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A New Era of Islamophobia: Muslim Women Fight to Find Place After Trump Fueled Hate

By Doha Madani

After Morgan Flake converted to Islam in 2007 and began wearing a hijab, it happened everywhere. A simple trip to the grocery store turned into an argument with an elderly couple. Running errands involved dirty looks and being told to go back to her country – even though Flake is white and was born in Florida.

After Donald Trump proposed a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. during this year's presidential campaign, it escalated. Incidents happened more often and confrontations became more intense.

Dirty looks became screaming matches. Rude comments became attempt to attack her physically. And in a terrifying incident this summer, a man tried to run Morgan's car off the road when she wore a hijab while driving.

"It's really, really, a sad situation when you realize you can't even walk down your own street without facing bodily harm or risk or issues to your safety," Flake said.

Morgan was wearing a black hijab on the day a man tried to run her off the road this summer. What used to be a dirty look is now a screaming match. What used to be a mean comment is now an attempt to attack her. She is one of 3.3 million Muslims in America.

Over the last two years, an ugly presidential campaign increased tension between the United States' political parties. A side effect of that campaign was an intensification of anti-minority sentiments online and in the mainstream, according to Jesse Daniels, Ph.D., sociologist and author of "Cyber Racism."

"Racism plays a persistent role in our politics in the U.S., I just think that some people haven't been paying attention," Daniels said.

Muslims already bore a brunt of these feelings after 9/11, but anti-Islam hate crimes declined from a peak of 481 in 2001 to 155 in 2002 year, according to the FBI. Donald Trump, now president-elect, brought those feelings into the mainstream, according to a special report from Georgetown University on the normalization of Islamophobia through Trump's media resources.

Hate crimes rose 6 percent in 2015, the height of the campaign, but hate crimes against Muslims rose 67 percent, based on new statistics released by the FBI. In New York City, this year's hate crimes are currently up 35 percent from 2015 as well, according to the NYPD's crime statistics. Police Commissioner James O'Neill and Mayor Bill de Blasio held a [joint press conference on December 5](#) to discuss the issue.

“Do I blame Donald Trump for using hate speech during his campaign?” de Blasio stated.

“Absolutely – he did. It’s a fact.”

In the 10 days after Trump’s win, the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded 867 hate incidents, 49 of which were anti-Muslim.

Experts are doubtful that the hatred will fade away now that the hate has a mainstream voice. The report from the Southern Poverty Law Center connects many harassers with Trump and says that the president-elect’s actions must consistently demonstrate his wish to bring the country together.

“Until president-elect Trump does these things, the hate that his campaign has unleashed is likely to continue to flourish,” the report states.

After the San Bernardino, Paris and Orlando attacks, Trump proposed registering Muslims who live in the United States and banning Muslims from other countries from entering the U.S.

Women who wear hijabs are traditionally targets for those actions because of their visibility.

Muslim women have had very different experiences but they have also found solidarity. Some have been encouraged to put the hijab on as a statement of protest. Others have taken off the hijab in favor of hats. And some are pushing through the harassment in an attempt to move forward.

Morgan Flake is one of them.

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A Summer of Hate

Without a hijab, Morgan Flake is just an average American woman in a crowd. She’s a pretty, thin and outspoken 35-year-old brunette. She’s returning to school to finish her bachelor’s degree and working part-time in a boutique in Tallahassee.

The moment she pins the headscarf on, she becomes a target.

In July 2016, Flake jumped in her car in Tallahassee, Florida and drove to work. It was her first day at her new job as a store clerk in a local Palestinian-owned boutique. She was wearing a black hijab when she pulled up next to a middle-aged, white man at a traffic light.

The man tried to get out of his car and approach her, but was stopped when another man in a truck pulled up beside her. He got back in his car, but that was only the beginning.

“I looked in the mirror and he just started making gunshot motions in the mirror, saying ‘You’re fucking dead. I’m going to kill you. You’re dead, you’re dead,’” Flake recalled.

She pressed the accelerator of her car and drove off, fortunate to be at the head of a line of cars. The man, who remains unidentified, pursued her and attempted to sideswipe Flake’s car a number of times.

