

Clash of Ignorance: Islamophobia

by Ameera Essabar





My name is Ameera Essabar and I am in my fourth year at the University of Toronto, pursuing a double major in English and Peace, Conflict and Justice, and a minor in Writing and Rhetoric. I have had the pleasure and the privilege to work on this piece for the past four years, and I am so excited for it to finally be out in the world!

I began “Clash of Ignorance: Islamophobia” in Grade 12, with the sole intention of completing a research paper for my English Literature course.

Now in my final year of undergraduate studies, I look back to my seventeen-year-old self, knowing that four years ago I could never have imagined what this piece has become. Throughout these past few years, I have been intensely editing the piece with the goal of creating something impactful for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

I am so honoured to have my work published by the Mosaic Institute, as it is a superb organization whose mission and vision align in every way with my story. This is an extremely personal piece, but it is not only personal to myself. It sheds light on the experiences of Muslims worldwide, and I hope, provides optimism for the creation of an inclusive and compassionate world for all.

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Former United Nations diplomat Hassane Bendahmane organized an international seminar in June of 2001 that analyzed the role of religion in environmental management in Tehran, Iran.

“Islam, like many religions, is what people make of it. Islam is a religion of peace, but several Muslims also use Islam as a justification for violence. It is not always religion that makes a person good or bad; it is what the person makes of his or her religion. [People] believe in something and practice the opposite, in every religion....The West has produced [an image of] fanatic Muslims who falsify Islamic values and principles, and [this serves as] a justification for promoting Islamophobia.”

“Yallah¹, we’re going to be late! Inshallah², we catch our flight,” my dad was yelling as I lugged my suitcase outside, piling into the car and day-dreaming about the adventures we would have on our family trip to Montreal. As my mum and brother walked out of the house, I caught snippets of what sounded like a heated debate.

“Khalil, you have to shave your beard, otherwise we’re going to be going through security twice as slow,” my mum said with urgency.

“Why does it matter?” my brother shot back. “I like my beard, and I think it looks good on me. Do you know how long it took for me to grow this?”

To that, my mum replied, “Do you know how quickly it will take for someone to accuse you of being a terrorist?”



As I watched from behind the car window, I saw my brother peer down at his feet and retreat into the house, a look of defeat on his face. Ten minutes later he re-appeared, the thick hair that was on his face a moment ago now reduced to bitter stubble.

We finally arrived at the airport, and my dad let out a sigh, the nervous energy that had enveloped him for most of the drive released by the word “SubhanAllah³.” As we waited in line at security, I noticed a lanky guard strutting towards us. He proceeded to tap my brother on the shoulder, announcing that he was conducting a ‘random search’. I thought, why him?”. What made my brother different from every other person waiting in line?

1 - Arabic term for “let’s go” or “come on.”

2 - Arabic term for “God willing.”

3 - Arabic term for “Glory be to God.”

Was it the colour of his skin, the way he spoke, how he smiled at strangers? He had shaved his beard, but he was no less of a Muslim. I looked up at my brother, confusion darkening his brown eyes as the security guard whisked him away.

I turned towards my parents, laughing as I mumbled, "Yeah sure, random search."

Jittery nerves swept through my veins, and my whole body pulsed with a burning feeling that was not fear. No, I was not afraid. I was angry. As I watched my brother being patted down for bombs and guns, I contemplated the honesty and integrity of airport security, and of the Western world as a whole.

As a child, I grew up learning to love and respect Islam. My household was a blend of cultural influences, as I lived with a Shia mum and a Sunni dad⁴. My brother and I used to joke that we were Sushis. This could be a blessing and a curse. One morning, I sat at the kitchen table trying to enjoy my croissant, when all of a sudden the sound of my dad yelling "That's because you're a Shia!" flooded my eardrums. To that comment, my mum screeched "I'd rather be that than a Sunni!" I was no longer able to enjoy my croissant, so I got up to see what the commotion was all about. Apparently, this religious dispute was the result of a petty comment my dad had made about wearing a hijab, or rather, my mum's lack of wearing one. I decided to interrupt this argument with what my family calls my "bassoon" voice, yelling at the top of my lungs, "If you want to wear a hijab, great, and if you don't want to, also great! For God's sake, it doesn't matter!"



That shut them up real fast. But then we burst out laughing, realizing how ridiculous the whole situation was. For my brother and I, there was no Sunni versus Shia mentality, as our parents placed the same morals on us, teaching us what it meant to be Muslim, not Sunnis or Shias. More importantly, teaching us what it meant to be good people. I have always admired my religion, but not because of its rules.

4 - Islam is grouped into two main branches: Shias and Sunnis. The main difference between the two branches is in their belief regarding who the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad is. While Sunnis believed that elite members of the Islamic community should choose Muhammad's successor, Shias believed that his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, should succeed him.

I admire it because it shows me that life is about much more than material desires. Islam has taught me that respecting your neighbor and helping those who are less fortunate than you is more rewarding than the pursuit of wealth. As I grew up, I never stopped loving my faith, but I learned that not everyone else does.

