

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Ecosystem of Approaches

ADDRESSING ANTISEMITISM,
ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Applied Research
Center for Civility

UC San Diego



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An Ecosystem of Approaches: Addressing Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Religious Intolerance

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Co-Chairs: Elizabeth Simmons, Executive Vice Chancellor, UC San Diego and Steven P. Dinkin, President, National Conflict Resolution Center

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Introduction

The University of California San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation partnered with the National Conflict Resolution Center to better understand the strategies and best practices of organizations working to address religious intolerance and discrimination, with a specific focus on antisemitism and Islamophobia. The research project began in July 2022 and included a survey of organizations, interviews with representatives from organizations, a review of publicly available resources and toolkits, analysis and presentation of corresponding data, and the presentation of findings at a conference held in September 2024. This executive summary provides an overview of the landscape of efforts to reduce religious intolerance and ameliorate the harms of hate and bias. The people and organizations reflected here and in the full report represent the hard work of our communities to build belonging, increase trust, generate understanding, increase capacity, pursue justice, and uphold one another. Together, they have been doing this work for many years, formed longstanding partnerships and coalitions, and established effective approaches to achieving the varied ends that are necessary to fighting social ills like Islamophobia and antisemitism. We hope that we have contributed to a better understanding of what we as a society are doing to reduce Islamophobia and antisemitism, de-polarize communities, strengthen communication, promote acceptance, increase social wellbeing, improve health, heal harms, and empower one another.

Defining the Problem

The project aimed to better understand how organizations approach the work of combatting religious intolerance through a specific focus on antisemitism and Islamophobia. We sought to identify the most common and effective practices that organizations take and share those practices through this report and the associated conference in September 2024. Research for the project began in July 2022 and data collection was completed in July 2024. We identified a catalog of strategies through a literature review, verified through an organizational survey, and refined and expanded by emergent themes and practices from follow-up interviews. These results were further expanded by referring to the reports and websites of organizations unable to participate in the survey and interviews. At every step of this process, we refined our catalog of best practices and approaches taken by organizations in this field. We have organized these practices across three levels at which organizations work when addressing antisemitism and Islamophobia: (1) individual, (2) community, and (3) structural. In what follows, we explain the approaches that organizations take at each of these levels. The goal of this work is to better understand this ecosystem of approaches, and in doing so to identify effective strategies and practices that can inspire and inform others doing this important work.

Levels of Engagement— Individual, Community, Structural

Addressing antisemitism and Islamophobia is complex. It involves a wide range of practices including changing people’s beliefs, educating them about other groups, reducing harmful behaviors, creating relationships between individuals, establishing organizations, building coalitions and mobilizing for change, and challenging and passing policy. This range of approaches was reflected in the programs and activities taken by the organizations we surveyed and interviewed for this report. We distinguish between the individual, community, and structural levels at which they operate.



Individual Level Approaches

Individual level approaches to combating religious intolerance typically focus on targeting harmful beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors by supporting the needs of individuals and building individual capacity. These types of interventions educate individuals, support their wellbeing and needs, and buffer against well-known risk factors. Education that focuses on improving awareness and knowledge can cover many different topics from religious and media literacy to forms of bigotry, systems of oppression, and historical education. Skill building offerings in this field typically try to support self-awareness or interpersonal interactions, such as critical-thinking and constructive dialogue. Supporting individual healing and mental wellbeing can help victims of hate, reduce individual risk-factors for engaging in violent behaviors, and disrupt radicalization.



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Educate

The goal of educational approaches is to promote understanding of others and improve awareness about histories and impacts of prejudice and discrimination. Organizations develop and provide educational programming to support improved understanding and knowledge of different religious traditions and cultures, forms of discrimination, and histories of these bigotries. The hope is that improved understanding can change individual beliefs and promote empathetic engagement.

PROMOTE RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LITERACY

Religious and cultural literacy education is an important aspect of countering religious intolerance because it demystifies religious beliefs and practices that may be different from one's own. Bigoted attitudes like antisemitism and Islamophobia stem in part from a lack of education and exposure. Through these educational events and workshops, mistakes and misinformation can be dispelled and replaced with nuanced understandings of the beliefs and practices of others.

TEACH HISTORIES OF TRAUMA AND SYSTEMIC UNDERPINNINGS OF HATE

Many organizations incorporate education about the relationship between histories of trauma and the structures of privilege and oppression that allowed for them to occur. To these organizations, it is paramount to understand the different ways in which Islamophobia and antisemitism show up structurally in society, as well as how they are linked with other forms of oppression and systems of power. The culture and history of white supremacy, colonialism, and Christian nationalism in the United States are often the focus of that work.

