

Rethinking Islamophobia: From Renaissance to WW1 to the Radical Right

Islam Issa and Imran Awan

In recent years, there have been numerous studies about the definitions and impacts of Islamophobia. The premise of this article is that by combining a number of different disciplines, including history and literature, we may elucidate further key contexts and realities about Islamophobia. As such, this article is a reflection on Islamophobia as a multifaceted and developing phenomena that in turn requires multidisciplinary reflection. Indeed, we approach the issue from different perspectives: one author is a literary critic and historian (who has written about early modern Europe and curated a high-profile exhibition on Muslims in World War One), one is a criminologist (a leading expert on Islamophobia and a key advisor to the UK government on how it might be defined).

Current political and social climates have brought Islamophobia to the fore, including important questions about how and to what extent it can be defined. In the current context surrounding Donald Trump's election, Brexit, and the political ascendancy of white nationalist parties in Europe and globally, the debate about how to define Islamophobia has caused controversy. In 1997, the publication of the Runnymede Trust report entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* was the first to define the problem of Islamophobia in the UK, as "the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims" (Runnymede Trust 1997, p. 1). Twenty years later, they published a new report, in which the definition (2017, p. 1) built upon the United Nations definition of racism:

Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

Imran Awan and Irene Zempi (2015) define Islamophobic hate crime as any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated wholly or

partly by hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion; that is, their Muslim religion. The All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018), which one of the authors (Awan) has advised, also presented its definition of Islamophobia. Their definition, which has been backed by many academics, policymakers, and community groups, states that Islamophobia is "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". This leads to the more detailed definition by Awan and Zempi (2017, p. 2):

A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim.

The significance of the definition by Awan and Zempi (2017) is twofold. First, it emphasises the link between institutional levels of Islamophobia and manifestations of such attitudes, triggered by the visibility of the victim's (perceived) Muslim identity. Second, this approach interprets Islamophobia as a form of racism, whereby Islamic religion and culture are seen as a "threat" to perceived Western values. Accordingly, this conceptual framework indicates that victimisation can be ideological and institutional (pertaining to ideas and concepts that victimise), or it can have material consequences for those who are victimised (through verbal and physical abuse). The notion of cultural racism is largely rooted in frames of inclusion and exclusion, specifying who may legitimately belong to a particular national or other community while, at the same time, determining what that community's norms are and thereby justifying exclusion.

Within the discussion around hate crimes, there has been a shift from race to religion: while the "old" racism was often based on an explicit belief of biological superiority, the "new" racism is based on notions of religious and cultural superiority (Awan and Zempi 2017). Prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, it could be argued that being a

visibly practising Muslim in the US and UK did not raise the same risk of abuse or violence as today. In 1980s UK, “Paki-bashing” (attacks on British-Pakistanis) was based on race more than religion. Lambert and Githens-Mazer (2011) point out that “Paki-bashing” has been replaced by “Muslim-bashing” as the new dangerous street phenomenon. Today, it has become clearer how conceptualising racism exclusively as a form of “biological determinism” ignores the ways in which cultural racism draws upon other markers of “difference” to identify minority groups and individuals that do not conform with “mainstream” society (Awan and Zempi 2017). It can also be understood that Islamophobia as a form of racism is the new “surveillance” premised on the notion that cultural difference slides into the demonisation and stigmatisation of the “Other” cultures, apparently in the interests of “protecting” the hegemonic society and its people, a separate entity in their own right (Awan and Zempi, 2017).

While it would be difficult and perhaps unnecessary for an official definition of Islamophobia to include comment on negligence or ignorance, there are many pointers both historically and contemporarily that indicate how negligence and ignorance can be key triggers of Islamophobia. As a result, Islamophobia is often a reaction triggered by specific events and premised on notions of prejudice, ignorance, and seeking vengeance. Research indicates that a person’s visible Muslim identity often acts as a trigger for emotional and psychological backlash against the wider Muslim community. As Matthew Williams and Pete Burnap (2015) point out, hate crimes are communicative acts often provoked by antecedent events that incite a desire for retribution in the targeted group, towards the group that share similar characteristics to the perpetrators. From this perspective, hate crimes increase following “trigger” events, such as terrorist attacks, as they operate to galvanise tensions and sentiments against the suspected perpetrators and groups associated with them (Awan and Zempi 2015). Spikes in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents following “trigger” events are not confined to offline settings; rather, the offline pattern is replicated online (Awan, 2014). Many of these involve generalisations about groups and communities. In turn, they may also be based on imagined communities and inaccurate understandings of one’s own or one’s seemingly opposing group.

