

RUTGERS LAW CENTER FOR SECURITY, RACE AND RIGHTS

PUNISHED FOR PARTICIPATING

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN U.S. ELECTORAL POLITICS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2026

“It is time we assume our place at the table. ... We must become participatory citizens in the American experiment.”

- United States House Representative Keith Ellison¹

The first Muslim elected to Congress in 2009 urged fellow Muslim Americans to “step out of the shadows.”² Representative Keith Ellison’s advice echoed the message given to multiple prior waves of new immigrants arriving on America’s shores seeking to integrate into their new homeland.³ Participate in American democracy and politics.

Over the next 15 years, Ellison’s advice would guide Muslim Americans as they sought elected office at the county, state, and national levels. By the summer of 2026, more than 230 Muslim Americans were elected officials, including four in the U.S. House of Representatives and three more predicted to win in the November Congressional elections.⁴ But rather than be embraced as engaged fellow citizens, Muslim American political candidates are encountering overt hostility and attempts to exclude them from public service. Put simply, Muslims are punished for participating in one of the most American acts—running for office in democratic elections.

Not only do Muslim Americans’ experiences contradict the fundamental American ideal of equal participation in self-governance, but they also reinforce the structural racism that has undermined this ideal since the nation’s founding. The report, *Punished for Participating: Islamophobia in U.S. Electoral Politics*, finds that despite historic gains in political representation, Muslim American candidates face a mainstreamed racialized backlash. Through analysis of over thirty-one case studies of Muslim American candidates and elected officials between 2001-2026, four distinct manifestations of Islamophobia pervade electoral politics: 1) conspiracy theories of an Islamic invasion and imposition of Sharia law, 2) gendered Islamophobia, 3) political violence, and 4) presumptions of antisemitism. To protect multiracial democracy, the report offers three recommendations intended to initiate the long-term project of combating Islamophobia and preserving equal access to self-governance for all Americans.

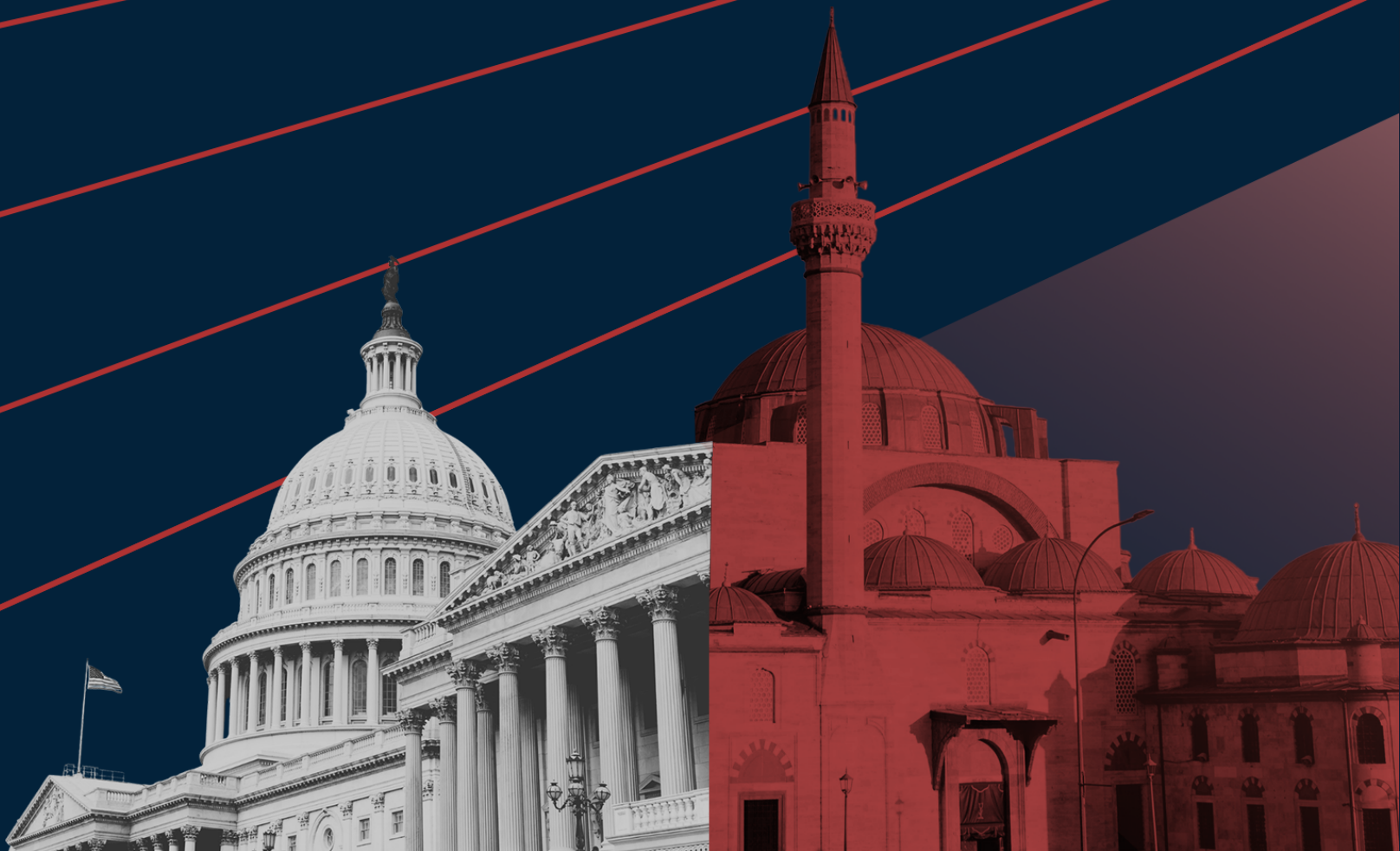
For decades, Muslims in America have been ‘otherized’ as presumptive foreigners who allegedly pose a threat to American democracy, liberalism, and equality. That is, “they” are outsiders who want to destroy “our” democracy, and in turn, do not deserve equality here in “our country.” That divisive narrative dominated the airwaves in the years immediately following the September 11th attacks. Most Americans at the time, however, did not think of their Muslim neighbors’ faith as antithetical to American life. The Pew Research Center, for example, found that in March 2002, only 25% of the public believed that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence.⁵ A year later in 2003 this figure jumped to 45%, demonstrating the impact of anti-Muslim narratives flooding mainstream media at the time.⁶

