

ADVANCING IMMIGRANT, MUSLIM, AND REFUGEE JUSTICE IN A PERIOD OF ASCENDANT WHITE NATIONALISM

POLITICAL
RESEARCH
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The election of a stridently racist candidate as president of the United States in November 2016 is a victory as well as an accelerator of a burgeoning White nationalist movement. It has been a game-changer for immigrants, refugees, and Muslims—among many other communities targeted on the basis of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, and sexuality. Donald Trump’s campaign began with a now-notorious tirade against Mexican immigrants, reenergized the White nationalist subculture, and mainstreamed racist rhetoric as economic and cultural populism. Beyond campaign slogans, the Trump team brought ruthless architects of racial inequality into the inner circle of the campaign and then the White House, giving nationalists and organized bigots remarkable influence over public policy and other levers of governance. Trump’s public statements, tweets, and strategy of impunity (and pardon) from prosecution for offenders has emboldened individuals to take action and target those deemed to be “foreign” or “un-American.”

These developments prompted Political Research Associates (PRA), an organization with nearly four decades of research challenging right-wing threats to human rights, to rethink approaches to

advancing immigrant, refugee, and Muslim rights in a period of ascendant White nationalism. We sought to document the effects of the rise of a White nationalist movement whose policy prescriptions and rhetoric on immigrant, refugee, and Muslim populations echo the White House’s, and to generate new thinking and strategizing to address the challenges that the moment presents. We interviewed 64 stakeholders—principally immigrant/refugee and Muslim advocates, as well as others who monitor, research, and organize to contain the influence of organized bigotry. Our project reviewed advocates’ current programs and statements of gaps and needs. We supplemented our interviews with an extensive literature review and PRA’s independent research on organized bigotry. This report includes a number of recommendations for immigrant, refugee, and Muslim organizers, advocates, researchers,* and funders.

KEY FINDINGS

Immediately following the 2016 presidential election, Trump filled key posts in the federal government with leadership culled from various factions of the contemporary White nationalist movement in the United States (see map on page 11). By January 2017, he issued two executive orders, “Enhancing public safety in the

interior of the United States”¹ and “Border security and immigration enforcement improvements,”² which include in their provisions that immigration law enforcement should prioritize deportation of every undocumented immigrant and detain any person suspected of violating any law, including immigration law. These orders effectively criminalized all undocumented immigrants and created new classes of immigrant-criminals. The racist strategies of proponents of White nationalism at influential organizations such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) are evident in the policies they promoted.**

While this administration’s anti-immigrant policy has a disproportionately negative effect on Muslims, the Muslim/Arab-identified organizers and advocates cited the intensified criminalization and delegitimization of Islam and Muslim people as the gravest threats.***

Organizers and advocates are finding established avenues to justice and policy change severely curtailed or even deployed against them. Some stated they no longer engage in administrative advocacy with the Department of Homeland Security, for reasons ranging from ineffectiveness to concerns about associating with what they consider to be hate groups that now advise the agency. Several interviewees

* For the purposes of this report, *organizer* and *advocates* refer to Muslim, immigrant, and refugee grassroots activists, groups, and coalitions and organizations (community-based, state, regional, and national) who advocate for these communities. *Researchers* refers to organizations and academics who research the Right and opposition research of the Christian, racist, far right in the United States, including anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and white supremacist and/or nationalist actors. These terms refer to interviewees’ primary work but are not mutually exclusive; for example, groups categorized as organizers and advocates may have detailed analyses of the histories and strategies of far-right opposition at local and regional levels; and groups categorized as researchers such as the Southern Poverty Law Center have supported advocacy initiatives to pressure social media companies to address racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim mobilizations on their platforms.

** This includes a merit-based system and aggressive cuts to, if not elimination of, other immigrant programs, including family-based and refugee, and pursuit and removal of all undocumented immigrants, withdrawing citizenship from those recently naturalized, tremendous restrictions on green card holders, and favoring White migration. See, for example, “Where the White House Gets Its Racist Immigration Policies,” *Political Research Associates*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2018/03/01/where-the-white-house-gets-its-racist-immigration-policies/>.

