# Report

## Part 2 :  The Mediatized Islamophobia in America: What is Beyond Othering Muslims?

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A young Muslim girl waves the American flag ahead of the Presidential elections. [AFP]

**Abstract**

There seems to be a strong correlation between the renewal of the Conservative Movement, the impact of FOX News, the anti-Muslim sentiment, and the success of Donald Trump in securing the nomination of the Republican Party for the presidential elections in 2016. His fast political rise as the personification of Islamophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, nativism, and isolationism begs the question: how to challenge his Islamophobic discourse and turn it on its head?

## Introduction

 Under the impact of the Conservative Movement's ideology, the FOX News factor, and the manipulation of the public discourse by Republican candidate Donald Trump, the media-driven reinforcement of the alleged Muslim-terror 'connection' seems to have led to the radicalization of the U.S. political discourse in 2016. Ironically, Trump's extreme right-wing stance stands out as a parallel to the radicalized discourse of most militant Islamist movements in the Middle East.

This part two of the report analyses the rise of Trumpism as a provocateur of anti-Muslim politics, and how he has manipulated identity politics against Muslims farther than Senator Joseph McCarthy's denigration of the Soviets in 1950s. It also addresses how Islamophobia has become a *groupthink dilemma* among American Conservatives with the blessing of some religious leaders. I also present a number of propositions about what can be reconstructed beyond the challenges of the Islamophobic discourse as well as the nuances of a much-needed Islamic narrative in the West. This need for an alternative mainstream discourse of Islam, as I argue, should to be formulated with a contemporary, non-apologetic, and non-defensive approach.

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## The Age of Islamophobic Politics

One of the early large-scale episodes of Islamophobic politics was in September 2015 when then-Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson told NBC's Meet The Press host he would "not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation" in response to his question about whether "Islam is consistent with the Constitution".

This psychologically-embedded fear of Muslims can be traced back to various points in American history. From 1790 until 1952, whiteness represented a legal prerequisite for naturalized American citizenship; whereas Islam was viewed as 'irreconcilable' with whiteness. One revealing case was in a 1914 legal decision knows as Ex Parte Mohreiz when the U.S. court denied a Lebanese Christian immigrant American citizenship because they associated his "dark walnut skin" with "Mohammedanism" [a reference to the Islamic faith].

Another interesting legal case was presented to the courts in 1942 when a judge denied a Muslim immigrant from Yemen citizenship due to his connections with "Arabs' because, as the court noted: "it cannot be expected that as a class they would readily intermarry with our population and be assimilated into our civilization." In this case, the court conflated "Arab" with "Muslim" identity. The courts too believed that such an identity was "inconsistent with the Constitution", and said so in public rulings. (1)

Some observers noticed Islam was equated with "a sense of tragic romanticism, loss of the grandeur, decayed antiquity, degeneration, corruption, backwardness, violence, fanaticism, fatalism and despotism. Today, other ideas and values have been added to this already overburdened chain of equivalences, most notably 'terrorism' and 'militancy'." (2)

In the last two decades, the evolution of the anti-Muslim discourse in America has intensified at several conjunctions between violent events and the impact of the spin journalism coverage since the establishment of Fox News in 1996. Within this media landscape, Trump has derived the energy of his fear-based ideology of exclusion and denigration of Muslims and other minorities from an expanding wave of American conservatism seeking to restore American exceptionalism.

Many Americans construct their meaning of American exceptionalism as the special character of the United States, which emerged as a good society from a revolution, as a uniquely free nation based on five ideas: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. American historian Howard Zinn (1922-2010) said that President George W. Bush carried the idea of American exceptionalism to its limits by putting forth in his national-security strategy the principles of unilateral war.

The 'axis of evil' narrative, which controlled the Bush administration's foreign policy as a naive response to the 9/11 attacks , has nurtured fear and suspicion, providing a foundation for the labeling of  Islam as "evil" while conversely, and ironically, laying the groundwork for framing America as imperialist "evil" across Middle Eastern public opinions with mushrooming conspiracy theories.

