

## OIC and IPHRC Efforts to Counter Islamophobia

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### Introduction

The concept of Islamophobia<sup>1</sup> is commonly known as a condition of phobia vis-a-vis Islam and Muslims, which develops into hostile behavior, including verbal and physical abuse against Muslims, their scripture, holy personalities, and symbols including assault against mosques, cemeteries, and religious centers. The Runnymede Trust, a British think-tank, holds that the “animosity harbored against Islam and Muslims in Western societies is unique and can only be grasped using an equally unique concept, hence the justification of the term Islamophobia” (Conway & Runnymede Trust, 1997).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist incident, Islamophobia is no longer viewed as a spontaneous reaction towards Muslims by isolated groups. Instead, it is transformed into a systematic anti-Muslim rhetoric of right-wing extremists propagated through well-designed and equally well-orchestrated media campaigns to achieve well-defined political gains. Although Islamophobic sentiments have gained traction, particularly after the events of September 11th, their origins can be traced back to much earlier periods, giving rise to problematic perceptions. Muslims are being subjected to pandemic of hate and negative stereotyping through different media platforms. Life for them, in some of these parts of the world, has become a constant struggle. They are living under fear of retaliatory attacks and being discriminated for maintaining their religious identity. This is happening under brutal occupation regimes in Palestine and Indian-occupied Kashmir and equally in democratic societies under the garb of “Laicite” (Wintour, 2020). Consequently, hate crimes against Muslims or even those who “look Muslims” have soared exponentially, especially, in parts of Europe, North America, and Asia. Muslims, in different parts of the world, whether living under occupation or as minorities and communities, are besieged and are under assault.

An interesting analysis by Mr. Craig Considine (2017), an American sociologist who has researched that out of more than 1,000 Hollywood films depicting Arabs, 932 of these films depicted Arabs in a stereotypical or negative light as bearded, dark-skinned, turban-wearing terrorists. This organized effort to distort the perception of Islam and Muslims persists without interruption to such an extent that even the most respected figure of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and other religious and cultural symbols like Minarets, Holy Quran, and Hijab are being targeted by right-wing individuals in Western societies that claim to be liberal. Islamophobia cannot be categorized as “rational” criticism of Islam or Muslims. It is simply a manifestation of discrimination against people who appear different, blending racial and religious prejudices, mainly due to the portrayal of Muslims as menacing figures. Considering these facts, including the

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profiling of Muslims based on race, Islamophobia has transformed into a type of racism intertwined with social, economic, and cultural intolerance as a whole.

A 'Report of the European Union's Special Committee on Terrorism' recommended that EU Member States "to effectively counter terrorism, may coopt or tolerate only those "practices of Islam" that are in full accordance with EU values" (Monika Hohlmeier & Helga Stevens, 2018). Accordingly, some of the EU States are pursuing regressive policies and measures which run counter to their own democratic and pluralistic ideals which include, the blanket ban on burqa/face veil, banning minarets, closure of mosques and places of worship, and ban of associations that do not adhere to EU values. Such attempts will serve no good other than to further polarize societies and endanger the spirit of multiculturalism.

Ironically, while the Western countries unanimously oppose racism, intolerance, and discrimination, their understanding of Islam and its pristine values remain incomplete. In this respect, the media has played a negative role to portray an image of 'us' against 'them' interlocked in a 'crusade' to stoke the civilizational divide for petty right-wing political objectives at the cost of societal peace and stability.

The significant rise in Islamophobic hate crimes and discrimination globally cannot be divorced from the portrayal of Muslims as a distinct racial group as opposed to pluralistic culture. This is not to say that I absolve those few in the Muslim world who are misguidedly involved in isolated acts of violence and intolerance. Consequently, Islamophobia is being embedded into the mindset of people in which media and its various tools have played and are playing a vital role.

What is happening in different parts of the world is not a clash between religions and civilizations as some have argued in the past. It should be seen in the wider perspective of the rising trend of xenophobia as a result of negative media portrayal and profiling, the rise of far-right politics, increasing immigration, and the failure of integration policies to assimilate migrants.

### **Freedom of Expression and the Role of Media**

Freedom of expression is one of the key planks of international human rights law. It enjoys wide recognition and is considered one of the most important universal rights. However, it is certainly not considered an "*absolute right*" and there are legitimate and widely acknowledged restrictions attached to its exercise that define the scope of this right.

Relevant international human rights instruments both regional and international have also defined these parameters in detail<sup>2</sup>. Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) clearly outline the significance, extent, and limitations of the right to freedom of expression, including expressions that should be prohibited by law. Similarly, Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and General Comment No. XV emphasizes the importance of combating and prohibiting hate speech. These provisions affirm the principle articulated in Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the exercise of rights and freedoms should be subject to legal limitations that aim to recognize and respect the rights and freedoms of others.

The fundamental purpose of freedom of speech is to create an environment for dialogue and diversity. Hate speech, incitement to hatred, or discrimination, however, directly contradicts this objective. That is precisely why it is prohibited under international human rights law, and many countries have enacted legitimate restrictions on this freedom when it involves incitement to hatred, discrimination, or violence<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, the scope of these restrictions may vary across different cultures and societies, depending on their socio-cultural and historic development of legal norms.

