THE SHAIFI CONTROVERSY: CONTEXT AND PRELIMINARY TAKEAWAYS

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April 2019
Introduction

In late 2018 and early 2019, a faction within the Tarrant County Republican Party (TCGOP) attempted to force the removal of the organization's newly appointed vice chair, Dr. Shahid Shafi, because he is Muslim. The controversy drew national and international media attention, and pitted anti-Muslim activists against party luminaries such as U.S. Senator Ted Cruz and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who voiced support for Shafi. Though anti-Muslim rhetoric has become common in the GOP, party leaders now condemned religious bigotry and discrimination as contrary to Republican principles.

While the effort to oust Shafi ultimately failed, the episode offers a case study in the ways religion and politics intersect in a Texas that is steadily growing more ethnically and religiously diverse. Shafi's appointment to party leadership is itself an indicator of the growth of the Muslim community, both demographically and in political influence, in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) area as well as statewide and nationally. Yet the backlash against his appointment illustrates the extreme hostility Muslim Americans continue to face; the effort to oust Shafi played out against the backdrop of Islamophobic rhetoric and actions often perpetrated by members of his own party.

This paper seeks to place the Shafi controversy in a wider context and reflect on its significance for religion and politics in the DFW area and in Texas as a whole. The paper is structured in three sections. The first places the controversy in a broader demographic and political context, while the second recounts chronologically how the controversy unfolded. The third section offers some preliminary and tentative reflections on what we can learn from the Shafi case.

The Context for the Shafi Controversy: The Muslim American Community, Islamophobia, and the Political Arena

1. A Growing Muslim Presence

While the Muslim American community remains comparatively small, accounting for slightly more than 1 percent of the U.S. population, it grew from an estimated 2.35 million in 2007 to 3.45 million in 2017. Three-quarters of U.S. Muslims are either immigrants or the children of immigrants, and three in 10 arrived after 2010. American Muslims also tend to be younger than most American adults. According to the Pew Research Center, 35 percent of Muslim American adults are between 18 and 29 years old, compared to only 21 percent of the general population in that age bracket. Pew Research projects that by 2050, Muslims will account for more than 2 percent of the U.S. population, overtaking Jews as the nation’s second-largest faith group.

In Texas, the Muslim population grew by more than 260 percent between 2000 and 2010, from 114,999 to 421,972, according to an Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) estimate. The number of Muslims in the Dallas-Fort Worth area more than tripled
between 2000 and 2010,\textsuperscript{7} and the DFW metroplex is now home to more than 155,000 Muslims\textsuperscript{8} and around 73 mosques.\textsuperscript{9}

Much of this growth is associated with the increase in the number of Asian immigrants (including Shafi himself, who immigrated from Pakistan). While the Asian immigrant population in Tarrant County itself is still comparatively small (nearly 6 percent),\textsuperscript{10} Asian immigrants now comprise a significant minority of the population in several DFW-area suburbs. In Irving, the Asian population accounts for nearly 18 percent of all residents, in third place after Hispanics and whites, in that order.\textsuperscript{11} Asian residents make up the second-largest demographic group in Plano (19.4 percent) after Hispanics,\textsuperscript{12} while about one in 10 Euless residents is Asian.\textsuperscript{13}

2. Islamophobia

Like many other U.S. minority communities, American Muslims are frequently the targets of suspicion, prejudice, discrimination, and, at times, violence. This phenomenon is generally known as Islamophobia.

Though widely used, the term Islamophobia is multivalent and sometimes imprecise.\textsuperscript{14} One scholar, for instance, defines it as “a single, unified, and negative conception of an essentialized Islam, which is then deemed incompatible with Euro-Americaness.”\textsuperscript{15} The Georgetown University Bridge Initiative defines Islamophobia as “extreme fear of and antipathy toward Islam and Muslims, which often leads to social and political discrimination and can be used to rationalize violence manifested in hate crimes and military attacks.”\textsuperscript{16} In this paper I will follow political scientist Eric Bleich’s broader definition: “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.”\textsuperscript{17} I will also use the terms Islamophobia and anti-Muslim interchangeably.

As the following subsections show, expressions of Islamophobia are abundant, especially among Republicans, on the national level as well as in Texas and in the DFW area.

a. Islamophobia at the National Level

Though evidence of Islamophobia dates back to the nation’s founding,\textsuperscript{18} it has become especially common in recent years. A 2016 report by Nihad Awad of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) “stated that fear and hatred of American Muslims have ‘moved from the fringes of American society to the mainstream.’”\textsuperscript{19} That claim seems to be borne out by polling. A 2003 Pew Research poll found that the percentage of Americans who believe Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions increased sharply between 2002 (25 percent) and 2003 (44 percent), though a narrow majority (51 percent) reported having a favorable view of Muslim Americans.\textsuperscript{20} By 2017, however, attitudes toward Muslims had improved somewhat; 55 percent of respondents said there is either not much support for extremism, or none at all, among U.S. Muslims. Yet nearly half of respondents (49 percent) believe that at least “some” U.S. Muslims are anti-American.\textsuperscript{21}

At times, Islamophobic attitudes are manifested in physical violence against Muslims, a phenomenon that seems to have increased in recent years. A Georgetown University
Bridge Initiative study found “174 reported incidents of anti-Muslim violence and vandalism,” including 12 murders and “54 acts of vandalism or destruction of property” during the 2016 presidential election season; this marked an increase over the 154 incidents reported in 2014. In 2015, according to the same study, American Muslims were “approximately six to nine times more likely to suffer [anti-Muslim] attacks” than they had been prior to 9/11.

