Editorial Introduction

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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CANADA, EH? AN OVERVIEW

Islamophobia in Canada has reached deadly proportions. In recent years the country has been rocked by two unprecedented attacks against Muslims. The first took place at the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec in Quebec City on January 29, 2017, killing six men after evening prayers. The second attack came four years later, on June 6, 2021, in London, Ontario, where four members of a Canadian Pakistani Muslim family were intentionally mowed down by a truck and killed. Both deadly attacks took place at the hands of White nationalists. Adding to the death toll, in 2020, a caretaker at a Toronto area mosque was stabbed to death by a man linked to a neo-Nazi death cult.

Since the 9/11 attacks, hate crimes against Muslims in Canada have ranged from these deadly mass killings to acts of vandalism at mosques, harassment, and physical aggression. Gendered Islamophobia is increasingly prevalent as Muslim women wearing religious attire have faced verbal and physical assaults across the country. These acts are expressions of anti-Muslim bigotry and racism that pervade many facets of Canada’s social, cultural, and political landscape.

Over the past two decades, national polls have revealed negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims among Canadians that include distrust, fear of radicalization, support for bans on religious attire, and concerns that Muslims are not compatible with Canadian values. These attitudes justify and fortify state policies that police and regulate Islamic attire in the public sphere as well as implementing security policies that unduly target Muslim communities as suspects and potential threats to public safety.

This special issue takes stock of Islamophobia in Canada through contributions that examine its historical, cultural, and racial formations as well as its contemporary articulations in public policy, security, and education. Canada’s Islamophobia ecosystem is unpacked through examining the organized networks that purvey anti-Muslim propaganda. We are also alerted to the ways Islamophobia has played into the political and affective responses to violence against Muslim women and Islamophobic acts of terror, through practices of memorialization and digital articulations of collective grief and mourning. These contributions provide a variety of cultural and political horizons through which to explore the complexities of Canada’s home-grown Islamophobia.

Laying the groundwork for these interventions, I propose a model for understanding Islamophobia as a system of oppression as a way of understanding how it is grounded and operationalized through intersecting and mutually reinforcing dimensions. This sociological model highlights how Islamophobia operates and is sustained as an integrative and dynamic phenomenon.

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DEFINING ISLAMOPHOBIA AS A SYSTEM OF OPPRESSION

Islamophobia is a term that is often misunderstood. It is not simply a fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims as the term suggests and it does not imply that Islam cannot be criticized as other religions might be. In my work I have proposed that Islamophobia can be best understood as, “A fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims that translates into individual actions and ideological and systemic forms of oppression that support the logic and rationale of specific power relations” (Zine 2004/2022). This broader definition outlines the sociology of Islamophobia as a dynamic and pervasive form of oppression and power.

Rather than being seen as an “irrational fear,” what is central to this framework of Islamophobia is that at every level—individual, ideological, and systemic—the relations of power that underwrite this dynamic support historically constituted racial logics. As a system of oppression, Islamophobia is embedded within formations of power that create the discursive, structural, and legal context of subordination that Muslims face. In Canada these conditions are rooted within the racial power structures built from White settler colonialism and are reinforced through contemporary global circuits of imperial racial formations enacted by the post-9/11 “war on terror.”

Anti-Muslim racism is a manifestation of Islamophobia which is evident through the violence, hatred, and discrimination enacted against Muslim bodies, but since these acts rely upon the demonization of Islam to sustain and reproduce its racial logic, one does not exist without the other. Islam and any markers, referents attached to it and its followers, comprise a predominant focus of social and political disapproval, legal regulation, and cultural concern.

The historical and ontological specificity of Islamophobia as a form of oppression must be considered in the ways that both religion and race are invoked and how religion is racialized.

The “racialization of religion” refers to how racial characteristics are ascribed to religious categories and racial phenotypes are coded as religious markers (Joshi 2006). Grosfoguel and Mielants (2006) describe Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism, arguing that religion has a dominant role in culturally based racist discourses: “The contemporary tropes about ‘uncivilized,’ ‘barbarian,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘underdeveloped,’ ‘authoritarian,’ and ‘terrorist’ inferior people are today concentrated in the ‘other’s’ religious practices and beliefs” (p. 4). The politics of religion, race, and culture are therefore interwoven and comprise the discursive tapestry of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia has a diversity of racial registers where a variety of anti-Muslim racism(s) intersect including anti-Arab racism, Anti-Brown racism, and Anti-Black racism. The politics surrounding race, religion, and culture have shaped public policy and opinion in Canada and is important in understanding the social-political landscape that is the matrix for Islamophobic subcultures to flourish. The examples that follow break down the integrative dimensions through which Islamophobia is enacted and institutionalized. The illustrations provide examples from Canada, however, the model can be applied in other national contexts.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

