

# Brief for Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights

**Topic:** Islamophobia in Canada

**Date:** March 14, 2023

**Presented by:** Beisan Zubi, as an individual

## Key recommendations:

- 1) Move on from conversations about ‘appropriateness’ of the term “Islamophobia” – this is for the Muslim community to discuss and they will no doubt inform you if or when the term they use to describe hate directed towards them changes;
- 2) Reject any analysis that frames human rights as competing or at odds with one another – this concept of ‘zero sum humanity’ is not real and a consequence of policy failure rather than a reflection of reality;
- 3) Reframe your understanding of racism within your power and privileges as legislators and away from individual manifestations – racism is perpetuated at the system level and the Senate of Canada has a duty to apply an antiracist lens to all its policy decisions to address this.

## Introduction

I’d like to thank the Senate Human Rights Committee for considering the following testimony.

My name is Beisan Zubi, I’m the daughter of Palestinian immigrants and I work as an equity and anti-oppression trainer.

My mother’s family is Greek Orthodox Christian and my father’s family is Sunni Muslim, which is not a common pairing today, and was especially not in the 1970s; they moved to Canada from Nazareth so they could be together. They raised my brother and I to understand their backgrounds, while also encouraging us to build our own relationships with faith. So in the spirit of full disclosure about the experiences that informed the perspective I’m sharing with you today: I settled into a spiritual-but-not-religious framework. I do not self-identify as religiously Muslim, but I consider myself connected to the Muslim community through family and culture.

To better understand your work, I’ve read up on your past meetings to get an understanding of what you’ve heard so far. I’d like to use my time with you to situate your work within a systems-level framework to make it clear why your responsibility here is more than just to listen and learn but to legislate change.

## On ‘Islamophobia’

Let me begin by saying that I believe this committee has spent far too much time on the question of whether there is a better term than ‘Islamophobia’ to use when discussing racism directed towards Muslims.

Language has always been, and will remain a malleable thing, but in the context of human rights, its most important function is to empower people who have not been understood or heard to be able to better communicate their identity and experiences.

The term Islamophobia serves its purpose as it has allowed Muslims to create shared understanding around their experiences — that in itself should satisfy this committee’s concerns. If the term does need changing, that conversation will take place between

Muslims, and trust me, you'll be notified. Until then, your work in eradicating racism — and specifically Islamophobia — does not include mulling over a re-brand.

I also acknowledge that the concept of phobia/fear has been a sticking point, and would like to share a potentially more helpful interpretation. The fear that underpins all hate is less a fear of the 'other' (a Muslim person in this case) and much more viscerally a fear of one's self or community losing power or privilege or social standing to that other. This is why hateful acts that are given the suffix of 'phobia' often lead to situations that wouldn't indicate someone was afraid of their victim at all.

This fear happens because power in our society is concentrated at the systems-level. This power structure is maintained by those who have it sharing a tiny bit of it and making the recipients of that tiny bit of power believe that there's only that much to go around. This is of course not true, but it creates the dynamic where people with a little bit of power see those with even less power than them as a threat, and not as they actually are, which is more vulnerable than them.

## Zero-Sum Humanity

The concept that there's a limited amount of something that everyone needs is often referred to in political theory as a zero-sum game, but when it comes to our rights, it's better described as 'zero-sum humanity.'

The impact of zero-sum humanity is that many people perceive anything that empowers others as a direct threat to their own power or standing in society.

So, if you are still unsure about the applicability of the suffix 'phobia' in this or other contexts, recognize that the real fear underpinning hate is better understood, not of the unknown or othered subject, but as a fear of what's intuitively known by the object: that our system is designed to make us fight for scraps in order to establish and maintain power structures in our society.

Evidence of this power struggle can be seen playing out in many cultural dynamics in Canada:

- established immigrant communities with negative views towards irregular border crossers or refugee claimants (Focus Canada and Environics, 2018);
- cisgendered women not wanting trans women to access their spaces and leading trans-exclusionary movements (Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan, 2022);
- Francophone Quebecers legislating against Allophones and Anglophone language rights as well as minority religious rights (Coleman, 2009)

Zero-sum humanity, or one group's well-being should or would threaten another's, is counter to the concept of universal human rights, and the work this committee has been tasked with doing. I ask this committee to be judicious in recognizing and calling it out, in others and in yourselves.