Anti-Muslim attitudes appear to be more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats. A 2015 Pew Research poll found that Republicans and those leaning Republican were far more likely than Democrats/Democratic-leaning voters to say that Islam encourages violence more than other faiths (63 percent to 26 percent), that Islam is not part of mainstream American society (68 percent to 37 percent), and that there is natural conflict between Islam and democracy (65 percent to 30 percent).22

As political scientist Michael Tesler notes, in the 2008 and 2012 elections, “Attitudes about Muslims were one of the strongest predictors of vote choice for president...despite their insignificant influence on the 2004 election....[A] majority of Republican voters in 2012 said Obama’s religion made them less likely to vote for him—almost none of whom identified Obama as a Christian,” Tesler observes. “That strong link between anti-Muslim sentiments and opposition to Obama helped Islamophobia emerge as a significant predictor of party identification for the first time ever during his presidency.”23

Islamophobic rhetoric has also become common among Republican politicians in recent years. For instance, in 2013 former Arkansas governor and sometime presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee referred to Muslims as “uncorked animals,” and asked: “Can someone explain to me why it is that we tiptoe around a religion that promotes the most murderous mayhem on the planet in their so-called ‘holiest days’?”24 During the 2016 presidential election season, GOP candidate Ben Carson (who later became secretary of housing and urban development in the Trump administration) stated that a Muslim should not be president.25

Islamophobic rhetoric reached new peaks in the presidential bid of Donald Trump, who rode an “Islamophobic wave throughout the 2016 campaign,” Tesler observes.26 “Unlike prior Republican primaries, when attitudes about Muslims were unrelated to vote preferences, Trump galvanized his party’s most Islamophobic voters...His campaign also activated Islamophobia in the general election. Attitudes about Muslims were a stronger predictor of vote choice in 2016 than they were in Obama’s elections, with those attitudes significantly predicting party vote changes from 2012 to 2016.”27

As a candidate, Trump “suggested registries and special IDs for Muslims,” and also called for “Muslims—immigrants, tourists, and perhaps even citizens—[to] be barred from entering the United States.”28 He “painted a picture of a United States under siege by refugees and immigrants...pledged to kick out all Syrian refugees...[and] led the charge that President Obama was Muslim, continuing to question his religious beliefs and birthplace long after the matter had been settled.”29 After winning the presidency, Trump quickly
made good on his campaign promise to seek a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” by signing executive orders, widely termed “Muslim bans,” that barred immigration from several predominantly Muslim countries.30

Another indication of Islamophobic attitudes, particularly among Republicans, is the proliferation of “anti-sharia” legislation across the country. Rice University sociologist Craig Considine reports that as of 2017, “at least 32 states across the United States have introduced and debated anti-sharia or anti-foreign law bills,” which he describes as “legislation designed to vilify or otherwise target Muslims at an institutional level.” The “anti-sharia” movement, Considine writes, “reached its climax in 2011 and 2012, when 78 bills or amendments designed to denigrate Islamic religious practices were introduced in the legislatures of 29 states as well as the U.S. Congress.” And this was a predominantly Republican effort: “Seventy-three of these bills were introduced by Republicans, while only one bill was introduced by a Democrat from Alabama.”31

Despite the prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment among Republicans and their leaders, the national Republican Party platform paints a much more inclusive and tolerant picture: “We denounce bigotry, racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic prejudice, and religious intolerance. Therefore, we oppose discrimination based on race, sex, religion, creed, disability, or national origin and support statutes to end such discrimination....Our ranks include Americans from every faith and tradition, and we respect the right of each American to follow his or her deeply held beliefs.”32 The disparity between these affirmations and the rhetoric of many of the party’s politicians is striking.

b. Islamophobia in Texas
Much like the national GOP platform, the platform of the Republican Party of Texas affirms “the constitutional right of all individuals to worship as they choose.”33 Yet it also asserts that the U.S. was “founded on Judeo-Christian principles,” and supports “the affirmation of traditional Judeo-Christian family values”—positions that are hardly inclusive of Muslims and people of other faiths.34 The platform also advocates “anti-sharia” legislation.35

Indeed, anti-Muslim attitudes have long been evident among GOP politicians in Texas.36 As a state senator, Dan Patrick, now the state’s lieutenant governor, boycotted the Texas Senate’s first invocation by a Muslim; Patrick explained that he did not want his “attendance on the floor to appear that [he] was endorsing” the Muslim prayer.37 U.S. Representative Louie Gohmert (R-Tyler) has made highly questionable claims that young women are raising babies to serve as future terrorists, and that “radical Islamists” are being trained to “act like Hispanic[s]” to cross the U.S.-Mexico border and infiltrate the U.S.38

A 2015 Facebook post by Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller called for using nuclear weapons on the “Muslim world.”39 The same year, state Representative Molly White (R-Belton) refused to meet Muslim visitors at her state capitol office unless they first “renounce[d] Islamic terrorist groups and publicly announce[d] allegiance to America and our laws,” and told a journalist that Islam is “not just a religion. It’s a whole ideology; it’s a
whole way of life. And their belief system is so contrary to our American ideology of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of worship.”

Though Governor Abbott called for civility in the Molly White case, he himself has made statements that, though not necessarily Islamophobic, suggest suspicion of Muslims. For instance, at the 2016 state GOP convention, the governor echoed Gohmert’s claims by raising fears of Muslim terrorists organizing at the state’s southern border. Abbott told delegates “that the Islamic State group, which has ravaged parts of the Middle East, was at work along the Texas-Mexico border. ‘Our country better wake up. We’re facing an existential threat,’ he said. ‘ISIS is running through the border made porous by Barack Obama’s policies,’” according to PolitiFact Texas, which called Abbott’s claim “ridiculous.” Whatever Abbott’s motivations, unfounded claims of this nature feed into the Islamophobic narratives of Muslims as constituting an existential threat to America and democracy.