Subsequently, the American public discourse has benefited from some cultural regression being reinforced by the popularity of a number of TV networks including Fox News, CBN 700, and recently OAN. President Obama has captured this constructed animosity toward Muslims since "our television shows should have some Muslim characters that are unrelated to national security because it's not that hard to do." (3)

Under the umbrella of post-9/11 homeland paradigm, significant distinctions between 'Islamist fundamentalists', 'radical Islamists', 'political Islam', and 'mainstream Muslims' remain ignored, and many Americans and other Westerners have framed the security threat of Islamic 'Fascism'. In his Cairo speech June 4, 2009, President Obama said "the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam…The attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. This has bred more fear and mistrust."

In the first phases of the presidential campaigns in 2015, Donald Trump and his former Republican rival Senator Ted Cruz decided to capitalize on this discursive shift in this untraditional political season as a promising strategy of appeasement toward the white republican middle class, namely the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP), and ultra-conservative Evangelist groups. Trump's frequent appearances on FOX News seem to be a marriage made in heaven between Trumpism on the waves and FOX News's need for the personification of power, political incorrectness, and identity politics.

Asked about the purpose of establishing a possible database of Muslims and Muslims carrying special identification cards in the United States, Trump responded, "I would certainly implement that. Absolutely…" In the same NBC News video, Trump added his support for such registration being required by law, "They have to be." (4) He also vowed to "shut down" mosques he deemed "extreme" if he is elected president. (5)

Before appearing at the Republican Party convention in Ohio, Trump volunteered to construct new labels and connotations when he stated, "radical Islam is anti-woman, anti-gay, and anti-American. I refuse to allow America to become a place where gay people,

Christian people, and Jewish people are the targets of persecution and intimidation by radical Islamic preachers of hate and violence." (6)

Six months earlier, he had dictated a statement to his spokeswoman, Hope Hicks, who copied it down on a note card that she has saved as a piece of history. For symbolic impact, the campaign decided to wait to announce the proposed policy at the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day in honor of 2403 victims who were killed in the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

As the statement reads, "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on," he said in the statement, adding later: "It is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension." (7)

Some intellectuals have expressed concern since "the real reason politicians like Trump and Cruz demonize Muslims is scarier than simple racism." (8) Trump's anti-Muslim discourse deemed by many as "un-American" has derailed the political philosophy of the Party of Lincoln, who was pioneering in advocating freedom and equality among all Americans through the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

President Obama has been skeptical of Trump's pledge of "making America great again" as the banner of White American exceptionalism. He once stated that "this is a country founded on basic freedoms, including freedom of religion. We don't have religious tests here. Our founders, our Constitution, our Bill of Rights, are clear about that. And if we ever abandon those values, we would not only make it a lot easier to radicalize people here and around the world, but we would have betrayed the very things we are trying to protect." (9)

## The We/They Dichotomy: 'Othering' Muslims

More than any presidential candidate in modern history, Trump has been a laborious architect of the construction of Islam as the new "Other"; and exceeded what Senator Joseph McCarthy [1908-1957] did with the perception of the "Red Enemy" at the height of the Cold War with the Soviets. Trump has manipulated identity politics against more than one billion Muslims including 6 to 7 million Muslim-Americans.

Trump has long stoked the idea that Obama might be a 'secret follower' of Islam and he was not born as U.S. citizen. As American sociologist Rowan Wolf points out, "even the repeated stressing of Obama's middle name - "Hussein" - was thrown out to inspire fear (and sometimes provide "proof") of his Muslim origins and connections. All of these were blatant calls to Islamophobia." (10)

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Trump also represents the cultural exclusivism and particularism of the American exceptionalism. On 21 June 2016, he boarded the USS Yorktown in Mount Pleasant and read his statement to a crowd heavy with members of the military. "If we want to protect the quality of life for all Americans – women, children, gay and straight, Jews, and Christians, then we need to tell the truth about radical Islam and we need to do it now." (11) The crowd went crazy. As Trump got into the car after the rally that night, he told his staff: "Well, there's your poll. That's how people feel about this." (12)

