A Guide to Understanding & Tackling Islamophobia in Intercultural Education, Training & Research

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This guide is the outcome of a SIETAR UK webinar held in October 2022 in which members explored Islamophobia. It was felt that the content would be of benefit to those unable to attend, as well as providing a resource for those looking for specific support or information on the topic.

Islamophobia - Context

This guide was written by Neil Payne, who hosted and presented the webinar on Islamophobia. Him being British, plus most of the audience also being so, means the content has a specifically UK slant.

This is purposeful. There are so many examples from around the world of Islamophobia. You can find different expressions of it in the USA, France, Germany, Sri Lanka, India, China and many other countries.

The author therefore limited examples to those from his own country. Readers from outside the UK are invited to reflect on the situation in their own countries and make connections with the examples that are be used here.

The Definition of Islamophobia

You may, or may not, be surprised to learn that there is no accepted definition of Islamophobia. This is for several reasons.

Although anti-Muslim sentiment has existed for hundreds of years, 'Islamophobia' is a fairly recent socio-political phenomenon and therefore, new vocabulary. There is also some contention around giving it a definition, as we'll come to in a minute.

That being said, there are definitions of Islamophobia we can find within the European context that give us an idea as to what it is, what it looks like and what it does.

"A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non- Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim." [Proposed definition of UN Human Rights Council]

"….[a] 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." [Council of Europe]

"Islamophobia operates by constructing a static 'Muslim' identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalised for all Muslims." [Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research]

"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." [All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims - UK]

"Islamophobia refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs." [Runnymede Trust - UK]

As you can see, there are common strands between all of the definitions: namely, it's a type of racism which discriminates against Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims – see Balbir Singh Sodhi & Jean Charles de Menezes) simply for being Muslim.

Whichever definition you prefer, none of them sound fun for those on the receiving end, do they?

So, why the contention around coming up with an international or even a common definition of Islamophobia? Well, there are some arguments against it; some clearly tinged with Islamophobia, others with valid points worth consideration.

 Here's an overview of some of the main arguments and their counterpoints:

a.   'Why do we need to define it?'

   • *'Do we really need a new definition? Surely, we have current frameworks and language that do the same job at the moment such as anti-discrimination laws and robust policing.'*
   • *'Allowing Muslims to define it is one-sided. They will come up with their own agendas and try to stamp out any criticism of their religion.'*

Counterpoints: Muslims would argue current frameworks, etc. aren't working. To tackle a problem, we must define it and, crucially, allow those affected by it to frame the experience and influence the discourse around it.

b.   'Why say "Islam" in the term? It's about Muslims.'

   • *'By using 'Islam' in the word the focus becomes the religion, not the people, which surely is what we are supposed to be protecting? i.e. the people not their religion or belief system.'*
   • *'There are other terms we could use such as 'anti-Muslim bias' or 'Muslim-hate' or something a bit more positive.'*

Counterpoints: The term has become part of the modern vernacular, with a loosely shared agreement that its focus is Muslims not their religion. Terms like 'Muslim-hate' fail to articulate the deeper, wider structural and institutional Islamophobia that impacts people's lives. Plus trying to put a positive spin on pain and suffering is an injustice.

c. 'It's not a 'phobia'; it's perfectly rational.'

- *'Being able to criticise people or their religion is part of living in a modern secular democracy – it is rational, if not necessary, to call out things we see that conflict with our own values.'*
- *'Using the word 'phobia' is a conscious attempt to frame us as the irrational ones, destroy our choices and how we think about things.'*

Counterpoints: It is important to understand the difference between criticism of Islam and the expression of Islamophobic views; the first is acceptable, the second is not. The victims of Islamophobia can also be non-Muslims, which points to the irrational nature of what it is and why it's important to define it as such.

d. 'Muslims are not a race, so how can it be racism?'

- *'Islamophobia can't be a form of racism as Muslims come from many countries and 'races' from all over the world.'*
- *'Labelling people who disagree with Islam, Sharia law and incompatible values as 'racists' is not fair.'*

Counterpoints: If perceived 'Muslimness' leads to othering, racialisation and racist actions by people or institutions, it is racist.

