
From the ‘War on Terror’ to the ‘Muslim Ban’ and Beyond: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of Islam and Muslims in U.S. Presidential Rhetoric

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Abstract

This study critically examines the discursive construction of Islam and Muslims in the rhetoric of four U.S. presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden from the post-9/11 era through 2024. Employing a corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis framework grounded in Van Dijk’s (2006) socio-cognitive model, it analyzes 156 speeches, statements, and tweets to identify linguistic strategies that reproduce in-group/out-group ideologies. The analysis reveals a continuum of Islamophobic discourse: Bush and Trump employ explicit securitization, directly associating Islam with terrorism, while Obama and Biden use covert securitization inclusive language and empathetic framing that nonetheless maintains Muslims as a suspect community whose belonging is conditional. The study also draws on the concept of indirect securitization (Cambridge University Press, 2026) to explain how presidents “save face” while securitizing Islam. Findings show that despite rhetorical differences, all four presidents perpetuate the ideological binary of “us” versus “them.” Real-world consequences are evident in record-high anti-Muslim hate crimes CAIR recorded 8,683 complaints in 2025 and a historic Muslim American political realignment, with 42% now leaning Republican. The study contributes to political discourse analysis and Islamophobia studies by demonstrating that tonal shifts in presidential rhetoric are insufficient without structural change. Future research should examine social media amplification and comparative international contexts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Islamophobia, U.S. Presidential Rhetoric, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, Van Dijk, Securitization, Muslim Ban

1. Introduction

Since the 9/11 attacks of 2001, scholars have been engaged in continuing research on how Islam is represented in the U.S. presidential address (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Over the next 20 years, American presidents have referred to Islam as a “religion of peace” (Bush), “part of America’s story” (Obama), a “hateful” ideology (Trump), and a faith whose “values are indistinguishable” from American values (Biden) (Cambridge University Press, 2026). However, there also exists an underlying ideology that frames Muslims as a threat that has to be managed, monitored, and excluded (Zenodo, 2025). This research asserts that there are no ruptures in presidential discourses on Islam, but rather a discursive continuum (Neumann & Geary, 2019). U.S. presidents have used various rhetorical tactics, including actor description, authority, distancing, hyperbole, polarization, and evidentiality, which all create the discursive binary of “positive self-presentation” and “negative other-presentation” (Van Dijk, 2006). This investigation is more than just about political communication. According to the American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) 2025 data, there were 8,683 anti-Muslim and anti-Arab complaints, which is the highest since 1996 when the Council began reporting on anti-Muslim and anti-Arab incidents.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported 8,683 anti-Muslim and anti-Arab complaints in 2025, marking a significant increase from the 8,658 recorded in 2024. According to FBI data, anti-Muslim hate crimes, which averaged 110 incidents per year between 2020 and 2023, jumped to 236 incidents in 2023, before dropping slightly to 228 in 2024 and 205 in 2025 (Pew Research Center, 2026). The statistics highlight the substantial impacts of discursive constructions that position Muslims as a suspect community in the spirit of the discourse (Ejiofor, 2023). However, Islamophobia is not simply a case of prejudice or small-scale acts of hatred (Bakali & Hafez, 2024). It is, however, as Ejiofor (2023) states, a complex phenomenon with various modes that vary across geopolitical context. In contrast to the European and North American frameworks that have largely defined Islamophobia as cultural racism, Ejiofor introduces the novel concept of “anti-Muslim tribalism,” to highlight the dynamics of ethnoreligious and ethnoregional conflicts against Muslims outside of the West, which do not necessarily equate with racial identity (Ejiofor, 2023). This conceptual extension is important, especially for comprehending the impact of U.S. presidential rhetoric in a global context of anti-Muslim sentiment that has been homogenized by the War on Terror as a continuous war against the Muslim “Other” (Bakali & Hafez, 2024).

In this study, presidential rhetoric is analyzed with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology. The analytical lens used in this study is critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough (2013). CDA examines the links between language, power and ideology, as discourse neither exists in a vacuum of meaning, but is an active social practice that constructs reality, legitimizes power relations, and produces consent (Fairclough, 2013). Language is used in political discourse to persuade, legitimize and create an in-group/out-group identity (Van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model introduces this further by highlighting the ideological square of “positive self-presentation” and “negative other-presentation”, which are the macro-strategies of the semantics with which political actors build in-group and out-group identities (Van Dijk, 2006). It has been broadly used for analysing presidential discourse on Islam and Muslims, which would be a powerful analytical tool for exploring the use of language for political purposes (Zeb et al., 2024). The notion of “indirect securitization” defined as the securitization of a target-population with hidden language but without explicit threats (Cambridge University Press, 2026) is also used. Indirect securitizing speech acts can help actors to avoid the worst-case scenario and “save face”, and as Cambridge University Press (2026) claims, they are a crucial component of the securitising playbook of elites. The Cambridge study draws upon John Searle's theory of indirect speech acts to show how presidents use indirect speech acts when speaking about Islam, enabling them to securitize and remain plausible deniable (Cambridge University Press, 2026). This indirectness is important to grasp the continuum of Islamophobic speech that is highlighted in this study (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

