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Towards a Working Definition of Islamophobia

A Briefing Paper

prepared in response to the

Home Affairs Committee

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by

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A Proposed New Working Definition of Islamophobia

1. This briefing paper was conceived in response to discussions following the presentation of oral and written evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on 13 December 2016¹. It recommends the following be adopted by the British Government as a working definition for Islamophobia:
2. ***“Islamophobia is a certain perception of Muslims, which may be expressed as hatred toward Muslims. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of Islamophobia are directed toward Muslim or non-Muslim individuals and/or their property, toward Muslim community institutions and religious facilities”***

Defining Islamophobia in Context

3. Islamophobia is a complex and contested phenomenon that has social, political, policy and cultural salience, expressed in speech, writing and visual forms as well as in the form of physical and violent acts all of which are underpinned by sinister stereotypes and negative character traits. It directly and indirectly impacts the everyday lives of many ordinary Muslims going about their day to day lives in today’s Britain.
4. In order to begin to address the problem of Islamophobia, there must be clarity and consensus about what Islamophobia actually is. It is for this reason a widely accepted working definition is necessary and as regards Islamophobia, long overdue. As well as supporting a more consistent and coherent approach to tackling the phenomenon it would also support those engaged in advocacy and campaigning as indeed those tasked with shaping appropriate policy and political interventions.
5. It should be noted that the need to establish a widely accepted working definition of Islamophobia is not a new endeavour. The author has made repeated recommendations pertaining to the need to prioritise this including to the All Party Parliamentary Group on

¹ See, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2015/161209-islamophobia-ev>.

Islamophobia² or the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate³ among others.

6. As with other similar discriminatory phenomena however, trying to establish clarity and consensus is far from simple not least because characterising something as Islamophobic is a political judgment. Doing so therefore requires knowledge about how Islamophobia works, the context within which it takes place, the intention of those perpetrating it and an awareness of any unintended consequences.
7. Any definition therefore needs to help with the recognition of Islamophobic actions and ways of thinking rather than whether someone is or is not Islamophobic. Consequently, definitions should be concerned with what people do, what they say and what they tolerate rather than what they are.

Political and Policy Definitions

8. As with other discriminatory phenomena, the process of defining can be complex and contentious and so Islamophobia is unexceptional in this respect. Unlike other discriminatory phenomena such as racism however, Islamophobia has a far shorter history. It should be remembered that the term only entered the public and political lexicon two decades ago and so thinking and understanding is less developed.
9. Nonetheless, numerous definitions of Islamophobia have been put forward which currently span the academic and scholarly, through the community and advocacy sectors, into the policy and political. While so, few of these have consensus acceptance and so would appear problematic as regards being established as a working definition.
10. Probably the most widely used definition relates to that conceived in a policy report published by the Runnymede Trust on behalf of the Commission for British Muslims &

² Allen, Chris (2011) *Written submission to the re-launched All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, https://issuu.com/drchrisallen/docs/chrisallen-written_evidence_appg_launch-nov_2011.

³ Allen, Chris (2012) *Cross-Government Working Group on anti-Muslim hatred*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, <https://issuu.com/drchrisallen/docs/chrisallen-cgwgscopingexercise-feb2012>.

Islamophobia (CBMI)⁴ in 1997. Titled *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*, the report defined Islamophobia as:

“a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims”⁵

11. The report went on to set out a series of ‘closed views’ through which to illustrate the range of Islamophobia. These included seeing Muslims and Islam as an enemy, violent, aggressive, threatening, separate and ‘other’. The report also deemed that normalising and mainstreaming of Islamophobia as being a ‘closed view’.
12. The CBMI’s definition and closed views approach has been widely criticised. This has focused on its overly simplistic and binary approach not least that if ‘closed views’ equal Islamophobia, so the ‘open views’ must equal Islamophilia⁶. Consequently, legitimate and valid disagreement and criticism could be censured or at least conceived to be Islamophobic and thereby unsuitable for any use in policy and political interventions.
13. Despite this, the CBMI definition remains the most widely referred to in the British setting.
14. The same was true in the European setting also. As research undertaken for the *EU Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC)*⁷ illustrated, less than half of member states at the time of the research had a working definition of Islamophobia despite having been monitoring it. Where member states did have a working definition, it was shown that the majority preferred the CBMI definition⁸.
15. Since then however, two definitions of note have emerged from the European setting. The first from the Council of Europe in 2005:

“[Islamophobia is the] the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them...[taking] the shape of daily forms of racism and

⁴ This report is widely referred to as the ‘Runnymede Trust report’ or ‘Runnymede report’ when referring to Islamophobia. Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997) *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*. London: Runnymede Trust.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Chris Allen (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁷ The EUMC has since become known as the European Union Agency for Fundamental rights (FRA), see <http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/frc2011/index.html>.

⁸ Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen (2002) *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*. Vienna: EUMC.

discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights”
(EUMC, 2007a, p. 61)

16. The second from the *Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA)*⁹. In its annual Islamophobia report it offers the following definition:

“Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilizing and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat – real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed ‘we’. Islamophobia operates by constructing a static ‘Muslim’ identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalized for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts, because Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam” (2016)

17. While useful, neither have to date attracted widespread acceptance either at the European or British levels.

18. At the international level, two further definitions warrant consideration. The first is from the *UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. In a report it defined Islamophobia as:

*“a baseless hostility and fear vis-à-vis Islam, and as a result, a fear of and aversion towards all Muslims or the majority of them. [Islamophobia] also refers to the practical consequences of this hostility in terms of discrimination, prejudices, and unequal treatment of which Muslims (individuals and communities) are victims and their exclusion from major political and social spheres”*¹⁰

19. The second is from the *Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s*¹¹ *Observatory on Islamophobia*. In its first report, it defined Islamophobia as:

“an irrational or very powerful fear or dislike of Islam and the feeling as if the Muslims are under siege and attack. Islamophobia however goes much beyond this and incorporates racial hatred, intolerance, prejudice, discrimination and

⁹ See <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/>.

