The Racial Dilemma

Cameron Mohammed was shot in the face because he “looked Muslim.”

On January 3, 2013, Mohammed and his girlfriend were walking to their car in a Wal-Mart parking lot near Tampa, Florida. A man suddenly approached, shouting, “Are you Middle Eastern?” Mohammed, who was raised in Florida and born in Trinidad, simply said no. “Are you Muslim?” Mohammed is Catholic, so again, he said no. The stranger scowled, “Nigger with a white girl.” Suddenly, he pulled out a gas-powered pellet gun and fired at Mohammed’s head, at point-blank range. A hailstorm of pellets lacerated Mohammed’s face and neck. The shooter, a White man named Daniel Quinnell, fled the scene before police arrived. Fortunately, Mohammed recovered, but he needed surgery to remove some of the pellets. A few days after the shooting, Quinnell was captured by police. When an officer informed him that Mohammed was not Muslim, he did not seem to care. “They’re all the same,” he reportedly said.

This hate crime is an example of “Islamophobia,” even though Cameron Mohammed is not Muslim, because the attack was motivated by a desire to harm a Muslim or someone from the Middle East. This shooting bears disturbing similarities to the brutal murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American who was shot and killed on September 15, 2001. The shooter in that case, also a White man, intended to avenge the 9/11 attacks by, in his words, “shooting some towel-heads.” Dozens of violent attacks like these have been reported in recent years. Sikh Americans have been frequently targeted. Like Cameron Mohammed and Balbir Singh Sodhi, everyone hurt or killed in these attacks were vulnerable to Islamophobia because they “look Muslim”—because of race.
“Looking Muslim”: The Middle Eastern American Racial Category

It should go without saying that the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims span the full range of human appearance. There is no way to actually “look Muslim.” Nevertheless, race operates at the very core of Islamophobia. The racial lens through which Americans see the world distorts and conceals the obvious truth that it is basically impossible to accurately determine someone’s religion based solely on their physical appearance. That racial lens is why it is possible to “look Muslim” in America. In other words, there are a set of physical traits and characteristics that can mark someone as “Muslim,” regardless of their actual religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Race is the only way to explain how this is so.

The process by which Islamophobia came to affect anyone who “looks Muslim” is an all-too-familiar process, one that has constantly roiled American life: the social construction of racial categories. Race is what links aspects of physical appearance (facial features, skin tone, attire, hair texture, etc.) to an ascribed social identity such as White, Black, or Asian. In America, as a fact of life, everyone gets ascribed with a racial identity. In today’s America, “Muslim” or “Middle Eastern” is one of the most commonly ascribed racial categories. Most of the time, getting racially ascribed with this identity is quick and easy. But the violence in some Islamophobic hate crimes serves as a reminder that racial identification is not benign.

Quinnell, the shooter in the Wal-Mart parking lot in Florida, saw Cameron Mohammed’s physical features and then placed a racial identity upon him: “Muslim.” At that point, Quinnell had done nothing out of the ordinary; looking at someone and assigning a racial identity based on physical appearance is unavoidable, nearly automatic in America. Racial identity is always there, in every social interaction. Usually it remains in the background—silently understood by everyone. Sometimes, however, race enters the foreground, like when someone makes race the topic of conversation. Sadly, on that January evening, Quinnell’s brazen questioning—“Are you Middle Eastern?”—and the shocking violence that followed it made the usually invisible and automatic process of racial identification all too visible. Race made Cameron Mohammed vulnerable to Islamophobia, as it has so many others.
In the United States, anyone who racially “looks Muslim” is similarly vulnerable to Islamophobia. Many South Asian Americans are Muslim, but many others are Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, or have no religion at all. Whatever their ethnic, religious, and cultural heritage, South Asian Americans often get caught up in Islamophobia because of race. Similarly, many Arab Americans are Christian, Jewish, or agnostic, but race exposes them to Islamophobia all the same. Because of race, these communities and many others have been pulled into the swath of Islamophobic discrimination, social exclusion, and violence that has marred American life for decades.

Even as non-Muslims have been directly affected by Islamophobia, there is, of course, no doubt that Muslim Americans and American Islamic institutions have been severely affected by Islamophobia. Slanderous rhetoric about Islamic faith has dramatically increased in intensity in recent years, as politicians and pundits frequently proffer uninformed opinions about Islam and Muslims. Along with the renewed trend in anti-Muslim rhetoric, denial of fundamental civil liberties such as basic religious freedom has been a growing problem across the United States. Mosques have been vandalized and faced protests against their very existence. Moreover, Muslim Americans have suffered the second-largest number of reported hate crimes over the past few years, second only to Jewish Americans, according to official Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) hate crimes statistics.