Finally, the State Board of Education (SBOE), responsible for establishing the curriculum for all Texas public school subjects and grade levels, has also promoted Islamophobia in recent years. As I have written elsewhere, in the late 2000s and early 2010s the board was dominated by a bloc of conservative Christian Republicans who combined Christian nationalism with a deep-seated distrust of Islam. Former SBOE chair Don McLeroy “dismissed the well-documented historical fact that Islam spread at least as much through the peaceful efforts of traders and preachers, as by military conquest.” During McLeroy’s tenure, the board adopted a controversial resolution claiming that Texas textbooks contained a “pro-Islamic/anti-Christian” bias, a claim the left-leaning Texas Freedom Network showed to be unfounded. Under the leadership of McLeroy and his fellow Christian nationalists on the board, the Texas public school social studies curriculum took on a pronounced pro-Christian, anti-Muslim slant.

c. Islamophobia in the DFW area
The growth of DFW’s Muslim community has been accompanied by instances of Islamophobic rhetoric and behavior among political leaders as well as members of the public.

In 2015 and 2016, members of a militia group calling itself the Bureau of American Islamic Relations, designated by The Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-Muslim hate group, began staging protests outside DFW-area mosques, armed with assault rifles and signs saying “Stop the Islamization of America.”

Rev. Robert Jeffress, minister at the 13,000-member First Baptist Dallas and an outspoken Trump supporter, is an equally outspoken critic of Islam. “Islam is a false religion that is based on a false book that was written by a false prophet,” Jeffress has written. “If you are genuinely concerned about the eternal destiny of Muslims, then you will tell them the truth about their religion. It is wrong. It is based on a fraud.”

Several DFW-area politicians have also engaged in apparently Islamophobic behavior. In 2015, Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne claimed that a Muslim court had imposed sharia law
in the Dallas suburb. As The Dallas Morning News reported, “In reality, a Dallas-based religious group was offering to mediate disputes: unusual only because they were Muslim imams instead of Catholics or Jews. But before she spoke to anyone involved with the group, Van Duyne said it was ‘bypassing Texas courts, bypassing American courts.’”\(^49\) The mayor persuaded her fellow Irving City Council members to pass, in a 5-4 vote, a controversial resolution supporting a proposed state house bill that would have banned the use of “foreign law” in American courts.\(^50\) Van Duyne, who did not seek reelection as mayor, was later appointed to a post in the Trump administration.\(^51\)

In 2018, state Representative Jonathan Stickland (R-Bedford) made an issue of a Pakistani-born candidate’s religion in a Euless City Council race. Stickland warned Euless residents to “BEWARE” of the candidate, Salman Bhojani, whom Stickland characterized as “a Muslim, a lawyer, and a lifelong Democrat.” Stickland said it was “thanks to” Bhojani that “the Koran [sic] was read for the first time at a city council meeting,” implying that such a development was somehow problematic. (In fact, the Muslim Boy Scout troop that Bhojani leads presented the American flag and recited verses from the Quran about respecting other faiths.) “News of Stickland’s comments spread quickly in the local media, as well as on Facebook and Twitter. Not only were Muslims outraged, but so were Jewish and Christian clergy, who condemned ‘attacks on [Bhojani’s] faith and ethnicity.’ In the end, Bhojani squeaked past his opponent, Molly Maddux, by 37 votes.”\(^52\)

Also in 2018, in the Dallas suburb of Plano, an apparently Islamophobic Facebook post nearly resulted in an unprecedented recall election for a city council member. In February 2018, council member Tom Harrison shared a Facebook post that said “Share if you think Trump should ban Islam in American schools,” and was accompanied by a video of female students wearing headscarves. After his fellow council members learned that he had shared other inflammatory posts—one read: “In the 19th century, all slaveholders were Democrats. In the 21st century, all slaveholders are Muslims. Their allies are Democrats.”—they called for his resignation and voted to censure him. Though Harrison issued an online apology saying the February post “was not meant as a personal attack against the Islamic faith,” an interfaith grassroots group organized a petition drive to force Harrison’s recall. “[M]ore than 200 volunteers collected nearly 4,500 signatures—well beyond the nearly 2,800 required.” On April 9, the city council voted to hold a recall election, which would have been the first in Plano’s history.\(^53\) Due to a technicality in the city’s charter, the recall election was cancelled.\(^34\) In January 2019, Harrison announced he would not seek reelection, citing health reasons.\(^55\)

3. Muslims and the Political Arena

Given that anti-Muslim sentiment appears to be more common among Republicans than Democrats, it is hardly surprising that U.S. Muslims have gravitated toward the Democratic Party. Following the 2016 presidential election, a CAIR exit poll of 2,000 registered Muslim voters nationwide found that, of the 90 percent who reported voting, 74 percent backed Hillary Clinton, and only 13 percent supported Donald Trump.\(^56\) A similar split was evident in the 2018 midterm election: a CAIR survey of just over 1,000 Muslim voters found that 78 percent voted Democratic and 17 percent Republican.
It has not always been this way. As David A. Graham writes, during the 2000 presidential campaign, candidate George W. Bush “made a special effort to court Muslims....That was in large part at the urging of Grover Norquist, the anti-tax crusader, who argued that because Muslims are a socially conservative, family-oriented, business-friendly group, they are a natural GOP constituency....Bush also spoke out [against] surveillance of Muslims during the second presidential debate. ‘Arab Americans are racially profiled in what is called secret evidence,’ [Bush] said. ‘People are stopped, and we have to do something about that.’” Although Norquist later boasted that the Muslim vote was decisive in Bush’s 2000 win, it is unclear precisely how well Bush did among Muslims. One survey found that 70 percent of Muslims voted for Bush, while another put the number at 42 percent.

