



SARA HUSEN, A SOPHOMORE IN
POLITICAL SCIENCE, HAS DEALT WITH
ISLAMOPHOBIA SINCE CHILDHOOD.

ISLAMOPHOBIA: A DESENSITIZED REALITY

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“MY MOTHER HAD TOLD ME NOT TO WEAR MY HIJAB BEFORE, BUT IT WAS ALWAYS WITH A TEMPORARY CONNOTATION, LIKE THAT I SHOULD LIE LOW AFTER AN INCIDENT ABROAD. BUT THIS TIME, SHE HELD A TONE OF FINALITY. HERE SHE WAS, THE MOST RELIGIOUS PERSON IN THE HOUSE, TELLING ME NOT TO WEAR MY HIJAB. IT WAS HEARTBREAKING.”



Sara Husen, a sophomore in political science, is no stranger to adversity. Growing up a Somali-American Muslim in Minnesota, the repercussions of Islamophobia, the dislike or prejudices against the Islamic community, have greatly impacted her life, whether they be subtle or blatant.

“My family and I have dealt with Islamophobia all the time growing up and continue to deal with it to this day,” Husen says. “Our house has gone through a lot of remodeling, cleaning up from being egged, having garbage thrown on it, and even removing paint that people smeared it with, especially after the most recent attack (Orlando) — we always prepare to feel the effects of it.”

Even as a child growing up post-September 11, 2001, she recalls callous episodes of animosity.

“Back when I was in second grade, probably 2005, my mom and I were walking somewhere downtown, when an older man, maybe in his 40s, spat on my shoe. The quickness, and the casualness of the encounter has always been kind of jarring. I was just a child, yet he had so much venom against me.”

Husen is one of an estimated 3.3 million Muslims currently living in the United States today, according to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center. After collecting data from over 15,000 law enforcement agencies that voluntarily share their information, the Pew Research Center and the

Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that in 2015, there were 257 reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes in the country — a 67 percent increase from 2014. Additionally they reported that the number of assaults with anti-Muslim bias totaled to 91, the highest it’s been since 2001 which totaled to 93.

Following the tragic San Bernardino and Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, hate crimes against Muslims and mosques tripled in a short space of time. Mosques (and Sikh temples) have been vandalized, restaurants have been set ablaze, and Muslims have been attacked, wounded and killed.

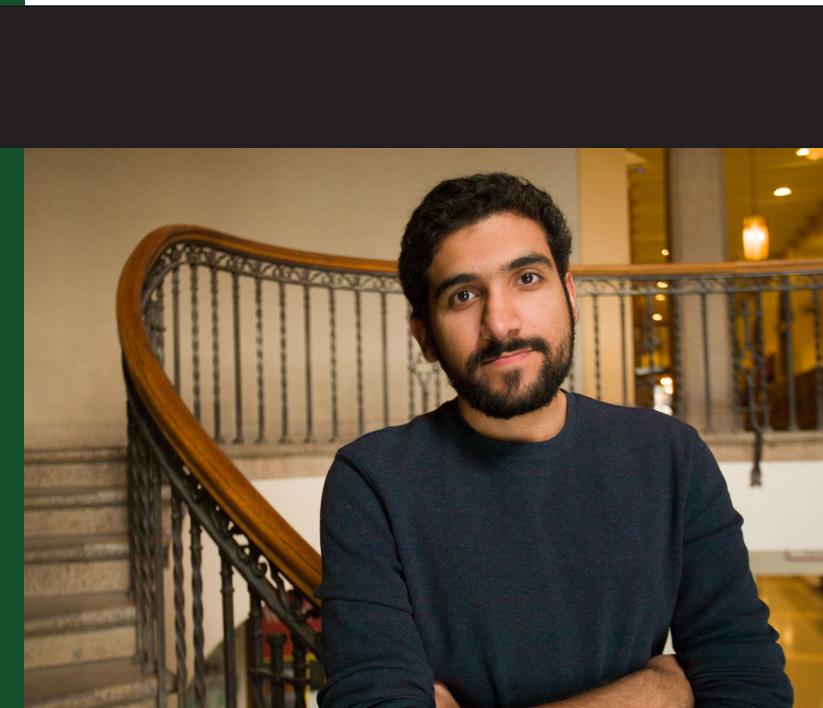
There has even been a substantial increase in harmful behavior toward Muslims since Donald Trump began his presidential campaign in June 2015. His calls for mosque surveillance, mass deportations of Muslims, a Muslim registry and a Muslim ban in the United States, impede the individual rights of American citizens given in the Constitution. However, following the presidential election result in November, nearly a thousand reports of harassment, intimidation and abuse have surfaced, aimed not only at Muslims, but at other minority and ethnic groups as well, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Numerous reports of incidents involving racial slurs, alarming accusations, death threats, physical assaults and in some instances, the forceful removal of Muslim women’s hijabs occurred in major U.S. cities, to the point where Husen’s mom asked her to abstain from wearing her’s, for her safety and for a seemingly indeterminable amount of time.