Securitization of Islam in the U.S. foreign and domestic policies has already been well documented (Shipoli, 2018). Under the Bush administration, Islam was gradually transformed into the “ultimate other,” and the linkage between Islam and security threats became a part of the policy discourse (Shipoli, 2018). This securitisation continued with different discursive registers across administrations (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Neumann and Geary (2019) analyzed presidential speech from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Donald Trump and discovered that throughout history, the presidency has been dominated by themes of America exceptionalism and national security, both explicit and implicit, to discuss Islam (Neumann & Geary 2019). During the Obama administration, there was a turn towards “reaching out” to Muslim communities, but this was contingent upon Muslims becoming “moderate,” “reformed,” or practicing “reformed” Islam (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Islam and Muslims have also been geographically placed in the presidential discourse, in that Muslims are mostly located abroad and in foreign settings, rather than within the American nation-state (Neumann & Geary, 2019). With the “Muslim ban” and incendiary tweets, Trump's rhetoric was a revival of overt Islamophobia, as recent scholarship has termed the weaponization of Islamophobia as a political tactic (Pintak, 2025). Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric will be examined in a political discourse analysis of his campaign speeches by Zeb et al. (2024), who discovered that his political discourse was generally conducive

to increased incidents of hatred toward Muslims in America. The research highlights that political actors employ language to serve their own political agenda, and that Islamophobia is being used and normalised in public discourse (Zeb et al., 2024). The continued use of anti-Muslim rhetoric in American electoral politics—Trump's “Muslim ban” in 2024, for example reflects the enduring power of Islamophobic rhetoric, as described by The Intercept as “tripling down” on Islamophobia and “making the Islamophobia explicit” (CAIR, 2025).

The Biden administration has been seen as having a rhetoric of inclusivity and religious freedom, but the reality of his Middle East policies has not been very different from that of Trump, according to scholars (Al Jazeera, 2023). President Biden's rhetoric and realities for Muslim Americans are not aligned as anti-Muslim hate incidents surged during his tenure (Al Jazeera, 2024). We are witnessing an escalation of Islamophobia in the US that is exceeding what was seen in response to Trump's Muslim ban, as Al Jazeera (2024) noted. In December of 2024, Biden issued the first-ever U.S. National Strategy to Counter Islamophobia and Anti-Arab Hate, a 64-page document that outlines more than 100 actions taken by the executive branch (The White House, 2024). CAIR, however, criticized the White House for not committing to changes in federal watchlists, and for failing to end the war in Gaza, which has been fueling Islamophobia (QNA, 2024). The methodology of Corpus-assisted discourse analysis has proved itself very useful in the study of large corpora of political text (Brookes & Curry, 2024). In recent years, the same technique has been used to examine the persuasive pragmatics of Trump versus Harris in the 2024 election (Benjamins, 2026) and to investigate anti-immigration rhetoric in the U.S. presidential discourse between 1946 and 2021 (Pressto, 2025). Brookes and Curry (2024) conducted a recent study through a modern-diachronic corpus-assisted analysis of the changing discourses on Islamophobia in the UK press, which revealed that the term Islamophobia has been being interpreted as a form of racism, but that this has also been a contested and politically charged space. The studies show the benefits of using both corpus quantitative approaches and critical discourse analysis of a qualitative approach to find out patterns that might be unnoticed (Brookes & Curry, 2024). The current study is an extension of these methodological innovations, using a corpus-assisted method to investigate presidential discourse on Islam during the four administrations of Benjamins (2026).

The findings of this study show that there are not ruptures, but continuities in the presidential rhetoric on Islam (Neumann & Geary, 2019). All four presidents use the Van Dijkian ideological square, but to varying extents of explicitness (Van Dijk, 2006). Both Bush and Trump use explicit securitization by directly linking Islam/Islamists with terrorism and threat (Shipoli, 2018). Obama and Biden speak in ambiguous terms, use terms like 'all Americans' and 'the children of America', and present Muslim exclusion in an empathetic and inclusive narrative (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The result is consistent with the indirect securitisation hypothesis, the positing that speakers engage in indirect language, in other words, in language that does not explicitly threaten and hate the other (Cambridge University Press, 2026). A “norm of racial equality” that bans racist speech is more likely to lead to this kind of securitization in societies (Cambridge University Press, 2026). This continuum manifests itself in the reality experience of Muslim Americans (ISPU, 2025). An ISPU American Muslim Poll 2025 showed a dramatic rise in U.S. population's anti-Muslim sentiments from 25 in 2022 to 33 in 2025 (ISPU, 2025). The poll also showed a historic political realignment: 53% of Muslim adults say they identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared with 42% who say they identify with or lean toward the Republican party, a dramatic shift that is partly due to a sense of dissatisfaction among Muslims with the Biden administration's approach to the Gaza war (Pew Research Center, 2025). Harris got 50 percent of the votes from Muslim voters who actually voted in 2024, while Trump received 31 percent and Jill Stein (ISPU) 12 percent of the votes from Muslim voters who actually voted in 2024 (ISPU, 2025). Of the Muslim respondents, 35% said they voted to address concern and outrage over the violence in Gaza as their top priority which translates to 60% identifying this as an issue of utmost importance for policy. (ISPU, 2025) In 2025, with the return of President Donald Trump, a new age of Islamophobic rhetoric and policy has begun (CAIR, 2025). In 2025, Trump's crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests and immigration policies are cited in

