TOWARDS A WORKING DEFINITION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

A BRIEFING PAPER PREPARED BY

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A Working Definition of Islamophobia

1. This briefing paper was conceived in response to recommendation number 9 from the report of the Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life[1]

    "For the Government to adopt a definition of anti-Muslim prejudice, and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to set up administrative systems to look at Anti- Muslim prejudice in the same way other hate crimes are considered. This definition should have broad consensus on the boundaries of hatred and prejudice, and could be informed by the definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the Government in 2016."

2. Preferring the term Islamophobia to describe what the Commission refer to as 'Anti-Muslim prejudice', this briefing paper recommends the Government adopt the following definition:

    "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 – the term preferred here to refer to all forms of anti-Muslim hatred, discrimination and prejudice - 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 – as identified by Theresa May recently[2] - there must be clarity and consensus about what Islamophobia is. It is

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[1] See, http://www.citizensuk.org/islam_public_life_commission.

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, to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia[3] and the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate[4] 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 functions, 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 recognising 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 much less developed.

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[2] See, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/19/may-says-islamophobia-form-extremism-marking-shift-rhetoric.

[3] 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.

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

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 attract consensual acceptance and so would be somewhat problematic if used to establish 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 & Islamophobia (CBMI)[5] 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"[6]

11. The report went on to set out a series of 'closed views' through which to illustrate the range and breadth 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 Islamophilia[7]. 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 is true of the European setting also. As research undertaken for the *EU Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia* (EUMC)[8] illustrated, less than half of member states at the time of the research had a working definition of Islamophobia

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[5] 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.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Chris Allen (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate.
[8] The EUMC has since become known as the European Union Agency for Fundamental rights (FRA), see http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/frc2011/index.html.

despite having been monitoring it. Where member states did have a working definition, it was shown that the majority preferred the CBMI definition[9].

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 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)[10]. 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*

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

[10] See http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/.

unequal treatment of which Muslims (individuals and communities) are victims and their exclusion from major political and social spheres"[11]

19. The second is from the *Organization of Islamic Cooperation's[12] 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 stereotyping. The phenomenon of Islamophobia in its essence is a religion-based resentment"[13]

20. As before, neither have been widely used or accepted 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; second, develop an existing working definition for an equitable and comparable 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 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. Identifying a process that enables the navigation around these potential pitfalls may therefore be beneficial.

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

[11] UN Human Rights Council Document No. A/HRC/6/6, 21 August 2007
http://www.oicun.org/uploads/files/articles/UNHRC-rep.pdf.
[12] See, http://www.oic-oci.org.
[13] 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.

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*[14] in May 2016, its working definition for Antisemitism has since been adopted by 31 Member Countries, ten Observer Countries, and seven international partner organisations.

25. The UK is one of the nations to have adopted the working definition which states that Antisemitism 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 non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities"

26. Given the clear resonance between Antisemitism and Islamophobia albeit while also acknowledging each discriminatory phenomenon's distinctivity and differences, it would be extremely easy and straightforward to amend the working definition to be applicable to Islamophobia. As such:

 "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 Government 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, it would ensure that comparability and consistency could be established as regards the development and implementation of policy and political interventions that seek to address the various discriminatory phenomena.

28. It is important to stress however that amending an existing working definition would seek to ensure comparability and consistency rather than impose homogeneity.

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

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[14] See https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/.

30. If this is not possible, it is recommended that the definition posited provides a useful foundation upon which to build and from which meaningful discussions might ensue.

Additional Considerations

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

32. 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.

33. 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 hand[15].

34. Third, 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 Judaism[16]. 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.

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

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

35. 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 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.

36. 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.

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Biography:	Chris Allen is a Lecturer in the Department of Social Policy, Sociology & Criminology in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham. For the past decade and a half, he has been researching the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Having completed his AHRC funded doctoral studies that explored the discourse and theory of Islamophobia he has been at the forefront of research that explores a range of issues regarding the 'problematisation' of Muslims and Islam in contemporary Britain. This has included seeking to understand such issues as the experience of Muslim women victims of hate crime to the anti-Islam ideologies of the far-right, the impact of counter-terror legislation through to governmental engagement of Muslim communities. He has published widely both in the UK and elsewhere being the first academic to publish a monograph of the phenomenon of Islamophobia as also peer-reviewed journal articles on the English Defence League, Britain First and the recently proscribed National Action. He regularly appears in the media and writes for a number of different news outlets. He has also been consulted in an independent capacity across the British and European political spectrum.

This report contains the views of the author and so responsibility for any errors lies solely with him.