
ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY IN AMERICA TODAY

There is a pervasive and unsettling trend of anti-Muslim violence, discrimination, and rhetoric, as well as a general lack of understanding about Islam in America today—and we see it across our nation. Incidents of intolerance span the spectrum: violent attacks against people just because they are Muslims or “look” like Muslims; inflammatory rhetoric in our national dialogue, most recently evidenced by congressional hearings that singled out the Muslim community for special scrutiny and suspicion; state legislatures’ unnecessary and discriminatory proposals to ban the consideration of *Shariah*, Islamic religious law, in courts; and local debates over whether the construction of mosques should be permitted. It is clear that those of us who stand up for religious freedom and human rights and believe in positive interfaith relations have our work cut out for us.

HATE CRIMES, OPPOSITION TO BUILDING MOSQUES & DISCRIMINATION

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the number of reported hate crimes committed against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, rose drastically from 28 reported crimes in 2000 to 481 in 2001, according to statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. While the number of reported crimes has dropped since 2001 and exact statistics are not yet available for 2010, we know that far too many hate crimes are still committed. Recent examples include the stabbing of a New York City taxi driver and exploding of a pipe bomb at an Islamic community center in Florida.

The past year has also seen increased opposition to the building of Islamic community centers and mosques around the country, spawning legal challenges as well as vandalism and violence. In one of the most high profile examples, community members in Murfreesboro, Tenn. have tried to derail a proposed Islamic center, arguing that a building permit should not be granted because mosques should not be treated the same as churches. “Not welcome” has been spray-painted onto signs announcing the center, and an arsonist set fire to construction equipment at the building site. An encouraging sign however, is that a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey released in late March found that 69 percent of Americans said they would be “okay” with a mosque being built in their community.

There has also been an increase in cases of discrimination against Muslims in workplaces and schools throughout the country. In 2010 alone, nearly 800 anti-Muslim discrimination charges were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and by contrast to the decreasing hate crime statistics, 2010 saw the highest number of reported charges in the past decade. Many cases resulted from employers and schools failing to reasonably accommodate the needs of employees and students, including the freedom to wear head coverings and to take time off for religious observances.

DESECRATION OF THE QU'RAN

In the fall of 2010, Florida pastor Terry Jones made worldwide news in the lead up to the anniversary of 9/11 when he announced his plan to publicly burn the Qu'ran. While voices of reason succeeded in convincing Jones to forgo that hateful initiative, he went ahead in March 2011, overseeing a "trial" of the Qu'ran at which the Muslim holy book was found "guilty" of crimes and then burned. Although a legal exercise of free expression, such a heinous act is offensive to people of all faiths around the world and undermines the American values of religious freedom and pluralism.

ANTI-SHARIAH LAWS

More than a dozen state legislatures have proposed (and in some states passed) bills that would prohibit the consideration of *Shariah* in civil courts. These bills are unnecessary; the U.S. Constitution's protection of the boundaries between religion and government already prohibits any religious law from being implemented as civil law. These bills appear to be a way to stir up fear of Islam and reflect deep misunderstandings about the religion. They also disparage the peaceful practice of religion, which should concern people of all religions about the state of religious freedom in our nation.

STEREOTYPING MUSLIMS AS "RADICALS"

In March of this year, Congress held two hearings regarding the Muslim community. The first, held by Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) in the House Committee on Homeland Security focusing on the so-called "radicalization of the American Muslim community," misguidedly tarring an entire community with the charges of radicalization and the failure to cooperate with law enforcement. While there is no doubt that our nation faces serious threats to its security both at home and abroad, the continued stereotyping of Muslims and questioning of the Muslim faith will not promote the unity we need to address those threats. It also has the dangerous potential to intensify, rather than to lessen, prejudice toward Muslims especially given the increased level of anti-Muslim bigotry in recent public debate. The second hearing, held by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) in a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, focused on protecting the civil rights of American Muslims. Though the tone of this hearing was more positive, it is unfortunate that such a hearing was necessary in the first place.