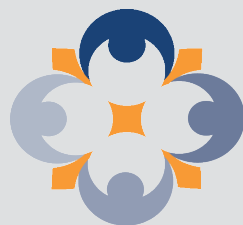




An Introduction to Islam and Islamophobia

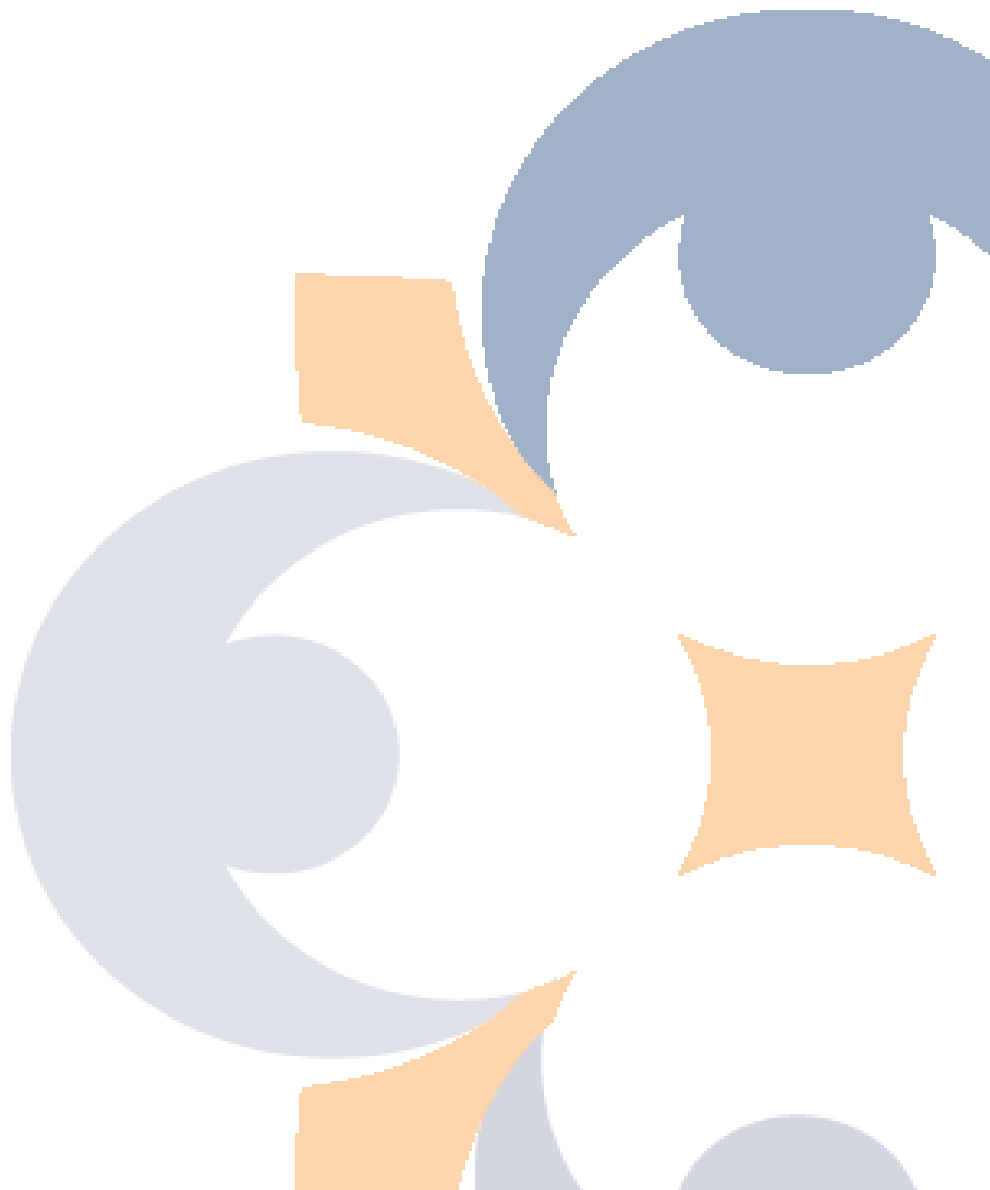
For School Administrators



CAIR
WASHINGTON

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Islam 101

Islam is the second largest religious group in the world, with 2 billion followers¹, called Muslims, worldwide. It is a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion based on the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Some Muslims are 'visibly Muslim' by wearing religious garments such as hijab, niqab, kufi or other traditional clothing. A 2024 CAIR survey found that 54.7% of respondents in Washington identified themselves as visibly Muslim. Muslims are also very ethnically diverse; many regions around the world have significant Muslim populations ranging from South Asia, the Middle East, South East Asia, North Africa, Central Asia, Eastern Europe and more. A majority of Muslims in Washington² are South Asian (28.9%), followed by Arab/Middle Eastern (17.1%) and Southeast Asian (9.4%).

