ACTing for Islamophobia

Flathead ACT for America
And Its Allies
Spread Anti-Muslim Bigotry
in Montana
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Introduction

Resentment and blame of the “other” are front and center in public discourse these days, which continues a long history rooted in concerted efforts to use fear as motivation. Montana experienced a dramatic rise in anti-Muslim activity in the last year. How it came about, along with who perpetrated it, is an important piece of stopping the bigotry, preventing it in the future, and preparing for the next onslaught of the blame game.

Overview of Anti-Muslim Activity

Ever since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the way many people in the United States view Muslim community members has changed. This is because right-wing activists and politicians created a narrative about national security that implies, or sometimes directly states, that all Muslims are potential terrorists. At the same time, law enforcement increasingly focuses its efforts to address domestic terrorism on homegrown Muslim terrorists, despite the fact that since 9-11, more people have died in the U.S. from politically-motivated violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists than by Muslim militants. All of this has helped feed an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment, as the right wing perpetrates the belief that there is a Jihadist around every corner.

This isn’t a minor political issue. Instead, this hatred and fear of Muslims has created an entire movement of Islamophobia, whereby Muslims are portrayed as engaging in a campaign to infiltrate and take over America. From opposition to building mosques to the support of legislation banning the use of Sharia Law, Islamophobic activists oppose Muslim culture at every turn, claiming they are saving America from an invading force. In this narrative, refugees seeking to escape their war-torn homes become sleeper agents biding their time until their numbers are sufficient to conquer the United States. Similarly, school textbooks are berated for not teaching these conspiracy theories about these supposed Muslim threats, and policy issues become high-stake crusades to protect “Western civilization.”

Anti-Muslim activists can point to the messages of our political leaders as proof that their views are no longer restricted to the political margins, especially as President Donald Trump rode Islamophobia all the way to the White House. Long before he was president, Donald Trump trafficked in this Islamophobic world. He was a high-profile proponent of the “birther” conspiracy theory, which argued that former President Barack Obama was not an American citizen, and, therefore, not the legitimate president. Trump even publicly questioned whether Obama was a Muslim, a frequent version of the “birther” conspiracy.  

During his presidential campaign and since taking office, Trump has repeatedly disparaged Muslims and talked about banning them from entering the country, while also suggesting that Muslims in the country should register with the federal government. Within a week of becoming president, he signed an Executive Order blocking Syrian refugees and banning citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States for 90 days, which kicked off a legal fight that is ongoing. President Trump and other political figures have normalized the fear and hatred of Muslims in a way that has reverberated throughout the country.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is an outlook or worldview involving a strident opposition to or overt hatred of Muslims, often informed by stereotypes and misinformation. It often includes the belief that Islam is a violent political ideology rather than a religion, and that all followers of Islam are dangerous extremists trying to conquer Western civilization. By dehumanizing and targeting members of the Muslim community, Islamophobia can manifest itself in anti-Muslim rhetoric, discrimination, intimidation, and even violence.

However, Trump is a symptom of rampant Islamophobia as opposed to the cause. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the number of anti-Muslim hate groups in the country increased almost threefold from 2015 to 2016. A report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism found that bias crimes against various minorities and religious groups were up some 20 percent since President Trump’s election, with the majority of the crimes perpetrated against Muslims and members of the LGBT community.

In August 2017, CNN reported that it had mapped 63 publicly-reported incidents from January-July 2017 where mosques were targets of threats, vandalism, or arson. In other words, the anti-Muslim sentiment being expressed wasn’t limited to rhetoric. Some activists were turning words into hateful action. The Islamophobia impacting the country is not just a top-down occurrence. Instead,
activists on the ground have been pushing it for years, and now they see even the White House reflecting back their anti-Muslim values.

Montana is not immune from this dangerous movement of Islamophobia. The epicenter in Montana is Flathead ACT, a chapter of the national ACT for America, which the SPLC has designated an anti-Muslim hate group. Over the past few years, Flathead ACT has regularly sponsored anti-Muslim speakers that portray followers of Islam as Jihadists seeking to destroy Western civilization. The group also spearheaded two attempts to pass legislation banning the use of Sharia Law in courts. While this legislation is unnecessary due to the protections afforded by the U.S. Constitution, Flathead ACT and its allies in the Montana Legislature succeeded passing the bill in 2017. However, Governor Steve Bullock vetoed the bill, saying such a law would be “interpreted by some as state endorsement for anti-Muslim sentiment and activity.” Instead of fear and hatred, he said Montanans needed to “recommit ourselves to protecting the religious and cultural diversity that makes our state and nation strong.”

As the major driving force of Islamophobia in Montana and its connection to a national group playing the same role, Flathead ACT is the focus of this report. However, the report also looks at ACT for America’s background and connections to the Trump Administration. Also examined are some of Flathead ACT’s allies in the state, both inside and outside of the state Capitol and Montana Republican Party.
From the Top: Brigitte Gabriel and ACT for America

Described a “radical Islamophobe” by the New York Times magazine, Brigitte Gabriel started ACT for America in 2007. While the group started in the spare bedroom of Gabriel’s home, ACT for America has grown into one of the largest organizations promoting Islamophobia in the country. Its over-the-top rhetoric and demonization of Muslims, mostly through conspiracy theories whereby followers of Islam are trying to take over the country, helped earn it a hate group designation by the SPLC. One media profile described Gabriel as presenting “a portrait of Islam so thoroughly bent on destruction and domination that it is unrecognizable to those who study or practice the religion.”

Gabriel, a Lebanese Christian born Hanah Kahwagi Tudor, started ACT for America after publishing her first book, Because They Hate: A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America. She has characterized her book as telling the “truth” about Islam, which she claims she learned as a child during Lebanon’s 15-year civil war. While many have questioned details of her biography, Gabriel claims that she lived in a bomb shelter for several years, and her family was targeted by Muslim extremists because of their Christian faith.

While Gabriel likes to describe herself as a “terrorism expert,” Imagine 2050, a blog operated by the Center for New Community, notes “her main area of expertise is taking a latent fear of Muslims and turning it into full-blown anger and hatred.” Gabriel’s writing and statements over the years reinforce this point. A sampling of her statements about Muslims and Islam include:

♦ “Every practicing Muslim is a radical Muslim.”

♦ “A ‘practicing Muslim, who believes in the teachings of the Koran, cannot be a loyal citizen of the United States.’”

♦ “In the Muslim world, extreme is mainstream.”

♦ “The Arab Muslim world, because of its religion and culture, is a natural threat to civilized people of the world.”

♦ “America has been infiltrated on all levels by radicals who wish to harm America. They have infiltrated us at the CIA, at the FBI, at the Pentagon, at the State Department.”

♦ Muslims are “a natural threat to civilized people of the world, particularly Western society.”

Despite her outlandish statements and lack of formal training when it comes to national security issues, she routinely speaks as an expert on Fox News and has addressed influential decision-makers, including the United Kingdom’s House of Commons, the Pentagon, the FBI, and others. As Imagine 2050 puts it:

“The danger of Gabriel and ACT for America is not that they speak out against threats to national security. The danger is that ACT’s vitriolic fearmongering is used to justify a broad agenda that threatens the rights of American Muslim communities and society at-large...They’ve [ACT and its supporters] also increasingly backed prominent anti-immigrant organizations in the push for harsh enforcement policies.”

As an organization, ACT sees itself engaged in an apocalyptic culture war, in which its members, according to one media report, see “themselves as warriors in a clash between Western civilization and Islam.” As the SPLC has stated, Gabriel has worked hard to give ACT a “veneer of respectability, despite extremist rhetoric profiling Muslims as indoctrinated, radical militants.”
ACT has eagerly tapped into a groundswell of anti-Muslim rage and done what it can to fan the flames. The group’s members have protested the construction of mosques in communities, argued that schools are indoctrinating children with Islamic beliefs, promoted discredited counterterrorism courses based on anti-Muslim bias, and promoted legislation to ban the use of Sharia Law in courts.

The fearmongering of ACT hasn’t hurt its ability to gain influence and favor within the Republican Party. The group’s events in Washington D.C. regularly include opportunities for its members to hear from and to lobby lawmakers. GOP speakers at these events don’t tone down their rhetoric. During one such legislative briefing, U.S. Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) told the 250 attendees, “This jihadist, Islamist, terrorist ideology, it is more dangerous than the Nazi ideology.”

Gabriel has made similar statements at influential conservative gatherings, as she has become a regular speaker at the Values Voters Summit (VVS), the largest annual Religious Right political event in the country.

Gabriel hyperbolically told the 2014 VVS audience that “180 million to 300 million” Muslims were “radical Islamists who are willing to strap bombs on their bodies and walk into this room and blow us all up to smithereens.” In contrast, a terrorism report by a reputable expert had recently found there were about 85,000 to 106,000 Muslims belonging to Jihadist groups, which translated to 0.006625% of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims. Gabriel also told VVS attendees that she was looking for chapter leaders and encouraged people to join ACT, because it was “building the NRA of national security” organizations. About this same time, Imagine 2050 noted that ACT unveiled a new website to “frame its bigoted agenda to appear more mainstream” and turn away “from tin-foil-hat territory.” The new website said ACT wanted to help create secure communities, instead of the previous version’s focus on Muslim sleeper cells that are seeking to takeover institutions through “stealth jihad” in order to implement Sharia Law. Imagine 2050 noted that Gabriel and ACT’s new website used “more palatable language and imagery in hopes to appeal to a more mainstream audience;” however, “anti-Muslim bigotry remains prevalent on the site.”

Gabriel has been invited back to VVS in subsequent years and is listed as a speaker for the 2017 event. Unfortunately, it isn’t that surprising to see Gabriel and her rampant Islamophobia included. The event’s primary organizer is FRC Action, the political arm of the Family Research Council (FRC). FRC Vice President Jerry Boykin has claimed Islam “should not be protected under the First Amendment.” FRC President Tony Perkins has advocated that religious freedom should not apply to Muslims in the U.S. and that Islam is incompatible with the Constitution.

VVS is hardly ACT’s only connection to the Religious Right. Before coming to America, Gabriel worked as an anchor for Pat Robertson’s Christian television station in the Middle East. Early on in ACT’s development, Gabriel hired Guy Rodgers. Rodgers had worked as field director for the Christian Coalition of America, founded by Robertson, and helped build that group into a political powerhouse by planting chapters across the country. Rodgers and Gabriel are using similar strategies with ACT. By the time Rodgers left ACT in 2014, the group claimed 280,000 members and almost 900 chapters in 11 countries. Both the structure that ACT has adopted and its engagement of the Republican Party follow the game plan used by the Religious Right to successfully build power within GOP structures over the last four decades.

Gabriel’s leadership of ACT has come under scrutiny by some. It has been reported that Guy Rodgers, since leaving the organization, has complained that she is “taking too much cash” out of ACT. An anti-Muslim activist and author, Dave Gaubatz, has aired many accusations against Gabriel. He has discussed her lavish lifestyle, writing that Gabriel charges between $3,000 and $10,000 for speaking gigs for which she brings along

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**Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Hate Groups”**

This report frequently notes when discussing organizations if they have been labeled a “hate group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). SPLC is considered the leading authority when it comes to mapping and determining hate groups across the country. On its website, SPLC defines a hate group as “an organization that – based on its official statements or principles, the statements of its leaders, or its activities – has beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.” Immutable characteristics are physical traits that are extremely difficult to change, such as race or ethnicity. The Human Rights Network feels that including information from SPLC in this report helps illustrate how events in Montana are connected to national movements and trends.
an “entourage” that includes her hairdresser. He also noted that Gabriel lives in a $3 million home in Virginia Beach, which he claimed is paid for “off the backs of the grassroots donors” and chapter leaders who are pressured every week to “raise money for her.” A journalist discovered that Gabriel’s income increased by 79% from $87,300 to $156,473 between 2010 and 2011. Gabriel said this was due to an emergency move to pay for her family to be relocated after a Tennessee newspaper published her real name.29

Gaubatz also raised questions about the number of ACT chapters that are in fact active. Gabriel’s response to this was to remove the map of ACT chapters from the group’s website. As reported by SPLC’s Hatewatch, ACT’s map actually contains fewer than half of the 1,000 chapters Gabriel claims, and of those, only about 10% are active.30

ACT for America and Right-Wing Extremists

Along with connections to the Religious Right and the Republican Party, ACT also frequently finds itself lined up with activists and groups in the hardcore white supremacist and the anti-government “patriot” movements. When Gabriel visited Twin Falls, Idaho, in 2017, a “patriot” group called the “Three Percent of Idaho” provided security for her at a number of different events.31 The reference to “Three Percent” refers to the “patriot” claim that only three percent of American colonists actually fought the British to win the Revolutionary War.

Back in 2015, when a local ACT chapter organized a rally in Olympia, Washington, to protest refugees, the Liberty for All Three Percent Militia provided security for the event, with armed militia members patrolling the area around the state Capitol.32 Last year, after paying a visit to the anti-government occupiers of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Washington State Representative Matt Shea (R-Spokane Valley) organized a chapter of ACT for America in Spokane.33

In early 2017, SPLC warned that anti-Muslin rhetoric and ideology were becoming key parts of the “patriot” movement:

White nationalism is a political and social movement that claims the United States was founded by and for people of white European heritage. It promotes efforts to perpetuate and enshrine white privilege, white supremacy, and white dominance. This movement includes traditional white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, along with other entities that prefer to use mainstream politics and academiciansounding language instead of overt slurs and race-based violence.

