Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

American Islamophobia with Nazita Lajevardi

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Andy Luttrell:
Earlier this year I finally watched the Hulu show Ramy. The show's creator, Ramy Yousef, won a Golden Globe award this year for the show. It's set in northern New Jersey and follows the life of a young Muslim guy whose parent's immigrated to the U.S. from Egypt. In an interview for Vulture, Yousef said: "A lot of immigrant stories on TV and film, I feel like I'm watching someone upgrade into a white lifestyle. And this show is a wrestling match of wanting to be in both."

An episode that's stuck with me shows how Ramy's family reacted in the aftermath of September 11th. A young Ramy logs into a chat room to see people quickly pinning it all on Muslims in general. His dad immediately hangs an American flag outside their home. And the next morning on the walk to school, he faces this conversation with his friends…

Boy 1
Hey, man. Can I ask you something?

Ramy
Yeah. What's up?

Boy 1
Are you a terrorist?

Ramy
What?

Boy 1
You know, like, are you a…

Boy 2
He means, like, is your family terrorists? Like, are you Arabic and stuff?

Boy 3
We were just wondering because, you know, you're from the Middle East and everything, so we thought maybe you guys were terrorists.

Ramy
Guys, I'm from Egypt. That's not even the Middle East. Egypt's in Africa! If anything, I'm Black.

Andy Luttrell:
As you'll hear in today's interview, this grappling with one's Muslim identity at this time was not uncommon. The country was thrust into a panic, quickly attentive to a religious identity that many may not have ever paid attention to before.

As a young Christian kid in the Midwest, it was certainly the first time I had heard of Islam. Or even the notion of terrorism. So without giving it a second thought, it could have seemed obvious that those two things went together.

But what do things look like now? How does the American public think about Muslims in the U.S.? What are the roadblocks keeping Muslims from politically representing their communities? And is there hope for tolerance around the corner?

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And this week I have a lovely conversation with Nazita Lajevardi. She's a political scientist and attorney at Michigan State University. She studies issues related to public opinion and political behavior through the lens of religious and racial identity.

In 2020, she published the book Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia. The book is an extension of her research on public opinion about Muslims in the United States, discrimination faced by Muslim Americans in politics, and the experience of facing these biases. In our conversation, we talk about all these questions and what makes Muslim American identity so tricky to pin down. Her work has had a real influence on how I think about these issues, and I'm excited to share our conversation. So let's get right to it!

Andy Luttrell:
So, before we get into what the book is about and other stuff that you do, one thing I'm very curious about is the fact that you are a JD PhD, and I'm curious because my wife is a JD and I'm a PhD, and you have managed to do both of what we've done as one person. So, I'm mostly curious why that would happen to a person, and also what that has meant for how you think about the problems that you study.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah, so I was one of those undergraduate students, and I don't know how many of them there are who make it into academia, but who… I faced a lot of financial barriers going to undergraduate school, and so I attended three different schools in four years, and I transferred to the UC system from community college and my only goal was to graduate as soon as possible without debt, and then I went to law school. So, that was a good idea. But you know, I was graduating in the middle of the recession, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and it was really becoming clear that to help my family, I needed a job that was going to support them, and they really thought that becoming a lawyer was the clearest way to that goal. And I hadn't really seen or found anything that made me question that. I hadn't really felt a passion for anything. I had

always loved politics. I was a political science major. I was a French major. But I never… I didn't know that you could study these questions. I didn't know that you could become a professor. I didn't know.

I just… I didn't know any of this. You know, we were dealing with questions of like are we gonna be homeless, and then are we… You know what I mean? So, it just like… I didn't have the role modeling, I think. And then I'm sitting there at UCLA in my last year, and I've already taken the LSAT and applied to law school, and here I am taking classes with people studying race, and ethnicity, and in Africa, and France, and in the U.S., in L.A., about populations that I belong to, and I was like, "Whoa! I could be like them!" And my parents were like, "It's too late. It's too late. We do not need you hanging around California…"

Anyways, so I ended up in law school, and that was rough. I really tell my students, like do not go to law school because you don't know what else to do. I'm really one of those people who did that and I was very fortunate. I found that I enjoyed criminal law and I ended up working in criminal law and specializing in it, and I actually accepted an offer as an ADA in Sacramento when I was… My 3L year. But you know, nonetheless, I took the GRE, and I found a way to apply to graduate school, and kind of just took a risk, and-

Andy Luttrell:
So, you did them sequentially, not at the same… I know, because sometimes they're like… There are different versions of this plan where people do them somehow at the same time.

