

# *Without a Border 'Invasion,' Texas G.O.P. Turns to an Old Enemy, Islam*

Republican politicians and strategists in Texas are amping up anti-Muslim rhetoric as a way to energize Republican voters after several elections when the border was the animating force.



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**By J. David Goodman**

Reporting from the suburbs north of Dallas and Fort Worth

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Republican officials and candidates in Texas have shifted their rhetorical attack lines from the border fears that dominated recent elections to the state's growing Muslim population, with language that echoes the aftermath of the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric has unnerved many in the state's Islamic community while sending signals to Republicans outside Texas who might be searching for rhetorical targets now that the nation's southwestern border has grown quiet.

Ads for Senator John Cornyn of Texas have touted his fight against "radical Islam." Texas Republican lawmakers created a "Sharia-Free America Caucus" in Congress. Gov. Greg Abbott has labeled one of the nation's largest Muslim rights groups a terror organization.

A “Save Texas from Radical Islam” dinner north of Dallas last month featured Steve Bannon, a former adviser to President Trump, the conservative commentator Glenn Beck and the Dutch right-wing leader Geert Wilders — and attracted party activists and Texas House members. The State Senate is weighing legislation requested by Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick to ensure Texans “are never held under the heel of ‘Sharia law.’”

Just on Monday, the state’s hard-right attorney general, Ken Paxton, announced he would investigate a proposed real estate development in Kaufman County, east of Dallas, as a “potentially illegal ‘Sharia City.’”

The attacks on Islam are a notable shift for a party that has spent the last several election cycles focused on the Mexican border. Warnings of migrant “caravans” and a criminal invasion have lost their sting with a Republican in the White House and new policies that have halted most border crossings.



Senator John Cornyn, a Texas Republican facing a difficult primary challenge, is running campaign ads denouncing “radical Islam.” Eric Lee for The New York Times

That has left the G.O.P. looking for ways to address its voters' concerns over the number of immigrants who came into the country during the Biden administration while avoiding the increasingly unpopular policy of mass deportations under Mr. Trump.

In Texas, concern about Islamic radicalism has recently been polling among the top issues for Republican primary voters, according to Republican campaign consultants. The state party put a resolution on its primary ballot asking whether Texas should “prohibit Sharia law,” a term that refers to Islamic religious rules but has long served as a catchall to signify expansions of Muslim culture and religion that opponents say threaten American values. Mr. Abbott has promised a “total ban” through legislation next year, though he has not said what that would mean in practice.

“Any event you go to, people ask about it. It’s like the border used to be,” said Dave Carney, the top political strategist for Mr. Abbott. ““What are you doing about Shariah law? What are you doing about the Muslims taking over the state?””

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But Muslims in the state say they feel the threat.

“I’m shocked and I’m offended by my own elected leaders,” said State Representative Salman Bhojani, a Democrat from the Dallas-Fort Worth area and one of two Muslims in the Texas State House.

The resurgence of anti-Muslim sentiment can be traced, in part, to the suburbs of Dallas and Fort Worth. Though Muslims make up around 2 percent of the Texas population, according to the Pew Research Center, the number of Muslim residents in those suburbs has grown significantly in recent decades. Mosques now dot a landscape once dominated by megachurches.

“In the Muslim community there are some who call this the Medina of the U.S. because of how many have migrated here,” Mustafaa Carroll, the executive director of the Dallas-area chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations, said, referring to one of Islam’s holiest cities. “Truthfully, Dallas-Fort Worth, outside of the politics, is just a good place to live.”



“Truthfully, Dallas-Fort Worth, outside of the politics, is just a good place to live,” said Mustafaa Carroll, executive director of the Dallas chapter of a Muslim civil rights group. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

A proposal just over a year ago to create a large housing development and mosque outside Dallas, known as EPIC City, alarmed many Republicans, who saw it as a prime example of the growing prominence of Islam in Texas, and helped propel the issue to the top of Republican voters' concerns.

"It's a top three issue," said Nick Maddux, a Republican consultant who represents candidates across Texas, including Mr. Paxton, who is challenging Mr. Cornyn in the state's Republican Senate primary. "It's EPIC."