Strengthen Skills

Providing information about different religious traditions, histories of oppression, and systemic discrimination helps inform people about how different religious intolerances operate, and also teaches them to identify forms of discrimination. However, individuals also need certain skills to be able to recognize misinformation and constructively engage in difference. Many organizations conduct trainings to support the development of critical thinking and to build skills to engage in constructive dialogue. By helping build up the tools of civil discourse, individuals are better equipped to engage with differences.

ENHANCE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Hate and extremist narratives provide oversimplified answers to complex problems. Organizations work to develop resilience against this kind of manipulation by developing critical thinking skills through programming and skill-building around digital literacy, developing an ability to recognize misinformation, and other general critical thinking skills.

FACILITATE CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT AND DIALOGUE

Organizations teach skills to engage productively with those who have different beliefs than them. Many interviewees felt that people lack the tools and social skills for engaging in civil discourse and cooperation. The development of skills in constructive conflict and dialogue can help address the problem of toxic polarization and violent communication.

Support Wellbeing and Healing

Supporting mental health and community healing from trauma is an important component for improving both individual and community resilience to intolerance and hate-fueled violence. Furthermore, marginalization and experiences of social and psychological instability can leave individuals vulnerable to adopting antisemitic, Islamophobic, and conspiratorial belief systems and ideologies. Organizations that work to support mental health and wellbeing in this field can support both the victims of bigotry as well as those who have caused hate-motivated harm or are at risk of doing so due to radicalization.

CARE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES IMPACTED BY HATE

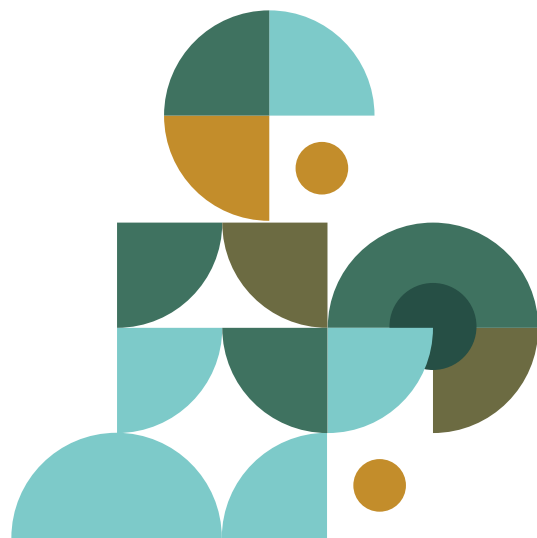
Communities that are targeted for hate in the United States have generational trauma and pain caused by experiences of discrimination and violence. Efforts are needed to support communities to heal, to build resiliency, and to repair harm through more systemic changes and reparations. Some organizations are working to foster healing within their communities and building resilience by offering support groups, psychoeducation or counseling, and encouraging community building practices.

DISRUPT AND REVERT RADICALIZATION

Targeting individuals at risk of radicalization (e.g. isolated, history of violence) is a sensitive strategy. It requires a careful approach or otherwise risks increasing radicalization. Rather than focusing on the general population with a goal of cultural change, this approach instead focuses on the individuals most at risk to commit acts of violence. Approaches that focus on disrupting and reverting radicalization have the potential for direct impact on curbing the violent effects of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other related forms of bigotry.

Individual Approaches within the Ecosystem

Overall, individual approaches tend to focus on both belief and behavior within the ecosystem of approaches. Many educational approaches focus on preventing the adoption of bigoted beliefs or changing harmful beliefs by providing new information, furthering understanding, or helping individuals to build up their critical thinking skills. On the other hand, there are many individual approaches, such as building skills in constructive dialogue and reverting radicalization, that focus more on changing behavior. Addressing both beliefs and behaviors are necessary within the ecosystem of approaches since beliefs and behaviors can influence and reinforce each other.



Community and Interpersonal Approaches

Community and interpersonal approaches to addressing antisemitism and Islamophobia include working across differences, equipping and empowering the community to respond to cases of hate, and building community resilience for prevention of and in response to cases of antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks. Collaboration and working with others, often across differences, are key to these approaches. Organizations often work across differences by establishing organizational networks and coalitions with organizations of different faiths and backgrounds, by joining coalitions on addressing these issues, and by developing capacity and training local leaders. All in all, these practices help build community resilience and relationships between individuals.



Equip Communities to Prevent and Respond to Hate

While antisemitism and Islamophobia are complex and historically extensive, these bigotries are also constantly evolving and how they show up can be dependent on local contexts and current events. Communities need to be equipped with the tools and networks to be able to prevent, respond, and remain resilient in the face of hate and violence. Organizations equip and empower communities by expanding awareness and adoption of evidence-based practices for countering hate and polarization, training community leaders to utilize these practices, and building coalitions that can mobilize collective efforts for shared goals.