Nazita Lajevardi:
It would be the wiser thing to do. It would have made more sense. And no. No, no, no, no. I really did this poorly. But I think that my experience in law school has really shaped the questions that I ask, and I think it's been very informative. I think it's been very helpful. So, I build arguments now thinking about the totality of the circumstances. I think about evidentiary burdens. I think about like opening arguments for me are like an introduction to a paper. I think about what it takes to win a case and what it takes to overwhelm reviewers with an argument. And so, I think those types of skills never really go away.

And moreover, I think that law is foundational to politics, and you don't have especially race in America without the law, and I think that at least in the way that I've written papers, and I've thought about these stigmatized populations, particularly Muslims, they are not marginalized without shifts in policy that have empowered law enforcement, for instance. And so, I think it's connected. I hope it's connected. Otherwise, it's a bigger waste of time and money than I thought. But yeah, I was definitely one of those students who couldn't figure it out. But you know, got it in the end, I hope.

And you know, life is… It's no good if it's stagnant.

Andy Luttrell:
There's a weird… You know, one of those things where it's a little trite to say, but it all works out, or this is the always the way it was supposed to be. I had, so my first year of undergrad, I went to

an art school and I was like, “This is what I want to do. I want to go to art school and all these things.” And then quickly realized like, “Ah, no. That’s not what I want to be.”

Nazita Lajevardi:
I don’t want to go to art school.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, but I would never get rid of that because it set me up so much for other stuff, right? To take a sort of creative spin on what is otherwise the sort of very clear path of academic research, to be like, “Well, how do we talk about it? How do we share it? And can we do it in creative ways?” And so, in the same way I go, “Yeah. I sort of went thinking I knew what was the best for me, and clearly that wasn’t the case, but I had to do that.” If I didn’t do that, I wouldn’t know what I wanted to do.

Nazita Lajevardi:
It makes you relatable, like you didn’t do it perfect. I think that there’s a lot of people who are like, “I was a first year, I was a freshman, and I started doing research with this famous professor at that famous school, and now I’m a second year PhD student with a CV that looks like a tenured faculty member from 10 years ago.” And like congratulations, good job, you know? I didn’t do that. And it’s fine, so it’s fine.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. It is amazing to see sometimes those people who are applying to grad school now and you go, “Holy…” I had no concept, but somehow, they knew from day one like, “Oh, here’s the plan to be a professor in 10 years.” And you go, “Oh, God.”

Nazita Lajevardi:
They had role models, you know? This is all down to role modeling. Which is like great, I’m really glad somebody mentored you through that, but you know, I think most of us kind of were figuring it out. Maybe not most of us, but at least some of us were… We had to figure it out. And I think that makes us more… I don’t know. Maybe just okay to roll with the punches. Rejection kind of feels like the name of the game.

Andy Luttrell:
Right.

Nazita Lajevardi:
You know what I mean? It hurts. It stings of course. But I don’t expect it to all work out. I’m kind of like surprised when it does and still kind of like, “Oh, wow! That’s nice.” I kind of expect there to be some mishaps and I think it’s important to learn how to deal with that kind of thing.

Andy Luttrell:
Totally. So, if we jump into the work that you’ve done…

Nazita Lajevardi:
Sure.

Andy Luttrell:
… in the broad domain, it's interesting. One thing I want to say is the cover of the book is beautiful.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Thank you.

Andy Luttrell:
It's just so attention grabbing and maybe that was part of why I just was like, "Well, yeah. Now I have to read this thing." Where did that… Do you have any… This is sort of tangential to what the work is, but I'm so curious.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Okay, so when I approached publishers about the book, I asked them if it would be okay if I helped to design the cover, and this is kind of atypical for university presses that are just trying to publish in a specific area. But when they asked me to explain why, I told them that I wanted this book to be different, and to show on its cover what the argument of the book is, and that it was important for me to make it as simple as possible but as clear as possible, and that I don't think the title is gonna do that, that I don't think an abstract is gonna do that, that it needs to be on the cover and it needs to reflect everything… It needs to reflect the climate.