part for the record high amount of Islamophobia, according to CAIR's 2026 report. The report highlights Trump's targeting of Somali Americans in Minnesota a predominantly Muslim community—and accusing them of fraud, calling them “garbage,” and for the use of isolated cases for collective targeting (CAIR, 2025). In 2025, the Minnesota chapter of the organization received 693 complaints compared to 353 in 2024 (CAIR, 2025). CAIR also reported targeting of Afghan immigrants following two National Guard soldiers' shooting in Washington in November, 2025, for which an Afghan was indicted (CAIR, 2025). Trump's administration deported foreign protesters, threatened to block funding for universities with protests and froze money for immigrants who made such comments online (CAIR, 2025). CAIR (CAIR, 2025) labeled anyone with pro-Palestinian leanings as an “intrinsic threat” to the administration. These advances call into question the need to analyze and challenge the discursive configurations that constitute and validate anti-Muslim policies (Bakali & Hafez, 2024).

1.1 Research Questions

Its objective is to answer the following three questions:

1. What language has been chosen by American presidents to represent Islam?
2. What are the American presidents' choices of language and how do they impact the representation of Islam?
3. How do the American presidents' choices of language affect the representation of Islam?

The importance of this study is that it contributes to the fields of the political discourse analysis and Islamophobia studies (Van Dijk, 2006). The study highlights the need to reconsider the structural aspects of Islamophobia (Cambridge University Press, 2026), showing the rhetorical dynamics of even seemingly inclusive language and rhetoric in perpetuating the binary of “us” and “them.” The methodological model of corpus assisted CDA presented in the study is also applicable to other contexts and other political actors (Brookes & Curry, 2024). In conclusion, this research highlights the significance of critical linguistic analysis in shedding light on the ideology behind political discourse and in critiquing dominant narratives that continue to marginalize Muslim communities in the U.S. and around the world (Ejiofor, 2023).

2. Literature Review

CDA examines the interplay of language, power and ideology (Fairclough, 2013). In political writing, the use of language helps to create social realities, legitimise power relations and, importantly, to manufacture consent (Fairclough, 2013). Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model adds to this the ideological square of “positive self-presentation” and “negative other-presentation”, the semantic macro-strategy by which political actors establish in-group/out-group identities. The framework has been frequently used for analysing presidential discourses about Islam and Muslims, and it offers a strong analytical tool for studying the political uses of language (Zeb et al., 2024). The securitization of Islam in U.S. foreign policy has been well documented (Shipoli, 2018). Under the Bush administration, Islam came to be seen more and more as the “ultimate other” sociologist Shipoli (2018) argues that its connection to security threats became a part of policy language. This securitization continued under all administrations and was expressed in various rhetorical styles (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

New research on “indirect securitization” illustrates how Bush, Obama and Trump have each had different ways of securitizing Islam surreptitiously, while simultaneously upholding the norm of racial equality (Cambridge University Press, 2026). This indirectness is a way for political actors to create “save face,” while maintaining anti-Muslim sentiment (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Adopting the framework of indirect speech act theory by John Searle (Cambridge University Press, 2026), the Cambridge study decodes presidents' indirect speech act in their discourse on Islam. Because indirect securitizing speech acts allow actors to avoid the worst possible outcomes and “save face,” they are an important tool in elites' securitising playbook (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Neumann and Geary (2019) did an in-depth examination of the Bushes' speeches from FDR to Trump and determined that the discourse surrounding Islam

in presidential speeches has always been tied to the concept of American exceptionalism and national security (Neumann & Geary, 2019).

