

Islamophobia Has Corroded American Values

Asma Khalid

Every July, I take my boys back to my hometown in Indiana so we can watch the Independence Day parade. They run around in American-flag shirts and devour far too many rocket pops as vintage cars, tractors, and an Abraham Lincoln in shorts make their way down Main Street.

I've always loved that parade, but it's not the same one I recall watching as a girl. In recent years—in between the marching bands and Girl Scouts—comes a camouflage military Humvee, a papier-mâché bald eagle flying at a jumbo-size Bible, and a tribute to “Indiana’s fallen heroes,” during which photos of so many, too many, young Hoosiers who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq are carried out on banners. It's a somber scene. The shadow of September 11, the wars that followed, and the culture that shaped us all hangs over the parade.

I'm not usually one to read much into the symbolism of anniversaries, but this year marks both 250 years since the founding of the United States and 25 years since 9/11. I can't think of one without the other, because September 11 not only transformed how the United States interacted with Muslims abroad and at home; it also changed our collective view of American values around citizenship, identity, and civil liberties.

In my earliest memories, we didn't have a hometown mosque—there wasn't enough money or enough Muslims to build one. But by the early 1990s, the community had raised the funds. We were excited to celebrate our newly constructed mosque amid the cornfields, but not everyone felt the same way. During the official ground-breaking, one of the neighbors blasted music aggressively. Then one day, a mountain of dirt appeared along that neighbor's property line—a berm to, presumably, hide the mosque from sight. We children were warned to stay away. If someone accidentally kicked a soccer ball into the neighbor's lawn, we were not to chase it. It's disorienting, as a kid, to feel unwelcome in your own hometown.

[Steven B. Smith: How to love the U.S.A.](#)

I was a teenager on September 11, and mourned with all Americans the terrible loss of 2,977 lives on that awful day. Three months later, [bullet holes were discovered](#) in a window at the mosque, though no one saw the culprit and no one was hurt. Muslim communities in other parts of the country faced more threats in the days, weeks, and years that followed. It became routine for women in hijabs to be harassed and for mosques to be vandalized. In Ohio, a man plowed his Ford Mustang into the front door of a mosque. In Texas, a man threw a Molotov cocktail toward a mosque; children fled as it shattered. In Seattle, a man attempted to set fire to cars in a mosque parking lot and then [fired](#) a gun at worshippers. I'm not sure how much I knew of these episodes at the time, but I was well aware that some Americans were deeply distrustful of Muslims, and I worried about the rumblings of government surveillance.

But in my hometown, such threats were not the norm. The Indiana I grew up in was friendly, known for its “Hoosier hospitality.” Sure, it wasn't always particularly attuned to difference. When I was in middle school, our class learned about Islam by watching *Not Without My Daughter*—the 1991 East-versus-West saga about an American woman, played by Sally Field, who was trapped in Iran by her husband.

One of the benefits of growing up in a fairly tight-knit city with a small-town feel, though, was that a lot of folks had known me—and my siblings and parents—for most of my life. Despite the bad guys who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center, to most locals we were just “the Khalids.” I was fortunate to have a relatively normal high-school experience. For homecoming I tie-dyed my hijab red and white—our school colors—and classmates complimented the look. It sounds so much like a cheesy Hallmark movie that I've asked friends and family to confirm, so I can make sure I'm not misremembering it all.

But as 9/11 retreats further into the past, strangely, anti-Muslim rhetoric has grown—no longer veiled or marginalized but actively celebrated by those in power. Prominent lawmakers have made it clear that they don't see people like me as Americans. "Muslims don't belong in American society," Representative Andy Ogles of Tennessee wrote on social media in March, the same month that Representative Randy Fine of Florida wrote, "We need more Islamophobia, not less."

"Every single Muslim holding public office in America is a trojan horse, and a threat to both national security and our republic," Representative Nancy Mace of South Carolina recently posted.

But the messages that are the most difficult for me to reconcile are the voices of my own people: Hoosiers.

In May, the lieutenant governor of Indiana, Micah Beckwith, went on a [conservative Christian talk show](#) and declared: "I hate Islam. It's a demonic death cult." (He added that he actually loves Muslims because we make "great Christians" once we find Jesus.)

