

THE MANY FACES OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Oral and written submission to The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims enquiry into the definition of Islamophobia/Anti Muslim Hatred

Tahir Abbas, 26 June 2018

Introduction

My work on Islamophobia began in the mid-1990s when the Runnymede Trust contracted me to carry out research on Islamophobia in the media for the original report published in 1997. I have been working on the concept ever since then, writing extensively on it based on qualitative and ethnographic research, predominantly in Birmingham, where I have also looked at a number of social, cultural and economic issues relating to the wider experience of ethnic and Muslim minorities in the city. It has helped to appreciate the holistic nature of different levels of discrimination facing groups, including Muslims in education.¹

The concept of Islamophobia applies in the Western European context but also elsewhere – i.e., in countries where Muslims are minorities. However, this an even more complex experience. For example, in Myanmar and Israel, there are issues of hate towards Muslims not necessarily because they are Muslim, but more because of questions of hyper-nationalism, economic opportunism and state violence bordering on population elimination. I will focus on the British case here.

¹ Abbas, T. (2017) ‘The “Trojan Horse” Plot and the Fear of Muslim Power in British State Schools’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37(4): 426-441; (2012) ‘Perceptions on the processes of radicalisation and de-radicalisation among British South Asian Muslims in a post-industrial city’, *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 18(1): 119-134 (with A Siddique); (2007d) ‘Ethno-Religious Identities and Islamic Political Radicalism in the UK: A Case Study’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27(3): 356-368; Abbas, T. (2006) *Muslims in Birmingham, UK*, Background paper for the University of Oxford Centre on Migration Policy and Society; (2005) ‘An analysis of race equality policy and practice in the city of Birmingham, UK’, *Local Government Studies* 31(1): 53-68 (with M Anwar); (2002d) ‘Teacher perceptions of South Asians in Birmingham schools and colleges’, *Oxford Review of Education* 28(4): 447-471.

In the UK, a great deal of current attention is on the idea of the need for a clear definition. I welcome the present efforts of this enquiry to generate momentum around this concept and to find legal ways of addressing the problems of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia definition revisited

Islamophobia is a number of different issues that come together as a whole where the sum is great as the individual parts. At some level, the issues of perceptions are important as there are significant issues concerning a pervasive anti-Muslim rhetoric that has penetrated the practices of media, politics, organisations and community relations. It is anti-Muslim action, sentiment, belief and even propaganda (e.g. the representation of hijabi Muslim woman on Westminster Bridge after the attack in 2017). Promulgated in a way to suggest that not only are ‘Muslims responsible for the attack’ but that ‘they’ also show disdain when ‘our’ people die, it generated significant online hate. At another level, the denial of Islamophobia can also exist to refute a range of social, cultural, economic, political and legal issues that are important in eliminating inequality, racism and intolerance while building social and political trust. Finally, Islamophobia is also a response. Here, it is hostility, fear, anger, mistrust and anxiety exhibited by groups because of misunderstanding, where dominant discourses in media and politics enhance and promote this misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims.

Over the last few years, in particular, we continue to witness problematic newspaper headlines and statements by parliamentarians that are now becoming everyday practices. Therefore, the problem is multi-dynamic. Islamophobia is not just one thing – it is a combination of many different elements. At some level, it is structural – i.e., reflecting the workings of institutions. At another level, it is individual, i.e., women face attacks on the streets because they were visual markers of Muslimness. It is also cultural. Here, its normalisation has made it all too easy to speak ill of Muslims and Islam without reservation, and without basing it on any verifiable ‘truths’. Here, social media dupes the ill-informed, but not necessarily especially hateful people. For example, many people routinely share problematic social media stories, memes or ‘fake news’ without due care or attention. Islamophobia is also ideological, which suggests that there are those who excuse their Islamophobia or seek to legitimise it through a focus on, for example, ‘British values’, which is a favourite trope of both the soft *and* hard right.

In finalising a book on Islamophobia, I have identified twelve areas of note. This book is extending existing ideas, but it also aims to develop the typographies now that we have a wealth of research and evidence before us. In alphabetical order,

the following are a set of universal set of characteristics relating to Islamophobia in the UK.