“IT FEELS QUITE VULNERABLE, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE RECENT ELECTION. I NEVER PUT IT PAST SOMEONE TO DO SOMETHING HEINOUS DURING THESE VOLATILE TIMES,” HUSEN SAYS.

In late January, the president fulfilled a campaign promise when he signed an executive order banning asylum-seeking Syrian refugees from entering the United States indefinitely, as well as imposing a 90-day travel and entry ban for people from predominately Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia. President Trump defended this decision by stating this was a move to prevent the potential influx of “radical Islamic terrorists” into the country and also stated that his administration would give priority to Syrian Christians. While federal judges have moved to repeal this ban, the restriction lingers largely with many US citizens. How extensive the repercussions are remains to be seen.

It’s clear that there has been a spike in domestic Islamophobic-related incidents. With a significant amount of Muslim students enrolled at the university, we look to see what Islamophobia is, why it exists, what some of the common misconceptions are and if it is a major problem at Iowa State, a university that is “proud of the ethnic, cultural, and national diversity of its students, faculty, and staff, and strives to celebrate diversity in all facets of campus life.”



HUMZA MALIK, A SOPHOMORE IN INDUSTRIAL TECHNOLOGY, IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE MUSLIM STUDENT ASSOCIATION, WHICH HOPES TO EDUCATE OTHERS ABOUT THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF ISLAM

Islamophobia is a term that was developed in 1991 by the Center of Race & Gender at the University of California, Berkeley meaning “unfounded hostility toward Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.” It is used to describe broad, generalized statements about the entire population of Muslims — 1.6 billion worldwide as of 2010, according to the Pew Research Center.

One Iowa State professor thinks that this definition is perhaps too narrow, and says that Islamophobia is by no means a new phenomenon.

“It is a component of orientalism, and the unreasonable dislike of Muslim populations, in context, isn’t new and isn’t a post-9/11, post-Iraq War phenomenon,” says Dr. Michael Christopher Low, assistant history professor at Iowa State, specializing in contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamic history. “Edward Said, who wrote ‘Orientalism,’ puts forward that Western culture saw Islam and the Islamic world as the ‘other’, expressed in a variety of ways going back as far as early modern times.”

In order to understand Islamophobia in its current form, we must follow the serpentine trail back into the chronicles of history to see its evolution. Low adds that the idea behind orientalism is that Western scholars, experts and travelers gathered knowledge in somewhat of a biased fashion, observing and recording several aspects of life in places like Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East, in an effort to create leverage over the “other” and subsequently instrumentalize power into their own hands.

“Historically, this created a series of tropes and shorthands about Muslim individuals, states, societies and cultures, which made it very easy to plug them into a big, existing framework of easy stereotypes,” Low says.

In modern times, a number of factors have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia. Low says that in the 19th and 20th centuries, there are many examples in British literature and documents that as the occupying power, the British feared rebellion by

subject populations like in Egypt, India and Palestine. This fear created a certain set of images, prompting writers to depict them as rebels, anti-colonialists and even terrorists.

In the United States, Low says a combination of historical elements and recent developments have shaped present-day Islamophobia.

“The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Saudi Arabians and oil, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Cold War encounters, Arabness, terrorism and the Global War on Terror — these things have melded together, forming a stew of stereotypes that didn’t always have anything to do with Islam, but still created a shorthand for it,” Low says.

“In the post-9/11 atmosphere, while there was an understandable climate of fear, the security measures that were implemented put ordinary Muslims under tremendous suspicion,” Low says, mentioning methods that became acceptable ways of enforcement — torture, imprisonment, surveillance — only added to this frightened environment.

“Even in situations like the one in Syria, we still hear about the ‘good Islam’ and ‘bad Islam,’ which has further developed to where you have some media, government and intellectual circles calling for Muslims around the world to stand up to radical Islam, mounting a lot of pressure on individuals and the Muslim community, where they have to constantly answer for the crimes and disturbing acts,” Low says.