In this day and age, the West has instilled a mindset in which the religion of Islam, and those who practice it, are seen as “terrorists,” “enemies” and “those from the other side,” This “irrational and categorical hatred⁵” of Muslims and Islam is merely another excuse to single out a group that does not have the same ideals and values as the Western world, just as it is done with Jewish people, African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQ2S+ community⁶. The real question is not whether these so-called “Muslim terrorists” cause destruction in other countries, but rather, where this notion that Muslims are the only terrorists came from.

Why is Islamophobia so prevalent in the West, which is a part of the world that prides itself on multiculturalism and inclusiveness towards all religions and cultures?

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Although Islamophobia existed before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it has increased since, making life increasingly difficult for Muslims worldwide⁷. President George W. Bush’s implementation of the War on Terror and the Patriot Act allowed the U.S. government to use the idea of security as a justification for alienating a whole religion, and all those who practice it⁸.

The subsequent and unjustified U.S. invasion of and war in Iraq killed thousands of innocent civilians in the process⁹. The aftermath was a ripple effect of hatred and prejudice directed against Muslims. There was no longer any sense of ‘innocent until proven guilty,’ but rather ‘guilty because you are a Muslim’. The West treats Muslims, and other non-White immigrant groups, as if they are “perpetual foreigners and aliens in their own land¹⁰.” This exclusion has detrimental effects on those integrating into Western society, all while remaining a part of their own culture¹¹.

5 - Hamid Dabashi, “The liberal roots of Islamophobia,” AlJazeera, March 3, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/3/3/the-liberal-roots-of-islamophobia>.

6 - Hamid Dabashi, “The liberal roots of Islamophobia,” AlJazeera, March 3, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/3/3/the-liberal-roots-of-islamophobia>.

7 - Alaa Elassar, “Those people are not me,” CNN, September 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/07/us/muslims-relationship-with-america-september-11/index.html>.

8 - Courtney Jung, “Terrorism” (lecture, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, December 2, 2019).

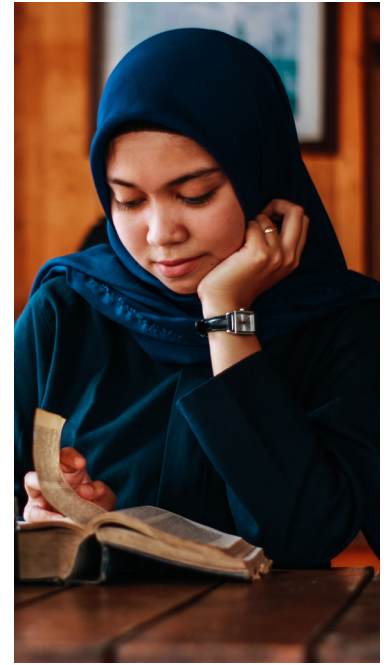
9 - Jung, “Terrorism.”

10 - Rebecca A. Clay, “Islamophobia,” American Psychological Association 48, no. 4 (2017): 34, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/04/islamophobia>.

11 - Clay, “Islamophobia,” 34.

Anisa Goforth, an Assistant Professor in psychology at the University of Montana, and her colleagues found that first and second-generation Muslim Arab Americans ages 11 to 18 who experienced acculturative stress were more likely to be withdrawn and depressed¹². However, Goforth et al.'s research finds that religious practices helped protect these youth against psychological problems¹³.

According to another American study on more than 600 Muslim students in 2015, "more than half had experienced bullying—twice as high as the national average¹⁴". Research has also found that having a hijab pulled off, being labeled as a terrorist, and other forms of discrimination can negatively influence students' academic performance, mental and physical health¹⁵.



EDUCATION: A TOOL FOR BUILDING BRIDGES

Discrimination against Muslims is extremely prevalent in Western society because there is a lack of education surrounding Islam. This is made worse when children are taught that certain people are 'wrong' for practicing their culture and religion. Early intervention can help prevent discrimination, and in turn, may discourage future generations from holding onto this sense of ethno-religious superiority utilize and empower the youth, because they are the ones who can relate the best with the current world.

I had a conversation with Hassane about Islamophobia for this paper, because I was interested in learning about the implications of prejudice on Muslim communities living in the West. Bendahmane believes that the best tool for the future of a rapidly changing world is "education, both among Muslims and Westerners¹⁶." While anti-bullying policies are one way to emphasize that discrimination will not be tolerated, we need something more impactful and long-lasting, such as the integration of school programs, including mandatory classes that educate youth on diversity and media bias¹⁷. Incorporating lessons on discrimination can educate people at a young age, and make them disinclined to conflate religions and cultures as a whole with acts performed by radicalist individuals¹⁸.

12 - Clay, "Islamophobia," 34.

13 - Clay, "Islamophobia," 34.

14 - Clay, "Islamophobia," 34.

15 - Clay, "Islamophobia," 34

16 - Hassane Bendahmane (Former Diplomat for the United Nations) in discussion with the author, April 2020.

