



Understanding Islamophobia in the Texas Public Sphere

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The Institute for Diversity and Civic Life is a non-partisan, non-profit educational organization based in Austin, TX with a mission to:

- foster religious and cultural literacy through research, professional development, and community education
- build a more inclusive public sphere

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Executive summary

Texas is home to the largest Muslim population of any state in the country. The growing Muslim population is an important part of the fabric of Texas; yet, many Muslims in Texas face a social and political climate of bias and discrimination that situates them as marginal, foreign, or ‘other.’ Texas has also seen an uptick in hate crimes against Muslims in the past year, which fits in a larger pattern across the country. In this report, we have set out to address this troubling political and social climate in Texas.

Drawing from media reports and government documents from 2011- 2016, our research reveals a number of features of this xenophobic atmosphere in Texas. The political climate of Texas is characterized by a significant amount of Islamophobic discourse from elected officials. Our research has found anti-Muslim rhetoric from Texas officials in all levels of government, including the governor, US and state legislators, a local mayor, and other state officials. This rhetoric has emerged in public speeches and inflammatory social media posts as well as in the drafting of anti-Shariah law legislation and discriminatory anti-immigration policies. This discourse has also impacted public education in Texas, through state-mandated social studies standards and textbooks that misrepresent Islam and perpetuate Islamophobic stereotypes. Texas public schools have seen a number of instances in which Muslim children have been the subjects of slurs, profiling and unwarranted disciplinary measures. Our research has also uncovered numerous incidents of anti-Muslim violence and discrimination ranging from vandalism, assault, and threats of extreme violence to armed anti-Muslim demonstrations to deliberate exclusions of Muslim communities from public life.

These patterns reveal a contested public sphere in which the identity of Texas, as a geographic, political, social, cultural, and civic space is being negotiated. Confronting this problematic climate is imperative for creating civic spaces that include Texans of all backgrounds. In response, we recommend increased educational programs to help professionals gain awareness of the dynamics of diversity in Texas as well as tools for engaging difference and creating inclusive spaces. With this greater awareness, there is a need for a more expansive civic discourse on who “we” are as Texans. And finally, we see a need for additional research to survey Muslims in Texas to gauge the extent to which they experience anti-Muslim bias and discrimination. This research will give us a much more expansive picture of the full scope and substantive impact of the rising anti-Muslim climate in Texas.



Introduction

As the second largest, second most populous, and fastest growing state in the country, Texas holds a prominent position in the national landscape. In the past 30 years, Texas has seen significant demographic shifts. The state no longer has an Anglo majority. Its largest city, Houston, now ranks as the most ethnically diverse city in the nation. Texas is among the top three destinations for new immigrants, primarily from Asian and Latin American countries. While Texas is well known as home to the largest number of evangelical Protestants in the US, it also has the largest Muslim population of any state in the country. In fact, Muslims constitute the largest non-Christian population in the state of Texas.

While the growing Muslim population is an important part of the fabric of Texas, they are often left out of the traditional narrative of Texas. Many Muslims in Texas face a social and political climate of bias and discrimination that situates them as marginal, foreign, or 'other.' From the rhetoric of elected officials to biased textbooks to hostile actions, incidents of Islamophobia are rising in Texas, which aligns with a national trend. The increase of anti-Muslim sentiment reveals a contested public sphere in which the identity of Texas, as a geographic, political, social, cultural, and civic space is being negotiated. This is a civic problem -- and it is imperative to confront this problematic climate in order to create civic spaces that include people of all backgrounds who identify as Texan.

In this report, we examine the features of this climate of Islamophobia in Texas, drawing primarily from media reports, social media posts, and government documents from 2011 – 2016, to identify patterns of public discourse as well as notable incidents of discrimination and hate crimes that received media attention. We then look at the implications of this climate for the Texas public sphere.



Defining a Term: What is Islamophobia?

Islamophobia is a manufactured hostility and fear-based prejudice against Muslims or groups or individuals perceived as Muslims. It presents itself in the forms of bias, stereotypes, discrimination, microaggressions, and even violence.

