

# Gaza: The Resurgence of Islamophobia in 2023



**Farah Affy, Keon Neghabat, and Corey Saylor**

“The racial lens through which America sees the world distorts and conceals the obvious truth that it is basically impossible to accurately determine someone’s religion based solely on their physical appearance. That racial lens is why it is possible to ‘look Muslim’ in America. In other words, there are a set of physical traits and characteristics that can mark some as ‘Muslim’ regardless of their actual religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Race is the only way to explain how this is so.”

*- Erik Love, Islamophobia and racism in America*

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*“[CAIR-Massachusetts] received more complaints of hate crimes this month than we did for all of 2022.”*

*- CAIR-MA Legal Director Barbara J. Dougan, Esq, 11/8/23*

## INTRODUCTION

In April, CAIR announced that it received a total of 5,156 complaints of anti-Muslim bias throughout 2022. This marked the first-ever decline in the organization’s nearly-thirty-year history.<sup>1</sup>

That downward trend appears to have come to a sudden end. **In just 8 weeks in October and November of 2023, CAIR received 42% of the complaints it received in all of 2022.** Following the escalation of hostilities in Israel and Palestine, and specifically the Israeli government’s apparent intent to commit genocide against the Palestinian people, **2023 is set to lay claim to one of the worst waves of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States in the last three decades.**

This research paper, the drafting of which began prior to October 7, was initially inspired by a hypothesis from experts at CAIR that the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia has changed. The U.S. Islamophobia Network -- a close-knit family of organizations and individuals that share an ideology of extreme anti-Muslim animus -- had been the primary actors propelling Islamophobic hate and rhetoric for the better part of a decade. This is no longer the case. This network of anti-Muslim actors, while still functional, has not been as influential in advancing anti-Muslim sentiment as they had been in the past.

This, however, is not an indication that U.S. Islamophobia has waned. Genocide currently unfolding in Gaza – authorized by U.S. politicians and justified by mainstream media – and an appalling surge in hateful incidents against Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs nationwide have proved: Islamophobia is alive and well in the United States.

This paper is a preliminary evaluation of the evolution of U.S. Islamophobia both leading up to and during the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza in 2023. It begins by examining how government and law enforcement officials, corporations, institutions of higher education, media executives, and social media networks have promoted Islamophobic tropes to justify the Israeli government’s violence against Palestinians and therefore emboldened anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian hate and rhetoric in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> CAIR, “2023 Civil Rights Report: Progress in the Shadow of Prejudice,” April 11, 2023, <https://islamophobia.org/civil-rights-reports/2023-civil-rights-report-progress-in-the-shadow-of-prejudice/>, p. 8.

This paper also contextualizes this present wave of anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Palestinian racism within a wider timeline of changes to U.S. Islamophobia. We argue that, while the network of actors previously responsible for U.S. Islamophobia has faded, other organizations and individuals who have contributed to anti-Muslim sentiment in the past -- namely the U.S. government, foreign nationalist governments, and social media platforms -- have emerged more clearly as the principal instigators of U.S. Islamophobia today. We discuss not only the decline of central players within the U.S. Islamophobia Network but also the subsequent efforts by other actors to take on the mantle of disseminating anti-Muslim sentiment domestically and globally. It is these actors whom we hold responsible for the present wave of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in the U.S.

Just as the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia has changed, so too must the work of those who favor justice and mutual understanding. As a result, this paper concludes by revisiting CAIR's tools for combating U.S. Islamophobia. We reassess CAIR's vision for this work as well as initiate work on a state-specific tool to quantitatively assess Islamophobia, in order to better address the demands of the current moment as we pave the way to our 2024 Islamophobia Report.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2011, CAIR has aimed to produce an Islamophobia report every other year. This report is a broad view of the state of Islamophobia in America, an evaluation of those driving such bias, and a guide to our strategic work promoting justice and mutual understanding.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research for this paper began in October 2023. External and internal experts were invited to comment on (1) the current landscape of U.S. Islamophobia, (2) the direction of CAIR's vision regarding Islamophobia, and (3) the development of a tool to measure the acceptance and rejection of Islamophobia at the state level.<sup>3</sup>

Based on these interviews, as well as internal research, this paper proposes four contributions to the strategic understanding of and approach to addressing Islamophobia in the U.S. and beyond. These preliminary findings are in no way comprehensive and will be reassessed in advance of our 2024 Islamophobia Report.

1. **The Gaza Genocide, Islamophobia, and Civil Rights Implications.** We assess how American Islamophobia has enabled the Israeli government to commit genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Alongside this, we consider implications for equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law – full and equal citizenship – for American Muslims.
2. **Reassessing the Drivers of American Islamophobia.** The paper contextualizes Islamophobia in this moment by providing a preliminary analysis of the main actors – domestic and foreign – primarily responsible for perpetuating Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, whether intentionally or unintentionally.
3. **Renewing CAIR's Vision for Combating Islamophobia in America.** Changes in the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia have brought about new questions for CAIR's vision to combat Islamophobia. We recommend alterations to our current vision, which was introduced in 2011, in order to better capture CAIR's evolving goals to not only address Islamophobic bias but also to ensure a better future for all Muslims.
4. **A Foundation for Measuring Islamophobia in the 50 States.** The paper also launches our work to devise new tools for assessing U.S. Islamophobia. We report potential indicators of the acceptance or rejection of Islamophobia at the state level with the goal that this information will pave the way for the creation of a quantitative tool for tracking and measuring Islamophobia.

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<sup>3</sup> See our note on 'Methodology and Limitations' below for more information.

This assessment of the changing nature of Islamophobia, as well as how those factors appear in and influence our understanding of the current genocide undertaken against Palestinians in Gaza, serves as an opening for our updated assessment of U.S. Islamophobia to be released next year. It is, however, by no means comprehensive and will certainly be reassessed as we continue to analyze U.S. Islamophobia over the coming months.

In this paper, CAIR notes that the latest round of intense violence in Gaza highlights the need of those who seek to promote justice and mutual understanding to understand Israel's decades-long policies of apartheid – which includes the seizure of Palestinian land, restriction of Palestinian movement, and systematic denial of equal citizenship to Palestinians.

CAIR further argues that Islamophobia has been widely invoked by domestic and foreign actors to discourage criticism of and justify the Israeli government's assault on Palestinians in Gaza. As CAIR continues to monitor the escalation of anti-Muslim racism across the country, we encourage other organizations to further our assessment here of Islamophobia during this present crisis.

While the intensity of the attacks on Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs across American institutions is appalling, CAIR emphasizes that Islamophobia is a pervasive feature of American society that has long been in operation. Many of the actors and organizations we detail below and in our reporting elsewhere did not begin to promote or rely on Islamophobic tropes on October 7 but have rather been key instigators of Islamophobia in the past. In the following pages, we move to contextualize the wave of Islamophobia witnessed in recent days as an extension of the many persisting challenges to domestic and global Muslim communities over the past several years.

**Although many prominent members of the U.S. Islamophobia Network have waned in influence, the emergence of new actors and heightened activities of old ones have spread Islamophobia in the U.S. and across the globe.** In particular, ongoing Islamophobia is perpetuated by the U.S. government; domestic actors are seeking to justify Israeli occupation of Palestinian land; social media networks are permitting disinformation and censorship; ongoing misinformation plagues educational content; and multiple foreign governments, including Hindutva nationalists, have made anti-Muslim hate and rhetoric a staple of American society in 2023. These existing issues were inflamed on October 7, when mainstream Islamophobia became once again relevant as U.S. and foreign actors sought to effectively squash pro-Palestinian dissent to ongoing violence in Gaza by the Israeli government.

However, just as the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia has changed, so too must the work of those who favor justice and mutual understanding. This paper begins our revisit of CAIR's tools for combating U.S. Islamophobia. We reassess CAIR's vision for this work and pursue new approaches, such as a state-specific tool to quantitatively assess Islamophobia, in order to better address the demands of the current moment.

As we ask ourselves what changes we want to see in the United States as a result of our movement's work to counter Islamophobic bias, we propose this preliminary 2024 Vision: "Our vision looks toward the time when

Muslims in America are granted equal access to social opportunities and equal protection under the law. Unhindered by Islamophobia, Muslims are afforded equal opportunities to pursue their dreams and potential. Islam is respected and equal among many faiths in America's pluralistic society."

At the same time, CAIR has started exploring the potential of developing a quantitative state-specific tool to measure the degree to which Islamophobia is accepted. In recent days, CAIR has found that quantitative information on the state of Islamophobia has been impactful for political leaders and media networks to understand the plight of American Muslim communities. Moreover, an understanding of Islamophobia at the local level would likely suggest places to which additional resources and campaigns need to be deployed.

Because this paper represents a starting point - one impacted by what is likely the worst wave of Islamophobic bias since then-candidate Donald Trump announced his plan to ban Muslims from coming to the U.S. in December 2015 - we do not provide recommendations. Instead we provide insights into our direction to inform our work in the coming months as we prepare for the release of our 2024 Islamophobia report.



## ‘GENOCIDE’ IN GAZA, ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND CIVIL RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

At the time of this paper’s writing, more than 17,000 Palestinians have been killed since the Israeli government began its attack on the Gaza Strip in October.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations, and respected human rights organizations, have written of the “unspeakable suffering” unleashed on the Palestinian people.<sup>5</sup> Thousands of Palestinians have been killed or injured, more than half of Gazan homes have been demolished, and over a million Palestinian men, women, and children have been displaced.<sup>6</sup> Access to food, water, and electricity has been severely restricted. Hospitals have turned into “morgues”<sup>7</sup> and “battlegrounds.”<sup>8</sup> As the UN Secretary-General wrote in a rare invocation of Article 99, calling on the Security Council to vote on a ceasefire: “Nowhere is safe in Gaza.”<sup>9</sup>

Leading genocide scholars and human rights experts have warned that these actions may constitute the crime of genocide. In a statement endorsed by members of an international community of scholars with “globally recognized criminological expertise” in state crime, the evidence “firmly indicates” that “the Israeli state is employing its extensive and advanced military capacity to inflict violence on Palestinian peoples on such a scale that it is accurate to frame it as the annihilation phase of genocide.”<sup>10</sup> In another statement, scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies, and genocide studies together warned of the “possibility of the crime of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.”<sup>11</sup> Human rights

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<sup>4</sup> Ali Sawafta and Maggie Fick, “How Many Palestinians Have Died in Gaza? Death Toll Explained,” Reuters, December 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-many-palestinians-have-died-gaza-war-how-will-counting-continue-2023-12-06/>.

<sup>5</sup> Farida Deif, “In the Israel-Palestine Crisis, Preventing Mass Atrocities Is Key,” Human Rights Watch, November 15, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/15/israel-palestine-crisis-preventing-mass-atrocities-key>.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Guterres, “Letter by the Secretary-General to the President of Security Council Invoking Article 99 of the United Nations Charter,” December 6, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/situation-in-occupied-palestine-and-israel/sg-sc-article99-06-dec-2023>.

<sup>7</sup> Deif, “In the Israel-Palestine Crisis.”

<sup>8</sup> Guterres, “Letter by the Secretary-General.”

<sup>9</sup> Guterres.

<sup>10</sup> “International Expert Statement on Israeli State Crime,” n.d., <http://statecrime.org/international-expert-statement-on-israeli-state-crime/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Public Statement: Scholars Warn of Potential Genocide in Gaza,” *Opinio Juris*, October 18, 2023, <https://opiniojuris.org/2023/10/18/public-statement-scholars-warn-of-potential-genocide-in-gaza/>.

officials such as the UN State Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories have also warned of the “risk of genocide” being perpetuated against the Palestinian people.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the wave of violence in the region since October 7 first necessitates understanding Israel’s decades-long policies of apartheid – which include the seizure of Palestinian land, restriction of Palestinian movement, and systematic denial of equal citizenship to Palestinians.<sup>13</sup> Haaretz’s editorial board has concluded that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu shares responsibility for the latest outbreak of violence due to his establishment of a “government of annexation and dispossession” and adoption of a “foreign policy that openly ignored the existence and rights of Palestinians.” Israeli experts themselves have acknowledged that their government is committing the crime of apartheid. Israel’s former attorney general called his country an “apartheid regime;”<sup>14</sup> the Israeli Law Professors’ Forum for Democracy found that Netanyahu’s government has “validated the claim that Israel practices apartheid;”<sup>15</sup> and a leading professor of the Holocaust at Hebrew University in Jerusalem has asserted that accusing Israel of apartheid is “describing reality.”<sup>16</sup> Here, in the United States, even conservative columnist Thomas Friedman wrote in July of this year in the New York Times: “If Netanyahu’s government is going to behave as if the West Bank is Israel...Why should the U.S. continue to defend the idea in the U.N. and the International Court that Israel is just temporarily occupying the West Bank – and therefore is not practicing some form of apartheid there[?]”<sup>17</sup>

During this latest crisis, Prime Minister Netanyahu and far-right extremists in his government have invoked ideas suggesting genocide and ethnic cleansing against Palestinians on multiple occasions. Since October 7, according to NPR, Prime Minister Netanyahu has “twice” invoked “violent” Biblical passages to “justify Israel’s devastating response,” which, according to scholars of religion, mean to “completely destroy... we’re talking

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<sup>12</sup> Stuart Norval, “UN Special Rapporteur Warns of ‘serious Risk of Genocide’ in Gaza,” France 24, December 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/perspective/20231205-un-special-rapporteur-warns-of-serious-risk-of-genocide-in-gaza>

<sup>13</sup> Haaretz Editorial, “Netanyahu Bears Responsibility for This Israel-Gaza War,” Haaretz.Com, October 7, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2023-10-08/ty-article-opinion/netanyahu-bears-responsibility/0000018b-ob9d-d8fc-adff-6bfd1c880000>.