And so, from the color of the book, from that pink, from that salmon color, to her sunglasses, to her very loose head scarf with her hair falling out, this to me was the modern Muslim woman in her twenties and thirties, who is from here, who is growing up witnessing and observing this hostility and this discrimination. And her unhappy lips, and her frown, and her… It just all is what it feels like to take in this world where you think you're at home, you have the cool sunglasses, you have the salmon colored… You're in, but you're not in, you know? And you're observing it and you're reacting in a way that makes you aware that this is uncomfortable. And I wanted it all to show.

And so, if you ever open the book and you look at the first page, there is another picture, and that was supposed to be the cover of the book. And it was really between the two and in the end, I went with this woman because I think she makes a statement I think in political science, but also, I think just to the average reader, which is like, "If you want to know what this book is about, it's about what it feels like." You know, at the very end, the last chapter, it's like what it feels like to live in this world. That's what it feels like.

And yeah, the second page I think also does it a little bit more directly, and maybe there's too much going on, which is why we sort of settled on the first one.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. Her expression is telling, right? And it sort of harkens to the points that you make about where other marginalized groups can get sort of fired up and called to action. There's this tendency among Muslims in the U.S. where facing this kind of bias and discrimination leads to sort of a retreat, right? And sort of like a, "Well, let's back away from this." So, yeah, it communicates all of that in such a simple way, so I'm glad there is a story, and you weren't just like-

Nazita Lajevardi:
There is a story.

Andy Luttrell:
… I don't know, someone drew a picture.

Nazita Lajevardi:
No, no, no. And it was very deliberate. It was in consultation with one of my really good friends who is an artist and was also writing a book about Muslims during this period of time, and the art was commissioned by a Muslim artist from Indonesia, actually, who works with her very closely. And so, the whole thing was just like a very creative effort, and so for someone like you, who's gone to art school, maybe that's cool. For me, it was the first time I've ever done anything like that.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. I mean, to your point, I've never said this about any other academic book cover before, that I noticed it and really appreciated and spent some time appreciating it. And it makes sense. I'm not surprised that that is not the priority, but I'm happy to see that there is at least, and maybe we'll see that this moves the needle a little bit, that that becomes a little bit more deliberate part of the argument.

Nazita Lajevardi:
I hope so. You know, I've seen it in other fields, like certainly in media studies. I've seen it on their book covers, and so that's been an inspiration to me, and I also… You know, I was told by some people that if your book looks too punchy, and it's too pink, and it's too this, that it won't be taken seriously, and that almost pushed me to make it even more obvious and more different, because… Okay, fine. Judge it by its cover, you know? Go ahead. Have a closer look.

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah. It's intriguing enough that you open it. So, one of the things, I think the thing that really most… As someone who really hasn't spent a ton of time thinking about these particular… You know, one of the classes I teach most often is stereotypes and prejudice. But the unique dilemma of Muslim identity is not one that I had grappled with. And that, to me, was the real light bulb moment, where you sort of try to disentangle like what's the primary identity that people are having a problem with? Is it a religious identity? Is it a race identity? Is it a geopolitical identity? So, could you talk a little bit about like what Muslim American means to people in the world, and how that defines the problem, and how it challenges the research on trying to understand what's going on?

Nazita Lajevardi:
Sure. Yeah. You've really hit the nail on the head right there. I think that… So, I'm gonna talk about people in the United States because I think people in the world is a bit broader, and I'll explain why. So, Muslims, predominantly from the Middle East if we're gonna sort of narrow our range of who we're talking about in South Asia, their immigration histories to the United States and to Europe and other Western democracies really differ from one another. The different laws

and quotas that have existed that have been able to bring different subsets of Muslim populations, Muslim immigrant populations to the United States, they differ greatly.

