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# DRIVERS OF ONLINE ISLAMOPHOBIC HATE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

**PROF MOHAN J DUTTA**
**Dean's Chair Professor**
**Director, CARE, Massey University**

CARE
center for culture-centred approach to research and evaluation

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Mohan J Dutta - Director
Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE)
School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing
BSC1.06, Level 1, Business Studies Central
Massey University Manawatū Campus
Private Bag 11 222
PALMERSTON NORTH 4442
New Zealand

**T:** +64 06 95182 ext 86282
**E:** m.j.dutta@massey.ac.nz
**W:** www.carecca.nz

# PROF MOHAN J DUTTA

**DIRECTOR**

CENTRE FOR CULTURE-CENTRED APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND AND EVALUATION (CARE)


## ABOUT CARE

The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as Neoliberal Health Organizing, Communicating Health, and Voices of Resistance.

This white paper may include images and texts around topics such as sexual violence, physical violence, identity-based discrimination and harassment, and genocide. I encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing while reading this paper.

# DRIVERS OF ONLINE ISLAMOPHOBIC HATE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

MOHAN J DUTTA
CARE, MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Online platforms are at the core of manufacturing and disseminating Islamophobic hate globally, and in Aotearoa New Zealand[1]. The Islamophobic hate on these platforms is largely unregulated, with both platform-driven mechanisms and state/civil society led mechanisms largely absent in regulating this hate. The current digital environment in Aotearoa is largely unregulated when it comes to addressing hate targeting communities at the margins, and particularly so when it comes to regulating Islamophobic hate. The Human Rights Act does not offer protections to Muslims who are targets of religious hate. Moreover, hegemonic constructions of human rights within the structures of colonialism have produced and disseminated Islamophobia to legitimize neocolonial interventions, including in the most recent instances of imperial intervention as evidenced in Operation Iraqi Freedom[2], the invasion of Afghanistan, and the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine[3].

The constructions of free speech in policy conversations on regulation have catalysed the proliferation of digital hate while simultaneously silencing the voices of communities at the margins experiencing the hate[4]. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the discursive constructions of freedom as an instrument for spreading colonial violence are embedded in the white supremacy of the settler colonial state that has systematically worked to erase the voices of Māori while simultaneously protecting and feeding racist speech targeting Māori[5].

The Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 and the mechanisms of Netsafe are not built to address the hate targeting marginalized communities. The underlying whiteness that shapes the digital environment individualizes the sources of hate, simultaneously individualizing the responses to hate, and is not built to address pile-on, networked forms of hate, and hate that originates from the structures of white supremacy.

This individualizing ideology leaves the underlying infrastructure of white supremacy intact, replete with rhetorical devices that claim kindness and altruism. This lack of an adequate regulatory framework is normalized through the Islamophobic infrastructure of the Crown, reflected in its security intelligence infrastructure that has mainstreamed Islamophobia through the marking of the Muslim as the “other” in the 9/11 climate and the neocolonial war on terror[6].

## DRIVERS OF ONLINE ISLAMOPHOBIA

The three main drivers of Islamophobia are white supremacy, far-right Zionism and Hindutva, often intersecting in both symbolic and material contexts to drive and amplify Islamophobia.

### White supremacy and Islamophobia

The Christchurch attack was motivated by the anti-Muslim hate that forms the infrastructure of white supremacy[7]. The communicative production of hatred toward the Muslim is carried out through the construction of the Muslim “other,” homogenizing Muslims as terrorists, portraying Muslims in dehumanizing language, and legitimizing the deployment of policies targeting Muslims[8]. The civilizational narrative of white supremacy legitimizes violence toward Muslims through the framing of Muslims as inherently and culturally prone to violence, as cultural enemies of Western civilization, and as organized to destroy Western

civilization[9]. The narrative frames of "great replacement theory" and "white genocide" construct the Muslim take-over of Western democracies as a threat, articulating images of Muslim population explosion, Muslim take-over of juridical and policy structures to undo Western democracies, and Muslim threats to white women[10]. Narrative frames around Muslim grooming gangs, love jihaad, Muslim terror, and sharia law are deployed to call for and actualize violence targeting Muslims.