1 Maps and data files for 2020. Us religion census. (n.d.)

2 Pew Research Center. (2025, February 26). People in Washington: Religious landscape study



Core Beliefs

Islam is based on the Quran which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 600s CE. In addition to the Quran there are also Hadith, which are accounts of Muhammad's life told by his followers. These two religious texts make up the basis of Islam. There are five main tenets or pillars of Islam that believers must adhere to:



Shahada

or **declaration of faith**, which states that there is only one God and Muhammad was his last prophet.

Salah

or **prayer** which must be observed five times a day after wudu (ablution, or ritual purification).

Zakat

or **mandatory charity** where Muslims must give a percentage of their wealth to those in need.

Sawm

or **fasting** which takes place during the month of Ramadan when Muslims refrain from eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset.

Hajj

or **pilgrimage** to the holy cities of Makkah and Medina, Saudi Arabia.



Common Misconceptions

Myth: “Muslims don’t believe in Jesus”

Fact: In Islam Jesus is a respected figure as he is a prophet. However, unlike in Christianity, he is not elevated to the son of God.

Myth: “Muslims are violent/extremist terrorists”

Fact: Islam is a religion of peace and any connotations of extremism or terrorism with Muslims, and the Islamic faith is a product of Islamophobia and racism¹. This stereotype stems from racist depictions in media as well as mainstream news of terrorist groups in the Middle East. The Quran says, “whoever takes a life it will be as if they killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity” (5:32). These groups are not a result of Islam or endorsed in the Quran but a product of complex social and political circumstances. US domestic terrorism is increasingly committed by right wing extremist groups, not Muslims.

¹ Cordesman, Anthony H. “Islam and the Patterns in Terrorism and Violent Extremism.” CSIS

Myth: “Zabiha Halal meat is different than regular meat”

Fact: Zabiha Halal refers to a way of butchering meat that is humane for the animal and is in the name of God. Halal beef is still beef, it was just cut in a different way. Some Muslims only eat meat that is halal. In general, Muslims do not eat pork of any kind or drink alcohol.

Myth: “All Muslims are the same”

Fact: Every individual has a different set of beliefs. In addition to the various sects of Islam, each with its own practices and beliefs, even Muslims within specific sects differ from one another.

Myth: “Muslims are Arab/ All Arabs are Muslim”

Fact: Religion and ethnicity are independent identity markers. A person of any ethnicity can be whatever religion they believe in. Not all Muslims are Arab and in fact, a majority of Muslims worldwide are South and Southeast

Asian. Although most countries in the middle east are Muslim majority, Arab people are diverse and can have different religious beliefs.

Myth: “Muslim women are oppressed/hijab is forced”

Fact: Women are given and treated with respect and dignity in Islam. Sexist practices, forced marriages for example, are explicitly forbidden in the Quran. Often Muslim women are mistreated by men due to harmful cultural practices that have no basis in Islam. However, this is not unique to any specific culture or religious group, patriarchal systems are present in every culture around the world. Muslim women also have personal agency and the choice to wear hijab if she wishes to or not.

Myth: “Jihad is a holy war, Allahu Akbar is a violent term”

Fact: Jihad in Arabic means to struggle or fight but does not have a violent connotation. It can refer to an internal spiritual struggle or a community wide struggle against oppression. Similarly Allahu Akbar simply means God is the greatest in Arabic. Arabic, like any other language is not violent or scary, fears of these completely normal terms stem from racism and islamophobia.

How to Accommodate Muslim Students and Staff

1. Excusing them for **prayer times** and designating a clean, quiet **space for prayer**.
2. Be understanding of **low energy** during Ramadan when they are fasting.
3. Understanding and accommodating their personal **clothing choices**.
4. Understanding and accommodating for **food restrictions** like avoiding pork and alcohol and eating Halal meat.
5. Excusing and accommodating needing to leave school for **religious holidays** like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.
6. Understanding the use of **different languages** such as Arabic, which is used to greet each other.