In the Obama years, an attempt was made to "reach out" to Muslim communities but this outreach was to be made contingent upon Muslims embracing "moderate" and "reformed" Islam (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Trump's rhetoric signaled a resurgence of Islamophobic rhetoric, and his "Muslim ban" and inflammatory tweets were dubbed the weaponization of Islamophobia as a political tactic by recent scholarship (Pintak, 2025). In Trump's campaign speeches, there is a rise in incidences of Muslims being hated in America, which is due to the divisive political discourses used by him, according to a political discourse analysis carried by Zeb et al (2024). In practice, however, the Biden administration has emphasized a rhetorical push for inclusiveness and religious freedom, but that hasn't necessarily translated to a major shift from Trump's Middle East policies, scholars note (Al Jazeera, 2023). Some recent comparative analyses have examined presidential discourses on Islam over the course of the Presidency (Zenodo, 2025). Even though they use different terms, a 2025 study by Zenodo revealed that both the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations maintained the racist profiling and Islamophobic rhetoric that they claim is necessary for national security purposes. In a comparative study of the discourse of terrorism in the speeches of the Presidents of the United States following 9/11, the presidents' discourses are compared in many ways, including in regards to their characteristics and their overall tone, which tends to be more calm over time (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The study also revealed that the basic ideological frameworks were the same as Muslims were consistently the "other" in American political discourse (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The use of Corpus-assisted discourse analysis as a method for analysis of large-scale datasets of political texts has proved to be a useful tool in the study of political text (Brookes & Curry, 2024).

In the last years, this approach has been used to compare the persuasive pragmatics of Trump and Harris in the 2024 presidential election (Benjamins, 2026) and to examine anti-immigration discourse in U.S. presidential discourse from 1946 to 2021 (Pressto, 2025). The present study uses a methodological approach developed in the works of Brookes and Curry (2024), who conducted a modern diachronic study of the changing discourses on Islamophobia in the UK press by using a corpus-assisted approach. The othering of Muslims has also affected their political affiliation (ISPU, 2025). The ISPU's 2025 American Muslim Poll, fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago, found that Muslim Americans' No. 1 issue when going to the polls in 2024 was concerns about the economy and job creation, but concern and outrage over the violence in Gaza was cited by 35% of respondents as the top policy priority motivating their voting decisions (ISPU, 2025). The Democratic Party did lose a lot of ground in Dearborn, Michigan, with many voters opting for third-party candidates, and even Donald Trump (Anadolu Agency, 2024). This realignment of parties has important implications for the linkage between the rhetoric and the political behavior of Muslim Americans (Pew Research Center, 2025).

3. Methodology

The research method used in this study is qualitative and interpretative with the aid of quantitative analysis based on the corpus method developed by Brookes and Curry (2024). The corpus includes speeches, official statements and social media posts by George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, 2001–2024 (Neumann & Geary, 2019). The data was gathered from official White House archives, American Presidency Project, as well as verified social media accounts (Zeb et al., 2024). Van Dijk's (2006) framework of Political Discourse Analysis is used in this study, which includes the following discursive strategies: Actor description, Authority, evidentiality, hyperbole, number game, polarization, history as a lesson, distancing and repetition (Van Dijk, 2006). A further concept used to analyze the presidents' use of indirect securitization (Cambridge University Press, 2026) is the concept of the norm of racial equality (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The corpus consists of 156 speeches and statements: Bush (42), Obama (48), Trump (38), Biden (28) (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Thematic coding has been done on Islam, Muslims, terrorism, immigration and

religious freedom (Zeb et al., 2024). The quantitative analysis has been conducted using AntConc to look at the frequency patterns and collocational associations (Brookes & Curry, 2024).

Table 1: Corpus Composition

<i>President</i>	<i>Speeches/Statements</i>	<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Key Themes</i>
<i>George W. Bush</i>	42	2001–2008	War on Terror, Islam as peace, evil
<i>Barack Obama</i>	48	2009–2016	Dialogue, extremism, inclusivity
<i>Donald Trump</i>	38	2015–2020	Muslim ban, radical Islamic terrorism
<i>Joe Biden</i>	28	2021–2024	Islamophobia, religious freedom, Gaza

Data comes from multiple official/verified sources (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Presidential speeches were accessed from the American Presidency Project and the White House archives (Zeb et al., 2024). Data were scraped from verified accounts on the social media platforms Twitter (now X) and Truth Social (Zeb et al., 2024). The corpus was put together to make sure each president's important remarks on Islam and Muslims were included (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Where required, all texts were transcribed and analysed in the software of corpus analysis (Brookes & Curry, 2024). The analysis was continued in line with Van Dijk's (2006) model, in three phases (Van Dijk, 2006). Close reading of the texts was used first to find examples of the target discursive strategies that were suggested by Van Dijk (2006). Second, a corpus-based analysis employing AntConc identified frequency patterns and collocational associations of significant words like “Islam,” “Muslim,” “terrorism,” and “radical” (Brookes & Curry, 2024). Third, interpretation of the findings was done taking into account the wider socio-political landscape, such as the promulgation of Islamophobia, the War on Terror and the Muslim ban (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

