

The Language of Fear: A Report on the Advocates, Critics and Victims of the Term “Islamophobia”



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The objective of the Programme for Cohesive Society is to create policy solutions to the threats of Islamist radicalisation, uncontrolled migration and ineffective minority integration.

- *“Islamophobia” is a well-intentioned word, but carries with it a number of flaws.*
- *The term confuses the difference between incitement to hatred and legitimate criticism*
- *“Islamophobia” is sometimes wrongly equated with anti-Semitism or racism*
- *Islamist organisations exploit the word to silence opposition against their ideology*
- *Using expressions such as “anti-Muslim hatred” is more accurate and preferable*

For decades now, the integrity of our liberal democratic societies has been challenged every few months by violent extremists intent on killing innocent people in the name of the Islamic religion. The broad debate surrounding this threat called into question the established understanding of terrorism and in some cases made it necessary to coin new terms to appropriately describe the situation. One of the new words which now entered popular use is “Islamism”. The use of this term allows us to differentiate between those who interpret Islam as a political ideology to be imposed over society (“Islamists”) and Muslims who view Islam in religious, non-political terms. Consequently, the public debate regarding Islamist terrorism steers away from blaming all Muslims for the behaviour of a far smaller number of militant Islamists.

Another recently adopted term used to exonerate Muslims from the highly securitised debate on the nature of Islamism is “Islamophobia”. The frequency with which this word was used has increased rapidly in the past two decades, to the point where many commentators and public institutions treat it as an established term. Today, many warn against “Islamophobia” as an ever-growing problem: for example, an annual “Islamophobia Awareness Month” takes place in the United Kingdom and elsewhere¹ and commentator Reza Aslan asserted the presence of an “Islamophobia industry” in the United States.² Professor Tariq Modood of the University of Bristol described “Islamophobia” as “the most important...form of cultural racism today”,³ and as will be discussed later, there have been calls to have “Islamophobic” attitudes criminalised.

However, a number of critics have disputed the utility of using the term “Islamophobia” and offered a number of arguments for its abandonment. The subsequent debate over the existence of the

¹ Islamophobia Awareness Month UK Facebook Page: accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/IAMonth/>

² Freedman, Samuel G. (2012): If the Sikh Temple Had Been a Mosque; International New York Times; accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/11/us/if-the-sikh-temple-had-been-a-muslim-mosque-on-religion.html>

³ Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (2009): “The Multicultural State We’re In: Muslims, ‘Multiculture’ and the ‘Civic Re-balancing’ of British Multiculturalism”; POLITICAL STUDIES: 2009 VOL 57, 473–497. Accessed at http://www.tariqmodood.com/uploads/1/2/3/9/12392325/multicultural_state_we_are_in.pdf

phenomenon of Islamophobia has continued to the present moment and shows no signs of stopping, partly because of the fundamental implications involved in cases where the criminalisation of “Islamophobia” has been introduced into the legal system. As the term is now being used by public institutions even in the Visegrad area⁴, it seems useful to review the way it has been proliferated since the 1990s and assert its utility in light of the arguments brought by its propagators and opponents alike.

1. “Islamophobia” Defined

What is “Islamophobia”? The word seemingly first appeared in French as “Islamophobie” a century ago, in a book written in 1916 by Alphonse Etienne Dinet, a painter and convert to Islam. However, in the English version of this book, the word was translated as “feelings inimical to Islam”. The term “Islamophobia” did not achieve broad use in English and other languages until the 1988 publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, which was described by multiple commentators as “Islamophobic”.⁵ Several years later, the Runnymede Trust constructed one of the earliest definitions of the term in its 1997 report on the subject. In the report, titled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, “Islamophobia” is defined as follows:

“An outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination.”⁶

Under this definition, Islamophobia is perceived as stemming from an irrational, *phobic* fear of the adherents to the religion of Islam, or those who are perceived as such. Of particular importance is the fact that this definition does not include any attitude against Islam itself but only reflects attitudes against Muslims. This sets the definition apart from many subsequent revisions of the meaning of “Islamophobia” which include negative attitudes against Islam as well as Muslims. A quick perusal of the Oxford English Dictionary yields the following definition of the term:

“Intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims.”⁷

⁴ For example, the Media Committee of the Council for Human Rights of the Government of the Czech Republic proposed in 2015 that broadcasting “Islamophobic” prejudices should be proscribed by law. Ceska Justice (2016): “Vládní výbor pro média navrhuje zákaz a tresty za vysílání náboženských a etnických předsudků”; accessed at <http://www.ceska-justice.cz/2016/06/vladni-vybor-pro-media-navrhuje-zakaz-tresty-za-vysilani-predsudku-o-nabozenskych-etnickych-mensinach/>

⁵ For example, in this study by the European Muslim Research Centre, Rushdie is referred to as “the Islamophobic author”. J. Githens-Mazer, R. Lambert, ‘Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hate Crime: A London Case Study’, European Muslim Research Centre, p. 41