Islamophobia

Overview

Islamophobia is the fear, hatred, and discrimination against practitioners of Islam or the Islamic religion as a whole. It can lead to hostility, provocation and intolerance of Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamophobia is a form of prejudice whereby Islamic religion,

tradition and culture are seen as a threat to Western values. This is commonly rooted in structural distortions of the religion into a set of stereotyped characteristics of violence, civilizational subversion, and fundamental otherness.



History

Islamophobic sentiments date back to the beginning of Islam itself. During the initial spread of Islam, religious and political groups, such as Christians and Byzantines, felt threatened by Islam's growing influence and thus proliferated adverse portrayals of Muslims. Many historians point to the *limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood" in Spanish) policy of the Spanish Inquisition as a stimulant for Islamophobic tendencies. During this time, descendants of Muslim ancestry were discriminated against even if they converted to Christianity. Additionally, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe is thought to have caused rising bias against Islamic society.

In 1978, Palestinian-American author Edward Said coined the term *orientalism* to describe the growing sentiments surrounding Islamic culture and identity. In his book¹ of the same name, *Orientalism*, Said wrote: "Arabs, for example, are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization. Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being."

Essentially, Said notes that this Western oversimplification of Muslims has a dehumanizing effect, thereby leading to the view

that Muslims (the Orientals) are less deserving of basic human rights than Westerns (the Occidentals).

In the 21st century, Islamophobia increased rapidly around the world following the September 11th, 2001, attacks. Islamophobic ideas and tendencies were escalated and exported by the subsequent "War on Terror", enacted by the Bush Administration in response to the attacks. In an essay² on Islamophobia, several law professors and directors of research wrote: "*In swift fashion, the Bush Administration restructured the national security, immigration and tracking apparatuses of the state, consolidated into the newly minted Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This Executive Branch restructuring resulted in what legal scholar Leti Volpp called the "consolidation of a new identity category that groups together persons who appear 'Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim.' This consolidation reflects a racialization wherein members of this group are identified as terrorists.*"

As a result, any individual exhibiting characteristics that have been racialized as "Muslim" – language, clothing, skin color – were targeted. As a consequence, Sikhs, Christian Arabs, and Hindu Indians were all targets of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

1 Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

2 Aziz, Sahar, Khaled A Beydoun, Dalia Moga-hed, and Lakshmi Sridaran. "Islamophobia." Essay. In *Antiracism Center*, 1–10. Boston, Massachusetts: Boston University



There are four main forms of modern Islamophobia:

Private Islamophobia:

“the fear, suspicion, and violent targeting of Muslims by individuals or private actors.

or attitudes about Islam and Muslim subjects inside and outside of its borders.”

Structural Islamophobia:

“the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of institutions—most notably, government agencies—that is manifested through the enactment and advancement of policies.”

Interpersonal Islamophobia:

“a form of oppression that occurs on the community/societal level and is rooted in contrived fear, hate, ideas of Muslims being inherently prone to violence, and other problematic narratives.”

Dialectical Islamophobia:

“the systematic, fluid and deeply politicized dialectic between the state and its polity: a dialectic whereby the former shapes, reshapes, and confirms popular views

Reason



Psychologists attribute practices of prejudice and stereotyping to evolutionary biology. A study¹ conducted by Yale graduates found evidence that monkeys distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders” and are more wary of the latter, implying that the same practices stayed with humans as they evolved.

Psychologists also argue this trait was developed due to “group living”, which was a more effective means of survival. Collaborating with others allowed better access to food and shelter. However, this inspired the need for identification of “insiders” who are dependable for collaboration, and “outsiders”, who could bring harm.

Many psychologists have shown that prejudices are automatic and most people incur them to at least some extent. This is contrary to the popular belief that prejudices are purely intentional and overt. Most people are able to “self-correct” when made aware of their biases.

Additionally, people tend to estimate the likelihood of an event by how easily they can remember it. This is called the

¹ “Beach Injuries & Fatalities,” *International Shark Attack File*, Florida Museum of Natural History.

availability heuristic, and can lead to correct conclusions on likelihood because frequent events come to mind easier.

However, there are miscalculations using this shortcut as well, because events that inspire strong emotions are also easier to remember. For instance, many people believe shark attacks² are more common than they are (chance of 1 in 11.5 million). Thus, it is unsurprising that people may choose to refer to terrorist attacks when making conclusions about Muslims as a whole, even though the likelihood of any Muslim being violent is miniscule.