“Individual actions” are manifestations of Islamophobia that include things like vandalism, name calling, exclusion, harassment, microaggressions, violence, and hate crimes. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11 a report by the Toronto Police Services revealed that there
was a 66 percent increase in hate crimes in 2001 (TPS 2001). Testimonies of 181 Muslim women living in various cities across Canada found that at least one attack per week took place against mosques across the country from September 2001 to June 2002; 16 of these were bomb threats (Helly 2004, 28).

Statistics Canada data on police-reported hate crimes between 2009 and 2020 demonstrate a slow but steady increase of anti-Muslim incidents across Canada for the first half of the 2010s, from 36 reports in 2009 to 99 in 2014 (Boynton 2021). From 2012-15 hate crimes against Muslims in Canada grew 253 percent from 45 in 2012 to 159 in 2015 (Minsky 2017). In 2017, following the Quebec City Mosque shooting, police-reported incidents grew 150 percent to 359 incidents as compared to 139 the year before (Boynton 2021). In 2019, there were 181 police-reported anti-Muslim hate crimes across the country which lowered in 2020 to 82 incidents (Wang & Moreau 2022). The brief decline in anti-Muslim hate crimes was short lived as more recent data from Statistics Canada showed that hate crimes subsequently increased 71 percent during 2020-2021. There were 84 documented hate incidents in 2020 which jumped to 144 incidents in 2021 (Middle East Eye, 2022).

Statistics Canada data from 2010-2017 revealed that police-reported violent hate crimes against Muslims (44 percent) and Aboriginal Communities (44 percent) were more likely than other hate crimes to involve female victims (Armstrong 2019). Since the terror attack in London Ontario on June 6, 2021, there have been several violent Islamophobic attacks targeting Muslim women across Canada (Boynton 2021). These incidents involved attacks at knifepoint, threats and racial epithets, and harassment. The social-psychological effects and trauma of these acts have a lasting impact on the victims (Awaad 2015; Rousseau et al. 2015).

Individual actions are the most prominent and visible phenomenon in the Islamophobia dynamic. We can imagine these acts as being the tip of an iceberg; hidden below the surface are the ideologies that justify and rationalize these actions and the systemic practices through which Islamophobia is reproduced.

IDEOLOGIES AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES

A 2022 Statistics Canada report found that, since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic, reports of discrimination targeting both Muslim and Jewish communities in Canada occurred as “the result of disinformation and conspiracy theories related to the pandemic, often tied to broader anti-Jewish or anti-Muslim theories or beliefs” (Wang & Moreau 2022). There are ubiquitous ideologies and conspiracy theories that serve to demonize and vilify Islam and Muslims. These include tropes like Muslims are terrorists who engage in *taqiyya* and are really “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” who want to install “creeping sharia laws” that will undermine Western society and civilization. Other stereotypes relegate Muslim women to being backward and oppressed, without agency or freedom. Muslims are interpellated into racist discourses as the bearers of “barbaric cultural practices,” conjuring images of bearded maniacal men and submissive women in burkas, hell-bent on the destruction of feminism and Western values.

These Islamophobic narratives become hegemonic as they are filtered through the institutions of civil society such as media (television, film, social media) and education (see Bakali, this issue), and are embedded in pop culture through widespread circulation on the internet (see Jiwani, this issue) where they are often uncritically absorbed, taken on as truths, and rarely debunked through counter-narratives.

Some of these negative stereotypes also feed into public attitudes about Islam and Muslims. For example, surveys from 2004 to 2022 that have measured public opinion in Canada on issues related to anti-Islamophobia legislation, niqab bans, and the prevalence of
Islamophobia in Canadian society, have found that most Canadians acknowledge that Islamophobia is a problem in Canada, yet most Canadians hold unfavorable views about Islam and Muslims, and most are open to policies that would single out Muslims for heightened regulation and monitoring in public spaces.