⁶ The Runnymede Trust (1997): “Islamophobia: a challenge a challenge for us all”, Summary; accessed at <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>

⁷ OED (2016): “Islamophobia, n.”; Accessed at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/248449?redirectedFrom=islamophobia&>

This is a slightly broader definition than that constructed by the Runnymede Trust, as it includes the dislike of Islam itself rather than the dislike of Muslims only. However, it is in line with other contemporary definitions of the term. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe (ECRI) defines Islamophobia in the following way:

*“Islamophobia” shall mean prejudice against, hatred towards, or fear of the religion of Islam or Muslims;*⁸

The Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe has a similar working definition which also includes Islam itself:

*“Islamophobia can be defined as the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them.”*⁹

What these definitions have in common is their inclusion of negative attitudes against Islam itself. This is important from a legislative point of view. While all member states of the European Union proscribe hate speech in the form of incitement to hatred of a group of people for their religious identity, only few European states criminalise prejudice against religions themselves. On the contrary, criticism of religious ideas is protected by legislation which guarantees the right to free expression. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe asserted in its 2010 report on the subject the following:

“The right to freedom of expression implies that it should be allowed to scrutinise, openly debate and criticise, even harshly and unreasonably, belief systems, opinions and institutions, as long as this does not amount to advocating hatred against an individual or groups.”

Weighing the implications of blasphemy laws, the Commission concluded that criminalising religious insult was not necessary to protect the core values of a liberal democratic society:

*“The commission does not consider it necessary or desirable to create an offence of religious insult (that is, insult to religious feelings) simpliciter, without the element of incitement to hatred as an essential component. Neither does the commission consider it essential to impose criminal sanctions for an insult based on belonging to a particular religion.”*¹⁰

As such, “Islamophobia” as the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam should not be criminalised, as this would constitute a breach of the right to free expression. The European Court of Human Rights sketched the extent of this right as follows:

⁸ ECRI (2016): “ECRI General Recommendation No. 15: On Combating Hate Speech”; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Council of Europe - 2016; page 15; Accessed at http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/activities/GPR/EN/Recommendation_N15/REC-15-2016-015-ENG.pdf

⁹ Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe (2004): “Islamophobia and its consequences on Young People”, European Youth Centre Budapest 1–6 June 2004; Page 6; Accessed at https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Resources/Publications/Islamophobia_consequences_young_people_en.pdf

¹⁰ Venice Commission (2010): *Blasphemy, insult and hatred: Finding answers in a democratic society*; Council of Europe.

The right to free expression “is applicable not only to “information” or “ideas” that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.”¹¹

What might amount to a criminal offence is not the criticism of Islam but the incitement to hatred of Muslims. In this regard, the incitement to hatred of a group of people for their religious identity is already a recognised criminal offence in most European states under Council of Europe legislation. “Islamophobia” in the form of exclusion, discrimination, violence or incitement to hatred against Muslims is therefore already criminalised, as opposed to “Islamophobia” in the form of “fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam”. Criminalising the latter kind of “Islamophobia” is not desirable, as it may have a chilling effect on the freedom of expression. This point is expressed, among other bodies, by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia:

“A distinction must be made between attitudes and actions against individuals or groups of individuals of Muslim faith, based on unjust stereotypes and generalisations on the one hand, and a critical stand towards religious manifestations in our society that do not respect fundamental rights on the other.”¹²

As such, taking a critical stand towards controversial tenets of Islam should not be confused for adopting an attitude against Muslims. The following table lists some examples of both phenomena. Some of these examples, such as burning of the Quran, are morally reprehensible; this table only concerns their legality.

Insulting Muslims on the basis of their religion may be considered a grey area with respect to its legality, as the ECHR may take into account whether or not the case at hand includes “gratuitous offences” undertaken to “incite disrespect or hatred.”¹³ Another grey area is burning of the Quran. Although the

¹¹ Handyside v. the United Kingdom judgment of 7 December 1976, § 49. Cited in European Commission (2016): “Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online”; Accessed at http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/hate_speech_code_of_conduct_en.pdf

¹² European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2006): “Muslims in the European Union - Discrimination and Islamophobia”; Accessed at <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/muslims-european-union-discrimination-and-islamophobia>

¹³ See Anne Weber (2009): “Manual on hate speech”, Council of Europe Publishing. Accessed at http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/hrpolicy/Publications/Hate_Speech_EN.pdf

Council of Europe and the European Union do not specifically proscribe such an act, Quran burning is proscribed in a number of member states and may be considered as an act of violence by the ECHR.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that there should exist a legal difference between criticism of the doctrine and

Illegal under CoE and EU law	Legal under CoE and EU law
Publicly promoting hatred against Muslims on the basis of their religion	Criticising the teachings of Islam, the Quran or Mohammed
Promoting violence against Muslims, mosques or other places of worship	Publishing cartoons or text satirical of Islam or Muhammed
Forcibly removing a woman’s hijab	Calling for public proscription of the hijab
Discriminating against Muslims on the basis of their religion	Expressing ideas which offend, shock, or disturb Muslims

Islam and discrimination, violence or hatred against Muslims on the basis of their faith. However, not all agree with this conclusion.