<sup>14</sup> MEE Staff, “Israel’s Former Attorney General Says His Country Is an ‘Apartheid Regime,’” Middle East Eye, February 11, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-apartheid-amnesty-report-attorney-general>.

<sup>15</sup> Middle East Monitor, “‘Israel Practices Apartheid,’ Say Israeli Law Professors,” Middle East Monitor, March 31, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230330-israel-practices-apartheid-say-israeli-law-professors/>.

<sup>16</sup> Middle East Monitor, “‘Accusing Israel of Apartheid Is Not Anti-Semitic - It’s Describing Reality’ - Holocaust Professor,” Middle East Monitor, August 25, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230825-accusing-israel-of-apartheid-is-not-anti-semitic-its-describing-reality-holocaust-professor/>.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Weiss, “‘Apartheid,’ Says Tom Friedman,” Mondoweiss, July 15, 2023, <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/07/apartheid-says-tom-friedman/>.

about killing each and every one of them – including babies, including their property, including the animals – everything.”<sup>18</sup> Israeli President Herzog declared, “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It is not true this rhetoric about civilians not being aware, not involved. It’s absolutely not true.”<sup>19</sup> In a statement, the Israeli Defense Minister claimed that the government was justified in cutting off water, electricity and other basic necessities to all Palestinians because Israel is fighting “human animals.”<sup>20</sup> The Israeli government also demanded a million residents of northern Gaza leave their homes or face death, an act of ethnic cleansing.<sup>21</sup>

As Israeli government officials deploy dehumanizing and racist language against Palestinians to justify their actions in Gaza, CAIR has witnessed a wave of Islamophobic hate and rhetoric in the U.S. which CAIR experts claim rises to the level of anti-Muslim animus triggered by then-candidate Donald Trump’s 2015 ban on Muslims entering the U.S. CAIR contends that this explicit targeting of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians in the U.S. is a direct result of a decades-long campaign of dehumanizing, racist, and Islamophobic rhetoric used by the Israeli government and endorsed by American officials, politicians, corporations, media personalities, and others to justify Israeli apartheid and its reliance on murdering, displacing, and oppressing innocent Palestinians.

Certainly, not all Palestinians and Arabs are Muslim. In 2018, the Arab American Institute (AAI) estimated that “63% of Arabs living in the U.S. are Christian.”<sup>22</sup> Former congressman Justin Amash (R-MI) wrote on social media platform X that members of his family in Palestine were “killed at Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church in Gaza, where they had been sheltering, when part of the complex was destroyed as the result of an Israeli airstrike” – a jarring statement that received little sympathy from congressional officials.<sup>23</sup> However, while in

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<sup>18</sup> “Netanyahu’s References to Violent Biblical Passages Raise Alarm among Critics,” NPR, November 7, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>.

<sup>19</sup> The Spot (@Spotnewsth), “SPOTLINE | Israeli President Isaac Herzog claims, ‘No one is innocent in the Gaza Strip including civilians,’” X, October 14, 2023, <https://twitter.com/Spotnewsth/status/1713270992120725521>.

<sup>20</sup> Middle East Eye (@MiddleEastEye), “The #Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said ‘we are fighting human animals’, referring to Palestinians, and vowed to ‘act accordingly.’” X, October 9, 2023, <https://twitter.com/MiddleEastEye/status/1711338295995551777>.

<sup>21</sup> Allie Weintraub, “‘Leave or Face Death’: Fleeing Palestinians Speak out after Israel Calls for Northern Gaza Evacuation,” ABC News, October 14, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/leave-face-death-fleeing-palestinians-speak-after-israel/story?id=103966290>.

<sup>22</sup> John Mason, “Who Are the Christian Arabs? Some Facts about Who They Are and Their Place in the World,” Arab America, March 4, 2018, <https://www.arabamerica.com/who-are-the-christian-arabs-some-facts-about-who-they-are-and-their-place-in-the-world/>.

<sup>23</sup> Justin Amash (@justinamash), “I was really worried about this. With great sadness, I have now confirmed that several of my relatives (including Viola and Yara pictured here) were killed at Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church in Gaza...” X, October 20, 2023, <https://twitter.com/justinamash/status/1715470077196194068?s=20>

reality all Arabs are certainly not Muslim, Arab and Muslim identities have long been conflated, making Islamophobia part and parcel of anti-Arab and, specifically, anti-Palestinian racism. We therefore note that, while anti-Palestinian racism cannot be confined to an analysis of Islamophobia, any assessment of the anti-Palestinian racism promoted by U.S. actors in a bid to justify the mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza must also address anti-Muslim bigotry and racism.

## Common Islamophobic Tropes

In this section, we present a preliminary version of a much-needed analysis of how various actors across U.S. political, legal, and social life have justified the Israeli government's present anti-Palestinian racism and intent to commit genocide against the people of Gaza by deploying Islamophobic tropes that endanger the lives of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims in the U.S. and across the world. We note that this preliminary evaluation of Islamophobic trends is necessarily non-comprehensive, as Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians in Gaza are ongoing and therefore anti-Muslim rhetoric to justify these attacks is increasingly deployed. As a result, we only seek to pave the way for analysis of Islamophobia during the present crisis in anticipation of further study.

A report released by the Center for Security, Race, and Rights at Rutgers in November confirms what Muslim and Arab communities have felt for decades: Islamophobia is weaponized in Israel-Palestine discourse to perpetuate racist tropes targeting Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians that serve to discredit legitimate critiques of Israeli state policy and ultimately deny the Palestinian people from "realizing their full civil, political, national, and human rights."<sup>24</sup> Here, we discuss the most common anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian tropes that have been deployed to silence human rights activists for decades before demonstrating, in the later sections, how American political, social, and economic leaders have relied on these same tropes to silence critics of the Israeli government and its apparent intent to commit genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza.

Among the most widespread tropes invoked against supporters of Palestinian human rights is one that posits Muslims and Arabs as, by nature, prone to violent action. Although non-violent action has been "far more prominent and consistent" in the Palestinian call for self-determination, American politicians and media executives have depicted Palestinians as "almost entirely violent."<sup>25</sup> Relying on this trope, U.S. leaders have therefore largely portrayed the peaceful and principled calls of Palestinians and their Muslim and Arab supporters for human rights as dangerous and threatening.

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<sup>24</sup> Mitchell Plitnick and Sahar Aziz, "Presumptively Antisemitic: Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine-Israel Discourse - Rutgers Center for Security, Race and Rights," Rutgers Center for Security, Race and Rights, November 11, 2023, <https://cssr.rutgers.edu/issues/presumptively-antisemitic/>, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, "Presumptively Antisemitic," p. 12.

Another common Islamophobic trope is that Muslims and Arabs possess animosity and act violently specifically toward fellow religious minorities. Any protest of Israeli state policies by Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians is therefore framed as a form of bigotry toward an entire religious minority, a dangerous and inaccurate conflation that has been time and time again revoked by human rights activists.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the legitimate criticism of Israeli state policies of apartheid, which have also been levied by expert scholars, are immediately discredited, due to a belief that Muslims, Arabs, and particularly Palestinians cannot possibly be objective or trustworthy observers. This suspicion toward any Muslim, Palestinian, or Arab call for Palestinian human rights ultimately lends itself to the dehumanization of Palestinians, who are rendered ‘casualties of war’ rather than victims of state-sanctioned violence.

These tropes have undergirded mainstream discourse on affairs in Palestine and Israel for years. Here, we make a preliminary argument that, in recent days, U.S. government and legal officials, civil society organizations, corporations, institutions of higher education, media outlets, social media platforms, and foreign nationalist governments have either promoted or relied on such anti-Muslim and anti-Arab tropes in order to justify the Israeli government’s most recent attack on the Palestinian people.

## U.S. Leadership Deploy Islamophobic Tropes, Dehumanize Palestinians

**Major U.S. political leaders have promoted tropes painting Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim as inherently violent and biased actors as they justify their support of the Israeli government and silence critics, despite reports from human rights activists and organizations of the grave consequences of their actions.**

Islamophobic tropes have been promoted from the highest level of political office in the U.S. Rather than confront the Israeli government over reports and footage of the massive death toll in Gaza, President Biden dismissed the credibility of the Palestinian Health Ministry’s reports: “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed.”<sup>27</sup> His remarks relied on the trope that Muslims and Arabs are inherently biased and therefore cannot be legitimate critics of political affairs when he questioned Palestinians’ ability to be trustworthy sources of information. However, while President Biden peddled Islamophobic stereotypes in public, reports have emerged that, internally, the U.S. State Department has “regularly

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<sup>26</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Biden’s Dismissal of the Reported Palestinian Death Toll,” Washington Post, December 2, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/11/01/bidens-dismissal-reported-palestinian-death-toll/>.



cited ministry statistics without caveats in its annual human rights reports.” Moreover, “the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which tracks deaths in the conflict, has found the ministry’s numbers to be reliable after conducting its own investigation.”<sup>28</sup>

Other U.S. government leaders, like National Security Council official John Kirby, also relied on anti-Muslim racism to dehumanize Palestinians. After over 10,000 Palestinians, including 4,000 children, had been reportedly killed in Gaza, Kirby, who with visible emotion mourned the lives of Ukrainian civilians killed by Russian forces, claimed in reference to civilians in Gaza: “And being honest about the fact that there have been civilian casualties and that there likely will be more is being honest, because that’s what war is. It’s brutal. It’s ugly. It’s messy.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than heed the calls of Palestinians to consider Israel’s actions as evidence of crimes against humanity, Kirby dismissed Israeli activity as ‘war’ and suggested that Palestinian lives were ultimately expendable in this pursuit.

The statement reads not only as a dismissal of the loss of innocent lives but, when compared to his response in the Ukrainian context, also suggests a common racist double standard in which Arab, Palestinian, and Muslim lives are considered less valuable than others. In another press conference, when asked by a reporter whether “the administration has no red lines at all” even as the “death toll for civilians in the Gaza Strip has gone up,” Kirby responded, “That is still the case.”<sup>30</sup> Indications that the U.S. government has sacrificed Palestinian lives in its unconditional support of Israel are furthered by a Politico article alleging that, amid discussions of a ceasefire, there was “some concern in the administration” that a pause would “allow journalists broader access to Gaza and the opportunity to further illuminate the devastation there and turn public opinion on Israel.”<sup>31</sup>

Congressional members have similarly relied on Islamophobic tropes. During a speech on the House floor, U.S. Representative Brian Mast (R-FL) claimed, “I would encourage the other side to not so lightly throw around

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<sup>28</sup> Kessler, “Biden’s Dismissal.”

<sup>29</sup> “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, National Economic Council Director Lael Brainard, and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby,” The White House, October 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/26/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-national-economic-council-director-lael-brainard-and-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby,” The White House, November 8, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/11/07/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-27/>.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Ward, Adam Cancryn, and Jonathan Lemire, “Biden Admin Officials See Proof Their Strategy Is Working in Hostage Deal,” Politico, November 21, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/11/21/biden-hostage-israel-hamas-war-00128351>.

the idea of ‘innocent Palestinian civilians’ [...] I don’t think we would so lightly throw around the term ‘innocent Nazi civilians.’”<sup>32</sup> Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Mont.) introduced a bill, along with ten other Republicans, that would ban Palestinians from entering the U.S. and possibly expel those who are already here.<sup>33</sup> U.S Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) falsely claimed a reputable Texas-based Muslim religious leader is biased against an ethnic group because the leader supported Palestinian humanity.<sup>34</sup>

**Meanwhile, Democrats and Republicans have also united over their commitment to suppress Palestinian voices that seek to challenge predominant anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism.** In November, more than 20 Democrats joined Republicans in the U.S. House to formally censure Representative Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) following her criticism of the Israeli government, allowing for the suppression of the only Palestinian Muslim voice in the House.<sup>35</sup> Once again, Palestinian protests of Israeli state policy are seen as evidence of inherent bias rather than valid critiques of foreign policy.

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<sup>32</sup> Akela Lacy, “GOP Representative Denies Existence of ‘Innocent Palestinian Civilians’ and Tries to Hobble Aid to Gaza,” The Intercept, December 5, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/11/01/brian-mast-palestinian-civilians-gaza-aid-aipac/>.

<sup>33</sup> Filip Timotija, “GOP Rep. Zinke Proposes Bill to Ban Palestinians From Entering U.S.,” The Hill, November 3, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/4292692-gop-rep-zinke-proposes-bill-to-ban-palestinians-from-entering-us/>.

<sup>34</sup> Ted Cruz (@tedcruz), “Colin Allred embraced & welcomed...” X, October 23, 2023, <https://twitter.com/tedcruz/status/1716586104441483697>.

<sup>35</sup> Farnoush Amiri, “House Votes to Censure Rashida Tlaib over Israel Comments,” AP News, November 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/congress-house-censure-resolution-tlaib-8085189047a4c40f2d44ada4604aa076>.