By 2017, when Muslim Americans were beginning to run for elected office in noticeable numbers, another Pew Research poll found that 50% of Americans believed that Islam was not part of “mainstream American society.”⁷ Almost as many American (44%) believed there was a “natural conflict” between the tenets of Islam and democracy.⁸ The same anti-Muslim narrative continues to dominate airwaves today in political advertisements, social media, and public statements by elected officials and opposition campaigns attacking Muslim candidates.⁹

Prevalence of these Islamophobic views is not the expected result of Al Qaeda’s September 11th terrorist attacks. Nor does it arise from good faith attempts to distinguish a small number of Muslims in the United States who commit criminal acts from the vast majority of the approximately six million law-abiding Muslims.¹⁰ Instead, Islamophobia is driven by a relentless fixation on casting Muslims as radicals and extremists. Not only is this fixation grounded in erroneous racial stereotypes, but it is factually false. One need only look to the increasing number of Muslims who are literally “playing within the system” by running for office in democratic elections—more than two hundred and thirty Muslim Americans across the country in 2026. Yet, this quintessential American act attracts the racial stereotyping premised on Muslims’ permanent outsider status, regardless of their individual actions, citizenship status, or civic participation.

The racialized backlash against Muslim political participation reflects a broader contradiction in American democracy. Muslim Americans are encouraged to assimilate, vote, and participate in civic life while simultaneously vilified when they do so in ways that offer their unique perspectives, experiences, and analysis on public policy as public servants. The experiences of Muslim American candidates and elected officials documented in this report, thus, offer a contemporary example of how racism threatens American democracy by creating different classes of citizens: a privileged class entitled to participate in self-governance and a subordinated class denied the same opportunity due to the extraordinary costs imposed on their safety, reputations, and mental wellbeing.

FOUR **ANTI-MUSLIM** NARRATIVES IN ELECTORAL POLITICS



Punished for Participating analyzes over thirty-one cases of Muslim Americans running for local, state, and federal office between 2001 and 2026, drawing from media analysis, social media posts, official statements, and campaign data. Through these case studies, the report examines the causes and harmful consequences of anti-Muslim racial tropes deployed against Muslim American candidates and elected officials at all levels of government for over over two decades. The cases reveal four recurring anti-Muslim narratives in public discourse that reinforce Islamophobia in U.S. electoral politics across the country.