His comments came just days after three people were killed in a shooting at a mosque in San Diego. Beckwith didn't mention that shooting, or any of the concerns that Muslims have for their safety—the need, for example, to hire guards or install security gates, as my old hometown mosque did. He wore a polo shirt with the insignia of the state of Indiana when he said that Americans need "permission to hate again," and singled out Islam for that hatred.

After a group of religious leaders including Jews condemned Beckwith's comments, he called them "deeply misguided" [on X](#) and wrote, "One need not look far into history to see what happens when the sheep are persuaded they can safely coexist with the wolf."

To me, it was all a depressing sign of how much my homeland has changed in the past 25 years.

I first started noticing the shift in the run-up to the 2016 election, as a reporter for NPR. I covered American politics, interviewing voters during one of the most tumultuous periods in recent politics, and an era in which being Muslim became seen as antithetical to being American.

In 2015, I was at a resort in Orlando for the Florida Republican Party's major political summit. By the time Donald Trump took the stage, the crowd was hearing murmurs of a tragedy unfolding in Paris—coordinated shootings and bombings by ISIS militants in what would become one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in French history.

A Muslim woman in a hijab spotted me in the audience, and excitedly introduced herself, thinking I was a fellow Republican in this unwelcoming crowd. "Sorry, I'm a reporter," I said. *But good luck*, I thought.

Roughly a week later, Trump was proclaiming—falsely—that when the Twin Towers fell, "thousands and thousands" of Muslims were cheering in New Jersey.

Soon after, he called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on."

In Florida, I met a man named Jared at an event for Trump-campaign volunteers. As I was about to leave, he stopped me. He wanted to share something that had been on his mind: why Trump's "Muslim ban" would be beneficial for a Muslim such as me. "True believers" of Islam, he warned, have a mission: to come to the U.S. and do "heinous things." And if they did, that would be a liability for me—I could even end up in an internment camp. A "Muslim ban," he said, was just "risk mitigation." I didn't bother telling him that I had always thought of myself as a true believer: someone who prays, fasts, and believes deeply and personally in God.

Shortly after that conversation, Trump casually told Anderson Cooper on [CNN](#), "I think Islam hates us." It was a flippant comment made by a man known for hyperbole and bombast, but one that is seared into my

memory. Who exactly was “us”?

Trump didn’t create suspicion of Muslims; he merely tapped into fears and distrust that had been bubbling up since 9/11. But his comments started permeating into our broader culture.

In late 2018, I went to the Mahoning Valley in eastern Ohio. I’ve visited that region many times, in part because it’s a place that tells a story of changing American politics—one of the counties that voted for Barack Obama before turning redder—and in part because it reminds me of home. These are the former steel hubs, old manufacturing towns and cities where many people tell me how much better life used to be.

One of my first stops was the local Republican Party headquarters, in an ordinary strip mall. Connie, one of the club’s volunteers, had told me to swing by because they were having their Christmas party that evening.

Before the festivities kicked off, we were chatting, and she told me how absurd it seemed to her that classic songs like “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” had become offensive to some people.

“You don’t want to hear it, go away. Get out of our country,” she said.

I initially thought she was complaining in a general sense about liberals, but then the conversation turned personal.

“You’re probably a Muslim?” she asked. (Probably the hijab was a giveaway.)

“I don’t care for them, I’m sorry,” she continued. “First of all, take that scarf off.”

“Me?” I asked, suddenly confused.

“When I see girls with those headscarves on, it just irritates me,” she said.

I tried to explain that I wear the scarf because I want to, that not all my sisters do, and that, frankly, my dad’s never been a big fan.

“You’re so pretty,” she said—a backhanded compliment, I assumed, to convey that she just thought I’d look better without a scarf. “I mean you have a pretty face.”

Connie was a former hairdresser, the kind of woman who, well into her 70s, still manicured her nails and had a blond pixie cut. I had interviewed her twice before, so perhaps that familiarity allowed her to feel that she could be candid. And I wanted to hear that candor—I was curious. So I asked her why she didn’t “care for” Muslims.