Often in Europe, they're conditioned by refugee laws, by colonial histories, and so the populations that you see in Europe and even amongst the different European countries, they really differ from what we see in the United States. And so, I always… Whenever I'm presenting this work in Europe, I'm always telling people, "You know, don't think about the Muslims that you know in your country. Let me give you a primer on the immigration histories and what the Muslim population looks like in the United States, because it's very different. It's very, very different."

And so, just to kind of paint a picture, in 2017 the Pew Research Center did a survey of Muslims in America, and it's a telephone survey that they do every few years, to try to gauge where the population is, but also to kind of give us an estimate of how many there are in the United States. Because the census doesn't collect data on religion and because people from the Middle East and North Africa are classified under the white category, the white/Caucasian category, white/non-Hispanic. And so, any sort of differences that you may want to highlight, and you may want to use in order to try to estimate that population size are going to be marred with the exclusion of MENA category and also with no data collection on religion.

And so, what we've learned from Pew is that today, 20% of American Muslims are Black and the vast majority of that Black population is native born. And this should not be a surprise, as the first Muslims in the United States were actually forcibly enslaved people. About 30% of enslaved people who were forcibly brought to the United States were Muslim and they were forced to actually convert to Christianity. And remnants of the Muslim identity actually still exist. Off the coast of Georgia, there's this really interesting dance that's akin to like a Sufi ritual called the ring shout that took place in the South that has actually been recorded and I only ever learned about by visiting the National African American History Museum that opened up in D.C. And you know, when I looked it up, there it was. There it was. It was really remarkable to see.

And so, people often don't realize that, and so what does it mean that the Black Muslim population in your country is not from a country that you colonized, but from forcibly enslaved people who were brought here, who you've struggled with in terms of racial and civil liberties, as well? So, that's one population.

Currently, 7% of the U.S. Muslim population is Hispanic, and so you're seeing among the Muslim population, so not only is it growing at incredibly fast rates in the United States, the fastest growing subgroup is among Latinos. Latinx people. So, very interesting to understand that racial diversity, as well. And then finally, the vast majority of Muslims in America were born abroad. 58% were born in another country. But of that 58%, over 80% have U.S. citizenship. And so, this kind of complicates our narrative, right? Who is this group? What are we thinking about and how do they relate to other Muslims in other… Well, you can't compare them. You really can't. Coming to the United States is already hard enough for any immigrant population. And on top of that, you have so much diversity from where people are coming from, and you're getting a selection effect where oftentimes the Muslim population that you're getting, that are coming from abroad, are highly, highly selective, and oftentimes they mirror if not surpass the white population on socioeconomic demographics.

So, it's complicated. It's complicated who these people are. Now, I've told you who they are, but who the ordinary, average American thinks they are is very different. So, in the minds of the average American, it's hard to paint a linear picture, because the tropes about Muslims have evolved over time and the concern about Muslims has evolved over time. And I think it's important to understand that events matter and that context matters, and oftentimes in political science that's not a satisfactory answer, and people just kind of want to hear about a game between… They want to hear about a game between two entities where the positions of the two groups are fixed, and they're not.

So, if you think about the '80s, or rather the '70s and '80s, that's the time where Muslims became salient to Americans through what was happening more by Muslim majority countries. So, you can think about the Iran hostage crisis. You could think about what was going on in Lebanon. You could think about the Iran-Iraq War. Countries were becoming salient, Muslim countries were becoming salient, and so their populations here in the United States were becoming salient, and so it was much more tied to interests of foreign policy, of foreign wars that were being fought, and so the Muslim in the American imaginary was really a Middle Eastern in the American imaginary, and it was really targeted in national origin. It was Iranians in the American image, it was Lebanese in the American, it was Iraqis. It was about Yemen. You know, and so it wasn't necessarily about Muslim, and so this Orientalist picture that we've had of this barbaric, violent, backwards, misogynistic Muslim, it took time to develop that trope, but it was really rooted in the Middle East.

