

# American Islamophobia

*Understanding the Roots  
and Rise of Fear*

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today's Islamophobia peddling politicians.

The Muslim naturalization ban lasted until American geopolitical interests in the Muslim world shifted, specifically when the need for Saudi oil facilitated its judicial dissolution in 1944.<sup>49</sup> The case that spurred the dissolution of the longstanding Muslim ban involved a Saudi Muslim immigrant petitioning for citizenship in a Massachusetts court. Mohammed Mohriez walked into court with his quintessential Arab physical features, dark skin kissed and colored by the scorching Saudi sun, fully candid about his religious beliefs. To borrow a phrase that prominent Muslim American civil rights activist Linda Sarsour has often applied to herself, Mohriez arrived in court “unapologetically Muslim.”<sup>50</sup> His prospects for citizenship would fall or advance without his shrinking from his religious identity.

His case came before Judge Charles Wyzanski eleven years after the United States, and President Herbert Hoover, formed the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) with the fledgling Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which had recently unearthed phenomenal reserves of crude oil—oil needed to fuel automobiles, a booming economy, a two-front war (World War II), and American foreign policy aspirations. Judge Wyzanski’s ruling would impact far more than the citizenship fate of one Muslim immigrant. It had the potential to disrupt or enhance the economic interests of the United States in Saudi Arabia and its political aspirations within the broader Middle East—a region rising from colonialism and coveted by both the United States and its emerging rival, the USSR. On that day in 1944, when the world and America’s position in it were radically changing, the naturalization interests of

Mohriez, a Muslim immigrant, converged with the foreign policy and economic interests of the United States.<sup>51</sup> The court's ruling would impact far more than the fate of one Muslim immigrant.

Judge Wyzanski granted Mohriez's petition for naturalization, and so at long last Muslim immigrants could become citizens. However, political interests were more important than principle in delivering the formal dissolution of the longstanding Muslim naturalization ban. As a result of this case, Middle Eastern historian Sarah Gualteiri writes, Arab Muslims became "‘honorary whites,’ those accepted into the nation but still under suspicion that they did not quite deserve it. Whereas the Christian identity of Syrian applicants in the racial prerequisite cases had been central to their argument for whiteness, Muslim Arabs were at their whitest when stripped of their religious identity"<sup>52</sup>—and, as exemplified by the Mohriez case, when the citizenship interests of Muslim immigrants aligned with the foreign and economic policy interests of the state.

The two cases that established that Syrian Christians and Arab Muslims were to be legally considered white, *Dow* (1915) and *Mohriez* (1944), are the basis of the modern legal classification of Arab and Middle Eastern Americans as white by law. This is a paradoxical designation considering the sociopolitical and legal stigmatization of Arab and Middle Eastern identity today,<sup>53</sup> as well as the rise of structural Islamophobia. This has pushed activists, civic organizations,<sup>54</sup> and scholars, including myself and law scholar John Tehranian, to advocate on behalf the "Middle Eastern and North African" (MENA) box that the United States Census Bureau may add to the 2020 census.<sup>55</sup>

Although the Naturalization Act of 1952 encouraged more Muslims to come to the United States, the Immigration Act of 1924, which had instituted quotas on immigrants from nations in

Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—home to sizable Muslim populations and many Muslim-majority nations—was still in effect. Despite a spike, from 1948 until 1965, in the number of students from Muslim-majority countries studying in the United States,<sup>56</sup> strict immigration quotas continued to stifle Muslim immigrants' ability to enter the United States, and suppressed their numbers within the country.<sup>57</sup> On one front, immigration restrictions against Muslims were eroding, but the Orientalism that fed the restrictions fluidly mutated into other forms of state policy and programming.

The Civil Rights Act, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, opened the door for the dissolution of these immigration quotas by way of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and it subsequently opened the door for Muslims to migrate to the United States and pursue citizenship without the obstacle of racial mandates or in-court religious vetting. As historian Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, author of *A History of Islam in America*, writes, "Thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, ... these new Asian and African Muslim immigrants came to the United States [and] did not have to change their names or dissimulate their religion."<sup>58</sup>

And yet, though the rights granted in 1964 and 1965 did change conditions in many positive ways, Islamophobia was not magically removed from the United States, but rather morphed into new forms, as it had in the past. The Islamophobia that pervades government structures and the minds of Americans today rises from a bleak history, judicial memory, and a naturalization ban that stood for 154 years—a ban that was enforced by the courts long before Trump proposed another while campaigning for the presidency and rode the tide of Islamophobia all the way to the White House.