

Opposing Islamophobia

& DOING IT WELL

WE HAVE TO DO MORE than contradict racist things people say about Muslims.

Our job is to undo a whole set of ideas that deliberately create anxiety and fear by playing on how little most Americans know about Muslims (and other people) in the U.S. and abroad.

Our job is to stop the violence that those ideas have unleashed -- however we can.

MAY 2017

These guidelines are offered in the spirit of the shared resistance rising against Islamophobia and racism. The ideas gathered here come from activist and academic work on Islamophobia and white supremacy. They are intended to add facts and context to help make organizing against anti-Muslim racism more effective.

This guide was drafted by a small informal group of concerned people, Muslim and non-Muslim, who work in Muslim communities. Feedback is welcome at OpposingIslamophobia@gmail.com.

What is Islamophobia?

Islamophobia is an ideology that generates prejudices, policies and actions. It's part of right-wing and liberal politics alike.

- **It invents a "clash of civilizations,"** an opposition between Muslims and the West.
- **It portrays the US as a space of exceptional freedom,** covering and diverting attention from U.S. racism, repression, and violence. It portrays Muslim societies as especially repressive by contrasting them with this whitewashed vision of the U.S.
- **It uses selective facts to distort reality and justify attacks on individuals and communities.** Attacks range from wars to surveillance, from individual assaults to discrimination of many different kinds.
- **It judges Muslims by different standards** than those applied to non-Muslims in order to make Muslims seem like dangerous outsiders. For example, Muslims must prove their patriotism and loyalty to the US, or they're deemed unpatriotic. And Muslims are often asked to distance themselves from their communities in order to be considered deserving of rights.

What purpose does Islamophobia serve?

Why would anyone invent fake knowledge about Muslims?

TO CONTROL OIL & LAND.

For nearly a century, the US government has propped up authoritarian figures in the Middle East. It has armed and funded them to push aside more democratic, anti-colonial leaders who would limit US access to oil and markets. At the same time, the US tries to maintain its reputation as the greatest proponent and defender of democracy in the world -- because that's its justification for controlling so many countries and economies.

TO INVENT A "USEFUL ENEMY".

"Experts" have promoted a made-up version of Islam that the West can define as a clear enemy, particularly since the Cold War ended. Painting Islam and Muslims as bad guys allows the US to keep fomenting crisis in the Middle East, making it "necessary" to control the region, while giving the impression that US violence there is honorable instead of atrocious.

TO DIVIDE & CONTROL PEOPLE IN THE U.S.

Inside the US, panic about "Muslims" distracts from more challenging questions (like, why are people in the US increasingly poor?). This type of panic also helps domestic leaders claim that we need mass surveillance and militarized police, which also target other marginalized groups.

Why is Islamophobia so challenging & confusing to address?

ISLAMOPHOBIA IS BASED ON MISCONCEPTIONS,

so it's not surprising that challenges to it are also often steeped in misconceptions. The mainstream news cycle continuously paints Islam as a monolithic or deeply problematic faith, with the result that almost everything Americans know about Islam is false or heavily distorted. Islamophobia relies on this persistent miseducation and demonization.

However, liberal expressions of sympathy for a certain type of “good” Muslim who renounces terror, loves the US, and is seen by mainstream culture as “just like us” are also part of the problem. That kind of sympathy is itself a form of Islamophobia. It justifies violence and repression against Muslims who are critical of the U.S. war on terror, or who aren't “like us.”

OUR LANGUAGE ON ISLAMOPHOBIA IS INADEQUATE.

The very language of “Islamophobia” promotes the false idea that it's only about Muslims, and therefore we just need to “stand up for Muslims.” Islamophobia does target Muslims. It also targets many more people, including those whose skin color, dress or country of origin suggests to others an association with Islam (e.g., Hindu, Sikh, and Arab peoples.)

In fact, the ideas about “Muslims” underlying Islamophobia have little to do with Islam or actual Muslim people. While “Islamophobia” is a recognized concept, many people are also using the term “anti-Muslim racism” to get at how religion, ethnicity, nationality, appearance (skin color, dress) and other factors are made into a racial category targeted for violence.

ISLAMOPHOBIA HAS PERVERSELY LINKED ITSELF TO CHERISHED IDEAS OF CIVIL RIGHTS.

Islamophobia often poses as a way to protect women, LGBT people, Jews, and other people from an inherently “harmful” Islam. This idea conflates “Islam” with dozens of cultures, political regimes, and schools of thought. It erases the experiences of many Muslims (including feminists and queers working in a Muslim context) and the multicultural history of Islam. And it purposely ignores similar concerns about patriarchy, homophobia and anti-Semitism present in Christianity and other religions and ideologies.

Fighting Islamophobia means thinking critically when people invoke concerns about women's rights, LGBT rights, Jewish rights, etc. that are primarily aimed at casting Islam as uniquely dangerous, while erasing the richness, diversity, and agency of Muslim people who are aligned with these human rights causes.

ISLAMOPHOBES PUSH US TO FOCUS ON MUSLIMS, RATHER THAN U.S. RACISM.