There are well over one billion Muslims around the world. Subsequently, Islam is lived, experienced, and understood in a multiplicity of ways that are mediated by the cultures and societies in

which Muslims live. Yet, Islamophobia takes an essentialist notion of culture that views all persons of a particular ethnicity and religion as having the same behaviors, values, and worldview. The logic upon which Islamophobia rests claims that the Muslim community is monolithic and engaged in a global movement of “Islamic fundamentalism” that promotes terrorism and an anti-modern ideology. It often characterizes Muslims as uncivilized, backwards, and intolerant as well as un-American. These stereotypes and misrepresentations serve to marginalize and exclude Muslims, or those perceived to be Muslim, from full participation in public, political, or civic life.

To be clear, Islamophobia is more than just a prejudice against a religion. It is a form of racism. It conflates religion with racial differences, associating phenotypic stereotypes with certain religious beliefs and behaviors. This racialization then works to marginalize, isolate, and delegitimize. In this way, Islamophobia is not about the religion of Islam, per se; it is about marking a group of people as ‘other’ and its impact extends far beyond just Muslims. In this climate, any brown-skinned person can be seen as Muslim-looking and therefore foreign or ‘other.’ Arab Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and Latinos have all been conflated into the same identity.¹

These racialized stereotypes also easily couple with nativist and anti-immigrant sentiments. As much of our research shows, most Islamophobic rhetoric involves accusations of threats to American-ness and American values such as democracy, sovereignty, and security. By marking a group of people as inherently characterized by beliefs and behaviors incompatible with American values, this rhetoric makes a narrow claim for what counts as normative, legitimate American values. All others are marked as foreign and marginalized.



The State of Anti-Muslim Discrimination in Texas

Islamophobic rhetoric and hate crimes against Muslims have increased across the country in the past year. Here, we examine the contours of this climate in Texas. At the same time, we recognize that, the political and social climate of Texas does not exist in isolation; it is continually shaped by national discourse. The climate of Islamophobia in Texas must be understood in the context of a post-9/11 national landscape. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 made an indelible impact on the experiences of American Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim. While anti-Muslim discrimination and bias existed before, this event provoked a tremendous increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric, hate crimes, and violence. Moreover, the US War on Terror, the USA Patriot Act, and the Department of Homeland Security have subjected American Muslims to new policies of surveillance and policing that have led individuals and communities to feel marginalized, stereotyped, and discriminated against. Anti-Muslim hate crimes have significantly decreased in number since the 2001 – 2003 time period; however, it is disturbing to see a new rise in these incidents as well as growing virulent rhetoric of Islamophobia.

Political Rhetoric

While Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric is not a new feature of the Texas political landscape, it has grown in the past year, particularly with the campaign cycle leading up to the 2016 presidential election. At a national level, several Republican presidential candidates have made numerous Islamophobic remarks that characterize Muslims as foreign, un-American, and potential threats to security. Donald Trump has stood out for the extent of his virulent, nativist hyperbole. Ted Cruz has largely echoed Trump's sentiments. While a candidate for the Republican nomination for president, Ted Cruz is also the US Senator from Texas. Having made many Islamophobic statements on a national stage, his role as a Texas elected official means that his rhetoric has an impact at a state level as well.



Many of Cruz's remarks, as well as those from other Texas elected officials, fit within a common pattern. After a violent event involving a small number of Muslim individuals takes place somewhere else in the world, some Texas officials respond with discriminatory generalizations that treat Islam and Muslims as monolithic, foreign, and threats to local security. They subsequently call for discriminatory, often unconstitutional policies and some form of hyper-regulation or increased policing of Muslim communities.

Senator Cruz has continued to amplify his discriminatory speech. Most recently, following a series of attacks in Brussels, Belgium by gunmen with ties to ISIS, Cruz quickly took to disparaging all Muslims as he called for increased policing of Muslims in the US. "We need to empower law enforcement to patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods before they become radicalized," Cruz said in a statement issued after the attack.² While many criticized these remarks, Cruz has repeatedly defended his comments.