Crime – Hate crime against Muslims/criminalisation of Muslims

Cultural – Orientalism and “failed multiculturalism” discourses

Gendered – “Dangerous’ brown men, “vulnerable” brown women

Ideological – Political left and the right are hostile to Islam/Muslims

Institutional – Organisations, rationalisation and normalisation lock in Islamophobic groupthink

Intellectual – Influential right-leaning and left-leaning thinkers in denial

Media – TV, print and social media and the press barons

Political – Populism, nationalism and neoliberalism driving mass public sentiment

Religious – Christian, Jewish, Hindu and others hostile towards Muslim minorities

State – Law, policymaking, judiciary, executive

Structural – Education and employment outcomes for Muslim groups; housing and health inequalities

Xenophobic – Resistance to immigration and the limits of ethnic boundaries

Thus, there are issues of structural racism that affect Muslim minorities as Islamophobia. There is also the issue of cultural racism, with its constant focus on idea of ‘them’ vs ‘us’ or ‘good Muslim’ vs ‘bad Muslim’ paradigms. Moreover, far right extremism feeds off *and* feeds into this Islamophobia, which also has a bearing on radicalisation of British Muslims – as both radicalisation and Islamophobia thrive because of the wider workings of structural and cultural racism.²

The Challenges Ahead

Having said all of this, there is still a problem with the wider narrative around the concept. Islamophobia is many different things – but one thing it is not is some kind of mere concept without genuine application. In fact, *the greater narrative* is to deny its existence at all – which, in some ways, is an attempt to legitimise existing norms in relation to anti-Muslim sentiment, racism and discrimination. Since the economic downturn that resulted because of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the policies of austerity that have plagued less fortunate groups since

² Abbas, T. (2017) ‘Ethnicity and Politics in Contextualising Far Right and Islamist Extremism’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11(3): 54-6; Abbas, T. (2011) *Islamic Radicalism and Multicultural Politics: The British Experience*, London and New York: Routledge

then, society as a whole has suffered because of widening social divisions with notions of hyper-ethnic-nationalism coming to the fore. It ensures that racists, bigots and supremacists get the oxygen needed from certain elites to fuel their hate, discord and disdain.

In order to help eliminate the many different layers and levels of Islamophobia, a legal definition that has teeth and bite must come into play. This is a difficult challenge. For example, if a white English individual who has converted to Islam but then experiences discrimination, vilification, exclusion, violence or marginalisation as variations on Islamophobia, how does the notion of anti-Muslim racism, as akin to Islamophobia, apply in such an instance? For example, if a member of the public shouts Islamophobic abuse at an English woman who has converted to Islam, is this Islamophobia also anti-Muslim racism in the way it would be if the victim of this abuse was, say, a Somali woman?

The closest alternative to Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism, but while we can prosecute racists according to legal definitions of racism and hate crime, Islamophobia is greater and perhaps more pervasive than identifiable acts of racism that can be prosecuted at an individual (not to deny the horrifying effects of racism on Muslim individuals at any one point in time). Perhaps, therefore, the answer is to keep using Islamophobia as it is a discourse, an action, an outcome, a perception, an experience, etc., but to now enhance an element of 'Muslim hate crime' into the existing legislation on hate crime. The actionable aspect focuses on individuals while the general discourse of combating Islamophobia can remain a wider social concern that allows the possibility of working with other groups in society experiencing vilification, demonisation and discrimination.

Some elements of Islamophobia are about racism towards groups who are different by virtue of ethnicity, race, heritage and even gendered visibility. This connects with racism and anti-racist law exists here to protect these groups. However, there is also the issue of Islamophobia as a much wider discourse of disdain, violence, hatred or enmity towards Muslim groups who are part of a faith that has a global identity but with many localised nuances. By enhancing the legislation against those who perpetuate acts of Islamophobic violence or hatred at an individual level it does indeed send a signal to Islamophobes as a whole. But while there is a separation between the lived reality of Islamophobia and acts of Islamophobia that are discriminatory, the division between them also has the potential risk of reducing Islamophobia to an individual matter that is not part and parcel of a wider social, historical, political and cultural discourse that continues to evolve and grow.

About the Author

Professor Tahir Abbas BSc (Econ) MSocSc PhD FRSA is currently a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Department of Government at The London School of Economics and Political Science (2017–). His research interests are the intersections of Islamophobia and radicalisation, anxious politics, gender and violence, and ethnic relations. From 2016–2017, he was a Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. From 2010–2016, he was as a Professor of Sociology at Fatih University in Istanbul, Turkey. During his time in Istanbul, he was a visiting scholar at New York University, Leiden University, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, International Islamic University in Islamabad and the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta. His recent books are *Contemporary Turkey in Conflict* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), *Muslim Diasporas in the West* (ed., four volumes, Routledge, 2017), *Political Muslims* (Syracuse University Press, 2018, co-edited with S Hamid).

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