

Inspiring Islamophobia: Media and State targeting of Muslims in Canada since 9/11

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Abstract:

This paper presents an outline of anti-Muslim racism and violence in Canada since September 11. We contextualise the anti-Muslim vilification and victimisation within an ideological and political climate that bestows permission to hate. That is, negative media portrayals, together with discriminatory rhetoric, policy and practices at the level of the state create an enabling environment that signals the legitimacy of public hostility toward the Muslim community.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks, from Bali to Madrid to London, backlash violence against those perceived to be Muslim escalated dramatically, resulting worldwide in assaults, arsons, even murders, especially in nations aligned with the USA. As we will document in this paper, even in Canada, one of the western nations that did not support the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, anti-Muslim violence rose, as anti-Muslim practices were instituted and intensified by the state. We seek to explain this upsurge of anti-Muslim vilification and victimisation within the context of an ideological and political climate that bestows 'permission to hate'. That is, we argue that negative media portrayals, together with discriminatory rhetoric, policy and practices at the level of the

state, create an enabling environment that signals the legitimacy of public hostility toward Muslim communities.

Hate Crime

Hate crime involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatised and marginalised groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterise a given social order. It simultaneously recreates the supposed dominance of the perpetrator's group, and the subordination of the victim's group. Bias motivated violence is directed not only at the individual victims, but also toward their communities. This violence runs the continuum from verbal harassment, to extreme acts such as assault, arson, and murder.

The goal of hate crime is to send a message to the targeted category – in this case all Muslims – that they are at risk and are not wanted here. It is thus much more than irrational acts of bigots. It is embedded in the structural and cultural context within which perpetrators feel entitled to convey this violent message (Bowling, 1993). Nor is it over when the perpetrator moves on. Moreover, the potential for hate crime is cultivated in particular contexts that allow for its growth. In the current paper, we focus specifically on the ways in which the popular media and the state contribute to the popular enactment of hate motivated discrimination, harassment and violence.

Muslims and the extent of hate crime in Canada

Muslims comprise approximately 2% of the Canadian population: almost 600,000 in the 2001 census. Some 86% of Canadian Muslims live in major metropolitan areas, with over 300,000 resident in the Greater Toronto region, and over 150,000 in Montreal. Vancouver and Ottawa have smaller but significant numbers of Muslims. Roughly one third are of South Asian background, a third of Arab background and a third of other backgrounds, including African and European.

The official data on racial victimisation in Canada suffer from gross underreporting to authorities. Indeed hate crimes are probably among the most underreported of criminal offences, for reasons including fear of retribution, lack of surveillance, and victims' apprehension of the criminal justice system (Roberts, 1995). Moreover, even where hate

crime is *reported to police*, it is less likely to be *recorded by* them. In Canada, police are not required to record statistics of hate crime.

In a survey involving twelve major police forces across Canada covering some 43% of the national volume of crime, there were 921 incidents of hate crime recorded for 2001 and 2002, some 57% of which were designated as motivated by race/ethnicity and 43% by religion (Silver, Milhorean and Taylor-Butts, 2004). Yet the Canadian General Social Survey showed for 1999 that about 4% of self-reported criminal victimisation incidents were believed by victims to be motivated by hate. This amounted to some 273,000 incidents, the vast majority of which were believed to be based on either race/ethnicity (43%) or religion (unfortunately categorised as 'other' along with age and sexual orientation, at 37%), or culture, at 18% (Silver, Milhorean and Taylor-Butts, 2004).

In addition to under-reporting, neither of these sets of data breaks down the broad categories of race, ethnicity, religion or culture to quantify anti-Muslim hate crime. For more specific counting of Islamophobic attacks, we must look to 'unofficial' measures. For example, over half of the Muslim Canadians surveyed by the Canadian Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN) had experienced an anti-Muslim incident since 9/11 (CAIR-CAN, 2004).

The Canadian Islamic Congress (2003) reported a 1600% increase in the annual incidence of anti-Muslim hate crime reported to them, albeit from a low base of 11 cases in the year prior to 9/11 to 173 in the subsequent year. The CIC fears the possibility of more backlash violence following the arrests of 17 young men arrested for their role in a plotted terrorist attack in Toronto in June of 2006. Indeed, within a day of the arrests, a major Toronto mosque was vandalised.