Islam came up repeatedly on Thursday night at a gathering of several dozen party activists and voters who had come to a restaurant in The Colony, a suburb of Dallas, to support a far-right challenger to the area's conservative Republican state representative.

"It's the hottest topic," Brooks McKenzie, a Republican activist in Tarrant County, said, while waiting to hear from the candidate, Lt. Col. Larry Brock, an Air Force veteran who served two years in prison for entering the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

Mr. Brock spoke for several minutes about Islam.

"We should ban the burqa, the hijab, the abaya, the niqab," he said, referring to different head and body coverings worn by some Muslim women. "No to halal meat. No to celebrating Ramadan. No, no, no."



“No to halal meat. No to celebrating Ramadan. No, no, no,” said Larry Brock, a Republican candidate for state representative who went to jail for his role in the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

The intensifying rhetoric has been disturbing to many Muslims who live in the northern suburbs of Dallas, attracted by work and business opportunities, the availability of housing and the promise of religious freedom.

“I fled persecution,” said Mujeeb Kazi, who came from the Kashmir region of Pakistan, and is the president of the North Texas Islamic Council, an umbrella group for mosques in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Mr. Kazi said there were more than 60 mosques in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, up from around two dozen in the mid-2000s, when his organization was founded.

There have been past flare-ups of anti-Muslim sentiment, he said, but never this bad. His face has appeared on political campaign fliers. He said he feared for his children’s safety.

Over the years, cultural differences and political campaigns have fueled periodic moments of increased anti-Muslim sentiment in the Dallas suburbs. A decade ago, Beth Van Duyne, the mayor of Irving, Texas, railed against Shariah law, and eventually won a seat in Congress. A majority of Texas Republicans supported a “ban on Muslims” entering the country, as Mr. Trump proposed during his 2016 campaign, according to polls at the time.

Then the issue receded as Republican voters became focused on the border.

But just over a year ago, a group of Muslim investors connected to a large mosque complex, the East Plano Islamic Center, began raising money for EPIC City, which led to a backlash among conservative activists. Protesters became a regular presence outside the mosque.



Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas has excluded Muslim schools like the one at the East Plano Islamic Center from his school voucher program, although other religious schools are included. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

Mohamed Ebeida, a research scientist who immigrated from Egypt, said often when he and his children would go to pray at the Plano center on Fridays, protesters told them they were “going to hellfire.”

“Do you want a society where every group alienates each other?” he said.

Mr. Abbott and Mr. Paxton began investigations into the proposed development, vowing to never let it be constructed. None of the investigations so far have found any wrongdoing and the proposed community, now known as The Meadow, has been moving forward.

That has only fueled the concern among Republican activists. In November, Mr. Abbott issued a proclamation declaring the Council on American-Islamic Relations, or CAIR, to be a “terrorist organization,” seeking to shut down one of the nation’s largest Muslim advocacy and civil rights groups. The group sued Mr. Abbott over the designation.

The governor has also tried to curtail other groups because of what he has said were connections to CAIR. He has targeted the Islamic Games, a Muslim sporting competition, and has so far excluded Muslim private schools from the state’s new tuition voucher program, which includes other religious schools.

Some Republicans have justified their attacks as coming out of concern for the future of the country. In Wylie, Texas, Jeff Forrester, a former city councilor and mayor pro tem, said the religious practices of Islam were incompatible with Western civilization and the Constitution.



“I fled persecution,” said Mujeeb Kazi, president of the North Texas Islamic Council, only to find anti-Muslim rhetoric in Texas. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

In his nine years in office, he said, Wylie grew to around 70,000 residents from 40,000, with some of those residents arriving from Muslim countries. “It changed the dynamic,” he said.

“I don’t hate people — I have the love of Christ in my heart,” Mr. Forrester, who is running for the State House, said. “The problem that I see,” he added, “is we have that diversity without assimilation.”

But some Muslim Texans say the attacks have made them less likely to seek connections outside of their community and have soured them on the outreach efforts that many hoped would build understanding and tolerance.

“The model for us after 9/11 was go out and get to know each other, and every mosque had interfaith, every organization had an interfaith relationship,” said Mona Kafeel of the Texas Muslim Women’s Foundation, based in Plano. “We tried that model. It has not been successful.”

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