A common thread between those who disagree with the use of the term 'Islamophobia' is that it shuts down debate and criticism of Islam. They'll point to figures such as Salman Rushdie as proof of their cause; fairly so many might say.

Therefore, it's critical we understand the line between criticising Islam and being Islamophobic.

For example, the following are not Islamophobic:

- Being critical of Islam – *"I don't really believe the Prophet Muhammad existed. Might have been a myth or something. It's all made up."*
- Citing facts about Islam – *"Islam allows polygamy and circumcision."*
- Disagreeing with Islamic practices – *"I really think a man being able to have four wives and a woman only one husband is kind of unfair. Kids should have a choice whether to be circumcised or not."*

None of the above are Islamophobic. What would make them so is if you started treating anyone you thought was Muslim unfairly because of your opinions, biases, prejudices, etc.

Here's a good example:

Disagreeing with the *niqab* (full face covering) is not intrinsically Islamophobic. It does become so if:

- ✓ Anyone wearing a *niqab* is discriminated against or prejudiced for this fact

- ✓ A law or policy is introduced targeting *niqab* wearers for their perceived identity, rather than, for example, security
- ✓ Dehumanising language is used to describe that person such as "bank robber" or "ninja"
- ✓ Someone is physically harmed for simply wearing a *niqab*

So, by now you should have a good grasp of what Islamophobia is and what it is not. Before we explore what it looks like, let's quickly reflect upon where it has come from.

The Roots of Islamophobia

As any good interculturalist will know, what we see today has its roots in yesterday. History is key to understanding any modern phenomenon and Islamophobia is no different.

Now, it's important to point out that Islamophobia looks different around the world and much of this is down to history. India's history of Muslims is different to China's, which is different to the Netherlands' and so on and so on.

Although there are intersections between them all, it's important to distinguish between them too. The history outlined below comes from more of a British/W. European/ N. American perspective.

So, where do we look back in history to identify the roots of Islamophobia?

a. The Crusades

As alluded to previously, Islamophobia has been around a very long time. Perhaps the Crusades is the best place to start as this is when the two 'worlds' started to collide militarily, culturally, and economically.

The Crusaders went to the Holy Land and returned with stories of a new enemy; barbarians with curved swords and bows, worshipping a false God with the taste of blood on their lips. Europe was gripped, and perhaps has remained so ever since.

b. Orientalism

A term coined by Edward Said in 1978, Orientalism captures the picture painted of the Arab/Turkish/Muslim world, 'the Orient', within the European imagination.

As more Europeans travelled to this part of the world in the 18th/19th century, more artists started to paint it, more writers shared stories about it and more people became exposed to it. This process in turn made the Orient 'exotic' accompanied with wild stereotypes and inaccuracies all folded into a European-centric world view.

c. The Iranian Revolution

A year after Said published Orientalism, the people of Iran overthrew the authoritarian Shah and welcomed in a new government who turned the idea that 'God is dead' completely on its head.

The new theocracy sent political and social waves across the world. In the West, the revolution was seen as going back to the dark ages. Instantly a new enemy was born (and one that has remained a thorn in their side ever since). Images of Ayatollah Khomeini and Iranians as medieval people following some sort of death cult lingers in the Western imagination.

d. The Clash of Civilisations

Published in 1993, this thesis developed by American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington argued that future wars would be fought not between countries, but between cultures. He identified the "Islamic world" as one such 'culture' being a potential problem for the "Western world".

His work continued the Western tradition of homogenising the Muslim world and identifying it as being at odds with 'our' culture and values. His thesis went on to influence many operating in politics, who adopted it as a paradigm in which to consider global power dynamics.

e. The War on Terror

It's no wonder that within this context, post 9/11, the Muslim world was stigmatised. Although Iraqis and Afghans felt the full force of American firepower in retaliation, Muslims around the world also had to deal with the backlash.