Anti-Government “Patriot” Movement

The anti-government “patriot” movement is based on a hatred and distrust of the federal government, which “patriots” justify through conspiracy theories, largely based in anti-Semitism, about secret cabals intending to subvert Americans to a shadowy one-world government. In the conspiracy theories, the federal government is often in cahoots with other entities like the United Nations, and many “patriots” believe they will ultimately have to fight off an invasion by these supposed “New World Order” forces. Its activists have been known to use threats of violence to bully communities and government officials. In western states, this nationalist movement often organizes around natural resource issues. Well-known examples of “patriot” activists include the Militia of Montana, the Montana Freemen, the Bundy Family, and the Oklahoma City bomber.

“...The Patriot movement, also often called the militia movement, has always had strains of white supremacy and anti-Semitism. But they were not its dominant features. Now, fueled by a rapidly expanding world of anti-Muslim propagandists and the very real psychological impact of terrorism and the ‘War on Terror,’ violent animus toward Muslims is becoming a key part of Patriot thought. As far out as these ideas are, they dovetail in substantial ways with the conspiracist orientation of the larger Patriot movement... While Patriots may see a White House ally in Trump — and therefore lose some of their animus toward the federal government — they are finding new enemies in Islam.”34

These connections to “patriots” and white supremacists were never easier to see than in the “Marches Against Sharia” held around the country in mid-June 2017. Sharia Law is the guiding
principles of Islam. Emphasizing ACT’s fearmongering claim that “Sharia is incompatible with Western democracy and the freedoms it affords,” the group planned to hold the events in 23 cities.  

The events were the brainchild of avid Trump supporter and ACT Field Director Scott Presler. The marches quickly drew the support and participation of right-wing activists. This included the militia-based Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Arizona Liberty Guard, and the Texas State Militia. It also included the white nationalist Proud Boys, Identity Evropa, Vanguard America, League of the South, Soldiers of Odin, and the Keystone State Skinheads. Event organizers said the Proud Boy and militia groups would be providing armed security at some of the events. Oath Keepers put out a call to action about the events and encouraged all able-bodied members to attend the ACT events and help with security.

ACT ran into a public relations problem when it was discovered that longtime neo-Nazi Billy Roper was the lead organizer of the event in Arkansas. Roper has a long history in the white supremacist movement, including as a unit leader with the National Alliance. Roper announced and promoted his ACT event on Stormfront, a popular white supremacist message board founded by a Klan leader. Roper reported he was working with ACT to organize the event and attended an ACT-organized conference call for event leaders. Roper’s event was listed on both the ACT website and on the Facebook group being used to organize the event nationally. He specifically encouraged “white nationalists” to attend marches and noted they could bring weapons to those rallies in states that have “open carry” gun laws.

After it was publicized that Roper was organizing an official event, ACT severed ties with him and canceled

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Many of ACT for America’s “Marches Against Sharia” featured the presence of anti-government “patriots” and white nationalists. (Top Left) Oath Keepers showed up at the rally in Raleigh, NC. (Top Right) Georgia Three Percent Security Force provided security at the rally in Georgia. (Bottom) The white nationalist Identity Evropa was at the event in Orlando, FL. All photos by the Southern Poverty Law Center.
the Arkansas event. The group issued a statement that it took these actions after learning that Roper was “associated with white supremacist groups,” which it said were “against all our values.” Roper showed National Public Radio copies of e-mails from Presler to Roper, including one reading, “You are approved and ready to go.” Roper ended up holding his own march that drew a few white nationalists.41

The Facebook page for the “Marches Against Sharia” events contained exactly the type of violent and racist rhetoric directed toward Muslims that ACT had stoked with the events:

♦ “I agree! The USA is a Judeo/Christian nation and the Muslim nations want to destroy Israel and us.”

♦ “We need to reclassify islam [sic] as a terrorist hate group, not a religion. It is an evil ideology invented by a murderous, insane pedophile!!!”

♦ “I beleave [sic] we use any force needed to remove these islamic muslim Refugees terrorist [sic] from this country and are [sic] way of life.”42

ACT for America and the Trump Administration

ACT for America has been a vocal supporter of President Donald Trump, both during his presidential campaign and since entering the White House. In October 2016, Gabriel said voting for Trump would help ensure the “survival of Western civilization.”43 Now, she says ACT has “a direct line” to the president and the ability to “shape policies with respect to radical Islam.”44 In fact, Gabriel even had dinner with Trump as U.S. warplanes bombed a Syrian air base.45

She told supporters that ACT was “on the verge of playing the most pivotal role in reversing the significant damage that has been done to our nation’s security and well-being over the past eight years.”46 Gabriel has said it’s time “to capitalize, and go for the jugular!”47 She has plenty of reasons to be optimistic, as ACT supporters can be found throughout the Trump Administration.

Trump’s CIA Director, Mike Pompeo, has spoken at ACT’s conferences and sponsored an ACT meeting at the Capitol last year.48 Gabriel has called Pompeo a “steadfast ally” of ACT, and he was awarded the group’s National Security Eagle Award in 2016.49 Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who has served on ACT’s board of advisers, served as Trump’s National Security Adviser before stepping down after revelations that he might have violated the law in communications with a Russian diplomat. Stephen Bannon, the former executive chairman of Breitbart News Network who has described Muslim American groups as “cultural jihadists” bent on destroying American society, served as Trump’s chief strategist until August 2017. Bannon’s Breitbart News has published several articles written by Gabriel.50

Prior to his position with the Trump Administration, Flynn had a long track record of anti-Muslim public statements over the years. He has claimed that “Fear of Muslims is rational” and compared Islam to Nazism, fascism, and communism. Flynn, who wrote a book about fighting a global war against Islam, stated that the religion is a “vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised.” Following Flynn’s departure as National Security Adviser, ACT circulated a message to its followers claiming that his removal was the work of “rogue weasels” and “shadow warriors” within the U.S. government trying to destroy Trump.51

It wasn’t just through appointees that President Trump rewarded the support of anti-Muslim groups like ACT. Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump used the same type of Islamophobic rhetoric favored by ACT. He talked about potentially closing all the mosques in America and creating a database for all Muslims in the country.52 The following are a sample of some Trump comments from the campaign trail:

♦ In September 2015 at a campaign rally, Trump pledged to kick all Syrian refugees out of the country, as they might be a secret army. “They could be ISIS, I don’t know. This could be one of the great tactical plays of all time. A 200,000 man army, maybe,” he said. In an interview that aired later, Trump said, “This could make the Trojan horse look like peanuts.”53
In December 2015, the Trump campaign issued a statement saying he was calling for a total ban on Muslims entering the country. He told Fox News that Islam was like a “sickness.”

In March 2016, Trump stated, “I think Islam hates us. There’s something there that — there’s a tremendous hatred there. There’s a tremendous hatred. We have to get to the bottom of it.”

After taking office, President Trump didn’t wait long to take action against Muslims. Within a week of becoming president, he signed an executive order blocking Syrian refugees and banning citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States for 90 days. Trump and his allies referred to it as a “Muslim Ban.”

Courts struck down the order as unconstitutional. Trump then issued a slightly-revised executive order, which was also blocked by courts. In late June 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way for President Trump to ban entry of some people into the United States from countries he deems dangerous, but the justices imposed strict limits on the travel ban while it examines the scope of presidential power. The court said it would hear arguments in October 2017 on the executive order banning travel from six majority-Muslim countries. ACT for America has vigorously supported President Trump’s Muslim Ban, including urging its members to lobby their lawmakers to support it.

The Trump Administration also made changes to the “Countering Violent Extremism” program, which was created to counter all violent ideologies. In early February, Reuters quoted anonymous sources that said President Trump wanted to change the program to only focus on Islamic extremism, including possibly renaming it “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism.” When the Trump Administration announced its grants in June, it rescinded a $400,000 grant approved by the Obama Administration to Life After Hate, a group dedicated to helping the rehabilitation of former neo-Nazis and other white supremacists. Most of the organizations that ended up receiving grants offered programs dealing with Islamic extremists, even as research shows that white supremacist groups have been linked to most domestic terrorist attacks in recent years. Sources said the Trump Administration rescinded the Life After Hate grant due to critical comments the group made about Trump on social media.

Creating and Riding the Waves of Islamophobia

Islamophobia is an “outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination” and may include the perception that Islam is inferior to the West and is a violent political ideology rather than a religion. Frequently, Islamophobes demonize all followers of Islam as dangerous extremists, refusing to recognize the moderate Muslim majority. The West is generally used...
as a coded term for white Christian people.

Spencer Sunshine, an Associate Fellow at Political Research Associates, has written about how Islamophobia is “increasingly uniting formerly disparate factions” of the far right around “their mutual hatred of Muslims.” Sunshine notes that Islamophobia is more socially acceptable than anti-Semitism, but still allows far-right groups to demonize a minority group, but the supposed focus on religion is a tactical way to try and avoid the issue of race. Because of this, he notes:

“Islamophobia is important to the far right because it can fill the same political role as the old anti-Semitic narratives, and draw on the same emotional power – but it is far more socially acceptable and appeals to a larger audience. For example, in some parts of the far right, Muslims have replaced Jews as a feared unassimilable religious minority that seeks to undermine the moral fabric of our society. Muslims are also perceived by many on the right to be lower on the socioeconomic ladder than U.S. Jews, and therefore an easier target...Islamophobia is also a way to express white nationalist ideals while avoiding explicit appeals to race, since it is cloaked as a criticism of a religion – even though its targets are overwhelmingly people of color. It is similar to, and has a large crossover with, the anti-immigrant movement.”

Sunshine’s description helps set the frame for how Islamophobia is directly tied to nationalism, which is a growing and alarming problem. In targeting a religion unfamiliar to many people in the United States, Islamophobes can use the framework of “national security,” disavow the label of racist, and even claim protection of the state of Israel to conjure up nationalist sentiment that narrowly defines who is “American” and, thus, who deserves rights as such.

All of this has helped facilitate various anti-Muslim conspiracy theories becoming common in the far right and, sometimes, in more mainstream circles. Islam is characterized as not a religion, but a political ideology determined to conquer all other cultures.

The conspiracy theories claim Muslims have infiltrated all major institutions, from academia and the military to political parties, to replace the U.S. Constitution with Sharia Law. Finally, all Muslims are viewed as potential terrorists and mosques are enemy military bases.

National watchdog groups routinely list ACT for America as one of the main purveyors of Islamophobia in America, and with good reason. The organization supports passing legislation to outlaw the use of Sharia Law, opposes the resettlement of Muslim refugees in America, attempts to stop the construction of mosques in local communities, and tells Muslims to assimilate and abandon their culture. ACT has stated on its website that anyone coming to the United States needs to recognize that “we are the greatest nation on Earth and that if you are an American you must be an American first.” The group also tries to downplay the charges of Islamophobia by calling it a “deceptive narrative” and claiming that refugee advocates are “fanatics.”

Currently, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim intimidation and violence are at high levels. In August 2017, CNN reported that it had mapped 63 publicly-reported incidents from January-July 2017 where mosques were targets of threats, vandalism, or arson. On average, CNN found that it came out to nine such incidents every month and at least two a week. These numbers echoed similar reports.

According to a report released by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) earlier in the year, 940 reports of potential bias incidents involving the targeting of Muslims happened during a three-month period. Of those, CAIR determined 451 stemmed from anti-Muslim bias, a 91% increase from the previous year. Another report by the Center for the Study of Hate and
Extremism found that bias crimes against various minorities and religious groups were up some 20 percent since President Trump’s election. The majority of the crimes documented were against Muslims and members of the LGBT community.64

This is the environment that ACT has helped create and in which it thrives. The group doesn’t merely engage in policy debates. Instead, it takes actions like posting the home addresses of Muslim community leaders and activists, while its leader calls “every practicing Muslim... a radical Muslim.” While trying to downplay its hatemonger tendencies, Imagine 2050 notes that the group’s leader, Brigitte Gabriel, “proudly stands with politicians who have been responsible for the most explicitly racist and vile campaign rhetoric we’ve seen in recent memory.”65
ACTing for Islamophobia

ACT for America has an established presence in Montana through the chapter based in Flathead County, which is known as Flathead ACT, Inc. The Flathead group’s website lists other chapters in the following counties: Lake, Lewis and Clark, Madison, Ravalli, Rosebud, and Stillwater.

While the level of activity varies for these other chapters, Flathead ACT has conducted consistent programming for the last few years and routinely draws fairly large crowds for the speakers it brings to the area. Frequently, these speakers also appeared in other communities, either for another ACT chapter or a local GOP entity.

Flathead ACT’s leaders and members in Montana have quite a bit of crossover with some local Republican Central Committees and other entities within the Montana GOP’s structure. In fact, despite the group’s rabid anti-Muslim sentiment and focus on defeating Islam, the media treats them like a legitimate conservative organization, seeking out its members’ thoughts on everything from the Affordable Care Act to how they feel about Republican candidates running for office.

