The Impact of Rising Islamophobia on Children

By Larry Marx, CEO, December 21, 2023

- Prosecutors have said that a Chicago-area landlord stabbed 6-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume 26 times until he died, and stabbed his mother, 32-year-old Hanaan Shahin, more than a dozen times because of their religion and nationality.

- Palestinian students Hisham Awartani, Kinnan Abdalhamid and Tahseen Ali Ahmad, all age 20 and sent to college in the U.S. because their parents thought it would be safer here, were shot by an assailant while celebrating their Thanksgiving break in Burlington, Vermont. One may never walk again.

Since identity is key to a child’s healthy development and well-being, The Children’s Agenda has long committed our advocacy and public statements towards antiracist policies, programs and practices, as well as affirming gender expression and sexual orientation. Given the press of current events, it’s also time for The Children’s Agenda to forthrightly address the rising tide of hate channeled as Islamophobia and antisemitism. Our organization strives to walk our talk and lead by example. The Children’s Agenda has separate but similar statements about both targets of hate. This statement is specific to Islamophobia.

The national Child Trauma Stress Network defines Islamophobia as “the unfounded fear, hatred of, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims.” Islamophobia can also target “non-Muslims, based on perceptions of nationality, racial or ethnic background.”

There has been a major surge in Islamicphobic and anti-Arab hate since the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and the subsequent war. The Council on American-Islamic Relations received 1,283 requests for help and reports of bias between October 7th and November 4th. That is a 216% increase compared to the average 29-day period in 2022. And it is important to mention the deplorable and unacceptable civilian death toll in Gaza as we write this – close to 20,000, with fully two-thirds women and children.

No aspect of a child’s identity – or any adult’s identity, for that matter – should ever be a source of distress, fear, shame, or bullying, let alone outright hate. A person’s appearance, ethnic, racial, and religious heritage and beliefs should be cause for celebration, not concealment.

For Islamic and Arab families -- in Rochester, in New York, in the United States, and around the world -- that sense of pride is increasingly eclipsed by fear. “Both Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism are out of control in ways we have not seen in almost ten years. . . . American Muslims are facing the largest wave of Islamophobic bias that we have documented since then-candidate Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban

announcement in December 2015. Political leaders, corporations, media outlets, civic organizations and others all have a role to play in ending this surge in bigotry,” CAIR Research and Advocacy Director Corey Saylor said in a statement.⁵

This is personal to many people, including The Children’s Agenda’s Board member, Dr. Sahar Elezabi, owner and founder of Empire Psychiatry and Medicine in Webster. Dr. Elezabi was touched personally by the Palestinian/Israeli conflict when her family had to deport from Port-Said, one of the Suez Canal’s Egyptian cities shelled in the 1967 war.

These are traumatic times once again for Islamic and Arab people. No parent wants to have to tell their child that there are mean people in the world who hate them just for who they are. But, of course, there is a long and painful history of Islamophobia across the ages and in nearly every country -- and children need to know. “Muslim children and adults may experience anxiety, fear, worry, confusion, and anger in anticipation of, and after hate-motivated events are committed against them or members of their community. Some may struggle to make sense of what happened and may feel hopeless and helpless that they or their loved ones will be targeted.”⁶

Ultimately, despite all the complications and many forms it may take, and despite how scary it can be for children to learn that there are people in the world who hate others simply for who they are, the ugly rise in Islamophobia worldwide is now an urgent topic parents need to discuss openly with their children – all parents, with all children. There are excellent resources out there to hold those conversations, like this fact sheet from the national Child Trauma Stress Network.

But Islamophobia – like racism – isn’t just a problem for those targeted and hurt by it. And it won’t just go away if Muslim or Arab people act differently somehow. Eliminating the policies, actions and speech that keep Islamophobia alive is primarily the responsibility of all those parents and families who are not subjected to it. Ultimately, the only way Islamophobia will finally become extinct is for generations of non-Muslim people to extinguish that flame, whenever and wherever it flares up.

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