Data from a 2022 Angus Reid poll revealed that many Canadians believe that religions like Islam, evangelical Christianity, and Catholicism are more damaging to society than beneficial. These findings reinforce an earlier national study in 2017 conducted by the Angus Reid Institute in partnership with Faith in Canada 150, about the role of religion in the public square. That study found that almost half (48 percent) of those surveyed said religion makes “a mix of good and bad” contributions to Canadian society. The most “benefiting” religions to “Canadian public life” were Catholicism (35 percent) and Protestantism (26 percent), while the most “damaging” religion was Islam (46 percent), by a large margin (Angus Reid 2017a).

Islamophobic xenophobia has also been evident in Canadian polls. For example, in 2017 after former US President Donald Trump introduced a travel ban on seven Muslim-majority countries, a Radio-Canada poll, found that nearly one out of four Canadians (23 percent) would favor a similar ban on Muslim immigration to Canada (Montreal Gazette 2017). Support for such a ban rose to 32 percent in Quebec. The poll also revealed that one out of four Canadians feel immigrants should be tested for “anti-Canadian values,” reinforcing the narrative that Muslim are incompatible with democracy and liberalism.

The “victim-blaming” discourse was also evident in 2012 nationwide survey conducted by the Association of Canadian Studies (ACS) and Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF) focusing on Canadian attitudes towards religion and multiculturalism that revealed that 52 percent of Canadians distrust Muslims, and 42 percent believe that discrimination against Muslims is “mainly their fault” (Csillag 2012).

Public opinion polls tell a troubling story of how Muslims are configured within the national narrative as undesirable minorities who are not compatible with “Canadian values” and pose a threat to national security. Anti-Muslim ideologies, stereotypes, and conspiracy theories undergird these sentiments and allow for problematic racist tropes to be readily and uncritically assimilated into public consciousness.

**SYSTEMIC PRACTICES**

Islamophobic ideologies have consequences in the way they shape, inform, and authorize global militarism as well as domestic policies relating to immigration, security, and social policies. In this way, Islamophobia provides a rationale for systemic practices such as racial and religious profiling and surveillance, state policies governing religious attire (i.e., hijab/headscarf and niqab/face veil bans), as well as institutional discrimination in education, social services, healthcare, and law enforcement, along with private-sector companies and institutions.

The targeting and undue surveillance of Muslim charities by Canada Revenue Services (CRA) is a growing concern (McSorely, 2021). In 2022, the Muslim Association of Canada (MAC) launched a Charter of Rights challenge against the CRA, claiming that a year-long audit of their organization had been based on unfounded suspicions and “innuendo” that would not be applied to other religious charities (Boisvert 2022).

Canadian security policies targeting Muslims include the Anti-terrorism Act (Patel 2012), Security Certificates (Flatt 2012), and the “No-Fly List” (Jamil 2017). Bahdi (2003) noted that after 9/11 racial profiling focused more on Arabs and Muslims and that surveillance spilled over into areas such as banking and employment, as well as increased scrutiny at Canadian airports (see also Nagra and Maurutto, this issue). Hennebry and Momani (2013)
have also pointed out that Canadian security policies and legal frameworks have specifically targeted Arab and Muslim Canadians. Muslims are perceived as potential threats to national safety and face targeting by security agencies and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) measures (see also Nagra 2017; Zine 2022).

In addition to security policies, social policies also serve as examples of systemic forms of Islamophobia. From former Conservative MP Kellie Leitch’s 2015 proposal for a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) “tip line” to report “barbaric cultural practices against women and girls,” to pushing for bans against the niqab at federal citizenship ceremonies and among civil servants, these social policies and proposals were inspired by gendered Islamophobic ideologies in the name of “rescuing” and “protecting” Muslim women from what is perceived as their backward and misogynist faith. For the past two decades, policies in Quebec have also focused on policing and regulating Muslim women’s dress in the name of preserving secular values and francophone culture. These systemic practices are underwritten by longstanding Orientalist tropes and ideologies that find renewed currency in Canadian public policy.

To summarize how the dynamic of Islamophobia as a system of oppression operates, we can see how individual actions like vandalism, name calling, and hate crimes are supported by widespread ideas like “Muslims are terrorists” and find expression in systemic practices such as racial profiling. The alibi of “Muslim peril” authorizes restrictive and draconian state policies targeting Muslims as well as legitimating the ongoing “war on terror” and militarized global imperialism. The ideologies supporting the spread and purveyance of Islamophobic narratives via mainstream media and a growing Islamophobia industry serve to justify and legitimate the individual manifestations of Islamophobia as well as the systemic practices that allow for their reproduction.