Congressman Roger Williams (R-Texas) has reiterated Cruz's xenophobic sentiments. In a March 2016 Facebook post, he referenced an older op-ed piece he had written where he initially claimed that all American Muslims had some culpability for the December 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernadino, CA, stating "We must first admit the real threat that radical Islam imposes on all of us. We have to close the gaps in border security. We must implement more accountability in the larger Islamic community, where leaders must denounce the actions of Muslims whom they say do not represent Islam."³ In this case, he claimed this argument held true for the Brussels terrorist attacks as well, essentially arguing that all Muslims hold responsibility for any act of violence committed by a Muslim.

In November 2015, in the wake of a Syrian refugee crisis in Europe and following terrorist attacks in Paris, France, Ted Cruz called for banning Muslim Syrian refugees entry into the US because they posed a potential danger. Meanwhile, Cruz argued that Christian refugees should be allowed, however, because there is not a "meaningful risk" that Christians will commit terrorist acts.⁴

Following the Paris terrorist attacks, Texas Governor Greg Abbott echoed Cruz's sentiments, issuing a letter stating that Texas would not accept any more Syrian refugees in the wake of these events. In a letter to President Obama, Abbott said,



“Given the tragic attack in Paris and the threats we have already seen... Texas cannot participate in any program that will result in Syrian refugees – any one of whom could be connected to terrorism – being resettled in Texas.” He went on to say, “Neither you nor any federal official can guarantee that Syrian refugees will not be part of any terroristic activity. As such, opening our door to them irresponsibly exposes our fellow Americans to unacceptable peril.”⁵ The policies for which Abbott and Cruz have advocated pose a threat to constitutional liberties. Abbott’s directive discriminates based on religion and nationality. Cruz’s call to only admit Christian refugees violates the establishment clause of the First Amendment.

US Representative Louie Gohmert (R-Texas) has also been known for his fear-driven, Islamophobic rhetoric. In April 2013, in response to the Boston Marathon bombings, Gohmert made claims that radical Islamists are being trained to “act like Hispanics” and cross the US-Mexico border. Gohmert made these arguments in support of his anti-immigration agenda. He also referenced Israeli border walls as a potential model for the U.S.⁶ In September 2012, Gohmert claimed that “Barack Hussein Obama” had “helped jump start a new Ottoman Empire,” ostensibly a claim that Muslims are taking over.⁷ Early in 2012, he signed letters authored by US Representative Michele Bachmann claiming that the Muslim Brotherhood had infiltrated the U.S. government and calling for investigations. Gohmert’s claims typically exhibit paranoia about conspiracy-driven threats to national security by foreign others.⁸

Several other incidents of Islamophobic rhetoric by Texas elected officials started on social media, Facebook specifically, and then received attention from media statewide. In January 2015, on the seventh annual Texas Muslim Capitol Day, when members of Texas Muslim communities meet with lawmakers and learn about the democratic process, Texas State Representative Molly White (R-Belton) posted on Facebook that she had instructed her staff to interrogate Muslim visitors to her office, stating: “I did leave an Israeli flag on the reception desk in my office with instructions to staff to ask representatives from the Muslim community to renounce Islamic terrorist groups and publicly announce allegiance to America and our laws. We will see how long they stay in my office.”⁹

White has shared Islamophobic sentiments on social media multiple times. In June 2014, she described among her top priorities as a legislator as “We must be diligent in finding Jihadists in Texas and arresting them. We must also purge Texas of all Muslim,



military training camps including Imam's [sic] who promote, assist and encourage Jihad." She also stated that "Muslims cannot be trusted no matter how peaceful they appear" in the comments on that post.¹⁰ Most recently, in April 2016, she shared a post from known Islamophobe Pamela Gellar claiming that terrorists are masquerading as Muslim refugees to infiltrate Europe and the U.S. White added, "The truth is on our side and what liberals and Muslims don't want to hear."¹¹