Zero sum humanity has been perpetuated by policy decisions made by the Canadian government over the past few centuries, but fortunately the members of this committee can work to change this.

## Systemic factors exacerbating racism

For example, when housing infrastructure, job creation or access to government services are not kept in line with our population growth (CBC News, 2022), or when police and the justice system criminalize racialized people at a disproportionate rate (Global News, 2013), our government is perpetuating the idea that immigrants are taking something away (be it opportunity or supports or safety, whatever) from more settled populations.

The multiculturalism PR campaign pushed by this government can also be attributed to unrealistic expectations on what newcomers can achieve in this country without infrastructure investments, recognition of foreign credentials, or enhanced community support. All this has led to the model minority myth that some kinds of immigrants are more desirable than others, which only serves to further entrench the belief in zero-sum humanity.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also acknowledge that Canada is first and foremost a settler colonial state and that its aggressive immigration quotas were essential in its agenda to displace and dominate Indigenous peoples through any and all means available (Bauder and Breen, 2022). I'd suggest this committee hear from witnesses that are more qualified than I am to properly unpack those policies for you.

## Lived experiences of racism

I know several people have testified to you about the intersections of systemic oppressions, but this committee seems to be more focused on the individual manifestations of racism instead of the systemic forces behind them. While that might engender compassion, it won't help you legislate against the causes of racism, which are consistent and follow systems theories.

There are just too many intersections and compounding factors in individual experiences of racism without a systems view. For example, I'm a Palestinian Arab and as you've already heard from many experts, anti-Arab racism, anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia share many similar manifestations-- from overwhelmingly negative depictions in movies and media, the terrorist label, women being robbed of agency, the discomfort we're met with when we self-advocate. However, some of us can choose to try and invisibilize ourselves to avoid danger, and some of us simply cannot, even if they want to.

For example, as a secularly-attired woman, veiled Muslim women are more visible and vulnerable than me in almost every way. That said, my equally non-religious brother is not spared negative visibility because all it takes is a five o'clock shadow for him to be perceived as the 'other'. That might not make sense until you understand that this hyper-visibility was created and is perpetuated by this country's 'war on terror' which continues to systemically target Muslim and Arabs and feed into individual racisms.

Another incoherence, I'm often not immediately coded as Palestinian or even Arab and can often be referred to as 'racially ambiguous.' So while I'm not actually Muslim, or South Asian, or Black, or Indigenous, I've been called slurs used against all of those communities. But this racial incoherence, often taking shape through colorism, also has also allowed me to exist in white spaces and can even translate into benefitting from white privilege in some circumstances.

Trying to apply logic or rationality to understanding individual acts of racism or hatred can almost obscure their root causes. It's more impactful for you to understand the systemic ways racism is nurtured and enforced in Canada, if you want to get closer to finding solutions to it.

## Conclusion

It's unhelpful to try and understand racism or hate as something that takes place between individuals, it must be understood as a response to the system you as Senators are charged with guiding.

The duty of the Government of Canada, and of every Canadian Senator, is to understand how racisms are systemically perpetuated, and act to change our systems in a just and expedient manner. Committee work can be helpful in increasing awareness, but unless those who hold the levers of power DO something to change systemic issues, it becomes a performance of trauma with no end.

This committee must be more judicious in recognizing all the ways that the myth of zero-sum humanity presents itself in the work you do, and to be more rigorous in rejecting the false dichotomy that any group's dignity and human rights would or could come at the cost of another's.

This idea needs to be rejected as it couldn't be further from the truth: our collective liberation is intertwined, and none of us will be free until all of us are.

Once you're able to recognize and reject the hierarchies that only serve to reinforce systemic racism, you'll be that much more effective and impactful in your roles on this human rights committee and as equitable legislators on the Canadian Senate.

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