**POLITICIANS PROMOTING ISLAMOPHOBIA**

In many Western nations, including Canada, there are significant overlaps between the Islamophobia of the far right and some government narratives and practices (see also Aked et al. 2019, 10). For example, Canadian political figures have contributed to purveying Islamophobia as part of their election campaigns (Zine et al. 2019). Conservative and far-right politicians along with right-wing think tanks circulate and authorize Islamophobia as a political currency, shoring up the discursive apparatus of the Islamophobia industry and rationalizing the securitization of Muslims as a form of systemic oppression. These political influencers play a key role in the circulation of Islamophobic propaganda, priming the ground for Islamophobic racism to take root and spread throughout the anti-Muslim ecosystem.

Problematic political rhetoric can serve as a dog whistle to far-right groups authorizing bigoted narratives. For example, at a military swearing-in ceremony in 2006, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper invoked the civilizational discourse of “us and them” in the following statement: “Their alleged target was Canada, Canadian institutions, the Canadian economy, the Canadian people. We are a target because of who we are and how we live, our society, our diversity and our values—values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law” (Chase 2006). This rhetoric positioned Muslims as being illiberal, anti-democratic subjects who are irreconcilable with civilization and modernity.

In 2011, Harper publicly stated that “Islamicism (sic) is the biggest threat to Canada.” Such unqualified public statements create fear and moral panic about the Muslim presence in Canada. Later in 2015, when introducing new anti-terror legislation, Harper reiterated this fearmongering, stating: “A great evil has been descending upon our world, an evil which has been growing more and more powerful: violent jihadism” (CBC News 2011).
In 2013, the Harper government introduced the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act that aimed at practices like forced and early marriage and honor killing often misperceived to be associated with Islam (see Haque, this issue). He further publicly stated that the niqab comes from an “anti-woman” culture as he made an effort to ban women wearing the face veil from swearing a citizenship oath. Using words and phrases like “barbaric,” “anti-woman culture,” “violent Jihadism,” and “great evil descending over our world” (Panetta 2015), Harper’s rhetoric was reminiscent of the idioms of colonial racism and fueled problematic stereotypes about Islam and Muslims as a campaign strategy.

During the 2019 federal election campaign, far-right People’s Party of Canada (PPC) leader Maxime Bernier also incited anti-Muslim moral panic with salacious and unfounded claims that “Islamist extremists have infiltrated Canadian politics” and that the PPC was the only party willing to speak openly about the “Islamist menace” (Althia 2019). He accused Andrew Scheer’s Tories of consorting with “radical Islamists who want to impose their barbaric values on Canada.”

Prominent Canadian Muslim politicians Omar Alghabra and Iqra Khalid have faced racist and Islamophobic smear campaigns which promoted suspicion of Muslims holding political office as a Trojan horse promoting “sharia by stealth” and undermining “Canadian values.” The Trojan horse narrative conveys the idea that Muslims in Western nations are operating covertly under the guise of multicultural civility to hide their nefarious plans to infiltrate and take over democratic societies and replace them with an Islamic state and sharia law. In these conspiracy theories, Muslim politicians are regarded as the “fifth column” who use willful deception (taqiyya) to mask their subversive goals.

Anti-Muslim populism (a fusion of anti-Muslim animus and populist forms of nationalism) underlies Canada’s far-right politics. Speaking at a PPC convention in the run-up to the 2019 federal election, Benjamin Dichter, a failed PPC and Conservative party candidate and leader of the anti-vax mandate “Freedom Convoy” campaign which has featured Nazi sympathizers and confederate flags, received a standing ovation for his warning “Despite what our corporate media and political leaders want to admit, Islamist entryism, and that is the adaptation of political Islam, is rotting away at our society like syphilis” (Althia 2019). Dichter has peddled Islamophobic conspiracy theories such as a video from “Crusade Against Islamisation of The World” with the subtitle proclaiming that “Moslems and scums destroying everything in a [sic] area in Paris France” (True North Times 2015).

Taking stock of how Islamophobic political rhetoric and the promotion of anti-Muslim ideologies shape the political and cultural landscape in Canada is important for a broader purview of the various ways Islamophobia is normalized and embedded.

**LIBERAL ISLAMOPHOBIA**

Examining the US Islamophobia industry, Lean (2017) refers to “liberal Islamophobia” as the Islamophobia of the left. He exemplifies this phenomenon by pointing to particular individuals who position themselves as left-leaning but reproduce narratives of the right and far right. In contrast, I refer to “liberal Islamophobia” as a state systemic practice where Islamophobic forms of governmentality are camouflaged within the liberal political mainstream.