He cut her off, blocked her attempts to pass and then slammed on his breaks in an effort to get her to rear end him, according to Flake. Eventually, she was able to shake him off before she or anyone else could get hurt.

“I knew darn well that if I was stupid enough to stop, that he would have tried to kill me,” Flake said. “He was already trying to kill me. He was trying to run me off the road.”

She remembered the man’s specialized plate. It was for disabled veterans.

Flake reported the incident to the local police, but when she opened a case with the advocacy group CAIR, Council on American-Islamic Relations, she found that there was no police report. The officer had filed an incident report instead of an official police report. It seemed to her that there was no intention to follow through with an investigation.

“They closed the case three minutes after they opened it,” Flake said.

The incident occurred several weeks after Omar Mateen, an Afghan American, killed 49 people in a mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub. In his speech addressing the shooting, Trump pushed once again for ban on Islam.

“Remember this, radical Islam is anti-women, anti-gay and anti-American,” Trump declared.

Comments such as that are what inspired Wahiba Abu-Ras, Ph.D., a social work professor from Adelphi University, to conduct a study on how Islamophobia negatively affects Muslims and their communities. Her teenage children, who watch the news with her and follow the campaign, reacted very strongly to comments by Trump.

“I was looking at their faces and they were really upset,” Abu-Ras said. “They said, ‘this man is really stupid. He doesn’t understand that we are human beings.’”

In her initial study, 790 participants were asked about the impact on Islamophobia on their families and communities. Of those participating, 82 percent felt some to extreme negative impact on their families and 87 percent felt the same impact on their communities.

“I’m not really worried about Trump, himself,” Abu-Ras said. “I’m worried about the 35 percent of the American people who represent Trump’s ideas.”

It was those worries that prompted Flake to remove her hijab on a weekend trip to Fort Pierce, Florida after the Orlando shooting. She and her sister were born in Fort Pierce, just like shooter Omar Mateen.

“Every time something happens, in Paris or Florida, the first thing we think is ‘I hope he is not a Muslim,’” Abu-Ras said. “And we react. We feel traumatized.”

Flake and her sister, Carlyn, were visiting their hometown to attend a funeral. Anticipating the worst, Flake took off her hijab out of fear for her sister’s safety.

“I think she made a tough decision that ultimately was the right one for her,” Carlyn said. “I would have supported her either way, but I think that we would have attracted a lot more negative attention if she had been in hijab. We were in a pretty conservative area.”

Flake encountered a lot of Trump supporters that summer, which typically meant arguments would follow. The more she fought with them, the more she realized wearing the hijab was more of a protest than an act of religious worship.

“I’m not doing this for Allah, I’m doing this to piss people off,” Flake said. “And I can’t do that to the hijab.”

She stopped wearing the hijab in August of 2016.

But after Election day, after seeing the stories of her Muslim sisters being attacked, she declared that she would put it back on, protest or not.

From Fearing Islam to Embracing It

Morgan Flake was only 20 years old on the morning the twin towers fell. By all reasonable standards she was just an ordinary American girl growing up at the turn of the century. She was a working college student, carried a Nokia phone, and she had left the Presbyterian church her mother raised her in.

In her town, no one locked their doors. That changed pretty quickly.

Unlike most, Flake can empathize with the fear expressed by those who distrust Muslims. After 9/11, she admits to feeding into the Islamophobia that encased the country.

“I had the same opinion as everybody else only because I watched what was on the news,” she said. “I didn’t know any Muslims, I didn’t ask any Muslims, I was too afraid.”

It was hijabs that sparked her to learn more about Islam, because she was convinced the women who wore them were brainwashed into their own oppression.

Google was only a few years old and internet sources weren’t nearly as vast as they are today. So she set out to dig deeper and argue against the hijab. She read history books and started talking to more and more Muslims. She says she has never been happier to be proven wrong.

“This wasn’t something I came to immediately or quickly, this was like, it took several years for me to get to where I am now,” Flake said.