Caroline Solomon and Calvin Beringer are co-leaders of Flathead ACT. Solomon has served as the president of the Flathead County Republican Women. At the 2015 Montana Federation of Republican Women’s Biennial Convention, she represented the Flathead Chapter and presented about Flathead ACT’s background and 2017 legislative agenda. Beringer is a former law enforcement officer in both Flathead County and King County in Washington State.

Solomon isn’t the only Montana ACT member involved in the GOP. On Flathead ACT’s website, Shirlee Keffer is listed as the ACT chapter leader in Stillwater County. She is also active with the Stillwater Republican Women and chaired the organizing efforts for the Montana Federation of Republican Women’s “Caring for America” conference in 2015.

Similarly, Fiona Nave is pictured on Flathead ACT’s website and identified as being with the Stillwater County Republican Central Committee. Dee Kirk-Boon played an important role in gathering and submitting written testimony in support of an anti-Muslim bill during the 2017 Montana Legislature. In the past, she served as the president of the Flathead County Republican Women and has continued to stay active with the group.

Under Solomon’s and Beringer’s leadership, Flathead ACT has held many events over the last few years featuring anti-Muslims speakers, with some coming from Montana and others from the national scene. Solomon has told the media that the group has about 70-80 members who show up for their work meetings.

Flathead ACT’s activism has been recognized at the national level. In 2016, it won ACT for America’s “Chapter of the Year Award.” Solomon and her husband attended the annual conference in Washington D.C. to accept the award. She said that attending the conference and meeting with U.S. Senators was powerful, but challenging. “I also can share with you that they all got messages from CAIR asking them to not meet with us,” Solomon said.

Speakers Represent Cross-Section of the Right

Flathead ACT has continually served up speakers specializing in Islamophobia, but many of them also included their activism with other right-wing groups and related issues. Speakers have touched on immigration, refugees, and even school textbooks. Descriptions of some of Flathead ACT’s speakers are included below.
to help provide a picture of what type of messages the group brings to the Flathead Valley.

Paul Nachman:  
Montanans for Immigration Law Enforcement

Based out of Bozeman, Paul Nachman is a retired physicist and one of the state’s primary anti-immigrant activists. He cut his teeth on immigration issues while living in California prior to moving to Montana and working at Montana State University.

While living in California in 2005, Nachman unsuccessfully worked to get California’s 1994 Proposition 187 back on the ballot as a leader of SUSPS (Support U.S. Population Stabilization). Proposition 187 was designed to deny undocumented immigrants social services, health care, and public education. It was passed by the voters in 1994, but it was later overturned by the courts. Nachman also unsuccessfully tried to get the Sierra Club to adopt anti-immigrant positions by talking about overpopulation, birth rates, and immigration as environmental issues. The Sierra Club has repeatedly taken a neutral stance on immigration policy.77

Nachman frequently writes for the white nationalist VDARE website. The site is named after Virginia Dare, who is said to be the first English (white) child born in America, and features work by white nationalists and prominent academic racists.78 SPLC designates VDARE an anti-immigrant hate group, but Flathead ACT lists VADRE as a “Suggested Website” for educational purposes.79

Nachman’s writings frequently reference noted white nationalists, including the likes of Jared Taylor and John Tanton (the architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement).80 He has also praised vigilante border militia groups like the San Diego Minutemen.81

Nachman has called refugees “parasites” and claimed that “Hispanic culture is incompatible with American rule of law” which makes it “a mortal threat to our civilization.”82 He has bemoaned that immigration “harms the U.S,” and “we can’t save the world, but we can ruin our own country in trying.”83 Similarly, he has claimed that “every aspect of our immigration regime amounts to a victimization of the native-born American citizenry.”84

Representing Montanans for Immigration Law Enforcement (MILE), Nachman presented to Flathead ACT in February 2016. MILE is the state chapter of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which is categorized by SPLC as an anti-immigrant hate group.85 His presentation contained references to VDARE, FAIR, and Tanton’s Social Contract.86 During his presentation, he told the crowd that America’s purpose is to “benefit the citizens of the United States... not to rescue the rest of humanity from its woes,” a sentiment he frequently repeats.87 He made this presentation available through the VDARE site.88

Tom Osborne

A frequent speaker at Flathead ACT events is Kalispell’s Tom Osborne, a self-proclaimed expert on the dangers of Islam. According to online biographies, Osborne spent 25 years with the Los Angeles Police Department and was an adjunct faculty member teaching at The University of Southern California for 35 years. Osborne says he became interested in Islam due to a gun battle his police department had with the Black Panthers in 1969. He says he later studied Islam in both undergraduate and graduate school. Following the 9-11 attacks, he says he began his in-depth research on Islam and Islamic Jihad. He claims to be a “recognized authority” in these areas and has been giving presentations on “Islamic Jihad” for the past nine years.89 Osborne has given public presentations and conducted classes about the dangers of Islam for Flathead ACT.90

In February 2017, he facilitated a question-and-answer session following Flathead ACT’s screening of Islam Rising, which repackages an anti-Islamic film by far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders that claims Islam is forcefully colonizing Europe. Throughout the discussion, Osborne reinforced his central argument: there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim. He claimed that 10% of Muslims in the world are “Jihadists,” making them “the largest militant force in the history of this planet.” He said Muslims who are not Jihadists refuse condemn these extremists, which makes them “passive terrorists... So there are no innocent Muslims.”91

In January 2016, Osborne gave a presentation for
Flathead ACT titled “The Truth About Islam and The Islamization of America.” He warned the audience that we are now in the “Third Jihad” of Muslims trying to take over the world and implement Sharia Law. He claimed the “Islamization of America” that is happening is part of a “carefully-orchestrated and skillfully-implemented plan created by the Muslim Brotherhood,” a frequent target of Islamophobic conspiracy theories.

The ultimate goal, he claimed, was to eliminate Western civilization. Osborne also stated that Islam has never been about peace, and anyone making that claim “should seek professional help.” He stated that Muslims have a need to get rid of freedom of speech and attack the First Amendment on many fronts, including by financing a non-discrimination ordinance in Billings.

He named many government officials that he characterized as Muslim sympathizers and claimed that President Barack Obama had a “shadow cabinet” in the White House full of Muslim Brotherhood members. Toward the end of his presentation, Osborne simply stated, “We are at war with radical Islam” and tried to distance himself from Islamophobia by saying, instead, he is “Jihad-ophobic.”

Osborne’s Islamophobic conspiracy theories haven’t just been spread in the Flathead area. Local Republican groups have sponsored his anti-Muslim presentations, including the Lewis and Clark County Republican Women in April 2016. The group said it was especially timely as “now that groups in Missoula and Helena are specifically inviting Muslims into our communities.” A Republican group in Stillwater County hosted him the same month.

**Roy White:**
*The Patriots of San Antonio and Truth in Textbooks*

Based out of Texas and a pilot for Southwest Airlines, retired Lt. Col. Roy White was part of an internal storm within ACT for America in 2017. In February of that year, Brigitte Gabriel fired White as the leader of ACT’s chapter in San Antonio after claiming he advertised a meeting where he would teach activists how to “shut down” mosques. Gabriel followed White’s firing by warning ACT supporters that they would be stripped of their membership for propagating bigotry or threats of violence, which did not sit well with some in the ACT camp.

White’s dismissal caused some turmoil within ACT as some members sided with him. He claimed that he never used the “shut down” language in his promotional materials, and email alerts from White’s San Antonio chapter back up his claim. In fact, White published email and text exchanges between himself and ACT staffer J. Craig which seem to indicate Craig used the term “shut down” mosques and not White. In any case, White has continued his anti-Muslim crusade under the banner of The Patriots of San Antonio. At its events, White has thanked supporters for sticking with him and said the incident opened new doors for him. He has said his new venture will allow him to talk more honestly about “the fight against Islam” without having to “sugarcoat it.”

Judging by his public statements over the years, it’s difficult to believe that White ever sugarcoats his beliefs. Saying he began studying Islam after three rotations with the Air Force in the Middle East, White has described his anti-Muslim activism as “a spiritual battle of good and evil,” and he’s called CAIR “jihadists wearing suits.”

He’s been a popular speaker among Religious Right, anti-immigrant, and Tea Party groups, where he frequently talks about the need to pass law banning Sharia Law.

White has carved a niche out
for himself when it comes to challenging the way school textbooks portray Muslims and Islam. His group Truth in Textbooks (TNT, formerly Truth in Texas Textbooks) has routinely challenged the content of books with the Texas Board of Public Education, and he has traveled around the country teaching other local groups how to do the same in their areas. Truth in Textbooks works to keep what White calls “soft and gentle” depictions of Islam out of public school curriculum and textbooks. “If you write about Islam in a way that’s positive to deceive,” he says, “then you are performing Jihad by the pen.”

In December 2014, after one long battle with textbook publishers, White claimed victory for changing the content. His group had challenged what they viewed as a “soft definition of ‘jihad’” that said the word meant the “struggle to become a better person.” White said his group made sure publishers understood Jihad was “a mandatory offensive war (including violence) to be waged by Muslims against non-Muslims.” He also complained that textbooks referred to America’s form of government as democracy instead of a “constitutional republic,” a differentiation popular with the anti-government “patriot” movement.

Truth in Textbooks’ presence in the Texas review process was not well received by all involved, and some of those entities noted that TNT’s suggested changes weren’t limited to Muslims and Islam. White’s group wanted to reduce the coverage of civil rights efforts, which it claimed promoted unwanted “racial politics,” and it tried to insert creationism into textbooks. TNT came to the party relatively late and submitted a 469-page report identifying more than 1,500 “factual errors, omission of facts, half-truths and agenda biases” in proposed materials. While White declared victory, the Texas Freedom Network said his group did not succeed in getting any “substantive changes” into the books.

White’s dismissal from ACT put the status of Truth in Textbooks up in the air. It had become a project of ACT for America in 2016. Starting in 2012, ACT had taken an interest in textbooks, publishing a report titled Education or Indoctrination? The Treatment of Islam in 6th through 12th Grade American Textbooks. The report examined 38 textbooks for how Islam was depicted and concluded the books provided a “faulty historical narrative” about Islam and its relationship to the West. ACT also stated that the Muslim world was “not generally held to the same rigor of historical analysis that the textbooks apply to Christianity, Judaism and the West.” The report recommended that ACT activists take the textbook fight to their local school boards.

When White’s group initially joined ACT, he said the merger would help form the “most extensive teams of social studies textbook reviewers in the country.” Once Gabriel fired him, White announced that TNT was filing paperwork to become a Texas non-profit. It remains to be seen how much of a fight ACT may, or may not, put up to keep TNT under its banner. Through his varied activism, White helps demonstrate how many anti-Muslim activists have combined previous endeavors that stressed Religious Right or anti-government issues with a new focus on Islamophobia.

White visited Montana in the fall of 2016 when he was still in ACT’s good graces. He talked about the work he was doing to try and purge any moderate mention of Islam from textbooks to a crowd of about 200. He told attendees that too often textbooks try to teach children “the soft side of Islam and not the factual side about Islam.” He promised to share with the crowd how they could successfully challenge textbooks and bragged how 50 volunteers “changed what five million children are going to study for the next 10 years.”

Toward the end of his Flathead event, Montana State Legislator Rep. Derek Skees (R-Kalispell), who was running for his seat at the time, complained that people
call anti-Muslims activists “xenophobes.” He said Islamophobic activists should call a person making this claim an “oikophobe, which means fear and loathing of the known or the familiar, which is what they’re destroying. They can’t argue with that fact.” Another audience member, a local Tea Party activist, claimed Sharia Law was being practiced in 20 states, and it “goes against everything we as Americans and Christians have been taught.” It boiled down, the activist said, to Muslims wanting to “convert or kill us.”

Flathead ACT members had already jumped on the textbook bandwagon before White’s appearance. In 2015, Caroline Solomon was one of the women who formed the Truth in Montana Textbooks Association. The founders encouraged people to check out TNT (Roy White’s group) to get a sense of what they hoped to accomplish. Solomon was joined by Dayton’s Linda Sauer (founder of Lake County ACT) and Kalispell’s Davida Constant in creating the group.

In a 2015 letter to the editor announcing the group’s formation, the trio said three area school superintendents had met with Flathead ACT to answer some questions concerning how the world’s religions were taught in area schools. The three activists said the superintendents repeatedly said there were no problems with Islam in their schools. However, the letter said Truth in Montana Textbooks was necessary because school districts were too quick to please CAIR and force teachers to distribute pro-Islam information to students. They complained that proponents of Islam were making “every effort to marginalize and silence those who cling to American values and traditions.” If these forces weren’t already at work in Montana, the women assured readers “it’s just a matter of time.”

William Federer: Author and Radio Show Host

William Federer has a longtime history of activism in Religious Right and anti-government “patriot” circles. Back in the early 2000s, he was a featured speaker at Media Bypass’ 10-Year Convention. Media Bypass was a magazine dedicated to “patriot” issues, especially concerning the anti-government notion that people didn’t have to pay their taxes.