Islamophobia can therefore be attributed to people making false conclusions based on mental shortcuts. People in power, such as politicians, can use this phenomenon to their advantage by making certain events seem more frequent than they are, such as Bush’s rhetoric during his war on terrorism. Bush stated that “war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated”

Journalist Deepa Kumar noted in her book³ that “such rhetoric constructed that overarching ‘Islamic terrorist’ enemy that must be fought abroad and at home.”

As such, people who develop Islamophobia make conclusions about all Muslims based on memorable stereotypes of violence and civilizational subversion.

² “Beach Injuries & Fatalities,” *International Shark Attack File*, Florida Museum of Natural History.

³ See Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: The cultural logic of empire*. Chicago (London: Verso, 2021), p. 3..

Examples in the World

There are many instances of Islamophobia all around the world. Below are just a few.

Us Travel Ban 2025

In June, a travel ban⁴ by the Trump administration took effect banning travel to the US from 12 countries, 8 being Muslim majority. A similar ban was passed during Trump's first term in office and was met with mass protest and legal action which led to a rollback of some of its provisions. Multiple civil rights organizations, including CAIR, have sued the administration for the new discriminatory ban. This is an example of structural Islamophobia committed on the presidential administration level.

Uighur Genocide

A minority in China, the Uighurs, are a mostly Muslim ethnic group, one million of which have been placed into "counter-extremism centers" and a further two million of which have been forced into "re-education camps for political and cultural indoctrination." The treatment of the those in these camps has been described as a form of genocide⁵ constituting crimes against humanity. China claims these policies are aimed at "tackling extremism" and denies accusations of genocide.

New Zealand Mosque Shooting

On March 15th, 2019, a gunman opened fire at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center, killing 51 people and injuring another 40. The murderer live streamed the entirety of the first shooting, and as revealed in a manifesto written by him beforehand, he was driven by anti-Muslim and supremacist

rhetoric. He wrote anti-Muslim phrases and the names of terrorist attack victims on his guns and magazines.

Examples in the Local Community

A 2024 CAIR-WA survey asked Muslims in Washington about their experiences with discrimination, their findings are cause for concern. An overwhelming majority (69.2%) of respondents stated they experienced discriminatory practices at work, school or other places in the past year.

Biased News Articles

In 2012, CAIR Washington researchers found that the news company, The Seattle Times, was incorrectly representing Muslims as violent, uncultured, and against women. They also labeled criminals who were Muslim as "terrorists" more often than criminals who were of other faiths.

Testing During Ramadan

In 2019, Seattle schools gave standardized tests during Ramadan and emailed parents to suggest they let their child skip fasting on test days. Schools telling Muslims how to practice their religion was inappropriate.

Graffiti On School Walls

In 2015, graffiti saying "Muslims get out" was found on the wall outside Skyview Junior High School.

⁴ "Muslim Travel Ban." *Immigration Histor*; "US House Panel Advances Bill to Repeal Trump's Travel Ban." *Al Jazeera*; *Trump's travel ban is now in effect. here's what to know.* NPR.

⁵ "New Zealand: Surviving a Massacre." *Al Jazeera*.

Solutions

There are many ways to combat Islamophobia:

1

Find **local** and **national groups**, such as CAIR, and **join them**. Sign up for their email and social media lists and **take action** when they ask you to. **Working together** in an organized way amplifies individual efforts and advances the movement **against prejudice**.

2

Work on practical **community projects** with people of **various backgrounds** to build interpersonal relationships and develop **solutions** to **shared problems**.

3

Organize **coalitions** of **community leaders** representing **different** cultural, ethnic, and/or religious groups and community sectors (such as schools, businesses, etc.) to **examine** existing **policies** and determine what **needs to change**.

4

Keep your cool. When confronted **by hate**, be **assertive** and **polite**. Rudeness hurts the cause and can be **used against you**.



5

Turn a **negative** into a **positive**. For example, if a place of worship is vandalized, bring **communities together** to **repair** and clean it up in a demonstration of **solidarity**.

6

Seek to **educate** whenever possible. Most Islamophobia stems from **misinformation** and contortions of **true Islamic practices**¹.

¹ *Islamophobia is manufactured through disinformation*, Islamic Research and Information Center (IRIC)

7

Report any **harassment** you see.

8

Increase **education** and **enforcement** of **anti-discrimination laws**.

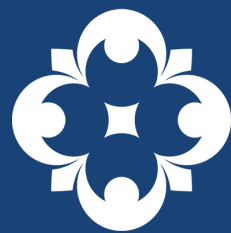


*Spread the truth
about Islam and
Muslims.*

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