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Anti-Muslim bigotry surges ahead of International Day to Combat Islamophobia

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March 15 marks the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, a day established to bring awareness to anti-Muslim prejudice in the wake of the tragic mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, when a white supremacist gunman killed 51 people and wounded more than 80 in an attack on the country's Muslim community.

This year, the day comes as the United States is seeing a resurgence in anti-Muslim fearmongering akin to the atmosphere of the 2010s, when Islamophobic narratives reached new heights and an organized anti-Muslim network was established. In 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center tracked a record 114 anti-Muslim hate groups in the U.S., a number that dropped to 31 in 2024. But group numbers are not the only measure for hate. The resurgence in rhetoric is not coming only from established anti-Muslim groups. It is also being parroted

by online hard-right influencers and elected officials who are using their positions in public office to spread Islamophobic conspiracy theories.

After building their work around anti-Muslim rhetoric and vilifying Islam, some anti-Muslim hate groups tracked by the SPLC broadened their scope in the early 2020s. They minimized their focus on Islamophobia to opportunistically shift to other popular scapegoats of the hard right, like “critical race theory”; diversity, equity and inclusion programs; public health mandates; and “election fraud.”

Past research suggests that Islamophobia seems to peak during election cycles more than around war or acts of terrorism. It remains to be seen how the war in Iran launched by President Donald Trump’s administration will impact levels of Islamophobic rhetoric. Data collected and analyzed by the SPLC shows Islam was not a central message in political campaign messaging as recently as 2024. *The Los Angeles Times* reported in 2023 that some Muslim communities no longer felt like a “political punching bag” for politicians.



Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont (left) swears in New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani as Mamdani’s wife, Rama Duwaji, holds the Quran at City Hall in New York on Jan. 1, 2026. Mamdani is New York’s first Muslim mayor. (Credit: Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images)

Anti-Muslim posturing was on full display last year around the New York City mayoral campaign and election of Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani became the target of anti-Muslim rhetoric directed at him from some anti-Muslim hate and hard-right figures, who, because of his faith, tried to tie him to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and claimed his win was the negative result of immigration and demographic changes in the city and broader country.

Such rhetoric feeds into an idea around the racist “great replacement” conspiracy theory, which claims white people are being purposefully displaced and replaced in Western nations.

The perpetrator of the Christchurch attack trafficked in similar ideas, as revealed in a manifesto attributed to him titled “The Great Replacement.”

The ‘Shariah law’ trope returns

Such rhetoric has not been isolated to New York politics. Members of Congress are spreading Islamophobic rhetoric, particularly around the specter of “Shariah law.” The term “Shariah law” is a misnomer because Shariah (also spelled Sharia) is not actually a law or a universally defined legal code, but a set of guiding principles to living a moral life set out in the Quran. Still, it has been commandeered, framed and deployed as a foreign threat in the U.S. by some hard-right politicians and their anti-Muslim allies.

In October 2025, U.S. Sen. Tommy Tuberville took to the Senate floor calling for states to outlaw Shariah. “Shariah law is anti-American and has no place in a free society,” Tuberville said. He then veered into ideas similar to the great replacement, saying: “The United Kingdom, once a proud nation that helped save the world from Nazi tyranny, has essentially lost its identity. It’s gone. Mass migration has destroyed their society.” He added, “If we aren’t careful, the United States will look like Europe in 10 years or less. It’s coming.”

That same month, Tuberville introduced legislation to ban Shariah in the United States. Muslim civil rights group the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) noted the revival of such rhetoric and issued a congressional memo on “Weaponized Islamophobia: The Return of the Anti-Sharia Hoax.” Still, the Alabama senator went even further in December 2025, writing on the social media platform X: “Islam is not a religion. It is a cult.” This prompted CAIR to designate Tuberville as an “anti-Muslim extremist,” making him the first U.S. senator to receive such a designation from the Muslim civil rights group.

Over in the House, several representatives introduced companion bills to Tuberville's legislation. Rep. Chip Roy of Texas introduced the "Preserving a Sharia-Free America Act." Rep. Randy Fine of Florida and Rep. Keith Self of Texas introduced the "No Sharia Act." CAIR claimed in a press release that such legislation, if enacted, "would effectively render the practice of Islam illegal in the United States."