These “politically embedded” forms of Islamophobia cut across the political spectrum where values of equity, diversity, and inclusion are espoused and celebrated, yet at the same time, policies and practices are enacted that target Muslims as suspect and illiberal minorities further authorizing and normalizing Islamophobia. In Canada, politicians of all stripes espouse the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and multiculturalism, on the one hand, but then enact or fail to repeal racist anti-Muslim policies.
This manifestation of liberal Islamophobia arises when “Islamophilia,” marked by cultural fascination and fetishism, converges with Islamophobia. As multicultural festivities and celebrations are highlighting Muslim cultures, regulatory laws and policies unduly focus on Muslim communities and expression of Muslim faith. The paradox of these two contradictory impulses of fetishistic fascination and racial disavowal shapes the political and cultural terrain of multiculturalism (Zine 2022). More than other extreme variants of Islamophobia, liberal Islamophobia does the work of normalizing anti-Muslim racism with greater legitimacy and institutional power.

For example, as previously noted, Canada has introduced state policies and practices that are based on and fortify anti-Muslim racism. For example, Security Certificates, part of the Immigration, Refugee Protection Act (IRPA); the Anti-Terror Act; the “No- Fly List” aka Passenger Protect Program have unduly targeted Muslim communities. The federal “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act,” discussed earlier, reproduced the idioms of colonial racism as well as the trope of “saving Brown women from Brown men” (Spivak 1988). More recently as previously noted, the surveillance of Muslim charities through Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) audits (McSorley 2021) is among other state profiling activities that have targeted Canadian Muslims and Muslim civil society groups and led to a climate of Islamophobic suspicion.

Policies in Quebec such as Bill 21 (“An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State”) that bans public servants from wearing religious symbols at work (see below) have also focused on policing and regulating Muslim women’s dress in the name of preserving secular values and francophone culture and the “feminist” project of “rescuing Muslim women” from the shackles of what is portrayed as their anti-woman faith. Relying on Orientalist tropes, these policies and practices do more to further the normalization of Islamophobia than far-right conspiracy theories and campaigns.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN QUEBEC**

The demographics, history, and cultural politics of Quebec influence the public views, actions, policies, and legislation that contribute to the normalization of Islamophobia and foment anti-Muslim animus. Secularism within White francophone ethno-nationalism has shaped the cultural politics of Quebec (see Benhadjoudja, this issue). Within Québécois nationhood, notions of belonging have been historically shaped by ideologies of racial and cultural purity, as demonstrated by the term “pure laine” (pure wool) linked to French White settlers. The term “Québécois de souche” also carries a similar connotation establishing the genealogy of belonging as the birthright of “old stock Canadiens.” These xenophobic White nationalist ideals are reflected in the name of the anti-Muslim far-right group, the “Fédération des Québécois de souche” (FQS).4

Islam and Muslims have been front and centre in Quebec’s racial project of secularism as exemplified by key flashpoints in the province’s political and cultural landscape. From debates on “Reasonable Accommodation” (Bouchard and Taylor 2008) and the integration of religious cultures within secular society in 2007, to the Quebec Values Charter (Bill 60) proposed in 2013 (though later failed after 2014 provincial election) and more than a decade of legislation outlawing religious symbols in the public sphere, Muslim immigrants are constructed as politically disruptive, religiously, and culturally overdetermined subjects fundamentally irreconcilable with the demands of secular modernity (Zine 2012). These political views are mirrored in the public sphere. For example, Nadeau and Helly (2016, 6) analyzed Facebook pages supporting Quebec’s Values Charter and isolated five predominant themes:
(1) the fear of a return of religion in the public space; (2) the emergence of a Muslim enemy whose values are perceived as irreconcilable with those of Quebec culture; (3) the inertia of the political class and its complicity with media and minorities; (4) the predominance of legal over political powers and of individual over collective rights; and (5) multiculturalism as a factor of denationalization and social fragmentation. Igniting a sense of paranoid nationalism, the Muslim presence in Quebec has sparked racial and religious fears and anxieties.

Public opinion polls provide further evidence of discontent toward Muslim Quebecers. A 2019 poll found roughly one in two Quebecers believe their way of life is threatened by the presence of religious minorities, with 47 percent believing that statement to be true, compared with 45 percent who disagreed. Most believe hatred directed at religious minorities is on the rise, and 53 percent said relations between Muslims and non-Muslims has gotten worse over the last five years (Magdar 2019).