## Law Enforcement Treat Muslims and Arabs as Inherently Violent

As U.S. government officials target Palestinians and Muslims at home and abroad, some law enforcement officials have also leaned on tropes that posit Muslims and Arabs as more inclined to violence, stoking fear and suspicion of Islam and Muslims.

In October, a call for protest in Muslim countries by a former Hamas leader was widely misrepresented online, ultimately leading to the demonization and targeting of Muslim and Arab communities in western nations. According to Wired, even though “[Khaled] Meshaal very specifically made the calls for protests in ‘the Arab and Islamic worlds,’ his comments were quickly mistranslated online to become a ‘global day of jihad,’ a phrase he did not use.”<sup>36</sup>

Still, police departments acted on this unsubstantiated strand of disinformation, announcing security enhancements in several major U.S. cities, and some schools were closed in anticipation of potential violence. The Nassau County Police department, for instance, issued a memo on October 12 indicating a threat of “global jihad,” even though they noted that they were “not currently aware of any planned activities.”<sup>37</sup> Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) elevated these unfounded claims and incited violence, writing on social media platform X: “FAFO [F\*\*\* around and find out]. Floridians are armed. We won’t be intimidated.”<sup>38</sup> Newsweek reported that Joey Mannarino, a conservative podcast host, posted: “Do not leave your homes that day unless there is an emergency. Avoid public transit. Avoid airplanes. Avoid public events.”<sup>39</sup> The New York Police Department also increased uniform deployments, while acknowledging “there are no specific, credible threats to New York City.”<sup>40</sup>

Although claims of a ‘global day of jihad’ were eventually dismissed as disinformation, law enforcement has continued to treat Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians as inherently suspect. Later in October, ABC News reported that Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in San Diego sent a memo warning of “individuals inspired by, or reacting to, the current Israel-Hamas conflict may attempt travel to or from the areas of hostilities in the

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<sup>36</sup> David Gilbert, “Rumors of a ‘Global Day of Jihad’ Have Unleashed a Dangerous Wave of Disinformation,” Wired, October 13, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/day-of-jihad-disinformation-israel-palestine/>.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Finn, “‘Global Day Of Jihad’ Threat Sparks Increased LI Police Presence,” Patch, October 13, 2023, <https://patch.com/new-york/riverhead/global-day-jihad-threat-sparks-increased-li-police-presence>.

<sup>38</sup> Nick Mordowanec, “‘Day of Jihad’ Sparks Warnings for Americans to Stay Inside,” Newsweek, October 15, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/day-jihad-sparks-warnings-americans-stay-inside-1834180>.

<sup>39</sup> Mordowanec, “‘Day of Jihad’ Sparks Warnings.”

<sup>40</sup> NYPD NEWS (@NYPDnews), “Please read NYPD’s statement on security,” X, October 12, 2023, <https://twitter.com/NYPDnews/status/1712596782683750830?s=20>.

Middle East via circuitous transit across the Southwest border.”<sup>41</sup> However, an agency spokesperson confirmed that the “agency has no indication Hamas has directed foreign militants to make entry into the U.S.”<sup>42</sup> Such statements provided without any evidence presume that Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs are inclined toward violence but also invoke fear and potential attacks toward them.

Unsubstantiated reports are coupled by explicit political attacks from U.S. legal officials. Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyare, who had previously urged Virginia sheriffs to send equipment to Israel, targeted the organization American Muslims for Palestine with baseless accusations of supporting “terrorist organizations” and announced a plan to investigate the group, threatening the safety of their staffers and the communities they serve.<sup>43</sup> These actions also promote fear of Muslims and Arabs, while potentially inspiring anti-Muslim and anti-Arab actors who may seek to cause harm to these communities.

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<sup>41</sup> Quinn Owen and Luke Barr, “ Hamas Militants ‘May Potentially’ Try Crossing Southern Border, US Officials Warn,” ABC News, October 24, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/hamas-militants-potentially-crossing-southern-border-us-officials/story?id=104236095>.

<sup>42</sup> Owen and Barr, “ Hamas Militants ‘May Potentially’ Try Crossing Southern Border.”

<sup>43</sup> Tara Suter, “ Virginia’s Attorney General Opens Probe Into Pro-Palestine Nonprofit,” The Hill, October 31, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/4285773-virginias-attorney-general-probe-pro-palestine-nonprofit/>.

## Pro-Israeli Organizations Double Down on Islamophobic Tropes, Target Muslims

Outside of U.S. political and legal systems, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism has been similarly deployed by civil society organizations seeking to stifle criticism of the Israeli government's policies of apartheid against the Palestinian people in the past and now amid the ongoing crisis. As reported by the Center for Security, Race, and Rights, over the past several years, pro-Israeli organizations have responded to a public shift toward support for Palestinian human rights among Democrats and younger generations by increasingly doubling down on anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>44</sup>

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has long worked to defend Israeli settlements and repressive policies against Palestinians, while maintaining close ties with Islamophobic actors and promoting anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>45</sup> While CAIR does not currently report AIPAC as a member of the U.S. Islamophobia Network, AIPAC has historically received support from network members such as Nina Rosenwald of the anti-Muslim think tank Gatestone Institute and reportedly been advised by Frank Gaffney, leader of the Center for Security Policy.<sup>46</sup> The organization has also repeatedly hosted Islamophobe Steven Emerson, platforming an individual with a well-documented history of anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>47</sup>

AIPAC has also been directly involved in promoting Islamophobia in order to sway public opinion. In late 2021, for example, AIPAC ran an Islamophobic ad campaign against Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN).<sup>48</sup> AIPAC's paid advertisement on Facebook displayed a darkened image of Rep. Omar with text reading "For Ilhan Omar, there is no difference between America and the Taliban, between Israel and Hamas, between democracies and terrorism." The image's accompanying text post reads "Stand WITH America. Stand AGAINST Terrorists."<sup>49</sup> The post likening Rep. Omar to foreign militant groups for her efforts to raise awareness regarding human rights abuses in Palestine by the Israeli government relies on anti-Muslim tropes in order to mislead social media users and incite potential threats of violence against Muslim political leaders.

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<sup>44</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, "Presumptively Antisemitic," p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> "American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)," July 25, 2022, <https://islamophobia.org/islamophobic-organizations/american-israel-public-affairs-committee-aipac/>.

<sup>48</sup> Plitnick and Aziz, "Presumptively Antisemitic," p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> "CAIR Condemns 'Dishonest and Dangerous' AIPAC Ads Smearing Rep. Ilhan Omar, Calls on Facebook to Remove Islamophobic Posts," August 11, 2021, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-condemns-dishonest-and-dangerous-aipac-ads-smearing-rep-ilhan-omar-calls-on-facebook-to-remove-islamophobic-posts/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-condemns-dishonest-and-dangerous-aipac-ads-smearing-rep-ilhan-omar-calls-on-facebook-to-remove-islamophobic-posts/).



AIPAC's efforts to target Muslims in order to influence U.S. foreign policy on Israel and Palestine has extended into this most recent crisis. In the month of November, two reports emerged from congressional candidates indicating that AIPAC allegedly offered them vast sums of money to run against Rep. Rashida Tlaib, one of the most active critics of the Israeli government in the U.S. Congress.<sup>50</sup> These efforts, if substantiated, may reveal the continued attempts by AIPAC to target Palestinians and Muslims who are critical of the Israeli government.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), another civil society organization which has historically worked to delegitimize human rights organizations critical of the Israeli state, has also used Islamophobic tropes to attack pro-Palestinian voices. In the past, the ADL has falsely accused organizations critical of Israeli policy toward Palestinians of being white supremacists.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the ADL has a history of aggressively intimidating Arabs, Muslims, and others who speak out in favor of Palestinian human rights. Interviews with eight former ADL employees found that Chief Executive Officer Jonathan Greenblatt has repeatedly chosen to support crack-downs on criticism of Israel over protecting civil liberties, putting him in conflict with his own civil rights office.<sup>52</sup> In April 2020, Starbucks excluded the ADL from helping develop the curriculum for its mandatory anti-bias training after Black Lives Matter activists cited the ADL's support for settlements in Palestine.<sup>53</sup> In June 2020, a leaked ADL strategy memo obtained by Jewish Currents illustrated how the organization was preparing to address critics of the Israeli government's annexation of the West Bank.<sup>54</sup> The "stakeholders analysis memo," published by the ADL's Government Relations, Advocacy, and Community Engagement department, warns the ADL will need to find ways to defend Israel "without alienating other civil rights organizations, elected officials of color, and Black Lives Matter activists, and supporters." The memo implies that the ADL hopes to "avoid appearing openly hostile to public criticism" of Israeli efforts to annex Palestinian land as it fights legislation that may criticize or have material consequences for Israel, such as constricting U.S. military assistance.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Arpan Lobo and Paul Egan, "Michigan Senate Candidate Hill Harper: I Turned down \$20M to Challenge Tlaib in Primary," Detroit Free Press, November 22, 2023, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2023/11/22/hill-harper-rashida-tlaib/71679790007/>.

<sup>51</sup> "The ADL Goes Full Bully," The Nation, May 9, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/adl-greenblatt-extremist/>.

<sup>52</sup> "How the ADL's Israel Advocacy Undermines Its Civil Rights Work," Jewish Currents, October 13, 2021, <https://jewish-currents.org/how-the-adls-israel-advocacy-undermines-its-civil-rights-work>.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Hanna, "Starbucks Drops Jewish Group from Bias Training," Politico, April 30, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/30/starbucks-adl-black-jewish-activists-511390>.

<sup>54</sup> "Leaked Memo Details ADL's Annexation Response," Jewish Currents, February 2, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/adl-formulates-response-to-annexations-critics>.

<sup>55</sup> "Leaked Memo Details ADL's Annexation Response."

In its most recent attempts to target critics of the Israeli government in October, the ADL, in collaboration with the Brandeis Center, released a letter to the presidents of nearly 200 colleges and universities calling on them to investigate pro-Palestinian student groups for “providing material support to Hamas.”<sup>56</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) quickly blasted the move, arguing that the accusations were made “without citing any evidence” and that “calls to investigate, disband, or penalize student groups on the basis of their exercise of free speech rights” should be rejected.<sup>57</sup> The ADL’s call not only threatened students’ free speech but also relied on an anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian trope that supporters of Palestinian human rights are by nature violent and would therefore fund violent activities abroad.

Other civil society organizations have also platformed anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian, and anti-Jewish racism as they work to garner support for the Israeli government amid its continued attacks on the Gaza Strip. On October 14, multiple organizations conducted a “March for Israel” on the National Mall, where Pastor John Hagee, who had made anti-Muslim and antisemitic remarks in the past, was prominently featured.<sup>58</sup> During the rally, some members of the crowd held signs reading “Make Gaza Flat Again”<sup>59</sup> and “Many Gaza Civilians are Hamas in Training,”<sup>60</sup> justifying the explicit attacks on Palestinian civilians by claiming, without any evidence, that they are prone to violent action. Attendees also attempted to silence political commentator Van Jones with chants of “No Ceasefire” when he called for an end to the violence against both Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>61</sup> Photos from the event show attendees wearing shirts celebrating the Jewish Defense League, the racist, anti-Palestinian organization founded decades ago by former Israeli Knesset member Meir Kahane.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Anthony Romero et al., “Open Letter to Colleges and University Leaders: Reject Efforts to Restrict Constitutionally Protected Speech on Campuses,” American Civil Liberties Union, November 1, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/open-letter-to-colleges-and-university-leaders-reject-efforts-to-restrict-constitutionally-protected-speech-on-campuses>.

<sup>57</sup> Romero et al., “Open Letter to Colleges and University Leaders.”

<sup>58</sup> Erik Ortiz, “Divisive Megachurch Pastor Draws Criticism for Role at March for Israel,” November 15, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/divisive-pastor-john-hagee-criticism-role-march-israel-rcna125346>.

<sup>59</sup> Ellie Silverman et al., “At March for Israel in D.C., Demonstrators Demand Hamas Release Hostages,” Washington Post, November 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/11/14/march-for-israel-dc-rally-national-mall/>.

<sup>60</sup> Ben Lorber (@BenLorber8), “Many signs in the crowd championing belligerent bombardment, collective punishment of civilians in Gaza,” X, November 14, 2023, <https://twitter.com/BenLorber8/status/1724501073396629735>.

<sup>61</sup> “Watch: Van Jones Booed at #MarchforIsrael after Demanding End to Bombs, Crowd Yells ‘No Ceasefire,’” The Hill, November 15, 2023, <https://thehill.com/video/watch-van-jones-booed-at-marchforisrael-after-demanding-end-to-bombs-crowd-yells-no-ceasefire/9175052/>.

<sup>62</sup> Abed A. Ayoub (@aayoub), “Lots of members of the JDL - Jewish Defense League, in DC. This is a terror organization responsible for many attacks in the US, resulting in the death of Americans,” X, November 14, 2023, <https://twitter.com/aayoub/status/1724516629617185095>.

## Employers Silence Dissent, Reject DEI Policies

The use of Islamophobic tropes to draw suspicion toward Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab critics of Israeli apartheid has also extended to other sectors of U.S. society. In particular, CAIR has noted what appears to be unprecedented involvement on behalf of corporations to restrict speech critical of Israel and supportive of Palestinian human rights, under the false pretense that any critique leveled against the state by Muslim, Palestinian, or Arab actors and their sympathizers is indicative of anti-Jewish racism.

