The Canadian Islamophobia Industry: Islamophobia’s Ecosystem in the Great White North

Jasmin Zine
Wilfrid Laurier University

ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDIES JOURNAL
VOLUME 7, NO. 2 Fall 2022, PP. 232–249.

Published by:
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,
Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley

Disclaimer:
Statements of fact and opinion in the articles, notes, perspectives, and so on in the Islamophobia Studies Journal are those of the respective authors and contributors. They are not the expression of the editorial or advisory board and staff. No representation, either expressed or implied, is made of the accuracy of the material in this journal, and ISJ cannot accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made. The reader must make his or her own evaluation of the accuracy and appropriateness of those materials.

DOI:10.13169/islastudj.7.2.0232
Since the 9/11 attacks, Canadian Muslims have been more openly vilified and targeted. As noted in the introduction to this special issue, Statistics Canada data on police-reported hate crimes between 2009 and 2021 revealed a steady increase of anti-Muslim incidents across the country. Among these hate crimes have been two unprecedented deadly attacks against Muslims in Canada. The first took place at the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec in Quebec City on January 29, 2017, where six men were brutally shot and killed after evening prayers and then four years later, on June 6, 2021, in London, Ontario, four members of a Canadian Pakistani Muslim family were intentionally mowed down by a truck and killed. Both deadly acts of violence were perpetrated by men inspired by White nationalist ideologies.

Within this context, understanding how Islamophobia manifests and is purveyed is more important than ever. In addition to the impact that state policies and systemic anti-Muslim racism have in perpetuating a climate of Islamophobic animus, there are more orchestrated ways that Islamophobic networks operate to support and sustain an industry of hate. The “Islamophobia industry” is comprised of media outlets, political figures, far-right, White nationalist groups, Islamophobia influencers and ideologues, pro-Israel groups (comprised of Zionist Jewish and Christian fringe right-wing groups), Muslim dissidents, think tanks, and the donors who fund their campaigns. These individuals, groups, and institutions comprise a network that supports and engages in activities that demonize and marginalize Islam and Muslims in Canada.

Over the past decade, research on the Islamophobia industry in the US has been comprehensive in mapping how networks of anti-Muslim bigotry are constituted and funded (see e.g., Lean 2017; Ali et al. 2011; CAIR 2019). These important interventions prompted my investigation into the dynamics of Canada’s Islamophobia industry. The objectives of this study were to: a) map the political, ideological, institutional, and economic networks that foment Islamophobic fear and moral panic in Canada; b) examine strategies employed by Islamophobia agents and highlight the ties among players within the Islamophobia industry; c) create profiles of key public figures, media outlets, and organizations who produce and distribute Islamophobic ideologies and propaganda; d) identify the dominant Islamophobic discourses that circulate through these networks.

A Social Network Analysis (SNA) was used to examine relevant media articles, websites, public commentary, and videos of Islamophobia influencers and ideologues, organizations, media outlets, and other anti-Muslim special interest groups that promote Islamophobic campaigns. This approach views networked social relationships in terms of nodes and ties. Nodes are the individual actors within the networks (in this case the individuals, groups, and organizations comprising the Islamophobia industry), and ties are the relationships between them. The analysis also involved mapping the social capital of individual actors and the spheres of influence associated with them (Moody and Paxton 2009). Examining the spheres of influence within Islamophobia networks is important to ascertain the flow of information which leads to the
spread of Islamophobic ideas and hate. As a methodological approach, SNA was useful for the mapping of actors within the network and the connections and communication flows between them as part of the ecosystem within which these Islamophobic subcultures reside.

The Islamophobia Industry

What distinguishes Islamophobia from other forms of oppression is that there is an industry behind purveying anti-Muslim hate. An influential report in the US, Fear Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America (Ali et al. 2011), was the first to shine a light on “the Islamophobia network of so-called experts, academics, institutions, grassroots organizations, media outlets, and donors who manufacture, produce, distribute, and mainstream an irrational fear of Islam and Muslims” (9). Lean’s (2017) study on the Islamophobia Industry further exposed the ideologies and tactics of the proponents of Islamophobia in the US from both the right and left of the political spectrum, religious and secular groups, as well as politicians and media personalities whose propaganda contributes to politicizing and legislating of fear of Muslims. These studies were able to identify the key elements of the Islamophobia industry and identify major donors financing the promotion of anti-Muslim hate and propaganda in the United States.

Lean (2017, 10) refers to a “tight knit and interconnected confederation of right-wing fear merchants” driving campaigns of anti-Muslim propaganda in the US. Since the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001, he argues that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in the US and Europe “is not the result of a naturally evolving climate of skepticism but a product that has been carefully and methodically nurtured” (13). The orchestrated and funded nature of this kind of Islamophobic enterprise, operates as a clearing house for anti-Muslim ideologies, activities, and transnational campaigns. This Islamophobia industry is constituted through the intertwined interests among the diverse individuals, groups, and organizations who coordinate in various ways to achieve shared and mutually beneficial political goals. These activities are often funded or generate revenue monetizing anti-Muslim bigotry, which is why these networks are characterized as an “industry.”