2. “Islamophobia” Exploited

The Venice Commission’s assertion appears to be in contradiction with the multiple resolutions of the United Nations Human Rights Council on the subject of “defamation of religions”. Resolution 7/19 of 2007 includes the following:

“[the Human Rights Council] ... urges States to provide, within their respective legal and constitutional systems, adequate protection against acts of hatred, discrimination, intimidation and coercion resulting from the defamation of any religion, to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and their value systems and to complement legal systems with intellectual and moral strategies to combat religious hatred and intolerance”.

The resolution does not specify what a “defamation of any religion” entails and how it may differ, if at all, from legitimate criticism of religious manifestations. A subsequent resolution from 2009 includes the concept of “Islamophobia”:

“[the Human Rights Council] Requests the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance to report on all manifestations of defamation of

¹⁴ Catherine B. Holmes (2012): “Quran Burning and Religious Hatred: A Comparison of American, International, and European Approaches to Freedom of Speech”; Washington University Global Studies Law Review; Volume 11, Issue 2; Accessed at http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1315&context=law_globalstudies

religions, and in particular on the serious implications of Islamophobia, on the enjoyment of all rights by their followers, to the Council at its twelfth session.”

The resolutions combating “defamation of religions” have a particularly interesting history. They have been introduced in various forms every year since 1999 by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)¹⁵, a group of 57 United Nations Members. In its first draft, the title of the original resolution read “Defamation of Islam”¹⁶ — this was eventually amended by the OIC to make the proposal more agreeable to members of the Commission on Human Rights. Nevertheless, the concept of “defamation of religions” has been heavily criticised by representatives of the United States and EU Member States as a disguised form of blasphemy law. The European Union delegate to the UN Jean-Baptiste Mattei repeatedly asserted that the concept of defamation should not fall under the remit of human rights because it conflicted with the right to freedom of expression. On one occasion, he claimed that “human rights laws did not and should not protect belief systems.”¹⁷ Eileen Donahoe, United States ambassador to the UN, also rejected the validity of the OIC resolutions:

“We continue to see the ‘defamation of religions’ concept used to justify censorship, criminalization, and in some cases violent assaults and deaths of political, racial, and religious minorities around the world.”¹⁸

Indeed, the idea that religion can be defamed stretches the established understanding of “defamation” as a form of libel. Libel involves the publication of a false statement about a person, business, group or government. However, in the case of defamation of a religious claim, the falsehood of a statement cannot be verified, and neither can its truth. Insofar as it is not the role of a judge to determine whether a religious claim is true or false, it is not possible to conclude whether such a claim has been libelled.¹⁹ In a joint statement to the United Nations in 2008, four international experts on the freedom of expression concluded that OIC’s concept of “defamation of religions” was incompatible with human rights: “religions, like all beliefs, cannot be said to have a reputation of their own”, they noted.²⁰ At a meeting of the

¹⁵ Formerly known as the Organisation for the Islamic Conference.

¹⁶ U.N. Econ. & Soc. Council [ECOSOC], Comm’n on Human Rights, Pakistan, Draft Res., Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and all Forms of Discrimination, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/L.40 (Apr. 20, 1999).

¹⁷ Denis MacEoin (2016): “Free Speech vs. Islamic Law?”, Gatestone Institute; Accessed at <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/7379/free-speech-islamic-law>

¹⁸ Aisha Rehman (2010): “Business and politics in the Muslim world”; Gilani Foundation, p.17. Accessed at <http://www.gilanifoundation.com/homepage/112/Asia%20112/Fertile%20Crescent%20112.pdf>

¹⁹ Elizabeth Samson (2009): “Speaking Out Against Silencing the Masses”; Gatestone Institute; Accessed at <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/520/speaking-out-against-silencing-the-masses>

²⁰ The four experts were Frank La Rue, a Guatemalan who is the Human Rights Council’s investigator for freedom of expression, Hungarian writer Miklos Haraszti of the OSCE, South African jurist Faith Pansy Tlakula of the African Union, and Catalina Botero of the Organisation of American States. Internet Centre for Anti-Racism Europe (2008): “RIGHTS EXPERTS ATTACK ISLAM DEFAMATION DRIVE AT UN”; accessed at <http://www.icare.to/news.php?en/2008-12>

European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics in February 2015, the National Secular Society executive director Keith Porteous Wood warned against the “15-year project by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to have defamation [of religion] made an international law”.²¹