In a previous special report in October, CAIR noted that following the initial attack on Israeli civilians, hundreds of top finance, tech, and healthcare companies issued statements or otherwise expressed support for Israel. While companies sought to create spaces of belonging for pro-Israeli employees through the release of such statements, their pro-Palestinian ones, who found themselves significantly impacted by Israel's subsequent attack on Palestinian civilians, were frequently left without any sense of support.<sup>63</sup> **Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, which many employers adopted in recent years in response to pervasive anti-Black racism, were abandoned, as Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab employees standing up for Palestinian rights were thought to be biased and even fired from their place of work.**

Specifically, while many corporate leaders simply refused to acknowledge the existence of Palestinian civilians, others explicitly sought to stifle any condemnation of Israeli attacks on Gaza, specifically painting student activists critical of Israel as biased toward religious minorities. Some corporate leaders sought to silence students by speaking to their university's administration, while others have used their public platforms to threaten students' career prospects.

As examples, Citadel LLC CEO Kenneth Griffin claimed that he used his considerable influence as a major donor to Harvard University to urge administrators to "come out forcefully in defense of Israel," seemingly seeking to counter the viral statement released earlier by students.<sup>64</sup> When asked by the New York Times if Citadel would ever hire the head of a student group who signed the statement, Griffin reportedly responded with an unequivocal no.<sup>65</sup> Also in response to the statement released by Harvard students, on social media

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<sup>63</sup> CAIR, "U.S. Corporate Leaders Promote Anti-Arab, Islamophobic Bias," October 17, 2023, <https://islamophobia.org/special-reports/u-s-corporations-promote-anti-arab-islamophobic-bias/>.

<sup>64</sup> Rob Copeland, "Powerful Donors Push Universities to Condemn Criticism of Israel," The New York Times, October 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/15/business/harvard-upenn-hamas-israel-students-donors.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Copeland, "Powerful Donors Push Universities."

platform X, Pershing Square Capital Management CEO William Ackman publicly called for Harvard to release a list of signatories to CEOs so that they do not “inadvertently hire any of their members.”<sup>66</sup> Multiple other CEOs, including those at FabFitFun, EasyHealth, Dovehill Capital Management, and Sweetgreen, have publicly supported him in threatening the careers of students.<sup>67</sup>

Attempts at silencing Muslim and Palestinian voices have also extended to places of employment. Sites have emerged online to intimidate employees who express support for humanitarian relief in Gaza. One site published more than 17,000 posts concerning employees of major corporations, such as Amazon and Mastercard.<sup>68</sup> LinkedIn issued a cease-and-desist letter to the site, after it determined that it extracted content from the platform using automated programs – otherwise known as ‘scraping’ – a violation of LinkedIn’s policies.<sup>69</sup> CAIR has itself received complaints in which Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab employees have been let go in connection with their support for Palestinian human rights on social media or at their workplace.

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<sup>66</sup> Bill Ackman (@BillAckman), “I have been asked by a number of CEOs if @harvard would release a list of the members of each of the Harvard organizations...”, X, October 10, 2023, <https://twitter.com/BillAckman/status/1711788747086233661>.

<sup>67</sup> Matt Egan, “Harvard Student Groups Issued an Anti-Israel Statement. CEOs Want Them Blacklisted,” CNN, November 28, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/business/harvard-israel-hamas-ceos-students/index.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Ryan Mac, “LinkedIn Issues Warning to Site Shaming Pro-Palestinian Sentiment,” The New York Times, October 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/22/world/middleeast/anti-israel-workers-website-linkedin.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Mac, “LinkedIn Issues Warning to Site.”

## Abandoning Pretense of Free Speech in Higher Education Institutions

**Across the country, university administrators have also participated in this disturbing trend of threatening students expressing vocal support for Palestinian human rights, also apparently under the false pretense that any critique of Israel, particularly from Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab students, necessarily constitutes discrimination against a religious minority.**

In October, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis asserted he had closed two chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), an organization advocating for Palestinian rights, in his state. These chapters were reportedly ordered to “shut down because they violated the state’s anti-terrorism statute.”<sup>70</sup> According to State University of Florida Chancellor Ray Rodrigues, the universities involved obtained legal opinions about dissolving these chapters, and found that they “raised concerns about potential personal liability for university actors who deactivate the student-registered organization.”<sup>71</sup> As of CNN’s report on November 9, neither chapter had been shut down.<sup>72</sup>

As noted above, the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) baseless accusations against pro-Palestinian student organizations in an effort to urge nearly 200 colleges and universities to investigate them also constitute a serious and unprecedented challenge to censor free speech in higher education. In November, Brandeis University became the first private university to ban a student chapter of National Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP).<sup>73</sup> Columbia University administrators altered event policies twelve days before suspending Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace student groups for violating university policies.<sup>74</sup> The suspension means that neither group will be eligible to hold events on campus or receive university funding.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Denise Royal and Steve Contorno, “Florida University System Says It Has Not Deactivated Students for Justice in Palestine Chapters,” CNN, November 9, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/09/politics/florida-students-for-justice-in-palestine-chapters/index.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Royal and Contorno, “Florida University System Says It Has Not Deactivated Students for Justice in Palestine Chapters.”

<sup>72</sup> Royal and Contorno.

<sup>73</sup> Olafimihan Oshin, “Private University Bans Students for Justice in Palestine as Middle East Fallout Spreads,” The Hill, November 8, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/4296741-first-private-university-bans-students-for-justice-in-palestine-as-middle-east-fallout-spreads/>.

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Huddleston, “Columbia Updated Its Event Policy Webpages. Seventeen Days Later, It Suspended SJP and JVP,” Columbia Daily Spectator, November 17, 2023, <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2023/11/17/columbia-updated-its-event-policy-webpages-twelve-days-later-it-suspended-sjp-and-jvp/>.

<sup>75</sup> Kristina Rex, “Expert Warns of Free Speech Concerns after Brandeis Bans Pro-Palestinian Group,” CBS News, November 7, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/brandeis-bans-pro-palestinian-group-free-speech-concerns/>.



CAIR experts struggle to determine if Governor DeSantis exploiting his role to collectively target students or the ADL calling for authorities to initiate investigations against an entire class of students absent evidence of wrongdoing stands as the most significant challenge to campus free speech in 2023.

## Media Outlets Censor Journalists, Anchors

Since October 7, CAIR has also noted attempts to censor journalists and reporters – particularly those who are Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian – who have attempted to raise concerns regarding the Israeli government’s treatment of Palestinian civilians, further promoting the Islamophobic trope that renders any criticism of Israel unacceptable.

Multiple journalists have been fired or threatened by various networks due to their support for Palestinian rights.<sup>76</sup> Sports reporter Jackson Frank was fired by PhillyVoice after expressing solidarity with the people of Palestine. Samira Nasr, the editor-in-chief of Harper’s Bazaar, experienced backlash and threats to her career after criticizing the Israeli government’s decision to cut off access to water and power in Gaza.<sup>77</sup> Editor-in chief of eLife Michael Eisen was let go after reposting a cartoon supportive of Palestinians from the satirical website The Onion.<sup>78</sup> Both Al Jazeera and Newsweek have produced more comprehensive lists of journalists who have faced consequences for supporting Palestinians.<sup>79</sup>

Media networks have also made clear attempts to censor voices critical of Israeli attacks on Palestine. In October, reports emerged that MSNBC may have removed the shows of three Muslim anchors: Mehdi Hasan, Ayman Mohieddine, and Ali Velshi.<sup>80</sup> BBC News Arabic had also reportedly taken six of their reporters off air for expressing pro-Palestinian sentiment on social media.<sup>81</sup> Publishing giant Axel Springer reportedly handed

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<sup>76</sup> Aleks Phillips, “Full List of Journalists Fired over Pro-Palestinian Remarks,” Newsweek, October 25, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/full-list-reporters-fired-pro-palestinian-remarks-1837834>.

<sup>77</sup> Angelina Chapin, “When Posting about the Israel-Hamas War Costs You Your Job,” The Cut, October 30, 2023, <https://www.thecut.com/2023/10/israel-hamas-war-job-loss-social-media.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Phillips, “Full List of Journalists Fired.”

<sup>79</sup> See Phillips, “Full List of Journalists Fired” and Rami G Khouri, “Watching the Watchdogs: Fear in Newsrooms Silences pro-Palestine Voices,” Al Jazeera, November 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/1/watching-the-watchdogs-fear-in-newsrooms-silences-pro-palestine-voices>.

<sup>80</sup> Jeet Heer, “The Fight over MSNBC’s Cave-in to Islamophobia,” The Nation, October 16, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/msnbc-gaza-hosts-islamophobia/>.

<sup>81</sup> Zane McNeill, “Six BBC Reporters Taken off Air for Liking, Posting Pro-Palestine Tweets,” Truthout, October 20, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/six-bbc-reporters-taken-off-air-for-liking-posting-pro-palestine-tweets/>.

down directives to reporters to amplify Israeli perspectives and minimize the Palestinian civilian death toll.<sup>82</sup> As media executives target voices sympathetic to the Palestinian people, they not only continue to suggest that Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs cannot be trustworthy sources of information, but they also allow for the dissemination of Islamophobic rhetoric as used by political leaders at home and abroad to go unchecked.

## Social Media Platforms Allow Disinformation, Silence Anti-Apartheid Voices

Social media platforms have also allowed for the continued use of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian tropes as they continue to fail in implementing restraints on disinformation and hate speech. At the same time, such platforms have reportedly endeavored to silence anti-apartheid and Palestinian social media accounts, seemingly suggesting they are untrustworthy or unreliable sources of information for reporting on the Israeli government's violations of human rights.

As noted in our discussion of U.S. law enforcement, a recent piece of disinformation that has spread across social media platforms, and particularly Facebook, is that Muslims across the world were conspiring to host a “global day of jihad” targeting Western countries and people of other faiths on Friday, October 13. The theory was misinterpreted from a statement by a former Hamas leader who called on civilians in the “Arab and Islamic worlds” to attend rallies in their home countries.<sup>83</sup> The term ‘global day of jihad’ was never used. However, right-wing lawmakers and influencers used this misinterpretation to spread a false yet widespread theory that all Muslims across the world were planning to unleash a violent “global day of jihad,” particularly in Western countries. Posts on Facebook both by these influencers and others, some of which have garnered thousands of views, have not only continued to suggest that Muslims and Palestinians are violent actors but have also prompted hateful and violent remarks against Muslims and Palestinians on the platform.

Other disinformation on Facebook also includes the now-widely-questioned claim that Israeli babies were beheaded by Palestinians during the attack on Israeli civilians on October 7.<sup>84</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu has since walked back these claims<sup>85</sup> –however, they remained widespread on social media long after this admission as

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Boguslaw, “Europe’s Largest News Aggregator Orders Editors to Play down Palestinian Deaths,” *The Intercept*, December 5, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/10/19/upday-news-gaza-israel-axel-springer/>.

<sup>83</sup> David Gilbert, “Rumors of a ‘Global Day of Jihad’ Have Unleashed a Dangerous Wave of Disinformation,” *Wired*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/day-of-jihad-disinformation-israel-palestine/>.

<sup>84</sup> Kat Tenbarge and Melissa Chan, “Blinken Reinforces U.S. Support of Israel in Tel Aviv Remarks,” *NBC News*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/unverified-allegations-beheaded-babies-israel-hamas-war-inflame-social-rc-na119902>.

<sup>85</sup> Matthew Chance, Richard Allen Greene, and Joshua Berlinger, “Israeli Official Says Government Cannot Confirm Babies Were Beheaded in Hamas Attack,” *CNN*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/12/middleeast/israel-hamas-beheading-claims-intl/index.html>.

Meta failed to take them down. This inflammatory misinformation led to incidents of hate against Muslims in America, including an armed man threatening to behead a Muslim woman wearing Palestinian-themed clothing on the Washington, DC Metro.<sup>86</sup>

Facebook has also reportedly failed to adequately screen hateful advertisements against Muslims on its platform. In November, a series of advertisements which actively promoted violence against Palestinians, including a call to attack “Gazan women and children and the elderly” and another post calling Gazan youth “future terrorists,” were approved by the platform.<sup>87</sup>

Social media platforms like Facebook have not only failed to protect Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab voices from hateful rhetoric and potential attacks; they have also reportedly participated in censoring those very same voices from sounding the alarm over human rights abuses in Gaza. CAIR has noted multiple reported attempts at censorship, particularly by Meta. In October, a Mondoweiss correspondent’s Instagram account was suspended, and the largest Palestinian news page, the Quds News Network, was removed from Facebook.

Some of these apparent attempts at censoring important Palestinian accounts seem to be systemic. In October, internal documents released demonstrate that Meta had been hiding Palestinian comments at a greater rate than Israeli comments. According to the Wall Street Journal, “Normally, Meta only begins to hide such comments when its systems are 80% certain that they qualify as what the company calls hostile speech...” Temporarily, “Meta cut that threshold in half over a swath of the Middle East, hiding any comment deemed 40% likely to be inflammatory...” and later further lowering “the bar to hide comments from users in Palestinian territories if Meta’s automated system judged there was at least a 25% chance they violated rules.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, Meta has seemingly judged that Palestinian social media posts are more likely to promote hateful language, once again relying on the trope that Palestinians cannot possibly be reliable sources of information as they are themselves subjected to what scholars and human rights organizations have warned constitutes genocide.