It took Flake years to feel secure wearing a hijab, and putting it on 2007 for the first time was a culture shock. She had become a visible target for harassment.

“It was the first time I had that I had really ever experienced societal abuse. At that time, I didn’t know how to take it,” she said.

But even Flake, who can intimately understand the perspectives of anti-Muslim beliefs after 9/11, feels that the 2016 election has dramatically shifted the dynamics of Islamophobia and racism. She sees it in her daily interactions, mainly with Trump supporters.

“Islamophobia is ten times worse because of what Trump has done,” Flake said. “His views on women, his views on minorities, his views on the LGBT communities. It’s not just Islam. It’s not just Muslims. It’s all of it. And it’s disgusting.”

Flake’s family is accepting of her conversion to Islam, despite their own religious beliefs. Her mother is a devout Christian, her father is agnostic, and her sister identifies as an atheist. But even though they accept her and the hijab, that doesn’t eliminate the fear.

Flake’s mother, Susan Boyle, just wants to be there for her daughter to talk to, no matter how hard it is to hear.

“It was a little difficult for me, but only as I worry for her safety and how others may view her,” Boyle said. “I don’t want any harm to come to her for her choices.”

The Trump campaign was unique in bringing the “alt-right” movement into the mainstream, something sociologist Jesse Daniels, Ph.D., calls re-branded white supremacy. Daniels is a professor at Hunter College and has been researching white supremacy for 25 years and had published two books, “White Lies” and “Cyber Racism.” She’s argued for years that white supremacy is actually closer to the mainstream than most people believe.

“But this is the first time we’ve had a presidential candidate, and now a President-Elect, who has so warmly embraced a white supremacist,” Daniels said.

The “alt-right” is considered to be a fringe conservative group that has thrived through the use of social media and the internet. And this movement has been using Trump from the beginning to get their messages across to the nation.

“Part of what they did, that was kind of an evil genius, was that they goaded Donald Trump into re-tweeting them,” Daniels said.

“And so he, through the campaign, became aligned with white supremacist by re-tweeting them on social media.”

Although the group isn’t primarily anti-Islam, there are many prominent alt-right figures who have made bigoted comments about Muslims and who have been appointed into Trump’s administration.

Michael Flynn, Trump’s choice for national security advisor, called Islam [“a vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised.”](#) Trump’s appointments of people with controversial views, such as Flynn, are a signal to many with supremacist beliefs that the president has their interests at heart, according to Daniels.

In the 10 days after Trump’s win, the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded 867 hate incidents, 49 of which were specifically anti-Muslim. The majority of attacks were anti-immigrant sentiments, which also applies to Muslims.

Flake, for instance, puts on her hijab and those around her seem to assume that she isn’t an American, despite the fact that she was born and raised in Florida.

“My favorite is, ‘why don’t you go back to where you came from?’ Well give me \$200 so I can make it back to South Florida and I’ll go,” Flake said.

The dangerous aspect of these incidents is that many of the perpetrators don’t see themselves as white supremacists or racists, Daniels says. Mainstreaming and normalizing these controversial figures becomes a signal that justifies underlying or latent beliefs in the loss of America’s “whiteness.”

“It’s certainly the case that when you have a climate, a political climate, where there is a president elect endorsing white supremacists that people,” Daniels said, “just sort of ordinary people who are not a part of any organized movement or have never been to a white supremacist sites online, are emboldened to act out in their everyday lives.”

Muslim Women Reconcile In Trump’s America

Hijabi women have permeated the mainstream in the last few years. Even the word hijabi is relatively new, used by Muslim women to normalize those who wear a headscarf to mainstream media.

But they are still at the center of harassment and violence towards Muslims. In 2016 alone a hijabi has been declared a Covergirl Brand Ambassador, New York Fashion Week held its first ever hijabi fashion show, and a young woman became the first contestant in the Miss Minnesota beauty pageant to wear a hijab.

But also in 2016, a Hijabi woman was lit on fire in Queens, New York. A young middle school girl had her hijab ripped off in Coon Rapids, Minnesota. A student at the University of Michigan was told to remove her hijab by a white male or he would set her on fire. A sophomore at San Jose State University was choked when a man grabbed her by her hijab.

