



Impact of Islamophobia, Hate Crimes and Media on Muslim's in the United States

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Abstract- Some people in the western states consider Islam to be a religion of violence and its practitioners as the people who want to bring the Western Civilization down. Islamophobia is on the rise, not only in the West but in almost every state of the world. There is a general view that the incidents of 9/11 gave birth to the concept of Islamophobia. But that is not entirely true because it existed well before September 11, 2001. It can be defined as hatred towards Muslim community or an irrational fear of Islam. 9/11 attacks simply amplified this fear. Moreover, after these attacks the lives of Muslims changed, as they were blamed for these attacks, specifically in the United States. Muslim states and scholars tried to counter this narrative, but they are facing challenge in doing so, because several media houses as well as some politicians have started to sell this narrative. This study, while using content analysis as methodological design, intends to find out what exactly Islamophobia is and how did this phenomenon get intensified after 9/11. The role of media and politicians is also critically evaluated. Lastly, this paper explores how this phenomenon is impacting the lives of Muslims.

Key Words: Islamophobia, United States, Media, Terrorism, Hate Crimes, White Supremacist

I. INTRODUCTION

September 11, 2001 saw the United States attacked by four coordinated terrorist attacks. Bush administration held Osama Ben Laden led Al-Qaeda responsible for these attacks. Soon Muslims of the US earned the ire of the general public who started blaming them for these acts of terrorism. Some media outlets in the United States played an important part in convincing a part of the general public that terrorism is associated with the people of the olive skin – especially those who are the followers of the religion of Islam. This narrative attached the phenomenon of terrorism with 1.7 billions Muslims who intend to impose Shariah Law in the US and other western societies. This fear of Muslims, being the 'others', who are not ready to assimilate and acculturate in the Western societies, accentuated with every terrorist attack – even if most of those attacks were carried out in the Muslim states. Creation of these binaries in the form of 'us versus them' heightened the insecurities in the western societies and furthered Islamophobia – the irrational fear of Muslims. Islamophobia is not a new concept. It was first used in 1910 in *La Politique Musulmane Dans l'Afrique Occidentale Francaise* written by Alain Quellien. In English language, the term Islamophobia was used in 1985 in an article written by the late Palestinian academic Edward Said. He was the first writer who mentioned that there is a strong connection between Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism. While building upon this debate this study addresses following questions: What is Islamophobia? How and why did it get intensified in the United States? And what impact did it have on the lives of Muslims in the United States? The study, conducted using embedded content analysis, defines Islamophobia as irrational fear of Islam and hostility toward Muslims. It hypothesizes that Islamophobia got intensified due to the attacks of 9/11. Several media houses played an important role in promoting it and due to this the lives of Muslims changed and hate crimes against them greatly increased in number in the United States.

Constructivism and the Discourse

Constructivism provides the theoretical bedrock for this study. Constructivism states that reality is socially constructed. People create their own understanding and are influenced by the social forces around them. On the one side there are Realism and Liberalism which focus upon material factors such as power, but on the other side there is a constructivism which takes into consideration the influence of ideas. Constructivists are of the view that people construct meanings which are actually based upon the connection with their circumambient. They consider that ideas have the capability to shape international politics and then this international politics can shape identities, interests and foreign policies of the states. This is what happened after the incidents of 9/11. A discourse was generated in the United States that Muslims are responsible for terrorist acts and Islam is a religion which promotes violence and extremism.

Intensification of Islamophobia

In the simplest words, Islamophobia can be defined as hatred towards Muslim community or an irrational fear of Islam. Khaled Beydoun considered Islamophobia as “The presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and inassimilable. Combined with this is the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are correlative with a propensity for terrorism. It argues that Islamophobia is rooted in understandings of Islam as civilization’s antithesis and perpetuated by government structures and private citizens ... Islamophobia is also a process---namely, the dialectic by which state policies targeting Muslims endorse prevailing stereotypes and, in turn, embolden private animus toward Muslim subjects.” The phenomenon of Islamophobia got intensified by the events of September 11, 2001. These events changed the lives of Muslims in the United States and certain groups of people started considering them as terrorists, or the ones who sympathized with the terrorists. Most of the Muslims around the world criticized these attacks but still in the United States after the attacks of September 11 they became the dangerous ‘Others’. A discourse was generated that Muslims actually want to impose Sharia law in the United States. This was actually the most absurd thing because the Supremacy Clause of the Article VI of the United States Constitution states “This Constitution, and the laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance thereof; and all treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land; and the judges in every state shall be bound thereby, anything in the Constitution or laws of any State to the contrary notwithstanding.” It further notes, “The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” Thus, this clause ensures that the federal laws and constitution take precedence over even the state laws. In presence of this clause if anyone is claiming that a meagre minority of Muslims will be able to impose their Shariah Law in the United States, their purpose is malevolent designs vis-à-vis Muslims. The terrorist attack in Paris on November 13th, 2015 furthered Islamophobia not only in France but in most of the western states. Paris Attacks were a series of harmonized attacks claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), and claimed the lives of 130 people, including several Muslims. ISIL claimed that these attacks were a response to the French air strikes against ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria. Muslim throughout the world condemned these acts and soon ‘terrorism has no religion’ became one of the top trends on social media. Apart from the Paris Attacks, there was another incident which created a lot of problems in the lives of Muslims living in the United States; mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. In December 2015, a Muslim couple named Syed Rizwan and Tashfeen Malik killed fourteen people during a holiday party which was happening for the San Bernardino County Health Department. As this mass shooting was carried out by a Muslim couple so again some of the people in the United States got an opportunity to blame all the Muslims. Some of the media also used this incident to promote hatred against Muslim community. Although after some time it was found out that the male shooter whose name was Rizwan Farook had stopped going to the mosque two years before he carried out this mass shooting. Moreover, it was also revealed that he also killed his Muslim female colleague who used to go to the same mosque as he once used to go. Lastly, it was also revealed that Rizwan’s brother named Raheel used to work in US Navy who had received several awards like National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal and Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