Hindutva nationalist groups, arguably among the primary instigators of Islamophobia today, have long engaged in efforts to spread anti-Muslim rhetoric across the globe. While we contextualize these efforts later in this paper, we first discuss here the concerning attempts by these foreign nationalists to stifle criticism of the Israeli government and promote disinformation regarding Palestinians.

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<sup>86</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Calls on D.C. Metro Transit Police to ID, Arrest Man Who Flashed Gun, Threatened to Behead Muslims Wearing Palestinian Clothing,” November 16, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-calls-on-d-c-metro-transit-police-to-id-arrest-man-who-flashed-gun-threatened-to-behead-muslims-wearing-palestinian-clothing/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-calls-on-d-c-metro-transit-police-to-id-arrest-man-who-flashed-gun-threatened-to-behead-muslims-wearing-palestinian-clothing/).

<sup>87</sup> Sam Biddle, “Facebook Approved an Israeli Ad Calling for Assassination of Pro-Palestine Activist,” *The Intercept*, November 21, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/11/21/facebook-ad-israel-palestine-violence/>.

<sup>88</sup> Sam Schechner, Jeff Horwitz, and Newley Purnell, “Inside Meta, Debate over What’s Fair in Suppressing Comments in the Palestinian Territories,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/inside-meta-debate-over-whats-fair-in-suppressing-speech-in-the-palestinian-territories-6212aa58>.

## Hindutva Groups Sense Opportunity and Join In

Prime Minister Modi, whose party has openly promoted far-right Hindutva nationalism, and his government have not only remained relatively silent amid the rising death toll of Palestinians in Gaza, but have also seemingly sought to suppress pro-Palestinian voices. On October 10, even after Israel announced its plans to conduct a “complete siege” of Gaza and cut food and electricity from Palestinian civilians, Prime Minister Modi once again expressed that the “[P]eople of India stand firmly with Israel,” failing to acknowledge the plight of Palestinians in Gaza.<sup>89</sup> On October 27, after more than 5,000 Palestinians were reportedly killed, India abstained from a UN resolution calling for a humanitarian truce, one that over 120 countries endorsed.<sup>90</sup> Reports have also emerged that the Indian government has barred solidarity protests organized by Muslims in Kashmir and asked Muslim religious leaders not to discuss the conflict, in an apparent attempt to challenge the Indian government’s endorsement of Israeli activities in Gaza.<sup>91</sup>

Modi’s unconditional support for the Israeli government and failure to address human rights concerns in Palestine is coupled with increased attempts by Hindutva extremists on social media to spread disinformation about Palestinians across the globe. In the days following October 7, social media accounts on X spread videos falsely mislabeled as incidents in which Palestinians attacked Israeli civilians along with other pieces of disinformation. According to a fact-checking journalist, roughly two-thirds of the disinformation about the crisis in Gaza was spread by Hindutva right-wing accounts.<sup>92</sup> It is evident that not only have social media accounts continued to platform anti-Palestinian rhetoric but also that foreign nationalist governments and their supporters have relied on anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim tropes to spread disinformation regarding Palestinians in Gaza.

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<sup>89</sup> Narendra Modi (@narendramodi), “I thank Prime Minister @netanyahu for his phone call and providing an update on the ongoing situation...”, X, October 10, 2023, <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1711669988116050142>.

<sup>90</sup> Nicolas Blarel, “How India Became Pro-Israel,” TIME, November 17, 2023, <https://time.com/6336217/india-modi-pro-israel/>.

<sup>91</sup> Aijaz Hussain and Sheikh Saaliq, “India Bars Protests That Support the Palestinians. Analysts Say a pro-Israel Shift Helps at Home,” AP News, November 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/india-kashmir-protests-israel-gaza-f4b431716decb1550522d-b2e49630d9e>.

<sup>92</sup> Vaibhav Vats, “India’s Hindu Extremists Are Trolling the Israel Conflict,” The Atlantic, October 30, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/india-hindu-extremist-disinformation-israel-hamas/675771/>.

## More Laws Restricting Free Speech Likely to Come

Prior to October 7, efforts to silence pro-Palestinian support were ongoing, particularly through a wave of legislation punishing those who seek to boycott Israel over its illegal settlements on Palestinian land. These boycotts, which are affiliated with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, are peaceful attempts to put pressure on the Israeli government as well as companies involved in the dispossession of Palestinian land and the establishment of new settlements.

Over past years, over two dozen states have passed legislation penalizing businesses or individuals who engage in boycotts of Israel, impacting 78 percent of the American population.<sup>93</sup> While CAIR has challenged anti-BDS laws in multiple states as an assault on First Amendment rights, the push to suppress calls to boycott Israel continued into 2023. For example, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu signed an order banning boycotts of Israel in July.<sup>94</sup> CAIR warns that, as attempts to stifle free speech critical of Israel have spread across the U.S., we may continue to see threats to pro-Palestinian voices in the coming months.

## Conclusion

Although this is a preliminary evaluation in advance of a more comprehensive analysis, it is so far clear that Islamophobia has been widely invoked by domestic and foreign actors to discourage criticism of the Israeli government and justify its assault on Palestinians in Gaza. As CAIR continues to monitor the escalation of anti-Muslim bigotry and racism across the country, we encourage other organizations to further our assessment here of Islamophobia during this present crisis.

While the intensity of the attacks on Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs across American institutions is appalling, CAIR emphasizes that Islamophobia is a pervasive feature of American society that has long been in operation. Many of the actors and organizations we detailed above did not begin to promote or rely on Islamophobic tropes on October 7 but have rather been key instigators of Islamophobia in the past. In the following section, we move to contextualizing the wave of Islamophobia witnessed in recent days as an extension of the many persisting challenges to domestic and global Muslim communities over the past several years.

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<sup>93</sup> Human Rights Watch, “US: States Use Anti-Boycott Laws to Punish Responsible Businesses,” October 28, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/23/us-states-use-anti-boycott-laws-punish-responsible-businesses>.

<sup>94</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Calls New Hampshire Governor’s Anti-BDS Order ‘Assault on First Amendment Rights,’” July 6, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-calls-new-hampshire-governors-anti-bds-order-assault-on-first-amendment-rights/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-calls-new-hampshire-governors-anti-bds-order-assault-on-first-amendment-rights/).



## REASSESSING THE DRIVERS OF U.S. ISLAMOPHOBIA

**The research for this paper, which began before events in Israel and Palestine on October 7, was motivated by an initial hypothesis that the face of Islamophobia in the U.S. has changed since President Donald Trump left office. Experts had seemed to agree that many key groups involved in spreading Islamophobia continue to promote bias yet had lost influence in the mainstream public.** The below represents our preliminary work to understand how Islamophobia in the U.S. may have evolved in recent years and from where does impactful work – whether deliberate or unintentional – opposing equal participation for Muslims in U.S. society originate. Understanding this landscape is key not just for our analysis of the current anti-Muslim atmosphere that has served to effectively squash pro-Palestinian dissent but also guides us as we seek to empower strategic campaigns to enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

In this section, we argue that changes to the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia have occurred in two parts. First, we chart the relative decline in influence held by the U.S. Islamophobia Network, a group of anti-Muslim organizations that had been primarily responsible for anti-Muslim activity for the better part of the 2010s.

Second, we detail certain domestic and international actors as those currently most accountable for promoting or simply relying on Islamophobia in 2023. Domestically, far-right actors who are largely motivated by white supremacy continue to promote anti-Muslim sentiment through legal, political, and social avenues. Anti-Muslim sentiment is also inflamed by state-sanctioned surveillance on behalf of the U.S. government disguised as measures taken for national security, as evidenced by the FBI Watchlist and other discriminatory government programs. From the left, Muslims have also continued to feel discomfort in liberal spaces, as core beliefs for the community, such as the end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, are continually ignored by members of the Democratic Party.

Moreover, domestic anti-Muslim sentiment is both advanced and wielded by right- and left-wing foreign governments, who promote suspicion of and intolerance toward Muslims and their religious practices for their own domestic purposes. We discuss how nationalist ideologies, such as the Hindutva movement, have relied on inciting violence against Muslims, as well as how left-wing European governments such as France have also relied on Islamophobic tropes to launch attacks on Islamic expression.

## The U.S. Islamophobia Network

In 2019's *Hijacked by Hate*, CAIR identified 39 groups in the U.S. Islamophobia Network, a close-knit family of organizations and individuals that share an ideology of extreme anti-Muslim animus, and work with one another to negatively influence public opinion and government policy about Muslims and Islam.<sup>95</sup> These organizations had been widely considered the primary instigators of U.S. Islamophobia for the better part of a decade. However, in our interviews with experts and activists for this paper, participants struggled to identify any pattern of substantive, recent success from a member of the U.S. Islamophobia Network.

This shift is immediately evident in the relative decline of interest in anti-Muslim legislation across the country. While over 20 anti-Muslim, and primarily 'anti-sharia,' pieces of legislation were introduced in the U.S. in 2017, only five were introduced between 2020 and 2022.<sup>96</sup> CAIR and other civil rights organizations have long noted how Islamophobia Network organizations have been primarily responsible for promoting this legislation targeting Muslims.<sup>97</sup>

Brigitte Gabriel's ACT for America also serves as a specific example of change in the U.S. Islamophobia Network. By 2017, ACT for America was considered the nation's largest grassroots anti-Muslim group.<sup>98</sup> The group claimed hundreds of chapters under its umbrella and, during the Trump administration, "boasted a 'direct line' to the White House" and other American lawmakers.<sup>99</sup> However, Gabriel's post-Trump presidency social media feed often featured messaging praising the former President, AI-generated photos lionizing Trump, and her ongoing boycott of the National Football League. In 2023, ACT's claimed recent legislative victories were focused on voter suppression bills.<sup>100</sup>

On November 14, after the start of Israel's attack on Gaza, Gabriel resurrected a long-debunked conspiracy theory about Muslims, who are approximately 1.1 percent of the U.S population, taking over the nation.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> CAIR, "2019 Islamophobia Report: Hijacked by Hate," <https://islamophobia.org/islamophobia-reports/hijacked-by-hate/>.

<sup>96</sup> "Islamophobia Legislative Database," Othering & Belonging Institute, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/islamophobia/islamophobia-legislative-database>.

<sup>97</sup> Alicia Gay, "ACLU Lens: The Truth behind the Anti-Sharia Movement," American Civil Liberties Union, February 27, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/aclu-lens-truth-behind-anti-sharia-movement>.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen Piggott, "Who Is the Real Brigitte Gabriel?," Southern Poverty Law Center, March 23, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/03/23/who-real-brigitte-gabriel>.

<sup>99</sup> The Bridge Initiative Team, "Factsheet: ACT for America," Bridge Initiative, April 30, 2019, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-act-for-america-2/>.

<sup>100</sup> Act for America, "Legislative Victories 2023," <https://www.actforamerica.org/accomplishments>.

<sup>101</sup> Brigitte Gabriel (@ACTBrigitte), "The Muslim Brotherhood has been working to destroy the United States from within for DECADES, this is their secret written plan exposed," X, November 14, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ACTBrigitte/status/1724650814340579584?s=20>.

Gabriel's decision to bring back a common anti-Muslim trope, after years of shifting focus to other matters, raises the question: why has such an alleged imminent national security threat essentially evaporated from Islamophobia Network messaging since President Biden took office? In 2010, Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy (CSP) put out a report entitled "Shariah: The Threat to America", which claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood has successfully infiltrated the "educational, legal and political systems," as well as top levels of government, intelligence, the media, and U.S. military" and that American Muslim organizations undertake outreach efforts in order to "subvert" institutions.<sup>102</sup> CSP routinely gave out copies of the supposed takeover blueprint and persistently called for urgent action. However, as evidenced by Gabriel, such theories have not been as widely dispersed by anti-Muslim actors in recent years, perhaps as anti-Muslim animus became less profitable as a tactic of fearmongering after the departure of former President Trump.

What is clear, however, is that while Islamophobia Network groups certainly exist, they appear to a large degree to have lost a saliency that they once possessed. However, given Gabriel's most recent activity, this may also foreshadow a return of Islamophobia Network groups as U.S. actors normalize Islamophobia in order to justify the Israeli government's aggression against Palestinians in Gaza.

## **The U.S. Government**

Throughout 2023 and in the immediate years prior, the U.S. government has continued to indicate that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism is acceptable not just by relying on Islamophobic tropes but also by empowering programs that target Muslims. While President Biden revoked President Trump's Muslim and Africa Bans in his first days in office, continued government overreach and surveillance ensure that the U.S. government remains a fundamental source of Islamophobia.

The continued threat of systemic Islamophobia from government officials can be best witnessed in CAIR's investigation of the FBI Watchlist this year, as well as the ongoing implementation of so-called 'preventative' programs that unfairly target Muslims and other minority communities.

In January 2023, CAIR raised the alarm after obtaining a leaked copy from a Swiss hacker of what the FBI refers to as the "Terrorist Screening Data Set," a subset of which is the "No-Fly List," finding that it appears to be almost entirely composed of Arabic and Muslim names.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, after a study of 1.5 million entries of a 2019 version of the list, CAIR found that 1.47 million of those entries - or 98 percent - regard Muslims. More than

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<sup>102</sup> Ismail Allison, "From Banning Sharia to Banning Critical Race Theory: When Bigotry Collides with a Conspiracy Theory," CAIR, January 6, 2022, <https://cairnational.medium.com/from-banning-sharia-to-banning-critical-race-theory-when-bigotry-collides-with-a-conspiracy-theory-f915546dfa67>.