In another incident of anti-Muslim rhetoric on Facebook from an elected official, Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne posted a troubling response to concerns about religious mediation panel held a local mosque. The Muslim mediation panel involved arbitrators settling civil disputes using Shariah law and non-binding decisions. Van Duyne, however, inaccurately called the panel a "court" and claimed it was acting in place of and in conflict with city and federal laws. She stated, "Sharia Law Court was NOT approved or enacted by the City of Irving... Our nation cannot be so overly sensitive in defending other cultures that we stop protecting our own."¹²

In August 2015, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller posted a picture to his Facebook page advocating the use of an atomic bomb on Muslims. The picture featured an atomic explosion and the overlaid text read: "Japan has been at peace with the US since April 9, 1945 (the day the US dropped the A-bomb on Nagasaki)/ It's time we made peace with the Muslim world." A consultant said that Miller did not share the post himself, but he would not "start a witch-hunt" to find the staffer that did share the image.¹³

In September 2012, Texas State Representative Debbie Riddle (R-Houston) took to her Facebook page to post a reaction to a news article calling for American soldiers in Afghanistan to show more sympathy to Afghans. She asserted that, "Our soldiers do NOT need to be taught how to be sensitive to radical Muslims. They should not be bothered with being sensitive to people who want us all dead!" When a commenter, Abdul Pasha, disagreed with her, she responded by questioning his citizenship and telling him to return to Afghanistan. Pasha, an American citizen born in Pakistan, is a student at the South Texas School of Law.¹⁴



Discriminatory Legislation

Texas lawmakers have taken anti-Muslim bias beyond discriminatory statements to drafting legislation based in Islamophobic rhetoric and ideology-- most notably, anti-Shariah or anti-foreign law legislation. Shariah law is a set of Islamic laws, based both in texts and traditions, which broadly encompasses both personal codes of ethics and religious laws. In the US, Muslims have used Shariah law for mediation of civil and family matters. It is non-binding and does not supersede state or federal law.

Since 2011, Texas GOP have pushed anti-Sharia bills three times. This move reflects a national trend to pass similar bills around the country out of unfounded fears of “Islamization” and Islamic infiltration of the US. These bills do not specifically prohibit Shariah law by name, ostensibly to avoid singling out a particular religion, but instead prohibit “foreign laws.” The Constitution is and has always been the supreme law of the United States, so the bills are effectively redundant. Moreover, Christian and Jewish meditation panels have settled civil matters for decades with no uproar. Therefore, these bills have mostly functioned to express Islamophobic sentiments and mark a group of people as marginalized and foreign.

In 2011, Texas State Representative Leo Berman (R-Tyler) sponsored a bill that he claimed would keep the threat of Shariah law out of Texas as a reaction to a radio story he had recently heard about Shariah law in Dearborn, MI.¹⁵ In 2013, State Senator John Carona (R-Dallas) proposed similar legislation. And in 2015, Texas State Representative Jeff Leach (R-Plano) filed another bill, HB562 “American Laws for American Courts,” to prohibit the application of foreign laws in Texas.¹⁶ In 2015, Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne asked the Irving City Council to officially support HB562.¹⁷

Notably, after the Irving City Council discussions of the problem of Shariah law and their subsequent vote to support HB562, the Islamic Center of Irving began receiving threatening phone calls. These disturbing messages ranged from “You’re not welcome here” to “We’re coming after you” and “Going to clear you out of here.” Subsequently, Irving Police increased patrols around the mosque.¹⁸



Bias in Public Schools

Anti-Muslim discrimination in the Texas public sphere is not only limited to the speech of elected officials. It has also filtered into public education. In the past five years, there have been multiple events in which Muslim children have been singled out as the subjects of profiling, slurs, and unwarranted disciplinary actions in their public schools.