The current political climate has also played a notable role in Islamophobia’s resurgence in the public sphere.

“If I had any doubts Islamophobia was seen as acceptable before the election (which I didn’t), it surely is now. I think some people feel a lot more comfortable speaking their hateful opinions,” Husen says.

“We have people, like Donald Trump for instance, who have repeatedly circled around the idea of a Muslim ban, which is very irresponsible because not only is it a blanket term for all Muslims, it’s as if all Muslims must prove that they aren’t violent,” Low says. “What’s also troubling is that in the wake of the election, there is a certain kind of authorization from a portion of Trump supporters that giving voice to anti-Muslim feelings is no longer taboo and now acceptable, believing as though they may do so — this is very dangerous,” Low says. But it’s no longer just talk, with President Trump recently signing a controversial executive order banning U.S. entry for refugees and citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries.

Low also talks about the dehumanizing effect that the media can have: “If there is a concern about a bomb in Berlin or New York, the connections to a place like Baghdad or Beirut are not the same. There is some supposition that these places are supposed to be violent and this is the institutionalized component of Islamophobia. Our cities are supposed to be safe and in their cities, it happens all the time — it sort of numbs people to the fact that these are human beings and they are suffering, so for some there is an inability to empathize with the Islamic world.”

UNBLURRING THE LINES IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

As of 2016, nearly one in four Iowa State students is either a minority or an international student out of the 36,660 enrolled, according to the Iowa State Office of the Registrar. In the 2016–2017 school year, the total U.S. minority and international enrollment is 8,748, or 23.86 percent of the student body.

Among those are Muslim students, and being a minority or an international student definitely has its challenges. In the United States particularly, in light of the aforementioned reasons, being a Muslim, born in the country or abroad, is not always easy. Much like other areas of the country, college campuses have also endured instances of backlash toward the Muslim community, namely incidents over the past two years at San Diego State University, New York University and the murders of three Muslim students near the University of North Carolina.

“Anybody I hang out with, or consider a friend can see that it is an issue in the West. I think people also come to realize how bad Islamophobia has gotten in the U.S. after they hang out with me in public,” Husen says. “Certain negative interactions, stares, and even shouts I’ve received in public boggles their minds. They wonder ‘Has it always been this bad? Why couldn’t I see it before?’”

Husen describes her experiences at Iowa State and tells of one instance where she attempted to pray outside of her dorm room, in the chapel at the Memorial Union.

“Praying on campus proved unsuccessful,” she says. “Being that the chapel seemed to have a Christian connotation, I wasn’t sure if I was even allowed (to pray), but people walked in front of me, and sometimes on top of my sajdah (prayer rug). While it wasn’t with ill intentions, they just didn’t know that it wasn’t appropriate to walk in front of me while I prayed.”

“I have experienced Islamophobia before I came to the university. People called me a terrorist or said rude things regarding my skin or hair color, that I had a beard or that I was a member of al-Qaeda,” says Humza Malik, president of the Muslim Student Association at Iowa State.

“But at Iowa State, this has never happened to me. I’ve never had someone come up to me and purposefully make discriminatory remarks regarding my religion — if anything happened it was subtle, but nothing I’ve had to report.”

Malik says that he feels that Islamophobia is present at the university, but that it’s not widespread nor does it occur on a daily basis but rather, it’s rare and often subtle. “There may be individual instances of Islamophobia, but I haven’t heard about or seen violent Islamophobia at the university.”

Malik, born and raised in England, leads MSA which is composed of Muslim students from around the world, with more than 100 active members and regular attendees.

“Our purpose is to have an organization helping Muslims on campus feel comfortable and helping non-Muslims get to know Islam, to destroy misconceptions and tackle issues brought up in the media,” he says. They also work with the mosque to strengthen the community, help Muslims coming to America for the first time, and host both social and informative events such as the “Women in Islam” and “Jesus & Islam” events this past semester.

Malik admits that in these mercurial times, the MSA has had to shift their focus a bit, “Last year we didn’t really worry about how people viewed Islam but this semester, we are because of what’s happening now in politics.”

Malik says the reignition of major misconceptions hasn’t dampened their cause, but in fact, inspired the group to go out and teach others what Islam is truly about.