The Christchurch terrorist attack was driven by anti-Muslim hate, converging with similar white supremacist violent terrorist attacks in the West[11]. Whereas on one hand white supremacy expresses itself in the form of terrorist attacks targeting Muslims, gender diverse communities, Black communities, other migrant communities and communities of colour, on the other hand, it is mainstreamed into politics. The mainstreaming of white supremacy as a political strategy is reflected in the political ascendance of Trump and several far-right candidates in US politics. This is further reflected in the anti-Muslim policies that have been pushed by far-right political parties in the US, Europe, and Australia[12]. The U.S.-based disinformation and hate networks travel globally, including into Aotearoa, leveraging and drawing upon the existing networks and ties of white upremacy in Aotearoa. The racist white supremacy underlying the settler colonial state offers the breeding ground for the racist white supremacy being manufactured in and circulated through the US and Europe-based networks.

### Far-right Zionism and Islamophobia

Globally, far-right Zionism has played a crucial role in the production and circulation of Islamophobia[13]. In the US, far-right Zionist funding of Islamophobia converges with the Islamophobia of white supremacy, generating narratives, images and frames that are circulated globally[14]. The narrative architecture of far-right Zionist discourse has framed Muslims, and particularly Palestinian Muslims, as terrorist threats. Muslims as terror threats are projected in a civilizational rame, produced as primitive savages threatening Western civilizational norms. Far-right Zionist discourse reproduces the orientalist frame that reduces Muslims to monolithic and homogeneous caricatures. The production of the Muslim as the terrorist is juxtaposed in the backdrop of the construction of Israel as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. The interplays of far-right Zionism and Christian Zionism drive ongoing forms of white supremacy portraying Muslims as threats. Christian Zionist discourse works through the depiction of Palestinian Muslims as inherently evil and occupying the mythical Holy land[15]. This framing of Palestinians and Muslims as evil offers the religiospritual justification for violence. Simultaneously, note here the communicative inversion at play, working to project the settler colonial occupation of Palestine by Israel and its corresponding strategies of violence as legitimate[16].

### Hindutva as a driver of Islamophobia

Hindutva, the far-right political ideology that constructs Muslims as the violent other within the context of India, has rapidly emerged as a key source of Islamophobia globally[17]. Networked through the organizing structures of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other affiliated Hindutva organizations ncluding the Overseas friends of the BJP (OFBJP)[18], Hindutva has rapidly captured the Indian diaspora globally, leading to the accelerated dissemination of anti-Muslim disinformation and hate in the Indian ecosystem in Western democracies[19]. Hindutva converges with white supremacy in its production and circulation of "The Great Replacement" conspiracy, amplifying the frames of Muslim population explosion and in Aotearoa New Zealand, Hindutva is disseminated both through brick and mortar organizations and an online ecosystem. Digital platforms in Aotearoa such as Hindus in New Zealand and Indians in New Zealand actively disseminate anti-Muslim hate, simultaneously intersecting with anti-Muslim white supremacy.

