

The Politics of Islamophobia

An interview with Yasmine Taeb

Yasmine Taeb is a lobbyist for the Friends Committee on National Legislation and manages FCNL's program on human rights and civil liberties. Some of the issues that Yasmine is working on include: the Syrian refugee crisis, closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention center, repeal of the 2001 authorization for the use of military force, and the U.S. lethal drone program. Yasmine spoke by phone with Western Friend on June 23, 2016. The following text was drawn from a transcription of that conversation.

Western Friend: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. I really appreciate you taking time out of all the chaos . . . [At the time of this interview, Congressional Democrats were just ending a day-long sit-in on the House floor, concerning gun control, in response to a recent mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, which had killed 49 people and wounded 53 others.]

Yasmine Taeb: Sure. Chaos is a good word . . .

WF: So how are you doing?

YT: I'm feeling frustrated. . . Obviously, the U.S. needs to take action to curb the rampant gun violence in our country, but Muslim Americans have a lot of concerns about the messaging and the rhetoric around this now. And this happens every time there is any sort of attack that can be seen as connected to the Muslim American community. The individual who was responsible for the Orlando shooting . . . Yes, he was Muslim American, but much of the information that has come out about him shows that this shooting was an act of personal revenge; it had nothing to do with anything related to his faith. But no one in the mainstream media really wants to hear that. They just see that he was Muslim, and that he committed this crime.

So some legislators push proposals that would do absolutely nothing to curb gun violence in our country, like this proposal that targets people on secret watch lists. If you consider all of the watch lists, not just the no-fly list, there are over 600,000 people on those lists. No one knows why they are on the lists, and they are not able to get their names removed. I have tried to help several people in the last few years, exemplary figures within the Muslim American community, doctors and other professionals, who contact us when they are traveling to let us know, "It happened again. I'm on some secondary screening list."

WF: I was at our yearly meeting's annual session last week, and I've been completely out of touch with the news for the last few days. I know there was a sit-in by Democrats in Congress, but I was assuming . . . Was it about this no-fly list?

YT: Basically, there are three proposals that Democratic leadership is pushing to get a vote on. So yes, one of them is this "No Fly, No Buy" bill by Representative Peter King. The other two concern research on gun violence and background checks on gun buyers. But Democrats know that if they are going to get a vote on anything, it will be on Peter King's terror watch list bill.

WF: What kinds of re-framing and re-phrasing would be helpful in terms of shifting the collective mindset?

YT: We deal with that every day. The issues that my program works on are ones that disproportionately affect the Muslim American community – whether we're lobbying for more re-settlement of Syrian refugees, pushing back against anti-immigrant rhetoric, or lobbying for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

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In terms of the messaging we use, we talk about our nation's history of welcoming refugees, for instance. The times in U.S. history when we have not welcomed refugees, we now see those as dark chapters in our history. So we emphasize that if we don't do anything to help these refugees today, then we will look back on this as a shameful and embarrassing moment for our country.

Also, when politicians on the Hill echo sentiments like those expressed by Trump – calling for the profiling of Muslim Americans, or greater surveillance of Muslim American communities or mosques – we have allies on the Hill who will push back. Members from the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, for example – folks like Representative Mike Honda or Representative Takano –

talk about the experiences their families had in the Japanese internment camps and about how the rhetoric they are hearing today about Muslims is the same rhetoric they heard about their own families long ago. They are talking about how dangerous this kind of rhetoric is and how we shouldn't normalize it, that we need to push back on it.

WF: So . . . Getting to my questions for this interview . . . Would you please introduce yourself in terms of the role you are playing at FCNL and how the job fits into your sense of what you want to do with your life?

YT: Sure. I'm a lobbyist at FCNL. I manage FCNL's human rights and civil liberties program. Some of the issues that we work on are lobbying for Syrian refugees, for the closure of Gitmo, for the repeal of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, and for reform to the U.S. lethal drone program.

In terms of how this fits into a larger sense of what I hope to do with my life . . . I have been working for years on issues concerning human rights and civil liberties – on Capitol Hill, with the Arab American Institute, and with the Center for American Progress. This work and these issues fit into my personal story, my family story. I am a Muslim American. I am an immigrant. I came to the U.S. with my family from Iran when I was in elementary school. The way we came to the country was very similar to the way I see a lot of refugees coming in today. We fled Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. We left because my 15-year-old brother was about to get drafted. We tried every avenue to come to the U.S. legally, but when that did not work, we eventually had to come here as undocumented immigrants. We hired a smuggler. Again, it was very similar to stories we hear now from Central American refugees fleeing violence. Similar to stories of Syrian and Iraqi refugees today. That's why I deeply care about these issues. They are quite personal to me.

WF: What was the attraction of FCNL?

YT: I had a friend who worked at FCNL. The organization has a great reputation, and I really respect the work that it does. Also, I appreciate the value of working on



Photo provided by Yasmine Taeb.

these issues at an organizations that does not necessarily represent the affected communities. You could work on similar issues at a Muslim American or Arab American organization. But what I have noticed is that lobbying on post-9/11 issues, you would be better positioned to work at an organization like FCNL. So I think it goes a long way – and it can be more impactful – to do this work through an organization that does not directly represent the affected communities.