Far-right White nationalist groups capitalize on these racial and religious tensions. For example, the Facebook page for “Pas d’Islam radical et de charia au Québec” (currently over 7,000 followers) had garnered 6,000 likes by regularly posting articles demonizing Muslims, women in hijab, as well as videos and messages by PEGIDA-Québec and the leader of France’s far-right Front National party, Marine Le Pen (Pucci 2019). Other groups trafficking in anti-Muslim hate campaigns like La Meute have become fixtures in the Canada’s Islamophobia industry (see Zine, this issue). Quebec’s mixture of ethno-nationalism, racially based secular hegemony, and Islamophobic public policies have laid the groundwork for anti-Muslim animus which has yielded deadly consequences.

**GENDERED ISLAMOPHOBIA AND “COERCED UNVEILING” POLICIES**

There is a specific way in which Islamophobia registers gender as the abject difference that situates Islam and Muslims in tension with the West, civilization, and modernity. Muslim women’s bodies have come to mark that divide (Zine 2022). Legislating and legalizing Islamophobia through policies that promote secularism and the regulation of Muslim women’s bodies further entrenches Islamophobia as an embedded political practice and lends tacit credence to the stereotype that Muslims are incompatible with Canadian society and values. Muslim women’s bodies continue to be the ideological and legal battleground for these contestations.

In Canada there has been more than a decade of efforts by the provincial government in Quebec as well as the federal government to ban religious attire in the public sphere. For example, in 2010, Bill 94 was introduced in Quebec by the Liberal government which would have banned the wearing of niqab in receiving public services. The Liberal government was defeated in 2012 before the bill was passed into law). In 2015, Bill 62 on “religious neutrality,” passed in the Quebec National Assembly, obliging citizens to uncover their faces while giving and receiving state services. This legislation effectively targeted Muslim women who wear the niqab.

In 2015 the Stephen Harper’s federal Conservative government attempted (unsuccessfully) to ban the niqab during citizenship swearing ceremonies. A 2015 Ipsos survey found that 68 percent of respondents disagreed with allowing Muslim women to wear niqab or burqa during citizenship ceremonies, and 72 percent “agreed” that the burqa or niqab are “symbols of oppression and rooted in a culture that is anti-women” (Ipsos 2015).

And yet a year earlier it appeared that Quebec’s bans on visible religious symbols received more support in the province than in the rest of Canada. A 2014 survey conducted by the Association of Canadian Studies (ACS) and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRRF) indicated that French-speaking Canadians (48 percent) were more likely than English-speaking Canadians (27 percent) to agree with the prompt that “banning the wearing of visible
religious symbols in public institutions will help reduce religious fundamentalism” (CRRF 2014). The varied findings from the national and Quebec-based polls measuring public attitudes about the regulation of niqab in the public sphere speak to the salience of racial secularism in Quebec (see Benhadjoudja, this issue) which may not be as evident in the rest of Canada, although the niqab is nonetheless seen by Canadians across the country as the product of an “anti-woman culture” (see also Bahkt 2020).

In 2019, Bill 21 was introduced in Quebec as: “An act respecting the laicity of the state,”5 which banned public workers and those in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols. A 2019 Leger poll in Quebec commissioned by the Association for Canadian Studies found that 63 percent of Quebeckers supported Bill 21’s ban on religious symbols for judges, police officers, and prison guards, and 59 percent were in favor of a similar ban for teachers (Magdar 2019). An additional national Leger poll found that support for Bill 21 among those who held unfavorable views of Muslims across Canada is relatively equal to that in Quebec. These more recent polls about Bill 21 reinforce the findings of earlier national and provincial surveys that demonstrated how anti-Muslim views find expression in gendered Islamophobic sentiments that are critical of Muslim women’s sartorial choices and religious expression.

Canadian policies regulating Muslim women’s religious attire enact a form of “sartorial nationalism” (Zine 2012) whereby veiled Muslim women are rendered as illiberal and “unimaginable” as citizens and where national belonging becomes determined sartorially through demonstrating allegiance to dominant secular values and beliefs. These “coerced unveiling” policies and practices (Zine 2022) are based on the problematic ways Muslim women’s dress has been regarded within the racial project of secularism as a sign of foreign, anti-modern, and anti-democratic religious sensibilities. The irony of the present pandemic moment is that Muslim women in Quebec are violating the law when they wear a niqab/face veil, but if they cover their face with a protective mask they are “good pandemic citizens” (Zine 2020).