In retrospect, Trump's claim of familiarity with the public pulse seems to build on the growing mediatized discursive formation of the image of Muslims from the lens of *Orientalism*, which shaped the Muslim image of reference before shifting to the lens of *violent extremism* as the newly-constructed image of utility. The denigration of Muslims has been the product of deliberate categorization of Muslims as the 'Other' in the politico-media discourse, uncontested political subjectivities, and lack of impartiality and accountability in the post-modern media-driven America.

While reflecting on this downturn in social tolerance and co-existence in the United States, President Obama recalls how Americans have gone through moments in our history before, "when we acted out of fear, and we came to regret it. We have seen our government mistreat our fellow citizens, and it has been a shameful part of our history." (13)

In his *the Other America* speech delivered in 1967, Civil liberties activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned that "racism is evil because its ultimate logic is genocide... If one says that I am not good enough to live next door to him; if one says that I am not good enough to eat at a lunch counter, or to have a good, decent job, or to go to school with him merely because of my race, he is saying consciously or unconsciously that I do not deserve to exist."

Besides the nationalist underpinnings of Trump's anti-Muslim position, there is also the religiosity of politics in the post-9/11 America. For instance, the famed evangelist Billy Graham's son, Franklin, proclaimed that all Muslims should be barred from immigrating to America and treated like the Japanese and Germans during World War II. Muslims who come to America have the "potential to be radicalized" and participate in "killing to honor their religion and Muhammad," he said in response to the murders of four Marines in Chattanooga. (14)

Other influential religious leaders like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell often courted by elected officials and politicians have called Islam "a wicked religion", the Prophet Mohammad "a terrorist," and Muslims "worse than Nazis." Since mid-2015, American Islamophobia has cropped up significantly in a parallel line of the 24/7 coverage of the

multiple attacks in Paris, Brussels, California, Florida, Istanbul, Nice, and other locations. "While no sector of the profession is immune from Islamophobia," says The Huffington Post Senior Media Editor, Gabriel Arana, "the problem tends to be particularly pronounced on television, where presenters are often tasked with filling in airtime in an information vacuum." (15)

The impact of this mediatized Islamophobia and the othering construct of Muslim-Americans can be seen in the emerging trends of local politics across mid-west America where there is a cluster of red states that vote for the Republican Party. For example, Businesses in Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, New York, Oklahoma, and New Hampshire have publicly declared themselves "Muslim-Free" Since 2014. (16)