First, conspiracy theories of an Islamic invasion and imposition of Sharia law portray Muslim public officials as disloyal Americans or agents of a secret foreign Islamic network's agenda, mirroring traditional antisemitic tropes of dual loyalty and a Jewish world conspiracy.¹¹ Second, American misogyny and gendered Islamophobia depict Muslim women as simultaneously oppressed and dangerous while Muslim men are racially stereotyped as patriarchal, misogynistic and terrorist.¹² Third, political violence against Muslims manifests through threats, harassment, intimidation, and physical assaults directed at Muslim candidates and elected officials. Fourth, the specious presumption of antisemitism of Muslim candidates and elected officials who advocate for Palestinian human rights or criticize Israeli government policies denies them equal opportunity to engage on a matter of public importance while reinforcing racial stereotypes of Muslims as hateful.¹³ The report's corresponding sections provide concrete evidence of how Islamophobic narratives operate to punish Muslim candidates and elected officials for participating in American democracy, and in turn exclude Muslim Americans from equal participation in the democratic practice of collective self-governance.

Section One, *Islamic Invasion and Dual Loyalty Conspiracy*, examines the most common Islamophobic trope: suspicion of a plan to control the United States from within based on an alleged loyalty to a global Islamic network. Proponents of a "creeping Sharia" conspiracy theory allege an Islamic infiltration of American institutions when Muslim citizens or public figures practice their faith.¹⁴ As a result, Muslim public officials who wear the hijab, openly practice their religion or use the Quran during swearing-in ceremonies are smeared as cultural threats to American identity. The case studies in this section demonstrate that Muslim identity is so reviled that even when Muslim Americans partake in the most American of acts—running for or winning elected office—they are accused of threatening the republic.

Section Two, *American Misogyny and Gendered Islamophobia*, examines how Muslim men and women are viewed through racialized and gendered negative stereotypes. Despite Muslim women's collective high levels of educational achievement in the United States, they are still perceived as oppressed, passive and lacking agency.¹⁵ Yet, when Muslim women are elected to public office, they are accused of supporting terrorism. Their hijabs attract harassment and suspicion rather than respect for their religious expression or bodily autonomy to choose how they dress. Meanwhile, Muslim men are stereotyped as patriarchal, misogynistic, and terrorist. These Orientalist importations from the European colonial era continue to taint how some Americans perceive Muslim elected officials and political candidates as threats rather than as fellow civically engaged citizens.

Section Three, *Political Violence Against Muslims*, sounds the alarm on the normalization of threats of harm and physical attacks that Muslim public officials have endured. This includes verbal or physical assaults in person, racist messages left through email or voice-mail, and credible death threats that take a deep psychological toll on the Muslim target and illustrate the racial price paid by Muslims in public service. Moreover, little regard is given to the substantial costs of security services to protect them should the threats of violence be acted upon.¹⁶ Recently, anti-Muslim threats have escalated to unprecedented calls for denaturalization of Muslim American citizens, including Representative Ilhan Omar and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani.¹⁷

The final section of the report, *Presumptively Antisemitic Racial Trope*, exposes the convergence of Islamophobic and pro-Israeli entities in furtherance of a shared goal: keeping Muslims out of elected office and public policy making. Muslims are labeled as antisemitic as a matter of course with no regard for the absence of credible evidence. The presumption of antisemitism is intended to portray Muslim candidates and elected officials as uniquely dangerous to Jews despite evidence of their inclusive political platforms.¹⁸ Muslim officials who advocate for Palestinian human rights, support a ceasefire in Gaza, or criticize Israeli government human rights violations are frequently subjected to coordinated defamation campaigns that equate criticism of Israeli state policy with hatred toward Jews, as experienced by U.S. Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib as well as 2006 Congressional Democratic nominees Adam Hamawy in New Jersey and Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan. These accusations often persist even where these same Muslim candidates and officials explicitly condemn antisemitism and promote religious pluralism.¹⁹ Ultimately, false allegations of hatred toward Jews directed at Muslim Americans seeking elected office reinforce Islamophobic racial tropes that ironically fuel hate against Muslim communities.²⁰



ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ELECTORAL POLITICS UNDERMINES AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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In some ways, Muslim immigrants and their children are no different than preceding Jewish and Catholic immigrants to the United States whose children and grandchildren sought elected office.²¹ They too were subjected to explicitly antisemitic and anti-Catholic smear campaigns. They too were accused of loyalty to secret foreign networks. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, for example, succumbed to anti-Catholic pressures to publicly declare he was first and foremost loyal to the United States of America, not the Pope.²² His historic electoral success constituted a watershed moment for Catholic Americans' entrance into mainstream political life.²³ However, the case studies in *Punished for Participating* reveal the opposite trend for Muslim Americans: the more they partake in electoral politics, the more explicit and intense the Islamophobic attacks. Rather than accepted as equal citizens, Muslim candidates and elected officials are routinely punished for their visibility and civic engagement through Islamophobic campaigns, harassment, threats, and attempts to politically exclude them.

The persistence of these racialized attacks illustrate that Islamophobia is not merely a reaction to isolated political disagreements or international events, but systemic discrimination that treats Muslims as permanent outsiders regardless of their citizenship, professional qualifications, or demonstrated commitment to democratic participation. For instance, the Pew Research Center showed that 45% of the American public believed that Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence in 2003.²⁴ Though this number has fluctuated throughout the years, the partisan gap in the response to this question has grown over the past two decades. In 2002, Republicans' and Democrats' opinions were separated by just eleven points.²⁵ By December 2016, this gap had grown to forty-four points: 70% of Republicans said Islam was more likely to encourage violence than other faiths compared to 26% of Democrats.²⁶ By 2024, when Donald Trump was elected to his second presidential term, a whopping 70% of Republicans supported banning travel from certain Muslim-majority countries.²⁷ Such views animate the disproportionately Republican led Islamophobic attacks against Muslim candidates and elected officials, although pro-Israeli Zionist Democrats often propagate the presumptively antisemitic racial trope.²⁸

While Islamophobia has been integral to the agenda of the political right, the Pew Research Center's surveys show a broader apprehension about Islam in America. In 2017, at the height of Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric, a poll found that 50% of Americans believed that Islam was not part of "mainstream American society."²⁹ Almost as many Americans believed (44%) that there was a "natural conflict" between the tenets of Islam and democracy.³⁰ In a 2024 YouGov poll measuring six forms of political extremism, 85% of Democrats were most likely to fear "white-supremacist extremism," while 78% of Republicans were most likely to fear "left-wing extremism," and 77% of Republicans were most likely to fear "Muslim extremism."³¹ Although Democrats were more likely to say they feared "white-supremacist," "right-wing," and "Christian" extremism, 55% of Democrats also said they feared "Muslim extremism." While fear of "white-supremacist extremism" has remained constant since 2022 at 62%, fear of "Muslim extremism" grew by seven percentage points, likely reflecting the resurgence of inflammatory anti-Muslim political rhetoric during Trump's 2024 presidential campaign.

Normalization of anti-Muslim rhetoric predictably has led to higher support for anti-Muslim discriminatory policies. A plurality of Americans (43%) in 2024 supported banning travel from certain Muslim-majority countries.³² Notably, such support was deeply polarized, with 73% of Republicans favoring the policy compared to 20% of Democrats. These polling trends reveal anti-Muslim attitudes are not confined to fringe political movements or constitute a new phenomenon. Rather, as the case studies in *Punished for Participating* demonstrate, suspicion toward Muslim Americans is increasingly normalized in mainstream political discourse.

That Muslims are punished for participating in electoral politics brings into sharp relief the threat to American democracy posed by Islamophobia. Public perceptions of Muslims as culturally incompatible with democracy or uniquely prone to violence create the conditions under which attacks against Muslim candidates and elected officials are denying the second largest religious minority equal access to the democratic process. That Muslim American politicians are forced to operate within a hostile environment where large segments of the public view their religious identity with suspicion or fear before even considering the candidate's policy positions or qualifications chills other Muslims from running for elected office.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When Muslims are penalized for participating in the electoral process, the harm reaches far beyond one religious minority—it undermines the foundational democratic principle that allows all Americans to participate equally and safely in public service. A more serious and systematic approach to combatting Islamophobia is thus long overdue. Accordingly, *Punished for Participating* offers three recommendations as a starting point for undoing decades of socialization that has legitimized discrimination against Muslims in all facets of life, including electoral politics.