A survey of Canadian Muslims in 2002 by CAIR-CAN found that 56% of respondents had experienced at least one anti-Muslim incident in the twelve months since 9/11. The same percentage found increased media bias against Muslims and Islam. Some 33% had experienced verbal abuse; 18% had experienced racial profiling and 16% had experienced workplace discrimination (CAIR-CAN, 2004: p.6).

Denise Helly (2004) cites a 2002 CAIR-CAN study which found that 60% of the people of Muslim heritage surveyed reported that 'they experienced bias or discrimination since

the 9/11 terrorist attacks', with fully a third saying their lives had worsened since 9/11, that they felt Canadians disliked them and that they were concerned about their own and their families' safety.

A survey of Canadian Arabs conducted between November 2001 and March 2002 by the Canadian Arab Federation (n=253) similarly showed 49.4% encounter racism in their daily interaction with people 'occasionally' (41.5%), 'frequently' (4.7%) or 'all the time' (3.2%), with the other half responding that it didn't happen to them (44.7%) or they didn't know (5.9%) (Khouri, 2003).

Anti-Muslim bias in Canadian media

These patterns of discrimination and violence are legitimated by ideologies which mark the Other in ways which normalise corresponding inequities. In the cultural realm we find articulated the relations of superiority/inferiority which establish a hospitable environment for openly racist activity.

Stereotypes which distinguish the racialised Other from 'white' help to distance white from not white. Here 'white' may be a metaphor for western or non-'Third-World-looking', rather than a matter of physical colour (Hage, 1998). The non-white Other is to be feared, ridiculed, and loathed for their differences as recognised in the popular psyche. Almost invariably, the stereotypes are loaded with disparaging associations, suggesting inferiority, irresponsibility, immorality, and non-humanness, for example. Consequently, they provide both motive and rationale for injurious verbal and physical assaults on minority groups. Acting upon these interpretations allows dominant group members to recreate whiteness as superiority, while castigating the Other for their presumed traits and behaviours. Members of subordinate groups are potential victims *because of* their subordinate status. They are already deemed inferior, deviant, and therefore deserving of whatever hostility and persecution comes their way. If they perform their identities on the basis of what is expected of them, they are vulnerable. If they perform in ways that challenge those expectations, they are equally vulnerable.

Such negative constructions of Islam undoubtedly underlie the victimisation of Muslims. Antonius (2006) argues that a background of 'respectable' racism in the Canadian media, that is unnoticed because it is taken for granted, forms the causal background to the

publicly repudiated forms of ‘disreputable’ racism associated with extremist groups such as racist skinhead organisations. Many commentators have suggested that Arabs generally and Muslims specifically may represent the last ‘legitimate’ subjects of slanderous imagery and stereotypes (see for example Abraham, 1994).

The media are especially complicit in the dissemination of anti-Muslim imagery (Moore, 1995). The widespread perpetuation of such caricatures—by the media and by public figures—fuels sentiments of suspicion and mistrust by unfavourably shaping public perceptions. There are few, if any, positive media images of Arabs, Muslims, or Middle Easterners generally. Rather they are portrayed collectively as wholly evil and warlike. Based on observations of cartoons and other public media, Stockton (1994) identified eight ‘assigned image themes’ that consistently appear in depictions of Arabs: sexual depravity, creature analogies (e.g., vermin, camels), physiological and psychological traits (e.g., unappealing physical characteristics, fanaticism, vengeance), savage leaders, deceit, secret power, hatred of Israel, and terrorism.

In a 2002 nationwide survey of some 300 Canadian Muslims of South Asian, Arab, African and European background, CAIR-CAN found that 55% of respondents thought the Canadian media were more biased since 9/11. The report remarked on ‘A startling similarity between media myths on Islam and Muslims and the hate-text of many documented anti-Muslim incidents’ (Khan, Saloojee and Al-Shalchi, 2004). Ismael and Measor (2003) observe that, after 9-11,

The blend of the xenophobic fears of the ‘other’, and that of terrorism, provided media consumers in Canada with a clear path to the conclusion that Islam was a faith in which acts of unspeakable violence were acceptable and that terrorism was endemic to Muslim and Arab culture.

This did not begin in September 2001, they point out, but the ‘war on terror’ marked an intensification of existing Islamophobia in the media.