According to a 2016 report by the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and University of California-Berkeley’s Center for Race and Gender, in the US there is a $208 million small, tightly networked group of donors, organizations, and misinformation experts who advance anti-Muslim political interests. In their updated 2019 report, Hijacked by Hate, CAIR’s research found that in the United States, 1,096 charitable institutions financed at least 39 Islamophobia network groups between 2014 and 2016 through Donor Advised Funds (DAF). These foundations donated a wide range of sums from $20 up to $32.4 million. The report also documented that between 2014 and 2016, these 39 anti-Muslim organizations had access to at least $1.5 billion through their collective organizational financial capacity. The financial resources at the disposal of Islamophobia networks is staggering and demonstrates how anti-Muslim bigotry has very deep pockets.

Manufacturing Fear

Manufacturing and instrumentalizing fear and hate through the propagation of Islamophobic ideologies is the mainstay of the Islamophobia industry. Anti-Muslim narratives provide the ideological underpinnings that underwrite the individual, ideological, and systemic dynamics of Islamophobia (Abadi 2018; Bazian 2015; Saylor 2014). A wide variety of conspiracy theories circulates through the individuals and organizations connected to these
Islamophobic networks, including representing Muslims and Muslim organizations as the “Islamist bogeyman” (alleged fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas); a “fifth column” waging “civilizational jihad” and imposing “creeping sharia law”; “Muslim invaders” as a “Trojan horse” and “wolves in sheep’s clothing” using deception (taqiyya) to dupe and overtake Western civilization. Globally, demographic replacement conspiracy theories are underpinned by xenophobic anti-Muslim ideologies. Ingraining fear and moral panic about Muslim “folk devils” (Cohen 1972/2014) allow for hate crimes as well as draconian security policies and racial profiling to be regarded as legitimate and necessary to preserving public safety (Jamil and Rousseau 2012; Razack 2008; Bahdi 2003; Khalema and Wannas-Jones 2003; Nagra 2011).

Other stereotypes represent Muslim women as backward, oppressed, and without agency or freedom. Kumar (2012) warns that such myths about Islam become commonsense ideas that shape the public imaginary. These notions become hegemonic as they are filtered through the institutions of civil society such as media (television, film, social media) and education and are embedded in pop culture through widespread circulation on the internet. These discourses are often uncritically absorbed and taken on as commonsense ideas and rarely debunked through counter-narratives. Allen (2010, 190) identifies vilifying ideologies as a facet of Islamophobia that is similar in theory, function, and purpose to racism and perpetuates negatively evaluated meanings about Muslims and Islam through “shared languages and conceptual maps” that shape and sustain negative social consensus (see also Sheehi 2011; Semati 2010). Orientalist ideologies shape Islamophobic imaginaries and provide the rationale for systemic practices through which Islamophobia becomes institutionally embedded and reproduced. These ideologies feed into the dynamic of Islamophobia by justifying individual actions like hate crimes, vandalism, harassment, and violence as well as proving the rationale for draconian security measures that target Muslims.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA’S ECOSYSTEM**

Unlike most industries where products are manufactured under a corporate umbrella, the Islamophobia Industry is different. It is more dynamic and flexible, with various moving parts that are not attached to one single branch. Still, its purveyors prowl the same terrain and are connected in many significant ways. Beyond legitimizing the work of one another, which is a key feature of how they operate, the Islamophobia industry has harnessed the power of the internet to expand their small networks into national and international organizations. Lean (2017, 10)

Islamophobia in Canada manifests within a political, cultural, economic, and social ecosystem where the dynamics of this oppression incubate and germinate among the constellation of individuals, special interest groups, and institutions that support and engage in activities that demonize and vilify Islam and Muslims. The ecosystem is a concept that helps illustrate how Islamophobia networks function symbiotically through synergetic subcultures comprising a broad-ranging industry. The fertile ground of the Islamophobia ecosystem is sown through state policies that target Muslims and negative public sentiments.

Like energy flows through organisms in a natural ecosystem, ideologies, propaganda, stereotypes, and fake news are the life blood of Islamophobia’s ecosystem. The social, political, and cultural ecology of Canada’s Islamophobic subcultures and the anti-Muslim ideas and campaigns they produce are the matrix within which this industry flourishes. Increasingly, the reach of Islamophobia actors is furthered by the internet and social media (as Lean’s quote above describes) and is demonstrated through their transnational activities and alliances.
There is a symbiotic relationship between the individuals and groups that comprise Canada’s Islamophobia networks. Seemingly disparate special interest groups and their influencers are aligning in various ways to promote a common agenda of maligning and vilifying Islam and Muslims. Islamophobic subcultures are converging within the wider political and cultural ecosystem building ties between groups to instrumentalize their shared goals and assets.

Many of the players in the Islamophobia industry are influencers, agitators, and professional provocateurs. They work both independently and in concert to spread Islamophobic paranoia and orchestrate controversies that circulate in far-right echo chambers and in pro-Israel circles. Emerging from this study is the following typology of Islamophobic actors and the ties that bind them.