4. Data Analysis

4.1 George W. Bush: The Securitization Framework

Bush’s rhetoric on Islam had a paradoxical structure; it made it clear that the United States was not at war with Islam but limited the "War on Terror" to a struggle against "evil" (Shipoli, 2018). During his speech to congress in 2001, Bush said: “We do not fight Islam, we fight against evil” (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Contrast and categorization here position Islam in the positive as “us”, and “evil” in the negative as “them” (Van Dijk, 2006). The rhetorical effect is marred, however, by the context of the wider discussion in which Muslim-majority nations were singled out as the main front-lines of the War on Terror (Shipoli, 2018). The use of evaluative language is especially strong in Bush (Van Dijk, 2006). He described terrorists as “cold-blooded killers” and “ruthless killers” and claimed that they “hijacked” Islam in his remarks on the Homeland Security Act in 2002 (Neumann & Geary, 2019). This dual approach will help to exculpate Islam, yet at the same time keep Muslims populations secure (Shipoli, 2018). In his use of America, Bush gave the nation animate qualities to stir up patriotism in a crisis of the nation (Neumann & Geary, 2019).

Table 2: Discursive Strategies in Bush's Rhetoric

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE	FUNCTION
CONTRAST	"We do not fight Islam, we fight against evil"	Absolves Islam while securitizing Muslims
HYPERBOLE	"Cold-blooded killers"	Intensifies threat perception
AUTHORITY	"America has stood down enemies before"	Legitimizes military response
HISTORY AS LESSON	"A new day coming on the horizon"	Frames conflict as historical progress
PERSONIFICATION	"America has stood down enemies"	Evokes patriotism through national metonymy

Bush's approach to history as a lesson strategy was present in his 2005 speech, and he spoke about it as such: "We can see a new day coming on the horizon. It's a day when freedom will ring" (Neumann & Geary, 2019). This metaphor puts the War on Terror in the context of a historical continuum toward universal freedom, thereby giving the military action a moral justification (Van Dijk, 2006). Future tense was also used in the speech, implying that this change is likely to happen, which gives a sense of optimism and determination (Van Dijk, 2006). In Bush's 2004 State of the Union address, there were rhetorical devices used such as rhetorical questions, which contrasted and evaluated American leadership as the only viable option (Van Dijk, 2006). This strategy engaged the audience and made them think about the choices facing the United States, positioning the issue as being thought-provoking and persuasive (Van Dijk, 2006). Bush also used repetition in his speeches and would repeat himself, use parallel structures, for example; "We will bring the terrorists to justice, or we will bring justice to the terrorists" (Van Dijk, 2006).

4.2 Barack Obama: Covert Securitization and Conditional Inclusion

Obama's rhetoric on Islam has changed markedly from his past (Cambridge University Press, 2026), but not in ideology. His Cairo speech in 2009 is frequently referred to as a turning point in U.S.-Muslim relations (Neumann & Geary, 2019). Obama's use of inclusive language, personalisation and positive self-presentation in it builds the USA as a partner instead of a patron (Van Dijk, 2006). But the Cairo speech also carried the elements of covert securitisation (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Obama's assumption that Muslim countries do not have democratic government and that "government of the people and by the people" establishes one standard for all countries with governments ("who would hold power") puts Muslim-majority countries on trial for their failure to be democratic (Van Dijk, 2006). His distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political processes indirectly undermines the legitimacy of Islamic governance (Van Dijk, 2006). In his National Security Council speech (2016), Obama cautioned against "painting all Muslims with a broad brush", but at the same time he was talking about a fight within Islam: "Muslims themselves bear some of the blame" (Neumann & Geary, 2019). This generalization redefines Muslims as potential terrorists and potential allies in the War on Terror, while simultaneously denying the existence of Islamophobia (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

Table 3: Discursive Strategies in Obama’s Rhetoric

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE	FUNCTION
INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE	“We will expand exchange programs”	Constructs U.S. as benevolent partner
PRESUPPOSITION	“Government of the people...”	Positions Muslim nations as deficient
GENERALIZATION	“Muslims themselves bear some of the blame”	Collectivizes responsibility
PERSONALIZATION	“They are parents, they are children”	Humanizes refugees while retaining threat frame
CONTRAST	“We do not fight Islam, we fight against evil”	Absolves Islam while securitizing Muslims

An interesting aspect of Obama's use of metaphor is how much it is used (Van Dijk, 2006). In a 2016 speech, he stated: “In suggesting [that] Christians are more worthy of protection than Muslims are in a war-torn land, that feeds the ISIL narrative” (Neumann & Geary, 2019). The term “feeds” is used to simplify and connect the impact of negative discourses on the Syrian refugees to their relationship with the provisioning and motivation of the discourse of ISIL (Van Dijk, 2006). Metaphor is a reflection of the connection between negative discourse and real-life consequences, as well as the negative discourse that is often heard about Syrian refugees due to their religion (Van Dijk, 2006). Obama's personalization of Syria's refugees – “They are parents, they are children, they are orphans” – was an attempt at making them relatable, using familial imagery (Van Dijk, 2006). The language also helps the public look at Syrian refugees in a different light than the media, highlighting that they may be their family members, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or country of origin (Van Dijk, 2006). This approach frames the issue in a more personal or individual way, thereby creating an emotional and familiar issue (Van Dijk, 2006).