These provisions form the foundation of an international consensus that recognizes the necessity of limitations on freedoms as determined by legislation or codes of professional ethics.

Without such limitations, there is a risk of violating other human rights, such as the right to dignity, privacy, respect, and the basic right to be free from degrading or inhumane treatment. A pluralistic society cannot thrive if its members feel threatened, discriminated against, or insecure. Hate crimes driven by racism, religious hatred, xenophobia, and related forms of intolerance, compounded by a lack of accountability for the perpetrators, not only foster an atmosphere of fear but also contribute to the marginalization and social exclusion of the individuals targeted by such crimes.

In today's world, the role of media in promoting freedom of expression and combatting hate speech cannot be over-emphasized. It carries a significant impact in promoting, projecting, and steering specific ideas, values, and beliefs. Even though it is not a formally recognized part of the international political system, mass media wields significant power to influence mindset, social behaviors, and political norms. With the advent of social media, this capacity and capability has increased manifold due to its speed and access to all corners of the world. Public opinion on a variety of important subjects across the world is largely shaped by the way these subjects are projected on mass media, the internet, and social networks.

Media outlets have a responsibility to be vigilant about the potential danger of perpetuating discrimination or negative stereotypes of individuals and groups, especially when these actions are fueled by specific interests or agendas. They must exercise caution and act responsibly to ensure they do not inadvertently become vehicles for promoting such propaganda under the guise of freedom of expression. Self-imposed codes of conduct and regulatory frameworks by the Media houses or organizations could be a good tool in this regard.

#### **OIC and IPHRC Efforts to Combat Negative Stereotyping and Islamophobia**

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an international organization of 57 Member States which is the second-largest intergovernmental body after the United Nations (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, n.d.). The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) of the OIC is an expert advisory body acting as one of the principal organs of the OIC working independently in the area of human rights (IPHRC, n.d.).

OIC's position on Islamophobic hate content is firmly grounded in Articles 19 and 20 of ICCPR, which provide clear limitations, including the duty of the State to prohibit, by law, "*any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*". OIC is committed to the full and effective implementation of UN Resolution 16/18 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2011). In line with this principle, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has played an active role in engaging in constructive discussions at the international level. Their aim has been to establish clear boundaries between freedom of speech and hate speech, particularly incitement to violence, in order to strike the right balance for the sake of public order and social cohesion.

OIC and IPHRC has always upheld the principle of openly discussing all ideas, values or beliefs in an environment of tolerance and respect. In this spirit, the OIC has been active in engaging in constructive debate at the international level to further delineate boundaries between free speech and hate speech to strike a balance for public order and social cohesion. These efforts and its continued engagement at all levels has paid its dividends in terms of raising awareness and creating institutional support through consensus UN resolution 16/18. In 2022, UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to designate March 15<sup>th</sup> as '*International Day to Combat Islamophobia*' (press.un.org, 2022) which is a significant victory to recognize the phenomenon at the multilateral level. It has provided an opportunity where irrational and hate-motivated agenda of extremists is being exposed.

OIC and IPHRC remain vocal in condemning hate-motivated acts. The timely calls to condemn the sacrilegious transgression of the Dutch Parliamentarian compelled the Dutch parliamentarian to call off the controversial caricature competition.

IPHRC has contributed towards the formulation of a comprehensive OIC Islamophobia strategy and published thematic studies and held Seminars to root out the menace. After thorough introspection, with a view to establishing a counter-narrative, OIC, has initiated the project of *'The Voice of Wisdom' Sawt al Hikma* which to delegitimize and deconstruct the extremist propagated and project of the true message of Islam for a better understanding in the west. Also, work of the OIC Islamophobia Observatory has contributed enormously in bringing to the fore the dangerous and malicious Islamophobic campaign.

We are encouraged to see that the coordinated efforts between the OIC, IPHRC, like-minded nations, and intelligentsia have resulted in an awareness of the dangers of Islamophobia and Muslim sensitivities. It shows that the collective efforts are paying dividends and the message is trickling down, albeit slowly, but effectively. The condemnation by many Western leaders and distancing of their governments of Islamophobic acts and massive public outpourings especially in the wake of the Christchurch tragedy in New Zealand are building blocks to erect a barrage against this Islamophobic tide. Russian President Vladimir Putin has aptly remarked that insulting Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) does not count as an expression of artistic freedom but is a "violation of religious freedom".

The Muslim world faces the imperative of bridging the gap of misunderstanding that has resulted in the proliferation of stereotypes against Muslims and the accompanying acts of intolerance and discrimination. Various actors, including inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, civil society, the media, local communities, and others, have a crucial role to play in this process. In the long run, political engagement is necessary to foster a culture of peace built on mutual respect, understanding, and dialogue among civilizations and cultures, aiming to overcome the "ignorance" and "fear" that fuel Islamophobia. Muslim communities are called upon to actively participate in their host societies, particularly by enhancing their involvement in social and political spheres. An intellectual, ethical, and media strategy is essential to bridge the perceptual gap. However, considering the magnitude of the challenge, the efforts of organizations like the OIC and IPHRC alone are insufficient. It demands collaborative and concerted endeavors involving states, civil society, intellectuals, and the media.