Facing increasing pressure from opponents of blasphemy laws, the OIC has shifted its tactic in 2011 to accommodate the wishes of Western states through the so-called Istanbul Process. The resulting Resolution 16/18 of 2011 aims to protect the rights of religious believers rather than the reputation of their religion itself.²² The concept of “defamation of religions” has not been proposed since 2012. Despite this, the OIC continues to publish regular reports on “Islamophobia”, which is defined by the OIC Secretary General in the latest report as follows:

*“Islamophobia can be defined as a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by unfounded fear, mistrust and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia is also manifested through intolerance, discrimination and adverse political, media and even academic public discourse....As such, Islamophobia is a direct and clear assault on the human rights and dignity of Muslims.”*²³

The OIC is not the only organisation to define “Islamophobia” as a form of racism. “Islamophobia” is understood in such terms by the European Network Against Racism, an umbrella group of civil society organisations in Europe.²⁴ In the academic circles, Tariq Modood understands the concept as “anti-Muslim racism”,²⁵ while Nasar Meer and Tehseen Noorani of the University of Bristol write that “Islamophobia” is “one of the most pernicious forms of contemporary racism and that steps should be taken to combat it.”²⁶

By defining “Islamophobia” as a form of racism and xenophobia and a violation of human rights of Muslims, the OIC and others present the concept as one that should be criminalised. After all, if one conceded that Islamophobia was a form of racism and xenophobia, then pre-existing anti-racism legislation of many states would apply. In this regard, it is problematic that the OIC continues to view

²¹ National Secular Society (2015): “Human rights group warns against global blasphemy law”; Accessed at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2015/06/human-rights-group-warns-against-global-blasphemy-law>

²² United Nations (2011): A/HRC/RES/16/18; Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council: 16/18, “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief”; Accessed at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18_en.pdf

²³ OIC (2015): “Eighth OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia”; Accessed at http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv3/upload/islamophobia/2015/en/reports/8th_Ob_Rep_Islamophobia_Final.pdf

²⁴ European Network Against Racism (2015): “Muslims in Europe: Questions and Answers”; Accessed at <http://www.enar-eu.org/Muslims-in-Europe-Questions-and>

²⁵ Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, 2009.

²⁶ Nasar Meer and Tehseen Noorani (2008): “A sociological comparison of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain”; The Sociological Review, 56:2 (2008); Accessed at http://www.nasarmeer.com/uploads/7/7/4/6/7746984/meer_and_noorani_-_the_sociological_review.pdf

“Islamophobia” as targeting Islam as well as Muslims. In its 2013 report on the subject, the OIC blames “perpetrators of Islamophobia” for inciting civil unrest:

“The perpetrators of Islamophobia, who seek to propagate irrational fear and intolerance of Islam, have time and again aroused unwarranted tension, suspicion and unrest in societies by slandering the Islamic faith through gross distortions and misrepresentations and by encroaching on and denigrating the religious sentiments of Muslims.”²⁷

The same report also notes that the OIC actively pursues the criminalisation of “acts or speech that denote manifest intolerance.” This suggests that the OIC continues to press for the criminalisation of speech which denigrates the religion of Islam. Understanding “Islamophobia” as a form of racism and xenophobia to be discouraged or outright outlawed and at the same time as a prejudiced view towards Islam as well as Muslims is therefore a covert route towards the establishment of laws criminalising otherwise legitimate criticism of Islam.

The OIC is by far not the only authority which strives towards the criminalisation of “Islamophobic” sentiments. Speaking prior to the 2015 general election in the United Kingdom, the then-Labour Party Leader Ed Miliband condemned the rise of hate crimes and promised to make “Islamophobia” an aggravated crime if elected:

“We are going to make it an aggravated crime. We are going to make sure it is marked on people’s records with the police to make sure they root out Islamophobia as a hate crime.”²⁸

That “Islamophobia” should be proscribed in the West is also argued by multiple organisations with connections to states in the Middle East and North Africa. This is the view expressed in annual European Islamophobia Reports of the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, a Turkish civil society organisation with ties to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.²⁹

In North America, the discourse on the issue of “Islamophobia” and the need for its criminalisation is dominated by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Muslim American Society (MAS) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which runs the islamophobia.org portal. However, all three of these organisations are tied to Islamist networks in the Middle East. ISNA was included by federal prosecutors on a list of un-indicted co-conspirators in the Hamas-financing prosecution of the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development (HLF). The organisation was founded by members of

²⁷ OIC (2013): “Sixth OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia”; Accessed at http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/upload/islamophobia/2013/en/islamphobia_report_2013.pdf

²⁸ Independent (2015): “General election 2015: Labour will toughen hate crimes legislation surrounding Islamophobia”; Accessed at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/general-election-2015-labour-will-toughen-hate-crimes-legislation-surrounding-islamophobia-10203918.html>

