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# MANIFESTATIONS OF INTOLERANCE AGAINST MUSLIMS: PUBLIC SPACES, POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND MEDIA IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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A PAPER PREPARED BY

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COMBATting INTOLERANCE, DISCRIMINATION AND HATRED AGAINST  
MUSLIMS: TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE IN THE OSCE  
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# Manifestations of Intolerance Against Muslims: Public Spaces, Political Narratives and Media in the United Kingdom

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## Islamophobia: an introduction

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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 and indeed elsewhere.

Trying to establish a definition of Islamophobia is not a new endeavour. As with other similar discriminatory phenomena however, establishing clarity and consensus is far from simple not least because characterising something as Islamophobic requires something of 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.

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.

In a similar way, much time has been given over to trying to identify the most appropriate terminology to 'name' the phenomenon that informs 'what people do, what they say, and what they tolerate rather than what they are'.

In terms of establishing a single definition and the most appropriate name for the phenomenon, a number of issues are worth considering. First, the non-existence of a widely accepted and single definition is not evidence that Islamophobia does not exist; a somewhat hollow argument routinely posited by critics and detractors alike.

Second, for those who suggest 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<sup>1</sup>. As scholars in the subject, we should use the term that is most appropriate to the context within which we are situating our inquiry. In the British setting for instance, anti-Muslim racism is inappropriate on the basis that ‘race’ can be legally defined whereby Muslims are excluded. Others contexts be they national, cultural or other may demand that other ‘names’ are more appropriate.

Third, it should be stressed that using the moniker of 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<sup>2</sup>. 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. Whether establishing a single definition or agreeing a single term with which to name Islamophobia, neither are likely to appease those who seek to criticise, detract from, nor deny Islamophobia’s very existence.

## The Media

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From existing research into Islamophobia, it is clear that the role and impact of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive review of alternative descriptors for Islamophobia and the arguments against using them, see Chris Allen (2010) *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate.

<sup>2</sup> Gavin Langmuir (1996) *Toward a definition of Antisemitism*. California, USA: University of California Press.

media is both “contentious and debatable”<sup>3</sup>. From data submitted to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Islamophobia by the author<sup>4</sup>, it was claimed that 74% of the British public claim that they know ‘nothing or next to nothing about Islam’. Of those that do, 64% claim that what they do know is ‘acquired through the media’<sup>5</sup>

Included in this submission were details of research which showed that press coverage relating to Muslims and Islam in British national newspapers had increased by approximately 270% over the preceding decade<sup>6</sup>. Of that, 91% of the national coverage was deemed negative<sup>7</sup>: 84% representing Islam and Muslims either as ‘likely to cause damage or danger’ or as ‘operating in a time of intense difficulty or danger’<sup>8</sup>. Much of this was codified by research undertaken at the University of Cardiff<sup>9</sup>. Most interesting in its findings however was how since 2008, the ‘volume of stories about religious and cultural differences (32% of stories by 2008) overtook those relating to terrorism (27% by 2008)’<sup>10</sup>. Whilst noting that the language used about British Muslims was largely reflective of the ‘problematic’ contexts within which they are routinely situated, “decontextualisation, misinformation and a preferred discourse of threat, fear and

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3 Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen, Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001 (Vienna: EUMC, 2002) 46.

4 An APPG is an informal cross-party group that is run by and for Members of the British Parliament – both the Houses of Commons and Lords – albeit with no official status.

5 Chris Allen, *Islamophobia in the media and the impact of recent events* (Birmingham: university of Birmingham, 2013).

6 INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

7 INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

8 INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

9 Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).

10 Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, *Images of Islam in the UK: the representation of British Muslims in the national print news media 2000-2008* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).

danger, while not uniformly present, were strong forces in the reporting of British Muslims in the UK national press”<sup>11</sup>.

