



# TAKE ACTION TO COUNTER ANTI-MUSLIM AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT BIGOTRY

## CONFRONTING HATE SPEECH IN POLITICS

The 2016 electoral season has seen an alarmingly consistent element of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry, along with other racially charged comments. Countering hateful messages is an important part of creating the world we believe in – a world in which the human rights and dignity of all people are respected. The Southern Poverty Law Center has an excellent guide on why and how to respond to messages of racial and ethnic hatred here: [splcenter.org/20100216/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide](http://splcenter.org/20100216/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide).

The way in which we speak our alternative message is as important as the content of that message. If we confront someone who is shouting about keeping out immigrants by shouting back at them, our message is likely to be lost in our method of delivery. When we hear racially charged statements from public figures, we often feel offended, angry or humiliated. It's important to be aware of these feelings in order to choose our message and tone of communication with care. Monitoring our own reactions can also help us maintain a stance of nonviolence, calm, and dignity when directly confronting an angry opposition.

Here are some helpful hints for countering hate speech:

1. Before writing a response to an article or news item, think about the values you most want to elevate to counter a message of hate. Rather than belittling your adversary's values, lean into the ones you most want to emphasize: fairness, compassion, peace building, diversity, dignity, hospitality.
2. If you have an opportunity to attend a protest or a counter rally in the name of immigrant rights or racial justice, try to gather a group of friends or members of your organization or congregation and go together. Invite the group to spend some time preparing for how best to respond to violent words or actions in ways that will not escalate the anger but will elevate a powerful counter statement.
3. In the context of heated confrontations at rallies or protests, remember the power of song, silent witness, and prayer. Some of the most eloquent renunciations of hate speech have come in these forms.

## UNDERSTANDING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN ERA OF MASS CRIMINALIZATION

Harmful depictions of Islam are not new, and they fit into a larger pattern of political scapegoating and criminalization that targets other communities of color, including African Americans and Latino/as. Islamophobia and related hate crimes often cast such a wide net that they catch many non-Muslims in the process, from anyone of Arab descent regardless of religion to Sikh men in turbans who are targeted because of religious and racial bigotry. This can't just be blamed on ignorance. The nation's demographics are changing and there is backlash: by 2045 the white population will be less than 50% of the United States, and that's already true for children five years old and under. While there are a lot of white Americans who appreciate diversity, there are still many who fear losing power and privilege and seek to keep others out.

Islamophobia targets both new refugees and Muslims whose families have been in the United States for generations. Similarly, anti-immigrant attitudes and laws targeting undocumented immigrants as "illegal" also harm Latino U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. For example, S.B. 1070, the Arizona state law that requires police officers to check for immigration status during routine stops, has resulted in regular harassment of Latino citizens. Terms like "illegal alien" that are used regularly in the media strip immigrants of their humanity. Some news sources have agreed to switch to language like "undocumented immigrant" which is more respectful of the people being addressed.

In recent years, #BlackLivesMatter protesters have shined a spotlight on the scale of unarmed Black men and women killed by police violence. These deaths are connected to a long history of criminalization of Black communities in the U.S., including police profiling practices like stop-and-frisk in which over 90% of people stopped are completely innocent.

Mass criminalization of Muslim refugees, immigrants, and Black communities serves at least two purposes: it deflects blame for the plummeting economic standards for lower- and middle-income whites; and it also creates a new source of profit for privatized prisons. Under U.S. and international law, everyone has the right to seek asylum if they are unsafe in their home country, and yet many who do so face months and years in prison. Mandatory minimums for drug sentences and immigrant bed quotas provide a guaranteed income to prison companies like GEO Group and the Corrections Corporation of America and their investors. The number of people incarcerated in the United States has risen to more than 2.2 million, an increase of over 500% since 1983, and these two companies have a combined annual profit of \$3.3 billion.