In a letter signed by 82 organizations to the U.S. Attorney General in September 2015, it reads "American businesses posting 'Muslim-Free Zone' declarations are no different than the 'Whites Only,' 'No Dogs, No Jews,' 'No Mexican' and 'Irish Need Not Apply' signs that were posted during past shameful periods of our nation's history that we hoped were over." (17)
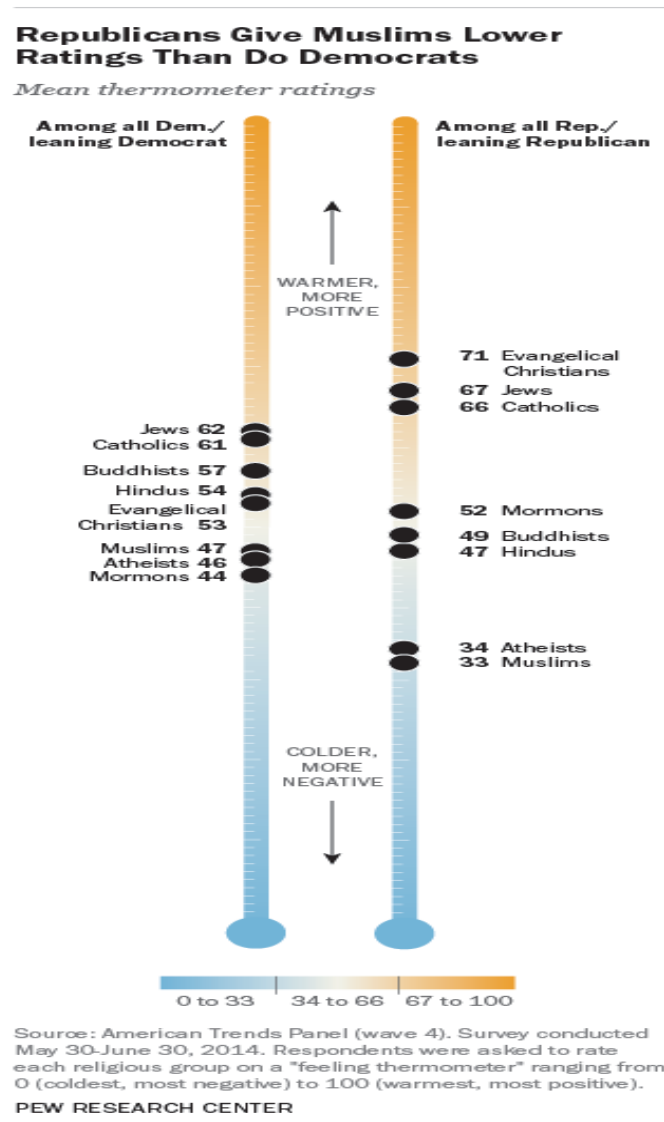
Moreover, 630 of the total 3813 Republican state legislators (16.5%) have sponsored or co-sponsored an anti-Islam bill. This figure offers some insight into "how widespread Islamophobic sentiment is among GOP officials in the various states," according to a recent study *In Manufacturing Bigotry* published by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. (18)

The effects of the growing Islamophobic trend can be seen among children at schools. Maha Elgenaidi CEO of the Islamic Networks Group (ING) points out "even when Islamophobia does not prompt overt violence — it still leaves its mark, sometimes in ways more insidious and more lasting. Chief among these is the teasing and bullying that most Muslim students endure during their school years. A survey in California — generally one of the most liberal areas in the country — has found that 50 percent of Muslim students have experienced bullying." (19)

On the whole, recent pools show Americans have a more unfavorable view of the Muslim religion (37% favorable and 61% unfavorable). However, this sentiment is not reflected among Democrats, where slightly more responding say they view the Muslim religion favorably (51% favorable and 47% unfavorable). (20)

As illustrated in Figure 1, asked to rate a series of religious groups on a "feeling thermometer" from zero (the coldest) to 100 (the warmest), Republicans gave Muslims an average of 33 – comparable to their average rating for atheists (34) and significantly lower than any other religious group. Democrats' average rating for Muslims was a more

neutral 47. Still, Democrats' ratings for Muslims were lower than for most other religious groups. Among eight groups tested, only atheists (46 average rating) and Mormons (44) rated as low.



**Republicans Give Muslims Lower Ratings Than Do Democrats**

*Mean thermometer ratings*

Among all Dem./leaning Democrat:
- Jews 62
- Catholics 61
- Buddhists 57
- Hindus 54
- Evangelical Christians 53
- Muslims 47
- Atheists 46
- Mormons 44

Among all Rep./leaning Republican:
- 71 Evangelical Christians
- 67 Jews
- 66 Catholics
- 52 Mormons
- 49 Buddhists
- 47 Hindus
- 34 Atheists
- 33 Muslims

WARMER, MORE POSITIVE

COLDER, MORE NEGATIVE

0 to 33 | 34 to 66 | 67 to 100

Source: American Trends Panel (wave 4). Survey conducted May 30-June 30, 2014. Respondents were asked to rate each religious group on a "feeling thermometer" ranging from 0 (coldest, most negative) to 100 (warmest, most positive).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Perception of Muslims among American Republicans and Democrats
**Source: PEW Research Center]**

An earlier Pew Research Center survey found that 82% of Republicans are "very concerned" about the rise of Islamic extremism in the world, compared with 60% of political independents and 51% of Democrats. Similarly, two-thirds of Republicans (67%) say that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers, compared with 47% of independents and 42% of Democrats.