**THE PLAYERS**

- **Media Outlets and Islamophobia Influencers:** In Canada, Rebel News and other far-right media outlets circulate racist and Islamophobic narratives that dog-whistle militant anti-Muslim groups. Islamophobia influencers contribute to far-right media forums and use social-media platforms to professionalize and monetize their propaganda and bigotry.
- **Foot Soldiers:** Far-right, White nationalist, and neo-Nazi groups and the agitators behind them are active in promoting anti-Muslim hate online and through public protests and demonstrations.
- **Soft-Power Groups:** Soft-power groups leverage influence by promoting anti-Muslim campaigns to achieve specific political, ideological, and religious goals that drive Islamophobic subcultures. They do this under the guise of promoting democracy, human rights, free speech, and Judeo-Christian values, ideals to which they deem Islam and Muslims as being antithetical and incompatible. Soft-power groups engage in coercive tactics such as bullying, harassment, and intimidation to silence those who oppose them.
- **Native Informers:** Muslim dissidents and ex-Muslims who play the role of authoritative interlocutors, creating and validating Islamophobic narratives and conspiracy theories. They provide the “political cover” for Islamophobic campaigns.
- **Think Tanks and Designated Security Experts:** These create a “cult of expertise” to promote Islamophobic conspiracy theories that brand Muslims as potential radicals and national-security threats.
- **Political Figures and Influencers:** The players in the Islamophobia industry are strengthened and enabled by politicians who authorize Islamophobic narratives and policies that promote anti-Muslim sentiments as part of the wider ecosystem that primes the ground for Islamophobic racism to take root and spread.

Some of the categories included here are more expansive than those identified in previous studies on the Islamophobia industry. For example, far-right, White nationalist groups (foot soldiers) and the industry of security experts are captured here but did not figure prominently in American studies though, undoubtedly, they play similar roles as Islamophobia purveyors. As the ties between different sectors of the Islamophobia industry grow, the interactive role of these groups is more evident.

**TYPES OF CONNECTIONS**

Islamophobic rhetoric and conspiracy theories are reinforced through their widespread circulation within the integrated Islamophobia networks. The degrees of separation between
these groups and others who share the same anti-Muslim ideologies are important in mapping the various spheres of influence and strategic alliances among them. The instrumental ties between different sectors of the Islamophobia industry involve the following strategies:

- **Platforming/Co-Platforming**: Cooperative and reciprocal ties where individuals move between Islamophobic interest groups to provide and share with one another public platforms for their anti-Muslim rhetoric.
- **Echoing/Amplifying**: The circulation and affirmation of shared Islamophobic tropes, discourses, and conspiracy theories. The reiteration and piggybacking of these ideas by different sectors of the Islamophobia industry lend them credence and further their normalization as commonsense notions.
- **Legitimizing/Validating**: The widespread circulation of ideas in the Islamophobia “playlist” can often be easily discredited, yet these tropes garner legitimacy from being leveraged simultaneously by different media outlets, influencers, organizations, think tanks and their designated security experts, and by Islamophobic special-interest groups. For example, Muslim dissidents and ex-Muslims provide the validation for anti-Muslim views and Islamophobic conspiracy theories through the presumed authority of their insider status.
- **Enabling**: Enabling involves the following activities: (a) financial support for anti-Muslim campaigns, events, speakers, or those behind these activities and/or (b) direct action (e.g., actively participating in rallies, demonstrations, and events held by other Islamophobic interest groups, acting as a security detail). The anti-Muslim ideologies and activities these players orchestrate are made possible in part by the donors who fund their campaigns and other concrete forms of alliance between these groups that instrumentalize and fortify their connections.
- **Infiltration/Surveillance**: A more recently identified and troubling tactic includes the infiltration and surveillance of Muslim organizations for the purposes of spying. In 2021, the Ohio chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) fired their executive and legal director, Romin Iqbal, alleging that he had been passing on confidential information to the Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT) founded by Steve Emerson, one of the longstanding architects of the US Islamophobia industry (Harb 2022). CAIR further accused IPT of surveilling Muslim American mosques and organizations in coordination with Israeli government officials. These spy tactics warrant continued monitoring within other contexts.
Massoumi et al. (2017) refer to the “pillars of Islamophobia” as being the institutions and machinery of the state: the far right; the counterjihad movement; neoconservatives; transnational Zionist groups; and the pro-war left and the new atheist movement. Among these institutions and agents, they identify “specific social actors (pillars) that produce the ideas and practices that result in disadvantage for Muslims” (4). These individuals and the networks among them are of increasing interest in Islamophobia studies.

As noted above, in Canada, the Islamophobia industry is comprised of five key sectors that include: a) media outlets and Islamophobia influencers; b) White nationalist groups; c) pro-Israel, fringe-right groups; d) Muslim dissidents and ex-Muslims; and e) think tanks and their designated security experts. These otherwise diverse individuals and groups have in common shared political and ideological mandates that involve the demonization and vilification of Islam and Muslims and often work in concert to foment controversies and spread Islamophobic narratives and conspiracy theories. A brief outline of these groups is provided below.

Far Right Media and Islamophobia Influencers

Rebel News has been referred to as “Breitbart North” and is a central clearinghouse for Islamophobic narratives in Canada (Markusoff 2017). A self-proclaimed “fearless source of news” that “won’t be found anywhere else,” the Rebel panders to fears about the demise of free speech and in response they push the boundaries of hate speech to create a platform for bigotry. Serving as a beacon for the “threat of radical Islam to the West,” Rebel News has platformed White nationalists and neo-Nazis and is a primary hub for purveying anti-Muslim rhetoric and ideologies.