The assumptions that Muslims are terrorists, that Latino/as are "illegal," and that African Americans are criminals all depend on the same thing: seeing people first as what they are instead of who they are, and presuming guilt rather than innocence. To effectively counter Islamophobia we must address these common fundamental attitudes and behaviors. We must commit to changing both the public's hearts and minds and the specific policies and politics that uphold discrimination.

In this social media-driven era we can feel pulled in too many directions, and conclude that there are too many injustices to tackle. When we understand how each of these oppressions is distinct, and yet interconnected, we can forge strong new partnerships and approach our work for justice with new eyes and greater effectiveness.

## COUNTERING FEAR: REFUGEES ARE NOT TERRORISTS

*If you have friends, family, or co-workers who oppose refugee resettlement in the United States, their opinion probably arises from a feeling of fear. While many of us prefer to avoid conversations about controversial subjects, we can play an important, constructive role in interrupting this fear.*

If you look at history, you'll find that U.S. refugees simply don't become terrorists. Throughout our history, the United States has welcomed in millions of refugees, including hundreds of thousands from the Middle East. Not one has committed an act of terrorism within the United States.

**It makes no sense for a potential terrorist to try to use the refugee resettlement process as a way to enter and attack the United States. Here's why:**

**Refugee status is the single most difficult way to come to the United States.** Processing times for refugee resettlement average 18–24 months and can take as long as three to four years. The United States already puts refugees through extensive security screenings with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and even the National Counterterrorism Center. Student and tourist visas are much easier and faster to obtain than refugee status. The lengthy and rigorous vetting that refugees have to go through before coming to the United States has proven effective in stopping potential terrorists from trying to use the refugee program to enter the country.

**Refugees don't get to choose the country where they'll go for resettlement.** Refugees who apply to be resettled through UNHCR are first screened and approved by the United Nations, and then referred to one of 28 possible countries that have agreed to receive refugees. It's possible that refugees could be sent to Italy or Korea instead of the United States. Potential terrorists could not reasonably expect to reach the United States even if they did manage to get approved for resettlement by the United Nations.

**Only the most vulnerable refugees are approved for U.S. resettlement.** Less than 1% of the global refugee population is ever referred for resettlement. Since the United States prioritizes hosting the most vulnerable refugees, we primarily accept female-headed households, families with many children, and extended families with elderly dependents. Half of Syrian refugees who have arrived in the United States so far have been children, and only about one out of every fifty is a young, single man.

**"Think Muslims Haven't Condemned Isis? Think Again."** Next time you hear someone say that Muslims aren't speaking out enough against ISIS, share this article ([beliefnet.com/columnists/commonwordcommonlord/2014/08/think-muslims-havent-condemned-isis-think-again.html](http://beliefnet.com/columnists/commonwordcommonlord/2014/08/think-muslims-havent-condemned-isis-think-again.html)). It includes an international round-up of Islamic leaders' and groups' statements against ISIS.

### LOVE DROWNS OUT THE VOICE OF FEAR IN ROANOKE, VIRGINIA

In November 2015, the city of Roanoke, Va., received international attention for a statement by our mayor that the United States should suspend the resettlement of Syrian refugees to prevent terrorism, referencing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II as a similarly necessary measure. This provocative statement emanated from the mayor, but it did not represent the local government. In fact, the city council unanimously disavowed its content.

Delegate Sam Rasoul, who represents Roanoke in the Virginia House of Delegates, asked me whether space could be made available at our church to host a rally in support of "The Real Roanoke." In response to the delegate's request, I immediately made available our main sanctuary for the rally. Only 48 hours later, we hosted an energetic event with a standing-room-only crowd of 300 citizens celebrating the diversity of our community. Local television and newspaper coverage was extensive and laudatory.

Many members of our congregation attended the rally, but the original concept and overall success of the event are to the credit of Delegate Sam Rasoul, his staff, and constituents. The event demonstrated the potential for putting into practical work each of our seven principles.

- Gary Crawford, President, Board of Directors, Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke