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Xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the Media:
When Prejudice Runs Amok

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Abstract

A narrow definition of Islamophobia flags religion as playing the central part in anti-Muslim prejudice. But a broader term bundles ethnic, national and cultural prejudices together with religious ones; the latter are gradually becoming disconnected from the cultures in which they were embedded. In measuring degrees and levels of Islamophobia, this article turns to the mass media to understand how they have amplified and at times echoed calls for anti-Muslim prejudice. Islam has become culturalized and racialized by both adherents and antagonists alike, lending a massive landscape for social media in particular to exploit. Qualitative data seem best equipped to assay popular attitudes and behavior towards Muslims. And their relevance is especially significant in shaping female Muslim experiences. To be sure, Islam is placed to take a key part in the making of a post-hegemonic international order. Highlighting tolerance towards others is critical rather than using other attributes to shore up the political legitimacy of a state. To categorize Islamophobes as racists makes for bad politics, but it can enhance legitimacy.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Islamophobia, Muslims, Media, Discrimination, Prejudice, Religion, Culture

Yabancı Düşmanlığı, İslamofobi ve Medya:
Önyargılar Çığırından Çıktığında

Öz

İslamofobi'nin dar bir tanımı, Müslüman karşıtı önyargılarda dinin merkezi bir rol oynadığını vurgular. Ancak daha geniş bir tanım, etnik, ulusal ve kültürel önyargıları dini olanlarla birleştirir; bu dini önyargılar, gömülü oldukları kültürlerden giderek kopmaktadır. Bu makale, İslamofobi derecelerini ve seviyelerini ölçerken, kitle medyasına başvurarak onların Müslüman karşıtı önyargıyı nasıl güçlendirdiğini ve zaman zaman bu çağrılara nasıl yankı yaptığını anlamaya çalışır. İslam, hem bağlıları hem de karşıtları tarafından kültürel ve ırksal bir hale getirilmiş olup, özellikle sosyal medyanın sömürmesi için geniş bir alan yaratmıştır. Nitel veriler, Müslümanlara yönelik popüler tutum ve davranışları değerlendirmede en iyi donanıma sahip gibi görünmektedir. Ve bu veriler, özellikle Müslüman kadınların deneyimlerini şekillendirmede önemli bir role sahiptir. Kuşkusuz, İslam, post-hegemonik bir uluslararası düzenin oluşumunda kilit bir rol oynamaya hazırdır. Başkalarına karşı hoşgörüyü vurgulamak, bir devletin siyasi meşruiyetini desteklemek için diğer özellikleri kullanmaktan daha kritiktir. İslamofobikleri ırkçı olarak kategorize etmek kötü bir politika olsa da meşruiyeti artırabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı Düşmanlığı, İslamofobi, Müslümanlar, Medya, Ayrımcılık, Önyargı, Din, Kültür

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Introduction

Discrimination aimed at particular communities has always existed. It is often a perfectly normal occurrence – for psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruel 'studying prejudices requires the consciousness that all peoples have prejudices, and that any group will develop customs and ways of thinking that lead the group members to form prejudgments' (Young-Bruehl, 2007, p. 219). In many respects, prejudice is a problem to overcome over time, not as an affliction to suffer for the eternities.

This article examines particular communities living today in Europe that appear to be regularly discriminated against for their religion, their culture, their ethnicity, and the backward homes they left behind in other parts of the globe. Muslim communities are extraordinarily diverse though typically wedded by a belief in the Prophet Mohammed. To be sure, some Muslims pay no heed to the religious dimension; are they 'bad' Muslims? Some accept cultural pathways brought from time immemorial. Others may be outright irreligious, agnostic, not tied to any particular culture, but bear traditions loosely associated with the Muslim world. Whatever their backgrounds, all these communities are subject to discrimination by European denizens.

The objective of this research project is to investigate the growth of prejudices towards Muslim communities settled in Europe, whether for many years or recently, through in-migration. In theory historical institutionalism can be the method used to investigate various forms of prejudice, discrimination, antipathy, suspicion, hostility, even hate. Institutions and organizations are critical in shaping society, politics and economics because they are defined as collective entities comprising rules, norms, and social structures.

On the surface institutional discrimination is important– they make up 'prejudicial practices and policies within institutions that result in the systematic denial of resources and opportunities to members of subordinate groups. This form of discrimination is maintained by the laws, organizational guidelines, or traditions of an institution' (Cunningham & Light, 2016). At the same time, my claim is that forms of discrimination have no boundaries, whether institutional or not. Indeed, that is the intent of my article titled 'when prejudice runs amok'.

This research is not based on quantitative analysis; I leave this to several of my previous books that have used survey data carried out in Europe and elsewhere to provide insights into attitudinal and behavioral shifts. It is primarily qualitative-based evidence stemming from changes in institutions and even their disappearance that are appropriate when researching Islamophobia.

Are key variables left out of this analytical framework? The answer is yes since multivariate analysis is not part of this study. What I have left out of the analysis may in fact appear to be a virtue since multiple variables need to be clearly defined in the context of Islamophobia. They are often replaced by random, hit-or-miss proxy variables. If all independent variables are difficult to chart, the dependent variable is fixed: anti-Muslim attitudes on the part of European elites and publics.

The case studies that are described in this article can be viewed as representative of extensive research and in-depth analysis. The methodological criticism that they may fall into the cherry-picking fallacy trap can, obviously, be put forward. Thus this fallacy appears 'when only evidence supporting an argument is selected and presented, while contradictory evidence is ignored'. Furthermore, 'This practice harms credibility and persuasiveness by giving an impression of bias and a lack of consideration for alternative perspectives. The problem can be remedied by including an objective acknowledgement of opposing data and viewpoints' (*What Is Cherry Picking Fallacy?*, 2024).

Confirmation bias by researchers showing evidence that document anti-Muslim attitudes may be sketchy, detached from serious empirical analysis, not easy to aggregate, and/or often are

hit-and-miss if not nonexistent, is not easy to find. In addition, this study offers alternative explanations for what the origins, and now pervasiveness, of Islamophobia are.

The next section reviews the concept of Islamophobia. Its 'expansion' into different facts of life are chronicled. Then follows a brief but essentialist description of social and print media in the way that they affect attitudes and behavior towards Muslim communities. The Muslim experience in Europe of victimization is assayed through case studies. An analysis of key findings bringing about negative attitudes to Muslim women complements this article. Lastly, how to assert Muslim agency in a contested international order forms the concluding section.

Beginning investigations into Muslims' experience of victimization

The postwar expansion through immigration of Muslim communities in Europe began with initial contract work handed out by Germany so as to meet its labor needs in the late 1950s. Turkish workers were an obvious source of employment during the post-World War II German recovery. Many were attracted by higher wages while others reasoned that they wanted 'a better life'. Easily overlooked by Western entrepreneurs was that Muslims arrived from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As labor needs grew immigrant works were recruited not just from Turkish but also Maghrebi, sub-Saharan African, Iranian, Arabic, Pakistani, Indian, and other nationalities. This 'Muslim diversity' may itself have triggered a rise in anti-Muslim attitudes and hostility from 'established' European residents. It also dawned on Europeans that migrants were here for the long haul and not returning home.

If on the other hand we adopt a clash-of-civilizations perspective, our attention would be drawn to some 1,400 years of rivalry between western Christianity and Islam. The phenomenon of anti- Muslim sentiments would accordingly be far more ancient than the recently-coined concept of Islamophobia, or fear of Islam as a religion, would have suggested (Taras, 2013) Deep structures and threatening fault lines of discord and dissonance would be unearthed and exposed.

The original usage of Islamophobia as a normative term that expressed disapproving judgements by Europeans is just over a century old. In 1918 a French-language biography of the Prophet Muhammad was published by Sliman ben Ibrahim (1991) and it made negative references to Islam (p. 191). But a better-known publication encompassing Islam appeared in 1985: Edward Said compared Islamophobia to a pathology, similar to anti-Semitism, in that both reflected similar epistemological origins. His roundabout method of 'stigmatizing' Islamophobia was to appropriate the rhetorical strength and accusatory power of Western interpreters that was directed at the malice and turpitude of that religion (Said, 2003).

An even more recent reference to Islamophobia was its adoption in England by the Runnymede Trust. Established in 1968 to provide advice to the British government on race relations, the Trust set up a Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1997. Its mission was to determine how deep the discrimination against Muslims was. It issued a much-praised report titled 'Islamophobia: A challenge for us all' (Parekh & Runnymede Trust, 2010, p. 1). An ancillary objective was to serve as catalyst for an emerging social conscience about racism. The Runnymede report regarded Islamophobia as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam' and viewed 'the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs'.

The study listed eight stigmatizing characteristics of Islam that transformed negative reactions to it as Islamophobic. These were how it was: (1) monolithic and static; (2) separate and 'other', not sharing the values of European cultures; (3) treated as irrational, primitive and inferior to the West; (4) seen as having a character that was aggressive, violent and inducing a clash of civilizations; (5) viewed as an ideology that promoted political and military interests; (6) seen as intolerant towards Western critiques of it; (7) deserving of the discriminatory practices that sought

to exclude Muslim populations; and, (8) inviting anti-Muslim hostility to be treated as natural and normal.

While particular religious and cultural attributes were attributed to Islam, a racial component was not yet emphasized. For Runnymede race was left aside, not altogether unreasonable for those times. Yet a conviction was developing that Europe was becoming in peril because of a process of Islamification; it encompassed a large-scale increase in the size of Muslim communities due primarily to mass immigration. Also the culture wars engaged by majority and minority groups in Europe were surfacing. Britain as mighty colonial power was in danger of being flooded by 'rivers of blood', as a prominent Minister in the ruling Conservative Party had phrased it (Powell, 1968).

Academician Tariq Modood's writings about Britain accepted the presence of multiculturalism in a 'new' Europe but added how Muslims were 'now emerging as the critical "other" in various nationalist discourses and in definitions of Europe' (Eckstein, 1997, p. 2). More recently and referring to British Muslims, he noted how 'We cannot both ask new Britons to integrate, and go around saying that being British is, thank goodness, a hollowed-out, meaningless project whose time has come to an end' (Modood, 2017). British Muslims had developed a unique and distinctive character.

The UK was not alone in recruiting immigrant labor but also for worrying where it would lead in the future. A significant counterpart to Runnymede in conducting survey research to discover what past and recent immigrants thought of European 'hospitality' was the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency located in Vienna. Its mission expanded over time but initially it was vested with studies coming from various European centers that paid attention to xenophobic attitudes and hate crimes. It did not specifically single out Muslim groups, therefore, but pioneering research on them about facing discrimination proved revealing.

An insightful 2009 EU-MIDIS survey shed light on Islamophobia by focusing exclusively on responses of self-identifying Muslims to a series of questions. For 89 per cent of Muslim respondents, religion played a very or fairly important role in their lives. One in three who were interviewed in the 14 EU states where Muslim minorities were surveyed indicated that they were victims of discrimination during the last twelve months. Muslims aged between 16 and 24 reported greater discrimination though, surprisingly, Muslims wearing traditional or religious clothing reported similar levels of discrimination as the general sample (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Annual Report, 2009).

Other factors involving Muslim communities came into play. Having EU citizenship or residing in an EU country for a longer time was positively linked to lower levels of felt discrimination. As was often the case in that era, racial and religious categories were not consistently distinguished. One of ten Muslims claimed to have been the victim of a racially motivated crime; among these, 72 per cent attributed the crime to someone who was of the majority population. One in four Muslims had been stopped by the police in the preceding year and 40 per cent believed this was attributable to their minority or immigrant status.

As a result, 'a growing perception among Muslim leaders and communities across Europe [developed] that they are being stopped, questioned, and searched not on the basis of evidence and reasonable suspicion but on the basis of "looking Muslim" ('Country Profile: The Conditions of Muslims in France', in Monitoring Minority Protection in EU Member States: Overview, 2004, p. 53). When causes of discrimination were examined in terms of respondents' ethnic origin and their European country of residence, Muslims of North African background residing in Italy experienced highest levels of discrimination and of repeat discrimination. Sub-Saharan Muslims polled similar discriminatory rates as North Africans. In The Netherlands and Denmark, being Muslim regardless

of one's racial or ethnic background was subjectively viewed by interviewees as the basis for being discriminated against.

What was most alarming when discrimination was disaggregated by source of perpetrator was that it applied to almost every area identified in survey research. It appeared (1) when looking for work; (2) when at work; (3) when looking for a house or an apartment to rent or buy; (4) when it involved health care staff; (5) when social services personnel were involved; (6) when school employees were involved; (7) when sitting at a cafe, restaurant or bar; (8) when walking into a store; and, (9) when opening a bank account or requesting a personal loan. By contrast, only 26 per cent of this cohort who lived in France reported experiencing such discrimination. Country-specific patterns of discrimination differed markedly.

Immigration to Europe continued apace over the decades that followed. It was punctuated by the crisis in Syria that brought over one million of its citizens to the continent. Politicians on the right of the political spectrum - and growing discontent from the public - teamed up to condemn features that appeared to frighten them: the emergent presence of visible symbols of Islam. These included such aspects as mosques, minarets, headscarves, burqas, niqab, street prayers, and garage mosques. They presaged a sense of Islamification of Europe. Never forgotten, however, were security fears caused by a series of terrorist attacks carried out by extremists in the name of Islam. Some of these were well-planned, others were lone wolf mavericks.

The intrepid fear of a total collapse of European civilization echoes to this day. It hardened European publics' impressions how an unbridgeable civilizational gap divided their own 'Western' environment from a remote, dangerous and alien 'Islamic' world. The Muslim migrant was thus seen as contaminated by and carrier of antagonistic values: 'The immigrant is no longer just a classical outsider but also the terrorist within' (Fekete, 2009, pp. vii–ix). This repugnance drew from historical anti-Muslimism and anti-Islamism – therefore, deep structures – and fused them with newer racist ideologies of the twentieth-first century.

Yet the conviction among some Muslim believers has become that it is Islam today that is in peril. It has been constructed as the West's 'other'. Defending Islam from danger forms part of a dialectical process that raises fears of each side towards the other. One French scholar raised the fundamental question: 'What makes Muslims the ultimate "others"? The public's acceptance – in some countries more, in others less – of a clash of civilizations and of ongoing culture wars was based on 'the assumption that Islam as a denomination and Muslims as believers constitute the ultimate cultural "other" that will never be able to cope with democratic and liberal values' (Amiraux, 2007, p. 147). Initial efforts in the twenty-first century to 'decolonize' religious and cultural divides on the part of major past colonizers, exemplified in the well-meaning efforts of the Runnymede Trust in England, have largely been unsuccessful. Arguably it is Europe with its majorities and minorities, and less so with its Muslim population, that stand in peril.

Do mass media manufacture Islamophobia?

During the 2020 Presidential campaign, Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden repeatedly attacked his opponent, Donald Trump, for supporting racist and xenophobic policies. On taking office in January 2021, Biden duly drafted a comprehensive overhaul of the US immigration system that would have expanded rights given for immigrants. Many Americans were taken by surprise, then, that in May 2024 the President labeled Japan as "xenophobic" He further claimed that India, China and Russia also 'don't want immigrants'. Speaking to a mainly Asian-American audience, he asked a rhetorical question and offered a punch line: 'Why is China stalling so badly economically? Why is Japan having trouble. Why is Russia? Why is India? Because they're xenophobic. They don't want immigrants.' (Bernd, 2024).

Predictably the White House administration came to Biden's defense. He had meant no offence in identifying other countries' xenophobia but was merely highlighting the advantages of

US immigration policies. His comments were intended to explain 'that the US is a nation of immigrants and that immigrants make the US stronger'. In the case of Japan, the nation had traditionally followed more rigorous immigration policies but in recent years had loosened them up. Paradoxically, Biden's xenophobia claim came less than a month after he called the US-Japan alliance 'unbreakable' during a state visit to Washington by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. US media had quickly taken up Biden's Islamophobia story and just as quickly had dropped it.

Admittedly, the US President had not used Islamophobia in his rhetoric; that was set aside for ex-President Trump to wrestle with. A more perceptive use of the term Islamophobia was proffered in 2008 when then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey had underscored how 'assimilation is a crime against humanity'. He had just returned from Germany where he had spoken out against efforts to compel its Turkish minority to adopt German ways.

Erdoğan went further in taking up the case of Islamophobia: 'We expect members of other civilizations to declare Islamophobia a crime against humanity, especially while we say that anti-Semitism is a crime against humanity'. From his perspective, rising alarm of Islam in the Western world was paranoia and 'a pathological state of mind' (EuropeNews, 2008).

In examining academic research on the growth of anti-Muslim attitudes within European society, including the linkages between race and religion of Muslims, a seminal study was published in October 2015. Its final report occurred at a time when the arrival of over a million refugees from Syria had reached its peak (H.W. Hoksbergen & J.N. Tillie, 2015). In many respects, significantly, it provided a pre-2015 'migration crisis' state of European societies' attitudes to Islam.

The consortium of universities pieced together in what was dubbed the EURISLAM project, most extensively disaggregated in its online version (no book publication based exclusively on the findings was published), has been groundbreaking in assaying European approaches to Muslim communities. As the final report outlined,

> The aim of the EURISLAM research project is to provide a systematic analysis of cross-national differences and similarities in countries' approaches to the cultural integration of immigrants in general and Muslims in particular. The countries studied in the research project are Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The core research question can be formulated as follows: 'How have different traditions of national identity, citizenship and church-state relations affected European immigration countries' incorporation of Islam, and what are the consequences of these approaches for patterns of cultural distance and interaction between Muslim immigrants and their descendants, and the receiving society?' (H.W. Hoksbergen & J.N. Tillie, 2015)

Unexpectedly this report preceded tragic events that surrounded Islamophobic attacks launched in Finsbury Park and Quebec City in 2017 and Christchurch in 2019.

Seven different work packages entailing EURISLAM research were completed. Its third package was of particular importance to Muslims in Europe:

> a survey questionnaire has been developed which enabled a study of the individual characteristics of Muslim immigrants. This survey is designed to answer one of the three specific research questions used in this project: 'To what extent do we find differences across immigration countries in cultural distance and patterns of interaction between various Muslim immigrant groups and the receiving society population?' On the one hand, we focused on attitudes, norms, and values, particularly those relating to democratic norms, gender relations and family values, ethnic, religious, and receiving society identification, and attitudes towards relations across ethnic and religious boundaries.

On the other hand, the study looked at cultural and religious resources and practices, such as language proficiency, adherence to various religious practices (e.g., attendance of religious services or wearing of a headscarf), interethnic and interreligious partnerships and marriages, the frequency and quality of interethnic and interreligious relationships with neighbors, friends, and

colleagues, and memberships in social and political organizations of the own ethnic and religious group as well as of the receiving society. (H.W. Hoksbergen & J.N. Tillie, 2015)

An increasing number of analysts pundits and bots concentrated on the part played by print and social media in fomenting fear and panic purportedly threatened by Muslim populations. Scholars Leticia Anderson, Shima Shahbazi, and Mujib Abid, based in eastern Australia, summed up the propensity to instigate anti-Muslim rhetoric this way:

> In a wide variety of studies over the past two decades, the media has consistently been identified as a significant social institution implicated in normalizing and disseminating anti-Muslim prejudice. Identifying and combating Islamophobic discourses has been a challenging proposition, however, due to difficulties in systematically identifying and evaluating "Islamophobia" within texts. Islamophobia is a complex and contested phenomenon that defies easy classification within the boundaries of terminology which would normally be employed to describe hostility or prejudice based oan, for example, race or religion (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 183)

The three authors strongly asserted that 'mental health and wellbeing can only flourish in a context of basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights," yet this possibility was undermined by the experience of suffering constant exposure to mediatized Islamophobia. The impact of negative media representations on rising Islamophobic rhetoric remained difficult to quantify (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 185).

Among other research projects on Islamophobia were Hina Nawaz and Syed Abdul Siraj's article highlighted a quantitative content analysis of Western media's attitudes towards Muslim communities. Focusing on four newspapers (The Guardian in the UK) the Washington Post in the US, The Australian, and the National Post in Canada), it sought to discover how coverage of episodic and thematic frames affected Muslims. Drawing on framing theory and Edward Said's Orientalism-versus-Occidentalism dichotomy, the authors concluded that coverage stressed mainly negative frames about Islam and Muslims.