Opposition to Islamophobia often takes the form of defending Muslims who are being attacked. While this is necessary, it is not enough to only focus on their experiences, beliefs and “character.”

Rather than constantly countering claims against Muslims (e.g., that they are sexist, anti-American, or violent), we need to turn those accusations around and shine a light on Islamophobes and US society. This means not only challenging the misinformation and faulty logic of Islamophobic arguments, but also undermining their power to direct our focus.

Make sure the fight against Islamophobia is a fight for all of us.

COMMIT TO ABOLISHING ISLAMOPHOBIA and anti-Muslim racism in all its forms.

DENOUNCE AND OBSTRUCT ISLAMOPHOBIC POLICIES THAT AFFECT ANYONE.

Oppose Islamophobia because it violates fundamental principles of equality and justice, not because the person targeted by Islamophobia is particularly sympathetic.

DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF MUSLIMS TO HAVE DIFFERENT BELIEFS than you do, whether social or political.

LEARN ABOUT PALESTINIAN HISTORY and the Palestinian people's long struggle for liberation.

DON'T DRAW A DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISLAMOPHOBIC ATTACKS ON NON-CITIZENS AND CITIZENS.

When we accept violations of the human rights of non-citizens, we feed the racist idea that the rights of (white) Americans are worth more than others, and that Islamophobic policies “keep Americans safe.” Attacks on non-citizens are often a testing ground for attacks on citizens.

DON'T ONLY FOCUS ON THE “RESPECTABLE” TARGETS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA.

Oppose the “Muslim ban” for the sake of doctors, researchers, or US military translators and for unemployed people, people who refused to work with the US military, unpleasant people, and people who don't have any family members waiting for them in the US.

DON'T PERPETUATE THE IDEA THAT, if someone who is Muslim has conservative social beliefs (e.g., thinks homosexuality is a sin), or is critical of US foreign policy, or defends the rights of Palestinians, that this means that they are supportive of “terrorism.”

DON'T ALLOW SUPPORT FOR PALESTINE TO BE USED TO DEMONIZE MUSLIMS.

Fears and ignorance about Palestine are a big part of how Islamophobia works. For example, some politicians who make a big deal about opposing Islamophobia are quick to throw under the bus anyone who criticizes Israel. That's liberal Islamophobia in action.

Some guidelines for taking action:

GET TO THE ACTION.

Islamophobia isn't just a way of thinking, it's a physical attack. Get on a picket line at a place – an airport or a march, for example – where Islamophobia is occurring. Put your body in the way of Islamophobes. Stop them from their work.

PREPARE YOURSELF TO ENCOUNTER AND INTERVENE IN ISLAMOPHOBIA

at any time. Learn tactics for supporting someone who is being verbally or physically attacked. These include ignoring the attacker, moving close to the person targeted, casually talking to them, and asking if they would like to go somewhere else or if you can do something for them.

TAKE YOUR LEAD FROM ORGANIZATIONS

and individuals who are targeted, when taking action against Islamophobia.

SYMPATHIZE, EMPATHIZE, & DRAW ON YOUR OWN VALUES, BUT

while you might note your own identity when you stand in solidarity with others, make sure you don't imply that your identity “as a _____” (American, queer person, Jew, New Yorker, etc.) gives you a special knowledge or moral standing.

CONTINUALLY DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING

of how Islamophobia builds on other forms of racism, xenophobia, and nationalism that have always been part of the US. Make clear distinctions between aspirations towards freedom, democracy, and equality, and the actual historical record of the US.

DON'T COMPLY WITH NORMS, RULES, OR LAWS THAT ENABLE ISLAMOPHOBIA.

That might mean challenging someone's casual racism at a party, even if it seems impolite. It might mean protesting when a university hosts a white supremacist speaker. Or it might mean becoming a tax resister to avoid paying for unjust wars. It's up to each of us to notice and resist the ways that “normal life” in the US supports Islamophobia.

DON'T CALL THE POLICE, AS A GENERAL RULE, WHEN YOU SEE SOMEONE BEING THREATENED

verbally or physically. The police often become perpetrators of violence. Also, depending on the victim's immigration status, a police encounter could lead to detention or deportation. Don't call police unless the person being targeted requests it. (You can ask them.) Do report the incident to local and national groups that are tracking such incidents.

DON'T FEEL YOU HAVE TO INVENT YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

or memes about Islamophobia, or even that you should. Islamophobia is complex, and the communities it targets are complex. It's easy to stumble into messages and images that reinforce harmful ideas.

DON'T USE SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED WITH ISLAM FOR YOUR OWN POLITICAL SPEECH.

Stand in solidarity from the position you actually inhabit. Putting on a headscarf or saying “we are all Muslims” does not actually change your relationship to Islamophobia, nor protect its targets. It keeps the focus on Muslims rather than exposing Islamophobia as an ideology constructed to support US global power and white supremacy.