As obviously 9/11 hit, and we entered into these wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the picture evolved where now you have images and thoughts of terrorists being pushed into the American imaginary. A terrorist. What is a terrorist? What is evil? What is bad? What is the axis of evil? What does that mean? You know, I had to hear as a teenager, as somebody in high school, I think it was in 2002 during the State of the Union speech where George Bush said on national television that Iran belonged to the axis of evil. And I had to reconcile, what does that mean, evil? You know, and when you're a teenager, and you're a young girl, and you hear those words, you internalize that. Am I evil? Did I come from a place that's evil? What does that mean? How does that hurt? What? Terrorist? Evil? Suicide? Bomber? These are words that are now being associated with a population that I belong to. Yeah, it-

Andy Luttrell:
Was it sort of overnight? My impression is that it sort of was a switch that flipped in terms of where the stereotype-

Nazita Lajevardi:
No. No, it wasn't. It built time. So, these are all about others. And it took time before we looked inward and there were events on U.S. soil. We're now, especially through these wars… It wasn't overnight. It took time for these tropes to develop. But you know, throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s, you start seeing words like loyal, patriot, violent, emerge. These stereotypes. And these are what I think people think of when they think of Muslim. They think somebody who's violent. They think somebody who's typically a darker, bearded man. Somebody who's backwards. Somebody who's different. Somebody who's disloyal. And I think it reverberates, right? Even as I say in the book, Hillary Clinton, in presidential debates, she said, "Muslim Americans…" When

she rose to their defense, she said, "They are America's eyes and ears," like our only utility is in surveillance, because naturally we are disloyal, and unpatriotic, and if only we could surveil each other, we could serve our country.

It just… It really I think shows the profound distrust that people have in the U.S. Muslim population, and I would say… Sorry for the really long-winded answer, the trope that exists today I think is rooted in an image that people have about a Muslim here at home, and it's not taking into account the vast diversity of the population, but it's about somebody who is dangerous. It's about typically a male. And it's typically someone who looks darker, with a more olive-skinned phenotype, who's bearded, and who cannot be trusted. And you see this in surveys, too, like the ANES asks stereotypes, and you see when you compare different groups and Muslims it pops, and it's… Yeah. I would say that's where we've landed so far. It can change.

Andy Luttrell:
I had wondered what it is that makes these stereotypes such potent triggers to prejudice and discrimination, and it reminds me of the work in psychology on how moral perceptions are at the heart of how we evaluate other people, and these are all stereotypes that touch this moral nerve, right? They're all about can I trust this person, will they hurt me, are they loyal, are they an affront to my dedication to this country, and so what I wonder is does that help explain why these have become as pervasive as they have? Whereas other biases may have less potency because they don't pinch the moral nerve quite so hard.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah. I think at the root of all this is a security concern. And if you think about just very basic human needs, we have a human need to feel secure. And I think that when you reduce a population to… You're just so reductive about it to they are an affront, and they are going to… They are a terrorist. They are other. They're an enemy combatant, right? You've now taken away any humanistic quality and you've made it such that this other group is going to challenge your security and your very livelihood, and the very existence of your population and your country, and that you've created… And so, I'm not sure if that theory would cover a security concern, but to me, this is all rooted in a zero sum, "As long as they exist, we can't exist." Because they want to get rid of us and they want to harm us.

And that's I think a very irresponsible description that's been painted by policymakers, by the media. I think they are very complicit in this. When you have a 20-second sound bite and a few hundred characters to tell a story, you can be incredibly reductive, and I think they are. I really think they are. And they've harmed this community. Because they've equated the two challenging people's feelings of safety.

Andy Luttrell:
The other interesting thing is historically you sort of trace racialization of this group in this country, and how this was a group that had been considered white on census data, and in other sort of forms, so maybe you could speak a little bit about what that means, and then what that trajectory then took.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah. So, I think like many other populations, non-Black Muslim groups have long fought for privileges of whiteness and recognition of whiteness, and why is that, right? Voting rights extended to free white persons. And this was something that obviously was not being afforded to African Americans, but other groups long fought in racial prerequisite cases for recognition of whiteness. It allowed them to own property. It allowed them to build wealth. It allowed them to vote. It allowed them to do a number… Just mobility in the United States was about a determination of your whiteness.