At the Convention, Federer shared the podium with the likes of self-proclaimed neo-Nazi Chris Temple, Aryan Nations attorney Edgar Steele, and anti-Semitic author Eustace Mullins. Federer spoke about why America is supposedly a “Christian Nation.” In more recent history, he’s made a name for himself in white nationalist and anti-Muslim circles. Federer gave a presentation titled “A History of Islam and the U.S. Constitution” to Flathead ACT in May 2017, and the chapter’s website features photos from the event.

His promotion of false history that America was founded as a “Christian nation” has been his calling card for decades. CitizenLink, a policy partner of Religious Right heavyweight Focus on the Family, promoted Federer as an “excellent reference” when it came to “the foundations of American law,” because he focused on how the Ten Commandments provided the basis for the
country’s legal and political system.\textsuperscript{111}

Federer has complained that the “religious toler-
ance” of America’s founders has backfired by being used
against Christians.\textsuperscript{112} He noted that “strict Islamic societ-
ies” prohibited Judeo-Christian expression “and now the
ACLU is doing the same in our country.”\textsuperscript{113} He claimed
Americans needed to understand that “tolerance is a
Christian idea and secularists are indebted to Christians
for their freedom,” which he extrapolated to mean that
there can be no separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{114} He concluded that, if the “foundation of our government —
the Judeo-Christian foundation” is taken away, Americans
shouldn’t be “surprised when the system falls.”\textsuperscript{115}

During the Obama Administration, Federer peddled
conspiracy theories involving the president. In 2012, he
told the listeners of a radio program by the American
Family Association (designated an anti-LGBT hate group
by SPLC) that President Obama would “use an invasion
of Iran as an excuse to attempt a shutdown of TV, radio,
and the internet.”\textsuperscript{116} He said he thought it was a viable
political strategy for Obama because, “If you can vote to
kill innocent babies, what can’t you justify?”\textsuperscript{117}

Federer told another online radio program that the
“atheist homosexual gay agenda movement” will move
America “into an Islamic future” complete with Sharia
Law. He also described an even more elaborate con-
spiracy theory whereby refugees coming to America will
join forces with Muslims smuggled into the country by
drug gangs to set up “sleeper cells” that will rise up once
they “get a signal to have Ferguson riots in malls across
America.” He said, once this happened, the government
would establish a “militarized dictatorship” under Presi-
dent Obama.\textsuperscript{118}

Federer has participated in “Writer’s Workshops”
convened by the white nationalist and anti-immigrant
Social Contract Press. These workshops attempt to use
essays and writings to add a semblance of legitimacy
to white nationalist arguments of advancing policy to
maintain a white European majority in the United States.
The workshops bring together white nationalists and
anti-immigrant activists “to share their bigoted ideas,” ac-
cording to Imagine 2050. During a presentation to one of
these workshops, Federer stated “multiculturalism is the
AIDS virus of Western civilization.”\textsuperscript{119} The Social Contract
Press’ YouTube Channel includes a Federer video titled
“What Americans Need to Know about Islam.”\textsuperscript{120}

In the last few years, Federer has showed up with in-
creasing frequency when it comes to attacking members
of the Muslim community. In 2016, he gave his “What
Every American Needs to Know about the Qur’an: A
History of Islam and United States” presentation at a
training in Virginia sponsored by the Culpeper County
Sheriff’s Department. The main draw was a disgraced
FBI agent who now travels the country offering bigoted
anti-Islam conspiracies to law enforcement.\textsuperscript{121} The anti-
Muslim website “The Counter Jihad Report” describes
Federer as giving a “fascinating perspective on Islam’s
1400 year war with the West.” The site says he gives a
“whirlwind tour through the history of Islamic conquest”
from the childhood of Mohammed all the way to present
day events.\textsuperscript{122}

Federer has managed to mold his traditional theo-
ocratic worldview and conspiracy theories to include
Islamophobia, which allows him to reach a broader
segment of the right wing these days. Echoing similar
comments from the past, he has warned that Europe
has gone from a “Judeo-Christian past into a neutral-
secular-gay-agenda present and now it’s going into an
Islamic future.” Federer warns that “the sexual confusion
agenda is simply a transition phase” that will soon “be
taken over by Islam.”\textsuperscript{123}

\textbf{Nonie Darwish:}
\textit{Arabs for Israel and Former Muslims United}

Born in Egypt, Nonie Darwish is the daughter of an
Egyptian Army Lieutenant who was killed by the Israel
Defense Forces in 1956. In the 1970s, she and her hus-
band moved to the United States and she converted from
Islam to evangelical Christianity. She says her current
activism stems from the 9-11 attacks, after which she
began speaking and writing about the dangers of Islam.

She founded Arabs for Israel in 1994, and she also
leads Former Muslims United, which is a project of the
anti-Muslim American Freedom Defense Initiative, which
the SPLC lists as an anti-Muslim hate group. The Defense
Initiative is led by Pamela Geller, whom SPLC calls the
“most visible and flamboyant figurehead,” and Darwish frequently shares the stage
with Geller.\textsuperscript{124} Flathead ACT’s website features numerous
Darwish and Geller books on its recommended reading
list.\textsuperscript{125}

At an anti-Muslim rally earlier this year in Texas,
Darwish stated:

“Islam, unlike biblical religions, it doesn’t
grow in grassroots, it imposes itself on
people through government control.
And this is what Americans should un-
derstand. Any religion that kills those
who leave it, should never get the ben-
efit of calling itself a religion or being
accepted as a religion.”\textsuperscript{126}
She has described Islam as “a poison to our society” that “should be annihilated.” Her rhetoric also helps explain why Darwish speaks at anti-Muslim rallies around the country targeting mosques in communities. “A mosque is not just a place for worship,” she has told the press. “It’s a place where war is started, where commandments to do jihad start, where incitements against non-Muslims occur. It’s a place where ammunition was stored.”

Research proves how inaccurate her claim is. A two-year study by a group of academics on American Muslims and terrorism concluded that contemporary mosques are actually a deterrent to the spread of militant Islam and terrorism. Similar to ACT’s Brigitte Gabriel, Darwish has been invited to participate in the annual Values Voter Summit and has made inroads to Tea Party circles. She has claimed “the most dangerous threat in our age is Islam.”

Darwish spoke to Flathead ACT in June 2017 and repeated many of her common anti-Muslim talking points. She said that Christianity teaches the way to heaven is through personal redemption in Jesus Christ, and Islam teaches the way is through violent Jihad against the enemies of Allah, which she said are Jews and Christians. She said every mosque in the world ends with a prayer cursing the enemies of Islam and calling for Jihad against them. She repeatedly criticized “far-left liberals and Democrats” as threats to America, because they support Muslim communities, immigrants, and refugees. She also mentioned that, when she came to America, she wanted to assimilate; however, she said today’s refugees are unwilling to do that.

After her talk, two men in the audience mentioned websites that reported there are somewhere between 20-40 Jihadist training camps in the U.S. Both men asked Darwish if she knew of these camps. Her answer was, “I have no doubt of it, and they are just waiting for the order.” Rep. Derek Skees (R-Kalispell) asked Darwish what action she recommended people take, to which she responded, “Politics.” Skees’ attendance was not too surprising, as his right-wing activism is well established. As a legislator, he has advocated nullifying federal laws, refusing federal funds, and shutting down many of the state’s school districts and siphoning those funds off to private schools. Mother Jones labeled him a “Tea Party purist.” Rep. Albert Olszewski (R-Kalispell) also attended the event. The two lawmakers were acknowledged during the program and received applause from the audience.

Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff: In Defense of Free Speech

Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff is the daughter of an Austrian diplomat who grew up in Kuwait, Libya, and Iran. At age 19, she was held hostage by Iraqis who invaded Kuwait where she had a summer job. Later, she became an anti-Islamic crusader and faced criminal repercussions.
in Austria for defamatory statements made about the Prophet Muhammad. Flathead ACT has brought her to Montana multiple times to share her story and warn that Islam is taking over countries.

In 2009, Sabaditsch-Wolff spoke at an event organized by the far-right Austrian Freedom Party where she accused the Prophet Mohammad of being a pedophile. A journalist recorded the presentation and the transcripts were used in a criminal case against her for the “denigration of religious beliefs of a legally recognized religion” under the Austrian Criminal Code. She was convicted two years later and ordered to pay a fine. Sabaditsch-Wolff appealed the court’s ruling, but the Austrian Supreme Court upheld it.

She has become a martyr for right-wing activists in America, capitalizing on her free-speech hero status and hatred of Islam. Sabaditsch-Wolff frequently speaks at anti-Muslim events, including in front of ACT for America chapters around the country.

Sabaditsch-Wolff has claimed that thousands of immigrants from Latin America are “in fact Muslims from the Middle East” that have forged documents and “learned a little bit of Spanish so that they can pass for Mexicans” once stateside. She has characterized the refugees resettling in this country as “overwhelmingly young Muslim men, of fighting age” that are here as part of a plan to “migrate into infidel lands to advance the cause of Islam.” She warned that, once enough of these Muslims got into the country, “violent jihad can begin.” As part of this effort, Sabaditsch-Wolff warned that “cultural institutions such as the Church and patriotic organizations” that were critical of Islam had be “discredited and weakened.” She has said we are “already in World War III.”

On a Montana radio program, she warned that Islam isn’t like other religions. “Sharia Law does not concern itself with just the Muslim believer,” she said, “but with the entire world.” In a speech to a Minnesota Tea Party, she said Muslims are the “engine driving the assault on civil liberties in Europe” and warned the Islamic population was large enough in most major cities to “pose the risk of mob violence when roused.”

Sabaditsch-Wolff has parlayed her international status as a right-wing free speech martyr into meetings with key political leaders. In March 2017, she met with Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach. Kobach himself is no stranger to anti-immigrant nativism and xenophobia. He is employed by the Immigration Reform Law Institute, which SPLC has labeled an anti-immigrant hate group. In
2015, Kobach spoke at the Social Contract Press’ “Writers Workshop,” and he has also been responsible for drafting model anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim legislation and government programs. Kobach was behind the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) program in the early 2000s under President Bush, which required tens of thousands of Muslim and Middle Eastern visa holders to register with the government and be fingerprinted. He also served as vice-chairman of the voter fraud commission created by President Trump, which according to the Washington Post, “is tasked with finding evidence to support the president’s unsubstantiated claim that there was widespread voter fraud in the 2016 election.”

Sabaditsch-Wolff’s talking points for the Kobach meeting were published by the Gates of Vienna, an anti-Muslim blog. She relayed her Islamophobic conspiracy theory regarding refugee resettlement being a plan to infiltrate America. She warned that migration was leading to “vastly increased rates of theft and property crimes, violent rapes and assaults, and nightly public disorder” in Europe. She also warned Kobach that free speech was being attacked in Europe. Sabaditsch-Wolff claimed that Kobach promised to pass the contents of her briefing to the White House. “Another fine example of transatlantic partnership in action!” she stated.

Shahram Hadian: Truth in Love Ministry

Born in Iran, Shahram Hadian became a Christian pastor after converting from Islam in 1999. His group, Truth in Love Ministry, is based out of Washington State and is categorized as an anti-Muslim hate group by SPLC. In addition to spreading Islamophobia, Hadian also speaks about how America is supposedly a “Christian nation,” protecting gun rights, and “the sanctity of life and marriage.” He has spoken multiple times and in different Montana communities over the past few years.

In October 2016, the Lake County chapter of ACT for America sponsored a speech by Hadian in Missoula, followed by an additional event in Kalispell. Local media about the event said Hadian’s speech would provide his opinions on the fallacy of peaceful Islam and its culture of death. However, even more specific to Missoula, Hadian said he would discuss how refugee resettlement was a key strategy of spreading Islam. He also promised to address what he called “Chrislam,” which he described as the “seductive lie of a common God between Christianity and Islam.” In the lead up to his speaking gigs, Hadian affirmed he thought Montana was in danger of an Islamic takeover.

Hadian spoke to about 90 people in Missoula; however, the media noted Lake County ACT organizers had the room set up for 370. He gave his normal presentation bashing Islam and its supposed history of violence. As promised, he warned the resettlement of refugees is the “Trojan Horse of Islamic migration,” and said refugees drain public resources, especially housing and education funding. “It is suicide,” he said of refugee resettlement. “It is not love, it is not compassion.” In media coverage of the event, Flathead ACT’s Calvin Beringer said ACT really wanted to get a chapter going in Missoula.

Hadian’s presentation in Kalispell, sponsored by Flathead ACT, drew 150 people to hear him discuss the “fallacies of peaceful Islam.” A major topic of his presentation was discussing how Islam and Christianity are not similar. He claimed that “Allah is satanic,” and Muslims are working with Black Lives Matter and other groups to destroy America. Flathead ACT’s Beringer stated that the event was great and brought in new people, with a quarter of the audience having not previously attended an ACT event. “So our organization is growing,” he said.