DON'T USE APPEALS TO U.S. NATIONALISM OR PATRIOTISM

to oppose Islamophobia. Consider the violence done to Muslim-majority nations and Muslim people by the US. Don't require Muslim people to embrace an idealized version of the US in order to be accepted and defended. (No more American flag hijabs, please.)

Islamophobia literally invents its enemies. Here's how we un-invent them.

Recognize that Islamophobia doesn't only target self-identified Muslims. Hindus, Sikhs, and others perceived to look “Muslim” have all been targets of anti-Muslim racism, regardless of their actual religion. Also, many people who come from Muslim backgrounds are not religious and may not identify as Muslim.

Reject guilt by association: someone who is represented as “a supporter” of Hamas or Hezbollah is not necessarily a supporter of Hamas or Hezbollah. Even if someone does hold political views that make you uncomfortable, you can and should reject Islamophobia-based attacks on them. (As we should reject homophobic attacks on LGBT people who are racist, etc.)

Recognize and subvert the tactics used to paint “Muslims” as a scary group. Get creative and turn Islamophobes' tactics back on them: use information about non-Muslims and (if appropriate) humor to challenge the assumptions that Islamophobes depend on. Point out who are actually the perpetrators of most violence against civilians in the U.S. (e.g., the police and white men with guns).

Question the constant urge to size up Muslims with data and polls, to surveil and dissect them. Scientific data are often collected in ways that reinforce the pre-existing beliefs of supposedly objective observers.

Don't refer broadly to the targets of Islamophobia as "Muslims", as it reinforces the lie that Islamophobia is based on actual concerns about Islam or Muslims. When you talk about people targeted by Islamophobia, make sure you're saying what you mean, for example: “people targeted by Islamophobia.”

Don't be deterred from defending someone against Islamophobia by scare-mongering claims like “she supports shari'a law!” or “he's linked to terrorists.” These claims are made to mislead and silence anti-racist opposition, so arguing over them is a trap. The mainstream American idea of “shari'a” is made up. (Shari'a is scriptural guidance for debate, not a set of laws.) People have been labelled “terrorist” for donating to poverty-relief charities run by political parties the US doesn't like. The FBI has intensely surveilled and entrapped members of Muslim communities to make them seem threatening. Islamophobic academics and policymakers have spread these mischaracterizations to make “Muslims” seem too scary to deserve rights.

Don't circulate any words, quotes, or images that perpetuate Islamophobic ideas, even if they are used by the media., without seriously considering the impact.

Don't get into a numbers debate about how threatening or not Muslims "really" are. Refuse to accept as “neutral” polls that make claims about “Muslim beliefs.” Even good data can be used to mislead, for example by failing to provide comparable data on non-Muslim populations (we rarely hear that polls have found much higher levels of support for intentional attacks on civilians among Americans than among Iranians, Egyptians, Moroccans, and Pakistanis). In fact, “scientific” measuring of feared groups to confirm racist beliefs has been a feature of racism at every point in history. Using such data in order to confirm or ease non-Muslims' fears is part of Islamophobia.

Whenever possible, translate Arabic words and phrases directly. In the US media, Arabic is often used to make recognizable ideas seem exotic or threatening. For example, “Allah” means God, not “the Muslim God.” “Insh’Allah” means, more or less, “hopefully” (“if God will”).

When Islamophobes say someone's beliefs or statements make them a threat, ask questions. Assume that the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are as rational as the rest of the world and be curious about people's political beliefs. Find out why some people—including Muslims—are critical of the U.S. and Israeli governments, for example.

Don't assume every mention of God in Arabic is religious. Maybe it is, or maybe it's not. Invoking God in Arabic, as in English, can be a casual part of everyday speech, something like “oh jeez” or “oh my God.”

Don't ignore history. Islamophobia wasn't invented by Trump, and it didn't start after the September 11 attacks. Learn about the historical factors (like the end of the Cold War) that made the idea of a “Muslim” enemy a useful tool for building US power in the world. Don't ignore the distinct experiences people from Muslim-majority countries have of US intervention that shapes their relationships to the US today.

Common tactics used to dress up Islamophobia as caring about people's rights...

PINKWASHING.

Pointing to LGBT rights as a way to claim that a country is good or moral while ignoring the racism, colonialism, or anti-LGBT violence there. This term was coined to describe an Israeli government campaign to distract from colonial violence against Palestinians by welcoming Western gay tourists.

HOMONATIONALISM.

Nationalism that glorifies the US state and military as a protector of LGBT rights, particularly against a “Muslim enemy”; claims that LGBT people worldwide share the same identity as those in the US, regardless of culture.

WHITE LIBERAL FEMINISM or IMPERIAL FEMINISM.

The belief that a particular Western version of women's self-determination is universal, the same for everyone in every culture — and that a woman whose life isn't that way wants or needs Westerners to intervene. This version of feminism, which originated among white middle class US women, fails to recognize the power, leadership, or histories of US women of color, poor women, and non-Western women. It ignores the fact that Western governments, colonialism, and economic models create oppression for women.

BLUEWASHING.

Claiming that Islamophobia (and anti-Palestinian racism) is a way to protect Jewish rights.