Role of Media in Promoting Islamophobia

After the 9/11 attacks, several media houses and personalities played a critical role in shaping a bad image of the Muslims in the United States. It was due to the role played by the media that a part of the general public in the US started to view Muslims as terrorists or as people who sympathise with terrorists. Besides media, some political leaders also came on the media and gave statements against Muslim citizens. Their statements created a sense of insecurity among the general public vis-à-vis Muslims. Muslim religious scholars and academics tried to clear this misconception that Islam does not promote violence and Muslims are not terrorists but unfortunately they faced challenge in this regard.

After Charlie Hebdo incident, Arslan Iftikhar who is a renowned Human Rights Lawyer and who grew up in Chicago was invited for an interview on CNN with Don Lemon. Mr. Iftikhar condemned Paris attacks and stated that the Paris terrorists were “irreligious criminals committing acts of mass murder” and that the bloodshed they perpetrated was a “crime against humanity.” Still this much condemnation was not enough for Mr. Lemon who asked him, “Do you support ISIS?” Imagining a person who is a human rights lawyer and dedicated his entire life to fight for the human rights of others, being asked directly on CNN such a question, was shocking. Mr. Iftikhar responded by saying “Wait! Did you just ask if I support ISIS?” Iftikhar responded in an article in *The Islamic Monthly* as this question was equivalent to asking someone that “Do you support the Ku Klux Klan?” After 9/11 and the Paris Attacks, Muslim scholars were invited in

media houses and it was expected that they will condemn these attacks. On the other hand, and it was also pointed out by Arsalan Iftikhar on the same show, Christians also commit acts which come under the definition of terrorism, but nobody had ever asked a priest or a pastor to come on television and give an explanation about these acts. But the case was different for Muslim scholars and intellectuals. Moreover, the US media rarely labelled a Christian as a terrorist even if he performed such acts of terrorism. For example, Dylan Roof was a twenty-one-year-old boy who was responsible for killing African Americans in Charleston Church South Carolina. He even killed Clementa Pinckney who was a member of the South Carolina Senate. Before shooting them, Dylan said to these people, "I have to do it ... You rape our women, and you are taking over our country." This incident happened on June 17, 2015. Paris Attacks also occurred in 2015. Media labelled Paris Attacks as an act of terrorism and Muslims were labelled as terrorists but the act of Dylan Roof was not considered as terrorism and he was not labelled as a terrorist. He complained that he was starving, and the police bought Burger King for him. Now one can imagine that if this mass shooting was carried out by a person who was olive skinned or in other words by a Muslim then reaction of the police could really have been different.

After the September 11 Attacks, in November 2001 Franklin Graham, the son of Reverend Billy Graham was invited on NBC News with Tom Brokaw. On this show he openly used derogatory language against Islam and God. Then again in 2005 he was invited for an interview by Anderson Cooper who at that time was a host on CNN. During that interview again he gave an absurd statement about Muslims and said that there is only one way for Muslims to gain redemption and that is to die in a holy war. Then he was again invited for an interview on the same channel (CNN) and again he did not have anything good to say about Muslims. He again rebuked and ridiculed Muslims. Graham did not stop here. In lower Manhattan, Park 51 Community Center was about to be constructed and he was the one who openly protested against its construction. When he was questioned why he was against the construction of it, he stated that "Muslims will claim now that World Trade Center property is Islamic land." Apart from Franklin Graham, another popular personality who promoted the phenomenon of Islamophobia at that time was Reverend Pat Robertson. He was also the founder of Christian Coalition and promoted Islamophobia through his *Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN)* television. He used to do a show on his CBN television with the name of *The 700 Club*. He once used highly derogatory language against Islam. He was also invited on a show named *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* on *ABC News*. During this show he openly said that Muslims along with Hindus should not be given top positions in American government or judiciary. He also gave another really pressing statement against Muslims and Islam on his television. He stated that he is allowed to persecute Muslims because, "Islam is not a religion as such... [It] is actually a political system that is bent on dominating you and killing you." Ann Coulter is also a part of the league of Franklin Graham and Reverend Pat Robertson. She stated openly, three days after 9/11 attacks in an article published in *National Review* that, "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."