Ezra Levant, a conservative broadcaster, and media personality, has been referred to as the “Commander” of Rebel News. Israel’s Haaretz newspaper has dubbed him as “Canada’s Jewish Steve Bannon wannabe” (Solomon 2017). Levant has had a long and controversial media career during which he was sued for libel and has promoted racist views under the guise of promoting “free speech.” Under Levant’s leadership, Islamophobic paranoia is widely circulated through Rebel News which has launched the career of Islamophobic influencers such as Lauren Southern and Faith Goldy.

Lauren Southern is a Canadian far-right, White nationalist, political activist, and popular YouTube personality. She actively promotes Islamophobic conspiracies about Muslim invaders taking over the West and that White, Christians face an existential and cultural threat because of this agenda. She has been connected to xenophobic far-right campaigns seeking to stop migrants from entering Europe. Her 2016 book titled: Barbarians: How Baby Boomers, Immigrants, and Islam Screwed my Generation, lists several “facts” for Millennials to reckon with, such as her assertion that acting “to push back as hard as possible against the Muslim invasion” cannot be construed as “Christian terrorism” (18-19). One of the book chapters is titled: “How Islam is Ruining Everything” where she mocks the idea of Islamophobia as being “most retarded” (89), since fearing Islam is simply “common sense” (90). She maintains that the problem with Islam is that it has not undergone an “enlightenment” the way in that Christianity and Judaism have progressed (93). In addition to promoting Judeo-Christian supremacy through deploying Muslim folk devil ideology, Southern also opposes immigration and multiculturalism, believing that these pave the way for the downfall of White, Western society and culture.

Faith Julia Goldy-Bazos, or Faith Goldy as she is commonly known, is a Canadian far-right political commentator and former Rebel News host. In 2018 Goldy campaigned to be
Mayor of Toronto. She came in a distant third. Despite her failed political aspirations, she is a prominent social media celebrity and Islamophobia influencer. As of March 2021, she had 110k+ followers on Twitter (now self-labelled an “inactive account” after losing 10k followers) and 97K+ subscribers on YouTube.

Goldy uses her social media platforms to promote anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic views and to foment fear of a “White genocide” (Picazo 2018). She warned of a declining White demographic in Canada and that “diversity” is a code word for “population replacement.” She has publicly recited the Fourteen Words of the White supremacist creed: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.” Goldy defended her actions saying: “I don’t see that that’s controversial.”

While at the Rebel, Goldy made several anti-Muslim and anti-Islam videos. Her coverage of the 2017 Quebec City Mosque shooting promoted the “two suspect” narrative of an alleged Muslim shooter involved in the terror attack. Attempting to lend credence to her unfounded assertion, she included video footage of an Imam discussing what she characterized as the conflict between “rival mosques,” though the comments were in fact lamenting disagreements among sectarian groups. Goldy’s focus on a “rival mosques” theory was an attempt to cast further aspersions and suggest that inter-Muslim conflict could have been the cause of the deadly violence rather than White nationalist terrorism. This victim-blaming strategy is often used to foment doubt and suspicion by appealing to existing stereotypes of violent, dangerous Muslims.

White Nationalist “Foot Soldiers”

Across Canada there are 300 White nationalist groups, up from 130 in 2015 (Perry and Scrivens 2016). Promoting Islamophobia is a core mandate for some of these Canada-based groups such as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA), Soldiers of Odin, Canadian Infidels, Northern Guard, ID Canada, Proud Boys, Cultural Action Party, Yellow Vests, Canadian Nationalist Party, Blood and Honour, Combat 18, Students for Western Civilization, Three Percenters, Rise Canada, and World Coalition Against Islam. Along with the Islamophobic group, La Meute, Nadeau and Helly (2016) cite the rise of “extreme right parties” (such as Génération identitaire, PEGIDA, English Defence League) indicating “the emergence of an extreme right ‘sensibility’ in the Province of Québec” (2). All these groups engage in public rhetoric against Islam and Muslims, prominently promoting anti-Muslim narratives in their social media posts and websites.

In 2017, anti-Muslim rhetoric north and south of the border and related hate crimes against Muslims were heightened, no doubt influenced by former US President Donald Trump’s anti-Muslim views and policies. Trump’s rhetoric was a dog-whistle to far-right White nationalist groups and authorized and emboldened all anti-Muslim voices to promote racism and hate. Islamophobic ideologies inspire anti-Muslim violence such as the Québec City Mosque shooting where the perpetrator Alexandre Bissonnette made 800 online searches of Trump. Racist ideologies underwrite violence and support state policies targeting Muslims. These connections cannot be ignored.

Soft-Power Groups

While White nationalist groups can be regarded as the “foot soldiers” who take their Islamophobic hate to the street in overt ways, there are “soft power” groups, comprised of pro-Israel, fringe-right groups that identify as Jewish and Christian. “Soft power” refers to the
ability to influence, persuade, and move people by way of argument (Nye 2005). It is a means of pursuing desired goals using persuasive tactics that create attraction to an objective or cause without resorting to overt aggression as a means of coercion. While the terms of “soft power” and “hard power” (i.e., coercion through economic or military means) are most often used to describe state governance and international relations, they can also be adapted to signify the kinds of strategies used by individuals and groups to achieve strategic goals in micro-political contexts.