<sup>103</sup> CAIR, "Twenty Years Too Many: A Call to Unwind the FBI's Secret Watchlist," <https://islamophobia.org/special-reports/twenty-years-too-many-a-call-to-unwind-the-fbis-secret-watchlist/>.

350,000 entries alone include some transliteration of ‘Mohamed,’ ‘Ali,’ or ‘Mahmoud.’<sup>104</sup> The watchlist, which has been in operation for more than 20 years, has in effect served as a Muslim registry. In September, CAIR filed a lawsuit against the federal government, seeking an end to the dissemination of the watchlist among law enforcement agencies.

The watchlist is just one of several anti-Muslim measures taken by the U.S. government in the name of national security. In past years, CAIR and others have also criticized Obama-era Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs as anti-Muslim based on a widely debunked presumption that certain communities are predisposed to violence based on their race and faith.<sup>105</sup> CVE therefore unfairly paints Muslims in the U.S. and other communities as criminals and legitimizes policing measures against them. In Minneapolis, for example, public school districts partnered with the Department of Justice to implement CVE programs in school to surveil Somali Muslim youth.<sup>106</sup>

CVE’s rebranding – like the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) program and the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) – have continued to operate in recent years, effectively continuing the work of CVE in unfairly monitoring and targeting Muslims and other minority communities. In September 2023, for example, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it had awarded \$20 million in TVTP grants to provide “financial assistance... to develop sustainable, multidisciplinary targeted violence and terrorism prevention in local communities...”<sup>107</sup> These programs have not only proven to be ineffective but also institutionalize and normalize anti-Muslim racism in the United States. The government therefore continues to be a primary proponent of U.S. Islamophobia.

In November 2023, the Biden administration announced its intent to develop a National Strategy to Combat Islamophobia.<sup>108</sup> The development of a national strategy to combat anti-Muslim bigotry is an important step that can make a positive impact only if it involves an inclusive process with all stakeholders in the American Muslim community and tackles institutional Islamophobia within the government, such as the watchlist, mass

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<sup>104</sup> CAIR, “Twenty Years Too Many.”

<sup>105</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Joins 70+ Civil Rights Groups in Letter to DHS Opposing ‘Countering Violent Extremism’ (CVE) Program Based on Junk Science, Targeting Vulnerable Communities,” June 2, 2020, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-joins-70-civil-rights-groups-in-letter-to-dhs-opposing-countering-violent-extremism-cve-program-based-on-junk-science-targeting-vulnerable-communities/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-joins-70-civil-rights-groups-in-letter-to-dhs-opposing-countering-violent-extremism-cve-program-based-on-junk-science-targeting-vulnerable-communities/).

<sup>106</sup> Kadra Abdi et al., “The ‘Countering Violent Extremism’ Program Institutionalizes Injustice against Somalis,” MinnPost, May 1, 2015, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2015/05/countering-violent-extremism-program-institutionalizes-injustice-against-so/>.

<sup>107</sup> Department of Homeland Security, “Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program,” <https://www.dhs.gov/tvtpgrants>.

<sup>108</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Says White House Strategy to Combat Surging Islamophobia Must Begin with Demanding Ceasefire in Gaza,” November 2, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-says-white-house-strategy-to-combat-surg-ing-islam-ophobia-must-begin-with-demanding-ceasefire-in-gaza/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-says-white-house-strategy-to-combat-surg-ing-islam-ophobia-must-begin-with-demanding-ceasefire-in-gaza/).

surveillance, spying on mosques, and discriminatory abuses at the border. CAIR continues to call on the White House to fulfill President Biden's campaign pledge to initiate a review of the watchlist and no-fly-list and improve processes to remove names.

## Supporters of Hindutva

As previously discussed, nationalist groups have been increasingly involved in spreading disinformation and Islamophobia during the present crisis in Gaza; however, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has for many years targeted Muslims, making it one of the primary threats to Islam and Muslims in the U.S. today.

India's far-right Hindutva government led by the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has played an increased role in inspiring and allowing mobs to target Indian Muslims and other religious minorities, contributing to Islamophobic sentiment across the world and in the United States. In December 2019, for example, the government passed a law that made religion the basis for citizenship, threatening the rights of Indian Muslims.<sup>109</sup> The year before, Indian officials also threatened to expel Rohingya Muslim refugees, despite the evident risk to their lives. State legislation, such as laws against cow slaughter and against religious conversion solely for the purpose of marriage, are also wielded against Muslims in India.<sup>110</sup> In 2020, forty Muslims were killed during riots in Delhi, where it was later discovered that BJP leaders and police officials were involved in the attacks.<sup>111</sup>

Attacks against Indian Muslims have continued into this year without impunity. In July 2023, for example, far-right Hindutva nationalist mobs murdered an imam, burned down mosques, and destroyed Muslim-owned businesses in a suburb of New Delhi.<sup>112</sup> The following month, more than 300 Muslim properties were bulldozed by the BJP government.<sup>113</sup>

The U.S. Department of State's most recent "Report on International Religious Freedom" expressed concern regarding the treatment of Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities in India and highlighted violence by law enforcement and pro-government Hindu nationalists targeting Muslims.<sup>114</sup> The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) "2023 Annual Report" also recommended that the State Depart-

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch, "India: Government Policies, Actions Target Minorities," Human Rights Watch, February 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/19/india-government-policies-actions-target-minorities>.

<sup>110</sup> Human Rights Watch, "India."

<sup>111</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>112</sup> CAIR, "CAIR Renews Call on State Department to Designate India a 'Country of Particular Concern' Following Killing of Imam, Attacks on Muslims," August 3, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-renews-call-on-state-department-to-designate-india-a-country-of-particular-concern-following-killing-of-imam-attacks-on-muslims/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-renews-call-on-state-department-to-designate-india-a-country-of-particular-concern-following-killing-of-imam-attacks-on-muslims/).

<sup>113</sup> Alishan Jafri, "Muslim Homes, Shops Bulldozed; over 150 Arrested in Nuh in India's Haryana," Al Jazeera, August 7, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/7/vengeance-muslim-homes-shops-bulldozed-150-arrested-in-indias-haryana>.

<sup>114</sup> "India - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, December 7, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>.

ment designate India as a “Country of Particular Concern.”<sup>115</sup> This year, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) rated journalism in India as less free than under Afghanistan’s strict authoritarian regime. RSF reports, “all the mainstream media are now owned by wealthy businessmen close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.” RSF adds, “At the same time, Modi has an army of supporters who track down all online reporting regarded as critical of the government and wage horrific harassment campaigns against the sources.”<sup>116</sup>

Hindutva movements are evidently at the core of anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, and anti-minority persecutions in India. They have also stoked fear of and violence toward Muslim communities in the U.S. In January 2023, CAIR-New Jersey called for an investigation into the use of a bulldozer, a symbol of anti-Muslim violence by far-right Hindutva extremists connected to the destruction of Muslim homes, during an India Day Parade. Muslim leaders noted other incidents related to Hindutva, such as a truck which displayed anti-Muslim messages circling the premises of multiple Islamic Centers in New Jersey.<sup>117</sup> In Chicago, CAIR also noted a reported Quran-burning incident by a student this year and warned of a troubling connection to the Hindutva movement.<sup>118</sup> In May, two Muslim organizations also condemned the screening of “The Kerala Story,” an anti-Muslim Indian film, in American theatres. The film has been widely criticized for its reportedly bigoted depiction of Islam and Muslims.<sup>119</sup>

In a shocking November report, the U.S. Department of Justice announced charges against an Indian government official who attempted to assassinate a U.S. citizen on American soil. The citizen is reportedly a Sikh separatist, who is a “vocal critic of the Indian government” and has called for the secession of the Indian state of Punjab.<sup>120</sup>

Last year, U.S. groups also protested speaking engagements featuring anti-Muslim, anti-Christian Hindu extremist leader Sadhvi Ritambhara. Ritambhara’s hate speeches have been described as “the single most powerful instrument for whipping up anti-Muslim violence” in various Indian states, leading to communal riots

<sup>115</sup> “2023 Annual Report,” U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, April 29, 2023, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publication/2023-annual-report>.

<sup>116</sup> “Sclerotic One-Party Regimes and Media Control by Oligarchs,” RSF, [https://rsf.org/en/analyse\\_regionale/1009](https://rsf.org/en/analyse_regionale/1009).

<sup>117</sup> CAIR, “CAIR-NJ Acknowledges Middlesex County Prosecutor’s Office Probe of Bias Incident, Continues to Call Attention to Hindutva Threat,” January 30, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-nj-thanks-middlesex-county-prosecutors-office-for-probing-bulldozer-at-india-day-parade/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-nj-thanks-middlesex-county-prosecutors-office-for-probing-bulldozer-at-india-day-parade/).

<sup>118</sup> CAIR, “CAIR-Chicago Condemns Student Quran Burning in Naperville, Exposes RSS Hindutva Connection,” October 3, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-chicago-condemns-student-quran-burning-in-naperville-exposes-rss-hindutva-connection/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-chicago-condemns-student-quran-burning-in-naperville-exposes-rss-hindutva-connection/).

<sup>119</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Media Availability: U.S. Should Not Honor Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi,” June 20, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-media-availability-u-s-should-not-honor-indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-media-availability-u-s-should-not-honor-indian-prime-minister-narendra-modi/).

<sup>120</sup> “Justice Department Announces Charges in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City,” December 4, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>.



and thousands of deaths.<sup>121</sup> Ritambhara is also well known for her anti-Christian hate and bigotry.

Despite Hindu nationalist attacks on Muslims and other religious minorities, which has itself been documented by the U.S. government, the U.S. has continued to normalize relations with Prime Minister Modi. For example, the White House honored Prime Minister Modi with a state dinner during his U.S. visit in June, and Congress hosted him for a speech to a joint session. The failure on the part of the U.S. government to restrain the Indian government's attempts to silence critics of Hindutva at home and abroad continues to pose one of the greatest threats to Muslims and Islam in the U.S.

## Elements of the Democratic Party and the American left

Right-wing political leaders have traditionally posed the most explicit threat to Islam and Muslims in the U.S. This has not changed. However, the experience of the post-Trump presidency suggests that anti-Muslim sentiment within strands of the Democratic Party and the American left must also be addressed as an active threat to the full and equal participation of Muslims.

Muslims have certainly become more politically accepted over the last few years. During the 2022 midterm elections, a record-breaking number of Muslims, primarily affiliated with liberal and left-wing parties, won seats across all three levels of political participation, with several becoming the first Muslim representatives to enter statehouses. Many praised the news as evidence Muslims were “no longer on the fringe of U.S. politics.”<sup>122</sup>

However, despite advances in political representation and participation, the challenge for American Muslims still lies in their ability to be fully, not just nominally, Muslim in these spaces. CAIR has noted several instances in which Muslims' sincerely held religious beliefs garner criticism from Democrats and other leftist political groups, lending at times to an uncomfortable tension in which Muslims do not feel like they can truly express their own beliefs in political life. In other words, if Muslims step outside of the bounds of what liberals and leftists deem acceptable, they may find themselves rejected, or even attacked, by those groups that claim to extend their support for the community. When this veers from political disagreement to the use of Islamophobic tropes, it poses a serious challenge to equal citizenship and participation for Muslims in this country.

<sup>121</sup> The Bridge Initiative, “Factsheet: Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA),” Bridge Initiative, July 27, 2023, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-vishwa-hindu-parishad-of-america-vhpa/>.

<sup>122</sup> Sanya Mansoor, “The Midterm Results Show Muslim Americans Are No Longer on the Fringe of U.S. Politics,” Time, November 11, 2022, <https://time.com/6232719/muslim-americans-midterms-2022/>.

Support for Palestinian human rights serves as one of the primary points of tension between many liberal politicians and the Muslim community. As discussed in the previous section on the crisis in Gaza, efforts to silence Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab voices critical of the Israeli state have been endorsed by both Democrats and Republicans. The strain between liberal political leaders and Muslim communities can perhaps be best noted in the successful bipartisan efforts to censure Rep. Tlaib (D-MI) for her criticism of the Israeli state in October.

However, these tensions are not novel. In recent years, tensions between liberal and left-wing leaders and Muslims have also emerged most clearly in disputes over educational issues. Throughout 2023, Muslim families in Maryland called for the Montgomery County Public Schools to restore its opt-out option from newly introduced curriculum and classroom discussions that some parents fear would force their children to violate their sincerely held religious beliefs. During one school board meeting, a Democratic Montgomery County Council member argued that this issue “puts some Muslim families on the same side of an issue as white supremacists and outright bigots.”<sup>123</sup> A school board member had also questioned the motivations of a female Muslim student who testified to her discomfort with the curriculum, claiming that she felt “kind of sorry” for her and reportedly “wondered to what extent she may have been ‘parroting dogma’ learned from her parents.”<sup>124</sup> These remarks rely on gendered Islamophobia, which assumes Muslim girls and women lack the agency to form their own opinions.

## Foreign Governments

Islamophobia in the U.S. is also deeply linked to the work of both right- and left-wing international actors. Indeed, foreign governments are some of the most vocal sponsors of Islamophobia. For one, actions by foreign governments to promote anti-Muslim sentiment in their own contexts contribute to fear and suspicion of Muslims in the U.S. In return, these governments rely on the presence of and amplify U.S. Islamophobia to advance their own domestic agendas. The nationalist government in India is a prominent source of anti-Muslim rhetoric; however, many other foreign governments have also contributed to and relied on Islamophobia.