And so, groups constantly were arguing their whiteness. You see this among Latinx populations, Asian populations, Middle Eastern, South Asian, I mean, there's just so many… I think there's 52 racial prerequisite cases that were argued in the courts, in circuit courts, two in the Supreme Court, where different groups were arguing and trying to get this recognition, and Middle Easterners who were Muslim were no different. They did so as well. And so, you see this victory almost where they were afforded privileges of whiteness somewhat ironically, especially with this case in 1915 called Dow vs the United States, where a Syrian man was recognized as white, and that sort of eventually allowed them to be recognized as white.
But as numerous scholars, like Neda Maghbouleh or John Tehranian have already argued, there are limits to whiteness. There was a Faustian pact with whiteness. In fact, they were not white, and the second that these newer, larger immigrant populations came, so if these cases are being won in 1915 and then you have a surge of immigrants coming in in 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, the 2000s, well, the everyday lived experiences of these groups, particularly in a post-9/11 world, are not those that are akin to whiteness. And in fact, you might want to highlight that these groups are not white, and that they're having experiences that are not akin to white Americans, and they can't do so.

And so, in some ways it privileged their predecessors, but it's really harmed the population. And so, it's a very nuanced understanding of what it means to be white, because to this day, we don't have a MENA category on our census, and those who would identify as Middle Eastern/North African do not have the possibility of doing so. This extends to education. This extends to employment. This extends to representation. This extends to federal dollars. This extends… I mean, you can imagine how informative it would be to know about the roots of this population. And unfortunately, we just don't. Any effort that we had at having a Middle Eastern/North African category, which was supposed to be on the 2020 census, were unfortunately taken away.

Andy Luttrell:
You could think that the way to help address these things or move forward is to get more representation in leadership and political positions, and in some ways a lot of the stuff that you've done looks at why that hopeful path forward is still riddled with challenges, right? In terms of how do people evaluate political candidates, how do people try to enter the political system, how do we use media to talk about these groups? So, I had a question about the candidate evaluation studies in particular. So, you do these cool studies where you take a kind of classic experimental approach, manipulating the identity of an apparent candidate and seeing people would be willing to vote for them, and one of the things I didn't quite follow was that there was this kind of competing partisan difference where Muslim candidates seemed to be more welcome in Republican races, but less welcome by Republicans themselves.

So, I couldn't quite parse those two or sort of reconcile those two things.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah. Okay, so I think you're mixing two different studies, and I want to clarify if I can. So, the candidate evaluation studies find that… and I think similar to other studies in political science, at least, that Muslims who run as Republicans fare better than Muslims who run as Democrats. And you know, there's a lot of scholarship here, especially about Latinx candidates, that Latinx candidates who run as Republicans are seen as more electable, that people are more likely to vote for them, and I think that what happens is that there is something about social norms that voters feel that minority candidates who run as conservatives are more willing to offer more honest criticism of their groups, and therefore are an asset to that party because they show that the party is not bigoted and they show that, "Look, there is a member of this group that's willing to offer honest criticism."

And so, I think there's a number of things that happen there that drive the willingness to vote for minority candidates who come from the Republican Party. And another scholarship, or another study in the book, I find that when Muslims write their Republican legislators, they're often ignored. And this is important because… and I think it's important to try to take those two pieces of evidence together, which is that, you know, Republicans are not going to be responsive to Muslim constituents. This is not something that they're going to do at a similar rate as their white constituents, as we see in the studies, but Democrats are also not serving their Muslim constituents very well, either. And so, I think on the one hand, the first study is about elites and the second is about everyday voters, and so… I think when I put those two things together, it tells me that if you can code switch, and you can kind of move away from being rooted in your identity, and you want to run for office, you have a better shot at it running as a Republican. But how much you can offer representation to minority populations, particularly Muslim populations, is going to be limited if you're running for that party.

And then on the flip side, as an everyday voter, you're probably going to be better served by Democrats, but not much. And that's really a tragedy, I think, so I think the solution to all this is not simple. It would be great to have descriptive representation and I think we're very lucky to see some strides in that space, but we're not quite there yet.

Andy Luttrell:
So, that poses challenges. The media stuff also shows negative media are super effective. Positive media, less so. So, you know, we're left with this question of like… Well, okay. The problem is clear. You've painted a picture of it. And so, either based on the data or based on just sort of where do we go next in terms of what do we try, what are the roads forward that you see? Is there any optimism for strategies, or changes, or ways of talking with people that can sort of chip away at this misperception of what Muslim identity is and also the stereotypes and prejudices that come along with it?