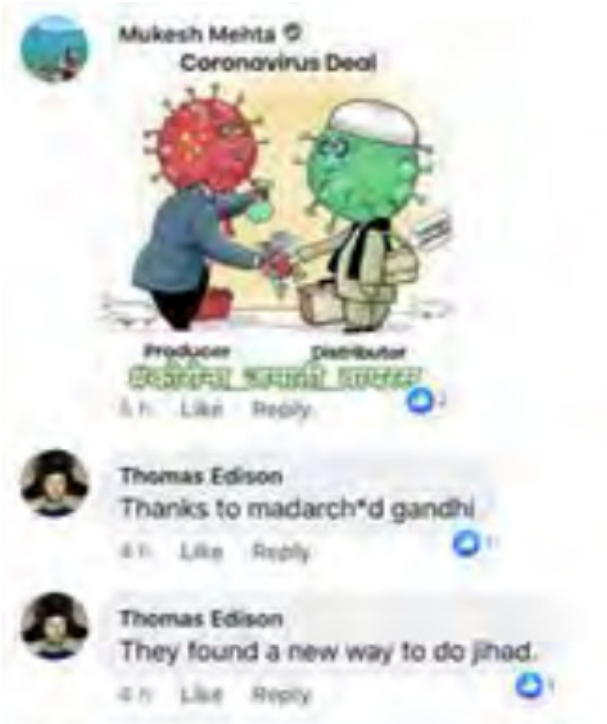


**Figure 1:** Corona jihad narrative circulated on digital platforms in Aotearoa

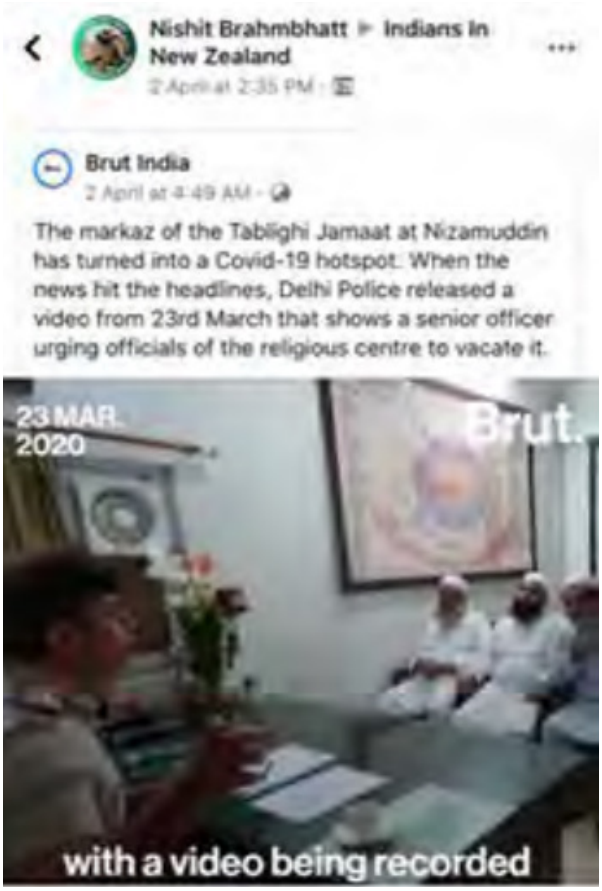


**Figure 2:** Disinformation around Muslim sources of COVID-19 spread in India being posted on digital platform in New Zealand

