

The Purposeful Creation of Islamophobia

By Liza Burr

What is Islamophobia? Fifteen years ago, in 1997, the Runnymede Trust, a British think tank, identified eight components of Islamophobia. By this definition, Islamophobia is an attitude toward Islam that views it as “a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change”; as separate from other cultures and espousing values not shared by them; as “inferior to the West...barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist”; as “violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a ‘clash of civilizations’” with the West; and as a “political ideology” in the form of “political Islam,” sometimes with a military edge. Furthermore, from an Islamophobic perspective, any Islamic critique of the West need not be taken seriously, the discriminatory and exclusivist treatment of Muslims is inherently justified, and Islamophobic hostility is accepted as “natural or normal.” More succinctly, today, in the United States, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) defines Islamophobia as the “closed-minded prejudice” of “people who have decided that Islam has no place in [U.S.] society.”

Islamophobia has a much longer history in Europe than in the U.S., but there is now ample evidence that Islamophobia is a flourishing industry in this country (see *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*, by Nathan Lean; London: Pluto Press, 2012). Poll statistics indicate a mentality in the U.S. that is heavily influenced by Islamophobia; for example, between October 2001 and 2010, polls taken by the Washington Post and ABC News found a 10 percent increase in the number of non-Muslim Americans with a negative view of Muslims (from 39 percent to 49 percent), and a Time Magazine poll taken in 2010 indicated that 62 percent of non-Muslim Americans (well over half) had “never met a Muslim.” Currently Muslims account for only about one percent of the U.S. population; yet 13 percent of the victims of hate crimes based on religion (or religious identity) in the U.S. are Muslims, and 20 percent of those who report experiences of discrimination based on religion are Muslims. Two recent egregious examples of U.S. hate phenomena directed at Muslims are the Islamophobic film *The Innocence of Muslims*, a recent focus of attention in the media and the Muslim world, and the currently running Islamophobic public advertisements placed in mass transit locations in New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., which read: “In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad.” These ads are sponsored by an organization called American Freedom Defensive Initiative, claiming to be pro-Israel. Both phenomena have been the subject of many opinion pieces in the media that, while decrying their message, simultaneously defend them on First Amendment grounds.

Conversely, however, there has been little defense of Muslims in most of the U.S. media. The leftist weekly magazine *The Nation* has proved an exception to this rule, titling its July 2/9, 2012, issue “Islamophobia: Anatomy of an American Panic.” The

issue includes an article on the New York Police Department tri-state surveillance campaign against Muslims and one on FBI sting operations reinforced by high-pressure informant recruitment among Muslims in the U.S. Perceiving “radicalization” wherever it looks, the NYPD program has succeeded in “criminalizing an entire community.” As a result, Muslim religious practice, especially prayer (one of the five ritual pillars of Islam), has become suspect. A similar effect has been felt in Minneapolis by the Somali community, which is also subject to FBI surveillance. Thus not only are hate crimes against Muslim persons and mosques on the rise, but state-sponsored discrimination against Muslims and Islam is also prominent. Another key facet of such discrimination is the Islamophobic campaign to pass legislation at the state level that interferes with Muslim practice.



Racism on Wheels: When transit systems in U.S. cities refused to run these ads, Pam Geller of American Freedom Defense Initiative sued them in court.

Photo: American Freedom Defense Initiative

Two notable statements made in Jack Shaheen’s article on Islamophobia in the American media, published in the issue of *The Nation* cited above, are (1) that the post-9/11 media representation of Muslims as terrorists has enabled their “profiling, imprisonment, extradition, torture, and even death” with no significant public backlash; and (2) that similarly, the media representation of Islam as the new global menace after Communism “primes American audiences [public opinion] for U.S. military aggression” in the Muslim world. In other words, on both the individual and collective levels, Islamophobia serves to legitimate criminal action against Muslims. Again in the Islamophobia issue of *The Nation*, an article by Laila Lalami concludes that “we have in America today two systems of citizenship: one for Muslims and one for non-Muslims.” Is it going too far to call this the latest version of

American apartheid? In a recent talk that I attended, a CAIR representative described the Islamophobic agenda as the disenfranchisement of Muslims and perhaps the reinvigoration of anti-Muslim Jim Crow laws.

Two reports available online, one called "Fear, Inc." by the Center for American Progress, and the other "Same Hate, New Target" by CAIR, provide an overview of the "Islamophobic network," including individuals and their organizations such as Pamela Geller and Stop the Islamization of America; former and current members of Congress such as Newt Gingrich; and "the grandfather of Islamophobia in America" Daniel Pipes, head of the "right-wing think tank" the Middle East Forum. The authors of "Fear, Inc." write that "a small group of foundations and wealthy donors are the lifeblood of the Islamophobia network in America." The proponents and supporters of Islamophobia can be classified for the most part as right-wing Christians (the majority) or right-wing Jews, though obviously not all members of either category can be classified as such.

An Israeli connection to Islamophobia in the U.S. is apparent, for instance, in the mass transit ads quoted above. In his Nation article in the Islamophobia issue, journalist Max Blumenthal identifies major "pro-Israel" donor and vice president of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs Nina Rosenwald as a leading funder, via the William Rosenwald Family Fund, of the "rapidly emerging alliance between the pro-Israel mainstream and the Islamophobic fringe [sic]." Prominent among her beneficiaries is Daniel Pipes (see above), who has explicitly promoted "aggressive U.S. and Israeli military action in the Middle East, including the razing of entire Palestinian villages." Blumenthal quotes Henry Siegman, president of the US/Middle East Project and former executive director of the American Jewish Congress, who has labeled Israel "the only apartheid regime in the Western world," as remarking with concern that "Islamophobia has gained many followers in the Jewish establishment and at this point has infected American Jewish life."

In her recently published *Palestine in Israeli School Books*, the Israeli scholar Nurit Peled-Elhanan argues that the goal of Israeli public education, in the absence of any official peace education in Israel, is to make Israeli children "good soldiers of the occupation." Her book is a study of how Palestinians (about half the population of Israel and the occupied territories put together) are represented in mainstream Israeli textbooks used in Israeli public schools. According to Peled-Elhanan, the presentation of Palestinians (referred to as "Arabs") in Israeli textbooks is homogeneous and racist; they are terrorists, refugees, primitive farmers, alien invaders, in sum a demographic threat to be controlled by the dominant Jewish-Israeli majority, which is to be maintained at all costs. Jewish-Israeli domination of (all) the land, including the occupied territories, is justified by means of biblical phrases. Evil done to "them" is considered acceptable if it spares "us" evil. Thus the racism inculcated in these textbooks is acted out on the ground by the military, which the children will join once they reach adulthood. With some exceptions, military service is mandatory for male and female Israeli citizens once they become 18.

The official Israeli attitude toward the Palestinians in their midst, as demonstrated in these textbooks, is analogous to the Islamophobic American attitude toward the Muslims in their midst. It seems that there is an unholy alliance between powerful right-wing interests here and in Israel that has targeted Muslims not, in fact, for religious reasons but rather for political-economic and geopolitical reasons. This involves the appropriation of land and water and the achievement of regional supremacy by Israel, and control of energy resources and global supremacy by the U.S.

Liza Burr holds a Ph.D. in the study of religion and teaches *The World of Islam* at Metropolitan State University. She has visited Israel/Palestine a number of times since 1970, and is a member of the Middle East Committee of WAMM.