Whatever the degree of Muslim support for the GOP candidate in 2000, since then the Muslim vote has shifted decisively to the Democrats. According to studies by Georgetown University’s Muslims in the American Public Square project, shortly after the September 11 attacks, “Almost a quarter [of American Muslims surveyed] identified as Republicans, 40 percent as Democrats, and 28 percent as independents. Three years later, those numbers were 12, 50, and 31, respectively. The 2004 poll, taken on the eve of the election, found three-fourths of Muslims planning to vote for Democrat John Kerry and just 7 percent backing Bush.” The Muslim migration to the Democrats continued in subsequent years. CAIR polling in 2008 found that 89 percent of Muslims planned to vote for Obama; a CAIR poll four years later indicated a smaller but still substantial majority of 68 percent of Muslims backing the incumbent president. Pollster John Zogby called the shift of American Muslims away from the Republican Party “dramatic,” “the truest example of a backlash we’ve seen,” and “virtually unprecedented.”

While there are undoubtedly several causes for this trend, the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric among Republicans is clearly a factor. A 2016 CAIR survey of the six states with the most Muslim voters found that “only 7 percent thought the GOP was friendly toward Muslims, down from 12 percent in 2010.” In 2018, Muslim perceptions of Islamophobia seemed to drive voting patterns: CAIR found that “78 percent of Muslim voters who primarily voted for Democratic Party candidates thought Islamophobia increased in the past year. Conversely, only 33 percent of Muslim voters who primarily voted for Republican Party candidates thought Islamophobia increased in the past year.” Furthermore, over half (53 percent) reported that they had become more interested in politics since the 2016 presidential election that brought Donald Trump to the White House.

Despite these trends, the Muslim community’s alignment with the Democratic Party is by no means inevitable. Muslim Americans remain a highly diverse group: a 2017 Pew Research study found that “no single racial group forms a majority” of the community, and some Muslims identify as white (41 percent), others as Asian (28 percent) or black (20 percent). Norquist’s claim back in 2000 that Muslims are a “natural GOP constituency” continues to have some merit. The 2018 CAIR study found that 35 percent of Muslims surveyed consider themselves conservative on social issues (versus 46 percent liberal); interestingly, 26 percent of Muslim voters “who primarily voted for Democratic candidates
perceived themselves as being conservative on social issues.” Furthermore, more Muslim voters (43 percent) consider themselves fiscally conservative than fiscally liberal (40 percent). In short, there appears to remain an opening within the Muslim community for Republican, or at least conservative, ideas—provided the GOP can be seen as welcoming.

**The Shafi Controversy: A Chronological Account**

Having sketched the context for the Shafi case, we can now turn to the controversy itself. Since accounts of the Shafi controversy were reported piecemeal, as they happened, in news outlets, especially the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and *The Dallas Morning News*, this section will provide a single, chronological narrative of how the incident unfolded from July 2018 through February 2019, drawing on press accounts and the author’s own reporting.

In July 2018, shortly after he took office as Tarrant County Republican Party (TCGOP) chairman, Darl Easton named Southlake City Council member and trauma surgeon Dr. Shahid Shafi to one of the county party’s two vice chair positions—making him the first Muslim to hold such a position in the organization. TCGOP officials ratified Shafi’s appointment with little objection, according to Easton.

The lack of significant objection is not surprising, given Shafi’s political positions and his long track record as a Republican activist. An immigrant from Pakistan, Shafi traveled to the United States in 1990 to study medicine. He became a naturalized citizen in 2009 and became active in Republican Party politics soon thereafter. According to his own account, Shafi’s involvement in GOP politics has been extensive:

> I have served in local Republican clubs and on various committees at TCGOP. I have served as a delegate at precinct conventions, SD [senate district] conventions, and state conventions. I have been elected as a delegate to the state GOP convention in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. I have worked extensively to promote GOP values and encouraged citizen participation in our democratic process in Tarrant, Dallas, and Collin counties. Most recently, I started a new Republican Club in our town, Southlake.

Shafi also listed his *bona fides* as a Republican and a conservative:

> I support our Second Amendment rights unconditionally, and I believe in the sanctity of life from conception onward. I believe in small government, lower taxes, individual responsibility, religious freedom, school choice, energy independence, rule of law, and secure borders. For five years in a row, as a city councilman, I have voted to reduce property taxes in Southlake. I also support Israel’s right to exist.

Despite Shafi’s considerable qualifications, soon after his appointment Easton began to receive “communications” calling for Shafi’s removal. The backlash against the Southlake surgeon seems to have been expressed mainly through social media, particularly Facebook.
One woman posted the following on the Republican Women of Arlington Facebook page: “Please explain to me...why we need a Muslim in the [executive committee] in Tarrant County! There are no conservative Muslims or moderate ones.”73 Another Tarrant County Republican “noted online that the goal [of the opposition effort] is to ‘oust the Muslim Brotherhood from Infiltrating [sic] the Republican Party.’”74

Dorrie O’Brien, a TCGOP precinct chair from Grand Prairie, spearheaded the movement to oust Shafi. O’Brien, The Dallas Morning News reported, “made repeated, unsupported claims that Shafi is a proponent of sharia law and connected to terrorist-affiliated groups.”75 In a December 2018 post, she explained her objection to Shafi’s appointment: “We don’t think he’s suitable as a practicing Muslim to be vice chair because he’d be the representative for ALL Republicans in Tarrant County, and not ALL Republicans in Tarrant County think Islam is safe or acceptable in the U.S., in Tarrant County, and in the TCGOP, and there are big questions surrounding exactly where Dr. Shafi’s loyalties lie.”76 In another December 2018 Facebook post, she connected the Shafi appointment to the following quote from Bruce Bawer, a critic of Islam: “[M]ost Muslims who have been elected to office in the West have made it obvious enough, by word and by action, that they are, indeed, true believers, whose principal loyalty is to their faith and whose primary goal as so-called ‘public servants’ is to serve the long-term jihadist objective of bringing the West into the House of God.”77 In January 2019, O’Brien accused Shafi of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (which she called a “terror group”) working to build “the Islamic State, and then the Islamic caliphate.”78

