



Islamophobia from Extremism

Chris Allen

A written response to my talk at the Finsbury Park Mosque – Wednesday 29th November 2017

Earlier this year, Theresa May rightly described the horrific incident at the Finsbury Park Mosque as "an evil borne out of hatred and it has devastated a community". In doing so, she captured the outrage that many were feeling at the time.

What was interesting however was the way in which she referred to Islamophobia. According to her, Islamophobia was a form of extremism rather than what I would suggest is a discriminatory phenomenon. Of course, any recognition of Islamophobia is not only welcome but so too long overdue in the British political spaces especially as the Conservatives had gone silent on the issue once the impotence of its Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate had been exposed. However, referring to Islamophobia as a form of extremism and indeed continuing to frame it in this way is extremely problematic.

Much has been made about the fact that Islamophobia is difficult to define. This isn't exclusive to Islamophobia. In fact the same is true of all discriminatory phenomena including racism, homophobia and sexism among others. As an attempt to bring some consistency to the debate, I recently authored and submitted a briefing paper to MPs suggesting that a definition of Islamophobia was desperately needed. It is not enough to merely name the phenomenon. For politicians and policymakers, it is necessary to define exactly what is and what is not.

Necessarily encompassing both ideological and actual expressions and manifestations of Islamophobia, any definition must also capture the perceptual, rhetorical and physical whether targeting individuals or the material structures associated with Muslims and Islam.

If Islamophobia is considered within the context of the Government's current definition of extremism, not only does it fail to offer consistency with other discriminatory phenomena but neither does it offer anything useful in terms of how Islamophobia becomes manifested or expressed in real-life settings. Accordingly, the Government's 2015 Counter Extremism strategy defined extremism as:

"Extremism is the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also regard calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist."

Even at its most straightforward, the Government's definition of extremism offers little in terms of understanding or conceiving what Islamophobia may or may not be.

Defining Islamophobia as extremism will also impact on how it is responded to in terms of policy and practice. If we consider for instance how manifestations of other discriminatory phenomena such as racism, homophobia or disablism are responded to by the police, hate crime legislation becomes paramount. Since 2007, the Police Service, Crown Prosecution Service, Prison Service (now known as the National Offender Management Service) and other agencies defined a hate crime as:

"any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice towards someone based on a personal characteristic".

Not only is this quite different from the Government's definition of extremism but so too would there appear to very little overlap between them. This prompts a number of questions. So for example, if Islamophobic hate crime is to be framed by counter-terror and counter-extremism narratives, why is this necessary? What makes Islamophobia exceptional and distinct from other discriminatory phenomena? How does Islamophobic hate crime differ from hate crimes motivated by race, disability, sexual orientation and so on? Little evidence can be put forward to substantiate any of these.

Referring to Islamophobia as a form of extremism would also be misleading as regards those who perpetrate it. While Darren Osborne's attack in Finsbury Park may have been motivated by certain extremist views or ideologies, most day-to-day manifestations and expressions of Islamophobia are not. On the contrary, the vast majority of hate crimes are committed by ordinary people. As research shows, extremists or 'mission offenders' - those whose life's mission it is to rid the world of certain groups they consider evil or inferior - make up only a small number of hate crime perpetrators. There is no evidence to suggest that those perpetrating Islamophobia are any different.

In truth, the linking of Islamophobia with extremism is far from new in the British political setting. When New Labour for instance sought to introduce legislation to protect against assault or abuse on the basis of religion, it did so via the Anti-Terrorism, Crime & Security Act 2001. In 2009 when Gordon Brown stated that a future Labour Government would be committed to doing more to addressing Islamophobia he balanced this by suggesting that British Muslims would need to 'do more' as regards tackling the extremists within their communities. Similar too in December 2013 when in the report of the Extremism Task Force, it stated that:

"...[the Coalition Government] must tackle extremism of all kinds, including the Islamophobia and neo-Nazism espoused by the murderer of Mohammed Saleem to justify his terrorist attacks against mosques in the West Midlands"

While welcome, the reality was that this was the sole mention of Islamophobia in the entire report. Sadly, the reference to Islamophobia appeared to be little more than mere lip-service.

For me, the political linking of Islamophobia with extremism is rather more deliberate than today's announcement might suggest in that it would appear to serve two functions. First, it sends out the misguided message that Islamophobia is solely consequential of terrorism and extremism. In other words, if Muslims 'stop blowing themselves up' then people will 'stop hating them'. Second, it appears to be something of a pacifier to Muslims in that the Government is saying that if it commits to doing something about Islamophobia then Muslims should not rock the boat about the

introduction of ever more stringent and pernicious counter-terror and counter-extremism measures that are likely to be announced in the Queen's speech on Wednesday.

Instead of exceptionalising Islamophobia by defining it as extremism, Islamophobia needs to be rather more normalised and brought in line with how we understand, define and subsequently respond to other discriminatory phenomena. In doing so, Islamophobia will have the potential to both speak to and indeed convince a greater number of people that Islamophobia is not only unfounded and unwanted but so too unnecessary in today's Britain.

Let's tackle Islamophobia for what it is. And what it isn't is extremism.