Somehow, Islamophobia remained largely under the radar until the 2000s. Despite decades of widespread, extremely damaging effects, Islamophobia did not attract a great deal of attention in America until recently. No doubt the new attention is mainly due to the unprecedented scale of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (or, 9/11), which led to an extraordinary surge in Islamophobic hate crimes and discrimination. This led many analysts and scholars to conclude that a “new” wave of specifically anti-Muslim sentiment had appeared in the United States. A great many books and articles have described the challenges facing Muslim American communities and the specifically anti-Muslim components of “post-9/11” Islamophobia. But limiting the discussion of Islamophobia to the “post-9/11” era obscures the long history of racial discrimination affecting Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, South Asians, and others in the United States. In fact, discrimination that would today be
called “post-9/11” Islamophobia has thrived in one form or another in the United States since at least the seventeenth century. Understanding the problems posed by Islamophobia requires not only looking farther back in time than just 2001, but it also means expanding the understanding of Islamophobia beyond religious and ethnic frameworks. Race must be part of the analysis.

This is because American Islamophobia developed in very much the same ways as all American social structures that involve race. As a form of racism, Islamophobia is built into American institutions. White supremacy and Islamophobia stem from the same root, and they are both burrowed into the foundations of American institutions. Therefore, any effective understanding of Islamophobia must take into account the full scope of American race and racism.

This presents a tremendous challenge, to contextualize Islamophobia as part of a newly salient manifestation of a centuries-long process that classifies people from North Africa and Southwest Asia (i.e., the Middle East) as racially distinct. Explicating this process requires elaborating the co-constituted nature of Islamophobia and the very concept of race itself. Each of these dynamic, overdetermined concepts—race and Islamophobia—is too complex to encapsulate fully in any one study. Despite the challenges and necessary shortcomings of any attempt like this one, there are significant analytic advantages that can only be brought by the endeavor to understand the co-constituted nature of American racism and Islamophobia.

Placing Islamophobia into the well-worn context of American racism makes it less anomalous and less mysterious. Racism has always been present in the United States, so it should not surprise us that Islamophobia has roots that extend far deeper in history than 2001. This approach also seeks to apply the tools developed for understanding racial discrimination to the analysis of Islamophobia. Drawing the connections between race and Islamophobia provides, among other insights, the only plausible explanation for why Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and people of all faiths are vulnerable to Islamophobia. Moreover, shining a light on the intrinsically dehumanizing elements of racism enables an understanding of connections between hate crimes and discriminatory “counterterrorism” policies, both domestically in the United States and globally on the so-called battlefields of the “War on Terror.” All of these
flow directly from the same source: Islamophobic racism. Seeing the links between them requires an understanding of how racism is embedded into American social institutions.

*The Race with No Name*

To illustrate the difficult task of untangling the complex web that connects race and Islamophobia, consider that there is no name for the socially constructed racial category that has been used to collectively ascribe Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian Americans. This category is called by many names: “Muslim,” or “Middle Eastern,” or sometimes it is rendered with an acronym like “MENA” (Middle Eastern and North African). Even when there is acknowledgment that there is, in fact, a racial category here, it has been nearly impossible to find a generally accepted term for it, yet all the while it finds constant expression through everyday encounters and in structural Islamophobic discrimination.

Currently, the most common colloquialism for this racial category is probably “Muslim,” but over the years, the most popular term for this racial category has varied quite a bit. Thirty years ago, the term “Arab” referred to people from a broadly conceived Middle East, while at that time “Muslim” had a close association with Black American communities. That these terms have shifted is not at all unusual. The popular names for racial categories change all the time. White people were more likely to be called “Caucasian” in the recent past, and that bizarre term still lives on today. Similarly, a Black American person would have been called “a Negro” sixty years ago, but today that term is generally considered archaic at best (and more than a little offensive). Moreover, the exact physical attributes associated with any racial category have never been static, much less obvious. The contours of racial categories are always contested and changing. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the racial categories exist. Elasticity—in terminology and otherwise—is an intrinsic part of the constant social reproduction of racial categories in the United States.

Today, based solely on his appearance, Cameron Mohammed might often get called “Muslim” or “Middle Eastern” by many of the people he meets. A century ago, however, in the early 1900s, someone look-