



Defining Islamophobia

Briefing Paper from
Muslim Engagement
and Development

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May 2019

As the world recovers from the recent deaths of fifty people in devastating far-right terror [attacks](#) on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, there are few reminders of the danger of Islamophobia that are more poignant. This problem is not new to the UK and its persistent presence in the daily lives of our Muslim communities is a stark reminder that action is needed to combat all forms of hatred which leave innocent individuals vulnerable to marginalisation, discrimination, and even violence.

Politicians such as Baroness Sayeeda Warsi have [remarked](#) on how Islamophobia “has passed the dinner table test” in the UK. Indeed, looking at patterns of Islamophobic comments amongst prominent members of political parties, it seems Islamophobic beliefs have been afforded an air of legitimacy even amongst our political representatives.

To protect our Muslim communities and meaningfully combat Islamophobia, it is essential that policymakers are firstly equipped with a definition with which to identify it.

As such, this paper seeks to offer a brief (but by no means exhaustive) analysis of the necessity to adopt a holistic definition of Islamophobia that encompasses the phenomenon in all its manifestations.

For a more comprehensive analysis, please see our 2018 report, “More than Words”, which may be found [here](#).

The Need to Define Islamophobia

Defining Islamophobia is important as it will provide much needed clarity in legislation and policies that are intended to protect vulnerable minorities. Defining Islamophobia is also an act of recognition. For British Muslims, it demonstrates that the Government recognises the hardships they face as undeniable facts in need of address. Furthermore, it reassures Muslim communities that these hardships can, and will, be tackled in a critical and dedicated manner.

The term “Islamophobia” is the most appropriate terminology to use in this debate for a variety of reasons.

- It is an established terminology in academic, activist, advocacy, and victim vocabularies.
- It is a terminology with an existing broad conceptual understanding. Therefore, it is a holistic descriptor that explicitly identifies the phenomenon in all its social, economic and political forms.
- The term ‘Anti-Muslim hatred’, a term proposed by some as an alternative to Islamophobia, is simply insufficient to encompass the broad nature of Islamophobia, and is not sufficient to adequately capture discrimination and socio-political exclusions, where there is often no ‘hatred’ explicitly expressed.

- Contrary to some claims, it has not historically, nor should it presently, be seen as attempt to stifle free speech and, in particular, an effort to curtail all questioning or criticism of religion.

A Holistic Understanding

Islamophobia encompasses far more than simply hostility and hate crime. Islamophobia is demonstrated in, and articulated through, speech, writing, behaviours, structures, policies, legislation, or activities that work to control, regulate, or exclude Muslim participation within social, civic, economic, and political life, or which embody hatred, vilification, stereotyping, abuse, or violence directed at Muslims. It includes Any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference against Muslims that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

As such, Islamophobia infiltrates every aspect of public life and creates barriers to Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslim) in overt ways, but also in ways that are subtler, and thus much harder to detect and demonstrate. For example, hatred and physical abuse on the streets is overt and impossible to ignore. However, the CV that is passed over because it boasts a Muslim sounding name; or the British-Pakistani man who is repeatedly assumed a threat at the airport on the basis of his beard; or the child who feels unable to ask questions in class because she is worried she may be swept up into the apparatus of PREVENT; these are examples that may be harder to detect, but which have dire repercussions on British Muslims' daily enjoyment of freedoms. It is in the aim of encompassing Islamophobia in all its manifestations that the guidance laid out in this briefing are in need of application.

Manifestations of Islamophobia

Moral Panic, Media, and Broadcasting

Studies have shown that, with 21 negative references to Muslims within British media output for every single neutral or positive reference, the media plays an integral role in spreading prejudice, stereotypes, and xenophobic views of vulnerable groups. These negative representations are incredibly detrimental to community cohesion and the subsequent ability of minorities to fully participate and engage as equal members of society. The prevalence of Islamophobia within the British press has been highlighted by several studies, including that of Paul Baker, Tony McEnery, and Costas Gabrielatos, who conclude that the “most salient finding is that the British Press most frequently positions Islam and Muslims in stories or contexts that relate to conflict”. Similarly, another [study](#) by Cardiff University found that the bulk of coverage on British Muslims was focussed on “Muslims as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values), or both (Muslim extremism in general)”. The study noted that in more than a quarter of the articles investigated, Islam was posed as being “dangerous, backward or irrational” and being in contrast to “British Values”.

Racial and Religious Hatred

Hate crime is, in many ways, the most overt, visible, and undeniable symptom of the Islamophobia prevalent across certain segments of society. Over recent years, British Muslims have suffered from increasing levels of hate crime in conjunction with an increasing levels of online hate speech on social media platforms. Major socio-political events, such as terror attacks and the EU referendum, often mobilise acts of hostility towards Muslims and the impacts of these crimes are long-lasting, with many victims left feeling anxious and fearful for their safety. In the year 2017/18, there was a [40% rise](#) in religious hate crime with 52% of these attacks aimed at Muslims.