Muslims now really were a threat. The symbolism of 9/11 was made explicitly clear to the Western audience – it's an attack on our values and our freedom. Even more fuel on the idea that Muslims at home 'aren't really one of us.' Subconsciously we learned that we had to be wary of the man with the beard and a rucksack or the lady in hijab saying a prayer on the plane.

d. Refugees and Migration

This brings us to today where, especially in the European context, Islamophobia has become intertwined with the debates around how to manage the influx of refugees and migrants. The fact that many of them come from Muslim majority countries (not surprisingly from places such as Iraq, Iran, Yemen and Afghanistan which have either been destroyed or under sanctions) has created very negative discourse around the topic.

The plight of refugees and migrants has become wrapped up in the wider Culture Wars, in which Muslims are positioned as a foreign threat, coming into our countries illegally, taking up valuable resources and destroying the cultural fabric from within.

Identifying Islamophobia

So, how can we recognise Islamophobia in the real world?

Well, as a form of racism it exists at different levels:

1. systemic (i.e. societal structures)
2. institutional (i.e. organisations)
3. interpersonal (i.e. bigotry)
4. internalised (i.e. belief systems)

Depending on where in the world you live, you will be able to identify different manifestations of Islamophobia at all four levels.

This happens in many ways, including:

a. Stereotyping
b. Denial of equality
c. Islamophobic tropes
d. Harm & violence

Here's some examples from the UK to illustrate further.

a. Stereotyping

There are many common stereotypes of Muslims that exist at a social, institutional and personal level. Muslims are *'intolerant, anti-Western, antisemitic, the men have four wives and they all like bombs'*. These are but a few.

Look at how a Muslim is talked about in the media after committing an act of violence and they'll usually be portrayed as a crazed maniac carrying out Allah's commandments. When someone of the same age and gender does something similar, but is 'white', they'll usually be portrayed as a troubled kid led astray by evil people.

Even in politics Muslims are not safe from Islamophobic stereotyping. It was only a few years ago that ex-Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said of Muslim women in niqab, *"It is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes."* Islamophobic incidents rose 375% immediately after this comment.

b. Denial of Equality

For some people, if you are Muslim then you can't really be 'the same as us'. Denial of equality happens in lots of ways, again at all four levels outlined above. At the street level Muslims have to deal with the "where are you really from?" questions and being told to "go back home" when they've upset someone.

It also takes the form of social marginalisation – with Muslims not having the same access to housing, healthcare, and education. Employment opportunities are also less for Muslims due to discrimination against them (see BBC experiment with CVs).

Another more current example is that of Shamima Begum, a British citizen who went to Syria to join ISIS. She has been refused entry back into the UK due to her dual-nationality. Many point out that others who followed a similar path to Begum were allowed back into the UK, despite also being dual nationals.

c. Islamophobic Tropes

Common tropes include the Great Replacement Theory; the idea that Muslims are going to take over the Western world by flooding in and having lots of babies. Along the way they are establishing Sharia courts, banning Christmas, creating 'no-go zones', slaughtering animals in barbaric ways, marrying child brides, undermining our institutions and wanting global domination.

It's these tropes, informed by stereotypes and fanned by certain elements of the media that feed into society, institutions, and people.

One example of this is the Prevent programme. It's designed for schools and guides them on how to spot children being radicalised. Critics have pointed out that the program does more harm than good because it actually reinforces Islamophobia.

d. Harm & Violence

As with the other examples, harm and violence towards Muslims can be identified at all four levels. In 2021, in the UK, 50% of hate crimes were against Muslims. Mosques have been attacked, as well as people. There are cases of Muslims dying in or after police custody.

A painful example often brought up by the British Muslim community and others is the Grenfell Tower fire. Many of those who died or were hurt were Muslims on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. To this day there has been no justice served with many believing the identity of the victims is the reason.

At a state level it's pointed out that the British government (and others) is very willing to engage in wars in Muslim countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen. Some feel that it has become acceptable within the general public to support such wars or, at best, be apathetic towards them due to the identity of the victims.

Tackling Islamophobia

As we see, Islamophobia presents itself in many ways; some of it obvious, some of it subtle, some of it completely under the radar.

Although our personal spheres of influence may be small, there are still some powerful ways in which we can help tackle the phenomenon.

The following suggestions are simple and practical ways in which 'we' interculturalists can start to positively influence the discourse around us.

1. **Include Islamophobia in racism education**
Whether you are a teacher or trainer, if you are educating people on racism then start including Islamophobia in the content and discussions. This helps widen the debate and add depth to people's understanding of how racism works and what it looks like.

2. **Address personal biases and stereotypes**
Islamophobia exists in us, our families, and our peers, both personally and professionally. We must recognise it, or elements of it, in ourselves and deconstruct why. It's critical we also call it out when we see or hear it and make clear to those around us as to what is acceptable, what is a joke and what is Islamophobic.

3. **Get your facts straight**
There is a huge difference of opinion between Muslims around the world, on all matters, religious or not. When it comes to Islam, we need to start getting into the details of the beliefs and practices. Many of us work on 2nd or 3rd hand knowledge which leads to inaccuracies. Spending time with Muslims, asking questions, observing, and reading are all excellent ways of improving awareness.

4. Recognise Islamophobic tropes

Islamophobia has become part of the Culture Wars and as a result the public space is full of noise when it comes to Muslims. We have to be able to identify and nullify dog whistle Islamophobia and tropes as well as critique the (usually racist) foundations upon which they are built.

5. Identify pernicious actors

We need to be able to recognise public Islamophobes and educate ourselves on how to combat their financers' pernicious influence. Research has highlighted a Transatlantic Network funding Islamophobic activities around the world including figures such as Daniel Pipes (Middle East Forum), Douglas Murray (Henry Jackson Society) and Morris Abram (UN Watch).

6. Actively replace stereotypical images

Islamophobia is heavily influenced by mental imagery. It's time to stop always showing the photos of women in hijabs or burqas and start showing Muslim women that smash the stereotype. Whether it's the people, their countries, or their culture, use images that challenge people to think differently about what or who a Muslim is.

7. Islamophobia Cheat Sheets

For those with little exposure to Muslims or Islam, it can be difficult to differentiate between what is Islamophobic and what is not. We need simple ways to help people analyse the facts. A great example of this is the Riz Test, created by the actor Riz Ahmed, which is a simple but highly effective way of identifying Islamophobia in movies.

8. Include Muslims in the conversation

Muslim representation in many organisations is low. Muslims need to be at the table having a conversation rather than being the topic of a conversation, which will undoubtedly be single-sided. Encouraging Muslim membership through recruitment is one thing, the other is making sure they're felt welcome and accommodated once onboard.

9. Show solidarity with Muslims

Whether at work or in public, when a Muslim is under verbal attack or on the receiving end of abuse, we need to show solidarity through words and action. Active Bystander training with an emphasis on Islamophobia can help us with the tools and techniques to be prepared and effective in such situations.

10. Inform Stakeholders

Materials, guides, training, and support for stakeholders within organisations which can help them manage Islamophobia in the workplace are essential. At school, university or in the workplace if we can raise the level of awareness amongst teachers, HR and management, the more we can tackle the problem.

Contributions

This guide to Islamophobia in no way assumes to be definitive. Our aim was to provide an overview of what it is, what it looks like and to help SIETARians feel more confident in discussing it and therefore dealing with it.

The author Neil Payne is Director of Commisceo Global. He specialises in the Middle East, Islam, and all things intercultural. A TCK influenced by English, Iranian and Arab culture, he has a passion for all things Middle Eastern (especially the food).

If you have any feedback or suggestions on this guide, or would like to send him some baklava, please contact him via his website or Linked In.

Resources

If you would like to read more, then here are some extra resources which may be of use:
- Counter-Islamophobia Kit – by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union
- The Bridge Initiative – a project by Georgetown University
- Combating anti-Muslim hatred – by the European Commission
- Countering and Dismantling Islamophobia – by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (USA)
- Islamophobia education pack resources – by Show Racism the Red Card
- Islamophobia Awareness Month – by IAM