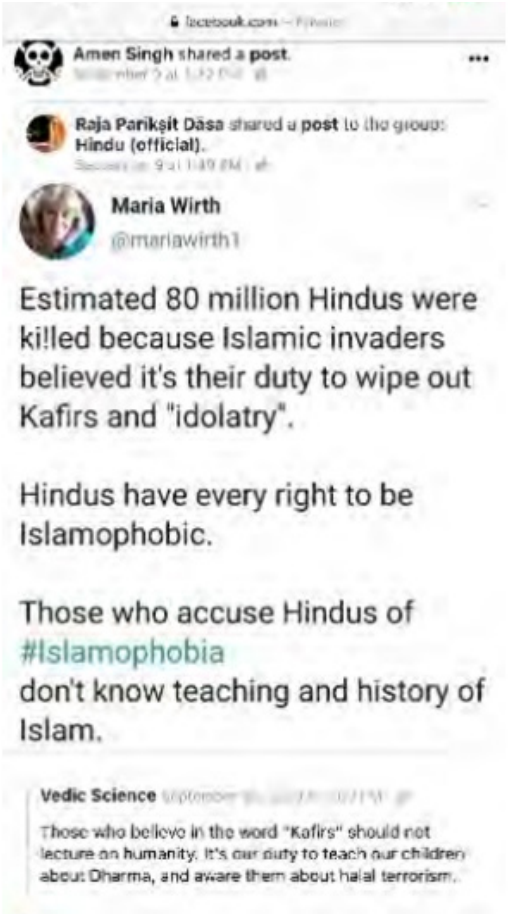


**Figure 3:** Hindutva's justification of anti-Muslim hate posted on Hinduta digital platform in New Zealand

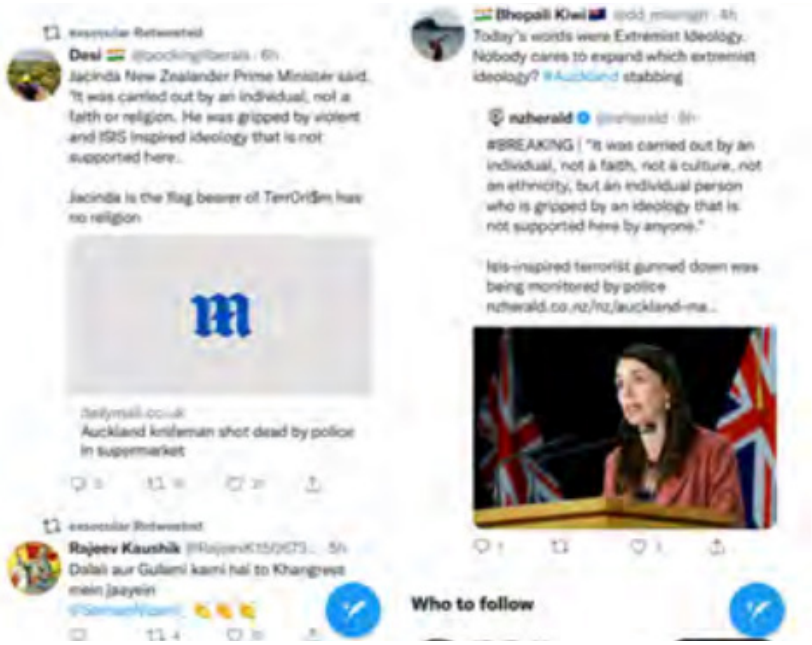


**Figure 4:** Anti-Muslim hate post the Lynn Mall attack

The online ecosystem of Hindutva celebrated the Christchurch terrorist attack, congratulating the white supremacist terrorist and narrating the event as a just response to Islam. In their celebrations of the extremist violence, Hindutva groups converged with white supremacist groups. In the backdrop of the terrorist attack at the Lynn Mall in Auckland by an individual motivated by the ideology of ISIS, I analyzed the digital environment around the attack. My analysis of 150 Islamophobic posts on Twitter suggested that over 85% of the posts were made by Twitter accounts disseminating the Hindutva ideology. Moreover, the Islamophobic hate content was simultaneously being driven by Hindutva extremist accounts functioning from Australia. These Australia-based Hindutva accounts have been linked with other incidences of Hindutva-linked intercommunal violence as witnessed in Leicester, UK, and in Australia. The networked conversations and connections etween White supremacists and Hindutva ideologues are instrumental in shaping the virality of anti-Muslim hate. The interconnections between Islamophobia and white supremacy are evident in the study published by the Islamic Council of Victoria, noting that over 85% of the anti-Muslim posts originated in India, the US and the UK[20]. Among these sources of anti-Muslim hate, India was by far the largest producer of anti-Muslim hate.

### Online hate and brick-and-mortar hate

The proliferation of hate online is directly correlated with material acts of violence[21]. As evidenced globally, anti-Muslim hate on digital platforms corresponds with acts of violence directed toward Muslims. In the realm of organizing anti-Muslim ideologies, the marking of the Muslim as the other on digital platform is intertwined with actual acts of violence directed at Muslims as evidenced in Myanmar and India. In Myanmar, rumours, disinformation and accompanying hate targeting Muslims has been directly connected to violence targeting Muslim Rohingya communities[22]. Similarly in India, hate targeting Muslims has been associated with acts of violence[23]. Moreover, the online environment creates the discursive ecosystem for the radicalization of individuals, creating the pathways for hate. Beyond the individual, it is critical to examine the overarching ecosystem of hate that is produced, magnified manifold and legitimized driven by ideologies based on othering.