²⁹ Enes Bayraklı, Farid Hafez (2015): “European Islamophobia Report”; Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research; accessed at http://www.islamophobieurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015.pdf

the Muslim Brotherhood and continues to have links to radical Islamist organisations and individuals.³⁰ Meanwhile, the MAS was founded as the North American wing of the Muslim Brotherhood.³¹ Finally, there is a proven connection between CAIR and Hamas, and the FBI has suspended all cooperation with CAIR in 2008 as a result of CAIR involvement in radical Islamist networks.³² This also casts a shadow over the work of Professor John Esposito of Georgetown University, one of the leading commentators in the USA on the subject of Islamist terrorism. Esposito is a regular guest at CAIR events and has openly and repeatedly defended the views of multiple radical Islamists, including the Islamist preacher and spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who described suicide terrorist attacks as “heroic martyrdom operations”.³³ In 2003, Esposito included Qaradawi on a list of religious scholars with a “reformist interpretation of Islam and its relationship to democracy, pluralism and human rights.”³⁴ As for his views on “Islamophobia”, Esposito warned in 2010 that “Islamophobia is fast becoming for Muslims what anti-Semitism is for Jews.”³⁵ When making this statement, Esposito was presumably unaware that Qaradawi described the Holocaust as “divine punishment” which put the Jews “in their place”.³⁶

Other commentators also drew the analogy between “Islamophobia” and anti-Semitism. Cora Alexa Døving, a senior scientist at the Norwegian Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, argues that there are significant similarities between “Islamophobic” discourse and European pre-Nazi anti-Semitism.³⁷ Sabine Schiffer and Constantin Wagner of the Media Responsibility Institute in Germany also identify similarities between “Islamophobia” and anti-Semitism.³⁸ According to the Centre for American Progress, “the roots of Islamophobia...bring to mind despicable anti-Semitism and the

³⁰ Investigative Project on Terrorism: "An IPT Investigative Report: The Islamic Society of North America"; Accessed at: <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/275.pdf>

³¹ Investigative Project on Terrorism: "Muslim American Society"; Accessed at <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/85.pdf>

³² Investigative Project on Terrorism: "The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR): CAIR Exposed"; Accessed at <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/122.pdf>

³³ Michael Slackman, “Islamic Debate Surrounds Mideast Suicide Bombers,” The Los Angeles Times, May 27, 2001.

³⁴ Investigative Project on Terrorism: "An IPT Investigative Report: John Esposito Defending Radical Islam"; Accessed at <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/304.pdf>

³⁵ John Esposito (2010): "Islamophobia: A Threat to American Values?"; Huffington Post; Accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-l-esposito/islamophobia-a-threat-to_b_676765.html

³⁶ Standpoint - Focus on Islamism (2009): “Yusuf al-Qaradawi Praises Hitler and the Holocaust”; Youtube; Accessed at https://youtu.be/VcB_DZ4YQYQ

³⁷ Cora Alexa Døving (2010): "Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: A Comparison of Imposed Group Identities"; Tidsskrift for Islamforskning – Islam og minoriteter, nr. 2 - 2010; Accessed at <http://islamforskning.dk/files/journal/2010/FIFO-2010-2-del4.pdf>

³⁸ Schiffer, S.; Wagner, C. (2011). "Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia - new enemies, old patterns". *Race & Class* 52 (3): 77–84.

struggles of other minorities for equal rights in the United States.”³⁹ In the UK, after Jack Straw expressed discomfort at having to meet fully veiled Muslim female constituents, author India Knight accused him of “Islamophobia” and claimed that Muslims were the new Jews.⁴⁰

3. A Faulty Expression

Drawing an analogy between “Islamophobia” and historical anti-Semitism is unfortunate. Multiple charters of the European Union, Council of Europe and the United Nations specifically prohibit discrimination against a group of people based on their religious identity. In contrast, the Nuremberg racial laws prohibited marriage between Jews and gentiles and were generally discriminatory against the Jewish communities. There is no evidence that Muslims are being systematically eradicated in Europe and North America, whereas the Jewish population of Europe was decimated by Nazi Germany in the Holocaust and was being systematically discriminated against even before that event. Even today, the number of anti-Semitic attacks recorded in the United States vastly outnumbers attacks against Muslims for their religious affiliation.⁴¹ While cartoons disparaging the religion of Islam and its adherents are being regularly published in the Western world, they are far more benign than anti-Jewish propaganda of Nazi Germany that incited to state-sponsored violence against the Jewish population.