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Council Document No. A/HRC/6/6, 21 August 2007
<http://www.oicun.org/uploads/files/articles/UNHRC-rep.pdf>.

¹¹ See, <http://www.oic-oci.org>.

*stereotyping. The phenomenon of Islamophobia in its essence is a religion-based resentment*¹²

20. As before, neither have attracted widespread acceptance at the International, European or British levels.

Towards a Definition of Islamophobia

21. Given the lack of suitability as regards existing definitions, two options would appear viable: first, to devise a new definition or synthesise those currently on offer; second, developing an existing working definition for a similar discriminatory phenomenon.

22. As regards the former, the fact that a suitable definition has failed to emerge suggests that the process of devising a new, synthesised working definition might be difficult. Given the political nature of Islamophobia and the different stakeholders who might need – or indeed want - to be involved in the process, so too might the process of incorporation, involvement and inclusion be as equally problematic. Navigating around these potential pitfalls therefore may be beneficial.

23. Consequently, developing an existing working definition would appear to be the most straightforward and potentially least contentious and problematic.

24. In this respect, the recent adoption of a working definition for Antisemitism might offer a good foundation upon which to establish an Islamophobia equivalent. Conceived by the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*¹³ in May 2016, its working definition for Antisemitism has since been adopted by 31 Member Countries, ten Observer Countries, and seven international partner organisations. The UK is one of these nations.

25. The working definition of Antisemitism therefore is:

“...a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or

¹² Organization of the Islamic Conference (2008) *1st OIC Observatory report on Islamophobia*. Kampala, Uganda: OIC, http://ww1.oic-oci.org/uploads/file/Islamphobia/islamphobia_rep_may_07_08.pdf.

¹³ See <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/>.

non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities”

26. Given the clear resonance between discriminatory phenomena, it would be extremely easy and straightforward to amend the working definition on Antisemitism for Islamophobia:

“Islamophobia is a certain perception of Muslims, which may be expressed as hatred toward Muslims. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of Islamophobia are directed toward Muslim or non-Muslim individuals and/or their property, toward Muslim community institutions and religious facilities”

27. Amending an existing widely accepted working definition has distinct benefits. These include establishing a comparable and consistent basis upon which different discriminatory phenomena can be considered and more importantly, understood. Likewise too, some comparability and consistency can be established as regards the development and implementation of policy and political interventions that seek to address the various discriminatory phenomena. It is important to stress that amending an existing working definition would seek to ensure comparability and consistency rather than impose homogeneity.

28. It is for this reason that the author recommends the British Government adopts this as a working definition for Islamophobia.

29. If this is not possible, it is recommended that this attempt to define Islamophobia provides a start point from which further discussions ensue.

Additional Considerations

30. In trying to establish a widely accepted working definition of Islamophobia, a number of issues are worth considering.

31. First, it should be stressed that the non-existence of a widely accepted working definition is not evidence that Islamophobia does not exist; a somewhat hollow argument routinely posited by critics and detractors alike.
32. Second, for those who that Islamophobia is an inappropriate term, no valid arguments exist for replacing it with alternatives such as ‘anti-Muslim hatred’ or ‘anti-Muslim racism’. Neither is any less complex or contentious and neither would likely change the views or opinions of those who seek to dismiss Islamophobia out of hand¹⁴.
33. Third, and following on from the second, it should be stressed that preferring Islamophobia does mean that it has to accurately describe what it is referring to in the policy and political settings. Instead, it merely needs to name. This can be illustrated by considering how Antisemitism or homophobia also name rather than describe. Far from actually referring to being ‘anti-Semite’, Antisemitism is widely accepted and used to name rather than describe the discrimination, bigotry, hate and violence expressed and manifested towards Jews, Jewish communities and importantly, the religion of Judaism¹⁵. Islamophobia is therefore unexceptional in this respect and so can be used without problem in the same way Antisemitism is. Such arguments and objections must therefore be dismissed as mere smokescreens behind which critics and detractors seek to obscure the debates about the realities of Islamophobia and the need to duly tackle it.
34. Fourth, critics and detractors argue that Islamophobia provides a shield behind which Muslims can deflect criticism both of themselves and the religion of Islam. Similar criticisms are posited at Jews as regards Antisemitism and to ethnic minorities when the ‘race card’ is alleged to be played. It is worth unequivocally stating that neither Islamophobia nor indeed any other discriminatory phenomenon can ever be used to limit or censure appropriate, legitimate or proportionate criticism, disagreement and condemnation in any way whatsoever. In this respect, it is not Islamophobic to not uphold or agree with the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims. Nor is it Islamophobic to condemn atrocities or similar when committed by a group or individuals who are identified as Muslim or who claim to be acting in ‘the name of Islam’ as indeed

¹⁴ For a comprehensive review of alternative descriptors for Islamophobia and the arguments against using them, see Chris Allen (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate.

¹⁵ Gavin Langmuir (1996) *Toward a definition of Antisemitism*. California, USA: University of California Press.

some do. It is however likely to be Islamophobic if those criticisms, disagreements or condemnations are used as to demonise or vilify all Muslims without differentiation.

35. Establishing a working definition will support the process of differentiating the appropriate from the inappropriate, the legitimate from the illegitimate, and the disproportionate from the proportionate. While so, it should be noted that establishing a widely accepted working definition is unlikely to appease those who seek to criticise, detract from, and ultimately deny Islamophobia's very existence.

Additional Information

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