig, Samira Puskar, and Corky Siemaszko, “Suspect in death of 6-year-old Palestinian American boy was obsessed with Israel-Hamas war, prosecutors say,” *NBC News*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/suspect-wadea-al-fayoume-death-was-obsessed-israel-hamas-war-prosecutors-rcna120589>; Angelique Chrisafis, “French Muslims decry religious hatred as mosque stabbing suspect arrested,” *Guardian*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/28/french-muslims-religious-hatred-islamophobia-mosque-stabbing-suspect-arrested-italy>; Ségolène Le Stradic, “A Killing in a Mosque Puts France’s View of Muslims Under Scrutiny,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/29/world/europe/france-mosque-killing.html>.

dishonest and suspicious. These tropes, religious and racial, interact with one another to produce what we see, hear, read, and experience as Islamophobia.