WF: Would you talk about the Quaker aspect of FCNL? What does that part of FCNL's persona – its Quaker identity – add to the mix in the work you do?

YT: It's huge. Because Quakers were persecuted when they first came to the U.S., our Quaker network is passionate about whether different religious groups are being discriminated against now. They care deeply about the rise in anti-Muslim hate and about Islamophobia. Quakers have also been quite active on other issues we work on, because of their historic work on issues dealing with war and peace. So, war authority issues, the war with ISIS, extra-judicial killings with drone strikes, indefinite

detention and torture at Gitmo – these issues we work on are incredibly important to our Quaker network.

WF: And on the other side of the conversation, when you're dealing with public officials, do you think FCNL's "Quaker brand" makes its messages easier to dismiss, or does it give more credibility?

YT: It depends who we are talking to, obviously. If we are talking to the hawks and conservatives, depending on which office it is, they may dismiss us because we are saying what they expect from Quakers. But overall, what I've noticed is that people on the Hill see FCNL as a principled organization. They see that regardless of what the political debate is, regardless of the issue, we will always stand up for justice and equity for everyone. Obviously, Democrats and progressives work more closely with us on various issues, but we are also able to meet with Republicans. A lot of conservatives meet with us simply for the reason that they know it's important for them to hear from faith groups. So overall, I think it's positive.

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WF: And when you were talking about being principled just now, I was flashing back to what you said earlier about your frustrations with Democrats using certain issues as negotiating chips.

YT: Yes. At the end of the day, we're not partisan. We are going to disagree with anyone if they are pushing a policy we don't agree with, a policy that we think is not right and unfair.

WF: So I wonder . . . You have just won an election yourself. You are now a member of the Democratic National Committee. You are serious about the potential of the electoral political system in our country. So I am interested in what you can say about what you think the rule of law can do to help reign in these irrational tendencies that people have when they are afraid.

YT: Yeah, it's incredibly easy to play into people's fears. It's the easiest thing to do after any sort of crisis or attack. You saw it immediately after 9/11. You know, two days after those attacks, Congress passed the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which has been used ever since to

authorize mass surveillance, torture, indefinite detention, extra-judicial killings, and drone strikes. That resolution was supported by every single member of Congress, with the exception of just one – Representative Barbara Lee.

Unfortunately, every election cycle, the Republican Party and their candidates really feed into this anti-Muslim hysteria. And it has real consequences. Every election year, we see a rise in hate crimes against Muslim Americans, against mosques, against Muslim community centers. This rhetoric has real impacts in local Muslim American communities . . .

WF: And since we have our First Amendment, there is only so much that is proper for the state to do to make people behave.

YT: Yes. There really isn't much that our government can do in curbing this sort of speech, unless the speech specifically calls for inciting violence.

WF: And what do you see as the potential for the faith community to help with this?

YT: We have seen our partners in the faith community really work with us and try to push back on hateful and dangerous rhetoric. All of that has been very helpful. It's important for all of our organizations to stand united and renounce any sort of hateful rhetoric directed at any community, and to continue to push back forcefully.

WF: Another area I want to ask you about concerns some things you said in a couple articles you wrote, posted on the FCNL website. You talk about the lack of diversity in elected bodies in this country. I'm interested to hear your thoughts about how to change that, and how that change could make our country better.

YT: Obviously, the more diverse the members in Congress are, the more diverse the voices in the political process, the better it is for us in terms of the policies they are proposing and the laws they are making. Most of the problems in this country are due to the reality that Congress is not representative of the diversity of the American people. The majority of members of Congress are older, wealthy, white men. There are several Asian American members, some who belong to the Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus, and we also have two members of Congress who are Muslim Americans. But that leaves a lot of room for improvement.

And congressional *staff* . . . That is definitely something we need to work on. The way most of these staffers get their positions is by starting out as unpaid interns, and then they just move up in the office. Well, the only people who are able to serve as unpaid interns in Washington, DC – a very expensive city – are people from a certain privileged background.

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If we provide opportunities and resources for recent college grads from all different backgrounds to intern on Capitol Hill, that would be tremendously helpful in terms of making sure that the voices in Congress are more representative of the American people.

WF: I agree that a more representative Congress would be better, but I am wondering if you have any examples.

YT: Of course we are making assumptions, but I can give myself as an example. I especially understand the impact of the “No Fly, No Buy” bill on the Muslim American and Arab American communities, more than non-Muslims do, because I come from that community. And I know exactly what the ramifications of that bill are. I see that it would strip civil liberties away from members of that community.

If you’re making and passing policies that impact the American people, and if you have immigrants in your office, if you have African Americans in your office, Muslim Americans in your office – then when you are working on particular bills, you will at least have a better understanding of how those pieces of legislation will impact different communities. It’s always to our benefit to have as many voices in the process as possible. That’s the only way we can make sure that the process is inclusive, transparent, and fair. ❖

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