Another media personality who openly promoted Islamophobia was Bill Maher. His show was really famous, and he used this show to promote the phenomenon of Islamophobia several times. He once stated that "Islam is one religion in the world that kills you when you disagree with them" and considered it as equivalent to "mafia." Fareed Zakaria who is another renowned Muslim intellectual tried to correct Maher when he appeared on his show in April 2015. He stated that Bill Maher must show some respect towards the religion of Islam as he was talking about a religion which is the second largest in the world, of 1.6 billion people. When Fareed Zakariya tried to do that Bill Maher became angry and he went to say that the comments given by Fareed Zakariya on his show were actually insulting for him. These are few of the many names that have propagated an irrational fear of the Muslims through the use of media outlets.

After the attacks of September 11 whenever there was a terrorist attack, some of the media outlets used to blame Muslims without even confirming the identity of the attackers. As is the case with a terrorist attack launched in Norway on July 22, 2011. Andres Breivik, the terrorist, first planted a bomb in a car which exploded and killed about eight people. Then he went to the island of Utoya and started shooting teenage boys and girls who were actually attending a Workers' Youth League summer camp. He did not stop until he ran out of the bullets. He surrendered thereafter. Interestingly, as soon as the news of the attack broke, several media outlets immediately started relating it with Al-Qaeda and Muslims. *The Sun* headline, a *Washington Post* blog, *Wall Street Journal* editorial, even *The New York Times* initial coverage pointed to the involvement of Muslims in the attacks. Shiva Balaghi called it a "tragic day for Norway; shameful day for journalism."

Hate Crime against Muslims

Lives of Muslims in the United States got changed because of the terrorist attacks. Number of hate crimes against them increased several times. These were not only the Muslims, who were targeted, anyone having olive skin or beard were attacked, especially members of the Sikh community, who prefer to grow

a beard. One would be surprised to know that the first person who became target of these hate crimes in the post-9/11 period was not a Muslim or an Arab, but a Sikh. His name was Balbir Singh Sodhi – a forty-nine years old Indian American businessman. He was murdered because of the colour of his skin, his beard and because he was wearing a turban. Frank Roque, the person who killed him, thought he was a Muslim, and when he was handcuffed, shouted “I stand for America all the way.” Moreover, white supremacists started to target Muslims deliberately. For instance, forty-six years old Craig Stephen Hicks deliberately killed three young Muslims – two female and a male - in their flat at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in February 2015. During investigation it was found that he did not have any strong reason for killing them. Overtly he killed them over a small parking dispute. His wife informed that “He used to watch a movie about a man who goes on a shooting rampage over and over again.” Investigation revealed that he was particularly hostile to coloured communities and Muslims. He once stated, “If your religion [Islam] kept its big mouth shut, so would I.”

An important fact remains that people in the United States were not only killed by the terrorists who call themselves Muslims, but also by members of other communities. But mostly these are the societal and media’s dual standards that the narrative against Muslims was specifically given credence over other issues. For instance, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) noted that a white supremacist Dylan Roof alone murdered more people in one night than Muslim “terrorists have killed on US soil in total between 2011 and 2014.”

SPLC noted that in 2019 there existed 940 hate groups in the United States, out of which 84 are specifically Anti-Muslim groups. Above figure also tells that the number of hate groups have increased steadily since 1999. Although they condemned the March 2019 Christchurch New Zealand attack, yet one of their main leaders John Guandolo, an ex-FBI agent and President of *Understanding the Threat*, noted “This also highlights the growing frustration in the West by citizens who feel helpless watching their communities being surrendered by their leaders to Islamic jihadis implementing barbaric sharia (Islamic Law) and destroying liberty while security services not only fail to do their duty, they promote and support the jihadis by catering to their every request.” Interestingly Guandolo was hired by the states to train its police and other law enforcement officers. Similarly Brigitte Gabriel, a Lebanese born Christian and leader of the one of the biggest anti-Muslim group in the United States, *ACT! For America*, once noted “If a Muslim who has—who is—a practicing Muslim who believes the word of the Koran to be the word of Allah, who abides by Islam, who goes to mosque and prays every Friday, who prays five times a day—this practicing Muslim, who believes in the teachings of the Koran, cannot be a loyal citizen to the United States of America.” It is believed that she was close to Trump's White House and even gave a national security briefing to Donald Trump. *Act for America* website claims that it helped pass 108 bills at state and federal levels. One can only presume that the laws that it helped pass must mostly be destined against the Muslims or minority groups.