Something must also be said about the supposed causes of “Islamophobic” sentiments. In pre-war Europe, state-sponsored anti-Jewish propaganda was rife, but the stories of murderous Jews were largely fictitious and driven by Christian anti-Jewish fundamentalism.⁴² In contrast, hardly a day goes by without yet another terrorist attack perpetrated by the followers of Islam. Contemporary Europe falls victim to Islamist terrorism every few months and the self-styled Islamic State continues to slaughter innocent people in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the few writers who still dare to openly criticise Islam must live in a perpetual fear of violent reprisal. The French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo was frequently labelled “Islamophobic” and even sued⁴³ for its portrayal of Prophet Muhammad, until its cartoonists were murdered by militant Islamist in

³⁹ Matthew Duss, Yasmine Taeb, Ken Gude, and Ken Sofer (2015): “Fear, Inc. 2.0: The Islamophobia Network’s Efforts to Manufacture Hate in America”; Center for American Progress; Accessed at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/FearInc-report2.11.pdf>

⁴⁰ India Knight (2006): “Muslims are the new Jews”; The Sunday Times; Accessed at <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/Features/Focus/article158659.ece>

⁴¹ FBI (2015): “Hate Crime Statistics, 2014”; U.S. Department of Justice—Federal Bureau of Investigation; Accessed at https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2014/topic-pages/victims_final

⁴² On this topic, see Mark R. Cohen (2008): *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*; Princeton University

⁴³ France24 (2012): “French Muslim groups sue magazine over Prophet Mohammed cartoons”; Accessed at <http://www.france24.com/en/20121207-france-islam-muslim-sue-mohammed-cartoons-charlie-hebdo/>

2015.⁴⁴ The staff of Jylands-Posten were accused of “Islamophobia” for publishing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad while Danish embassies were set on fire and Danish-looking tourists were being attacked by thousands of violent protesters.⁴⁵ Theo Van Gogh, the director of a film critical of the treatment of women in Islam⁴⁶, was murdered in broad daylight by an Islamist extremist in 2004.⁴⁷ Van Gogh’s colleague Ayaan Hirsi Ali, herself an escapee from radical Islamism, continues to receive death threats while being accused of “Islamophobia”.⁴⁸ Salman Rushdie was likewise accused of “Islamophobia” for writing the novel *Satanic Verses*. Soon after the book was published, Rushdie was forced into hiding after a fatwa was declared against him by Ayatollah Khomeini and a spate of burnings, kidnappings, bombings, and murders followed.⁴⁹ This fatwa is renewed periodically and is still in force, placing a credible threat against the life of Rushdie and those around him.⁵⁰ Despite this, Tariq Modood wrote in 1991 that in writing the book, Rushdie committed “a deliberate, mercenary act of Islamophobia” and that “while Islamophobia is certainly at work, the real sickness is [Rushdie’s] militant irreverence”.⁵¹ In this respect, the difference between anti-Semitism and “Islamophobia” is that virtually all popular writers and cartoonists who publicly criticise or satirise Islam must deal with a real and tangible threat of violence from the hands of the followers of Islam. Given the frequency with which this threat is carried to its conclusion all over the world against anyone who disparages Islamic tenets, fearing violent reprisal for publicly criticising Islam is entirely rational and justified. Of course, it must be stressed that the acts of violence in the name of Islam are only committed by a fraction of Muslims. However, for many supposedly “Islamophobic” writers and artists in Europe and North America, the small minority of adherents to Islam who are ready and willing to kill in the name of their religion fosters an atmosphere where fearing to criticise Islam is not a sign of “Islamophobic” irrationality, but of a healthy sense of self-preservation. There is no similar dynamic today with regards to Judaism, or indeed any other religion.

⁴⁴ BBC (2015): “Charlie Hebdo attack: Three days of terror”; Accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>

⁴⁵ Flemming Rose (2014): *The Tyranny of Silence*, Cato Institute.

⁴⁶ IMDB (2004): Submission: Part I; Accessed at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0432109/>

⁴⁷ Guardian (2004): “The murder that shattered Holland’s liberal dream”; Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/07/terrorism.religion>

⁴⁸ For example, she is accused of “Islamophobia” on the “Americans Against Islamophobia” website, accessed at <http://www.islamophobiatoday.com/2014/04/12/when-neo-cons-and-liberals-unite-the-case-of-anti-muslim-crusader-ayaan-hirsi-ali/>

⁴⁹ Guardian (2012): “Looking back at Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*”; Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/14/looking-at-salman-rushdies-satanic-verses>

⁵⁰ Independent (2016): “Salman Rushdie: Iranian state media renew fatwa on *Satanic Verses* author with \$600,000 bounty”; Accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/salman-rushdie-iranian-state-media-renew-fatwa-on-satanic-verses-author-with-600000-bounty-a6887141.html>

⁵¹ Reprinted in Modood, Tariq (1992) *Not Easy Being British: colour culture and citizenship*; Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books: 75-6.

Given the above, equating “Islamophobia” with anti-Semitism is inaccurate — particularly in those cases where the supposed “Islamophobes” face a credible threat of violence from the hands of radical Islamists.