*** These policies institutionalize the rhetoric of, for example, the David Horowitz Freedom Center, Center for Security Policy, and Stephen Miller.

cited examples of individuals attempting to access basic protections offered by courts or other government systems, who were arrested by immigration law enforcement in the process;³ and of the arrests of individuals with current authorization to be in the United States,⁴ including community activists. Humanitarian organizations, which often work parallel to advocacy groups and the government, reported their work is being increasingly complicated or undermined by State actions. For example, No More Deaths reported Border Patrol* has declared its intent to arrest volunteers providing humanitarian aid to migrants at the southwest border.

Consequently, when asked about current threats to immigrant, refugee, and Muslim communities, organizers and advocates identified the federal government, in the form of immigration policy, surveillance, and law enforcement, as the single biggest threat. They also cited state and local government, including police, working in close concert with the federal administration and with right-wing groups. Many interviewees also referenced a range of right-wing actors, including the Alt Right, local militias, and White nationalist organizations, that have long been mobilizing resentment** toward immigrant, Muslim, and refugee communities as a political tactic and have infiltrated these arms of the state. Many interviewees also referenced their views that right-wing elements within immigrant and Muslim communities, and reformist (rather than generative) currents within the community at large compromise resistance to the onslaught of this hostile administration and its supporters.

Organizers and advocates have responded by building systems of mass protest, direct action, mutual support, and resistance. They continue to provide services in efforts to improve the material conditions of people's lives. They continue practices that include litigation, policy and regulatory advocacy, voter identification and engagement, support for elected public officials who stand with targeted communities, and community education.



They are increasing pressure against the administration's rhetoric and policies, while shifting (sometimes sharply) the focus and strategies of many of these efforts and cultivating new coalitions of shared work or affinity in the process.

Researchers continue to monitor anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim movements to expose their organizations and leadership. They use this information to inform policy makers about these movements' influence in public, private, and civil sectors and inform organizers and advocates about their opponents' strategies, tactics, and internal conflicts. Researchers have joined communications advocacy initiatives to counter the influences of anti-immigrant and White nationalist organizations in the media, and more recently in social media and digital platforms. They also work to align and coordinate the efforts of advocates across issues and communities to draw more groups and communities into the fight against organized bigotry.

Organizers and advocates are also creating alternative routes to safety and equity for all. These efforts seek to build defiant, resilient communities that expose and reject collusion with federal prerogatives such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program, monitor and disrupt Immigration and Customs Enforcement

(ICE) activity in communities, refuse to do business with the corporations that back racist politicians and projects, and counter right-wing claims across college and university campuses that equate hate speech with free speech. They advocate for thorough research and documentation projects to include accurate reporting of the scope and nature of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and State violence; investigations of the administration's policies, practices, architects, and donors; and accurate representations of the cultures, religions, migration contexts, struggles, and achievements of communities at greatest risk. Many noted also that all documentation, whether for political, historic, or artistic purposes, must be centered and shaped by immigrant, refugee, and Muslim communities to account for the entirety of communities' experiences and to ensure their full humanity is respected and retained throughout.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We are inspired by the vision—expressed in various ways by project participants, advisors, and supporters—of winning an enduring majority of the population committed to a just, multiracial, socially inclusive, and religiously pluralistic democracy. Toward this end, PRA offers the following recommendations to stakeholders in this field. We invite discussion and debate on these recommendations, in the spirit of shared commitment to building a just society.

Reframe and expand the anti-bigotry field

- Expand the focus of the anti-bigotry field from research (document, monitor, and publish) and advocacy to a rich and diverse ecosystem with multiple players, strategies, and organizing practices grounded in a movement-building approach.
- Address organized bigotry both within and outside government and seek to

* Border Patrol is an agency within U.S. Customs and Border Protection and is generally associated with control of people at the physical borders with México and Canada, inside the 100-mile zone extending from the borders, and the coastal waters surrounding Florida and Puerto Rico.