Another prominent Shafi opponent, Sara Legvold of Keller, a former member of the State Republican Executive Committee79 and Tarrant County co-chair of the 2016 Trump campaign,80 posted the following comments on Facebook: “Dr. Shafi is a practicing, Mosque-attending muslim [sic] who claims not to follow sharia law or know what it is. As a practicing muslim [sic] that is an overt falsehood. Sharia law is anathema to our Constitution because Islam recognizes no other law but shariah [sic]. It is past time we took our Party back,” Legvold wrote.81

Shafi opponent James Scott Trimm, who describes himself as a rabbi at a Messianic Jewish church,82 used his blog to voice his opposition to the appointment. Referencing the Texas GOP platform’s affirmation of “traditional Judeo-Christian values,” Trimm contended that “One simply cannot accept that the Quran is true, and also accept the God-ordained Biblical design for marriage as stipulated in the Texas Republican Party Platform. Islamic family values are not the same as Judeo-Christian family values.” Though Trimm does not mention Shafi by name, the Southlake surgeon is the clear reference: “Someone who does not believe in the principles of our platform is not well suited for a position of leadership in propagating our platform[.] That is no more bigotry than a business refusing to hire a one-legged man to serve as a runner.”83 Trimm also took aim at TCGOP chairman Easton: “Regardless of which side one takes on the appointment of Shahid Shafi as vice chair of the Tarrant County Republican Party, Darl Easton should have foreseen that such a controversial appointment would plunge the Tarrant County GOP into division and created a public relations nightmare for our party....The Tarrant County Republican party
needs new leadership if we are to unite and keep Tarrant red. Darl needs to be a man, and recognize that the party is best served with his resignation.”

Easton called the attacks on Shafi “disgusting” and “very embarrassing.” He refused to remove Shafi, and predicted that “the majority of the Republican precinct chairs will vote down this effort to bring religious discrimination into the party.” Easton later told The Texas Tribune “[Shafi is] very active with the party, but most of the people don’t even care about what he’s done…Most of them already have a prejudice against Muslims.”

Easton expanded on these themes in an August 2018 statement:

The leadership of the Tarrant County Republican Party unequivocally rejects the religious discrimination being demonstrated by a few members of our party….Intolerance, based on one’s faith, has no place in the construct of Tarrant County GOP policy, and violates the very principles and moral values upon which our nation and the Republican Party were founded. Those immutable principles include individual freedom and religious liberty….We, the members of the Tarrant County Republican Party leadership, are an organization that practices inclusion not exclusion of opinions.

For his part, Shafi refused to resign. In an open letter, he denied the accusations that he was associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, CAIR, or any terrorist organizations, or that he had promoted sharia law, and he reiterated his bona fides as a Republican.

At a TCGOP meeting in September, Grand Prairie precinct chair O’Brien moved that Shafi’s appointment “be reconsidered in a secret ballot vote at the next party meeting after the November 6 midterm election.” A vote by TCGOP precinct chairs to oust Shafi was scheduled for November 10, 2018. Although the group held a closed-door discussion of the issue on that date, they ran out of time and rescheduled the vote for January 10, 2019.

“The party over this issue is more split than I’ve seen it in the past,” Easton told the Star-Telegram after the November session.

As the January vote loomed, state GOP leaders began to line up in opposition to the efforts to oust Shafi. The State Republican Executive Committee adopted a resolution in December 2018 calling “for all Republican organizations to advocate and adhere to our platform planks protecting and preserving religious liberty for all Americans” (emphasis in original). Republican Party of Texas chairman James Dickey stated in an op-ed that his party “firmly opposes all racism and religious bigotry.” Travis County Republican Party Chairman Matt Mackowiak urged Easton to reject the “bigoted effort” to remove Shafi. Mackowiak worried that “the headlines the story is generating could hurt Republicans locally, statewide, and even nationally,” the Star-Telegram reported, quoting Mackowiak as saying “Our opponents claim the Republican Party is bigoted or racist. The last thing we want to do is take an action that would make that argument for them.”

Leading officeholders in the Texas GOP also came to Shafi’s defense. “Discrimination against Dr. Shafi b/c [because] he’s Muslim is wrong,” U.S. Senator Ted Cruz said in a tweet.
“The Party of Lincoln should welcome everybody & celebrate Liberty [sic].” Governor Abbott also weighed in. Citing the prohibition of religious tests for public office in the Texas Constitution, Abbott declared in a press statement that “Religious freedom is at the core of who we are as a nation and state, and attacks on Dr. Shafi because of his faith are contrary to this guiding principle.”

Retiring Texas House Speaker Joe Straus (R-San Antonio) called the effort to oust Shafi “disgraceful and un-American.” Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush tweeted: “I urge the Tarrant County GOP to stop this attempt to remove a hardworking county party official based on religious beliefs. We must move towards a more inclusive Republican Party and stop tearing down our own if we are to keep Texas red.”

Even state Representative Stickland, who had raised Islamophobic fears about Euless candidate Salman Bhojani earlier in 2018, came to Shafi’s support: “Dr. Shafi is my friend and a long time [sic] supporter,” he tweeted. “He has worked to advance Republican principles in Tarrant County.”

Comments from Democrats confirmed the concerns Mackowiak raised. In a tweet, state Representative Chris Turner (D-Grand Prairie) called the efforts to oust Shafi “disgusting” (the same descriptor used by TCGOP chair Easton) and added, “The intolerance and bigotry in today’s GOP has no place in our politics.” And the Texas Democratic Party said in a statement: “From the White House to Texas, Republicans in the era of Trump have mainstreamed Islamophobic rhetoric. They have made Muslims in this state feel like no matter what they do, they’re going to be under suspicion and under attack.”

Meanwhile, the Fort Worth Star-Telegraph reported that sources from the TCGOP said the Shafi controversy was hurting the party’s fundraising efforts. “I have heard that several big donors are waiting until after the vote to pledge their support,’ said William Busby, a former precinct chairman and area leader for the Tarrant County Republican Party. ‘This (Shafi) story has gained national attention and has put the party in a bad light, all thanks to the actions of a few. Corporate donors, the big donors, don’t want to be associated with a party that’s going in the direction of excluding people based upon their religious beliefs.”