The idea that “Islamophobia” is a manifestation of racism has likewise come under fire. Although the scholarship on racism is diverse and often contradictory, the core building block of racism is generally understood as the belief that all members of one race are inferior to members of another.⁵² The belief in one’s own genetic superiority is what has led to so much suffering being committed against those whose race was deemed “inferior”. To be sure, much of what we consider to constitute “human races” is socially constructed.⁵³ Nevertheless, the mainstream understanding of this issue seems to be that skin colour is biologically natured rather than socially nurtured, and one cannot “convert” from one race to another.

This concept may only be translated onto Islam with great difficulty. Islam is not defined by genetic traits, nor can it be. It is fundamentally a set of ideas, and as such it is possible to adopt this set of ideas or reject it irrespective of one’s race. This is attested by the large communities of former Muslims around the world of all ethnic groups who organise in a number of organisations. Even the global Muslim community is a highly heterogenous and amorphous grouping composed of different racial groups. People are not born with specific genes which make them Muslim, but acquire their religious identity through conversion or upbringing.

In both cases of legitimate criticism of Islam and illegitimate incitement to hatred of Muslims, responding with charges of racism is therefore inaccurate. This is not to excuse the incitement to hatred of Muslims as somehow more acceptable than racism (it is not) nor to suggest that a person cannot be racist and hateful towards Muslims at the same time (they can be). The point is that the two phenomena, overlap as they may in some cases, should not be confused because the underlying mechanisms at play are fundamentally different. This difference is unhelpfully lost when “Islamophobia” is presented as a form of racism. The confusion of the two phenomena is also counter-productive, for at least two reasons. One is that to conflate racism with “Islamophobia” is to distort the image of racism as a scientifically unsupported and anachronistic worldview which has caused the deaths of millions of people in the past century alone. The second is that accusing someone hateful towards Muslims of racism may serve to strengthen their position, because they will perceive the criticism of their prejudice as entirely unjustified and grow more defensive.⁵⁴ If our common goal is towards minimising instances of racism as well as anti-Muslim hatred, we should be mindful of the difference between the two.

Many distinguished commentators took issue with the term “Islamophobia” itself. Robin Richardson, a former director of the Runnymede Trust which created one of the first definitions of “Islamophobia”,

⁵² Newman, D. M. (2012). *Sociology: exploring the architecture of everyday life* (9th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

⁵³ Haney Lopez, Ian (1994). "The Social Construction of Race". *Critical Race Theory*: 191–203.

⁵⁴ Nadra Kareem Nittle, “Five Reasons Not to Call Someone Racist”, Accessed at <http://racereactions.about.com/od/understandingrac1/a/callingsomeoneracist.htm>

asserted significant flaws in the concept.⁵⁵ To have a “phobia” implies a severe mental illness. However, Richardson notes that feeling anxiety about Islam and Muslims is not the result of a mental illness involving only a small number of people. The same problem is noticed by professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne Nick Haslam, who rejects the term “Islamophobia” in describing anti-Muslim prejudice:

“Prejudice flourishes among people who are cold, callous, inflexible, closed-minded and conventional, not among those who are anxious and fear-prone....Prejudices are collectively shared and organised phenomena, not individual pathologies.”⁵⁶

Haslam further asserts that the term “Islamophobia” is used as a condescending label that “would have no pejorative force if suffering from a mental disorder was not seen as shameful and demeaning. ...To diagnose people with these phobias is to recruit the stigma of mental illness to diminish them.” In this respect, accusing those who are anxious about Islam and Muslims of being insane or irrational “Islamophobes” is highly counter-productive, as the term “Islamophobia” is used abusively and makes the target audience defensive and defiant. Engaging with them in a reflective dialogue subsequently becomes all but impossible. At the same time, to dismiss the critics of Islam and Muslims as irrational “Islamophobic” racists is to absolve oneself of the responsibility of trying to understand, both intellectually and with empathy, why they think and act as they do and of seeking to modify their understanding of the issue.

Another problem with the term “Islamophobia” is that it groups together very different approaches to the Islamic faith: a general anti-religious attitude from the ranks of atheists, anti-Islamic sentiments from the critics of the religion of Islam and expressions of hatred towards Muslims. Whereas the last of these three attitudes is deeply problematic, the other two are legitimate forms of expression that have their place in functioning liberal democratic societies. This point is expressed in the 2006 manifesto of Western public intellectuals against the growing threat of Islamism:

“We refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of “Islamophobia”, a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatisation of those who believe in it.”⁵⁷

As long as the term “Islamophobia” will continue to be used to label both legitimate criticism of Islam and the incitement to hatred of Muslims, its descriptive value will suffer. In this respect, author Sam Harris points out that the victims of the faulty definition of the term are often Muslims themselves:

⁵⁵ Robin Richardson: “Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism – or what? – concepts and terms revisited”; Accessed at <http://www.insted.co.uk/anti-muslim-racism.pdf>