Youth and Education

Islamophobia in the education system is a serious problem which impacts Muslim children and their development in a wide variety of ways. From being bullied explicitly in reference to their faith, to being stigmatised and reported to the PREVENT strategy for views they may hold, and to being interminably questioned on their apparent divergence from (thus far ill-defined) “British Values”, Muslim children are struggling to navigate this complex maze. Meanwhile, controversies such as the apparent “Trojan Horse” affair and Amanda Spielman’s recent proposals to question school girls who wear the hijab highlight the obsessive scrutiny and problematisation of Muslims within the sphere of education. The impacts of these experiences can be long-term, damaging their ability to achieve success in the employment sphere and inhibiting their participation in wider civic society and the political arena.

Economic Exclusion

It is necessary to examine Islamophobia in terms of its ability to economically exclude Muslims from the labour market, thereby furthering socio-economic divides. Indeed, numerous studies in recent years have researched the failure of Muslims to progress and reach levels of success in the workplace which their non-Muslim counterparts enjoy. These studies have pointed to a combination of Islamophobia, racism, and discrimination as reasons for Muslims to be paid less than their non-Muslim counterparts, less likely to be in work, less likely to be in skilled and professional occupations, and less likely to break through the glass ceiling to access top level executive positions.

Security and Counter-Terror

The lens through which Muslims are repeatedly and forcefully portrayed as security threats is a narrative desperately in need of recalibration. Meanwhile, the damaging consequences that result from misguided policies predicated upon Islamophobic assumptions and discourses is an area that is in need of immediate address. Processes of securitising Muslim identities have intersected with vague definitions of “extremism”, “radicalisation”, and “Fundamental British Values” to result in damaging policies such as the PREVENT strategy, which are based on flawed evidence and serve to stigmatise Muslims and marginalise their voices within democratic debates.

As a result of the amendments to the Counter-Terror and Border Security Bill proposed by the House of Lords, the Government has conceded to an independent review of the PREVENT strategy. The review follows sustained criticism of the strategy put forward by experts from across society, including three [special rapporteurs to the UN](#), the Joint Committee on Human Rights, the NEU (formerly known as the [NUT](#)), the [NUS](#), the former [Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation](#), [Rights Watch UK](#), the [Open Society Justice Initiative](#), the [Joint Committee for Human Rights](#), and more than 140 academics, politicians and experts in [one instance alone](#).

Crime, Policing and the Criminal Justice System

Institutional Islamophobia relating to discriminatory practices ingrained within the Criminal Justice System is particularly significant because of both its disruption to the lives of many Muslims and for its long-term consequences to their future social engagement as equal members of society.

While noteworthy and commendable steps have been made to improve equalities in the Criminal Justice System since the publication of the Macpherson report in 1999, Muslims and ethnic minorities remain over-represented and demonstrate low levels of trust in the system. Furthermore, homogeneity within the Criminal Justice system needs to be examined as conduit for potential biases and as a hindrance to understanding the experiences of Muslim

offenders, thereby obstructing meaningful strategies to approach Muslim socio-economic mobility and the driving forces behind criminality. As such, Islamophobia must be examined as a mechanism potentially maintaining inequalities at all levels of the Criminal Justice System.

Political Representation and Exclusion

Islamophobia should be understood as a mechanism which marginalises and excludes Muslims from being able to fully participate in social, political and civic life. While barriers have been broken by individuals such as Mohammad Sarwar, Sayeeda Warsi, Naz Shah, Yasmin Qureshi, Shabana Mahmood, and Rushanara Ali, to name but a few, Muslim representation of 2% of the House of Commons still lags far behind what is proportional considering the population of British Muslims, which stands at 4.4% according to the 2011 census.

Furthermore, divisive security strategies such as PREVENT have been utilised by certain groups (such as the Henry Jackson Society and its project Student Rights) to shut down Muslim voices, particularly on university campuses which are intended to be the epicentres of critical debate and engagement of ideas. The result is that young Muslims in particular are actively discouraged from being politically active and engaging with the debates that are integral to a democratic society.

Moreover, it is essential that the Government's policy of disengagement with credible mainstream Muslim organisations and be urgently reversed so that the relationship between Government and Muslim communities may be recalibrated.

It is imperative that Islamophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic attitudes are tackled and that people of all backgrounds and faiths stand in solidarity against prejudice and violence. As such, MEND calls upon the UK Government commit to the adoption of an agreed definition of Islamophobia, through independent consultation with grassroots Muslim organisations, that takes into account the process of Islamophobia, the actions that qualify as Islamophobic, and the impact of Islamophobia.

How MEND can assist parliamentarians and policy makers

- Providing briefings, information, analysis, and expertise on issues impacting British Muslim communities.
- Arranging opportunities for MPs to engage with their local Muslim communities.
- Conducting research within Muslim communities.
- Connecting MPs to local stakeholders.

If MEND can be of any assistance to your work, please feel free to contact

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