The suspicions against Muslims has become, to some extent, a permanent feature of United States society. After the 9/11 incidents, the New York Police Department (NYPD) started spying on American Muslim community. Associated Press reporters Matt Appuzo and Adam Goldman uncovered this activity, for which they won Pulitzer Prize in 2012. It was also found out that the police officials used to send undercover agents to Ivy League Colleges like the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University to spy on Muslim students. Apart from this, it also sent undercover agents known as “rakers” into Muslim neighbourhoods. They used to sit with Muslims and used to interact with them in places like internet cafes, restaurants, halal meat shops and hookah bars. NYPD also used to recruit Muslims for carrying out spying activities, especially the ones who used to get arrested for small crimes like a traffic violation. Those who used to agree to spying were given cash rewards. For example, nineteen years old American Muslim Shaimur Rahman, when got arrested was forced to become an undercover agent – ‘a mosque crawler’ – and his task was to instigate Muslims to give pejorative comments. He used to provide pictures of mosques, make lists of the Muslims who used to attend religious study groups. Actually, a strategy was made by the NYPD with the name of “create and capture”. According to this strategy, the task of Rahman was to initiate a conversation with Muslims about jihad, terrorism, and revolution and report back to the New York Police Department the details of the conversation. For carrying out this task he was rewarded with a cash prize of about \$1000 per month. NYPD said to him, “We need you to pretend to be one of them.” Even Muslims who used to cooperate with them were spied on. For instance, Reda Shata, an Imam in New York, used to fully cooperate with the law enforcement agencies. He used to invite police officials and even Mayor Michael Bloomberg for breakfasts and dinners in his mosque. But still the NYPD spied on him continuously. Spying by the NYPD on the basis of religion was illegal. Besides it created resentment and tensions within the Muslim community who started to suspect their fellow worshippers. The NYPD continued this activity till January 2016, when a lawsuit was filed against it and the decision forbade it to

carry out investigations on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity. Some US politicians did not hide their hatred for the Muslims. For instance, after 9/11 the then Republican Congressman Saxby Chambliss informed a meeting of law enforcement officials at Georgia that an appropriate response to terrorism would be to “turn the sheriff loose and have him arrest every Muslim that crosses the state line.” This hatred was so strong that even President Barrack H. Obama had to face it. He was often intimidated by the opposition and rightist groups of being a black Muslim. because of his middle name which was Hussein. The statements given by these politicians had a strong impact on American public. This can be seen from the fact that in 2011 a public opinion poll carried out by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that thirty percent of the Americans were of the view that Muslims wanted to impose Sharia law in the US. President Donald Trump also used hatred against Muslims as an opportunity to gain votes when he was running his Presidential campaign in 2016 and again in 2020. He even issued several executive orders to ban entry from some Muslim states of the immigrants. Several polls were carried out which showed that these were mostly republicans who are suspicious about Muslims.

Not only the lives of the Muslims in the US but also in several other European states got affected and hate crimes against Muslims increased several times. For instance a poll was carried out in France in 2016 in which around forty six percent of French respondents stated that they are afraid of the refugees especially those coming from Muslim majority areas.

II. CONCLUSION

Islamophobia is not a myth. The narrative against Muslims was created by several groups in the United States and the media intensified this phenomenon. September 11 attacks gave a specific boost to this phenomenon. After these attacks, Muslims were openly declared as dangerous ‘others’. There is a dire need to introduce steps to curb growing Islamophobia. President Biden, soon after assuming office, issued several executive orders reversing the travel ban on Muslims Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) must come up with a policy and it must take steps to prevent the growth of Islamophobia in the Western societies. Islamophobia is real and it is growing, and it is impacting the lives of Muslims throughout the world. It impacted the lives of the Muslims in the United States of America and in Europe and recently one can see wave of Islamophobic policies in India as well. Muslims throughout the world are looked with suspicion, and the United States which was supposed to be the torch-bearer of universal moral values in the world, furthered it because of its policies. In order to address Islamophobia, the Western states and societies need to understand that Muslim living in those states wish to lead a normal life. Muslims, living in the United States and other Western states, have also hesitated to assimilate in the host societies. Unless Muslims and members of the host societies do not realise and learn to live together in a pluralistic environment, the mutual fear of each other will continue to grow.

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