Hadian’s October 2016 presentation in Kalispell came not quite a year after he spoke in the same community for Flathead ACT. During an event in December 2015, he called President Obama a Muslim and condemned the Islamic religion as “an evil ideology that is corrupting individuals.” Speaking the day after the massacre in San Bernardino, California, that left 14 people dead, Hadian repeatedly tied the event to his conviction that Islam is incompatible with American values. “There is no making peace with the ideology of Islam,” he said. “It’s time we got bolder with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Ann Corcoran: Refugee Resettlement Watch

Based out of Maryland, Ann Corcoran runs Refugee Resettlement Watch, which is designated an anti-Muslim hate group by SPLC. She claims she formed her group in 2007 due to her fears about allowing Muslim refugees into the country. Since that time, the SPLC states that
“racist groups have increasingly adopted her as one of their own.” She frequently touts information from racist websites like VDARE and American Renaissance. The white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens, which has described black people as “a retrograde species of humanity,” has featured a live feed of her articles on its website. Her writings have also appeared in John Tanton’s racist journal The Social Contract.

In a radio interview with American Family Association, Corcoran encouraged conservative women to outbreed Muslims as a strategy to keep Muslims from being able to “shove Sharia Law down our throats.” Corcoran was in Montana in July 2016 when she toured Glacier National Park with Caroline Solomon (Flathead ACT) and Paul Nachman (Montanans for Immigration Law Enforcement).

In addition to the speakers profiled above, Flathead ACT has brought other speakers to the state. They include:

♦ ACT for America’s leader Brigitte Gabriel and National Field Director Kelly Cook. Gabriel spoke to a crowd of 500 when she came to the Flathead Valley in 2015.

♦ The Center for Immigration Studies’ Don Barnett. The Center is designated an anti-immigrant hate group by SPLC, and Imagine 2050 has called it a “false-fact think tank.”

♦ Former Department of Homeland Security employee Phillip Haney, who has made his name in anti-Muslim circles by claiming that the Obama Administration made the agency delete or modify hundreds of records of individuals tied to Islamic extremist groups. Flathead ACT’s website features the PowerPoint presentation Haney gave to the Lake County ACT chapter in Polson in November 2016, and it has Haney’s book on its recommended reading list.

♦ The Center for Security Policy’s Frank Gaffney in 2017. Gaffney’s claims to anti-Islam fame are his conspiracy theories that the Muslim Brotherhood has infiltrated the government and Sharia Law is a dire threat to democracy. The Center for Security Policy is categorized as an anti-Muslim hate group by SPLC.

Flathead ACT has sponsored a parade of anti-Muslim speakers representing, or with ties to, a veritable “Who’s Who” of hate groups from around the country. These speakers have contributed nothing but negative vitriol demonizing Muslims, while encouraging Montanans to prepare for war with Islam.
Targeting Refugees: Missoula Becomes Flashpoint

As rhetoric by national ACT for America staff demonstrates, as well as comments by speakers brought to Montana by Flathead ACT, Islamophobia has also targeted recent efforts to resettle refugees in America from their war-torn homelands. This battle has come to Montana. Soft Landing Missoula formed in September 2015 when a group of 10 women in a book club launched a grassroots community effort to bring refugees to Montana.

The International Rescue Committee, which first opened an office in 1979 to resettle Hmong people from war-torn Laos, announced plans to reopen an office in March 2016. Led by Executive Director Mary Poole, Soft Landing not only supports incoming refugee families. It also educates the community about refugee resettlement. As Soft Landing started its efforts, its mission and that of Flathead ACT’s collided, leading to rallies in communities around the state. Today, nearly 100 refugees from Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia now live in Missoula.

ACT’s Brigitte Gabriel has been fearmongering about refugees for years. Back in 2015, she used one of her main talking points with the Breitbart News Network, saying that refugees were akin to parasites coming to live off Americans:

“They are people from Libya, Tunisia, Eritrea, Egypt, the Horn of Africa. They are not only people that are escaping wars, but they are people seeking economic freedom. They are people trying to suck off of the people from the West. They know they can get a free ticket for money. They are not coming here to build empires and become great business men and entrepreneurs. They are coming here to get the free checks from you and me who work very hard to pay our taxes.”

In 2015, ACT for America announced it was working on model legislation to give states more of a role in refugee resettlement. This effort sought to build on its Tennessee chapter’s success in passing such a bill in its state in 2011, and ACT hoped to take this model nationwide. The hate group said the goal of such legislation was to let states decide if refugees should be “allowed to live in their communities.” Immigration, including refugee resettlement, is solely under federal discretion, and this effort to define it as a “states rights” issue harkens back to a common tool used to deny civil rights.

With this emphasis by the national group, it’s not surprising that Flathead ACT took aim at Soft Landing and Missoula. On February 1, 2016, Flathead ACT members turned up for a protest against refugees outside the Missoula County Courthouse. Called the “American Security Rally of Montana,” the event was organized by Whitehall’s Jim Buterbaugh. He told the press he was motivated to hold the rally by “all this crap” being conducted by Soft Landing. “Right now, we’re locked in a battle to protect our security, to protect our country,” he said. “We are fighting the system, trying to head this thing off at the pass.” SPLC has designated the American Security Rally of Montana an anti-Muslim hate group.

Flathead ACT distributed an e-mail asking its members to attend the Missoula rally. It claimed that the “FBI has informed us they are now following terrorist cells in all 50 states.” It stated that Montanans need to “take a stand,” because “Once the seeds of resettlement are planted in the state there will be no stopping it.” On the day of the rally, Caroline Solomon and 27 ACT members took a chartered bus from the Flathead Valley to attend, making Flathead ACT members about one-quarter of the crowd. She told the press ACT objected to resettling “unvetted refugees” and those “using loopholes to bring the Jihadists in.” Calvin Beringer, who paid for the bus, also attended the rally. He said Flathead ACT wanted to start educating Missoulians about the social and financial costs of welcoming refugees. Blending an anti-Indian and anti-Muslim conspiracy theory, Beringer warned that refugees could congregate on Montana’s Indian reservations, which he said have attracted interest from Arab governments.

Up from the Bitterroot Valley for the rally, John and Dee Gibney held signs reading “They rape, kill, destroy” and “They hate Christians, Jews, women, gays.” The “They” referenced in the signs were “Syrian refugees,” according to Dee Gibney. John Gibney claimed this was all part of America’s “black Muslim president” trying “to bring this country down.” Echoing Brigitte Gabriel, Dee
Gibney complained that refugees come and “suck off the system.”

During the rally, Missoula’s Tom Wing urged the crowd to start “doing something” by flooding the chambers at that evening’s Missoula City Council meeting. Wing has described himself as an ACT supporter both in Florida and Montana. He has said that refugee resettlement “can be referred to as a Trojan Horse effort on the part of radical Islam.” While there are “good Islamists,” he said, “they get sucked in by the bad guys.”

Wing and others did offer anti-Muslim testimony at the city council meeting that night. Wing complained that “politically-correct public officials” and the media call Islam a peaceful religion, but he countered that the facts contradict such “politically-correct supposition.” Lake County’s Eric Knudsen first declared he wasn’t Islamophobic and then encouraged Christians to not ignore that Jesus said, “Don’t cast your pearls before swine.” He warned that refugee resettlement was used to get enough Muslims in a place to commit Jihad. Missoula’s Kandi Matthew-Jenkins also spoke against refugees. Matthew-Jenkins was a longtime activist with the Constitution Party of Montana, which fused anti-government “patriot” beliefs with theocratic Christian fundamentalism.

The Montana ACT members followed up the anti-refugee rally in Missoula by attending a public hearing held in Ravalli County later in February 2016 to support a letter the Ravalli County Commission wanted to send to President Obama saying Syrian refugees were not welcome in Montana. Over 500 people, including a number of people with holstered handguns, showed up in Hamilton, which led to the meeting being moved to the junior high gymnasium to accommodate the large crowd.

The commissioners had recently released a draft of their letter to the U.S. State Department opposing the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the county and surrounding area (it’s a little more than 45 miles between Hamilton and Missoula). The letter restated the common Islamophobic talking point that the government couldn’t adequately vet the refugees to ensure they didn’t belong to a terrorist organization.

The reality is that refugees seeking resettlement go through an extensive process, which includes filling out applications and participating in one-on-one interviews with multiple international and American intelligence agencies. Refugees from Middle Eastern countries face additional scrutiny during the process. Less than 1% of global refugees are referred to any country, not just the United States, for resettlement. This thorough vetting process can take years to complete.

Commission Chair Ray Hawk opened the public hearing by saying the commission had received lots of correspondence about the draft letter, with a margin of about 50-1 opposing refugee resettlement. Hamilton’s Hollis Poe claimed the issue wasn’t really resettlement. Instead, Poe said it was about setting the stage for martial law. Poe, a longtime theocrat and anti-government “patriot,” currently runs Advancing Conservatism Society, which describes itself as a “Constitutional Christian” group. Almost a decade ago, he was active with Celebrating Conservatism, which brought a parade of anti-government speakers into the Bitterroot Valley. After listening to public testimony, commissioners unanimously voted to send the letter opposing refugee resettlement.

Commissioner Hawk and his wife, Arlene, were interviewed later in 2016 on National Public Radio about the refugee issue. On the question of what role race plays in the refugee debate, Arlene claimed that Montanans can’t be racist, because “we don’t have a lot of different racial
cultures.” Commissioner Hawk said there was “a lot of sentiment against those refugees” when the commission decided on its letter. He claimed the problem was there was no way to know what kind of refugees might come to Montana. He offered this comparison: “Like somebody bringing in a bowl of jelly beans and putting them on your table and say take all you want, but two of those in there are cyanide.”

The end of February 2016 featured another “American Security Rally of Montana,” this time at the Capitol in Helena. Jim Buterbaugh, who organized the Missoula protest, teamed up with longtime right-wing activist Tim Ravndal to hold the event. Ravndal’s right-wing history includes militia organizing with groups like the Oath Keepers and the Order of the Constitutional Defenders, along with being ousted from a Tea Party for advocating hanging gay people. Flathead ACT’s Caroline Solomon was one of the event’s speakers. One attendee repeated the anti-Muslim claim that refugees “were not interested in becoming Americans” and just wanted to come here for “the free living and to spread Islam.” Helena’s Gina Satterfield, a strident Islamophobe who would appear prominently during the 2017 Montana Legislature, called Islam a “cult.”

This American Security Rally wasn’t the only time that the anti-refugee issue appeared in the Helena area. At the end of March 2016, Tim Ravndal posted a picture on Facebook of Mayor Jim Smith attending an ACT for America presentation in Helena featuring Tom Osborne. Ravndal said Mayor Smith “promises he will not sign off on welcoming refugees to Helena like Missoula did.” Mayor Smith claimed he had no idea what ACT was and that the people at the event seemed “concerned & fearful” but not “hateful.” He continued to make remarks that, as “a Post-911 person,” he was concerned about the security threat of refugees. A local award-winning immigration attorney, Shahid Haque, wrote the following to Mayor Smith, and it encapsulates the dangers that anti-refugee sentiment pose to members of Montana communities who are people of color:

“When you go down the path of stoking fear against people of an entire faith, where do you draw the line?

Ultimately, it’s not even about whether you are a Muslim or not. It’s about whether you look like one. And as the father of two young children, that is the most terrifying thing I see happening.

March 2016 kicked off with a pro-refugee rally in Kalispell’s Depot Park attended by about 80 people. Similar pro-refugee rallies were held on the same day in Helena, Bozeman, Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula. In Kalispell, approximately 12 anti-refugee activists held a counter-protest on the opposite side of the roadway. One online call for counter-protestors encouraged community members with anti-Muslim tendencies to “Come stand with us AGAINST the invasion of our community by people who are against our American values and way of life.” The post ended with a string of anti-Islam YouTube video links. The anti-refugee activists sported placards with messages like “Europe’s murder and rape epidemic is REAL, not ‘fear.’”

Tim Ravndal
Local media reported that the rally and counter-protest happened about a week after Paul Nachman spoke at a Flathead ACT event to over 450 people. Nachman had warned attendees that refugee resettlement drains taxpayer’s money and compromises national security. In the media coverage, Caroline Solomon repeated her claim that the government cannot vet refugees and doubled down, saying ISIS will “use this resettlement loophole to bring terrorists into our communities.” She also complained to the media about SPLC designating ACT for America an anti-Muslim hate group. Solomon said the group doesn’t oppose immigration or helping the poor. However, she said ACT is opposed to “bringing in people who want to hurt us, who don’t want to assimilate and who want to damage our constitution.” If that makes ACT a hate group, Solomon said it is “a very sad day in America.”

Solomon wasn’t quoted as to what she believed immigrants need to do to assimilate, but this common dog-whistle statement is meant to evoke ideas of a white Christian community.

Following their colleagues in the Bitterroot Valley, the Flathead County Commission held a meeting in mid-March 2016 about sending a letter to federal officials saying refugees were not welcome in the Flathead Valley. The letter stated the commissioners’ opposition was due to federal security officials not being able to screen refugees coming from war-torn countries. The commission took public comment for 15 minutes at the meeting, and all 17 people who spoke opposed refugees. Commissioner Phil Mitchell said he received about 40 letters regarding the issue, with 38 supporting the commission’s letter. Following the public comment, the Flathead County Commission voted to approve the letter.

During public comment, Kalispell’s Yvonne Stottler said Islam was a “theocracy that controls every part of a person’s life and requires its followers to put Shariah law in place where ever they go.” Others blamed Middle Eastern countries for not stepping up and “putting the burden on us,” and on the refugees themselves for not staying in their home countries and fighting. Caroline Solomon’s husband, Harry Solomon, put refugee resettlement in terms of the one-world government conspiracy theories popular with anti-government “patriots.” “The entire refugee resettlement agenda is a (United Nations)-inspired plan to erase borders and dilute Western culture through mass immigration,” he told commissioners.

Right-wing activists from other issue areas and groups also attended the hearing. Charlotte Komeda, who has been an activist with the Constitution Party of Montana, was pictured in the audience clapping after the commissioners announced their decision to send the letter. Clarice Ryan offered testimony during the public comment period. Ryan is a longtime activist in the anti-environmental “Wise Use” movement, including with Montanans for Multiple Use (MFMU). While administering MFMU’s e-mail list in 2002, she sent out a derogatory “poem” about Spanish speakers and characterized the families of immigrants as “trash.” More recently, Ryan has been a vocal opponent of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ Water Compact, including organizing events featuring speakers from national organizations that seek to eliminate tribal sovereignty.

Montana Human Rights Network board member Will Randall said he thought the meeting’s attendees “have mixed up the victims and the perpetrators of what’s happening (in countries like Syria).” Given that the Flathead County Commissioners had drafted their letter before seeking public comment, Randall said their meeting was more “like a political rally.” Randall issued a statement before the meeting saying that the Human Rights Network was disappointed the commissioners had been “misled to believe it is impossible to adequately investigate refugees.” The Network then provided a brief recap of the elaborate screening process through which refugees go.
Things continued to ramp up in the fall of 2016 as the elections drew near. October 2016 featured Shahram Hadian’s presentations in Missoula and Kalispell. Hadian further promoted nastiness towards refugees. He claimed resettlement is a $2 billion a year industry used by the United Nations and the Obama Administration to shun Christian refugees in favor of Muslims. He also repeated on a Montana radio program the Islamophobic claim that Islamic law itself has a migration strategy that Muslims will use to seed and then transform U.S. communities.

Post-election and into 2017, Flathead ACT’s opposition to refugee resettlement fanned the Islamophobic flames. At a film screening in early 2017, Caroline Solomon continued to harp on her consistent talking point that the only reason her group opposes refugees is because they are not vetted, adding refugees could “come here with diseases and then we have to deal with the problem.” A reporter at the meeting noted Missoula’s refugees were “mentioned with great derision;” however, nobody mentioned that, of the 17 families that had arrived in Missoula since March 2016, five were Congolese Christian and six were Eritrean Orthodox Christian. The reporter noted only four families were from Muslim-majority nations.

As the refugee debate continued to heat up, the Montana Human Rights Network continued to discuss the role groups like ACT for America have in creating and mobilizing anti-Muslim fear and resentment. “ACT for America, and its chapters in Montana, spreads hate and fear against Muslim people through their community activism and political actions,” said Rachel Carroll Rivas of the Network. “In a time where it is easy for fear to take hold, it is important to hold to our values to be a free and welcoming place for people of all faiths.”
Along with the various rallies and meetings decrying refugee resettlement going on in 2017, the Montana Legislature also convened. Flathead ACT again followed the lead of its parent organization by supporting legislation to ban Sharia Law in Montana. Passage of such laws has been a priority for ACT for America in recent years.

The word “Sharia” stands for Islamic law or sacred law. For centuries, Muslim scholars have broadly defined Sharia Law as reflecting the diversity of interpretations on how Muslims have attempted to best understand and practice Islam. Most American Muslims understand Sharia Law to represent how practicing Muslims can best live their lives in accordance with God’s divine guidance. Sharia Law may be generally defined as the Islamic law revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad. This isn’t different from other religions. For example, just as many observant Jews follow Halakha and Catholics follow Canon Law, many observant Muslims follow some aspect of Sharia Law. Among the primary aims of Sharia Law are the achievement of justice, fairness and mercy.223

There is no one interpretation called “Sharia Law” and no single official document encapsulates it. Interpretations may vary significantly from country to country and community to community. That said, many common aspects of Sharia are consistent with modern legal rules found in American law. For example, both legal systems allow rights to personal property, mutual consent to contracts, the presumption of innocence in criminal proceedings, and the right of women to initiate divorce proceedings. If and when religious laws conflict with American law, the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the First Amendment prohibit America’s government, including the courts, from substituting religious laws for civil law or following religious laws that violate civil law. This prohibition applies to all religions equally.224

As SPLC, Imagine 2050, and other organizations point out, there is no evidence that Sharia Law is being substituted for U.S. law in American courts. The U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment bars government imposition of any religious law. At the same time, the First Amendment protects the rights of religious groups to practice their faiths.225

Despite the protections offered by the First Amendment, ACT for America has targeted the supposed dangers of Sharia Law by encouraging its state chapters to pass legislation outlawing Sharia’s use in courts. In early 2012, David Yerushalmi formed the American Freedom Law Center (AFLC) and began pushing an “American Laws for American Courts” initiative. His model language for anti-Sharia bills argued that America has “unique values of liberty and freedom” that do not exist in foreign legal systems.226

This model legislation is used by the broader anti-Muslim movement as a tool to demonize Muslims and advance a right-wing agenda. Yerushalmi, who has a history of making inflammatory statements about race and works closely with well-known anti-Muslim activists like Frank Gaffney, has made it clear that the purpose of his model legislation is not about advancing public policy. Instead, he told the media:

“If this thing [model legislation] passed in every state without any friction, it would have not served its purpose. The purpose was heuristic – to get people asking this question, ‘What is Shariah?’”227

After getting people to ask the question, Yerushalmi and his anti-Muslim counterparts attempt to indoctrinate community members into the battle to, as Imagine 2050 puts it, “prevent the mythical threat of Sharia Law from taking over the U.S. legal system” and to “demonize Muslims.”228 These anti-Sharia bills go hand-in-hand with advancing a larger right-wing agenda:

“Anti-Sharia legislation is a tool to spread fear and advance the divide-and-conquer agenda by the right-wing forces. Legislators who pass anti-Sharia laws are also likely to demonize and oppress other marginalized groups. Based on a study of more than one-hundred anti-Sharia laws introduced between 2011 and 2013, the non-profit organization Institute for Social Policy and Understanding found a heavy overlap with other restrictive laws. Eighty percent of the legislators who introduced anti-Sharia bills also introduced laws that targeted women, LGBTQ folks, workers’ unions, voters and immigrants.”229

By 2013, the Center for American Progress and Brennan Center for Justice reported 32 states had considered anti-Sharia bills, which were a “thinly concealed attempt to inflame anti-Muslim attitudes.” Despite the inflammatory purpose of the bills, numerous states had enacted...
such measures. “Although packaged as an effort to protect American values and democracy,” the two groups stated, “the bans spring from a movement whose goal is the demonization of the Islamic faith.”

The American Bar Association, the country’s largest and most respected association of legal professionals, has also passed a resolution opposing Sharia bans. The Bar Association pointed out that these bans on Sharia Law could negatively impact the business community due to the legal uncertainty created by the measures, along with jeopardizing a wide range of personal arrangements regulated by international law.

Yerushalmi understood that laws specifically targeting Sharia and Islam would be found unconstitutional, which is why he started to frame his model policy in terms of the more generic “foreign law,” which is how the legislation proposed in Montana was framed.

2015 Montana Legislature

The first attempt to pass a Sharia ban in Montana came during the 2015 Montana Legislature. Flathead ACT was instrumental in getting Sen. Janna Taylor (R-Dayton) to sponsor SB 199, and many of the group’s activists came to Helena to testify for it, including Caroline Solomon, Calvin Beringer, Harry Solomon, and Tom Osborne.

In her opening on the bill before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Taylor said Sharia Law was the most common foreign law found, but she also warned committee members that they should be afraid of policies originating from the United Nations. Many of the proponents talked about incidents around the country where Sharia Law and foreign laws had supposedly been used in court cases with dire results. Tom Osborne did warn against UN treaties, but he spent most of his testimony denigrating Islam and Sharia Law. He said this bill was needed, because any attempt to undermine the U.S. Constitution led to “consequences that are unthinkably frightening.” He warned that Sharia Law is not compatible with American society, because it does not allow for freedom of speech, religion, or the press. “It’s inconceivable that we should allow Sharia Law to interrupt the integrity of our law,” he told the committee.

Bigfork’s Dennis Nelson tried to get out in front of the Islamophobia charge, telling the Senate Judiciary Committee that the bill was “neutral” and couldn’t be called “discriminatory.” Davida Constant, who formed Truth in Montana Textbooks with Caroline Solomon, submitted testimony by ACT for America’s Brigitte Gabriel to the committee. Gabriel stated that foreign law bans honored the “hundreds of thousands of courageous men and women [that] have given their lives to protect America’s sovereignty and freedom.” She lamented that foreign laws and policies were finding their way into American courts, some of which are “inherently hostile to our constitutional liberties” and violate “the principles on which our nation was founded.” Gabriel referred to the bill as “American Law for American Courts,” the moniker used by David Yerushalmi.

SB 199 did not make it out of the Republican-controlled Senate Judiciary Committee. Sen. Jennifer Fielder (R-Thompson Falls) moved to pass the bill during executive action, saying “ample evidence” was provided by SB 199 proponents that we need to keep foreign law from being used in courts.

Sen. Fielder is a far-right Republican who has made a name for herself championing efforts to end public lands as we know them, working closely with the American Lands Council and other groups with clear linkages to anti-government and anti-Indian entities. She would be an important supporter when identical anti-Sharia legislation appeared again in 2017.

Sen. Fielder’s motion to pass SB 199 died on a tied 6-6 vote. Solomon promised that Flathead ACT would reintroduce the bill during the 2017 legislative session. “Everything that is happening in our country and worldwide,” she told the media, “I think people are realizing
that it is something you cannot say is not going to happen in Montana.”

2017 Montana Legislature

As promised, Flathead ACT brought its anti-Sharia bill back during the 2017 session. Sen. Keith Regier (R-Kalispell) sponsored SB 97, which was identical to Sen. Taylor’s SB 199 from 2015. Sen. Regier told the media he felt Taylor’s bill was a good one that had been introduced too late in the previous session to gain enough traction. As in 2015, Flathead ACT members and associates turned out for the hearings before the Senate and House Judiciary Committees. These activists included Caroline Solomon, Calvin Beringer, Paul Nachman, and Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff. They were joined by other anti-Muslim and right-wing activists better known for other areas of issue activism.

Sen. Regier’s talking points for SB 97 varied little throughout the bill’s legislative journey. He claimed the bill would protect constitutional rights and keep foreign law out of U.S. courts. He also emphasized that seven other states had passed similar legislation. “This country has many immigrants that come from many different societal structures,” he told one legislative committee. “For these immigrants to retain their diverse rules of law would create a society in chaos.”

Promoters of Islamophobia Support SB 97

Echoing Brigitte Gabriel’s comments from the 2015 bill, Caroline Solomon said Americans have died for our freedom and constitutional rights. She stated America had “unique values of liberty” that didn’t exist in other countries. Her co-leader with Flathead ACT, Calvin Beringer, told legislative committees about his law enforcement background and how SB 97 would provide clarity to police officers, especially when responding to domestic violence calls.

Paul Nachman, a speaker at Flathead ACT events, told lawmakers that SB 97 could “prevent evil law and customs” from taking hold in Montana. Another Flathead ACT speaker, Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff, appeared in front of the House Judiciary Committee in support of the bill. She told the committee her story of being held responsible for her degrading statements against Islam in Austria.

While these usual suspects affiliated with Flathead ACT were to be expected, they were joined by activists involved with protesting refugee resettlement in Montana and allies from other sectors of the right wing. Jim Buterbaugh, whose American Security Rally of Montana organized various rallies to protest refugee resettlement, told the Senate Judiciary Committee that he was “amazed” that it had come to the point where SB 97 was needed to “protect our way of life.” Another Security Rally protestor, Gina Satterfield, was one of the most rabid anti-Muslim testifiers during the hearings on SB 97.

In addition to attending the American Security Rally protests against refugees, Satterfield appears to be one of the group’s Facebook administrators. Her personal Facebook page indicates she “Likes” numerous right-wing organizations, including the anti-government Oath Keepers of Montana and the 3% Militia; and radical right media sources like Alex Jones and Worldnet Daily.

During her testimony to lawmakers in support of SB 97, Satterfield claimed foreign law was already present in America due to “political correctness” and was not “going to remain peaceful.” Before the House Judiciary Committee, Satterfield devolved into conspiracy theories blaming non-profits in Montana for facilitating this “totalitarian” takeover by Islam. She told lawmakers it was her job to educate them about this Islamic conspiracy and then proceeded to unleash vitriolic attacks against the Montana Human Rights Network, Montana Immigrant Justice Association, Montana Association of Christians, ACLU of Montana, and others for being CAIR stooges, which she claimed was a front for the Muslim Brotherhood. She complained that various interfaith networks were promoting “Chris-lam.”

Multiple House Judiciary Committee members unsuccessfully requested their chairperson make Satterfield keep her testimony on the bill, instead of bashing individuals and organizations. When the House Committee Chairperson finally asked her to wrap up her testimony due to the limited time allotted for proponents, Satterfield complained that she had been interrupted during her diatribe and emphasized that her conspiracies and allegations were “important.”