“Because they want to take over America,” she said.

Personally, I’d never met a Muslim who came to America to “take it over,” so I was baffled.

“Why can’t they just come here and live like us?” she went on. “If you want to be an American, be an American. Or be a Muslim.” She said it as if the two were incompatible.

“Do what we do,” she continued. “We were here first, okay? You’re second.”

That comment has haunted me for years: *We were here first, and you’re second.*

The story of Islam in America is not a foreign story; it began long before September 11—before, even, our nation’s founding. Thousands of Muslims were present in the colonies, captured in West Africa and brought to the shores of North America in chains. Historians estimate that 10 to 15 percent—possibly even 30 percent—of enslaved people transported to North America were Muslim.

One of those people, Yarrow Mamout, was brought to Annapolis, Maryland, in the summer of 1752, where he was put up for sale. He spent decades enslaved on plantations in Maryland, before gaining his freedom and building a home on a plot of land he bought on what is now Georgetown. I live near where his house once stood, and to my shame knew little about Yarrow's story, though he was so well known in his time that he was painted by the famous Revolutionary War-era portrait artist Charles Willson Peale. That portrait is now preserved at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Peale was fascinated by Yarrow and wrote about him in his diary: "Yarrow has been noted for sobriety & a chearfull conduct, he professes to be a mahometan, and is often seen & heard in the Streets singing Praises to God—and conversing with him he said man is no good unless his religion comes from the heart."

When Yarrow died in 1823, an obituary was published on him in more than 38 papers. His house is now gone, but at the site you'll find a plaque—a reminder not just of Yarrow but of the tens of thousands of Muslims already here at the nation's founding.

When the Founders first enunciated their commitment to religious freedom, they were thinking about Muslims. The protections of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Thomas Jefferson wrote, extended to "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination." He invoked Islam to demonstrate the theoretical reach of religious freedom in America—even as tens of thousands of enslaved African Muslims were denied that freedom themselves.

For the past three years, I've been working on a PBS documentary series tied to America's 250th anniversary called *American Muslims: A History Revealed* that tells these and other stories. I wanted my sons to have a fuller vision of American, and Muslim, history. The 9/11 era shaped so much of my adult life. It changed not just how we deal with one another—domestic surveillance laws, TSA checks, a political shift in American partisan politics—but also how we interact with the rest of the world. I had hoped that the era of the U.S. fighting in the Middle East wouldn't be a patriotic inheritance for my boys.

But if anything, we seem to be stuck in an even worse version of 9/12—one governed less by fear than by outright hate.

This unease with Islam isn't an issue only on the right. For all of the Biden administration's talk about diversity, few Muslims had any role in foreign-policy decisions. Many Muslim Democrats remain angry about Joe Biden's approach to the war in Gaza, and feel that his attitude toward Palestinians abroad was so dehumanizing that it has exacerbated hostility and harassment at home. But on the right, Islamophobia has been much more direct.

[Read: What the Islamophobic attacks on Mamdani reveal](#)

This summer, Beckwith, the lieutenant governor of Indiana, told the podcast [Conservative Review](#) that Islam is "a more dangerous ideology than even Nazism." I had been wondering whether he might ever apologize for saying "I hate Islam." Eventually I emailed his office to ask. An aide replied that "Lieutenant Governor Beckwith does not regret his comments and has not had a change of heart."

Since 9/11, the Muslims of my hometown have grown in number. The mosque has expanded. I'm told that relations with the neighbor have improved, though the mound of dirt remains—now covered in grass and trees, but still a warning to stay on our side of the property line. I tried calling and texting the neighbor, but she declined to talk—replying "do I want to speak to you NO" and "you need to research your information a lot better."

Growing up, I had thought of our mosque's neighbor as a bit of an odd character—an uncharacteristically unfriendly midwesterner, her attitude not particularly indicative of how Muslims were seen in the city or the state.

But in the past decade, politicians have amplified and normalized that animosity toward Muslims, even

when it has no basis in reality. This summer, Beckwith advocated for banning the Muslim call to prayer on loudspeakers—though there are no reports of any mosques in Indiana publicly broadcasting it.