“People will always have misconceptions or be completely wrong about Islam so it’s up to us to continuously give (da’wa: making an invitation toward Islam) about Islam,” Malik says, adding that the MSA doesn’t push their beliefs on others, but rather they provide information to those willing to listen and learn.

One common misconception is that Islam is exclusive to a particular region, i.e. the Middle East or that most, if not the majority, of Muslims are located near the Levant or Arabian Peninsula. In fact, Islam is the second largest religion in the world.

Another prevalent misconception is that the hijab is a symbol of oppression toward Muslim women.

“When non-Muslim women, or men, from the West try to tell Muslim women how they’re oppressed, it is incredibly frustrating,” Husen says. “Many women around the world could argue that normalizing the use of high heels, large amounts of skin showing, and uncomfortable beauty standards is a worse form of oppression, since it involves “self objectification.”

Husen goes on to provide the distinct example of women in the Olympics. When beach volleyball became a gold medal event at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, bikinis were the primary option, with body suits allowed underneath depending on the weather. They didn’t have a choice and it excluded female athletes from primarily Islamic countries. It wasn’t until 2012 that this rule

changed, giving women more clothing options. Sara argues that, for instance in the match between Germany and Egypt at Rio 2016, the Egyptian duo had not been forced to wear long sleeves and their hijabs, they chose to do so because of their religious and cultural beliefs.

“Using the far and few examples of women being forced to wear the burqa and never leave without a male escort is not the reality of Muslim women around the world,” she says. “Some of my family come from a Muslim country (Ethiopia) that has had women in the workforce, military, and at the forefront of business and politics far before America had even granted voting rights for women.”

Low goes on to mention the distorted and misinterpreted notions toward concepts such as Shari’a law and jihad.

“People in the West have come to think that there is some sort of Shari’a conspiracy to be imposed in new places and territories which becomes a talking point for certain groups advocating for legislation protecting against sharia law,” he says. “But it’s wildly unrealistic and there is no real danger of that ever happening.”

As of June 2016, 10 states have passed anti-Muslim and anti-Shari’a legislation, including Texas, North Carolina and Tennessee.

However, Low says that Sharia law is a lot like many other legal systems and today, it often gets misconstrued.

“There is a tendency to hyperfocus on the most repressive components (of Sharia law),” he says, mentioning practices like execution in Saudi Arabia.

In his classes, Low allows students to understand the rules and norms as put forth in the Quran and hadith (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that govern almost every facet of Muslim’s daily lives.

The concept of jihad, Low says, can mean “daily struggle” of a Muslim or strictly mean “war.” He also says that in recent times, some groups have blurred the lines between them.

“The norms are shifting — those that existed before the 20th century have broken down,” he says. “Now there’s a much looser vision of what’s possible which has led to the idea that some can act with impunity in ways that Muslim communities would not have thought to do previously... this has not been the way Islam has operated for many centuries.”

He adds that it’s important to distinguish between Islamists themselves, noting a significant difference between politically active, non-violent Islamists and violent Islamists, and members of the Muslim community because they see the world very differently, instead of thinking that there’s an existential conflict with Islam and the West.

Low says that most people don’t realize who the major sufferers of such atrocities are.

“FAR AND AWAY THE MOST VICTIMS OF TERRORISM HAVE BEEN WITHIN THE MIDDLE EAST AND HAVE BEEN MUSLIMS — THAT REALLY GETS OVERSHADOWED.”

Malik agrees that Islam is vastly misinterpreted, “Fundamentally it is a peaceful religion and it has laws that are fair and just.”

“Understanding the teachings in their Arabic form, the teachings of Muhammad and the people who surrounded and joined him, once people know about that, they might be surprised by how amazing that story is.”

Malik also says he believes that issues related to Islamophobia aren’t isolated.

“When we see Islamophobia happening, it’s not because people are out to get just Muslims, people have adopted a kind of ideology where they are prone to discriminate against others too.”

Overall, Malik says he feels comfortable telling others at the university that he’s a Muslim, and feels safe at Iowa State.

“I remind myself and my friends that the Qu’ran says not to be afraid of admitting that you are a Muslim and a follower of Islam,” he says. “If you believe in your religion, then there isn’t anything to fear by saying that you are Muslim and for some people it might take more courage to do that.”

“THE BUCK STOPS HERE”

There are many methods and ways that the university, the MSA and the students are combatting Islamophobia. For one, the Union Drive Dining Center implemented halal meat (permissible and by means of a humanely killed animal) choices last fall, addressing the needs of the Muslim student community. Following election day, many services were provided for those who felt unsafe, confused or distressed about the result’s implications.