** The late founder of Political Research Associates, Jean Hardisty, coined this term in her 1999 book, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers*.

disrupt the convergence of (and synergy between) these forces.

- Support collective action, strategy, and visioning across marginalized communities. The struggle for immigrant, refugee, and Muslim communities should be understood as, more than ever, inseparable from the struggle for the rights of all marginalized communities. Immigrant, refugee, and Muslim rights cannot in our estimation be won independent of defeating White nationalism and affirming a positive alternative vision of who we are as a people. Funding and advocacy fields built around specific communities/issues must address this broader challenge, whether through coalition building, supporting structures across fields, or a fundamental reworking of goals and methodologies.
- Avoid limitations of the “hate” and “extremist” frames. While such terms as *hate groups* and *hate crimes* effectively evoke overt supremacists, they are less useful for addressing systemic, even government-backed, programs of discrimination, expulsion, and supremacy. Hatred is not so much the agenda as a tactic used in pursuit of political and social goals, for example, the expulsion of people of color and religious minorities and the establishment of a White Christian ethnostate. We can remain flexible in our use of terminology as we adapt to changed circumstances and improve how we communicate about the stakes for our society and about our alternative vision.
- Invest in experimentation around narrative change strategies that broaden prevailing notions of who is part of “We, the People.”

Building the field: For funders

- Address whether the current philanthropic affinity groups/tables are adequate to the task of resourcing strategies to contain and overcome White nationalism, or whether new arrangements are needed.
- Create responsive and flexible funding mechanisms to support experimentation and creativity; de-professionalize grant-making processes, including

support for community-based activists and collectives not legally recognized as organizations.

- Create responsive thematic and programmatic priorities that reach for broader social and immigration justice strategizing. These include knowledge-building and community-based culture and education work and expanding the range of effective actors through investments in progressive Muslim infrastructures and advocates within private and public sectors.

Building the field: For researchers and organizers

- Generate movement-building research priorities, to include advancing communities’ knowledge of opponents’ positions; the frameworks and strategies employed to galvanize vigilante or government threats, and the interconnections between these systems; and potential strategies to deconstruct and disempower the far right.
- Do much needed racial justice work internally to support greater collaboration. The call for a more democratic anti-bigotry ecosystem includes an explicit call for researchers to seek and center the leadership of Muslim, immigrant, and refugee communities and organizers. Tracking and running interference to organized anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim movements needs to recalibrate from the federal-policy focus of the Obama period to also support/partner with frontline groups dealing with government and vigilante attacks and national movement leaders.
- Consider new “tables” (activist and funder) that facilitate communication, coordination, and resourcing among groups/leaders from the various communities most targeted by White nationalism.
- Address the rising tide of far-right and nationalist elements within communities of color. Overcome pressures to hide intra-community conflicts and far-right tendencies within immigrant communities, while inviting reflection, inquiry, and internal and collaborative

efforts to build equity for all persons in the new home country.

- Document the full range and extent of assaults and threats, including civil sector and State, to establish the scope, nature, and patterns of organized bigotry mobilized against communities.

Building long-term infrastructures

- Invest in narrative shifts. Anti-bigotry movement frameworks should be informed by narrative change efforts centered and created by immigrant, refugee, and Muslim communities; that permeate culture, institutions, and politics; and that can popularize more honest and democratic representations of the population across sectors. These narratives not only must speak to the converted but also address a larger swath of the population.
- Build a multiracial, inclusive, pluralistic movement for democracy. Cultivate a racial justice analysis that centers anti-Black racism and challenges both anti-Muslim bigotry and antisemitism as forms of racism.
- Invest in women’s leadership and confront the misogyny that animates the far right and imperils democracy.
- Build capacities to reflect, envision, and act. These are relational practices and also strategic priorities, including for a broader and stronger organizing base. This includes dedicated space and time to develop strong strategies based in resistance and proactive visioning, investment in racial justice practices, as well as flexibility and creativity in planning and strategies.