There is much relevant historical precedence. As Islam expanded in Europe, medieval writers began to create inaccurate reports about the faith. As Matthew Dimmock rightly notes, depictions of the Abrahamic faiths in the medieval and renaissance periods do not offer a “single coherent narrative” (2008, p. 66). What is clear, though, is that the European writers of these periods caricatured Muslims and Muhammad in particular in largely derogatory ways. While writers like John Tolan (2002) have recorded such European writings in commendable detail, it remains to be added that these medieval responses were, by definition “Islamophobic”, stemming from a real fear of Islam, whether its geographical expansion or its perceived opulence. Indeed, one such caricature was the Turk, “warlike and bombastic” (Dimmock 2008, p. 67).

View of Islam in that period offer particularly clear examples of negligent generalisations that actually reached a position of commonly assumed “truths”. Many of these related to the figure of Muhammad, who was a household name - to the extent that a Shakespearean character can refer to him in passing - but almost always depicted as a heretic and more often than not as morally wicked, wretched, drunk, and epileptic. Moreover, Muhammad was regularly presented as a man who used his message to garner wealth and power. For instance, in art, he was depicted “as a hooped beast (perhaps a stag) with a bearded human head” (Dimmock 2008, p. 71). And as Dimmock (2013) documents, reports about Muhammad’s death were particularly polemical: it was commonly reported that upon his death he was eaten by dogs, then details were added about the cause of death being drunkenness, before the dogs were changed to pigs. Influential accounts included Ranolf Higden’s famous fourteenth-century human history which noted:

He hated wine drunkenness ... But in a night he was drunk, and fell down in the street, and there swine ate him, that he held unclean beasts, therefore they that holdeth his law spareth wine and swine’s flesh. (1865, p. 39; spelling modernised).

Similarly, in his popular work, *The Fall of Princes*, John Lydgate claimed more poetically that: “Like a glutton dyed on dronkenes / By exces of drynkyng moch wyne / Fyll in a

podell deuoured amonge swyne” (1494, sig. E. 6v). By highlighting Muhammad’s objection to “wine” and “swine” so explicitly in the very account of the death, this belittling end, dying drunk amidst pigs, is not only disparaging, but shows the direct and continued obsession with Islamic prohibitions of alcohol and pork: a trait of Islamophobic rhetoric that continues through this very day (Awan and Issa 2018).

But ignorance, as opposed to exaggeration, extends further in the travel writing and drama of these periods. It was commonly assumed truth, stemming from available travel writings, that Muhammad’s coffin, which of course is in Medina, hung in the air next to the Ka’aba, either magnetically or via rope, suggesting his relation to black magic or the trickery of the faith. The medieval pageant *Herod the Great: The Slaughter of the Innocents* - written by the Wakefield Master and telling the story of Herod’s massacre of newborn boys in an attempt to kill baby Jesus - begins with a reference to Muhammad, or “Mahowne”, in its very first line, and it becomes clear that Herod worships “Mahowne in heven” (Bevington, ed. ll. 1, 127). Of course, Muhammad was not born until 571 AD: such a conflation of time periods is uncanny and places Islam as a direct enemy to the Christian faith and Christ. It also suggests, like other dramas of the period, a conflation of Islam and Judaism, whereby the anti-Semitism of the period is easily and conveniently coupled with a similar, if less striking, Islamophobic narrative. What is more, though the political climate may have been different from today in terms of power dynamic, similar fears of the other exist in both contexts.

If ignorance is a trigger of hate crime, the *Stories of Sacrifice* exhibition, which launched in 2016, researched and curated by one of the authors (Issa), presented the power of narratives that respond to gaps in general knowledge. Indeed, one of the driving forces for the exhibition was the relative obliviousness about the Muslim contribution to World War One. In 2014, an ICM survey released by the British Future thinktank revealed that only 2 percent of the British public were aware of the Muslim contribution to this war. In fact, 78 percent of people in the UK were totally unaware of the fact that people of other faith groups and ethnicities were even involved. While the former fact was quoted in the exhibition guide, there was no mention of “Islamophobia” in any exhibition content, or

that the project was in any way reactionary. In a climate of increased Islamophobia, presenting the story of Muslims in the World Wars has often been used to prove integration, yet it was noted that this exhibition did not answer to these concerns directly. A write-up by Chris Hill (2018) for the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council "Voices of War and Peace" project noted:

For Dr Issa, however, this went against the ethos of the exhibition: he wanted to allow the narratives of individuals to speak for themselves. How these narratives were then co-opted by community groups, stakeholders and the wider public was not his concern. 'The moment the exhibition launched', he claimed, 'it ceased to be my work'. The politics of public ownership took over. Dr Issa's interpretation of the function of the exhibition – and his role in curating it – is quite a refreshing one given the politicised climate around Muslims in the UK.