Brant Levine, a senior staff attorney for the SPLC, told Hatewatch, "These bills likely violate the First Amendment's establishment clause because they single out a single religion for government regulation." In 2010, an Oklahoma bill to amend the state constitution to ban Shariah was passed, but a federal court later struck it down after finding it to be in violation of the First Amendment because it unfavorably singled out Islam. The 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals highlighted the plaintiff's allegation that "the proposed state amendment *expressly* condemns his religion and exposes him and other Muslims in Oklahoma to disfavored treatment."

The bill was part of a larger nationwide effort to legislate anti-Muslim animus based on model anti-Shariah legislation known as American Laws for American Courts (ALAC). Anti-Muslim hate groups like ACT for America and the Center for Security Policy work to support, lobby and champion this legislation. Over a dozen states have passed ALAC-inspired bills. At least 43 states have seen ALAC-inspired legislation introduced in the past 10 years. After Oklahoma's ruling, language in ALAC-style bills shifted to focus on "foreign" or "international" law rather than singling out Shariah in an effort for them to pass.



Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama speaks at a Sharia-Free America Caucus press conference at the U.S. Capitol on Feb. 3, 2026. (Credit: Michael Brochstein/Sipa USA/Alamy)

But passing this legislation was not always the intended goal, as the legislation's mastermind, David Yerushalmi, has laid out. Yerushalmi, who co-runs the anti-Muslim hate group American Freedom Law Center, told *The New York Times* in 2011, "If this thing passed in every state without any friction, it would have not served its purpose." Instead, he said, "The purpose was heuristic — to get people asking this question, 'What is Shariah?'"

The so-called Sharia-Free Caucus

The anti-Shariah fearmongering did not end with federal legislation. In December 2025, Reps. Roy and Self launched the “Sharia-Free Caucus.” As of February, Self announced, the caucus had grown to include 41 members of Congress from 20 states. Anti-Muslim figurehead Brigitte Gabriel, who heads ACT for America, applauded the caucus for “igniting urgent conversations across Capitol Hill and throughout the country about the dangers posed by Sharia law.”

That same month, caucus member Fine faced backlash and calls to resign from Congress following a social media post where he suggested dogs are preferable to Muslims. Fine responded to an X post from New York-based Muslim and Palestinian activist Nerdeen Kiswani, who commented against owning dogs as pets in the city, in accordance with some Islamic tenets. Fine responded, “If they force us to choose, the choice between dogs and Muslims is not a difficult one.” Fine pushed back in media interviews, claiming his remarks were made in “satire.”

Kiswani defended her comments as also being a “mild, satirical” post and told *The New York Times* that Fine’s response is reflective of a political climate where “anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim bigotry is normalized and hostility toward our communities is more easily justified.”

In late February, Fine met with Tommy Robinson, a British Islamophobic activist and co-founder of the English Defence League, during Robinson’s controversial trip to the United States.

Robinson posted a photo of the meeting with the caption, “Good to meet this great patriot today @RepFine (sic) Dogs [for the win] every time.” A few days prior, on Feb. 20, Fine introduced legislation to “Protect Puppies From Sharia.” During his stay, Robinson was also reportedly given a tour of the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C.

Also in February, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and Limited Government, which is chaired by Roy, held a hearing titled “Sharia-Free America: Why Political Islam & Sharia Law Are Incompatible With the U.S. Constitution.” The event appeared to be an extension of Roy and the caucus’ Islamophobic posturing.

The event featured two figures associated with anti-Muslim hate groups who were invited to testify and answer questions. One was Robert Spencer, one of America’s most prolific and

vociferous anti-Muslim propagandists. Spencer, who heads the hate group Jihad Watch, has been peddling anti-Muslim hate for at least three decades.

Self-taught in the study of Islam and its religious texts, Spencer has been widely criticized for a lack of scholarly credentials and espousing selective ultra-literal readings of scriptures. He considers these texts to be innately extremist and violent and refuses to acknowledge nonviolent passages and variations in interpretations. Spencer was cited dozens of times in the manifesto attributed to Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist responsible for killing 77 people in 2011.

Spencer used his testimony to fearmonger about Shariah and spoke of demographic anxieties similar to those serving as the foundation for the great replacement theory. This included warning against admitting Muslim immigrants and an increased Muslim population in the U.S.