In September 2015, a 14-year-old Muslim student at an Irving, TX public high school, Ahmed Mohamed, was handcuffed, detained and suspended from school for bringing a homemade clock that a teacher believed to be an explosive device or a hoax bomb, though Mohamed never claimed it be anything other than a clock. After the misunderstanding was cleared with the police department and all parties involved, the school kept Mohamed's 3-day suspension. The police considered charging him with creating and bringing a "hoax bomb" to school. School officials and police claimed they were only concerned with safety and had no biased motive; yet, it is difficult to imagine that their quick associations of a Muslim boy with a potential terrorist act were not influenced by Islamophobic bias.¹⁹

Just three months later in another Dallas suburb, a 12-year-old Sikh boy, Armaan Singh, was also arrested for an alleged bomb threat. Another student said that Singh's backpack looked like a bomb and perhaps Singh joked with him about this. The student then reported him to teacher. The backpack in question had a built-in battery charger for electronics. Singh was held in juvenile detention for three days without any contact with his parents.²⁰

In other incidents, teachers made Islamophobic remarks or distributed anti-Muslim material to their students. Most recently, in March 2016, a Houston area middle school teacher mocked a Muslim 7th grader and told him, "I wouldn't be laughing because we all think you're a terrorist." The teacher was placed on administrative leave.²¹ In April 2015, a Houston area high school teacher handed out a sheet with uncited claims about Islam presented as facts, including that Islam is an "ideology of war" and that Muhammad was a "false prophet." The teacher later resigned.²² In late 2014, a Houston area third-grade teacher was forced to resign after appearing on a conservative public access television show and making anti-Muslim remarks.²³ And in 2011, another Houston area high school teacher resigned after making a remark about the death of Osama bin Laden to a Muslim student in his class: "I bet you're grieving."²⁴



Muslim children may also feel bullied by peers. A 2015 survey of Muslim children in California public schools found that at least half had experienced bullying or some form of discrimination in school.²⁵ However, currently there is no data to establish the extent to which Texas school children have been affected by Islamophobia.

This discourse also impacts public education in Texas, where a politicized State Board of Education has approved state-mandated social studies standards that misrepresent Islam and perpetuate Islamophobic stereotypes and discourse. Subsequently, these standards have also materialized in textbooks. Reviews of these standards and textbooks have noted pro-Christian biases and inaccurate depictions of Islam that present it as more prone to conflict and violence than other religions and inherently in conflict with “western” societies.²⁶

Acts of Violence and Intimidation

The anti-Muslim climate has culminated in incidents of violence with growing frequency, not just in Texas but across the country. The FBI has reported that, in 2014, hate crimes were down against all groups except for Muslims.²⁷²⁸²⁹³⁰ However, statistics for reported hate crimes do not give a complete picture of the extent of actual hate crimes and the discrimination that accompanies them. Hate crimes are notoriously underreported. A government study found that only one in three hate crimes has actually been reported in recent years.³¹ Additionally, for law enforcement agencies to determine that an incident is a hate crime, a motive must be established. However, if the perpetrator is not found and a motive cannot be definitively established, some crimes that appear to be hate crimes are not recorded as such. Subsequently, we do not know precisely how many individuals have been the victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes; yet, we can reasonably assume that the number is far greater than reported statistics reveal.

Moreover, to gauge the true impact of hate crimes, it is crucial to recognize that these crimes affect far more than just the direct and immediate victims. Hate crimes send a message of violent intolerance to a larger group of people based on their race, ethnicity, or religion. Therefore, the impact of these acts is felt by other individuals of the targeted race, ethnicity or religion, who experience the act as a threat to their own security and well-being. The Offices of the U.S. Attorneys explain the deep impact that hate crimes have on the broader community: “the fear of becoming a victim of violence can be nearly as debilitating as suffering through an actual crime. The message of intolerance that is communicated through a hate crime can have broadly disruptive social effects as



well, and can lead to greater distrust of law enforcement or friction between racial or religious communities.”³²

The Texas Department of Public Safety’s annual report of hate crimes Texas shows an increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes from 2013 to 2014. (The 2015 report has not yet been released). Our analysis of media reports uncovers an increase in reported incidents of anti-Muslim hate crimes, intimidation, and discrimination from 2014 to 2015 in Texas. Most of the incidents involved anonymous vandalism. They took place in major urban areas of Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin or their suburbs. Most targeted mosques or used a mosque to find a victim. Many of these incidents occurred in the immediate aftermath of major terrorist attacks, global or domestic. These terrorist attacks also provoked Islamophobic political rhetoric. These hate crimes may have been incited by the terrorist attacks, the anti-Muslim rhetoric, or both.