Shafi’s opponents, however, appear not to have been cowed either by the worries about donors or by the litany of pro-Shafi statements from prominent state Republicans. Indeed, they expanded their list of targets to other Tarrant County Republicans, including Easton himself and a precinct chairwoman who is married to a Muslim. Following Abbott’s public statement in defense of Shafi, Legvold posted on Facebook, “Governor Abbott came out in support of the Islamization of our Republican Party of Texas today. How’s that for shariah [sic] compliance?” And O’Brien said on Facebook: “This is where we are in Tarrant County today….Divided by those who won’t see the stealth jihad and by those who do. Those who’ve drunk the Islamic Kool-Aid and those who haven’t.”
Shafi, meanwhile, continued to hold his ground. “If somebody is wondering if one can be a Muslim and a...good American, I am a living example of that. Sharia law — I have no interest in living under sharia law.” The support he had received, he said, “has reaffirmed my faith in the party and reaffirmed my faith in the country. I’m very proud to be an American and very proud to be a Republican....I think a higher principle is at stake here. When the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence...they pledged their sacred honor to the principle of liberty and religious freedom and equality....The reason I’m standing and fighting is for that principle of equality and for nondiscrimination based on religion.”

On January 10, 2019, hundreds of people—including TCGOP officials and precinct chairs, pro- and anti-Shafi activists, interested visitors, numerous law enforcement officers, and members of the press—packed into the Faith Creek Church in the Fort Worth suburb of North Richland Hills. This author covered the meeting as a member of the press.

A group of Muslim women in hijabs from Plano were in attendance to “support justice,” as one of them told me. Several of the women also told me they had voted Republican in the past, though they did not specify when or which candidates. Also in hijab, but not for religious reasons, was Legvold. Though she is not Muslim, she was dressed in a black niqab in order, as she told me, to “make a statement” about Shafi. She claimed Shafi had “infiltrated the Republican party.” A practicing Muslim like Shafi, she argued, follows sharia law, and “sharia law is the complete opposite of our Constitution.” She also said that if Shafi were “apostate” (if he renounced Islam), “he’d be okay.”

The meeting itself was closed to the media. After about two hours of debate, which an attendee later told me was contentious and filled with repeated “point of order” calls, the TCGOP precinct chairs finally voted 139 to 49 against ousting Shafi from his position as vice chair.

Shafi was understandably upbeat after the vote: “Today, the beacon of liberty held by the Statue of Liberty is shining brighter,” he told the press contingent. “My faith in our party, in our country, has been reaffirmed.” Easton said in a prepared statement: “Religious liberty won tonight. And while that makes a great day for the Republican Party of Tarrant County, that victory also serves notice that we have much work to do unifying our party.”

The vote also prompted celebratory comments from state and local GOP leaders. For instance, Texas land commissioner Bush tweeted: “I salute the Tarrant County Republican Party for re-affirming Shahid Shafi as vice president of the county GOP. He is a good man who is doing a good job. And we should never allow religious bigotry to play any part in our politics.”

Yet the fact remains that about one in four TCGOP precinct chairs were willing to oust Shafi because of his religion. And the vote clearly did nothing to mollify his opponents. Legvold posted on Facebook after the January 10 decision: “Tarrant County went full on
Shariah compliant [sic] at the EC [executive committee] meeting tonight. We are stuck with the moslem [sic] operative. Lost this battle.”109 “When I heard the vote numbers I was astounded,” Trimm posted on Facebook. “Thank you to the rest of the 49 courageous souls who voted with me to bless Israel. Unfortunately the 139 voted to take a different path.”110

Later in January, in a move to heal divisions in the TCGOP, Shafi opponent Trimm was named to a TCGOP committee charged with recruiting precinct chairs. Though The Dallas Morning News reported that sources called Trimm “one of the most hated men” in the TCGOP, his appointment was “intended to be an olive branch to those who voted to remove Dr. Shahid Shafi from his position.” As recruitment committee chair Joel Downs explained, “We need to bury the hatchet and defeat the Democrats.”111 The olive branch, however, quickly wilted. After the Trimm appointment, Downs resigned, and the committee was then disbanded until further notice.112 In a separate development, a Republican from the Rio Grande Valley “offered a “$500 cash bounty” to anyone who could give him the names of the 49 who voted against Shafi; TCGOP officials, however, said they would not release a list showing how precinct chairs voted on January 10.113

At a February TCGOP executive committee meeting, Shafi said that he holds “no animosity toward anybody in this group” and pledged to help reunite the party. “We need to...move forward,” he said.114

Several issues stand at the time of this writing.

**Early Lessons from the Shafi Controversy**

In the Shafi case, the TCGOP took a small step toward embracing the increasing diversity of the DFW area. Yet a substantial number of its members appear to be deeply unhappy with that move. What lessons can be drawn from this controversy? While it is too early to know whether the Shafi case represents any longer-term trends in Texas politics, a few preliminary and tentative reflections are possible at this early stage.

1. **Muslims are Taking an Increasingly Active Political Role**

The Shafi case is another example of the fact that Muslims are playing an increasingly active and visible role in all facets of life, including political life, in the DFW area and in Texas. Generally, however, that activism has accrued to the benefit of the Democratic Party, due at least in part to reaction against the Islamophobia many area Muslims connect with the GOP under Trump.115 At least three Muslims—Huma Ahmed, Syed Hassan, and M. Emad Salem—serve on the Texas State Democratic Executive Committee.116 There appears to be no comparable Muslim representation on the State Republican Executive Committee.

