

ANTI-IMMIGRANT BACKLASH CATCHES MUSLIMS

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Abstract: The anti-Muslim movement is a well funded and brilliantly organized phenomenon, bringing in tens of millions of dollars, producing books and research, supplying pundits and politicians with talking points, giving bigoted training to homeland security and intelligence officials on Islam, and supporting an array of self-appointed experts on Muslims and Islam.

Full Text: Growing up I was always a country girl at heart. No one could tell me, despite all appearances to the contrary, that I wasn't an all-American gal. When the Oak Ridge Boys sang "My Baby is American Made," I was pretty sure they were talking about me. It wasn't until high school that I realized that the sexy long legs they crooned about (that came without a foreign name) were decidedly not mine. Over time this point was reinforced in many ways: When I started representing clients in Immigration Court and was always asked "where is your attorney?" it was clear I did not look like an American. And, then, after 9/11, my faith became reason enough to suspect my patriotism. The past 10 years have, for Muslims and immigrants, brought together a multitude of intersecting challenges. The overlap of the post 9/11 backlash against Muslims and the robust anti-immigrant movement is not readily apparent. Two events this month at the Hartford Library, however, will examine these connected issues -- the experiences of American Muslim immigrants, and U.S. immigration policies that have become increasingly rigid and troubling from a civil liberties perspective. Muslim immigrants have experienced a double whammy for the past decade. The anti-Muslim movement in the U.S. is well documented by the reports "Fear, Inc.," published by the Center for American Progress, and "Manufacturing the Muslim Menace," published by Political Research Associates. The anti-Muslim movement is a well funded and brilliantly organized phenomenon, bringing in tens of millions of dollars, producing books and research, supplying pundits and politicians with talking points, giving bigoted training to homeland security and intelligence officials on Islam, and supporting an array of self-appointed experts on Muslims and Islam. The anti-immigrant movement is no less organized. The Southern Poverty Law Center has documented the extreme rise in anti-immigrant, or "nativism," movements since the 1990s. Currently, almost a dozen organizations and institutions focus their time and energy on anti-immigrant agendas, and have successfully made immigration reform and enforcement a litmus test for politicians. It comes as little surprise that the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant movements often stem from the same groups or individuals. The NAACP released a report detailing the tea party's ties to anti-immigrant, Islamophobic and even anti-Semitic agendas. Groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Center for Immigration Studies and The Social Contract Press have openly anti-immigrant and Islamophobic stances. In Europe we see a heightened version of this nexus, brought to a terrifying head by Anders Brievik, the Norwegian mass murderer inspired by well-known anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant voices from the United States such as Pamela Geller and Frank Gaffney. In the U.S., movements to marginalize Muslims and immigrants have resulted in very real legal and public policy shifts. From tough anti-immigrant state laws to a rash of anti-sharia legislation across the nation, and finally to laws such as the National Defense Authorization Act and programs like Secure Communities, Muslims and immigrants are experiencing unparalleled challenges to their civil liberties. The economic recession has added to the fear and insecurity of Americans toward immigrants and perceived outsiders, resulting in great public support for tougher policies. After 9/11, as a Muslim and immigrant, I have had to wrestle deeply with my sense of identity and belonging. Despite being told in many different ways that perhaps I am not truly an American, I finally came to the conclusion that I absolutely am. My parents chose this nation as their own for themselves and their children, and I have chosen it for myself and my daughters. We have no where else to call home but the United States.

Despite the rhetoric from anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant groups, after all these years I finally realized that I am truly, as the Oak Ridge Boys said, "American Made." Rabia Chaudry is an attorney, president of the Safe Nation Collaborative (www.safenationcollaborative.com), and an associate fellow of the Truman National Security Project. She will join two discussions, "Secure Communities" and "The Immigrant Muslim Experience" at the Hartford Public Library on May 16 and May 23 at 6 p.m.

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