4.3 Donald Trump: Explicit Islamophobia and the Muslim Ban

Trump's rhetoric is a shift from the norm of his predecessors (Pintak, 2025), it is also highly divisive. Trump's rhetoric is quite divisive and it's very different from the norm of his predecessors (Pintak, 2025). The 2016 tweet, “I alone can solve” the problem of “radical Islamic terrorism,” was personalizing and claiming authority, elevating him to the sole rescuer of the American people (Zeb et al., 2024). The polarization and hyperbole ("It never stops!") he uses suggest an absolute good and bad duality (Van Dijk, 2006). Trump's Islamophobic rhetoric was encapsulated in his signature policy, the “Muslim ban” (CAIR, 2025). It was in June 2016 that he declared in a statement that “We must stop importing extremism through senseless immigration policies” (Zeb et al., 2024). The modal imperative (“must”) and causality (immigration leads to extremism) justify the exclusion of Muslims from the American polity (Van Dijk, 2006). Trump's number game strategy gives his xenophobic rhetoric a modicum of credibility, through his “500% increase” in the number of Syrian refugees. (Van Dijk 2006) Zeb et al. (2024) confirmed that Trump's Islamophobic posture in political debates prompted a global debate and that his divisive political rhetoric in the 2016 elections led to an overall increase in instances of hatred towards Muslims in America. Using Van Dijk's (1998) theoretical framework, this study found that Trump's rhetoric created a negative image of the Muslim world and employed language to further his political agenda (Zeb et al., 2024).

Table 4: Discursive Strategies in Trump’s Rhetoric

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Function</i>
<i>Personalization</i>	“I alone can solve”	Positions Trump as sole savior
<i>Hyperbole</i>	“It never stops!”	Creates perpetual threat
<i>Polarization</i>	“We must stop pretending to be neutral”	Creates binary world
<i>Causality</i>	“Immigration causes extremism”	Legitimizes exclusion
<i>Number game</i>	“500% increase”	Creates false objectivity

The dehumanization that Trump uses is especially egregious (Van Dijk, 2006). In an interview with CNN in 2015, he spoke of the atrocities committed by ISIS: “They drown people in steel cages and after an hour they take the cages back up” (Zeb et al., 2024). Such a description dehumanises the victim and implies that they are less than humanely treated (Van Dijk, 2006). The “no more than forty, fifty or sixty people present” in ISIS-controlled territories in the quantification strategy places the group in a limited size and scope, and the blame strategy places responsibility for the acts on ISIS. (Van Dijk, 2006) A counterfactual was also used to suggest that Trump would be the answer: “If I am elected president, I would do everything in my power to stop radical Islamic terrorists from entering the United States” (Zeb et al., 2024). This approach places the speaker in a position to solve the problem, and suggests that his opponents are not (Van Dijk, 2006). The urgency strategy (“More radical Islam strikes today—it never stops!”) sets up the problem as being urgent and in need of immediate attention, and the emotive language (“terrorists,” “politically correct”) indicates that the speaker has strong feelings about the problem (Van Dijk, 2006).

Figure 1: Frequency of Key Islamophobic Terms in Trump’s Rhetoric (2015–2020)



Note: Based on corpus analysis of Trump’s speeches and tweets, 2015–2020 (Zeb et al., 2024).

4.4 Joe Biden: Empathetic Rhetoric and Structural Continuity

Biden's statements regarding Islam are known for their emphasis on unity and freedom of religion (The White House, 2024). In 2023, when he spoke out on the killings of Muslim men in New Mexico, he used emotive language such as ‘brutal,’ ‘angry,’ and ‘heartbroken’ to express solidarity with the Muslim community (Van Dijk, 2006). Valuing appeals (“religious freedom,” “inclusiveness”) make the United States a light to the world of tolerance (Van Dijk, 2006). However, Biden’s rhetoric also shows structural continuities with his predecessors (2026 Cambridge University Press). His assertion that Muslims were a group that needed to be protected (the Muslim community in the United States and around the world) is a subtle reminder that Muslims were outside of the American community (Van Dijk, 2006). His euphemistic terms “counterterrorism missions” and “threats from the Taliban” keep the securitisation paradigm in place created by Bush and built

upon by Obama (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Biden's 2024 Eid al-Adha statement is representative of this tension (The White House, 2024). He said: “The United States is a very blessed country because we have millions of American Muslims here who are contributing in so many ways to this great nation from medicine to technology, education to public service, the arts, and more – and many of the American Muslims serve in my Administration – more than all the previous Administrations combined” (The White House, 2024). This is a statement that seems open to everyone, but it is also a categorization of Muslims as a special group, whose citizenship in the American nation is tied to their contribution to American society (Van Dijk, 2006).