The soft power brokers in the Islamophobia industry promote social, cultural, and political ideas in an attempt to influence, shape and inform public opinion and policies. However, they also use more coercive tactics like bullying, harassment, and intimidation to silence opposition. These groups validate bigotry by dressing it up as patriotism and hide it behind rhetoric like upholding “democracy” and “the rule of law” or preserving and promoting “Judeo-Christian values,” and attempt to legitimate their anti-Muslim views through respectable influential channels, such as conferences featuring high-profile speakers including political figures, academics, journalists, lawyers, designated security experts, and professional leaders.

The pro-Israel, fringe-right groups that have been identified as promoting anti-Muslim ideologies and Islamophobic scare stories have shared goals geared toward propagating the Islamist bogeyman conspiracies that they claim threaten both Israel and the West. Muslim organizations in Canada and the US are branded by these groups as fronts for Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood, posing serious political and existential threats to Western democracy and freedom by serving as a Trojan horse for an Islamist take over and civilizational jihad. These conspiracy theories are not unlike the views that are promoted by the far-right White nationalist “foot soldiers.” However, when these ideas are espoused by groups with social and political clout that have wide spheres of influence in professional circles, as well as the economic resources to promote anti-Muslim narratives, they are imbued with a greater sense of legitimacy. Under such “liberal washed” political cover (Zine 2019) and given the elevated social status of the players, the instrumentalization of Islamophobia by these groups is rarely questioned—which allows their anti-Muslim narratives to circulate with greater impunity as they are echoed, amplified, and reinforced by different sectors of the Islamophobia industry.

Muslim Native Informers

Unlike Islamophobic ideologues include self-proclaimed Canadian “Muslim dissidents” that feature prominent public figures like Tarek Fatah and Raheel Raza, among others. Muslim dissents and ex-Muslims play the “insider role” as “native informers” validating negative views of Islam and play a major role in fomenting and legitimizing Islamophobic hate. Hamid Dabashi (2011, 6) refers to the role these “insider experts” play as “native informers” who he charges as being responsible for authenticating and corroborating efforts to demonize and vilify Islam and Muslims. He likens them to the indigenous inhabitants in the colonial period who aligned with the colonizers and acted in service of empire and its ideological and commercial interests. Dabashi refers to these native informers as “comprador intellectuals” responsible for propping up the imperial project for personal gain and careerism and being “paid to facilitate cultural domination and political pacification” (39). Contemporary native informers produce, validate, and promote Islamophobia as authoritative and “authentic” interlocutors empowered by their “insider status.” Like Muslim native informers of the colonial era, today’s Muslim dissidents and ex-Muslims earn notoriety and opportunities to monetize their propaganda within the Islamophobia industry through their salacious exposés. They market themselves strategically as professional Islamophobia provocateurs to purchase social capital.
Canadian Muslim dissidents gained recognition following the 9/11 attacks, branding themselves as “reformists” attempting to manage the “clash of civilizations” and claiming to be the “authoritative voice” representing “progressive” Muslim perspectives. They contribute to the soft-power spheres of influence in the Islamophobia industry. Some Canadian Muslims dissidents are featured as writers and distinguished fellows at anti-Muslim think tanks such as the Gatestone Institute and Middle East Forum. Their views are represented as a clarion call against the “Islamization” of the West and they purport to protect secular values and sensibilities that undergird modernity from the encroachment of predatory Islamism. Their narratives create moral panics surrounding the Muslim folk devil by reproducing the clash of civilizations binary and reinforcing racist fears of Islamic degeneracy using the seal of “insider” authority.

Think Tanks and their Designated Security Experts

Right-wing think tanks and their designated security experts play a role propagating Islamophobic rhetoric under the guise of security, securitization, and protecting the nation from dangerous Muslim foreigners and “home-grown radicals.” These stereotypes allow for Muslims to be singled out for undue scrutiny and racial and religious profiling. Islamophobia fortifies the security industrial complex and legitimates policies that construct Muslims as potential jihadists that require state surveillance and monitoring (Zine 2022). The anti-Muslim security industry propagates fear-mongering conspiracy theories and false essentializing narratives that include the “impending invasion” of Islam in the West (specifically Canada); Islam’s alleged nefarious plot to enact violent jihad against non-believers and forcibly spread Islam globally. The validation and corroboration of anti-Muslim conspiracy theories receive a seal of authorization when purveyed by individuals and groups who manufacture a self-styled brand of expertise. Their views are celebrated and amplified within conservative, right-wing echo-chambers and institutions.

MONETIZING HATE

A 2018 Carter Center report on Countering the Islamophobia Industry in the US emphasizes that “Islamophobia is not just an arbitrary and uniformed fear of Muslims. Islamophobia is, in large part, the function of an anti-Muslim industry and well-funded and well-connected network of individuals … institutions … and donors” (Abadi 2018). Islamophobia actors (individuals and groups) find ways to monetize hate through website donation links, crowdfunding efforts, and revenues from social-media platforms (though Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are working to monitor, de-platform, and demonetize hate groups). Yet often these organizations are funded through larger transnational networks. Anti-Muslim special-interest groups and philanthropic organizations have long been bankrolling bigotry and supporting the activities of Islamophobia groups and their campaigns.