⁵⁶ Nick Haslam (2008): “Bigots are just sick at heart”; The Australian; Accessed at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/bigots-are-just-sick-at-heart/story-e6frgclo-111118335847>

⁵⁷ BBC (2006): “Full text: Writers' statement on cartoons”; Accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4764730.stm>

“Anyone who likens the criticism of Islam as a doctrine to a hatred of Muslims as people—or to anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of bigotry—has made it more difficult for Muslims who are truly suffering to speak about their problems.”⁵⁸

The same dynamic is recognised by Kenan Malik, author of *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy*. Malik points out that the accusation of “Islamophobia” is used “not to highlight racism but to silence critics of Islam, or even Muslims fighting for reform of their communities.”⁵⁹

Recognising the significant problems inherent in the term “Islamophobia”, a growing number of commentators have stopped using it altogether. Public intellectual Richard Dawkins described the term as a “non-word”⁶⁰ and French writer Pascal Bruckner goes as far as suggesting that “Islamophobia” is a word we should “delete from our vocabulary.”⁶¹ Given the host of aforementioned problems with using the term, this conclusion seems inescapable. The concept of “Islamophobia” in its current popular usage is inaccurate and highly counter-productive. The way the term is used to place limits on the freedom of expression worldwide should also be of concern. Recognising these problems, the Associated Press removed the term from its Stylebook in 2012.⁶² Similarly, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015 the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls refused to use the term “because those who use this word are trying to invalidate any criticism at all of Islamist ideology.”⁶³

Nevertheless, this does not remove the necessity to adequately label a world-view based on an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims. Professor Haslam utilises the term “anti-Muslim prejudice”, while Alan Johnson of the London-based Foreign Policy Centre uses the stronger phrase “hatred against Muslims”.⁶⁴ A report on the subject by the Quilliam Foundation argues that terms such as “anti-Muslim bigotry” or “anti-Muslim hatred” are more preferable, as they cannot be taken to describe criticism of

⁵⁸ Sam Harris (2014): “Lifting the Veil of ‘Islamophobia’”; Accessed at <https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/lifting-the-veil-of-islamophobia#sthash.bM4Un8kE.H21DmKxR.dpuf>

⁵⁹ Kenan Malik (2005): “Islamophobia myth”; Prospect; Accessed at <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/islamophobiamyth>

⁶⁰ Independent (2015): “Richard Dawkins defends Ahmed Mohamed comments and dismisses Islamophobia as a ‘non-word’”; Accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/richard-dawkins-defends-ahmed-mohamed-comments-and-dismisses-islamophobia-as-a-non-word-10515389.html>

⁶¹ Pascal Bruckner (2010): “L’invention de l’«islamophobie»”; Liberation; Accessed at http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2010/11/23/l-invention-de-l-islamophobie_695512

⁶² Politico (2012): “AP nixes ‘homophobia’, ‘ethnic cleansing’”; Accessed at <http://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2012/11/ap-nixes-homophobia-ethnic-cleansing-150315>

⁶³ Atlantic (2015): “French Prime Minister: ‘I Refuse to Use This Term *Islamophobia*’”; Accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/french-prime-minister-manuel-valls-on-islamophobia/384592/>

⁶⁴ Alan Johnson (2011): “The Idea of ‘Islamophobia’”; World Affairs Journal; Accessed at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/alan-johnson/idea-islamophobia>

aspects of Islamic belief which is protected under laws which guarantee freedom of expression.⁶⁵ In any case, it is clear that criminal behaviour towards Muslims, be it discrimination or anti-Muslim hatred, must be tackled in the strongest terms. Such criminal offences are already covered under existing legislation and it is not necessary, nor desirable, to introduce new and confusing concepts.

4. Conclusion

It is clear from the above that there is a pressing need to find a simple yet easily understandable expression to describe the all-too-common incitement to violence or hatred against Muslims for their religious identity. However, the concept of “Islamophobia” is unsuitable to meet this role. Its politically charged nature has resulted in a plethora of definitions which incorrectly equate “Islamophobic” behaviour with anti-Semitism or racism. While used to expose abuse against minorities, the term is in itself used as a form of verbal abuse whose pejorative power is derived from the stigma attached to people with a mental disorder. Above all, the term “Islamophobia” blurs the line between criminal acts and legitimate forms of free expression. Consequently, usage of the term may result in a chilling effect on the exercise of free speech. Disaggregating the broad concept of “Islamophobia” into legal criticism of Muslims and Islam on the one hand and proscribed incitement to hatred of Muslims is crucial, as it is a more accurate way of approaching the issue. Therefore, use of the term is not recommended. Using more specific expressions such as “anti-Muslim hatred” or “criticism of Islam” where necessary is preferable.

⁶⁵ George Readings, James Brandon and Richard Phelps (2010): “Islamism and language: How using the wrong words reinforces Islamist narratives”; Quilliam Foundation; Accessed at <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/islamism-and-language.pdf>

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