“Moreover, emigration to a new land to bring Shariah to it is also an Islamic imperative,” Spencer said during his testimony. “The Quran promises a reward from Allah to those who ‘emigrate for the sake of Allah,’ which means for the purpose of bringing Shariah to a non-Muslim land.” Spencer elaborated further on this in his written statement for the record, writing, “Thus the conflict between Sharia and the U.S. Constitution will only grow as the Muslim population in the U.S. grows, for among that population will always be some Muslims who take these imperatives with the utmost seriousness.”

Writing at FrontPage Magazine, Spencer claimed the hearing to be “historic.” Spencer and his materials were once relied on by U.S. government agencies in the post-9/11 world as resources on terrorism. But he and his materials were removed under the Obama administration after efforts by Muslim civil rights groups to expose his hateful agenda.



Rep. Randy Fine of Florida (right) poses with Tommy Robinson, a British Islamophobic activist and co-founder of the English Defence League, in late February 2026. (Screenshot via X.com)

Spencer remarked after the hearing, “To have a discussion of Shariah on Capitol Hill represents a significant breakthrough.”

Another witness invited to testify was Krista Schild, the Texas director of Rise Align Ignite Reclaim (RAIR) Foundation USA, a hate group founded by anti-Muslim social media troll Amy “Mek” Mekelburg. Schild focused her remarks on Texas and repeated conspiracy theories affiliated with the broader anti-Muslim movement, saying: “Texas is ground zero for the Islamic conquest of America. We are deep into a 1,400-year Islamic immigration conquest pattern. A patient, relentless strategy of settlement, infiltration and eventual dominance.” She said elsewhere in her remarks: “I travel across Texas listening to communities. Residents tell me their neighborhoods are becoming unrecognizable. Streets once familiar now echo with foreign calls to prayer that drown out church bells.”

In an article published Feb. 19, Mobashra Tazamal of the Bridge Initiative, a research project on Islamophobia housed at Georgetown University, observed the resurgence of Islamophobia in the Lone Star State.

“Today, the ‘Sharia takeover’ narrative is ripe and rampant in Texas,” Tazamal wrote. One of the nodes feeding that narrative is fearmongering around a proposed Islamic-centric residential development project in North Texas called the East Plano Islamic Center, or EPIC City, which sparked a yearlong campaign by some elected officials and anti-Muslim groups to reignite fears about Shariah and bigoted rhetoric framing Muslims as a subversive cultural threat. RAIR Foundation USA has been involved in helping fan the hysteria around EPIC City.

On Feb. 24, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott reposted a now-deleted social media post on X from Mek to spread disinformation about EPIC City. In her original post, Mek wrote: “America, wake up. A massive 402-acre Sharia enclave is rising in Josephine, Texas—and the U.S. government is effectively subsidizing it.” It also included a video about the project produced by RAIR.

Building on Mek’s post, Abbott peddled anti-Muslim rhetoric and conspiracy theories, including so-called Muslim-only “no-go zones,” a common anti-Muslim conspiracy theory popular among hate groups. “To be clear, Sharia law is not allowed in Texas,” Abbott wrote on his official X account. “Nor are Sharia cities. Nor are ‘no go (sic) zones’ which this project seems to imply. Bottom line. The Project as proposed in this video is not allowed in Texas.”

The Department of Justice was tapped to probe EPIC City and closed its investigation in June 2025 with no further action. EPIC City still remains at the center of legal actions and disputes in the state. In September 2025, Abbott signed a bill aimed at banning “Sharia compounds” in Texas.

As Tazamal wrote for Bridge Initiative: “Islamophobia endures because it’s built upon centuries of racialized stereotypes. It is an ideology and system of oppression rooted in fear, which has long been a powerful unifying force in American politics. Given fear is one of our most primal instincts, appeals to this emotion often provoke strong reactions. We are wired to detect threats and to protect ourselves from perceived danger. So, when politicians and media figures tell the public that Muslims are ‘taking over’ the Lone Star state, that Sharia law will replace the Constitution, or that their way of life is under threat, it is unsurprising that some people feel compelled to act.”

As anti-Muslim bigotry continues to permeate politics and feed exclusionary narratives, International Day to Combat Islamophobia serves as a reminder of the importance of challenging it in furtherance of a more just and inclusive society.

Image at top: Demonstrators including Muslims, Christians and Jews protest against Islamophobia on March 24, 2019, in Times Square in New York following the attacks at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, earlier that month. (Credit: Atilgan Ozdil/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

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