ISLAMOPHOBIA **VS** ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY

A guide to protecting free speech and human rights in policy and content moderation.

EX-MUSLIMS
OF NORTH AMERICA

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

- While "**Islamophobia**" is meant to flag hostility toward Muslims, it is often used as a catch-all that conflates bigotry with dissent, silencing *both* discrimination against individuals *and* legitimate criticism of Islam

- A more precise and effective term is **Anti-Muslim Bigotry**, which describes speech or conduct that threatens, harasses, or incites violence against Muslims while still upholding protections for free expression.

- Labeling all criticism of Islam as "Islamophobia" **undermines religious freedom**, which must protect not only believers of all faiths, but also those who dissent against or leave their faith.

WHY DOES THE DISTINCTION MATTER?

Ideas vs. Individuals

- *People* have rights; *ideas* do not. Conflating the two actually undermines human rights. Islam is a religion made of many different sects or denominations; Muslims are people who come from a wide array of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

- **Criticizing Islam is not hate speech**; calling for violence or discrimination against Muslims is. Challenging religious ideas is protected expression, and conflating the two chills vital dialogue while silencing journalists, dissidents, and reformers from engaging in open discussion about Islam.

- **Free speech and religious freedom are interdependent.** Individuals must be protected from discrimination for their beliefs, but ideas must remain open to scrutiny. There is no true religious freedom without the right to dissent.

Racism and Anti-Muslim Bigotry

- The term "Islamophobia" often carries an implication of racism, but **Muslims in the US are ethnically and geographically diverse**; 35% come from South Asia, 25% from the Middle East-North Africa region, 23% from other Asia-Pacific countries (like Iran and Indonesia), 9% from sub-Saharan Africa, and smaller percentages from Europe (4%) and the Americas (4%).

- **Anti-Muslim bigotry is often racialized**, targeting not only Muslims but also non-Muslims—such as Sikhs, Hindus, and ex-Muslims—who are perceived as being Muslim based on their skin color, clothing, or names. Nearly 1 in 4 Muslims eventually leave the faith[1] and may continue to face discrimination even after disassociating from Islam.

- **While it is critical to confront this bigotry**, it is equally important not to conflate racial or ethnic prejudice with criticism of religious beliefs. Anti-Muslim bigotry more accurately targets discrimination against people without suppressing the open critique of ideas.

1. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/18/how-us-muslims-compare-with-other-americans-religiously-and-demographically/

- Speech that incites violence or discriminates against Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslim, has no place in legitimate discourse and must never be tolerated. It is also vital to acknowledge that **Muslims—and Islam—are not a race**.

Human Rights and Global Democracy

- In authoritarian Muslim-majority countries, laws against **"blasphemy"** or **"defaming Islam"** are **used to persecute religious minorities, apostates, secular activists, and political dissidents**. Blasphemy laws are also often used to ensnare other Muslims including reformers and members of Islam's minority sects.

- When U.S. tech companies use "Islamophobia" to guide content moderation, they often **conflate protecting people with protecting ideas**. This blurring risks silencing legitimate criticism of Islam and inadvertently enforces censorship norms aligned with those of repressive regimes.

- Labeling all criticism of Islam as "Islamophobic" also **chills free expression, undermines democratic values**, and silences ex-Muslims and reformers who rely on open platforms for debate.

WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS AND ONLINE PLATFORMS DO?

- **Adopt precise language:** Replace the term "Islamophobia" with "anti-Muslim bigotry" in legislative or policy frameworks to uphold both civil rights and free expression.

- **Consult dissenting voices:** Engage ex-Muslims, secularist Muslims, and free speech advocates in advisory roles when considering policies impacting free speech and religious dissent

- **Protect dissent globally:** Avoid setting policies on content moderation or regulation of speech that validate blasphemy-style censorship or assist in silencing dissidents abroad.

Condemning anti-Muslim bigotry is essential, but it must not come at the cost of suppressing legitimate criticism of Islam.

Protecting individuals from violence should never mean shielding ideas from scrutiny.