

Submission to APPG on British Muslims – Definition of Islamophobia

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is the largest umbrella body of Muslim organisations - with over 1000 mosques from diverse schools of thought and ethnic backgrounds, across the UK as either affiliates or members of affiliates.
- 1.2. The MCB is pledged to work for the common good, and as a representative body, our role is to act as a voice for our affiliates and Muslim organisations more generally. Our work includes supporting mosques through initiatives like Visit My Mosque; finding and sharing best practice through our workstreams following our annual Our Mosques Our Future Conference; and ensuring the views of Muslim communities are heard and have impact at all levels of society.
- 1.3. As is well documented, the specific term Islamophobia had emerged following the need for a specific word to focus minds and lead to substantive action against growing anti-Muslim prejudice, and the Runnymede Trust's popularisation of the term in 1997 was very welcome.
- 1.4. Muslim civil society has long been alert to bigotry against Muslims in its various manifestations. In 1997, the UK Action Committee in the run up to the General Elections, described Muslim stereotyping and Islamophobia as "one of the most serious problems in Britain today...the climate of hate and prejudice does no good to the abuser or abused."¹ The MCB in July 2001 drew attention of the then Home Office Minister Angela Eagle to the overlap of racism with Islamophobia.²
- 1.5. The MCB has been involved in many initiatives to tackle Islamophobia, from the campaign to include a question on faith within the Census to help create a fact-base to support research into structural discrimination, to highlighting and challenging Islamophobia in sections of the media.

¹ UKACIA, Elections 1997 and British Muslims

² <http://archive.mcb.org.uk/racism-delinquency-and-islamophobia-muslim-leaders-to-meet-home-office-minister/>

1.6. There has always been a worrying dismissal of the reality of Islamophobia even from apparently “liberal” members of British society.

1.7. The APPG’s call for evidence for a working definition of Islamophobia is welcome insofar as it helps institute the term among decision makers as a precursor to advocating for serious action to be taken.

1.8. This submission is structured as follows:

- Section 2: Summary statistics on Islamophobia
- Section 3: Muslim Council of Britain working definition
- Section 4: Key principles to be considered in the definition of Islamophobia
- Section 5: Recommendations and conclusion

2. Summary statistics on Islamophobia

2.1. The social acceptance of Islamophobia is borne out by the following polling results:

- 37% admitted they would be more likely to support policies to reduce the number of Muslims in Britain (note this is worse than stopping Muslims from entering the country)³
- On average, people think that Muslims make up 17% of the population⁴, compared to the reality of less than 5%
- 62% agreed that Britain would lose its identity if more Muslims came to live here⁵
- More than half of Britons regard Muslims as a threat to the UK.⁶

2.2. Such attitudes have permeated amongst the next generation within schools:

- 35% of 10-14 year olds agree that “Muslims are taking over our country”.⁷
- Islamophobia is a particular issue in schools, according to Childline, with young Muslims reporting that they are being called “terrorists” and “bombers” by classmates.⁸

2.3. A large number of Muslim institutions and cemeteries have been attacked⁹, including with petrol bombs,¹⁰ attempted bombing and arson.¹¹ Many more have been the subject of other hate crimes such as ‘mosque-invasions’ by organisations such as Britain First, threatening letters and pork-related products being thrown at mosques.

2.4. A particularly tragic example is what occurred to a pregnant Muslim lady in August 2016. According to reports, she was verbally assaulted, called a “terrorist” and was beaten up to the extent that she had a miscarriage.¹²

³ [YouGov](#), September 2012

⁴ Average of sample in [YouGov](#), 12-13 January 2015

⁵ [BSA National Survey](#), 2013

⁶ YouGov poll conducted by [Huffington Post](#), 2015

⁷ A survey of 6,000 schoolchildren between the ages of 10 and 14 conducted by Show Racism the Red Card, reported in the [Guardian](#), 2015

⁸ [Independent](#), 2014

⁹ [Tell MAMA Reporting 2014/2015: Annual Monitoring, Cumulative Extremism, and Policy Implications](#)

¹⁰ E.g. [Edinburgh Mosque](#) (Edinburgh), [Finsbury Park Mosque](#) (London), [Zainabiya Islamic Centre](#) (Milton Keynes)

¹¹ E.g. [Al Hira Education Centre](#); [Penny Lane Mosque](#)

¹² [Expectant mother lost twins after ‘racially motivated’ car park attack](#), The Times, August 2016

2.5.Sometimes, victims of Islamophobia are not even Muslim, but those racialised and viewed as Muslim.¹³

3. Muslim Council of Britain working definition

3.1.The term "Islamophobia" was initially defined as "unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims."¹⁴ The term was popularised by the leading equalities think tank Runnymede Trust in its 1997 report in the context of Muslims in the UK in particular and Europe in general, and formulated based on the more common 'xenophobia' framework in a similar way to 'homophobia'¹⁵

3.2.In its latest report of 2017, the Runnymede Trust have defined Islamophobia as "anti-Muslim racism", with a longer explanation given as follows: "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."¹⁶

3.3.As is clear from both definitions, Islamophobia is not about disagreeing, criticising or condemning the faith of Islam. Instead, the concept refers to how that disagreement, criticism or condemnation involves the promotion of stereotypes and mistruths, and is used to intentionally promote, encourage or justify discrimination, hatred, bigotry or even violence.¹⁷

3.4.Professor Tariq Modood notes that "There is not a single racism, but multiple racisms that include colour/phenotype forms but also cultural forms building on 'colour', or on a set of antagonistic or demeaning stereotypes based on alleged or real cultural traits. The most important such form of cultural racism today is anti-Muslim racism, sometimes called Islamophobia."¹⁸