1

**ESTABLISH TASK FORCES AT THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL
TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM**

2

**TRAIN LOCAL AND STATE LAW ENFORCEMENT ABOUT ISLAMOPHOBIA,
ANTI-MUSLIM HATE CRIMES, AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR
PROSECUTION AND PREVENTION**

3

**DEVELOP CURRICULUM AND TRAININGS TO UNDERSTAND MUSLIMS
AND COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA FOR K-12 SCHOOLS, UNIVERSITIES, AND
GOVERNMENT AGENCIES**

1. ESTABLISH TASK FORCES AT THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM

The federal government and each state should establish a *Task Force to Combat Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism* that is comprised of state and local government officials, educators, scholars, journalists, and diverse Muslim American civil society leaders. The task forces can learn from and build upon similar ones created to combat antisemitism across the United States.³³ Existing anti-discrimination task forces combine data collection, civil-rights enforcement, education, public safety, institutional reform, community engagement, and periodic government accountability. Accordingly, the state task forces should study Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, propose measures to combat it, reduce anti-Muslim incidents, assist public schools and universities, and compile educational materials. To ensure public accountability, a *Task Force to Combat Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism* should also hold at least four public meetings annually, invite public testimony and produce annual reports that make recommendations to the respective governor and state legislature.^a

The mandate of each task force should clearly state that it distinguishes between protected expression from unlawful discrimination, harassment, threats and violence. As such, nothing in the task force's work should be construed to authorize restriction of constitutionally protected speech, academic freedom, religious exercise, peaceful protest, criticism of any religion or religious doctrine, or criticism of any domestic or foreign government, political movement or ideology.

2. TRAIN LOCAL AND STATE LAW ENFORCEMENT ABOUT ISLAMOPHOBIA, ANTI-MUSLIM HATE CRIMES, AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR PROSECUTION AND PREVENTION

Each state government should train local law enforcement on how to identify, document, prevent, and prosecute anti-Muslim hate crimes and harassment, which empirical studies show rise with the increase in Islamophobic rhetoric in U.S. electoral politics.³⁴ Such trainings should include developing and implementing safety protocols for Muslim American political candidates and elected officials who are frequently targets of hate crime threats and acts. Again, task forces to combat antisemitism offer a useful template. Preventing and prosecuting anti-Muslim hate crimes requires improving centralized hate-crime reporting, participation in FBI reporting, and adequate staffing of specialized anti-Muslim hate-crime units.

Law enforcement should also conduct listening sessions at Muslim American community centers to understand the threats they face and consequent security needs. Local officials should provide security training for Muslim elected officials' staff as well as cybersecurity training for mosques and Islamic schools. Local and state governments should offer specialized anti-Muslim hate-crime training for police, prosecutors, magistrates and victim advocates.

3. DEVELOP CURRICULUM AND TRAININGS TO UNDERSTAND MUSLIMS AND COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA FOR K-12 SCHOOLS, UNIVERSITIES, AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Too often, Muslims in the United States are absent or inadequately covered in school curricula. Muslim-American history thus should be incorporated into state social-studies standards that allows for instruction concerning Islam as a major world religion, the history of Muslim Americans, Muslim immigration, Black Muslim movements and contemporary Muslim-American civic life. Teaching modules should explain Islamophobia and anti-Muslim stereotyping against Muslim women, Arabs, Palestinians, South Asians and African American Muslims.³⁵ Likewise, existing anti-discrimination training and educational programming in public schools, universities, government agencies, and workplaces should incorporate the history and experiences of Muslim in the United States, as well as prevention of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. Teachers should receive professional development to educate them about Islamophobia and the distinction between Islam, politically motivated violence, and the political diversity of American Muslim communities.

At the university level, administrators should create standardized anti-Muslim bias reporting systems and report anonymized aggregate data annually to state and federal agencies. Campus climate surveys of Muslim students, faculty and staff that measure harassment, religious accommodation, classroom climate, discrimination and perceptions of institutional belonging can inform educational programming intended to combat Islamophobia on campus. Additionally, universities should develop anti-doxxing protocols, which is particularly relevant for Muslim students publicly engaged on Palestinian human rights who are consequently targeted by pro-Israeli special interest groups.³⁶ Administrators should be trained on the various ways in which Muslim students, staff, and faculty experience violations of Title VI, Title VII, state civil rights laws, and First Amendment protections. Finally, state governments should establish and increase grants for university research concerning Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism whose analysis can meaningfully inform the work of the state level *Task Forces to Combat Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism*.