Satterfield has continued to demonize Muslims and any individuals or organizations she thinks are part of her conspiracy theory long after the legislative session ended. Her Facebook page is filled with venomous Islamophobic posts and hatred of progressive non-profits and personal attacks. She has been banned by Facebook for this activity at different times while her account was reviewed. Her posts include statements like:

♦ “The Shariah compliant Southern[sic] Poverty Law Center can kiss my ‘White Privileged’ ass.”

♦ “EVERYONE OF THEM [Helena City Council members] ARE SHARIA COMPLIANT ASSHOLES [sic].” This was in response to the council deciding to remove a
Confederate fountain in a city park.  

♦️ “[State Representative] Shane Morigeau and his useful idiot American Indian Caucus reminds me of his opposing vote to keep foreign law (Shariah) out of our Montana courts...I am GOD DAMN well not going to be dhimmitude and/or assimilate to this Sharia compliant tribal double digit IQ BS.”

Satterfield’s derogatory comments about Montana’s American Indian Caucus weren’t the only anti-Indian perspective when it came to SB 97. Two activists who fought the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes over water rights supported the bill.

Elaine Willman is a leader of a national organization that opposes tribal sovereignty and supports termination of tribal governments known as the Citizen Equal Rights Alliance.

In submitted testimony supporting SB 97, Willman said the bill reinforced President Trump’s mantra of “America First.” She also stated it was “a sad commentary on the State of Montana” that SB 97 needed to be passed to affirm the state’s “constant honor, respect, devotion and compliance” to the U.S. Constitution, Montana’s Constitution, and the American judicial system. David Passieri was also a vocal opponent of the Flathead Water Compact. When it came to SB 97, he said it was necessary to protect the state from any executive orders that might allow “the lease of federal trust lands to foreign sovereigns by a federally recognized Indian Tribe,” which he said was a “dangerous precedent.”

The Montana Family Foundation’s Jeff Laszlloffy testified in support of SB 97, saying he was only representing himself. However, the Family Foundation dedicated one of its radio updates to supporting the bill. During his testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, Laszlloffy lamented that U.S. Supreme Court Justices had acknowledged using international law to reach verdicts. He said, “Our Constitution should stand alone as the chief governing document of this nation,” while also complaining that SB 97 “doesn’t go far enough.” In the Family Foundation’s radio update, Laszlloffy regurgitated much of his testimony and said Sen. Regier should be “applauded” for bringing forth SB 97. He complained that Supreme Court Justices were
Another right-wing supporter of SB 97 was former Montana Republican legislator Ed Butcher. During his testimony, Butcher admitted that “the elephant in the room is Sharia Law,” which he said had sparked similar legislation around the country. The bill was needed, he said, because we are “addressing the fanatic followers of the Koran” and that Islam is a “religious cult.” He also claimed that refugees were “dangerous,” but that SB 97 was “not racist.” He told lawmakers to remember that America was founded “under a unified Christian culture” and complained that “naïve and gullible citizens” living in “political socialist pockets” would elect Muslims who would institute Sharia Law.

This was hardly Butcher’s first such anti-Muslim tirade. Back in November 2009, he wrote a letter to the editor warning that Muslims continued to invade Western countries through immigration with the help of “pacifist western leaders.” He praised Russian leaders for rounding up “radical elements” of Muslim communities to end “the wave of jihad.” He blamed “silent Muslims” for enabling their “radical brethren.” He claimed Muslims were “quietly waiting until their numbers are strong enough to overthrow the government.”

Over the years, immigrants of all kinds have faced Butcher’s ire. He once claimed that half of all gang members in Los Angeles were undocumented immigrants. In an op-ed and legislation he proposed, Butcher stressed that all government documents should be printed in English, because countries with multiple languages “face tremendous instability.” He grudgingly admitted that America needed an “immigrant labor force,” but he said only because “abortion mills” had killed the country’s future labor force.

During his time as a legislator, Butcher vocally supported bills that echoed concerns of the antigovernment “patriot” movement. During the 2007 legislative session, he supported a bill that banned flying the United Nations flag on state property and limited the authority of international courts over Montanans. Foreshadowing some of the complaints made by Flathead ACT in support of its ban on Sharia Law, he said, “I think this bill may be very timely, because right now we are looking at a movement to internationalize this nation.”

Butcher also repeatedly got in trouble for offensive statements while in office. In 2004, he called severely-disabled students “vegetables.” While serving in the Montana Senate, he made headlines when he called Indian reservations “ghettos” that put residents in a form of “bondage.” Butcher claimed he had only been making an “academic observation” and that none of his comments were untrue.

During SB 97’s legislative journey, many supporters demonized CAIR as a front group for Islamic Jihadists and/or the Muslim Brotherhood. When CAIR submitted a letter to the members of the House Judiciary Committee opposing SB 97, the hatred of CAIR became even more intense. Satterfield made the Muslim Brotherhood claim about CAIR in her remarks to the committee and submitted testimony that greatly expanded on these supposed sinister connections. Caroline Solomon also discussed the CAIR letter to House Judiciary. She told committee members that CAIR has been an unindicted conspirator in terror-financing schemes and complained that CAIR called SB 97 “anti-Islam.” Much of the submitted testimony by SB 97 supporters repeated the various derogatory conspiracy theories about CAIR.

Echoing another common theme of SB 97 supporters, Sandy Montgomery claimed that the Constitution only protects the rights of “God-fearing Christians,” making it incompatible with Sharia Law. Similarly, an e-mail in support of the bill stated America was founded upon a “Judeo-Christian value system.”

These types of references to America being a “Christian nation,” while also historically inaccurate, help
reveal some hypocrisy on the part of SB 97 supporters. While they fight tooth and nail to keep Islam from taking root in communities, many fully support a theocratic view of America, through which their interpretation of Christianity should be fused with and executed by the government.

Numerous speakers warned that Muslims coming to America will not assimilate, and instead want to invade and conquer the country. When SB 97 supporters mentioned assimilation, what they envisioned was Muslims throwing away and disregarding their religion and culture. For Islamophobes, the only good Muslims are those that convert to Christianity and submit to Western (white) culture. This narrative can be seen in the former-Muslim speakers that Flathead ACT has promoted in recent years.

SB 97 supporters also frequently said that anyone opposing the bill was not a true American. While some supporters tried to pay lip service to other types of “foreign law,” it was clear that SB 97’s purpose was to ban Sharia Law.

**SB 97 Opponents Call Out Anti-Muslim Sentiment**

Opposition to SB 97 came from the faith, human rights, and civil rights communities. The Montana Association of Christians (MAC) told lawmakers that the bill did not protect Montana communities, and Sharia Law has not caused the “horrors” in the legal system claimed by SB 97 supporters. MAC’s David Andersen warned the House Judiciary Committee that the bill had “clearly become a lightning rod for a narrative of fear and hatred.”

Likewise, Rabbi Ed Stafman of Bozeman’s Congregation Beth Shalom submitted testimony stating it was clear that the bill was part of “a growing anti-Muslim movement in the country,” and the testimony of supporters showed it was “centered on an unreasonable fear of Islam.” Because of this, Rabbi Stafman said SB 97 “flagrantly violates the very essence of both Judaism and Christianity.” In the end, he said he stood “firmly with my Muslim cousins against the hate being directed at them.” The Montana Catholic Conference, which lobbies on behalf of the state’s two Catholic Bishops, also opposed the bill based on various concerns about contract law.

The ACLU of Montana spoke against the bill both because of its dubious legality and because of the hate it directed at the Muslim community. The group’s Advocacy and Policy Director, SK Rossi, told lawmakers that SB 97 was based on “anti-Muslim sentiment” and that the references to “foreign law” were a smokescreen. Rossi pointed out bills like SB 97 had originally singled out Sharia Law, but courts found them to be unconstitutional because they targeted a specific religion. The drafters of the model pieces of legislation then substituted in the phrase “foreign law” to try and make them pass legal muster. She mentioned SB 97 was patterned from one of the four national templates that exist for Sharia Law bans.

“It comes from a place of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment,” Rossi told lawmakers. “It does more to hurt the Constitution than help it.”

While many SB 97 supporters claimed the bill was needed to protect women, the Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence provided insight and context regarding this claim. The Coalition pointed out to lawmakers the perpetrators of domestic violence aren’t limited to one type of religious theology, and abusers may claim any religious tradition while trying to exert control over victims. The Coalition also mentioned that the anti-Muslim rhetoric around SB 97 could actually resort in Muslim women being too scared to report incidents of domestic violence and access needed services. If SB 97 supporters really cared about domestic violence, the Coalition said they would support organizations that helped all survivors. The Coalition also stressed that courts, when dealing with domestic violence cases, use civil statutes, not religious law.

The Montana Human Rights Network stressed to lawmakers that SB 97 was part of the national Islamophobic movement’s attempts to attack Muslims and further marginalize them in communities. At a time when attacks on Muslims around the country are at an all-time high, the Network stated a bill like SB 97 was a horrible idea. It noted that ACT for America was one of the national organizations behind this type of legislation, and that Flathead ACT was the impetus behind SB 97. It also discussed how the “foreign law” wording was a shallow façade to try and make them pass legal muster. She mentioned SB 97 was patterned from one of the model pieces of legislation then substituted in the phrase “foreign law” to try and make them pass legal muster.

While attacks on Muslims around the country are at an all-time high, the Network stated a bill like SB 97 was a horrible idea. It noted that ACT for America was one of the national organizations behind this type of legislation, and that Flathead ACT was the impetus behind SB 97. It also discussed how the “foreign law” wording was a shallow façade to try and make it seem like the bill wasn’t targeting Islam and Sharia Law. As the Network pointed out, the testimony of SB 97 supporters proved the bill’s purpose was to ban Sharia Law. “These tactics divide, not unite, our communities,” the Network’s Rachel Carroll Rivas told lawmakers. “This is policy rooted in xenophobia.”

Other opponents included a person who worked with Missoula’s refugee population. He told lawmakers that the Koran prohibits forceful conversion to Islam, and SB 97 promoted a “harmful view” of Muslims that could result in “increased violence.” The Associated Students of the University of Montana also spoke against the bill. Its lobbyist said SB 97 was being used to “justify and celebrate hateful rhetoric.”
Montana Republicans Support Anti-Muslim Bill

After listening to all the testimony and reading all their messages related to SB 97, it was Montana lawmakers who ultimately decided the bill’s fate in the legislature. Overall, SB 97 received heavy support from Republicans, including at the committee level where they allowed supporters of the bill to unleash anti-Muslim tirades that strayed far from the bill’s text and supposed purpose.

SB 97 started with a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, which featured a 7-4 GOP majority. The chair of the committee happened to be Sen. Keith Regier, who sponsored SB 97. Therefore, the hearing itself was presided over by Vice-Chair Sen. Jennifer Fielder (R-Thompson Falls). During the testimony mentioned above by Ed Butcher, two different times Democratic Committee members objected to his anti-Muslim statements as being off the bill. Both times Sen. Fielder said she would allow Butcher’s line of testimony to continue. A similar dynamic occurred later in the testimony, when a proponent was talking about Muslims not assimilating and wanting to take over the country. Sen. Diane Sands (D-Missoula) objected. Sen. Fielder said she thought the testimony was relevant and could proceed.

During the part of the hearing for questions from the committee, Sen. Jedediah Hinkle (R-Belgrade) tried to reinforce proponent testimony that SB 97 would help protect women and members of the LGBT community from death under Sharia Law. He questioned how the ACLU of Montana could oppose the bill when Sharia Law condemns women adulterer and LGBT people to death. The ACLU’s Rossi pointed out how shallow the supporters’ convictions were around these issues, saying:

“These bills are not based in a protection for human rights. If we have an interest in protecting human rights, we should add LGBT people to the Montana Human Rights Act. We should do things like that which actually advance the rights of the groups we’re talking about….It’s [SB 97] a wolf in unconvincing sheep’s clothing.”

When Senate Judiciary took executive action on SB 97, it was Sen. Fielder, as she did in 2015, making a “Do Pass” motion on it. Sen. Regier commented that he had received many e-mails about his SB 97, and he couldn’t understand why people called the bill “hateful” and “offensive.” He wondered if that meant the Pledge of Allegiance was offensive, because legislators addressed the American flag instead of a Canadian one. Sen. Fielder echoed this line of thinking. She said the real cause of fear and concern is Islamic law. She claimed she had people “close to her” who worked in counter-terrorism that had talked to her about the “culture clash” happening. Sen. Fielder emphasized that SB 97 was not a “hate bill.” Both Senators Fielder and Hinkle, in supporting the bill, mentioned they have Muslim friends, which is a common refrain from those who support institutional white supremacy and are trying to infer that they could never support discrimination.