Texas saw a number of incidents of anti-Muslim discrimination and violence after a December 2, 2015 workplace shooting in San Bernardino, CA by a Muslim couple with ties to extremists groups. A Muslim family in Plano reported that someone had thrown rocks through their windows on two consecutive days in early December only six weeks after they had moved into the first home in a newly built neighborhood that included a mosque.³³ Around the same time period, two Muslim students at the University of Texas at Austin left a local restaurant near the campus after being harassed by another diner, who told them to go back to Saudi Arabia. The women said that restaurant staff and onlookers remained silent after the racist taunting.³⁴

The terrorist attacks by ISIS affiliates in Paris and Beirut on November 13, 2015 were also followed by several cases of anti-Muslim discrimination, intimidation, and violence. In days after this event and on the same day that Senator Ted Cruz and Governor Greg Abbott made statements about the dangers of Muslim refugees to the security of Texas, a member of the Islamic Center of Pflugerville found a destroyed Qur’an (torn and smeared with feces) outside the mosque when arriving for morning prayer.³⁵ The following day, a Houston area man was reported to authorities after sending Facebook messages containing threats to “shoot up a mosque” and photos of ammunition and an assault rifle. After his arrest, he cited losing a friend in the Sept. 11 attacks and the recent terrorist attacks in Paris as reasons for his threats.³⁶ In San Antonio, a man walked into a mosque and began shouting obscenities at worshippers, while carrying a U.S. flag. He wiped and dragged his feet across the prayer rugs, despite being asked to



remove his shoes to show respect. The police were called after he refused to leave and he was arrested.³⁷

There have been many other incidents of hate crimes and threats against Muslims between 2011 to 2015. In October 2015, Masjid Al-Ahad in Katy had its glass front door smashed in between prayers. Situated next to a church and businesses, it was the only storefront vandalized. Nothing was taken. Community members believed it was motivated by anti-Muslim bias.³⁸ In May 2015, a man was pushed to the ground and beaten when leaving a Dallas area mosque after evening prayers. Other community members quickly rushed to his aid and stopped the attack.³⁹ In early March 2015, CAIR-Houston received a threat via social media directed at an event about being Muslim in America. The comment threatened to make sure that those attending did not enjoy themselves and said that Islam should be “outlawed in the US.” Upon further investigation, community members found disturbing images of firearms on the man’s Facebook page. The FBI and Houston Police Department provided extra security for the event.⁴⁰

In October 2014, a Houston-area man was arrested just before attempting to launch an “American Insurgent Movement,” including plans to shoot up a mosque and kill police officers.⁴¹ In January 2013, community members of Houston area mosque discovered a disemboweled pig at the entrance of the Islamic Outreach Center before evening prayers.⁴² In March 2013, the McKinney Islamic Association reported that their mosque was vandalized when over 2-dozen paintballs were shot at the building late at night. A worshipper’s car was also hit by a paintball. The mosque and its members had recently been under frequent harassment by a group of young people.⁴³ In August 2013, signs reading “No Muslim parking in the Westview Shopping Center,” were posted in a strip-mall near the El Farouq Mosque. No one claimed responsibility for the signs and they were removed.⁴⁴

In November 2012, San Antonio mosques were alerted by police of a potential threat by a local man who vowed to shoot up a mosque and then turn the gun on himself. The man was arrested before he could carry out his plan.⁴⁵ On July 4, 2012, a Pakistani-American family in San Antonio had their home vandalized when some person or group of people spray painted “terrorist” on the wall of their house and then threw fireworks at their front door.⁴⁶



In December 2011, Houston resident Yaqub Bham, a home security company technician, was assaulted when he went to inspect a client's house. He was stabbed, bitten, and badly beaten. The assailant became violent after asking Bham, a native of Pakistan, about the origin of his name and background. The family called for the crime to be considered a hate crime; however, the assailant was charged with assault.⁴⁷ In February 2011, a man set fire to a playground at the Dar El Eman Mosque in Arlington. He also painted anti-Islam obscenities, threw cat litter at the front door, and shouted racial slurs at community members. He was charged with a hate crime and he confessed that he committed the crime out of hatred for Arabs and those of Middle Eastern descent.