Most media stories were founded on stereotypes, prejudices and fundamentalism, followed by racism and religion. Accordingly, 'Western newspapers have racial and stereotypical predispositions towards Islam and its adherents. Furthermore, Islam was framed more often as threatful and intolerant religion. It was also found out that in all the selected newspapers, coverage of Western politicians was more harsh and negative than positive towards Islam and Muslims' (Nawaz & Siraj, 2021, pp. 151–162) Singled-out elites, therefore, were ascribed as anti-Muslim, perhaps more often than the public.

The authors' framing was based on the Orientalist perception that the Muslim world not only was hostile to the West but also 'monolithic and inert;' unlike the West, it could not record progress and development. Said's Covering Islam - his most influential work on Orientalism reflecting media coverage – represented the Western media's dominant approach on Islam and the Muslim world. As Said put it, when media outlets use Islam as a 'brand' to explain events and issues occurring in its party of the world, then the most negative and most irresponsible images of it emerge (Said, 1997).

How true is it, then, that the Western press consistently frames Islam as a violence-prone religion and it portrays Muslims in a negative way? Do Western political pundits and trolls employ Islamophobia as a device to devalue Islam- in part because it has been the fastest-growing religion in the West?

Hina Nawaz and Syed Abdul Siraj used both quantitative content analysis and qualitative approaches to investigate the narrative whether Western politicians, overtly or covertly. undermine Islam and Muslims in the press. They dissected the attitudes of Western leaders into positive, negative, and neutral viewpoints. The study used an unusual sentiment analysis technique and it resulted in largely negative qualities of Islam: terror-struck, inflammatory, gullible, notorious,

nasty, extreme, fearful, guilty, unsuccessful, ferocious, conservative, controversial, and radical (Nawaz & Siraj, 2023, p. 303).

Further data analysis confirmed this pattern. 'The quantitative findings of the data indicated that the majority of the stories (61.8 per cent) had a negative tone used by Western political leaders. The contextual polarity used in political discourse against Muslims and Islam was verified by using sentiment analyses. The authors signaled how three lists differentiated not just verbs, adjectives and nouns employed but also the tone whether positive, negative, or neutral. The results were striking:

> The most frequently occurring negative attributing nouns used in the quotes and speeches by Western politicians were fleeing, bombing, raid, stronghold, war, terror, terrorist attacks, string attacks, conflict, extremists, fighter, propaganda video, arrest, and plots, etc. The 'fleeing' was used in the context of any Muslim who fled conflict, persecution, civil war, ISIS and arrives in Western countries for refuge or future security from his home Muslim war-torn country (Nawaz & Siraj, 2023, p. 305)

Siraj and Nawaz's (2023) research confirmed that Western societies were more mono-cultural than was generally accepted. They were 'not ready to assimilate and accommodate Islam and Muslims'.

A different study conducted in other European states came to the conclusion that simply encountering Islamophobic discourses in the media was closely correlated with high levels of psychological distress absorbed by Muslim participants: 'perceptions of belonging to a group that is feared in society has itself a distinct effect on Muslim minorities' health and identification, regardless of whether individuals personally experience discrimination in their daily lives or not' (Kunst et al., 2013, p. 235).

Recent Australian research also found that Islamophobic media representations contributed to increased marginalization of vulnerable young non-Muslims and influenced their involvement with extremist propaganda. In effect, 'mainstream media sources were reinforcing, perpetuating, and disseminating a range of negative stereotypes' about Muslims (Kabir, 2020, p. 184)

Findings make clear that '"Islamophobia" has achieved widespread social and academic currency, working on refining definitions and understanding of what "Islamophobia" signifies and means in various settings'. Even the Runnymede Trust recently updated its definition to emphasize racialization of Muslims as core element of contemporary Islamophobia. In response to criticisms of the elision of race and in its place the emphasis on fear in Runnymede's original definition of Islamophobia, on the twentieth anniversary of its landmark report's release the Trust redefined Islamophobia as 'anti-Muslim racism' (Cainkar & Selod, 2018). This deepened the stakes for avoiding such a formulation. But it nevertheless, in some ways, encouraged adherents to condemn Muslims in even stronger terms. In short, whether called Islamophobes, anti-Muslim racists or both accelerated the speed with which Muslim communities were becoming denigrated and vilified.

