The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslims in the West

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People of color, immigrants, Latinos, people of a particular faith among other sectors of society do experience racism, prejudice and discrimination in America.

According to Oxford dictionary, racism is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.¹

Islamophobia is arguably another form of racism. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, Islamophobia is the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam.² Islamophobia, as the term suggests, is made up of two words Islam and —phobia which means fear, horror. It is intolerance and bigotry against and fear of Muslims or groups perceived to be Muslim. “Islamophobia” connotes a social anxiety about Islam and Muslims. It is a social stigma towards Islam and Muslims, namely fear. Some scholars define Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism and a continuation of anti-Asian and anti-Arab racism that existed for more than a century.

According to Fred Halliday, “Islam as a religion was the enemy in the past: in the crusades or the reconquista. It is not the enemy now: Islam is not threatening to win large segments of western European society to its faith, as Communism did, nor is the polemic, in press, media or political statement, against the Islamic faith…The attack now is against not Islam as a faith but Muslims as a people.”³

Is Islamophobia a form of racism? In his book, “The fear of Islam, an introduction to Islamophobia in the West,” Professor Todd Green writes, “If there is an explanatory factor that rivals religion in the debate over what drives Islamophobia, it is racism. Islamophobia is not racially blind, nor is it simply a manifestation of older forms of racism rooted in biological inferiority. It is an example of what some scholars have labeled ‘cultural racism.’ This form of racism incites hatred and hostility based on religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and ethnic backgrounds.”⁴

Muslims have been a target of hate by right-wing groups after 9/11 and 7/7. The social and religious foundations of Islam, as well as Muslims in general, have attained such a degree of notoriety that their presence is immediately associated with entirely negative and detrimental frames of reference.⁵

¹ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/racism
³ Fred Halliday, “Islamophobia’ Reconsidered,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 22 (September 1999):898
⁴ The fear of Islam, an introduction to Islamophobia in the West, by Todd Green p27
Islamophobia is not only targeting Muslims but the faith they claim, Islam. It is common to hear statements “Islamic Terrorism” in mainstream media such as Fox News. Islamic terrorism implies that Islam is terrorism, i.e. Islam promotes terror. Former President Obama refrained from using the phrase, however, with the white-supremacist agenda in the White House, President Donald Trump has no problem using the phrase. In his inaugural speech Trump vowed to, “Eradicate Islamic Terrorism.” The outcome of using such phrase by mainstream media and the President of the United States affects all people, Muslims and all others who lend an ear to the media.

As recent as October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock opened fire on concertgoers in Las Vegas leaving 58 people dead and 546 injured. This was the deadliest shooting in the country’s modern history. He was found dead in his hotel room from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. His motive is unknown. Immediately after the shooting, a “conservative media personality Wayne Allyn Root tweeted to his nearly 110,000 followers that there were shots fired at multiple hotels in a ‘coordinated Muslim terror attack.’”6 At a press conference, President Donald Trump described Paddock as “a very very sick individual”, and "a demented man, [with] a lot of problems".7

Not long after the Las Vegas shooting, on October 31, 2017, a sick man, who happened to be Muslim, in a rented pickup truck drove down a busy bicycle path near the World Trade Center. The vehicle-ramming attack killed eight people and injured a dozen others. President Trump tweeted, “Would love to send the NYC terrorist to Guantanamo but statistically that process takes much longer than going through the Federal system...”8 (Emphasis is mine)

Five days after the Manhattan carnage, a mass shooting took place at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas on November 5, 2017. The murderer, Devin Patrick Kelley, 26 years old, killed 26 and injured 20 others. He was shot by a civilian and later he died from a self-inflicted head shot. The attack was the deadliest by an individual in Texas and fifth-deadliest mass shooting in the United States.9 US president Donald Trump has called the Texas church shooting a “mental health problem at the highest level” and the said gunman was “deranged.”10

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6 http://time.com/4965012/las-vegas-shooting-hoaxes/
8 https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/926053970535243777?lang=en
One could not help but notice the double standard and bias against Muslims by white supremacists.