Along with incidents of violence, large anti-Muslim group demonstrations also contribute to a climate of intimidation and intolerance. As legal expressions of First Amendment rights, these events are not hate crimes. However, they have a similar effect in their messages of hate, xenophobia, and racism.

Just over a week after the January 7, 2015 Paris attacks on the office of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo by armed men with ties to Al Qaeda's Yemeni branch, thousands of anti-Muslim protesters showed up at a conference in Garland, titled, "Stand with the Prophet in Honor and Respect," which was aimed at educating Muslims on how to counter negative representations and interpretations of their faith. The protesters held signs claiming that Islam poses a threat to the American way of life. Some individuals also confronted the Garland Independent School District for allowing the conference to take place at the district's convention center so soon after attacks on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris.⁴⁸

In response to the Garland event, a week later, Pamela Geller, a New York based anti-Islam activist and leader of a hate group, announced a contest for drawings of the Prophet Muhammad-- an act that many Muslims find offensive-- and offered a \$10,000 prize. The anti-Islam event was set for May 3, 2015 in the same GISD convention center in Garland, TX. While recognizing this event as intentionally inflammatory, the Council on American-Islamic Relations chose to ignore it.⁴⁹

In another event soon after the Paris attacks, on February 5, 2015, Texas Muslim Capitol Day was met with protest for the first time in seven years. Protesters yelled: "We don't want you," "ISIS will gladly take you," "Remember 9/11," and "Go home." The



event was also interrupted when a protester rushed the stage and grabbed the microphone from the speaker.⁵⁰

The Dallas suburb of Irving has become a trouble spot for Islamophobic sentiment. Home to a mayor who has fomented uproar about Shariah law as well as the high profile case of the profiling of 9th grader Ahmed Mohamed, Irving has seen a number of disturbing anti-Islam demonstrations. On December 2015, the Texas Rebel Knights, the East TX branch of the Ku Klux Klan, announced a planned “mosque rally” to protest against Syrian refugees set for May 2016 outside an Irving mosque.⁵¹ In November, armed anti-Muslim protesters from the Bureau of American-Islamic Relations (BAIR), which is listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, demonstrated outside an Irving mosque while openly carrying assault rifles.⁵² The same organization also posted the names and addresses of local Muslims and so-called “Muslim sympathizers” who opposed HB562, an anti-Shariah law bill, on their Facebook page. The post was later removed for violating Facebook terms.⁵³ In December 2015, BAIR-affiliated heavily armed protesters gathered around a mosque in nearby Richardson with signs and chants accusing the mosque of supporting terrorism.⁵⁴

Other discriminatory incidents have involved the exclusion of Muslims from public life. In 2015, a plan for a Muslim cemetery in rural area of Collin County, which would accommodate the estimated 22,000 Muslims living in Plano, Richardson, Garland, Irving, Dallas and the surrounding area, was met with protest after it was approved by the city of Farmersville in May. Angry protesters attended public meetings and yelled threats such as “You’re not welcome here!” Claiming that the cemetery would be an extremist training ground, threats were also made to cover the land in pigs’ blood.⁵⁵

In July 2013, a local mosque was denied entry into a Round Rock Independence Day parade. While the parade’s chairman cited safety concerns, another local resident said that there had been rumors floating around that the Muslim group would be carrying a banner in support of jihad, which would offend military veterans and mothers of soldiers participating in the parade. In actuality, the Muslim group planned to carry a banner reading “Muslims for Loyalty. Love for all – Hatred for none.”⁵⁶