FLASHPOINT: MOTION 103 AND WEAPONIZING FREE SPEECH

Motion 103 (M-103) is a non-binding resolution in the Canadian Parliament that called on the government to “condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination.” The motion was tabled by Liberal MP Iqra Khalid in the wake of the
2017 Quebec City Mosque attack. Immediately M-103 ignited a virulent right-wing backlash, using free speech as an alibi to wage a belligerent ideological campaign to discredit attempts to address and challenge Islamophobia. A National Post article addressed the fallout: “Though M-103 was a motion, not a piece of legislation, and thus did not create any new laws, it ignited a political firestorm, with Conservatives arguing it would stifle free speech as, they claimed, the term Islamophobia was poorly defined” (Forrest 2019). The debate over the term Islamophobia weaponized free speech and become a rhetorical prop in right-wing campaigns of ideological intimidation to silence and censor work on Islamophobia.

Anti-M-103 campaigns mounted by political Conservatives, far-right White nationalist groups and media outlets, pro-Israel groups, Muslim dissidents, and others, were attempts to undermine anti-Islamophobia efforts in the face of a horrific terror attack against Muslims at a Quebec City Mosque. These concerted activities created political cohesion amongst these groups and galvanized the work of anti-Muslim networks. The backlash arising from M-103 heralded a period of heightened activity and coordinated actions among diverse Islamophobia actors and represents a key flashpoint moment for Canada’s Islamophobia industry (see Zine, this issue).

Outside of the groups that opposed M-103, an opinion poll published in March 2017 by the Angus Reid Institute measured wider public responses to the motion. In response to the question “if you were a Member of Parliament, how would you vote on this motion (M-103)?” 42 percent said they would vote against it, 29 percent would vote in favor, and 29 per cent were unsure or would abstain. Three in ten (31 per cent) of those surveyed believed M-103 threatened free speech. Canadians are divided on the saliency of Islamophobia. Forty-five percent believe that Islamophobia and discrimination are a serious problem, while 55 percent believe that anti-Muslim attitudes and discrimination have been “overblown” by politicians and the media (Angus Reid 2017b).

Yet in another survey on Islamophobia in Canada released the following year, in 2018, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) reported that more than half (57 percent) of Canadians responded that Islamophobia is “an increasingly disturbing problem in Canada,” and 60 percent agreed that the government “must take action to combat Islamophobia” in Canada. These findings show the overall ambivalence in Canadian public opinion surrounding Islamophobia and M-103. The reticence to address Islamophobia in Canada or even identify it as a problem was exploited by conservative politicians taking advantage of negative public opinion on the matter (CJPME 2018).

Parliamentary hearings were held on M-103 before the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage on Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination which involved 22 consultation sessions from September to December 2017 where the government heard from about 600 people. A report on the proceedings of these hearings was released in 2018 titled Taking Action Against Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination Including Islamophobia (Fry 2018). What began as an inquiry galvanized by the Quebec City Mosque attack to address Islamophobia in Canada was reduced in this report to an “add on.” A “National Action Plan” with 30 recommendations was highlighted in the report. Only two of these recommendations reference Islamophobia: the first tacked Islamophobia on to an education strategy and the second suggested that “January 29th be designated as a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Islamophobia, and other forms of religious discrimination,” which was eventually enacted four years later in 2021.

The Conservative Party of Canada’s ‘Minority Report’ raised the following concerns, defaulting on the lack of definitional specificity of the term “Islamophobia” to undermine the focus and validity of M-103:

The debate on M-103 captured the attention of Canadians and the mainstream media for several weeks. The main objection Canadians had to M-103 was that it complicated
and confused the issue of anti-Muslim bigotry and violence rather than clarified it. The word “Islamophobia”, which features prominently in M-103, has a long history. Unfortunately, “Islamophobia” has received many definitions, and the failure to use just one definition for the word is highly problematic.

The Minority Report cited people who identify as Muslims making similar arguments to validate their case. For example, cited elsewhere in the report, Ali Rizvi, author, also noted that the term may have a negative impact on the Muslim community. He stated: “The word ‘Islamophobia’ is an umbrella term that also conflates legitimate criticism of Islam—as is being done by many of my fellow liberals and secular activists trying to change our societies in the Muslim world—with the demonization of Muslims, which is obviously wrong” (72). Raheel Raza, President of the Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow, also argued along with Conservative detractors that the term could limit freedom of expression: “I believe, though, that using the word ‘Islamophobia’—let me be very clear—in the motion will curtail free speech, because no other ethnic community or religious community is mentioned by name in the motion except Islamophobia” (73).