Was the charge of racism late in coming, was it merely an oversight, or was it inconsequential? By this stage the Trust had lost much of its status as influencer. Islam in Europe and Islam of Europe had gained in strength and agency, less concerned with what former colonizers – and ongoing neo-colonists – thought of their roles. Given the pervasiveness of Islamophobic representations within all media, renewed communicative practices required enlarged but, perhaps, ineffective critical skills to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Interrogating Islamophobia

Has a robust response appeared challenging the connection between mass media and Islamophobia? An unexpected crusader has appeared from nowhere insisting that rules tightening what social media should be allowed to disseminate had become a priority. Jacinda Ardern's

experience as Prime Minister of New Zealand at the time of the 2019 Christchurch massacres of Muslims reciting prayers in city mosques had prepared her to come to the need of New Zealand Muslims. When she left office in 2023, Harvard University bestowed on her a series of fellowships that singled out her uniqueness (Ardern, 2022). Her views are therefore striking.

Ardern emphasized how her own background was out-of-the-ordinary: 'I was raised a Mormon in a town where the dominant religions were Catholic, Anglican and Rugby. I was a woman interested in politics, left wing politics, in a region that had never in its entire democratic history, elected anyone other than a conservative candidate'. These 'assets' had helped her become leader of the Labor Party and after that Prime Minister. What was most striking was her campaign to check the values implanted in technological advances.

> Social media platforms were born offering the promise of connection and reconnection. We logged on in our billions, forming tribes and subtribes. We published our thoughts, feelings and ideas freely. We found a place to share information, facts, fiction dressed up as facts, memes, and more cat videos than you ever thought possible. We found a place to experience new ways of thinking and to celebrate our difference. But increasingly, we use it to do neither of those things (Ardern, 2022)

So the former Prime Minister went further to lay bare the realities of mass media. 'What we con-sider to be mainstream media outlets have proliferated but ownership structures have not'. In fact, oligopolies emerged to provide little to no competition for achieving a market share. Focusing on the individual level Ardern noted:

> There's a term that gets thrown around a lot – keyboard warrior. It's used to refer to someone who makes aggressive or abusive posts online, often anonymously. I like the name. In my mind, when I read something especially horrific on my feed, I imagine it's written by a lone person unacquainted with personal hygiene practices, dressed in a poorly fitted superhero costume – one that is baggy in all the wrong places (Ardern, 2022)

The reenergized Harvard scholar questioned the very nature of media content. As she put it, 'we're not even talking about where or how we access information to inform debate, but whether you can call it information at all. Within your own campus [Harvard], you have those who will argue that the current problems of disinformation are not the result of algorithms or trolls, but of 'asymmetric media structures decades in the making'. Consequently, media are in a unique position to act as influencers in a society whether it be five-million-strong New Zealand or 1.4-billion-strong China. As she saw it. 'The stakes are enormous, for disinformation corrodes the foundation of liberal democracy, our ability to assess facts on their merits, and to self-correct accordingly'.

The very same stakes affect the status of today's Muslim communities as they counteract Islamophobic narratives.

Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobia

Among those most exposed to Islamophobic attacks, including verbal and physical abuses, are women. They are often accompanied by their children as victims of abuse, too. The hypervisibility of Muslim women is as a function of their being at the intersection of gender, race, and faith. Insert after 'race and faith. A magisterial book on security issues was published by Sociology professor Tania Saeed at Lahore University (2016). Multiple alternative frameworks can be used to discover negative female experiences with Islamophobic barbs and struggles.

Eccentricities do arise in Europe where Muslim women have chosen to make their home. For instance, the division of roles between men and women in the household has proved divisive among *majority* populations, but not among *Muslim* groups. As a result, 'the UK can take comfort in perceiving the status of women as not a polarizing issue' (Taras, 2018, p. 118). But outside the home the female Muslim presence can be divisive and noxious for them.