Such would have resonance with the Muslim Council of Britain’s observation that media coverage of Muslims and Islam is always akin to a ‘moral panic’. Such are widely evident and can be seen to include – among others – the coverage of stories relating to the wearing of the niqab<sup>12</sup> the ‘halal hysteria’ controversy in relation to Pizza Express<sup>13</sup>, the hiring of Legoland for a private visit by a London-based Muslim organisation<sup>14</sup>, the allegations of a plot to take over 20 state schools in Birmingham by ‘Islamic hardliners’<sup>15</sup>, While each of these could be seen to clearly focused on the cultural ‘threat’ posed by Muslims and Islam as opposed an violent of terroristic equivalent so too is there evidence that each suffered from decontextualisation and misinformation as identified previously.

These issues were alluded to in the 2012 report from the Leveson inquiry; a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following the News International phone hacking scandal. As the report confirmed, the coverage and representation of Muslims and Islam in the British press was extremely problematic<sup>16</sup>:

“[W]hen assessed as a whole, the evidence of discriminatory, sensational or unbalanced reporting in relation to ethnic minorities, immigrants and/or asylum seekers, is concerning. The press can have significant influence over community relations and the way in which parts of society perceive other parts. While newspapers are entitled to express strong views on minority issues, immigration and asylum, it is important that stories on those issues are accurate, and are not

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11 Ibid.

12 See <http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/MCBPress%20Release.pdf>

13 See [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/halal-meat-hysteria\\_b\\_5306911.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/halal-meat-hysteria_b_5306911.html)

14 See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2561686/LITTLEJOHN-Jolly-Jihadi-Boys-Outing-Legoland.html>

15 See <https://discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/operation-trojan-horse-how-a-hoax-problematised-muslims-and-islam/>

16 See the Leveson Report, An Inquiry into the Culture, Practive and Ethics of the Press Vol.2 pp. 486-487 & pp. 668-673 [http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780\\_ii.pdf](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780_ii.pdf).

calculated to exacerbate community divisions or increase resentment. Although the majority of the press appear to discharge this responsibility with care, there are enough examples of careless or reckless reporting to conclude that discriminatory, sensational or unbalanced reporting in relation to ethnic minorities, immigrants and/or asylum seekers is a feature of journalistic practice in parts of the press, rather than an aberration.

“Overall, the evidence in relation to the representation of women and minorities suggests that there has been a significant tendency within the press which leads to the publication of prejudicial or pejorative references to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or physical or mental illness or disability.”

It is important to note that Muslims were the only minority group to be specifically named in the report.

In the submission made to the APPG on Islamophobia by the author, it was suggested that the likely consequences of the adverse reporting and coverage of stories and issues related to Muslims and Islam would be:

- to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims;
- to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government’s measures to reduce and prevent extremism;
- to do nothing in respect of diminishing levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims;
- to hinder the successful implementation of various Governmental policies in relation to cohesion, integration and counter-terror; and,
- to contribute little towards as informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.

As stated at the outset, the role and impact of the media is therefore extremely problematic. The evidence shows an overwhelmingly negative picture, where threat, otherness, fear and danger posed or caused by Muslims and Islam underpins a considerable majority of the British media’s coverage. Such a stream of negativity has

the potential therefore to feed, create and justify a form of order about who we are, or more precisely who we are not in the populist mindset.

## Political Discourse

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As a number of the author's studies have shown, political discourses can be utilised as conduits through which unwritten and unofficial policies and policy-thinking are aired, affirmed, reiterated, and reinforced<sup>17</sup>. While it might be argued that the Coalition Government (2010 to 2015) shifted its initial discourses about Muslims and Islam – in particular the need to address Islamophobia – in truth, there has been little discursive differentiation between any British Government over the past decade and a half. Aside from the maybe necessary undue emphasis placed on terrorism and extremism, successive British Government's disproportionately focused on the 'problems' attributed to Muslims and Islam.