Several reports and studies in the United States and Europe have tracked funding for Islamophobic hate campaigns and the individuals and organizations behind them. In 2011, a study on America’s Islamophobia networks, Fear Inc, revealed that more than $40 million dedicated to promoting anti-Muslim animus flowed from seven foundations over a ten-year period (Ali et al. 2011). Funding sources have since diversified and grown exponentially. For example, as noted previously, the CAIR’S report Hijacked by Hate (2019) examined publicly available tax filings of anti-Muslim organizations and found that 1,096 organizations were responsible for funding 39 groups involved in the Islamophobia network between 2014-16, and that the total revenue capacity during this period amounted to an incredible $1.5 billion. The study mapped
the flow of funding from prominent charitable organizations to anti-Muslim special interest groups through Donor Advised Funds, leading to calls for American philanthropic organizations to divest from the Islamophobia industry. These studies have been an invaluable resource for identifying and mapping the sources of funding and the donors bankrolling anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States.

In Canada, a similar analysis of tax filings is not possible since the information required to replicate the US studies is not publicly available. For example, while the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) has recently required charities to report on donors not resident in Canada, that information is confidential and not available publicly. Only non-specific aggregated data are publicly accessible, which has raised concerns regarding DAFs in Canadian charity law and the possibility that they could be covertly used to fund hate groups (Blumberg 2019).

Several studies have documented how pro-Israel interests are funding Islamophobia in the United States and internationally (Aked et al. 2019; CAIR 2019; Abdulhadi 2018; Marusek 2017; Bazian 2015). A 2015 report by the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) examined over 10,000 pages of publicly available tax returns in the US and confirmed that through Donor Advised Funds “funders support extreme anti-Muslim and anti-Arab propaganda and virulent attacks against pro-Palestinian organizing with some, if not total anonymity” (4). The report identifies the donor institutions and the circulation of funds along with the ideological and political priorities attached to them as being part of an Islamophobia network and a “concerted campaign to stop any and all criticism of Israel.” Based on their detailed study, IJAN maintains that “much of the funding of the Zionist backlash network comes from eleven extraordinarily wealthy individuals, many of whom acquired their wealth and retain investments in industries that directly profit from Israeli domination of Palestinians, Islamophobia, wars in the Middle East, and environmental degradation” (8). The report reveals that bankrolling backlash involves investing over $300 million in propaganda, surveillance, and lawfare directly aimed at silencing dissent and solidarity with Palestine.

Similarly, a 2018 report authored by Jews Against Anti-Muslim Racism, Jews Say NO!, and Jewish Voice for Peace—New York City details how the United Jewish Federation (UJA) of New York used its Jewish Communal Fund to support several anti-Muslim hate groups. The authors acknowledge how these anti-Muslim organizations and their demonizing propaganda prime the ground for anti-Muslim hate crimes. The study outlines the “rapidly emerging alliance between the pro-Israel mainstream and the Islamophobic fringe” (2).

Support from US-based organizations and foundations have made their way into Canada to bolster the activities of specific individuals and organizations promoting Islamophobic bigotry. These American donors have been investigated and are featured in reports on the financial backing of the Islamophobia industry in the United States and Europe. While in Canada the money trail is not easily uncovered, the connections between American donor organizations and Canadian Islamophobia merchants invite speculation and warrant concern.

For example, *Rebel News* has been a beneficiary of Shillman Fellowships that have supported far-right personalities like British White nationalist Tommy Robinson, British media personality Katie Hopkins, and American anti-Muslim activist, Laura Loomer. Robert Shillman is a wealthy American philanthropist who is reported to support “US far-right groups that have railed against Muslims and refugees” (Press Progress 2019). Tommy Robinson received approximately £5,000 a month during his tenure as a Shillman Fellow at *Rebel News* in 2017.

*Rebel News* also has ties with the Gatestone Institute, a key donor organization in the US Islamophobia Industry. *Rebel News* partnered with Gatestone on the production of “12 cross branded videos” featuring anti-Muslim advocates including Daniel Pipes and far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders (Press Progress 2018). The topics ranged from “The Dangers of
Islamization in the West, and the Growing Influence of Sharia Law” and “Will Europeans Succumb to Islamization, or Will they Rise to Fight Radical Islam and Hold on to Western Values?”

The Middle East Forum (MEF) headed by Daniel Pipes, a key figure in the US Islamophobia Industry, provided funding for the Canadians for the Rule of Law conference in 2019 that promoted Trojan horse conspiracy theories and labelled prominent Muslim organizations as being “sham charities” that were operating as fronts for Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The alliances and financial support provided by these US-based donors to Canadian organizations that promote Islamophobic narratives demonstrate the broader transnational ties of Islamophobia networks.

*AYMAN ELKASRAWY CASE STUDY:*

**THE ISLAMOPHOBIA INDUSTRY IN ACTION**

The case of Ayman Elkasrawy illustrates the way the Islamophobia industry operates to orchestrate controversies through networked actions, disseminating Islamophobic narratives, fabricating information, and weaponizing religious texts to demonize Muslims and support anti-Muslim propaganda.