In 2012, the Houston Islamic school, Iman Academy, had their application to join the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools rejected. The school’s principal sought to join the association to give students the opportunity to compete with other



area private schools in sports and academics. As part of the application process, the principal said she received Islamophobic questions such as, “It is our understanding that the Koran tells you not to mix with (and even eliminate) the infidels. Christians and Jews fall into that category. Why do you wish to join an organization whose membership is in disagreement with your beliefs?” as well as a question about her opinion about the Ground Zero Mosque. A board member also told her, “ I know all Muslims are not terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims.”⁵⁷

Findings and Recommendations

In and of themselves, each of these anti-Muslim events and statements is troubling and problematic. Taken as a whole, they illustrate a hostile and dangerous climate being cultivated in Texas. And this is not an exhaustive account of all incidents of Islamophobia in Texas over the past five years. Yet even with this incomplete picture, what we do know about the climate of Islamophobia in Texas indicates that the xenophobic and nativist rhetoric creates a hostile and threatening public sphere for Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim. In response to this troubling atmosphere, our recommendations are three-fold: 1) increased education, 2) a more expansive civic discourse, and 3) additional research.

Increased education

Effective engagement in the public square requires a nuanced understanding of religious and cultural diversity. Elected officials, policy makers, educators, and other professionals who have contributed to this climate of anti-Muslim discrimination demonstrate a troubling lack of awareness of the complexity and nuances of Islam, the experiences of American Muslims, the changing demographics of Texas, and the role of religion in the American public sphere. While not all may be open to change, many professionals would more successfully navigate differences in their workplaces and other public settings with educational opportunities that helped them



develop religious and cultural literacy as well as skills for cultural fluency, addressing conflicts, and creating more inclusive spaces.

A more expansive civic discourse

Islamophobic rhetoric has consequences for current Texas residents, citizens and recent immigrants. When elected officials such as Ted Cruz argue that Muslims are dangerous and only Christians can be trusted to enter the US, they erroneously imply that the US belongs to Christians and all others may only enter at the discretion of the Christian majority. For American Muslims, this language sets them apart as marginal and not legitimate Americans. In addition to causing psychological harm, this rhetoric of exclusion also puts American Muslims in danger as it fuels Islamophobia, bigotry and hate crimes. The rhetoric of Islamophobia situates all Muslims as foreigners who do not truly belong in American society. Yet, simply folding American Muslims into “us” can be equally problematic if they are expected to conform to an identity established by a dominant group and have no role to play in determining and defining “us.”

We need a more expansive civic conversation about who “we” are as Texans, taking into account the changing demographics of this state. Policy makers, community leaders, journalists and others engaged in the public sphere need to reframe the conversation about who counts as a Texan away from an older idea of a singular identity toward a model of manyness. Many Texans are committed to fundamental civic values of individual liberty, religious freedom and equality. We need to ask how these values can galvanize and support a public square that allows for the free encounter of the many peoples of Texas.

Additional research

We know that Texas has seen an increase in hate crimes targeting Muslim and we have found evidence and reports that point to a widespread problem of Islamophobic rhetoric in the Texas public sphere, which extends from the speech of elected officials to proposed legislation to public school textbooks. However, our research has also revealed a lack of data on how this climate impacts the lives of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim in Texas. How do these experiences of misrepresentation and discrimination impact their wellbeing, safety, and security? How does this affect the place they see for themselves as citizens of Texas? How do they negotiate these experiences? What resources have they found that help them address or overcome



these experiences? How have they developed counter-narratives in which they make claims as Texans?

This lack of answers to these questions demonstrates the need for research and resources to investigate if and how often individuals have experienced incidents of bias, discrimination or violence, such as comments, remarks, slurs, intimidation, physical altercations or property damage, as well as how these experiences have been addressed and negotiated. This research will give us a much more expansive picture of the full extent and substantive impact of the rising anti-Muslim climate in Texas.

Notes

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