As regards the Coalition, this included many of the issues highlighted previously as regards the Muslim Council of Britain's observation of Muslims and Islam being associated with the notion of various 'moral panics' for instance: Governmental Minister Jeremy Browne questioning whether the state should protect young Muslim women from having the veil 'imposed' on them in schools<sup>18</sup>; Governmental Minister Jeremy Hunt suggesting similar in the health sector and the right of patients to 'see the face' of clinical staff<sup>19</sup>; and Michael Gove appointing Peter Clarke—the former head of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism command—to investigate the Operation Trojan Horse allegations<sup>20</sup>. It is interesting that the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police condemned the latter as a 'desperately unfortunate appointment', given the message it

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17 Allen, Chris. "Passing the Dinner Table Test: Retrospective and Prospective Approaches to Tackling Islamophobia in Britain." *SAGE Open* 3.2 (2013): 2158244013484734.; Allen, Chris. "Political Approaches to Tackling Islamophobia: An 'Insider/Outsider' Analysis of the British Coalition Government's Approach between 2010–15." *Social Sciences* 6.3 (2017): 77.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.stylist.co.uk/people/debate-should-muslim-girls-be-allowed-wear-veil-hijab-school-liberal-democrat-mp-jeremy-browne>

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/few-if-any-muslim-hospital-workers-wear-full-veil-8826042.html>

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-27031941>

sent to Muslim communities<sup>21</sup>. Similar too with New Labour and the extensive list previously offered by the author including: John Reid's call for Muslim parents to look out for the 'tell-tale signs' of extremism; ministers at the Department of Education issuing guidelines to universities urging them to 'spy' on Muslim and 'Muslim-looking' students; Ruth Kelly announcing that Muslim organisations needed to do more to defend core British values; and Jack Straw's comments that the niqab was a barrier to integration. For recent British Governments, Muslims and Islam have been undeniably seen to be problematic.

There has also been a clear resonance between British Governmental discourses and some within the far-right milieu. A good illustration of this is Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 speech in Munich. Declaring the end of British state multiculturalism, Cameron blamed its demise on the threat posed by Islamist extremism<sup>22</sup>. While Cameron was saying this, a rally was taking place in Luton to celebrate the second anniversary of the English Defence League (EDL), a far-right, counter-jihadi street movement. At the rally, the EDL's leaders delivered speeches that similarly focused on the perceived threat posed to Britain by Islamist extremism. In the media's reporting of the two speeches, not only did the latter gain publicity for resonating with that of the Prime Minister, but so too did it acquire legitimacy. As the author previously wrote, "the messages taken...categorically reinforced the idea that Muslims and Islam were something that was causing 'us' problems: a problem that was threatening 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' way of life"<sup>23</sup>. As was shown previously, such discourses not only reinforce pre-existing fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam, but so too do they place Muslims and their communities under increased pressure, potentially increasing feelings of anger, alienation, and mistrust, while also giving credence to extremist ideologies. In this respect, it could be argued that Governmental and political discourses about Muslims and Islam have the very real potential to give credence to the

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<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/apr/15/police-chief-counter-terror-officer-islamic-schools-plot-birmingham>

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994>

<sup>23</sup> p.230, Allen, C. (2017). Fear and loathing: The political discourse in relation to Muslims and Islam in the British contemporary setting. *Politics and Religion Journal*, 4(2), 221-236.

misinformation and negative stereotypes in circulation about both Muslims and Islam that in turn affirm and increasingly normalise Islamophobia-thinking and expression.

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, the representation and coverage of stories and issues relating to Muslims and Islam in the British media in conjunction with Governmental and political discourses about Muslims and Islam in the British political spaces have the potential to confer legitimacy and normality onto processes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance. If such representations and discourses are seen to 'make sense' – something that is quite possible given that media and political discourses are conveying extremely similar notions and meanings - then not only is it possible that this will result in discriminatory and exclusionary practices but so too make the divisive messages of those such as the far-right and others appear justified and fair. From an alternative perspective, such a process also reinforces the view that Muslims do not – and never will – 'belong' here, reinforcing dualistic and oppositional rhetoric especially of those promoting more radical ideas from within some sectors of Muslim communities.

## Contact

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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 ‘problematization’ 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.