Ayman Elkasrawy was a PhD student in electrical engineering at Ryerson University (now Metropolitan Toronto University) who held the position of assistant Imam at the Masjid Toronto mosque. In 2016, while leading prayer, El-Kasrawy recited a supplication that was recorded and posted on the mosque’s website. Eight months later, a *Toronto Star* article noted that the video had resurfaced in a digitally manipulated version that was spliced together with mistranslated Arabic (Yang 2017). The doctored video was reposted to the now defunct CIJ News under the title: *Supplications at Masjid Toronto Mosque: “Slay them one by one and spare not one of them.”* This version of the video was circulated by numerous news outlets, and Jewish organizations were outraged by what were misconstrued as anti-Semitic comments. Of particular offence was the alleged statement, “Oh Allah! Purify Al-Aqsa Mosque from the filth of the Jews.” Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem is a contested holy site for both Muslims and Jews. The Canadian pro-Zionist, Jewish advocacy organization, B’nai Brith urged Ryerson University to fire Elkasrawy (Fishman 2016). The Jewish Defense League Canada (JDL) sent the tape to the Toronto Police and filed a hate-crime complaint (Csillag 2017). Elkasrawy was fired from Ryerson University and suspended as Imam of Masjid Toronto.

Elkasrawy was blindsided by the accusations and publicly apologized for any offence caused to the Jewish community, which he stated was not his intent. Wanting to rectify the misunderstanding and to learn more about how his words caused offence he reached out to Bernie Farber, former chief executive officer of the Canadian Jewish Congress, former executive director of the Mosaic Institute, and board chair of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network. Farber accepted the request and, upon meeting Elkasrawy, realized that although his choice of words was problematic, he was not anti-Semitic. Elkasrawy agreed to take part in a series of workshops on anti-Semitism and human rights offered by Dr Karen Mock through the Mosaic Institute.

If Elkasrawy had uttered the words he is alleged to have said during the supplication, they would be without doubt anti-Semitic, appalling, and indefensible. To determine the veracity of his statements, the *Toronto Star* contacted several international Arabic-language experts to have them view the tapes. Their scholarly review determined that not only had the video been digitally manipulated (segments from different parts of his supplication were spliced together), it was also mistranslated (Yang 2017). For example, what Elkasrawy said was not to “purify Al-Aqsa Mosque form the filth of the Jews,” but rather to “cleanse Al-Aqsa Mosque
from the Jews’ desecration of it.” Elkasrawy later acknowledged that referring to “the Jews” was not as clear as saying “Israelis,” which is what he meant. He said he would have preferred to say, “Oh Allah, protect the Al-Aqsa Mosque from occupation,” or “preserve the sacredness of the Al-Aqsa Mosque from violation.” The timing of his supplication was during the holy month of Ramadan, when Arab news reported that Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) had stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque and beat worshippers, while Israeli news characterized the clashes as the result of “masked Arab assailants” hurling rocks. The violence and tensions at Al-Aqsa Mosque during the month of Ramadan were the impetus for Elkasrawy’s prayer to preserve this holy site.

In another example of what linguistic specialists referred to as “propaganda translation,” experts clarified that Elkasrawy’s alleged call to “slay them one by one” was not a reference to Jews or Al-Aqsa Mosque but was taken from another part of his supplication made on behalf of suffering in the Muslim world. Expert examination of the videotape revealed that there were digitally manipulated sections where different parts of Elkasrawy’s prayer were spliced together to provide “slanted translations” transforming the Quranic verse that states “Thou art our Protector. Help us against those who stand against faith” to “Give us victory over the disbelieving people.” These fabrications served to weaponize the Quran to support Islamophobic discourses that represent Islam as a violent and radical faith.

The video of Elkasrawy’s prayer was initially posted on CIJ News, an obscure far-right media outlet that has since been taken down, although some posts remain archived on the pro-Israel platform Honest Reporting. CIJ News was founded by Jonathan Dahalo Halevi, who was head of the Information Branch of the IDF Spokesperson Unit from 2002 to 2003 and head of the Palestinian Research Branch in the IDF Intelligence Unit between 1998 and 2002. Notably, Halevi was the translator behind the altered video. Aside from his ties to the Israeli military, Halevi was also a prominent blogger at Rebel News, where he participated in weekly talks with Rebel founder, Ezra Levant.

Despite the Toronto Star providing impartial reviews by third-party Arabic-language experts, Halevi maintained the accuracy of his translation and continued to make posts about the case to his CIJ News site before eventually taking it down after the Toronto Star contacted him. B’nai Brith also refused to accept the Arabic-language experts’ opinions and contacted unnamed translators who endorsed Halevi’s version.

In a comment to the Toronto Sun, Tarek Fatah shared another mistranslated video with the discredited Australian Imam, Mohammad Tawhidi, who claimed that Elkasrawy’s prayer in this video said, “Whoever wants bad to happen to Muslims return his plots to his neck and flip the plot onto him and punish them like you punished Aad and Thamud” (Warmington 2017). The version that Tawhidi, who is not an expert in Arabic linguistics, asserted is also inconsistent with the translations offered by the scholars. Throughout this controversy, competing translations were leveraged to support the initial narrative against Elkasrawy, which reinforced the idea that Muslims are anti-Semitic.