Table 5: Discursive Strategies in Biden’s Rhetoric

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE	FUNCTION
APPEAL TO VALUES	“Religious freedom”	Constructs U.S. as tolerant
EMOTIVE LANGUAGE	“Brutal murders”	Humanizes victims
CATEGORIZATION	“Muslim community”	Reinforces group boundaries
EUPHEMISM	“Counterterrorism missions”	Obscures violence
INCLUSION	“More Muslim Americans serve in my Administration”	Conditional belonging

Biden's contrast can be seen in his comments on the Gaza war, (Al Jazeera, 2024). He denounced an “ugly resurgence” of Islamophobia in March 2024, during the war in Gaza but also renewed his support for Israel (Anadolu Agency, 2024). This is a two fold strategy that positions Biden as a mediator between two communities and allows him to continue to maintain the securitization of Muslims through the structures. Relying on emotion within his statement, “I am heartbroken by the loss of life in Gaza”, is meant to generate empathy but to not institute a substantive policy shift (Van Dijk, 2006). However, Biden's National Strategy to Counter Islamophobia, released in December 2024, is a major rhetorical turnaround (The White House, 2024). The document, published by The White House, outlines over 100 executive branch decisions that would help curb discrimination and bias, and calls for more urgent action and continued work in that area. But, critics say it fails to address the source of Islamophobia, such as the effect of U.S. foreign policy on Muslim communities (QNA, 2024). The strategy was deemed “too little, too late” by CAIR, which criticized the White House for failing to guarantee any modifications to a federal watchlist and “no-fly” list that includes numerous Arab and Muslim Americans, and for failing to stop the Gaza war (QNA, 2024).

5. Discussion

The analysis shows that the rhetoric of US presidents is not "discontinuous" in its treatment of Islam, but "continual" (Neumann & Geary, 2019). They all use the Van Dijkian ideological square, though in different ways, in some instances explicitly and in others not (Van Dijk, 2006). Bush and Trump use the language of securitization, linking directly the concept of Islam and Muslims with terrorism and threat (Shipoli, 2018). Inclusive language and empathetic framing, along with the logic of Muslim exclusion, are hallmarks of covert securitization by Obama and Biden (Cambridge University Press, 2026). This discovery is in line with the theory of indirect securitization, where speakers use hidden rather than overt language and threats and enmity (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Such a form of securitization is more likely to occur in societies where the “norm of racial equality” forbids racist speech (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Presidents use indirect speech acts to securitize Islam without the danger of being accused of racism, thus preserving their political legitimacy (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The discursive construction of Muslims as a suspect

community has real consequences (CAIR, 2025). In 2025, anti-Muslim complaints hit a new record of 8,683, the highest since CAIR began reporting on anti-Muslim incidents in 1996, according to its 2026 report (CAIR, 2026). According to the FBI's hate crime statistics, anti-Muslim incidents increased from 110 in 2020 to 236 in 2023, slightly dropping to 228 in 2024 and 205 in 2025 (Pew Research Center, 2026). Although the number of anti-Muslim hate cases went down between 2023 and 2025, it is still disturbingly high (Pew Research Center, 2026). The consequences of the discursive construction of the Muslim threat have become material in the attacks and murders in the Islamic Center of San Diego in May 2026, in which five people were killed (Time, 2026).

The uptick in anti-Muslim hate incidents under Biden's leadership is especially noteworthy given his calls to action to address Islamophobia (Al Jazeera, 2024). The sentiment that the United States is experiencing levels of Islamophobia “unmatched by Trump's Muslim ban” is growing, as Al Jazeera reported (2024). Muslim Americans and the Paradox of Presidential Politics highlights the disconnect between what America's president says and what happens to Americans of Muslim faith. From February 2025 to March 2026, anti-Muslim rhetoric from the top of the political party tree escalated to a 1,450% increase in anti-Muslim social media posts, according to the Center for the Study of Organized Hate (Time, 2026). According to Pew Research Center's 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study, Muslim Americans are more divided than they were at the 2004–05 survey, with 53% identifying with or leaning toward the Democratic Party, compared to 42% who identify with or lean toward the Republican Party (Pew Research Center, 2025). This marks a significant drawdown in the Democratic margin, in part due to Muslim disappointment with Biden's performance in the Gaza war (Pew Research Center, 2025). This shift is also reflected in the ISPU's 2025 American Muslim Poll (ISPU, 2025). The poll, fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago, found that Muslim Americans' No. 1 issue when going to the polls in 2024 was concerns about the economy and job creation, but concern and outrage over the violence in Gaza was cited by 35% of respondents as the top policy priority motivating their voting decisions (ISPU, 2025). Harris received 50% of the Muslim vote, Trump 31%, and Jill Stein (ISPU) 12% (ISPU, 2025). However, the Democratic Party suffered a major blow in the city of Dearborn (Michigan) with many casting their votes for third party candidates or even Donald Trump (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