ENDNOTES

* The full report, *Punished for Participating: Islamophobia in U.S. Electoral Politics*, can be downloaded at csrr.rutgers.edu/newsroom/reports.

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⁸ *Id.*

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²⁶ *Id.*

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³² *Immigration: What 2024 Voters Want and Which Candidate They Trust*, Yougov Poll (Oct. 25, 2024), <https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/50795-immigration-what-2024-voters-want-and-which-candidate-they-trust>

³³ See, e.g., Jacky Rosen, *Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism*, Jacky Rosen, U.S. Senator for Nevada (established in 2019), <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/about-jacky/senate-bipartisan-task-force-for-combating-antisemitism/> (highlighting the bipartisan push for comprehensive executive response and for making funding a priority); Joseph R. Biden Jr., *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Releases First-Ever U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism*, Am. Presidency Project (May 25, 2023) (Biden administration, established in 2022), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-releases-first-ever-us-national-strategy-counter> (noting the wide membership spanning a number of federal agency decision-makers as well as its inclusion of differing antisemitism definition frameworks);

U.S. Dep’t of Justice, *Justice Department Announces Formation of Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism* (Feb. 3, 2025)(Trump administration, established in 2025), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-formation-task-force-combat-anti-semitism> (noting the overly broad enforcement of antisemitic speech likely counter-productive); U.S. Dep’t of Justice, *Justice Department Announces Formation of Advisory Committee on Anti-Semitism* (May 19, 2026),(Trump administration, established in 2025), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-formation-advisory-committee-anti-semitism> (bridging gap between governmental actors and communities as well as providing for a dedicated feedback and recommendations process); Virginia Commission to Combat Antisemitism, (Youngkin administration, established in 2022), <https://www.rosen.senate.gov/about-jacky/senate-bipartisan-task-force-for-combating-antisemitism/> [LINK MIGHT BE INCORRET, HERE IS A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE: <https://www.commonwealth.virginia.gov/va-government/boards-and-commissions/combating-antisemitism/>] (providing an example of differing approach to antisemitism definition framework); Mass. Gen. Court, *Special Commission on Combatting Antisemitism*, (established by statute in 2024), <https://malegislature.gov/Commissions/Detail/646> (providing an example of differing approach to antisemitism definition framework); N.Y. Governor’s Off., *New York State Center for Educational Civil Discourse*, (Hochul administration, established 2025;previously “New York State Anti-Hate in Education Center”), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/programs/new-york-state-center-educational-civil-discourse> (providing an example of alternate state model for effectuating task force goals).

³⁴ See, e.g., Karsten Müller & Carlo Schwarz, *From Hashtag to Hate Crime: Twitter and Antiminority Sentiment*, 15 Am. Econ. J. Applied Econ. 270, 270-312 (2023); Lawrence Pintak, Brian J. Bowe & Jonathan Albright, *Influencers, Amplifiers, and Icons: A Systematic Approach to Understanding the Roles of Islamophobic Actors on Twitter*, 99 Journalism & Mass Comm. Q. 955-79 (2022); Aeelah M. Granger & Kimberly Barsamian Kahn, *The Roles of National Anti-Muslim Policy, State Context, and Individual Ideology in Anti-Muslim Implicit Bias in the United States*, 28 Group Processes & Intergroup Rels. 1505, 1505-29 (2025).

³⁵ See, e.g., Center for Security, Race and Rights, *Muslim Heritage Month Resource Guide* (2025), <https://csrr.rutgers.edu/resources/muslim-heritage-month-guides/>.

³⁶ Gabriella Borter, Joseph Ax and Andrew Hay, *Name and Shame: Pro-Israel Website Ramps Up Attacks on Pro-Palestinian Student Protesters*, Reuters (May 11, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/name-shame-pro-israel-website-ramps-up-attacks-pro-palestinian-student-2024-05-11/>; Will Oremus, *A Militant Zionist Group Threatens Activists Online with a ‘Deport List,’* Wash. Post (Mar. 29, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/03/29/zionist-palestinians-deportations-x/>; Press Release, N.Y. Att’y Gen., *Attorney General James Stops Violence, Harassment, and Intimidation from New York Extremist Group*(Jan. 13, 2026), <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2026/attorney-general-james-stops-violence-harassment-and-intimidation-new-york>.



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