The Muslim headscarf appears to serve as an interminable source of Western fixation on Muslim women. Extensive literature has parsed the connection - whether it incites Islamophobic

reactions or pacifies them. Among the massive literature on the subject is an article on the headscarf and four Muslim women's differing coping strategies in Europe (Hametner et al., 2021).

An American analysis of the subjugation of Muslim women to an Islamophobic backlash was compiled in 2021 and focused on five women. Its scope was to follow 'the lived experience of Muslim women in the United States who wear/wore hijab and have been subjected to bigotry, hatred, and discrimination because of their faith' (Moghadam, 2022, p. 1). The goal of the article was 'to gain an understanding of the short-term and long-term effects of prejudice against Muslim women'. These were self-identified Muslims from different geographical locations and diverse backgrounds in the US. The author's finding was that 'Geo-political differences, racism, misogyny, lack of support, and hijab were identified by the participants as the external contributing factors resulting in the perpetuation of Islamophobia'.

At the other end of the Islamophobic spectrum appeared an article focusing on microaggressions related to parenting and marital relationships. Specific concerns of Muslim families included par-ents concerned about their children's future which could be exacerbated by negative sentiments about Islam in media and social media. For the authors, 'Many parents encourage their children to stay silent in the face of stereotypes and microaggressions out of fear for their safety' (Haque et al., 2019, p. 86).

Furthermore, Muslim women appeared frustrated by the assumption that, after a divorce, they would automatically lose custody of their children. Not only that, 'Muslim women also feel that others believe they are controlled and oppressed by their husbands and that most non-Muslims do not see the equality in their marital relationship'. At times, for Haque et al, Muslim women explained how 'their non-Muslim friends encourage them to leave their husbands assuming that all of their marital issues result from their husbands' Islamic beliefs'. The mental and psychological strains of motherhood as a Muslim woman bear greater in-depth investigation.

Conclusion

Religion, race, ethnicity and culture constitute variables explaining how under given conditions Islamophobia appears. How significant each variable is in determining variations in it is difficult to measure. Racializing Muslims as a category by fusing these variables can serve as an explanatory device for the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim attitudes. Racializing Muslims allows this group to be classified as not just 'other' but 'inherently dangerous and inferior' (Modood et al., 2006, p. 17). Racialization, race and differential racism have become endemic in Islamophobic stigmatizing of Muslims today compared to in the past.

Debates about national identity, migration, multiculturalism and interculturalism typically employ primordial, civilizational and racial differences instead of identifying civic identity. Before 2001 and the terrorist shock it punctuated public discourses. At the same time, classifying Islamophobes as racists makes for bad politics if honest scholarship. It credits perpetrators with a chiliastic, if repugnant, vision and transforms their shallow stereotypes of Muslims into racially-determined deep structures. A Manichean world view of Islamophobes and the rest of us should not be reproduced by the opponents of Islamophobic – it is more complex than that.

An intruding role may be played today by Islam, whether in Europe, Africa and Asia or the global South. Over centuries European colonizers' mission has been to recognize, demonize and colonize the international system. 'Liberal agendas' seemingly condemn societal intolerance. Yet by maintaining or enlarging socio-economic inequalities, inaction on climate change, the multiplication of conflicts in many parts of the globe, political polarization at home, and outright racial discrimination liberal agendas are not liberal in the least.

Muslim agency and engagement are particularly important at a crossroads of world order. Before Islam lies the opportunity to build a different multipolar order. Muslim leaders have a crucial part to play in constructing a peace-loving, multi-centered global order.

Media debates have raged over the burning of the Quran that has occurred mainly in north European states. Arguably it is Canada with its laissez-faire legislation that comes closer to getting it right. It does not have laws attempting to enforce religious beliefs or values; Indeed, it is legal to burn a bible, Quran or other holy book so long as it is yours to burn. How does this approach undermine Islamophobia?

It is by stepping back from the overwhelmingly defensive-oriented protection of Muslims from Islamophobic torment that is the key. Ending 'smokescreen 'liberal' hegemony, discarding economic neoliberalism, and recognizing that Islam has a major part to play in an emergent multipolar system are higher stakes. They can trigger exceptional developmental breakthroughs in politics and society.

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