What is more, as Meghan Tinsley notes in a recent doctoral thesis, "Issa was wary of presenting Muslim colonial subjects unequivocally as either loyal heroes or victims of colonial oppression. Rather, he sought to represent the diversity and individuality of their experiences" (2018, p. 139).

The result appears to be an exhibition that responded to issues of Islamophobia in and of itself. First, the findings made headlines, as noted by Tinsley: "*Stories of Sacrifice* has received significant attention in the national media for Issa's archival work. His research revealed that twice as many Muslims had fought in the war as had been widely believed" (Tinsley 2018, p. 81). By combining library-based and archival research, it became clear that the previously reported number of Muslims recruited by the Allies (most often limited to Indians and specified at 400,000) were very significantly understated. A figure of at least 885,000 is verifiable. The number is likely to be higher but would have required further verification. Moreover, a number of previously unreported letters by Muslim soldiers were included in the exhibition or released separately, including from individuals describing such experiences as visiting department stores or using the London Underground.

Further to our contention that negligence and ignorance are triggers to Islamophobia, and that fear of the other remains an important aspect leading to societal divides, we should like to add three further points highlighted by this exhibition.

First, that humanisation can be an effective response to hate. Given access to various public and secret archives for this exhibition, interdisciplinary research methods and aims were applied. In particular, the research utilised literary scholarship techniques, most importantly detailed textual and character analysis to examine and present, as works in their own right, literature derived from thousands of soldiers' letters, officers' regimental diaries, and other such materials. Aside from providing vital statistics about the numbers, this led to stories of sacrifice about individual named figures from the war, in turn, and importantly, humanising them (in large part through their normality).

Second, trigger events that most often lead to increased hate crime can also result in positive reactions. The 2017 Manchester Arena bombing led to Greater Manchester Police requesting a mobile version of the exhibition to be housed in their headquarters for their counter-terrorism staff to see.

Third, the responses showed that, despite all of the findings and coverage, an Islamophobic narrative can be manipulated into many contexts. On the day of the launch, an English Defence League (EDL) social media page shared the news, quickly adding that it was proof of an inability to integrate since the exhibition is by nature differentiating between Muslims and non-Muslims. The narrative of discontent is well established both by radical right groups such as the EDL and Britain First, as well as more political savvy groups such as UKIP and the rise of populist figures across Europe, like Marine Le Pen.

This last point brings us to the very present day. Radical right groups such as Britain First promote and incite racial and religious hostility. The group's credentials are seriously undermined by the recent convictions of its two leaders, Jayda Francis and Paul Golding, and it continues to be an active voice of Islamophobia in Britain today. We

mention them here because they are a clear example of the ever-changing reality of Islamophobia, most notably, the digital factor and its ability to propel the ignorant or negligent messaging of the phenomenon. Despite the concerns raised about the group, the US President Donald Trump retweeted three videos from the Britain First social media account related to alleged Islamist violence. The three videos purported to show a Muslim man destroying a Virgin Mary statute, another showed someone attacking a boy on crutches, and a third video showed men pushing a boy from a building. The videos clearly were horrific and quickly turned into anti-Muslim hostility. The problem, however, was that all of the videos, posted originally by Fransen, were in fact fake. Indeed, Britain and its social media accounts are littered with short videos depicting violence apparently perpetrated by Muslims. In a statement issued from Downing Street, the British Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May, stated that: "Britain First seeks to divide communities by their use of hateful narratives that peddle lies and stoke tensions. They cause anxiety to law-abiding people ... It is wrong for the president to have done this" (Reuters 2017). Social media companies such as Twitter and Facebook have taken action against the leaders of far-right groups such as Tommy Robinson (former leader of the EDL) who has had his Twitter account removed. Research shows that social media comments of an Islamophobic nature can lead to a spike in hate incidents. The rise of Islamophobic incidents following political statements in Europe and the US also shows a revealing pattern. For example, Between January and September 2017, the Council for American Muslim Relations recorded 1,656 so-called "bias incidents" and 195 hate crimes. That represented a 9% increase in bias incidents and a 20% rise in hate crimes compared to 2016.

In looking at the future landscape, then, it is crucial that Islamophobia, as well as its contexts and manifestations, are observed through a globalized, historic, and contemporary lens. Such an approach shows the existence of both trends and changes.

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