Having said that, however, our comments must be qualified somewhat. Anti-Muslim bias in the Canadian news media has tended not to be quite as virulent in its racism as the media in other Western nations. Indeed, Helly (2004) cites research suggesting that many Canadian media outlets offer relatively ‘balanced’ or ‘objective’ coverage of Islam. A

recent case in point is newspaper coverage of the foiled terrorist attack in Toronto, wherein seventeen suspects were arrested. Coverage in the *Toronto Star*, for example, was rather sympathetic, taking pains to call for tolerance, and the recognition that the suspects were fringe members of a marginal sect. Muslim leaders are cited liberally, in an apparent effort to present the peaceful side of Islam. This contrasts greatly with British, American and Australian accounts of similar events, which tend to use such occasions to reinforce negative perceptions.

Permission to hate

Hate-motivated violence can only flourish in an enabling environment. In western nations like Canada, such an environment has historically been conditioned by the activity – and inactivity – of the state. State practices, policy and rhetoric have often provided the formal framework within which hate crime – as an informal mechanism of control – emerges. Practices within the state, at an individual and institutional level, which stigmatise, demonise or marginalise traditionally oppressed groups, legitimate the mistreatment of these same groups on the streets.

The role of the state in legitimating hate crime is inextricably linked to its role in the politics of identity-making and the construction of difference. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the state is increasingly the pre-eminent site of racial conflict. The state is implicated in constructing popular notions of identity in racialised terms. The state racialises difference, prescribes the boundaries of its legitimacy, and maintains the hierarchy of national cultural capital (Hage, 1998).

Political discourse reaffirms and legitimates the negative evaluations of difference which give rise to hate crime. The state is a contested site, wherein the ‘deliberate use of hate by rhetors is an overt attempt to dominate the opposition by rhetorical – if not physical – force’ (Whillock and Slayden, 1995: xiii). Muslims in Canada post-9/11, as in other countries, have been subject to the stigmatising effects of state action intended to control and contain the terrorist threat by which all Muslims become suspect. Since the attacks, political and public figures have intensified their ‘crusade’ against Muslims.

Political expressions of hate and bigotry are to be located at any number of different sites. Press releases and related sound bites, judicial decisions, parliamentary debates,

commission hearings and certainly single-issue and electoral political campaigns are laden with racialising images and language. The demonisation of minority groups is reinforced by the racialised discourse of other politicians, judges, political lobbyists, and more. Also *failure* to engage in public discourse can leave groups vulnerable. Both acts of commission and omission raise questions about particular groups' legitimacy and belonging in the nation; in some cases, they explicitly define their 'outsider' status. Consider, for example, Prime Minister Chretien's failure to condemn the hate-motivated violence perpetrated against Canadian Muslims after 9/11: a failure roundly criticised by Muslim organisations. Such inaction suggests sympathy with the perpetrators rather than the victims, and thus lends legitimacy to the reactionary violence.

Politicians' and policy-makers' demonising of Muslims eventually leads to policies and practices that further marginalise them. This is especially so with the activities of law enforcement and security agencies. Here one can easily see how negative images have shaped discrimination against Muslims. Anyone displaying interest in their Middle Eastern homeland affairs, or even being noticeably devout in their religion, is potentially vulnerable to pursuit by federal agencies. Involvement in Muslim organisations, political activism, even subscribing to Middle Eastern magazines, can provoke federal attention.

Patterns of surveillance and harassment of Muslim residents are particularly intense in the aftermath of events like terrorist attacks, when government agencies step up their engagement with Muslims. Not only did the Chretien administration not intervene to dissuade perpetrators from Islamophobic attacks after 9/11, it helped intensify the hostility toward Muslims. Soon after September 11, Canada joined the US and UK, and indeed Australia, in a flurry of new and strengthened anti-terror legislation.

Bill C-36 featured the most extensive of such new laws. The legislation was passed by December 2001 showing little time for reflection or consideration. Its definition of terrorism is dangerously inclusive in referring to acts of civil disobedience committed 'in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause', which is intended to cause 'serious disruption of an essential service, facility or system.' Under this definition, virtually any industrial action or political demonstration could be considered terrorism.

Moreover, the legislation allows for an unprecedented extension of intrusive law enforcement activities on the one hand, and contraction of individual and collective rights on the other. In addition to the expected Criminal Code amendments, the Bill also provided for parallel amendments to fifteen additional Acts, including the Canadian Human Rights Act, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Act, the Personal Information Protection And Electronic Documents Act, and the Privacy Act. Collectively, these amendments allow for an array of increased powers of surveillance and intrusion, including:

- making it easier to use electronic surveillance against [suspected] terrorist groups;
- creating new offences targeting unlawful disclosure of certain information of national interest;
- amending the *Canada Evidence Act* to continue and clarify the mandate of the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) to collect foreign communications;
- allowing the arrest, detention and imposition of conditions of release of suspected terrorists to prevent terrorist acts and save lives;
- requiring individuals who have information [suspected to be] related to a terrorist group or offences to appear before a judge to provide that information; and
- extending the DNA warrant scheme and data bank to include terrorist crimes (Smith, 2003: 149)

Both facets – law enforcement expansion and rights constrictions – were vigorously resisted by rights groups across Canada. Among the dissenters were Muslim organisations that recognised the particular threat the new anti-terrorist measures posed for their constituents, not just through state harassment, but also by reinforcing public perceptions of ‘villainy’ and terrorist tendencies. In a Justice Committee hearing leading up to passage of the Bill, Mohamed Elmasry, of the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC), argued that it would make Muslim Canadians ‘the most targeted group in the country’. Subsequent events have borne out these fears.

The 2004 CAIR-CAN report documents extensive experiences in which law enforcement agents (CSIS, RCMP, police) ‘approached’ or ‘contacted’ Arabs and Muslims, often with no explanation for the contact. In fact, of the 467 respondents, 8% had been contacted – the bulk of whom (84%) were Canadian citizens; among those who were not directly contacted, nearly half (43%) knew at one other Canadian Muslim who had been (CAIR-CAN, 2004). Particularly disturbing is the impact that the contact had on those visited:

46 percent said they felt fearful, anxious, ‘freaked out,’ paranoid, confused and/or nervous when contacted by security officials. 24 percent indicated feeling harassed and pressured, violated and/or discriminated against (CAIR-CAN, 2004: 13).

The fear associated with the visitations was exacerbated by the fact that many occurred in the respondents’ workplaces, drawing attention to their ‘suspect’ identities.

Also intimidating were tactics used by law enforcement agents. Among the practices identified were discouraging legal or other third party assistance; aggressive and threatening behaviour; threats of arrest; problematic and suggestive questions (e.g., attitudes toward or knowledge of such things as jihad, al-Qaeda, or loyalty to Canada *as opposed to* loyalty to their religious faith); improper identification; attempts to recruit participants as informants; and interrogation of minors. These practices counterproductively increase the alienation and mutual distrust between Muslims and law enforcement agents. They also reinforce the public perception that Muslims *are* questionable over their loyalty to Canada and their knowledge of, if not involvement in, terrorism. The pattern of state badgering of Muslims ‘makes people feel comfortable with their prejudices and grants those who hold pre-existing racist attitudes permission to express those attitudes and expect them to be taken seriously. It empowers individual prejudices and fuels popular fears’ (Bahdi, 2003: 314).

Islamic leaders are justifiably concerned that such actions fuel the backlash. As noted above, state practices provide a context and a framework for the broader demonisation and marginalisation of minority groups. Through its rhetoric and policies, the state absorbs and reflects back onto the public hostile and negative perceptions of Muslims. Thus, the state seems to reaffirm the legitimacy of such beliefs, while at the same time giving them public voice. In so doing, the state rhetors play on cultural symbols – often

provided by the media – that differentiate ‘Us’ from ‘Them’: good vs. evil; the ‘savage’ vs. the ‘civilised.’ Political discourse thus reaffirms and legitimates negative evaluations of difference, in that it is central to the ‘enactment, expression, legitimation and acquisition’ of bigotry of all types (van Dijk, 1995:2), including hate-motivated violence.

The biases embedded in the state create an environment hostile to Muslims in Canada. Discriminatory policies and practices by government agencies reinforce anti-Muslim sentiment. Moreover, they have a ‘trickle down’ effect, by which ‘official use of profiling (for example) sends a message to the larger community that a person who fits a certain physical or religious description is suspect, if not guilty until proven innocent’ (CAIR, 2002:7). Consequently, political manipulation of public perceptions and its attendant discriminatory practices bestows permission for other forms of discrimination.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the intensification after 9/11 of existing anti-Muslim racism in Canada: from popular xenophobia, to media stereotyping and bias, to state institutional discrimination and targeting. We have argued that the state, in collaboration with various popular media expressions of anti-Muslim bias, has effectively lent ‘permission to hate’ to those inclined to commit hate crime against Muslims. In declining adequately to recognise and to act against hate crime, and in actually modeling anti-Muslim bias by practicing discrimination and institutional racism through ‘ethnic targeting’, ‘racial profiling’ and the like, the state conveys a sort of ideological licence to individuals, groups and institutions to perpetrate and perpetuate racial hatred.

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