Hate crimes against Muslims tend to increase after terrorism attacks, but the numbers aren’t always accurate, according to researchers. Incidents like the encounter Flake had often aren’t recorded, even after police are contacted. Muslims are also more likely to encounter job discrimination and verbal harassment than physical attack, which Abu-Ras says typically go unreported.

The research Abu-Ras has conducted into the reaction of Muslim communities this year shows a PTSD type reaction to Islamophobia, she says. She sees it in the heightened fear and anxiety expressed by young Muslims.

Blair Imani, 23, is an activist who converted to Islam in May 2015. She’s protested against police brutality and was arrested during demonstrations in Baton Rouge in the summer of 2016. She works as a press officer for Planned Parenthood.

She’s been afraid to wear her hijab since Election Day.

“The fear set in when I was on the subway and I realized, wow, some of these people really think this way,” Imani said. “When I realized what I had chalked up to trolls on the internet is actually a majority of America.”

Her tweet on election night, “I’m scared that today will be the last day I felt somewhat safe wearing my hijab,” was one of hundreds of Muslim-American women. She made waves when she also tweeted that she would trade in her headscarf for hats and beanies.

“In the kind of general population, I’m more apprehensive than I was in the past,” Imani said. “I don’t know how long that will last.”

Reports of aggression against Muslim flooded in after Trump’s win, mostly from hijabi women. A middle-school student in Minnesota had her hijab forcibly removed. A man yelled racial slurs to a hijabi woman and her son at a bus stop in Nashville. A San Jose State University student was attacked in a parking garage after being grabbed by her hijab.

An older man in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, followed Marwa Safa, 23, for two blocks on her lunch break from the doctor’s office she works in. The entire time he was yelling, “Trump for white America.”

“I was trying not react to it,” Safa said. “A patient of ours, who knows me, crosses the street and walks with me the two blocks.”

Safa grew up in a Muslim family in Bay Ridge and tries not to pay attention to what she calls, “the random jerk.” Safa has been wearing her hijab since adolescence and has no intention of removing it.

“I think if you want to feel safe, have someone with you rather than giving up part of you in order to accommodate their actions or to make them feel better,” Safa said. “You’re accommodating hate by doing that.”

Safa’s argument is one that many Muslim women who refuse to take their hijabs off have vocalized on social media. They refuse to allow Trump’s words to scare them. Flake, however, is a part of a group of women who want to wear the hijab as symbol of protest and solidarity.

Flake decided to put her hijab back on after Trump won because of the reports of other women wearing hijabs being victimized.

“I refuse to watch them be hurt and not share their pain,” Flake said. “I will not stand in solidarity and only sympathize. I will stand in solidarity and experience.”

Before her first time wearing a hijab years ago, Flake had never felt hated by anyone. She had never felt societal abuse until she chose to adopt the conservative dress of her religion. She didn’t know how to handle it at first. As time went on, she decided that confrontations were opportunities to change how hijabi women were viewed.

“There is nothing wrong with fighting back,” Flake said.

Flake says it’s important to push back against stereotypes and ignorance, because otherwise nothing will change. She wants to change the way Muslim women are viewed by speaking out when she is harassed. She wants Americans to know that Muslim women have a voice and that’s part of why she wears the hijab.

“It gives me an opportunity to be loud enough so that the people around me hear what is coming out of the mouth of a Muslim woman,” Flake said.

Trump reinforced this stereotype in an interview with George Stephanopoulos after being criticized by the Khan family at the Democratic National Convention.

“If you look at his wife, she was standing there,” Trump said. “She had nothing to say. She probably — maybe she wasn’t allowed to have anything to say. You tell me.”

The future is uncertain and researchers such as Daniels and Abu-Ras are unsure of whether the trend of hate Donald Trump has inspired will end anytime soon. Flake plans to keep fighting and giving a voice to Muslim women. History has shown that group hate blows over, Flake says.

Will Islamophobia end?

“I do have hope that it’s possible, but only if the current situation changes,” Flake said.