CREATE NETWORKS AND FORM COALITIONS OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

A central focus of many organizations working in this field is the intentional development of diverse organizational networks and coalitions. Creating networks across divides promotes a culture of tolerance while providing crucial administrative avenues for organizing and attending events. These networks can be mobilized in response to hateful acts to show community integration and a shared opposition to all forms of hate, and they can be used to share resources such as conflict resolution mechanisms and mediation strategies.

BUILD CAPACITY

Just as it is important to build skills on the individual level, organizations and communities also need support in capacity building to help them be better equipped to address intolerance and discrimination on an organizational or community level. This includes spreading the adoption of multidisciplinary and evidence-based interventions.

LEVERAGE COMMUNITY LEADERS

Building leadership capacity is key for expanding the anti-bigotry work organizations are involved in. Many individuals come out of educational and skill-building training wanting to be more involved and to enable change in their wider community. Leadership training that happens in tandem with these other forms of knowledge and skill-building empowers individuals to create a more equitable society.

DEVELOP SAFER ONLINE SPACES

Building safer online communities is just as important as improving in-person communities for addressing religious intolerance and related issues. Addressing online hate and radicalization is an important field for ongoing work to curb antisemitism, Islamophobia, and polarization. It is also a constant concern for most organizations working in this field, even if their programming does not directly address online.



Foster Civic Engagement

Fostering civic engagement is an approach to countering religious intolerance that can take place locally, state-wide, or at the national level. Organizations that promote civic engagement do so in several ways, for example, by partnering with elected officials, building faith-based coalitions to advocate for local issues such as housing justice or to support refugees, and engaging in policy advocacy. Overall, these approaches encourage and support people to engage in their communities and can build a greater sense of belonging by working together and across differences.

WORK ON SUPERORDINATE GOALS

Equal contact between communities reduces intolerance, but this contact does not necessarily have to relate to the identity of the groups involved. Working together on a common goal unrelated to one's identities promotes collaboration and equal contact, deepening relationships without a focus on religious literacy or formal education. Organizations that take this approach to intolerance focus on activities and programming that have little if anything to do with religion, instead focusing on shared ventures or common goals.

ENCOURAGE DEMOCRATIC AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement improves the health and resilience of societies. When communities can engage with leaders and decision-makers to advocate for their community, community needs are heard, and trust and accountability are built. Organizations encourage democratic and civic engagement at various levels including civil society organizations, workplace democracy, public forums for open debate, and voter turnout campaigns.

Community Approaches within the Ecosystem

Building up and strengthening communities to respond to hate and biases like antisemitism and Islamophobia often necessitates bringing people together across differences and equipping them with the skills to work together and address intolerance. Interfaith and multifait approaches are both important to doing this work. Bringing people together across differences requires education that may change beliefs, but it also requires actions that can change or prevent behaviors. Civic engagement and political action within a community that is intentional about building bridges can prevent or reduce harmful behaviors by channeling action towards strengthening the community through democratic processes. Within the ecosystem of approaches, the community level tends to bridge both the individual level – through education and personal transformation – and the structural level – through working collectively toward larger, social ends.



Structural and Institutional Approaches

Organizations operating at the structural level aim to achieve enduring change related to antisemitism and Islamophobia by influencing policies and broad-level change. Instead of focusing on modifying individual attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, or fostering a sense of belonging within community or developing networks of local organizations, they target changes at the policy or cultural level to address these issues systematically. Their approaches include ensuring just governance and inclusive legislation, developing research that can motivate institutional change, evaluating the impact of interventions, and cultivating a culture that sees intolerance as unacceptable.



Legislate

Inclusive institutional policies and legislation can encourage a culture that respects and appreciates religious and cultural diversity, whereas discriminatory and unjust policies can embolden intolerance and prejudice in both communities and organizations. Many organizations work to lobby against discriminatory policies and legislation and in favor of inclusive policies in both organizations and local, state, and federal government.

REMOVE DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES AND PROMOTING INCLUSIVE LEGISLATION

Islamophobia and antisemitism are perpetuated through legislation that discriminates against freedom of religion and religious practice, as well as legislation that perpetuates fear and marginalization. Challenging these discriminatory policies, and promoting inclusive legislation, is a strategy adopted by several of the larger organizations in this field and can also be an effective strategy locally through coalitions.

EXPAND HATE CRIME LEGISLATION

Hate crimes are any crime that is deemed to be perpetrated due to a bias based on a person’s gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, or ethnicity, or national origin, or their presumed association with any of those characteristics. In the context of antisemitism and Islamophobia, hate crime victims are identified by the perpetrator due to their religion. Laws defining hate crimes and the government’s responsibility in response are fundamentally important to curbing antisemitism and Islamophobia.