¹³ <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/news-events/news/you-all-look-the-same--new-research-reveals-experiences-of-non-muslim-men-accused-of-being-terrorists>

¹⁴ 1991 report by the race equality think tank Runnymede Trust

¹⁵ <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/islamophobia/defining-islamophobia>

¹⁶ [Islamophobia: still a challenge for us all](#), The Runnymede Trust, 2017

¹⁷ Islamophobia Today: [State of the Nation Report](#) May 2014, Chris Allen. See also See also Robin Richardson's essay, ['Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism – or what? – concepts and terms revisited'](#)

¹⁸ 'Remaking Multiculturalism after 7/7', Open Democracy, 2007

3.5. The Muslim Council of Britain has not previously adopted a formal definition. It has recognised that Islamophobia is only form of racism that still considered to be socially acceptable in large sections of this country.

4. Key principles

4.1. This section outlines the key principles in the definition of Islamophobia.

4.2. **Islamophobia is a form of racism:** The Runnymede Trust states in its latest report: “Among sociologists it is common to talk about different forms of racism, processes of ‘racialization’, and even ‘racism without races’. The notion that ‘race’ is a social construct is more familiar today and indeed widely affirmed even outside the university and across the political spectrum. Just because something is a social construct, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t drive or explain individual and group outcomes in the real world.”¹⁹ The UN definition picks out the ways racism operates: not simply as an attitude or prejudice, but by denying people dignity, rights and liberties across a range of political, economic, social and cultural institutions.

4.3. **Islamophobia is more than just anti-Muslim hatred or bigotry.** Many of the most pernicious instances of Islamophobia are institutional and arise not from personal animus but practices and procedures which discriminate against Muslims through ignorance, unwitting prejudice, or thoughtlessness.

4.4. **The term Islamophobia is well established:** as a term, Islamophobia has now become well established Its usage spans across the globe beyond academics and researchers, to mainstream communities, police and media, including our own prime minister, all of whom understand what the term means.

4.5. **Islamophobia does not incorporate criticism of Islam as a faith:** Whether in any of the well-known definitions, or amongst leading Muslim activists, it is well established that criticism of Islam as a faith would not be considered Islamophobic. Despite this reality,

¹⁹ <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Islamophobia%20Report%202018-Part%201%20FINAL.pdf>

Islamophobia is often dismissed by deploying “straw man” arguments that refer to a shutting down of debate and deliberate contortion of Islamophobia to undermine real concerns about bigotry through these semantic games.

4.6. Some people may hide behind “criticism of Islam” when engaging in Islamophobia: There are some who hide behind “criticism of Islam” as they attempt to legitimise their bigotry, such as author Douglas Murray’s theory that less Islam is a solution to terrorism.²⁰ While using the term “Islam”, what that implies is that we need fewer Muslims to keep British shores safe. It is difficult to understand how such a goal could be achieved other than through some form of ethnic cleansing or mass deportation. This is not “criticism of Islam” and falls well within the scope of Islamophobia.

4.7. Islamophobia is not a perfect term, but neither are other similar terms such as anti-semitism – let us not play semantic games: Similar terms to Islamophobia rarely are perfect, nor do they necessarily need to be – different wording makes little impact on the average bigot. Consider the term “antisemitism”, for example. Literally, it would refer to bigotry against Semites (defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as the Arabs and Jews of the Middle East). However, its meaning is defined and well understood to be bigotry against Jews in particular. Furthermore, the definition goes beyond simple hate and includes anti-semitic tropes still commonplace in many sections of our society. If someone were to try to claim that an Arab could not be anti-semitic because an Arab is a Semite, they would roundly and rightly be condemned as playing semantic games.

The criticism against the use of Islamophobia is similar to those greeted Race Relations legislation in the past, and included complaints that anti-racist measures, will make comedy impossible, will lead to backlash, prevent teachers or police from doing their jobs because of being accused of racism, will stifle public debate. These objections have proven to be invalid, and there is no reason that similar criticism of the concept of Islamophobia have any greater validity.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

²⁰ [Never mind singing John Lennon songs... if we want peace then we need one thing – less Islam](#), Douglas Murray in The Sun, June 2017

- 5.1. The Muslim Council of Britain recognises a need for a working definition of Islamophobia insofar as it helps institute the term among decision makers as a precursor to advocating for serious action to be taken.
- 5.2. The quest for a perfect definition has hindered both the understanding of the phenomena and the formulation of effective tools to counteract it. The Muslim Council of Britain favour a pragmatic definition of Islamophobia, that is straight-forward, actionable and effective.
- 5.3. A proposed definition by The Muslim Council of Britain, that takes all of this into account is:

Islamophobia is the process of discrimination against Muslims, in particular the curtailment of the ability of Muslims to articulate their Muslimness with equal legitimate expression in a democratic society, whether incidental or systematic, by individuals, or organisations, by the State or within civil society, by commission, or omission.

- 5.4. Islamophobia is widespread in employment²¹, media²² and politics²³. It is not simply a problem that affects Muslims in this country, it is a direct threat to democracy as it sanctions unjust discriminatory practices which undermine civil rights. Therefore, a working definition with broad-based approval from Muslim civil society organisations and decision-makers is of utmost importance.

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/07/islamophobia-holding-back-uk-muslims-in-workplace-study-finds>

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/27/islamophobia-not-british-press-issue-got-to-be-kidding>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/31/muslim-council-calls-for-inquiry-into-conservative-party-islamophobia>