For example, policies by the Chinese government have also contributed to the proliferation of Islamophobic rhetoric across the globe over the last several years. Since 2017, the Chinese government has been involved in a campaign of genocide against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other predominantly Muslim minorities in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in an attempt to “root out the religious traditions, cultural practices, and local

<sup>123</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Seeks Apologies from Maryland Elected Officials Who Disparaged MCPS Muslim Families, Students,” June 8, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-seeks-apologies-from-maryland-elected-officials-who-disparaged-mcps-muslim-families-students/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-seeks-apologies-from-maryland-elected-officials-who-disparaged-mcps-muslim-families-students/).

<sup>124</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Seeks Apologies from Maryland Elected Officials.”

languages of the region’s Muslim ethnic groups.”<sup>125</sup> Millions of Uyghurs have been detained in concentration camps, and millions more are being used as slave labor on plantations and in Chinese factories.<sup>126</sup> According to a report by the U.S. State Department released this year, crimes against Muslims include “forced sterilization, coerced abortions, and more restrictive application of the country’s birth control policies; rape; torture of a large number of those arbitrarily detained; forced labor; and draconian restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement.”<sup>127</sup>

In late 2022, the New York Times presented evidence demonstrating that the Russian government had also reportedly promoted Islamophobia for their own political agenda, targeting the prominent Muslim American activist and community leader Linda Sarsour through an online smear campaign designed to benefit Donald Trump.<sup>128</sup> Following the 2017 Women’s March, organizations linked to the Russian government disguised themselves as fictional Americans and tested social media messages criticizing the movement.<sup>129</sup> One message, however, was more effective than others: singling out Sarsour’s identity as a Palestinian Muslim. Over nearly a year and a half, the Russian government circulated “often fabricated narratives around Ms. Sarsour, whose activism made her a lightning rod for Mr. Trump’s base and also for some of his most ardent opposition.”<sup>130</sup>

By creating and elevating racist, Islamophobic posts about things that Sarsour never said or did, the Russian government easily manipulated social media and bolstered the efforts of pro-Trump extremists on the right and anti-Palestinian extremists on the left who wanted to smear and silence Sarsour because she is a prominent Muslim, Palestinian female activist who has spoken out against injustice here and abroad.<sup>131</sup> The Russian government’s targeting of Palestinian Muslims such as Linda Sarsour demonstrates how U.S. Islamophobia is simultaneously used and created by foreign governments seeking to advance their own concerns. It also speaks to the prevalence of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian sentiment on social media platforms, which fail to adequately check disinformation and hateful rhetoric that comes to affect the lives of Muslims in the United States and abroad.

<sup>125</sup> Amnesty International, “China: Draconian Repression of Muslims in Xinjiang Amounts to Crimes against Humanity,” August 8, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/china-draconian-repression-of-muslims-in-xinjiang-amounts-to-crimes-against-humanity/>.

<sup>126</sup> CAIR, “CAIR Urges Biden Administration Act on China’s Destruction of Mosques, Suppression of Islam,” May 30, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-urges-biden-administration-act-on-chinas-destruction-of-mosques-suppression-of-islam/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-urges-biden-administration-act-on-chinas-destruction-of-mosques-suppression-of-islam/).

<sup>127</sup> John Feng, “China’s Uyghur ‘Genocide’ Ongoing in Xinjiang—U.S. Human Rights Report,” Newsweek, April 13, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-uyghur-muslim-xinjiang-genocide-human-rights-1697536>.

<sup>128</sup> CAIR, “BREAKING: CAIR Responds to NYT’s Report That Russian Trolls Targeted Muslim Activist Linda Sarsour to Help Donald Trump,” September 18, 2022, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/breaking-cair-responds-to-nyts-report-that-russian-trolls-targeted-muslim-activist-linda-sarsour-to-help-donald-trump/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/breaking-cair-responds-to-nyts-report-that-russian-trolls-targeted-muslim-activist-linda-sarsour-to-help-donald-trump/).

<sup>129</sup> Ellen Barry, “How Russian Trolls Helped Keep the Women’s March out of Lock Step,” The New York Times, June 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/18/us/womens-march-russia-trump.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Barry, “How Russian Trolls Helped Keep the Women’s March Out of Lock Step.”

<sup>131</sup> CAIR, “BREAKING: CAIR Responds to NYT’s Report.”

However, Islamophobia is also a key operating factor even in democratic societies, particularly in Europe. The French government, for example, has continued its work to stifle expression of Islamic religiosity, promoting and using existing gendered Islamophobia. In August 2023, the French government banned Muslim students from wearing the abaya, a long, flowing robe-like garment worn by many Muslim women. The following month, French courts upheld the ban, the latest one in France regarding Muslim religious clothing.<sup>132</sup> In 2018, for example, the French government banned the niqab, a full-face covering, which the United Nations determined was a violation of human rights. Avenues through which Muslims in France can dissent to these discriminatory bans are dwindling, as the French government continues to forcibly close French Muslim civil rights organizations.<sup>133</sup> Mosques and other Muslim organizations in France are also under attack, after the government announced that 13 Muslim associations have been closed since President Emmanuel Macron took office and that many more will soon face the same fate.<sup>134</sup> Despite this blatant disregard for Muslim civil rights, the U.S. has yet to act. While the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom denounced the ban on the abaya, the U.S. government has ignored CAIR's calls for the State Department to designate France a Country of Concern.<sup>135</sup>

The victory of far-right and proud Islamophobe Geert Wilders in a recent Dutch election, possibly elevating him to the position of Prime Minister, continues a rightward swing in Europe.<sup>136</sup> Wilders has frequently been hosted by Members of Congress and U.S. Islamophobia groups.<sup>137</sup>

Finally, Austria's persecution of Muslim researcher Farid Hafez ended earlier this year after an Austrian court said there was no evidence supporting the allegations against Hafiz and had all charges dropped. Notable in that episode was the influence of George Washington University's Lorenzo Vidino, "a central figure in the Islamophobia network" according to the 2022 European Islamophobia Report.<sup>138</sup> On March 23, 2023, the New Yorker reported, "In 2020, the Austrian Interior Ministry cited a report by Vidino as a basis for carrying out raids on dozens of citizens or organizations suspected of having links to the Muslim Brotherhood. No one

<sup>132</sup> CAIR, "CAIR Condemns French Ban on Abaya in Schools, Reiterates Call for State Department to Designate France as Country of Concern," August 28, 2023, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-condemns-french-ban-on-abaya-in-schools-reiterates-call-for-state-department-to-designate-france-as-country-of-concern/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-condemns-french-ban-on-abaya-in-schools-reiterates-call-for-state-department-to-designate-france-as-country-of-concern/).

<sup>133</sup> CAIR, "CAIR Urges Biden to Condemn France's Forced Closure of Last Major French Muslim Civil Rights Organization," December 23, 2022, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-urges-biden-to-condemn-frances-forced-closure-of-last-major-french-muslim-civil-rights-organization/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-urges-biden-to-condemn-frances-forced-closure-of-last-major-french-muslim-civil-rights-organization/).

<sup>134</sup> CAIR, "CAIR Calls on Sec. of State Blinken to Condemn, Address Actions Targeting Mosques in India, France," October 27, 2021, [https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-calls-on-sec-of-state-blinken-to-condemn-address-actions-targeting-mosques-in-india-france/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-calls-on-sec-of-state-blinken-to-condemn-address-actions-targeting-mosques-in-india-france/).

<sup>135</sup> "US Panel Denounces France Abaya Ban as Targeting Muslims," France 24, September 8, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230908-us-panel-denounces-france-abaya-ban-as-targeting-muslims>.

<sup>136</sup> "Geert Wilders, a Far-Right Anti-Islam Populist, Wins Big in Netherlands Elections," CBS News, November 28, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/geert-wilders-netherlands-election-win-for-far-right-anti-islam-populist/>.

<sup>137</sup> CAIR, The Empowerment of Hate 2017 Civil rights Report, <https://ca.cair.com/sfba/publications/2017-cair-national-civil-rights-report-the-empowerment-of-hate/>

<sup>138</sup> Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, "European Islamophobia Report 2022," <https://islamophobiareport.com/en/>, p. 74.

targeted in the raids has been arrested, much less convicted of any wrongdoing. An Austrian appellate court ruled the raids unlawful.”<sup>139</sup> Vidino’s collaboration with U.S.-based anti-Muslim racists Steven Emerson and Daniel Pipes is documented by groups that monitor Islamophobia in the U.S. Such trends in European countries have demonstrated that Islamophobia is a key operating factor that threatens the lives of Muslims abroad and, by extension, in the U.S.

## Passive Forces

While there are indeed active forces that intentionally seek to threaten Muslims, it is important to note that passive forces – those who do not actively seek to perpetuate harm to Muslim communities – also contribute to the spread of anti-Muslim sentiment.

### *Traditional Media and Social Media Outlets*

Media outlets and social media platforms continue to be among the primary perpetrators of Islamophobia. By allowing anti-Muslim hate, stereotypes, and misinformation to spread, these platforms serve as passive – though dangerous – vehicles for actors seeking to actively promote fear and hatred of Islam and Muslim communities.

Earlier this year, 28-year-old O’Shae Sibley was stabbed and killed by a 17-year old while ‘voguing’ – a form of dance associated with communities that identify as LGBTQ+ – at a gas station in New York. When the store clerk claimed that the suspect was reportedly a Muslim, media platforms amplified the unverified claim, prompting discussion that the murder was associated with the suspect’s supposed Muslim identity and leading to pressure on the Muslim community to address the incident.<sup>140</sup> The explicit identification of the suspect’s religious identity, when religious identity is frequently unaddressed in other similar cases, perpetuates an Islamophobic trope that presumes that Muslim communities are prone to act violently against people who identify as LGBTQ+. Reports later emerged that the suspect was in fact Christian.

Social media platforms are also increasingly important passive actors in disseminating Islamophobia. Global actors, in particular, have used social media to promote Islamophobia in the U.S. and advance their own agendas. As previously discussed regarding Hindutva nationalist involvement in spreading disinformation on X in October, social media accounts by Hindutva nationalists have become among the most active “Islamophobia social media influencers.”<sup>141</sup> Social media platforms have failed to adequately regulate these accounts, making them vehicles through which anti-Muslim sentiment prevails.

<sup>139</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “The Dirty Secrets of a Smear Campaign,” *The New Yorker*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/03/the-dirty-secrets-of-a-smear-campaign>.

<sup>140</sup> Kristie Keleshian, “Teen Arrested in Stabbing Death of O’Shae Sibley Charged with Murder as a Hate Crime,” *CBS News*, August 6, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/oshae-sibley-death-suspect-charged-murder-hate-crime/>.

<sup>141</sup> Mobashra Tazamal, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2023.

One notable example is that of Manu Manesar, a Hindu ‘cow vigilante’ who kills Muslims under the guise of protecting cows from slaughter. In one video posted on his YouTube channel, Manesar and his followers are seen attacking Muslims and forcing them to eat cow dung.<sup>142</sup> This channel, which features more videos of men flashing firearms and photos of injured Muslim men, has become popular among right-wing Hindu groups. The platform, however, had allowed the account to continue spreading anti-Muslim sentiment, even awarding it a silver play button for having over 200,000 subscribers.<sup>143</sup> Although some platforms like Meta and Google have now acted to take down his pages just earlier this year, these videos are still reshared widely on social media and on WhatsApp, provoking further violence against Muslims both in India and across the world.<sup>144</sup>

### **Education Settings**

While educators and administrators can certainly be active perpetrators of Islamophobia, CAIR has found that frequently schools are spaces in which Islamophobia is simply left unaddressed and Muslim students go unprotected, passively contributing to an atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment affecting Muslim students and their families. Therefore, there remains an urgent need to adequately address the challenges to Muslim students in educational settings, such as the bullying of students and discrimination in educational material.

For example, in a report released just this year, CAIR-CA found that, among Muslim student participants between the ages of 11 and 18, nearly half reported being bullied at school, and nearly half reported feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, 25% of these students reported that an adult at their school made offensive comments or acted in a way that was offensive to Islam/Muslims. Additionally, 34% of respondents reported that these experiences have a negative impact on their physical, mental, or emotional well-being.<sup>146</sup>

The work conducted by CAIR-CA is significant as we continue to assess how Muslim youth are impacted by Islamophobic rhetoric and work toward devoting resources to address these challenges. More research such as that conducted by CAIR-CA is urgently necessary to both understand the experiences of Muslim youth across the country and work toward advising parents, educators, and school districts as to how to address them.

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<sup>142</sup> Alishan Jafri and Kaushik Raj, “Who Is Monu Manesar, Indian Vigilante Accused of Inciting Haryana Violence?,” Al Jazeera, August 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/14/who-is-monu-manesar-indian-vigilante-accused-of-inciting-haryana-violence>.

<sup>143</sup> Jafri and Raj, “Who is Monu Manesar.”

<sup>144</sup> Jafri and Raj.

<sup>145</sup> CAIR-CA, “2023 Bullying Report,” November 2, 2023, <https://ca.cair.com/sfba/publications/cair-ca-2023-bullying-report/>.

<sup>146</sup> CAIR-CA, “2023 Bullying Report.”