In an article by Thomas Freidman featured in the New York Times titled, “If Only Stephen Paddock Were a Muslim,” “We’d be scheduling immediate hearings in Congress about the worst domestic terrorism event since 9/11. Then Donald Trump would be tweeting every hour “I told you so,” as he does minutes after every terror attack in Europe, precisely to immediately politicize them.”

Any time a shooter happens to be a Muslim, immediately, it is Islamic terrorism but if a white person commits mass shooting, he is labeled “mentally unstable.”

These subliminal messages from mainstream media against Muslims and the faith they represent, Islam, are producing hate and rage among ignorant people, mainly white supremacists, which is reminiscent to the experience of people of color a century ago (and are still enduring to this day). The same KKK that was hostile to blacks are hostile to Muslims today. In an article by Harriet Sinclair featured in Newsweek on November 25, 2017, entitled “Muslim Family in Long Island told ‘The KKK is coming for you’” says it (the family) received threatening messages saying: “The KKK is coming for you,” part of a series of incidents that authorities are investigating as hate crimes. The family said it discovered the messages in its mailbox on two different occasions, with an image of a swastika posted to them as well as letters saying “KKK Hate Muslims, We will kill you, Jesus loves you” the Council on American Islamic Relations(CAIR) reported.

In its recent study, Pew Research found that, “there were 307 incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2016, marking a 19% increase from the previous year. This rise in hate crimes builds on an even sharper increase the year before, when the total number of anti-Muslim incidents rose 67%, from 154 in 2014 to 257 in 2015.”

Some estimates say that there are eight million Muslims in America, others say six millions and according to Pew Research Center estimates, there were about 3.3 million Muslims of all ages living in the United States in 2015. It matters not what the number is, racism against one Muslim is racism against all Muslims. Muslims are the latest victims of racism in America.

14 http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/
Racism can be at the individual level, but it can move up to the institutional, cultural, and structural levels also.

Case in point, On February 10, 2015 Deah Barakat, 23, a second-year student in University of North Carolina’s School of Dentistry, his wife, Yusor Mohammad, 21 who planned to begin her dental studies in the fall and her sister, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, a sophomore at North Carolina State University were murdered in cold blood by a white male, Craig Stephen Hicks. Hicks hate toward Islam and Muslims took the life of bright young students including Deah whose ambition is to become a dentist and was active in providing relief to Syrian refugees in Turkey.

About the institutional and structural racism, after the first, second and third attempt on the Muslim Travel Ban, we are today witnessing state-sponsored Islamophobia.

On Monday, December 4, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Trump’s third version of the Muslim ban was fully enforceable. The same day, in Jacksonville, Florida, a self-identified Christian was arrested for planning a mass shooting at a local Islamic Centre… At the time of his arrest, he had 2,500 rounds of ammo and 12 guns.¹⁵

Racism against Muslims is rampant. Researchers are beginning to explore the toll that Islamophobia can take on mental and physical health of Muslim-Americans. The Psychological impact racism and Islamophobia have on Muslims since 9/11 is profound. Racism is linked to poorer mental health consequences, including higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress. Studies have found that the process of encountering racial microaggressions can be psychologically and physically draining, often to leading to higher levels of stress and poor mental health outcomes.¹⁶

In her article, “Islamophobia Is Giving Muslims Mental Disorders,” Alex Zielinski quotes a group of Norwegian psychology professors in a 2012 study, “Studies have shown that many Muslims not only experience religious discrimination in their daily lives, but are fully aware of their devalued position in society.” Their study found that perceived Islamophobia has a “distinct effect on Muslim minorities’ health and identification.”¹⁷

In a 2011 study on Muslim-Americans, researchers found that the vast majority of participants said they felt extremely safe prior to 9/11. Following the attack, 82 percent of them felt “extremely unsafe.” The researchers later found many of those studied developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from this constant anxiety and abuse.¹⁸

¹⁵ http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/travel-ban-donald-trump-far-right-extremism-islamophobia-fake-news-sessions-a8094731.html
¹⁶ https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jmmh/10381607.0006.203?rgn=main;view=fulltext
¹⁷ https://thinkprogress.org/islamophobia-is-giving-muslims-mental-disorders-f0b13232f2a8/
¹⁸ Ibid
Another study, a 2013 study of Muslim women in the United Kingdom who had been the victims of an Islamophobic attack found that nearly all of the women “expressed feelings of humiliation, anger, sadness, isolation, and disgust.” Some of them were afraid to leave home because of this.19