As a result of this orchestrated controversy, Elkasrawy not only lost his job at the Metropolitan Toronto University (formerly Ryerson University) and his position of assistant Imam at the Masjid Toronto mosque but he became publicly branded as anti-Semitic. The US-based pro-Israeli website, Canary Mission, dedicated to documenting academics who are critical of Israeli policies and deemed anti-Semitic as a result, added Elkasrawy’s profile to their website along with the mistranslation of his supplication. They also posted some of his retweets, which they deemed showed a “hatred for Israel.”

This experience prompted Elkasrawy to comment about how he felt forced to self-censor for fear of having his words deliberately twisted: “I am scared to tell my story. I used to be able to speak freely. Now, I am scared that anything I say can be spliced, rearranged, and
twisted into something ugly that hurts people. I am scared that my own words will be used against me to make me seem like someone I am not” (Elkasrawy 2017).

Elkasrawy’s picture was placed on posters at anti-Muslim rallies against Motion 103 (M-103) a non-binding motion to address Islamophobia in Canada put forward by Liberal MP Iqra Khalid after the Québec City Mosque shooting. A photo captured members of JDL Canada and the far-right, White nationalist group, Soldiers of Odin, with arms around each other at a rally in front of a sign that read “Imam Ayman Elkasrawy, Purify Al-Aqsa mosque from the filth of the Jews.”

This case illustrates the how the interaction of various sectors of the Islamophobia industry came together to foment controversy. The groups involved in this example represent the soft-power groups (JDL Canada, B’nai Brith, a former IDF spokesperson, Canary Mission), Muslim dissidents and native informers (Tarek Fatah, Mohamed Tawhidi), Islamophobia foot soldiers (Soldiers of Odin), and media propagators, Rebel News. In concerted ways that echoed, amplified, and attempted to validate the discourse that Muslims are anti-Semitic through the weaponization of Quran, these diverse individuals and groups became united in a common cause of vilifying Elkasrawy to propagate Islamophobic narratives that engender hatred and distrust of Muslims.

Ex-Muslim Sandra Solomon waving an Israeli flag alongside members of the Jewish Defence League at a counter-protest where demonstrators were rallying in support of Palestinian political prisoners on a hunger strike in Israeli jails. She is ironically sporting a kuffaya (symbol of Palestinian resistance) and is pictured next to a sign with the mistranslation of Elkasrawy’s statement (Toronto, May 13, 2017). (Nurphoto via Getty images)

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Unpacking the networks of bigotry and anti-Muslim hate and identifying how they bolster ideological and systemic forms of Islamophobia and create a breeding ground for hate
crimes, is imperative to fully understanding the dynamics of Islamophobia as a system of oppression and the industry behind its promotion. It is through such an examination that the consequences of anti-Muslim racism can be fully understood, and measures that address the contemporary formations of Islamophobia can be developed and deployed with this more robust understanding of Islamophobia’s ecosystem.

This research has shed light on the orchestrated ways that Islamophobia is instrumentalized and the myriad of groups and individuals that operate in concerted ways to foment controversies, spread disinformation, scare stories, and outlandish conspiracy theories. This phenomenon is unique to Islamophobia. Other forms of racism and oppression do not have coordinated networks and industries behind their propagation. Islamophobia is a form of discrimination, prejudice, and racism that operates with impunity. Despite the violent and fatal attacks against Muslims in Canada in 2017 and 2021, and the global context of genocide and ethnic cleansing targeting Muslims in Myanmar and China, Islamist ethno-nationalism and state repression in India, the oppression suffered by Palestinians, and policies promoting systemic Islamophobia in many Western nations, there is yet to be a watershed moment that can stem the planetary tide of anti-Muslim hate, violence, and bigotry.

This research is dedicated to the victims of deadly Islamophobic violence in Canada. The tragedy of their deaths is a call to action for the government, policymakers, educators, media, and all people of conscience to find ways to amplify anti-Muslim racism and seek tangible and sustaining solutions to challenge this global scourge. The Muslim community and its allies must work to engage social movements, enact dedicated advocacy and powerful lobbies to combat the formidable and lucrative business of Islamophobia, its industry, and purveyors, as well as the underlying conditions that allow its ecosystem to thrive before more tragedies occur.

ENDNOTES

1This article contains excerpts from the 2022 report by Jasmin Zine titled The Canadian Islamophobia Industry: Mapping Islamophobia’s Ecosystem in the Great White North, published by the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) and the Islamophobia Studies Center at the University of California-Berkeley.

2CAIR’s report notes that this funding is derived from multiple sources such as private donations, membership fees, and investment vehicles. Data were collected about the overall financial capacity of the Islamophobia Network by analyzing its total revenue capacity through a list of each organization’s revenue between 2014 and 2016.

3See: “The Quebec Attack: Rebel on the Scene.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLOKvDkOzvA

4Elkasrawy was quietly returned to his duties at the Masjid Toronto a few months later. Islamophobia played into the mosque’s decisions regarding this case as they were subject to vandalism and picketing outside by White nationalist groups during Friday prayers, which made them reticent about attracting further negative attention and potential attacks.

REFERENCES