Shafi is something of an outlier, since he has chosen to affiliate with the Republican Party despite its Islamophobic elements. Furthermore, the opposition to his appointment suggests that Muslims are still relatively underrepresented not only in Republican Party leadership but (as discussed above) in GOP circles generally.
Having a Muslim immigrant like Shafi in a prominent leadership position in the Tarrant County GOP could motivate his fellow Muslims and immigrants in the DFW area—especially those like Shafi who consider themselves socially and/or fiscally conservative—to at least consider supporting Republican candidates, and perhaps draw some away from the Democratic Party. Party affiliation trends in the DFW and Texas Muslim communities deserve further study.

2. Ideology Trumped Religious Identity—But Not for Everyone

One obvious barrier to increased Muslim affiliation with the GOP has been the prevalence of anti-Muslim rhetoric and activity among Republicans, especially since the rise of Donald Trump. The Texas Democratic Party makes a good (though no doubt partisan) point in saying (as quoted above) that “Republicans in the era of Trump have mainstreamed Islamophobic rhetoric,” making Muslims feel that “no matter what they do, they’re going to be under suspicion and under attack.” The Islamophobic comments of Tarrant County Republicans such as O’Brien and Legvold serve to exacerbate such feelings. That stands to keep the growing Muslim population largely out of reach of the GOP, robbing the party of a potential new source of voters.

Thus, it is especially noteworthy that state Republican leaders mounted a vigorous defense of Shafi and condemned religious bigotry in no uncertain terms. The controversy gave Texas Republicans an opportunity to show a different face of their party, one largely obscured since the days of George W. Bush; an opportunity to portray the Texas GOP as a welcoming, inclusive party in which ideology and political beliefs outweigh religious and ethnic identity.

Leading Republicans—including some, like Abbott and Stickland, who have used Islamophobic or at least Muslim-unfriendly rhetoric in the past—came to Shafi’s defense. Some, like Cruz, Abbott, and Dickey, argued on principle that religious discrimination has no place in the GOP. Others stressed Shafi’s track record as a Republican activist, e.g., commenting that he is “a hardworking county party official” (George P. Bush) and that he “has worked to advance Republican principles in Tarrant County” (Stickland). State party leaders indicated that Shafi’s political views and demonstrated party loyalty make his religious identity irrelevant. In the January 10 vote, a clear majority of TCGOP precinct chairs concurred.

Yet equally noteworthy is the fact that a quarter of the precinct chairs voted in favor of Shafi’s ouster. Although the precise motivations of those 49 precinct chairs is unknown and the media was not privy to the discussion and debate in the closed meeting, the vote suggests that a significant portion of Republicans still continue to consider religious identity essential to Republican identity—at least in a negative sense: Shafi’s opponents simply did not believe that a loyal Muslim can really be a genuine Republican.
3. Recognition of Islamophobia as a Potential Danger to the GOP

Given the fact that numerous Republican politicians at the national and state levels have clearly considered Islamophobic rhetoric politically advantageous, it is interesting that some Republican defenders of Shafi either implied or said outright that religious bigotry and discrimination within the GOP poses a danger to the party.

The Shafi controversy came to a head in the context of poor Republican performance statewide in the 2018 midterm elections. Performance was particularly worrying for Republicans in the usually reliably red Tarrant County, where Cruz lost to his Democratic challenger Beto O’Rourke by over 3,000 votes, Republican incumbent state Senator Konni Burton lost to Democrat Beverly Powell, and several suburban districts flipped from red to blue. As veteran Texas politics reporter R.G. Ratcliffe wrote, “Tarrant County...for two decades has been the Republican Party’s major urban Alamo, the last stand against a rising Democratic resurgence...But this year’s election showed the county is no longer safe in Republican hands.”

That disappointment, and concerns about the party’s prospects in 2020, formed the backdrop for some defenses of Shafi. Land commissioner Bush tweeted: “We must move towards a more inclusive Republican Party and stop tearing down our own if we are to keep Texas red.” Travis County Republican Party Chairman Matt Mackowiak worried “that the headlines the [Shafi] story is generating could hurt Republicans locally, statewide, and even nationally.” Arlington Republican William Busby said in a social media post that “This kind of bigotry...is the reason the democrats [sic] will eventually come back into power in Texas.” Busby later commented: “Tarrant County could easily turn blue and this display of bigotry and exclusion is only giving the democrats [sic] more ammo to use in 2020.” GOP strategist Brendan Steinhauser also voiced concerns that the Shafi controversy could harm the TCGOP and state party in 2020: “These are the kinds of headlines the party doesn’t need right now....Doubling down on shrinking the tent is a very bad idea. It does make me wonder what’s next. Are they going to say no Catholics can be in a leadership position in the party or no Jews? I mean, what is the religious standard that they want to impose?”

Shafi himself underscored the risk to the party of policies that promote exclusion and purity. “It is through inclusion, and not exclusion, that we will be able to build strong communities, where neighbors trust and protect each other, and our enemies cannot find refuge,” he wrote in his November open letter. After the January 10 vote, he declared that the Republican Party “cannot grow by subtracting people.” And as he earlier told a Republican group, “If we aren’t growing, we’re dying.”

Here again, however, Tarrant County Republicans were divided. Shafi opponent Legvold opined that the TCGOP’s vote not to oust Shafi was itself a threat to Republican dominance: “our county turned purple and this is only gonna turn it even more purple.”
4. The Texas GOP has Much Work Ahead to Dissociate Itself from Islamophobia

Although in the Shafi case both the TCGOP and prominent Texas Republicans took a very public stand against Islamophobia, the Texas GOP has a long road ahead if it wishes to dissociate itself from religious bigotry and truly welcome ethnic and religious diversity.

The anti-Muslim rhetoric of Shafi opponents like O’Brien and Legvold is only an extreme version of a general pattern of Islamophobic discourse within the GOP itself. There is little if any substantial difference between, on one hand, Mike Huckabee’s reference to Muslims as “uncorked animals” or Ben Carson’s assertion that a Muslim should not be president and, on the other hand, O’Brien’s suggestion that Islam is not “safe or acceptable in the U.S., in Tarrant County, and in the TCGOP.”