It must be acknowledged that discrimination against race and religion is also prevalent in medical settings. As with racism, clinicians need to know that religious discrimination exists, in order to recognize its effects.20 It is important for a physician, clinician, psychologist or a therapist to recognize and understand their own biases and stereotypes about Muslims even if they are unintentional. For instance, “If a non-Muslim female psychologist assumes that a hijab is oppressive against women, she may unconsciously try to steer her client away from covering, instead of understanding the significance of the hijab in her Muslim client’s life.”21

Studies have shown that Muslims are subjected to various types of religious microaggressions such as being stereotyped as a terrorist, having others pathologize or exoticize them or their religion, and being the target of Islamophobic or mocking language (to name a few). Muslims often endure negative media messages in both the news and on fictional television shows. Being the victim of such covert discrimination on a consistent basis can have an additive effect on one’s mental health and ability to function daily. Thus, in the same way that efforts have been made for racial equality for African Americans, Latina/os, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, efforts must be made to decrease discrimination toward Muslim Americans, in order to promote their positive mental health and well-beings.22

There is a clear relationship between social injustice and the mental health of groups upon which the injustices are perpetrated. The 2001 U.S. Surgeon General’s report highlighted the relationship between mental health and discrimination, oppression and poverty. Issues of social justice are integral to counseling because our clients do not exist as individuals independent of society, culture and context.23

Mental illness is often stigmatized in Muslim culture. Many chose prayers or private coping before seeking professional help. Therapeutic interventions, researchers suggest, could make it easier for families to discuss problems and accept care.24

Islamophobia is racism and racism is a social justice issue. Just as racism is a violation of human rights so is Islamophobia. It is simply a violation of human rights. Behaviors of racism and race-based discrimination can be viewed from a psychological science lens in the hopes of eliminating and preventing these behaviors. The studies and data by researchers and psychologists will enable civil rights organizations, activists and advocates will open the door to the enactment of policies that address prejudice and discrimination at systems level the same way that efforts were made for racial equality for African Americans among other minorities. Victims

19 Ibid
20 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2083249/
21 https://thinkprogress.org/islamophobia-is-giving-muslims-mental-disorders-f0b13232f2a8/
22 https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jmmh/10381607.0006.203?rgn=main;view=fulltext
23 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264844712_Why_social_justice_is_a_counseling_concern
24 Ibid
of Islamophobia may learn from the experience of racial inequality from African Americans to cope with such injustice.

Institutionally, we must reform education in a way that helps children learn about other races and cultures and speak out against all forms of racism. Muslims, African Americans among other minorities must believe in their own self’s worth and build self-confidence.

People should be open to learn about people of other races and cultures and to accept their differences. The differences present an opportunity for human growth and development. Each culture has its own values, principles, norms, and traditions that should be respected. We must recognize ourselves as, not African Americans, Muslim Americans, Asian Americans, etc. rather as humans belonging to one human family.

Spirituality and sense of accountability is another way to combat discrimination and prejudice. Accountability before God has a profound effect on people. Spiritual activists and advocates must live out and preach the religious teachings to overcome discrimination and prejudice. Teachings like the Golden rule, “Do unto others as you have them do unto you,” (Matthew 7:12) and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)’s saying, “No one may claim faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” We must maintain an attitude of acceptance and to never consider one’s own race or culture as superior to others. It is the diversity in races and cultures that make the human family so interesting. Chapter 49, verse 13 of the Qur’an, Muslims’ holy Book says, “O mankind! We created you from a male and a female (Adam and Eve) and made you into nations and tribes so you may know one another (not that you may despise each other) verily, the most noble in the sight of God is he who is righteous.” People must recognize God and the creation of all people belonging to one human family. Thus, they are all, regardless of their race, religion, culture, tongue, skin color, and gender, equal in the eyes of God. Superiority and inferiority is on the basis of piety and righteousness, something that is known only to God.

Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, prejudice and discrimination are all fruits of the same tree called hate. You can have all the laws in the world against racism, unless the minds, hearts and souls are changed, racism will not end.

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