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Conduct Research and Evaluation

Research on Islamophobia and antisemitism is necessary for understanding and assessing the frequency and the nature of how these forms of hate are showing up in communities and across the country. Research and evaluation can also inform and provide direction for the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions for countering religious intolerance, extremism, and polarization. Increasing the adoption of evidence-based interventions and expanding robust evaluation of programming may increase funding to organizations that could make important headway in countering religious intolerance.

UNDERSTAND HATE, ANTISEMITISM, ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Conducting research on the causes, prevalence, and impacts of antisemitism and Islamophobia are a key part of addressing religious intolerance and related bigotries. Organizations work to capture accurate data on incidents of religious intolerance, hate-motivated violence, and the impacts of intolerance. This evidence can be used to inform policymakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders to inform policy, safeguards against and responses to violence and hate, and anti-hate interventions.

EVALUATE BEST PRACTICES

Evaluating the impact of work to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia is difficult and expensive. While few organizations have formal evaluation procedures, certain organizations provide resources for conducting evidence-based programming. Rather than evaluating their own programs, organizations can use resources provided by these organizations as blueprints to implement programming that has already been evaluated for its impact. Other organizations partner with researchers and evaluators to conduct sophisticated evaluations of the impact of their work. Still others offer validated research tools that organizations can use to evaluate their own programs.

Cultivate a Culture of Inclusion

Establishing tolerance as a social norm is critical for reducing extremism. Creating such a culture involves promoting tolerance and celebrating inclusion at every level ranging from social media to cultural products (television, books, etc.). Organizations that work on combating antisemitism and Islamophobia contribute to this work through a variety of means, many of which we discuss in other sections, such as education, relationship and bridge building, and formal anti-discrimination policies. Developing relationships between faith-based organizations, for example, contributes to this culture of tolerance through a public manifestation of that culture. Certain organizations do, however, seek to influence the broader culture in more directed ways.

IMPART DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY VALUES THROUGH STORYTELLING AND POPULAR CULTURE

Direct encounters across difference are difficult to scale and resource. Vicarious intergroup engagement or witnessing productive conflict and dialogue across difference through diverse media sources and content can help change narratives and build empathy by showing ways of engaging with differences that they may not have known were possible. These methods can be especially powerful when fueled by compelling stories. People are more willing to listen to opposing viewpoints and take seemingly abstract problems like antisemitism and Islamophobia more seriously when they can engage with them in the context of individual lives. Encouraging

people to share their stories and offering the resources and structures to enable that sharing is therefore a critical component to combatting antisemitism and Islamophobia.

CHALLENGE HATEFUL SPEECH

In many cases, violence and oppression start with hateful speech. Calling out hateful speech can help to ensure that hateful speech is not normalized. One approach to creating this culture of tolerance is therefore to call out politicians, media figures, and others who make antisemitic or Islamophobic comments. This “name and shame” approach is used by several organizations in this field including the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

Structural Approaches within the Ecosystem

Structural level work makes critical contributions to the ecosystem of approaches to addressing antisemitism and Islamophobia through its broad impact. Passing inclusive legislation and challenging discriminatory policies, for example, are critical approaches to limiting behavior on a societal scale. Cultivating a culture of inclusion by promoting inclusive representation in popular media, on the other hand, can potentially impact the beliefs of anyone with access to a television or media device. Through collaboration on these projects, and particularly the organizing and coordination required to challenge policy, organizations can furthermore promote understanding and cooperation across differences by focusing on a superordinate goal. Interfaith and multifaith approaches can be useful in this context, with multifaith approaches often having the greatest potential to mobilize a broad coalition to work on system-level goals that impact everyone.



Conclusion

This executive summary highlights the approaches taken by organizations in the United States to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia and compiled the approaches of these diverse organizations under the thematic framework of Structural, Community, and Individual. While this categorization does help organize the enormous and varying work done in this field, in practice most organizations work at more than one level, if not all three. The distinction between the three levels is therefore somewhat arbitrary and should be understood as a device for analysis rather than prescription.

What the distinction between Structural, Community, and Individual level approaches does do, however, is highlight the range of tactics that organizations take to combat these bigotries. Antisemitism and Islamophobia are complex, insidious, and historically extensive. Combating them is not simply a matter of organizing educational events to learn about other faiths. It also requires crisis-response initiatives to support the victims and potential perpetrators of violent incidents, as well as legislative and policy change around structural discrimination and online radicalization. It requires fundamental change to the culture of the United States as well as practical work to ensure that people feel like they belong in their communities. In other words, combatting antisemitism and Islamophobia requires an “ecosystem” of approaches, with organizations fulfilling roles at every level and collaborating on their shared goals.