



Anti-Islamic rhetoric from GOP politicians sparks concerns over religious hatred

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More than two weeks into the war with Iran, Muslim Americans are confronting a new surge of hateful rhetoric amplified online and echoed by some of the country's most prominent Republican officials. Civil rights advocates and Democratic lawmakers have condemned the remarks as dangerous and openly bigoted. Geoff Bennett discussed more with Maya Berry of the Arab American Institute.

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Geoff Bennett:

More than two weeks into the war with Iran, Muslim Americans are confronting a new surge of hateful rhetoric here at home, amplified online and echoed by Republican lawmakers.

Tennessee Congressman Andy Ogles posted that Muslims don't belong in American society.

Florida Congressman Randy Fine wrote this: "We need more Islamophobia, not less. Fear of Islam is rational."

And Alabama Senator Tommy Tuberville paired images of 9/11 with New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, saying -- quote -- "The enemy is inside the gates."

Civil rights advocates and Democratic lawmakers have condemned the remarks as dangerous and openly bigoted.

We're joined now by Maya Berry, executive director of the Arab American institute.

Thank you for being with us.

Maya Berry, Executive Director, Arab American Institute:

Thank you for having us, Geoff.

Geoff Bennett:

When you hear and read some of the comments from Republican lawmakers right now, what stands out to you most?

Maya Berry:

I mean, to be honest, the initial response is just how broken our democracy is. I feel it in a very personal way in terms of the targeting in the American Muslim community like this, the scapegoating of a community like this.

But the fact that it's coming from elected officials who have American Muslim constituents who should understand with greater clarity how their rhetoric is perhaps different than mine or yours, and yet they feel very comfortable continuing to engage in this, stoking fear and putting communities and individuals at risk.

Geoff Bennett:

Does the rhetoric we're hearing now, does this represent an escalation or is this part of a longer pattern in American politics?

Maya Berry:

So I think that's a really important observation. Communities being scapegoated at different times for different reasons is certainly a pattern in our country.

What's different here, and I would even suggest worse than what we saw post-9/11, is that after the terror attacks in 9/11 happened, you had elected officials, a president, who went to a mosque within a couple of days to get those attacks and said, do not target your fellow Americans. This is not who we are. This is not what we're going to do.

Now, obviously, there are policies that ensued that securitized a community, that treated it as a potential security threat moving forward and that really harmed the relationship between those individuals and their fellow countrypeople.

But what I would say is that, when the largest office of the land, the presidential bully pulpit, is being used to tell their fellow Americans, do not scapegoat those communities, that's very, very different than what we see today. The single largest crime -- or hate crime data that we had that targeted both actually Arab-Americans and American Muslims came after 9/11.

The second largest numbers came after the 2015 and 2016 years, which is the beginning of President Trump's initial campaign and running for office. So there is certainly, I think, a decision among some that this rhetoric is helpful. It gives them viral moments. It helps them raise money.

That, to me, is why I keep emphasizing that you should care about this because it is harmful to a community, but you should also care about this because I think it is indicative of how problematic and how fragile our democratic institutions are right now.

Geoff Bennett:

And you have some defending their remarks by pointing to these recent attacks allegedly carried out by Muslim men, the car ramming at a Michigan synagogue, the shooter at Old Dominion University last week.

President Trump, who you mentioned, he was on Brian Kilmeade's FOX radio show last week. Take a listen to what he said.

President Donald Trump:

They're sick people. And a lot of them were let in here. They shouldn't have been let in. Others are just bad. They go bad, something wrong. There's something wrong there. Genetics are not exactly -- they're not exactly your genetic. It's one of those problems.

Geoff Bennett:

I want to ask you to respond to that. And there can be legitimate concerns about how people become radicalized and then carry out acts of violence.

There's a separate question around how leaders address that without turning it into sweeping claims, derogatory claims about millions of Americans.

Maya Berry:

Look, I'm not going to argue that someone who resorts to violence like we saw in the horrific attack in Michigan or the shooting in Virginia isn't perhaps sick in some way. There's something wrong there, without a doubt.

The difference, though, is that no one would suggest that we engage in that kind of talk when we talked about the Sikh shooting, the temple shooting in Oak Creek. No one said that when there was a shooting in South Carolina. No one said that when we were talking about the devastating killing of congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue or Charlottesville, Virginia, where Heather Heyer was killed, or the supermarket in El Paso.

There have been systematic ways in which our country has increasingly moved with some level of comfort with political violence that's really very alarming. There were two assassination attempts on President Trump. There was a legislator and her husband that -- killed in Minnesota.

The question is, why do we take those individual incidents and understand there to be a problem that our country has to address and not suggest that we develop a different relationships with white supremacists, for example, who've engaged with those and start saying that we need to -- what went wrong? How do we take away their citizenship? What's the denaturalization process?

None of that happens, except when it is looking at American Muslims and sometimes Arab Americans.

Geoff Bennett:

Well, on that point, I want to ask you this, because in the past, party leaders have taken action against members of Congress for racist and extremist rhetoric. That was the case back in 2019, when Speaker, then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy booted Steve King off of his committees for racist rhetoric.

Fast-forward to the present moment. There doesn't appear to be that same level of accountability. What's the impact of that?

Maya Berry:

No, to the contrary, there's no censure. There are no committees assignments being withdrawn. In fact, in the case of Congressman Randy Fine, the day he actually said starve them all is the day that he was appointed to the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

And you have a situation where the House speaker, instead of saying this kind of rhetoric must stop, it's harmful to our fellow Americans and we ought not to engage in it, he said there's a legitimate fear about Sharia, demanding Sharia law in our country. Sharia law is something, a concept within like a moral or religious code that applies to me personally.

It would never apply to you or anyone else if they weren't Muslim. It dictates things like our prayer or our marriage processes or burials. So this idea that we're going to take something like that and the speaker would suggest this is the reason why his members would get away with saying the kinds of things that they said is just intellectually dishonest and morally replicable.

Geoff Bennett:

Beyond the rhetoric, are you seeing signs that these attitudes are influencing policy?

Maya Berry:

Without a doubt. There have been some pretty, pretty significant setbacks in terms of basic civil rights protections and First Amendment protection rights.

But I would focus more on -- at this point, frankly, I go back to Congress, because certainly I'm not suggesting the executive is working great. But the issue with Congress is, it's not just that a member tweets something that's reprehensible. Look at the remarks they're giving on the House floor.

Look at the questions and comments they make during congressional hearings. It's not just about, like, they need to engage or behave in ways that are decent. It's really about a structural problem within the body itself. It's not passing budgets on time. It's not passing laws. There's no congressional oversight.

Our country just went to war without a war powers resolution. But what do they find time to do? They find time to sit and tell us that we need to fear our fellow Americans.

Geoff Bennett:

Maya Berry, executive director of the Arab American Institute, thank you for your perspectives.

Maya Berry:

Thank you.