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah, so I think representation matters. And not just political representation. So, representation in Hollywood. Representation in the news media that's I think more full and captures… I don't want

to say more fair, but I want to say more full and less reductive I think matters. I think the way that politicians speak about the group matters and the way that they speak to the community matters. But you can't control these organizations, so what can you do as a group? As a group, you can run. You can run for office. You can run for local office. You can do what our leaders, like Muslim leaders are doing right now, which is be a part of the progressive coalition. Join in. Be seen. Be heard. That's something you can do.

It's really crazy, but you can make a difference on social media. I know so many folks who have started social media pages and who have 80,000 followers to half a million followers, and who are advertising essentially what it means to be a Muslim in America. What does it mean to be a queer Muslim in America? What does it mean to be a Black Muslim in America? What does… I think highlighting that type of visibility, highlighting our intersections, highlighting that we hold multiple identities I think is important, and I think people are doing it really well. And I guess the final thing is that I will say that conditions have changed on the ground. The Trump Administration and the Trump years changed outcomes for Muslims. And they changed obviously outcomes for a lot of groups, but in this last year, we saw Muslims decline in salience, and we saw African Americans and especially Asian Americans rise in salience, and I think that's important too, right?

You may not expect them to always be salient, and I think in some ways it's a bit of a breather, and I wonder myself just as an empirical question, how has that decline in salience shifted attitudes and the importance of anti-Muslim attitudes in determining hostile policy positions? So, I think these are open questions, but yeah, we'll see what happens next.

Andy Luttrell:
We'll see. And so, for you, just in terms of work that you're doing, what's on the horizon either in this space or outside of it? I know you've sort of… This is a piece of the scholarship that you do, and so I wanted to give you an opportunity just to sort of give folks an entry point into the other kind of stuff that you work on.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah. I'm looking at alt right speech right now, trying to understand how social media discussion of Muslims and Jews has translated into or mirrors sort of offline hate crimes towards Muslims and Jews. So, right now I'm working with a couple colleagues and trying to understand that link, and we're seeing that there's actually a target substitution. That once these extremist groups are activated online, they don't need much encouragement, and they can switch in their targets. So, Unite the Right is a really important and I think overlooked rally where we see a shift from a focus on Muslims to a focus on Jews among these populations. And then similarly, we see a decline in targets of… a decline in hate crimes that target Muslims and an increase in anti-Semitic hate crimes.

And so, trying to understand how that happens and what the processes are is sort of next on my horizon, and yeah, I'm actually… I just bought an intro to social psychology book and I'm teaching myself a little bit.

Andy Luttrell:
Sure.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Yeah, just trying to educate myself a little bit more on prejudice, so really this is an amazing career path insofar as we can always learn, so that's kind of what's next for me.

Andy Luttrell:
That's funny. You're dipping your toe in social psych. I'm dipping my toe in political science. That's just how it works. That's the beauty of it.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Pandemic times, you know?

Andy Luttrell:
Yeah, right. Read up on whatever you want.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Crisis of identity.

Andy Luttrell:
Well, I appreciate you taking the time to talk about this, and it was great to hear about.

Nazita Lajevardi:
Thank you. Thank you for the invitation. This was a lovely conversation. I'm really appreciative.

Andy Luttrell:
That'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thank you so much to Dr. Nazita Lajevardi for talking about her work research. Once again, her book is Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia. You can find a link in the show notes, and you can see the book cover that we talked so much about! You'll also find a link to Nazita's website and a transcript of this episode.

For more about this show, head on over to OpinionSciencePodcast.com. Follow the show @OpinionSciPod on Twitter and Facebook and anywhere you get podcasts. And if you like this stuff, it would mean a lot if you left a review on Apple Podcasts or any other app. We've gotten some nice comments recently. Here's one that says: "Love this podcast! In-depth, thoughtful discussion that's always relevant. Can't wait for each new episode." Thanks a bunch!

Learn more about the science of opinions and persuasion with one of my online courses. More info at OpinionSciencePodcast.com.

Okay, that's it. Thanks for tuning in, and I'll see you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Buh bye!