Another obstacle to greater inclusiveness in the Texas GOP is the party’s continuing insistence on “Judeo-Christian” values and heritage. As noted above, the state party platform declares the United States was “founded on Judeo-Christian principles,” and supports “the affirmation of traditional Judeo-Christian family values.” These positions are echoed in the statements of a number of prominent Texas Republicans. For instance, one of the state’s most powerful politicians, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, has “called America a ‘Christian nation,’ declared that politics is about ‘building the kingdom’ for God and proclaimed that government policy should be ‘biblically based.’”

Interestingly, the GOP has confronted the problem of inclusiveness in the not-too-distant past. In a 2013 postmortem on the previous year’s presidential campaign, which GOP candidate Mitt Romney lost, the Republican National Committee (RNC) took note of demographic changes throughout the country and the need for a more inclusive message, and did so with a forthrightness that seems almost prophetic. “[M]any minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country,” the report, entitled Growth & Opportunity Project, observed. “America is changing demographically, and unless Republicans are able to grow our appeal the way GOP governors have done, the changes tilt the playing field even more in the Democratic direction.” The report further argued that “The Republican Party is one of toleran...
campaign opened with a speech describing undocumented Mexican immigrants as rapists and murderers, which Trump followed with a call for a ban Muslims entering the U.S.\textsuperscript{136}

That strategy seems to have worked for Trump in the 2016 election. But it is an open question whether it will continue to work as the nation’s demographic profile changes and as the Muslim population grows in numbers and in political engagement. Perhaps it is time for Republicans to take a second look at the recommendations in that 2013 report.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank William C. Martin and Eleanor Forfang-Brockman for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this research paper.

Endnotes


4 Pew Research Center, “1. Demographic portrait.”

5 Lipka, “Muslims and Islam.”


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8 Association of Religion Data Archives, Metro-Area Membership Report, Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX.

9 Salatomatic, Dallas-Fort Worth (Includes Irving, Plano, & Richardson), https://www.salatomatic.com/sub/kpanEvSMHv.


17 Bleich, “What Is Islamophobia,” 1582. Emphasis in the original. It should be noted that, as Craig Considine writes, “Those who fall under the umbrella of Islamophobia, for example, might see themselves not as racist or xenophobic, ‘but as defenders of democracy and human rights against the adherents of a religion they believe is incompatible with both.’” Considine, “The Racialization of Islam,” 7. Such persons may hold that self-image and still fall under Bleich’s definition.

18 See, for example, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, “Islamophobia and American History: Religious Stereotyping and Out-grouping of Muslims in the United States,” in Islamophobia in America, ed. C.W. Ernst (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 53. The author writes that “American Anti-Muslim attitudes are as old as the United States. Throughout its history, large segments of American society have identified Islam with tyranny, intolerance, misogyny, violence, sexual promiscuity, and heathenism.”


21 Lipka, “Muslims and Islam.”

22 Lipka, “Muslims and Islam.”


Graham, “How Republicans Won.”


Though the ban was blocked by courts, in December 2017 the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the third revision of the ban to take effect. Its ultimate status remains unresolved, however. Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative, “Factsheet: Donald Trump,” December 4, 2018, [https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-donald-trump/](https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-donald-trump/).


45 Brockman, “Raising foot soldiers.”


Brockman, “When Islamophobia Backfires.”


Graham, “How Republicans Won.”

Graham, “How Republicans Won.”


Graham, “How Republicans Won.”


Robert S. McCaw, et al. According to the report, “34 percent maintained the same level of interest in politics and 13 percent became less interested in politics.”
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See Anna M. Tinsley, “It is time we took our party back.’ Some Tarrant Republicans want Muslim leader out,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, August 21, 2018, https://www.star-telegram.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article217070295.html; and Sarah Sarder, “Tarrant County GOP votes to retain Muslim vice chair following months of controversy,” The Dallas Morning News, January 10, 2019, https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2019/01/10/tarrant-county-gop-votes-retain-muslim-vice-chair-following-months-controversy. Regarding “first Muslim,” Darl Easton told me, “To the best of my knowledge Dr. Shafi is the first Muslim to be appointed as a vice chair or as a committee chair of any of the standing committees, which are essentially the leadership positions in the TCGOP.” Darl Easton, private communication, February 9, 2019.


Shafi, “Open Letter from Shahid Shafi.”

Shafi, “Open Letter from Shahid Shafi.”

Sarder, “Republican leaders urge.”

Tinsley, “It is time.”

Anna M. Tinsley, “This is not all of us.’ Call to remove Muslim from post divides Tarrant Republicans,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, November 14, 2018, https://www.star-telegram.com/news/state/texas/article221605150.html.

Sarder, “Republican leaders urge.” The article also notes that “O’Brien has been an active member of ACT for America in the past, an organization the Southern Poverty Law Center classifies as an anti-Muslim hate group.”


On James Scott Trimm’s Facebook page, he is described as “Rabbi at Worldwide Nazarene Assembly of Elohim,” https://www.facebook.com/james.s.trimm (accessed February 6, 2019).


Tinsley, “Bigotry has no place in our party.”


Sarder, “Outspoken proponent.”


Tinsley, “Tarrant Muslim who survived party ouster.”

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117 Tinsley, “Bigotry has no place in our party.”


122 Sarder, “Republican leaders urge.”

123 Tinsley, “Bigotry has no place in our party.”

124 Tinsley, “Plan to oust Muslim.”

125 Samuels, “Tarrant County GOP set to vote.”

126 Shafi, “Open Letter from Shahid Shafi.”


133 Republican National Committee, Growth & Opportunity Project, 78.

134 Republican National Committee, Growth & Opportunity Project, 5.