The Iowa State Discrimination and Harassment policy clearly highlights, in addition to all groups on campus, that there is no tolerance for harassment against races, ethnicities and religious groups, and says in Section 1.2 “even if actions are not

MUSLIM POPULATION BY COUNTRY

WHILE SOME PEOPLE THINK ISLAM IS CONFINED TO THE MIDDLE EAST, IT IS ACTUALLY THE WORLD'S SECOND LARGEST RELIGION, AND IS PRACTICED AROUND THE WORLD.

COUNTRY	# OF MUSLIMS	% OF TOTAL MUSLIM POPULATION
1) INDONESIA	209,120,000	13.1%
2) INDIA	176,200,000	11%
3) PAKISTAN	167,410,000	10.5%
4) BANGLADESH	134,430,000	8.4%
5) NIGERIA	77,300,000	4.8%
6) EGYPT	76,990,000	4.8%
7) IRAN	73,570,000	4.6%
8) TURKEY	71,330,000	4.5%
9) ALGERIA	34,730,000	2.2%
10) MOROCCO	31,930,000	2%
TOTAL	1,053,010,000	65.8%

Sidebar: Countries with highest Muslim populations according to the Pew Research Center as of 2010.

directed at specific persons, a hostile environment can be created when the conduct is sufficiently severe or pervasive and objectively offensive so as to substantially interfere with the person's work, education, or activities on campus."

Malik and the MSA have also been working diligently with the Dean of Parks Library to establish a prayer area in the library, not only for Muslims, who must pray five times a day in a clean, peaceful environment, but for other religious and ethnic groups as well.

The MSA and the Committee on Lectures hosted an event at the Memorial Union in January, entitled "What Are Your Rights?" discussed the rights that Muslims, and all US citizens, have protected under the Constitution. Rita Bettis, ACLU Iowa Legal Director, and Corey Saylor, head of the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) Department to Monitor and Combat Islamophobia, spoke about many of the issues facing Muslims in America today, the bravado of the Trump administration, possible solutions and what freedoms

are granted under the law. Things like religious freedom in school and the workplace, being permitted to wear your the hijab, even in the airport, your rights pertaining to houses of worship and in regards to interactions with law enforcement.

Ames Police Chief Charles Cychosz and fellow officers were in attendance, maintaining that all Ames police officers are aware of and appreciate the motley of different groups in the city. He also mentioned the various methods in which the officers prepare to protect such a multifarious population, including many mandatory diversity training sessions.

Saylor went on to speak about bills that have been passed protecting Muslims, such as Governor Jerry Brown's in August 2016, protecting vulnerable Muslims and Sikhs that face bullying and harassment in schools.

While Islamophobia may never be permanently eradicated, Low, Malik and Husen all agree that education and engagement are two plausible ways in which others can abate the threat of Islamophobia.

"I don't think any form of discrimination can be completely eradicated," says Husen. "But listen to your Muslim friends and their narratives of oppression, walk with them at night if they do not feel safe (that goes for everyone), start conversations that can help you understand what they go through," Husen says.

"No matter how much you try, you can't completely get rid of it but if people don't educate themselves on it, there is a very easy way of others manipulating misconceptions, especially to reach a certain agenda," says Malik.

He adds that taking classes on Islamic studies will really boost people's knowledge about the different issues and if they ever see Islamophobic instances on campus, they can then recognize that it's discriminatory, stand up for Muslims and tackle the issue the same way they would tackle racism or sexism.

"The U.S. have come a long way in becoming more aware of institutionalized racism and prejudices. That said, the awareness of them doesn't mean their presence is dampened and learning about these things is good but it's insufficient. It doesn't mean that it won't continue, even among people who mean well."

Saylor, a Muslim, agreed that simply teaching about Islam is not enough, mentioning that all people, in one way or another, have a confirmation bias. He believes Muslims must not only explain Islam and themselves in a familiarized way, but to also show grace and have people see them as human beings and not just a fixed media image. He urged Muslims to assertively and respectfully stand up and be seen, both socially and politically.

However, Low is guardedly optimistic. "It's very difficult to imagine that this is a permanent state of being. We, in the US, has gone through a difficult period of relations with the Middle East and the Islamic world but there's nothing to say that it has to remain this way."