### **Recommendations**

The primary responsibility for addressing acts of Islamophobia lies with the States. In this context, legislation and law enforcement play vital roles as essential tools to combat crimes and violent expressions of intolerance and discrimination based on race or religion. Additionally, there is a need to develop further legally binding instruments that encompass emerging forms of racism.

There is a need to establish a multi-stakeholder dialogue to objectively analyze the role of media and professionals in promoting freedom of expression in a responsible fashion that avoids drifting into the domains of negative stereotyping or hate speech that leads to hatred, discrimination or violence against specific individuals, groups, races or religions. The media has to inculcate the standards of responsible reporting within the confines of voluntary codes of ethics and professionalism, particularly to understand the challenges to and opportunities for promoting a positive role of the media in building robust, law-abiding, and multicultural societies.

IPHRC held a Seminar on the topic of *'Role of Media in Combatting Hate Speech'* which issued a comprehensive Rabat Declaration (IPHRC, 2017) which provides useful recommendations to media to combat hate speech and Islamophobia which include:

- States should collaborate with relevant information centers and institutions to develop a comprehensive information strategy that identifies and counters hate speech. This can include the formulation of a code of conduct to monitor and address hate content, providing culturally sensitive training to journalists for unbiased reporting, and upgrading media infrastructure to identify and counteract hate content effectively.
- Media outlets have a responsibility to educate themselves and others about different cultures, traditions, and beliefs in order to break down stereotypes that reinforce xenophobic attitudes.
- Education on media ethics, with a specific focus on the rights and responsibilities of journalists in promoting peaceful societies, should be promoted.
- Media organizations should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to identify hate speech and effectively respond to hate speech messages.
- Encouraging multicultural awareness campaigns that respect the diversity of cultures and traditions can help promote inclusivity and tolerance.
- Victims and witnesses of hate speech-related crimes should be encouraged to report such incidents to combat impunity. Establishing monitoring and evaluation units within newsrooms can help track hate speech trends and compile reports to be shared with relevant institutions and civil society.
- Utilizing modern information and communication technologies, the creation of Media Early Warning Mechanisms can help identify and prevent the escalation of violence by monitoring increases in hate speech.

### Conclusion

The rising trend of islamophobia worldwide is worrying. In addition, some discriminatory measures such as imposition of various bans on Islamic symbols adopted by states are creating psychological barriers that impede the ability to observe, practice and manifest one's religion freely, a matter that might ultimately result in social disharmony and violation of human rights.

In order to tackle this phenomenon, OIC Member States should work on this issue in full solidarity and engage with the UN Human Rights Council and other regional mechanisms to establish the mandate of a Special Rapporteur on Islamophobia to address this discriminatory trend in a holistic manner.

It should also be proposed to: (a) counter Islamophobia based on a holistic approach, including the engagements with media to propagate a counter narrative to Islamophobia worldwide; (b) provide adequate human and financial resources to OIC Islamophobia Observatory to carry out the mandated tasks and to activate it to coordinate with other likeminded observatories to make their reports more visible and submit them to the international human rights mechanisms to highlight the human rights violations emerging from Islamophobia; (c) intensify their efforts to produce a civilizational form of Islamic discourse to address the misunderstandings and misleading perceptions about Islam; (d) cooperate with other observatory centers, both religious and otherwise, including civil society across the world; (e) reinvigorate the Resolution 16/18 and Istanbul process to address the core issue of growing incitement to hatred and discrimination based on religion, through a consensual approach that shuns the ideological divide and suggests an action oriented policy framework to define and criminalize hate speech, including Islamophobia.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although there are many discussions on the term, Islamophobia was preferred since the OIC and the IPHRC have used this term regularly.

<sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 19, European Convention on Human Rights Article 10, American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man Article IV, American Convention on Human Rights Article 13, African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights Article 9, and finally in categorical terms Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; emphasize that the right to hold opinions without interference is an absolute right and “permits no exception or restriction”, however, their expression is subject to “special duties and responsibilities”, hence subject to possible restrictions.

<sup>3</sup> Where the comments in question amount to hate speech and negate the fundamental values of the European Convention Human Rights, the ECtHR has concluded that no protection of Article 10 (freedom of expression) can be given by Article 17 (prohibition of abuse of rights) [https://echr.coe.int/Documents/FS\\_Hate\\_speech\\_ENG.pdf](https://echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Hate_speech_ENG.pdf)

**Arařtırmacıların Katkı Oranı Beyanı/ Contribution of Authors**

Yazarların alıřmadaki katkı oranları eřittir.  
The authors' contribution rates in the study are equal.

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**ıkar atıřması Beyanı / Conflict of Interest**

alıřma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kiři ile ıkar atıřması bulunmamaktadır.  
There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

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