## ERASURE AND CO-CREATING VOICE INFRASTRUCTURES

Drawing on the key tenets of the culturecentered approach (CCA) as a framework for challenging marginalizing practices, I argue that co-creating voice infrastructures in partnership with Muslim communities at the margins is a vital step toward addressing the ecosystem of digital anti-Muslim hate[24]. The ongoing dialogues carried out by the Center for Culture-centered Approach to Research and Evaluation with Muslim activists and advocates points to the systemic erasure of the voices of Muslim communities in the backdrop of the Christchurch terrorist attack. Muslim community members note the ways in which this erasure is felt in the form of the platforming of experts deploying the Islamophobic narrative of Muslims as terror threats on the very spaces that had been created by the Crown to address the violent extremism that led to the Christchurch terrorist attack[25].

They further observe the exclusion by the Crown of Muslims directly impacted by the Christchurch terrorist attack, suggesting that this exclusion is evident in the absence of systemic attention to the drivers of Islamophobia in Aotearoa New Zealand and the ongoing minimization of threats posed by online anti-Muslim hate speech. In our research on the sources of anti-Muslim hate, participants point to an overwhelming sense of voicelessness, ften reporting the experience of being unheard and not being listened to. Critical to the erasure of Muslim voices s the mobilization of right-wing politics in Aotearoa that deploys the language of free speech to counter advocacy efforts led by Muslim communities and advocates to build regulatory frameworks for hate speech.

When instances of online hate are brought up by Muslim and allied activists and advocates, these articulations go unheard. Technologydriven platform-owned frameworks of regulating hate speech are largely unreliable in responding to the reports of anti-Muslim hate, with anti-Muslim content continuing to proliferate on platforms in spite of ongoing reporting by community members, advocates, and activists. It is worth noting here that the underlying model of profit driving digital platforms draws upon the virality of hate reflected in accelerated circulation, growth of clicks and views, and delivery of an exponentially multiplying audience segment[26].

The erasure of Muslim voices is reflective of the racism of the Crown that has historically perpetuated violence targeting Māori through the erasure of Māori voices and the racist framing of Māori as primitive subjects without agency.

In this backdrop, co-creating voice infrastructures for the participation of diverse Muslim communities, and particularly, Muslim communities at the margins of the margins" is a critical step toward addressing anti-Muslim hate. These voice infrastructures can serve as the basis for the participation of Muslims in Aotearoa New Zealand in driving community-led solutions to anti-Muslim hate, holding the settler colonial state to account, and participating in community-led advocacy to bring about structural transformation. Moreover, these voice infrastructures offer openings for crafting solidarities with Māori communities who have historically negotiated the racist violence of settler colonialism and resisted settler colonialism through ongoing participation in transformative processes. The openings for crafting solidarities can further facilitate the connections among Pasifika, migrant and refugee communities working alongside Māori and Muslim communities in resisting hate. Moreover, solidarities among diverse intersecting identities that are the targets of hate such as Muslims and rainbow communities can offer frameworks for collective resistance.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the interpenetrating relationship among white supremacy, far-right Zionism and Hindutva drive the online infrastructure of anti-Muslim hate in Aotearoa. Noting the communicative intersections among these ideologies is essential to the development of regulatory frameworks for addressing anti-Muslim hate on digital platforms. Currently, anti-Muslim hate continues to proliferate on digital platforms, with the absence of a regulatory framework. Simultaneously, the content moderation features of digital platforms are largely ineffective in responding to the hate and controlling its proliferation. Making note of the racist ideology that shapes the settler colonial state, this paper argues that the ongoing erasure of Muslim voices upholds anti-Muslim racism. Building voice infrastructures for the participation of Muslims, attending to participatory openings for Muslims at the "margins of the margins" is a necessary first step toward challenging online hate and regulating the digital ecosystem of anti-Muslim hate.

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