Democrats on the committee had a very different view of SB 97 and the hearing on it. Sen. Margie MacDonald (D-Billings) said the hearing was difficult to sit through due to the “vilification” of people and the “sense of fear” promoted by bill supporters. She was troubled that SB 97 supporters had called opponents “un-American” and “un-Christian.” Sen. Sands echoed these concerns, saying the bill would create “even more dissension among our constituents” and noted that the bill was totally unnecessary due to our constitutional protections. In the end, the Senate Judiciary passed the bill by a party-line vote of 7-3.
When the bill came up for Second Reading on the Senate Floor, Republicans continued to try and downplay the anti-Muslim sentiment providing the foundation for SB 97. Sen. Fielder told her colleagues that opponents claimed the bill targeted certain people, but that it only offered clarity to the courts. Sen. Hinkle asserted the bill protected human rights and civil rights. On the other side of the aisle, Democrats raised questions about how SB 97 might negatively impact Native American tribes in Montana. Sen. Frank Smith (D-Poplar) said the bill might cause problems for the tribes and their legal codes. Sen. Lea Whitford (D-Cut Bank) mentioned that some Indian Nations, like the Blackfeet, have dual citizenship because tribal lands exist both in America and Canada.289

Before the floor vote, Sen. Regier said his bill was no different than legislators being sworn into office. Legislators swear to follow the Constitution, he said, and his bill would make sure courts upheld these same fundamental rights. SB 97 passed Second Reading by a largely party-line vote of 28-21, with Republican Senators Brian Hoven (Great Falls), Nels Swandal (Wilsall) and Russ Tempel (Chester) joining Democrats in voting against it. SB 97 passed Third Reading by a 28-21 vote with the same three Republicans joining Democrats in opposing the bill.290

The dynamic as SB 97 moved through the Montana House was similar. During the hearing in House Judiciary, the Republican Chair, Rep. Alan Doane (R-Bloomfield), overruled requests from Democratic committee members to stop Gina Satterfield’s personal attacks during her testimony. While he did request Satterfield keep her testimony to the bill, he said the Democrats must be “hearing something in the testimony that I don’t hear.” After a third objection by Democrats, Rep. Doane asked Satterfield to wrap up her testimony. Satterfield responded by complaining that she had been interrupted.291

Rep. Shane Morigeau (D-Missoula) mentioned that many proponents of SB 97 had mentioned that refugees and Muslims need to assimilate, and, as a Native American, he was reminded how that word has been used as a euphemism for genocide. He also mentioned that the Blackfeet Nation has historical lands that crossover into Canada, and tribes are frequently attacked for having “foreign law.”292

During executive action on the bill, Rep. Theresa Manzella (R-Hamilton) mentioned that she had attended a presentation by Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff, the speaker brought to Montana by Flathead ACT. Rep. Manzella said Sabaditsch-Wolff was convicted of a crime because her country lacked First Amendment rights. She told her fellow committee members that there is a difference between individual rights and community rights. She reminded them that America’s founding documents guaranteed individual rights, whereas the United Nations creates community rights. She said those two things can’t be reconciled, which is why she was going to support SB 97. Her talking points about the UN and collective rights are commonly found in the anti-government “patriot” movement. The bill passed out of committee on a party-line vote of 11-8.293

Due to his opposition to the bill banning Sharia Law, Rep. Shane Morigeau (D-Missoula), and other members of the Native American Caucus, drew Gina Satterfield’s wrath on social media, even after the legislative session ended.294

**Gina Satterfield**

August 16 at 11:56pm

WE AS A NATION AND LOCALLY ARE UNDER ATTACK!!!

Remember, the Council American Islamic Relations (CAIR) are Hamas terrorist and the political and legal arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, sent a letter to the MT. House Judiciary Committee to stop SB 97 and submissive Governor Bullock went along with their demands.

As a concerned U.S. Montana Citizen, I was there at the MT. State Capital House Judiciary Committee SB 97 (ban foreign law out of our court system) hearing and gave testimony I watched and listened as Rep. Shane Morigeau said, “I heard the word assimilate in testimony, as a American Montana Indian, that word is synonymous with genocide.”

Shane Morigeau and his useless idiot American Indian Caucus reminds me of his opposing vote to keep foreign law (Shariah) out our Montana courts. Now, Shane wants to erase and destroy our history just as the Muslim’s “Religion of Peace” that have obliterated the ancient and Biblical history of the Middle East. I am GOD DAMN well not going to be dhimmitude and/or assimilate to this Shariah compliant tribal double digit IG BS. The Women’s Confederate Fountain is only being used to amp your racist nith of treason and sedition. What’s next??! What else is going to ruffle all your feathers??!

Many others, including the Mayor of Helena, Jim Smith; Vilmo Collins (from Liberia) is the MT. Delegate for Refugee Congress, a lobbying group for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is running for Mayor of Helena; Mary Ann Dunwell (D) HD64, ACLU, MHRN,...went along with this act of domestic terrorism that is funded with our tax dollars, including the money we give to the U.N. that is controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Organization of Islamic Cooperation that these people and groups align with. CAIR’s national director, Nihad Awad made a statement urging “all state and local governments to erase every symbol and every remnant of Confederate history immediately.”

HELENA, WAKEUP AND SMELL THE JIHAD.

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The debate over the bill got heated during Second Reading on the House Floor. Rep. Brad Tschida (R-Missoula) sponsored the bill on the House Floor. During his opening remarks, he assured his colleagues that SB 97 didn’t “focus on anyone negatively,” but instead was “pro-Montana and pro-U.S. Constitution.” Rep. Manzella repeated her comments, warning the Montana House to be aware that the United Nations promotes collective rights over individual rights. She said our rights are “God given” and SB 97 would be a “good law.” Multiple other Republican representatives repeated the claims that SB 97 strengthened constitutional rights and would provide guidance to the courts.294

Democrats quickly jumped on the bill. Rep. Morigeau said the bill was unnecessary because of the protections afforded by the U.S. and Montana Constitutions. He repeated his claims that the bill could be problematic for tribes, because the part of the bill exempting tribes was sloppily written. Finally, he told his colleagues SB 97 was “attempting to attack” minorities and was “xenophobic.” “I truly believe this law is repugnant,” he said. Rep. Tom Woods (D-Bozeman) told his colleagues, “Religion is not our enemy. Extremism is our concern.” He noted that people come to America to escape the type of persecution contained in the bill.295

Rep. Ellie Hill Smith (D-Missoula) went even further. She said the bill was “wholly unnecessary” and undermined courts, especially in certain areas of international law. She noted that testi-

Supporters of the American Security Rally of Montana and Flathead ACT took to social media to voice their displeasure with Governor Bullock for vetoing the Sharia Law ban, sometimes in violent terms. American Security Rally commented there was still a use for Bullock since “Used body parts bring big money at hospitals.” A comment on Flathead ACT’s page stated, “Hang this dirty SOB!!!”
mony in support of the bill was “peppered with anti-Muslim” comments, which helped show how the bill was “discriminatory.” She told her colleagues how bills like SB 97 had been struck down in numerous states because they unfairly target Sharia Law. In a nod to how many SB 97 supporters invoked the false “Christian Nation” belief while supporting the bill, Rep. Hill offered an amendment. The amendment said courts should also reject Old Testament biblical law to prove SB 97 wasn’t about one religion. She said, if the amendment failed, the bill became a “lawyer’s dream,” because it would prove this was all about banning Sharia Law. She ended by saying, “This bill makes me sad.” Her amendment failed 18-82.296

Human rights supporters lined the gallery above the House unveiling signs and large banners opposing SB 97 and with messages like, “Peace” and “I love my Muslim neighbor” as the floor debate began. House staffers confiscated the signs. Leading up to Second Reading on the House Floor, Republican leadership had moved the day of the vote around to try and keep anti-SB 97 groups from turning out their membership in the House Gallery.

Closing the floor debate before the vote, Rep. Tschida opined that he wouldn’t be supporting SB 97 if it were “anti-religion.” Instead, he said he supported the bill because “our Constitution is constantly under attack.” He complained that calling the bill xenophobic was an “insult;” and he was not “intolerant.” “It is not a document of fear,” he stated, “Anyone who would approach it that way is totally wrong.”297

SB 97 easily passed Second Reading by a 56-44 vote, with Rep. Jeremy Trebas (R-Great Falls) the only Republican opposing it, and successfully made it out of the legislature with a final 56-43 vote. Now, SB 97 was on its way to the desk of Governor Steve Bullock.

**Governor Bullock Vetoes SB 97**

In early April 2017, Governor Steve Bullock vetoed SB 97. He noted that the Montana and U.S. Constitutions “contain strong protections” that our courts are sworn to uphold. He also stated that the “vague exceptions” found in the bill did not “save it from its complete unworkability.”298

The most disturbing part of SB 97, Gov. Bullock noted, was that Islamophobia and banning Sharia Law were the purpose of the bill. He said these types of laws are meant to “target a particular religion and group of people for disfavored treatment.” Even more troubling, Gov. Bullock stated, was that passage of such a law would be “interpreted by some as state endorsement for anti-Muslim sentiment and activity.” Instead of fear and hatred, he said Montanans needed to “recommit ourselves to protecting the religious and cultural diversity that makes our state and nation strong.”299

Not surprisingly, the Bullock veto didn’t sit well with Flathead ACT and their anti-Muslim allies. Caroline Solomon drafted a letter to editor saying Bullock’s veto showed the importance of elections. Had Republican Greg Gianforte defeated Gov. Bullock in the 2016 gubernatorial race, she wrote, SB 97 would have been signed into law.300

Flathead ACT’s Facebook page featured many commentors calling on Gov. Bullock to be impeached, and one person promoted violence, saying, “Hang this dirty SOB!!”301 When sharing an article about the veto on Facebook, Flathead ACT said this showed “how much more ‘educating’ we have to do!”302 Similar sentiments were expressed on the Facebook page for the American Security Rally of Montana. The group called Gov. Bullock’s veto “Beyond disappointing. Not surprising.”303 Gina Satterfield chimed in with, “What a Globalist, Sharia Law, Islamic compliant POS!!”304 When one commenter said the governor was worthless, American Security Rally responded by saying that wasn’t totally true as “Used body parts bring big money at hospitals.”305
Where This Leaves Us

The current political atmosphere, from the national level to the local level, creates a perfect storm for groups like ACT for America and its Montana activists to turn their Islamophobic message into real political power. By joining with their allies, these groups are able to normalize and legitimize action that targets Muslim communities. Flathead ACT has spent the last few years bringing speakers into Montana promoting a message that Muslims are to be feared and hated because followers of Islam want to destroy our country.

On top of that, Flathead ACT has used the Montana Legislature as a venue for more fearmongering around the supposed dangers of Sharia Law. Judging by the bill’s legislative supporters in 2017, many Republican lawmakers share anti-Muslim views. Given Flathead ACT’s connection to entities in the GOP structure, that’s not surprising. The inflammatory rhetoric used by Flathead ACT and its allies divides communities and can influence real-world action. For instance, in early 2017, an armed man protested outside Bozeman’s Islamic Center.

The Islamophobia movement has managed to integrate other sectors of the right wing. As this report illustrates, many right-wing activists with long histories in the Religious Right, anti-immigrant, anti-Indian, and anti-government movements have found new audiences by reworking the boogeymen in their traditional conspiracy theories to be Muslims. Since the majority of Muslims are people of color, Islamophobia has also given white supremacists and white nationalists a new avenue to talk about racism in a way they view as more socially accepted. Part of the anti-Muslim movement’s power comes from the ease with which right-wing activists can plug into and participate in its efforts.

While the anti-Muslim movement uses the cover provided by elected officials, it still has a history of attracting and integrating right-wing extremists into its efforts. A recent development illustrated that leadership in these groups understands that part of its base can cause problems. In late August 2017, ACT for America canceled 67 “America First” rallies planned across the country to support President Trump’s anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies, including one listed in Helena. ACT’s change of plans came on the heels of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA, in which three people died and more than 30 were injured. Brigitte Gabriel released a statement saying ACT did not want to give “Neo-Nazis, Antifa, the KKK, and ISIS-inspired individuals and groups” an opportunity to crash ACT events and advance their own agendas.

As SPLC stated, ACT’s statement “conveniently ignores the participation of neo-Nazis and white nationalist alt-right groups” in previous ACT events. SPLC makes a good point. As long as groups like ACT for America and Flathead ACT demonize and dehumanize Muslims with conspiracy theories framed in warlike terms, they will attract right-wing extremists.

It’s not a coincidence that Gabriel routinely has to publicly say she isn’t racist, as do Flathead ACT members and supporters. Just look at the steady parade of anti-Muslim speakers representing hate groups that Flathead ACT has brought to Montana. Furthermore, Flathead ACT’s website links to these types of resources, encouraging viewers to consult them for more information. Flathead ACT offers nothing to Montana communities except fear and hatred. It and its allies have neither the
agenda nor the will to help bring communities together and move forward in productive ways.

In many ways, the anti-Muslim and anti-refugee movement in Montana mirrors so many other right-wing movements. It is rooted in bigotry and the oppression of the “other.” It seeks to define who is an American based on characteristics like race and religion. It uses revisionist history while being steeped in conspiracy theories. It packages all of this together to create fear and promote resentment, while its activists deny having any ill intentions. Montana does not have a large Muslim population. However, the hatred perpetuated by this movement, and the power it is building for the Right, demands human rights supporters take notice. The Montana Human Rights Network believes that it is important to continue exposing the bigotry and countering Islamophobic messages, while continuing to take action rooted in the values of equity and justice that are key to a thriving inclusive democracy.
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