## Islamophobia as a Groupthink Dilemma

It has become clear that Islamophobia has entrenched itself in the American pop culture with a conservative twist. One can reduce the imagery into two typical Muslim stereotypes: a) the images of the Muslim-Arab, terrorist male and b) the oppressed, veiled Muslim woman. For example, University of Denver scholar Ashley Moore explains that "almost all Muslims are portrayed as Arabs, despite the fact that only about 20 percent of the worldwide Muslim population identify themselves as Arabs. Muslim women are most often portrayed wearing the veil, *burqa,* or *niqab*. These images conjure ideas that Islam subjugates and oppresses women." (21)

Another example of the mediatized play of Islamophobic narratives stood out during an interview between FOX News host Lauren Green and religious studies scholar Reza Aslan, which became known as "the Stupidest Interview Ever by Fox News - anchor to Reza Aslan - But you're a Muslim, right?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt1cOnNrY5s.

Instead of discussing the merit of his new book *Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House 2013), Lauren Green invoked her skepticism repeatedly about his religion rather than critiquing his arguments in the book. "You are a Muslim, so, why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?" she asked, and was not convinced he was a qualified scholar with a PhD in sociology of religion.

Aslan underscored the fact that people are violent or peaceful and that "depends on their politics, their social world, the ways that they see their communities." When confronted with the idea that Islam is inherently degrading to women, he points out that Muslim-majority countries have elected female heads of state seven times. The U.S.? Zero", he said. This on-air encounter was illustrative of FOX News anchors' tendency toward denigrating Islam and fearing Muslims, even if they are established scholars in certain academic fields.

Instead of mediating the news as factual events, FOX News has generated what seems to be a process of objectification and commoditization of the images of Muslims. With no prior investigation or fact-checking, the Network hosts and reporters have used a one-size-fit-all approach toward Muslim's connection (or lack of) with violent attacks. The dominant constructivism of the image, video, and audio has gone farther with the blessing of pundits and analysts within their spin journalistic maneuvering of events around the clock.

As shown on Figure 2, many conservative Americans have retired to the simple narrative: "all I need to know about Islam, I learned on 9/11." This simplistic one-dimensional perception follows the reductionist logic equating 19 hijackers to more than one billion

Muslims in the world today. It also embodies the very risk of constructivism and othering of American-Muslims when the collective mind gets into such regression.

Islamophobia has served as a perennial chosen-trauma perpetuated by the conservative media discourse at every occurrence of violence within the 24/7 cycle of coverage and political spin. Under the heavy constructivism of the American reality(s), Islamophobia has incrementally turned into a cultural reservoir for the maintenance of the American exceptionalism. It has provided the needed reciprocity between the protection of American exceptionalism based on its radical and power-driven interpretation among right-wing groups, Evangelist associations and other coalitions in Trump's base on the one hand, and the utility of bashing Islam at this delicate conjuncture between the Christian West and the Islamic East on the other.



**Representation of Islamophobia** [Source: Elephant Journal]

## Conclusion: Beyond The Islamophobic Discourse

Islamophobia has served as a perennial chosen-trauma perpetuated by the conservative media discourse at every occurrence of violence within the 24/7 cycle of coverage and political spin. Under the heavy constructivism of the American reality(s), Islamophobia has incrementally turned into a cultural reservoir for the maintenance of the American exceptionalism. It has provided the needed reciprocity between the protection of American exceptionalism based on its radical and power-driven interpretation among right-wing groups, Evangelist associations and other coalitions in Trump's base on the one hand, and the utility of bashing Islam at this delicate conjuncture between the Christian West and the Islamic East on the other.