Conservative politicians like Andrew Scheer and other MPs raised similar concerns that the term ‘Islamophobia’ is being used to silence free speech and criticism of Islam. These concerns were echoed by other anti-Muslim activists. Through these networked circuits, a significant amount of content contributing to the promotion of harmful anti-Muslim stereotypes have been perpetuated under the guise of “objectively critiquing Islam” or “exposing the danger” that Islam poses.

Several pro-Israel groups took on a key role in the contesting M-103, promoting conspiracy theories that it was the gateway to an Islamist take-over of Canada by making the country a “sharia compliant” state, and warning that MP Khalid was a Muslim Brotherhood operative (Breakenridge 2018). Other warnings included that M-103 would criminalize criticism of Islam and would be tantamount to blasphemy laws. And yet, pro-Israel advocacy groups, such as the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and B’nai Brith Canada, that contested M-103 on the grounds that it would silence free speech and single out a specific religious group for special treatment, did not cite similar concerns with respect to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The double standard is curious since the IHRA definition and its illustrations have been widely criticized for being vague yet overly broad and for silencing valid critique of the Israeli state as a racist endeavor and yet the definition has been officially adopted by Canada’s federal government (Zine et al. 2020).

Piggybacking on the anti-M-103 bandwagon, PPC Leader Maxime Bernier argued that the motion is a first step “towards restricting our right to criticize Islam” and that, “given the international situation, and the fact that jihadi terrorism is today the most important threat to our security, I think this is a serious concern we have to take into account” (Boutilier 2017). Bernier, like other prominent detractors and M-103 conspiracists warned that it would introduce blasphemy laws into Canada and open the door for the Trojan horse of creeping sharia law. Media outlets like Rebel News circulated similar Islamophobic scare stories and misinformation within the far-right echo chamber.

All the detractors of a motion that sought to acknowledge the salience of Islamophobia in Canada in the wake of a mass murder in a house of worship engaged in a callous political campaign at a time of public mourning and grief. The Parliamentary hearings on M-103 heard voices from the political right and Muslim dissidents weaponize free speech and undermine attempts to challenge what had become murderous levels of violence against innocent Muslims.
TAKING STOCK OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CANADA

This special issue takes stock of how Islamophobia has been embedded within Canada’s White settler colonial history and has shaped contemporary laws and policies related to Quebec’s racial project of secularism (Benhadjoudja); Islamophobia’s impact on education and curriculum in Quebec schools (Bakali) and the securitization of Muslim youth by federal agencies (Nagra and Maurutto). Contributors also examine how Islamophobic activists in the US have intervened in a Canadian “honor killing” case to further their anti-Muslim agendas (Haque), and how Canada’s home-grown Islamophobia industry has developed integrated networks to orchestrate controversies and purvey propaganda (Zine). In addition, the grief and mourning of Islamophobic violence in Canada is explored through the digital platforms that offer collective spaces of memorialization (Jiwani).

These contributions trace the legacies and contemporary contours of Islamophobia as a distinctly Canadian phenomenon. Moving beyond the guise of Canada’s multicultural utopia to examine the deeply embedded structures of anti-Muslim racism within the nation’s history and cultural politics is vital to creating a deeper understanding of the various manifestations of Islamophobia that must be addressed before other tragedies occur.

ENDNOTES

1The aftermath of the 9/11 phase of Islamophobic history has made “Muslimness” salient for those who would otherwise not identify with the category due to lack of religiosity or more secular lifestyle preferences. For these more culturally affiliated Muslims (i.e., those who acknowledge a cultural connection to Islam but eschew religious practice) or even those who identify as atheist and distance themselves from Islam, they are nonetheless still affected by Islamophobia by virtue of racial affiliation and origins within Muslim countries or by their Muslim-sounding names.

2People misidentified and perceived to be Muslim have also suffered the impact and violence of Islamophobia. For example, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man mistaken for an Arab Muslim because of his turban, was killed in reprisal for the 9/11 bombings.

3*Taqiyya* refers to a denial of Islamic belief and practice or concealing one’s faith to prevent persecution, which has been used by White nationalist and other Islamophobic groups and ideologues as a way of suggesting that Muslims are deceitful and hiding their presumed nefarious aims to overthrow Western civilization behind a friendly facade.


5“An Act respecting the laicity of the State” (*Loi sur la laïcité de l’État*) was tabled by the ruling Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) on March 29, 2019. See http://legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/showdoc/cs/L-0.3.

REFERENCES