17 - Leah Shafer, "Dismantling Islamophobia," Harvard Graduate School of Education, November 23, 2016, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/11/dismantling-islamophobia>.

18 - Shafer, "Dismantling Islamophobia."

Some examples of incorporating anti-bias training into curricula include hosting inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogues for students to teach and learn from one another, and facilitating exhibitions that showcase Islamic contributions towards society. Additionally, schools should make an effort to educate students not only on topics and history relating to their own cultures, but also those worldwide. After all, a society in which people know only about their own history and culture is one that is unable to connect with the rest of humanity. Schools could further unite communities through family-oriented events where parents and students can get to know one another, and learn about other cultures and beliefs firsthand¹⁹. Adnan Akiel, the president and founder of the Bridging Gaps Foundation — an organization that aims to bridge gaps between Muslims and non-Muslims — explains that “we have to utilize and empower the youth, because they are the ones who can relate the best with the current world²⁰.”

Building bridges begins with building knowledge. One of the best ways to educate ourselves and facilitate cross-cultural cooperation is through dialogue. We need to be open to having conversations — albeit sometimes difficult ones — with individuals from other communities in order to break barriers and grow beyond our preconceived notions. Four years ago I went to a Christian camp, and on the last night all of the campers went for a walk together through the forest, where we prayed under the stars, a pack of teenagers with immensely different lives from one another. But that night, we were all united by our faith, or at least our curiosity of faith. I ended up meeting a camper who told me that “Christianity just makes more sense to me,” to which I replied, “well, I feel that way about Islam.” He then asked me, “would you like to sit down and discuss Christianity and Islam?” We spent an hour exploring the two religions. I taught him what it meant for me to be a Muslim and he taught me what it meant for him to be a Christian, by discussing verses of the Quran and the Bible. That conversation never left me. Not only had I learned more about Christianity in that one night than I ever had before, but I believe that I also changed his views on Islam as well.

The problem was not that we had conflicting beliefs; the problem was that we had thought we had conflicting beliefs. As Akiel notes, “We are all part of one community, and in order for us to lead a life that truly benefits one another, we have to unite beyond ignorance. We want people to understand that this is a clash of ignorance, and not a clash of religion²¹.”



19 - Shafer, “Dismantling Islamophobia.”

20 - Adnan Akiel (President and Founder of the Bridging Gaps Foundation) in discussion with the author, April 2020.

21 - Adnan Akiel (President and Founder of the Bridging Gaps Foundation) in discussion with the author, April 2020.

I encourage people to read a book about Islam or Muslim religion, or talk to someone that you know who is Muslim. Learn and educate yourself before assuming the worst of someone who is not exactly like you, or who does not have the same views as you. Edward Said's book entitled *Covering Islam*, goes into great detail on the distortions and hidden agendas of the western media coverage of the Islamic world. In addition, Jasmin Zine's book entitled *Under Siege*, is another insightful read on the lived experiences of Canadian Muslim youth from the 9/11 generation and how they had to navigate "the war on terror." These books are great starting points for those interested in learning how and when Islam became synonymous with religious hysteria and terrorism and the lived experience of Muslim youth in the post-9/11 era, the stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islam, Muslims and the heightened securitization discourse triggered by 9/11.

The true religion of Islam does not, in fact, promote violence and terror. On the contrary, Islam fights for peace, compassion, equality, and unity. The Prophet Mohammed said in one of his Hadiths²² that, "none of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself²³". No one is a true Muslim until they know what it means to have humility and show selflessness. The leader of the Ismaili sect of Islam, His Highness the Aga Khan, preaches the importance of pluralism and diversity in a world that is constantly innovating, stating that "instead of shouting at one another, we must listen to one another — and learn from one another. As we do, one of our first lessons might well center on those powerful but often neglected chapters in history when Islamic and European cultures interacted cooperatively — constructively and creatively — to help realize some of civilization's peak achievements²⁴."

Living in Canada, I have been privileged enough to know people of diverse backgrounds and opinions. I can personally say that there is a unique power in diversity, one that you cannot find surrounded solely by people like yourself. It is not the religion, race, gender, sexuality or class that is the root cause of societal issues; it is individuals and structures within that society. It is not Muslims who are terrorists; it is the person holding the gun. It is not a clash of religions; it is a clash of ignorance. It is time to break the barriers that false pre-conceptions have built, to fight for diversity, to educate ourselves, and to work towards ending Islamophobia and discrimination of any kind. As a result, future generations can grow up living in a world that embraces inclusivity, pluralism and diversity, where multiculturalism promotes innovation, and open discourse leads to understanding. A world where a Muslim family is no longer afraid to go to an airport, but rather excited about the journey ahead.

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OTHER RESOURCES

For more on how exclusion affects ethnocultural minorities see:

[The Perception and Reality of "Import Conflict" in Canada](#)

[Through Our Eyes: Understanding the Impact of Online Hate on Ontario Communities](#)

[Breaking the Bias](#)