## Internalized Islamophobia

Finally, CAIR also notes ongoing conversations regarding internalized Islamophobia among Muslim populations. In a report by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), researchers note, “Over time, Islamophobia has declined among other groups but has increased among Muslims.”<sup>147</sup>

The sense of internalized Islamophobia is reportedly “more prevalent among younger Muslims than older members of the community, Americans who have lived the majority of their lives after 9/11/2001 in a country that has demonized their identity in popular culture, news media, political rhetoric, and in policy.” The “steady drumbeat of bigoted ideas and state actions” have a “detrimental impact on the target group’s self-image and mental health.”<sup>148</sup> CAIR notes these challenges from within Muslim communities and intends to monitor such reports as civil rights activists work to address the systemic causes that continue to make internalized Islamophobia possible.

## Conclusion

The wave of Islamophobia currently witnessed in response to ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine is not an isolated incident. Instead, CAIR has argued in this preliminary assessment of Islamophobia today that, while the landscape of Islamophobia has changed, it is still alive and well in the United States.

Although many prominent members of the U.S. Islamophobia Network have waned in influence, the emergence of new actors and heightened activities of old ones have spread Islamophobia in the U.S. and across the globe. In particular, ongoing Islamophobia perpetuated by the U.S. government; domestic actors seeking to justify Israeli occupation of Palestinian land; social media networks permitting disinformation and censorship; discrimination and defamation against Muslim parents and children who advocate for religious accommodations in educational curriculum and activities; and multiple foreign governments, including Hindutva nationalists, have made anti-Muslim hate and rhetoric a staple of American society in 2023. These existing issues were inflamed on October 7, when mainstream Islamophobia became once again relevant as U.S. and foreign actors sought to effectively squash pro-Palestinian dissent to ongoing violence in Gaza by the Israeli government.

However, just as the landscape of U.S. Islamophobia has changed, so too must the work of those who favor justice and mutual understanding. The next section of this paper revisits CAIR’s tools for combating U.S. Islamophobia and makes recommendations to our approach as we move forward through the challenges

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<sup>147</sup> Dalia Mogahed, Erum Ikramullah, and Youssef Chouhoud, “American Muslim Poll 2022: A Politics and Pandemic Status Report | ISPU,” Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, August 25, 2022, <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2022-1/>.

<sup>148</sup> Mogahed, Ikramullah, and Chouhoud, “American Muslim Poll 2022.”

presented. We reassess CAIR's vision for this work as well as our definition of Islamophobia and pursue new approaches, such as a state-specific tool to quantitatively assess Islamophobia, in order to better address the demands of the current moment.

## RENEWING CAIR'S VISION FOR COMBATING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AMERICA

Preliminary 2024 Vision: *“Our vision looks toward the time when Muslims in America are granted equal access to social opportunities and equal protection under the law. Unhindered by Islamophobia, Muslims are afforded equal opportunities to pursue their dreams and potential. Islam is respected and equal among many faiths in America’s pluralistic society.”*

In 2011, CAIR put forward a vision regarding Islamophobia in America to represent the progress we seek to make as a result of our work to overcome anti-Muslim bias. This vision stated:

*“Our vision looks toward the time when being Muslim carries a positive connotation and Islam has an equal place among many faiths in America’s pluralistic society.”*

CAIR also presented several indicators that, if attained, would render this vision a reality:

- Islam has a 75 percent or higher favorability rating among the general public.
- A person’s Muslim faith is considered an asset in private employment and public service.
- Politicians welcome and seek public support from Americans of the Islamic faith.
- Association with anti-Muslim movements or rhetoric discredits those who put themselves forward seeking to earn the privilege of public service.

Current research participants commented on the vision as well as the underlying indicators. Two main suggestions emerged which we believe will inform a renewed understanding of CAIR’s mission to address Islamophobia.

First, participants remarked that the vision should more clearly address Muslims and Muslim communities in the United States. In its work, CAIR has strived to combat Islamophobia so that all Muslims are afforded the ability to focus on their dreams and potential, without being held back by the fear and anxiety of being met with discriminatory behavior. CAIR’s vision should therefore be dedicated not just to the idea that Islam will hold an “equal place among many faiths” but also that Muslims in America will not be hindered by Islamophobic hate and rhetoric. Participants therefore suggested that the vision be amended to emphasize the need for Muslim communities to feel a sense of belonging.

However, that sense of belonging should not come at the expense of the Muslim community. Other participants cautioned that parts of the 2011 vision may place too much emphasis on the need for others to hold Muslims in high esteem. The first half of the vision, which asserts that CAIR works to develop a “positive connotation” of Islam and Muslims, may find the community seeking the approval of others and, potentially as a result, sacrificing their beliefs in order to garner this approval.

As discussed elsewhere in this paper, Muslims have found themselves at odds not just with right-wing politicians who frequently endorse anti-Muslim legislation and attitudes, but also with left-wing politicians, who have historically clashed with Muslim communities over some beliefs held dearly by Muslims, such as the need to address Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestine and protect religious accommodations in school settings. As a result, participants recommend that CAIR’s vision shift to emphasizing our aim to advance respect for all Muslim communities and their various traditions and beliefs, just as respect is expected toward other religious and racial communities.

Other participants note that indicators should also be altered to reflect not only this vision but also the changing status of the Muslim community in the U.S. For one, the first indicator may no longer reflect our vision, if we no longer hold favorability as a necessary outcome of our anti-racism work and instead seek to promote respect. Also, as we continue to work toward Muslim political participation, one indicator should reflect progress made toward establishing voting power for Muslim communities.

Challenges arise with other indicators, however, as some, such as the second one regarding employment, may prove difficult to comprehensively measure. More work toward refining the vision, as well as developing new indicators, is therefore needed as CAIR navigates the role of its work in documenting Islamophobia.

## A FOUNDATION FOR MEASURING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE 50 STATES

CAIR has started exploring the potential of developing a quantitative state-specific tool to measure the degree to which Islamophobia is accepted. In recent days, CAIR has found that quantitative information on the state of Islamophobia has been impactful for political leaders and media networks to understand the plight of American Muslim communities. Moreover, an understanding of Islamophobia at the local level would likely suggest places to which additional resources and campaigns need to be deployed.

In preparation for this undertaking, we asked our research participants, including local and statewide leaders at CAIR, to develop indicators that would be significant in assessing the state of Islamophobia in their region.

Below, we offer a list of these indicators, which span political, educational, legal, and social spheres. In the coming months we expect CAIR to undertake internal work that will add indicators, remove others, and make progress toward identifying measurability. This list is not exhaustive but instead serves as a departure point for further study.

### Politics

#### *Islamophobia Accepted*

- Islamophobia against Muslim political leaders and candidates is accepted
- Anti-Muslim legislation introduced
- Anti-Muslim rhetoric used
- Issues core to Muslim communities ignored by political leaders
- Government programs to combat Islamophobia rejected
- Symbolic resolutions are rejected or face opposition (i.e. Muslim Appreciation Month)
- Major Muslim holidays ignored by political leaders
- Muslim organizations targeted by political leaders

#### *Islamophobia Rejected*

- Islamophobia against Muslim political leaders and candidates is rejected
- Anti-Muslim legislation rejected
- Rhetoric by political leaders denouncing Islamophobia
- Issues core to Muslim communities addressed by political leaders
- Government programs to combat Islamophobia adopted
- Symbolic resolutions are introduced or passed (i.e. Muslim Appreciation Month)
- Major Muslim holidays acknowledged by political leaders
- Muslim organizations acclaimed by political leaders

## **Education**

### ***Islamophobia Accepted***

- Reports of students bullied due to their Muslim religious beliefs and/or expression increasing
- Educators and administrators not responsive to concerns of anti-Muslim sentiment
- Educators and administrators promote anti-Muslim sentiment
- Lessons about Islam and Muslims are not included in school curriculum
- Muslim parents and students attacked for seeking reasonable religious accommodations in educational curriculum and activities
- Lessons about Islam and Muslims misrepresent the community and its beliefs
- Call for Muslim prayer spaces on university campuses rejected or ignored
- Calls for religious accommodations during Ramadan rejected or ignored
- Calls for recognition of holidays such as Eid are rejected or ignored
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion trainings rejected or banned

### ***Islamophobia Rejected***

- Reports of students bullied due to their Muslim religious beliefs and/or expression decreasing
- Educators and administrators responsive to concerns of anti-Muslim sentiment
- Educators and administrators reject anti-Muslim sentiment
- Lessons about Islam and Muslims are accurate and introduced in curriculum
- Muslim parents and students receive reasonable religious accommodations in educational curriculum and activities
- Efforts made to establish Muslim prayer spaces on university campuses
- Efforts made toward religious accommodations during Ramadan
- Efforts are made to recognize holidays such as Eid
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion trainings accepted and implemented

## **Social Life**

### ***Islamophobia Accepted***

- Incidents reported to CAIR increasing over previous years
- Negative social attitudes toward Muslims accepted
- Anti-Muslim incidents reported to the FBI increasing over previous years
- Plans for new mosques rejected or face opposition from local groups
- Plans for new private Islamic schools rejected or face opposition from local groups
- Other civil society organizations reject efforts to engage with Muslim organizations
- Local programs accept resources from CVE-legacy programs

### *Islamophobia Rejected*

- Incidents reported to CAIR decreasing over previous years
- Negative social attitudes toward Muslims rejected
- Anti-Muslim incidents reported to the FBI decreasing over previous years
- Plans for new mosques accepted
- Plans for new private Islamic schools accepted
- Other civil society organizations make efforts to engage with Muslim organizations
- Local programs reject resources from CVE-legacy programs

### Legal System

#### *Islamophobia Accepted*

- Police officers responsible for Islamophobic acts against Muslim defendants or Muslim members of the general public
- Reports of anti-Muslim hate not taken seriously or investigated
- Reports of law enforcement agencies visiting specifically Muslim and/or Arab households
- Religious accommodations for Muslim inmates refused
- Religious materials withheld from Muslim inmates
- Reports of Muslims disproportionately in solitary confinement

#### *Islamophobia Rejected*

- Police officers demonstrate respect to Muslim defendants and Muslim members of the general public
- Reports of anti-Muslim hate are taken seriously and investigated as hate crimes
- Religious accommodations for Muslim inmates welcomed
- Religious materials permitted for Muslim inmates

Challenges may arise in finding acceptable means to adequately measure certain indicators. Efforts to address them may require partnership with other Muslim organizations. Some research participants have also emphasized the need to look toward tools developed by other minority communities in the U.S. not just to inform the development of an Islamophobia tool but also to understand the degree to which Islamophobia is acceptable. Our experts have noted that there are correlations between the acceptability of Islamophobia and the acceptability of hate toward other minority groups across the country. CAIR will continue to assess these possibilities, as it becomes more clear that quantitative tools may complement the organization's primarily-qualitative strategies.



## LOOKING AHEAD

This paper has served as a preliminary evaluation of key trends in U.S. Islamophobia. We have discussed the present use of Islamophobic tropes by a range of domestic and foreign actors to justify the ongoing violence against the Palestinian people by the Israeli government, while also contextualizing these actors within a wider frame of changes to U.S. Islamophobia over the past several years. The changing face of U.S. Islamophobia has illuminated gaps in our anti-racist efforts, which we have sought to address through the reassessment of CAIR's vision as an advocate for Muslim civil liberties and an exploration of new tools that may help us meet the current moment.

The presence and proliferation of Islamophobia in recent days has left advocates for Muslim civil liberties with an uncertain future ahead. Questions of how Islamophobia will continue to evolve in the U.S. to suppress the civil liberties of Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs domestically and abroad continue to emerge. These questions are particularly pressing as we quickly approach the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. Should former President Trump return to the White House and potentially reignite anti-Muslim sentiment from Islamophobia Network groups with a renewed Muslim or Africa Ban, the state of U.S. Islamophobia may continue to shift in unprecedented ways. Moreover, challenges to the American Muslim community may also emerge in the event of President Biden's re-election, whose government's most recent decisions regarding the ongoing crisis in Palestine has created tension with Muslim communities across the country. Efforts to document and resolve these challenges must be made by organizations committed to promoting justice and civil liberties in the coming year. For now, this paper is a humble step toward this project of understanding U.S. Islamophobia and what must be done to address it in 2024.

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

As noted, over the span of October 2023, CAIR conducted interviews with external and internal experts to gather their assessment of: (1) the current landscape of U.S. Islamophobia, (2) the direction of CAIR's vision regarding Islamophobia, (3) the development of a tool to measure the acceptance and rejection of Islamophobia at the state level, and (4) what constitutes Islamophobia as activists struggle to address 'gray area' incidents. Some scheduled interviews were necessarily disrupted as CAIR and partner organizations shifted toward addressing urgent complaints from Muslims, Palestinians, and Arabs across the country.

Following the start of hostilities on October 7, CAIR has also closely monitored news coverage related to the ongoing genocide of Palestinian people in Gaza. As Islamophobia continues to spin out of control in the U.S., CAIR reassessed its approach and sought to produce a paper that would both document the use of Islamophobia in current rhetoric and contextualize this wave of Islamophobia amid the wider context of anti-Muslim actors in 2023. We note that this work is inherently limited, given that, as we write, more instances of Islamophobia have been reported to our offices. We hope that this serves as a start to further analysis of the state of Islamophobia in 2023 and specifically during the crisis in Gaza.