President Obama has been cautious about the slippery road toward the clash-of-civilization interpretation of 'religious wars'. He stated that "we can't securitize our entire relationship with Muslim Americans. We can't deal with you solely through the prism of law enforcement. We've got to build trust and mutual respect." (22) Still, I argue that the pursuit of a non-Islamophobic America can be challenging and requires four key steps:

## 1. For a Mediatization Outlook

The treatment of Islamophobia should not remain a discourse of protest against or an apologetic narrative of defending Islam. Instead, it can focus more on deconstructing the public sphere where Americans walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which they receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. (23)

This mediatization process of individuals and societies offers a catalog of tools of maximum impact on the senses of vision, hearing, imagination, and even ways of thinking and conceptualizing new points of view. Therefore, mediatization as a general theory is not focused solely on politics. Rather, it has encompassed several trends of change with modern societies like America. The media have become the mother of all influential institutions.

Therefore, Muslims and Arab-governments, institutions and individuals need to configure the modalities of the American public sphere and the media determinism in shaping the public opinion and guiding public policies. This shift should acknowledge that Islamophobia is not only a political and cultural force, but also a product of mediatization. This can be a good point of entry into challenging the modalities and drivers of Islamophobia.

While ISIL has hijacked the perception of +1 billion Muslims in the world, the question is: what to do with the deep gab between the "objectivity" and the "subjectivity" of understanding Islam in America. Muslim Americans need to reconstruct the meaning-making of their Islam based on its original texts like Christianity and Judaism. All religions call for peace and regulate how to handle conflict. One good example of the needed media tools was highlighted recently in the Huffington Post: https://www.facebook.com/HuffingtonPost/videos/10154291639926130/

## 2. A Bottom-up Dialogue with America

Muslim and Arab governments, institutions, and individual interlocutors have often targeted the top federal entities such as the White House, the State Department, and occasionally the Congress. Time has come to complement this top-down diplomacy with bottom-down public engagement across various spaces of the public sphere. There has

been an uneven representation between Islamophobic voices in the media and politics and mainstream Muslims and Arabs outside the scope of power.

The prospects of an effective public diplomacy will depend on engaging with the media, universities, arts events, and social media not to react to the Islamophobic attacks or defend Muslims, but to engage in conversations and storytelling. The very constructivist approach can help undo the residue of the Islamophobic discourse and restore dialogue, constructive debate, and multiculturalism back to America's democracy.

### 3. Who Owns the Agency of Islam?

Some radical groups have positioned themselves as the voice of 'pure' Islam and caused open-ended confusion for most Americans about what is and what is not in the teaching of the religion. Some conservative networks tend to invite some of the less-educated 'imams' and 'scholars' on their shows for the purposes of 'balance'. The well-informed scholars of Islam are not part of these debates, or precisely 'judgments' of the Islamic faith. The question remains: who speaks for Islam in America?

To overcome this disarray of opinions and interpretations, American audiences need to hear from individuals who are vetted to be well-versed in the interpretation of Islam and can put forth a nuanced worldview of mainstream and moderate Muslims.

### 4. The Need for an Islamic Narrative

The combination of a mediatization framework of analysis, a bottom-up dialogue with America, and restoring the agency of Islam by the insights of its qualified scholars can provide adequate tools of analysis and intervention as well in countering Islamophobia. Along this path, an American narrative of Islam should emerge out of the life and experiences of real-human beings known to their American neighbors, students, customers, and friends across America.

This domestic and transparent narrative can stand against the temptation of the clash-of-civilizations hypothesis, and defy all the videos of ISIL, images of 9/11, or the spin talk of the conservative talk show hosts and pundits. As President Obama eloquently put it, "If we're serious about freedom of religion -- and I'm speaking now to my fellow Christians who remain the majority in this country -- we have to understand an attack on one faith is an attack on all our faiths. And when any religious group is targeted, we all have a responsibility to speak up. And we have to reject a politics that seeks to manipulate prejudice or bias, and targets people because of religion." (24)

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