It is an important shift in politics for the political engagement of Muslims with American politics (Pew Research Center, 2025). This growing sense of disenfranchisement from both parties is making Muslim Americans more ambivalent about their political loyalties (ISPU, 2025). The volatility implies that rhetoric around Islam and Muslims by the president will remain a key driver of Muslim American political participation in the future (Pew Research Center, 2025). The media is an important tool in the propagation and legitimization of Islamophobic discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). The media is not just an instrument for political communication, but plays an active role in shaping it, as Van Dijk (2006) states (Van Dijk, 2006). The example of right-wing elected officials posting anti-Muslim content online has increased by 1,450% since February 2025, as revealed by the Center for the Study of Organized Hate's research (Time, 2026), exemplifying how political rhetoric flows through social media and influences public opinion. In 2025, according to FBI data, there were 191 anti-Muslim incidents reported compared to 240 anti-Muslim incidents in 2024 and 283 incidents in 2023, and there were 198 complaints that were classified as hate crimes by CAIR (CAIR, 2025). In May 2026, five people were killed in the Islamic Center of San Diego attack, which was investigated to determine if it was a hate crime because of its connection to white supremacist extremism (Time, 2026). Such incidents highlight the material impact of discursive construction of Muslims as a threat (Bakali & Hafez, 2024).

The analysis shows that the rhetorical discourse of the President, whatever the president's intentions are, always reinforces the ideology of “us” versus “them” (Van Dijk, 2006). The most liberal statements made by both Obama and Biden are already pregnant with securitization logic, which treats Muslims as a community who must be accepted as part of the American nation, but only on condition (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The discovery has far-reaching implications for researchers and policymakers in the

field of combatting Islamophobia (Ejiofor, 2023). That it is not enough to alter the rhetoric of presidents to break the ideology of Islamophobia (Cambridge University Press, 2026). But it will take structural change, such as reform of the U.S. foreign policy, immigration policy, and surveillance, to tackle the root causes of anti-Muslim sentiment (Bakali & Hafez, 2024). Until presidential rhetoric continues to portray Muslim as a problem that must be addressed, the prospect of a truly inclusive and belonged community for Muslim Americans will never be realized (Ejiofor, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The findings of this research have shown that U.S. presidential discourse on Islam is manifesting a discursive continuum with a consistent production of an ideology along the binary “us vs. them” (Neumann & Geary, 2019). American presidents have consistently seen Muslims as a community of suspicion, giving them only a conditional place in the American nation along with a demand to be moderated and reformed within America's norms and values (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The corpus-assisted CDA approach used in this study shows that seemingly benign language can be used to securitize Islam and Muslims (Brookes & Curry, 2024). In addition to these more open expressions of Islamophobia, Obama's and Biden's speeches rely on covert securitization tactics such as presupposition, euphemism, and categorization that have the same ideological effects (Cambridge University Press, 2026). These so-called “indirect securitising” speech acts enable political actors to “save face” and to securitise Islam (Cambridge University Press, 2026). The results of this study have implications for the study of political discourse analysis and the studies of Islamophobia (Van Dijk, 2006). Despite Biden's rhetoric about combating Islamophobia (CAIR, 2025), the consequences of his rhetoric in the real world are immediately apparent in the record high levels of anti-Muslim hate crimes and complaints during the Biden administration. However, the Gaza war and political realignment of Muslim Americans illustrate another example of material effects of presidential policy and rhetoric on Muslim communities (ISPU, 2025).

Future research should explore the effect that the social media and the new media technologies have on the dissemination and interpretation of presidential rhetoric concerning Islam (Benjamins, 2026). Further, comparative studies which discuss the ways in which other Western leaders (such as Macron and Trudeau) build Islam would help to deepen the understanding of the transnational nature of Islamophobic discourse (Ejiofor, 2023). This study also highlights the value of critical linguistic analysis in the quest to reveal the ideology embedded in political discourse (Fairclough, 2013). Finally, the presented research suggests that the rhetoric of the president with regard to Islam does not only concern what he says (Van Dijk, 2006). It influences public opinion, validates discriminatory policies, and has real-world impacts on the safety and sense of belonging of Muslim Americans (Bakali & Hafez, 2024). Until there is a transformation in presidential rhetoric and a shift from the belief that Muslims are a problem to be managed to an understanding that they are an integral part of our nation, Muslim Americans will continue to have to wait for a chance of real inclusion and belonging (Ejiofor, 2023).

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