TESSELLATE INSTITUTE

In Brief
Policy Backgrounder: Defining Islamophobia for a Canadian Context

Katherine Bullock

March 2017

About the Institute

The Tessellate Institute is an independent, non-profit research institute that explores and documents the lived experiences of Muslims in Canada.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not necessarily those of The Tessellate Institute, or its Board of Directors. Permission to use or reproduce this paper is granted without fee and without formal request, provided that it is properly cited.

Support Us

This publication is available free of charge at www.tessellateinstitute.com. Please donate and help us continue to offer our publications free online.

Connect with Us

Follow us @TessellateInst

About the Author

Katherine Bullock obtained her PhD in Political Science from the University of Toronto in 1999. She is co-founder and current President of the Tessellate Institute, serving also as its Director of Research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In light of the Canadian debate (February - March 2017) over Liberal Party MP Iqra Khalid's Motion 103, a motion in part to "condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination," this brief examines "Defining Islamophobia in a Canadian Context."

Islamophobia was first used in French (islamophobie) in 1910, but was not used widely in the English language until the 1997 publication of Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, a report written for the Runnymede Trust in the UK.

A new field of academic studies has since emerged to study "Islamophobia." Questions that are explored include: Is "Islamophobia" new or a continuation of historical Western antagonism to Islamdom? What counts as "Islamophobia"? How do we define the term? Is it a "phobia" or are there better terms? Is it connected to racism? How does it relate to other forms of bigotry? Is it similar to anti-Semitism? What is the relationship between anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobia?

The academic debates have not mirrored closely the Canadian public debates over M103. Perhaps because scholars inimical to Islam enter other fields of study most scholars of "Islamophobia" do not see attempts to develop the field as encroaching on freedom of speech, nor as part of "creeping shariah." However, the term "Islamophobia" itself does not actually have widespread acceptance.

The brief then examines some of the many definitions offered for "Islamophobia," including alternatives suggested such as "anti-Muslim racism." Scholars recognise that the phenomenon in question, whatever it is called, is ultimately about exclusion.

Addressing exclusion requires precise responses, at the governmental and societal level. The better the definition of the key term, the easier it is to formulate policy responses and to rally public support. Thus, even if only strategically, avoiding the concepts of "irrationality" in relationship to the phenomenon is preferred.

Anti-Semitism is defined simply as "hostility to or prejudice against Jews." Perhaps we could start with something similarly simple: Anti-Muslim bigotry: hostility or prejudice against Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

Reminiscent of the frenetic debate over faith-based arbitration in Ontario (2005), a heated dispute occurred in February and March of 2017 around Liberal Party MP Iqra Khalid's Motion 103, a motion in part to "condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination."[1] As is often the case in political matters, rigid lines were quickly drawn between supporters and objectors to the motion, with no nuanced ground in between.

A similar motion condemning anti-Semitism was passed unanimously by Parliament without public controversy in 2015.[2] No-one debated the correct meaning of the central term "anti-Semitism, "even though, as Richardson (2015, p. 5) points out the word "antisemitism, for example, is lexically nonsensical since there is no such thing as semitism; and in any case not all Jewish people are so-called Semites, nor are all so-called Semitic people Jewish." Yet "anti-semitism" is agreed upon without controversy as a term describing anti-Jewish racism. In the case of M103, the lines were drawn around the meaning of the key term "Islamophobia." Objectors characterised the motion as an attempt to stifle free speech, with some claiming it is the first step to making Canada a "sharia-compliant" state. When pressed, Khalid said, "What is Islamophobia? The most commonly used definition, and the one I ascribe to, is that Islamophobia is the irrational hatred of Muslims that leads to discrimination."

Denying that there was any attempt either to stifle free speech or to introduce sharia into Canada, many supporters echoed her definitional viewpoint, with NCCM's Amira Elghawaby (2017) suggesting the debate was over "semantics." Tabatha Southey (2017) for The Globe and Mail joked that the debate seen in #M103 was so "fanciful …that #M103 may be the first hashtag nominated for a Hugo Award."

---

[1] Tabled by Mississauga—Erin Mills Liberal MP Iqra Khalid on Dec. 5, 2016. It does three things: (i) Calls on the government to condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination; (ii) Asks the government to recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear; (iii) Requests the Commons heritage committee to study how the government could develop a government-wide approach to reducing or eliminating systemic racism and religious discrimination, including Islamophobia, and collect data to provide context for hate crime reports and to conduct needs assessments for impacted communities. Findings are to be presented within eight months (Harris, 2017).

[2] Text of the anti-Semitism motion (Cotler, 2015):
That, in the opinion of the House:
    a) there has been, in the words of the Joint Statement issued following the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on January 22, 2015, "an alarming increase in Antisemitism worldwide," including the firebombing of synagogues and community centres, the vandalizing of Jewish memorials and cemeteries, incendiary calls for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people, and anti-Jewish terror;
    b) this global anti-Semitism constitutes not only a threat to Jews but an assault on our shared democratic values and our common humanity;
Therefore the House:
    a) declares its categorical condemnation of anti-Semitism;
    b) reaffirms the importance of the Ottawa Protocol on Combating anti-Semitism as a model for domestic and international implementation;
    c) reaffirms, in the words of the Ottawa Protocol, that, "Criticism of Israel is not antisemitic, and saying so is wrong. But singling Israel out for selective condemnation and opprobrium – let alone denying its right to exist or seeking its destruction – is discriminatory and hateful, and not saying so is dishonest;"
And the House further calls upon the government to:
    a) continue advancing the combating of anti-Semitism as a domestic and international priority;
    b) expand engagement with civil society, community groups, educators, and other levels of government to combat anti-Semitism and to promote respect, tolerance, and mutual understanding.

HISTORY OF THE TERM "ISLAMOPHOBIA"

While we are used to criticising academics for what seem like pedantic debates over definitions, the debate over M103 shows that words matter, since language determines how we interpret our world. In this case, the meanings attributed to the words that formed the motion became part of the political event itself (Hall, 2007). In this way the debate itself became a sign of the phenomenon the motion was meant to address: dislike and hatred towards Muslims, and an attempt to discipline Muslims through exclusionary tactics.

On December 7, 2004, then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (Annan, 2004) addressed a Department of Public Information (DPI) seminar entitled "Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding." He lamented that "when the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia."

During Annan's time the term "Islamophobia" was newly entering public consciousness; historians point out that it was coined in French at the turn of the twentieth century - islamophobie - most likely by Alain Quellien in his 1910 book criticising French colonial administrators' view of French-African cultures (Richardson, 2012, p. 3). Its next use seems to be in academic reviews of Quellien's book, and then in a 1916 biography of the Prophet Mohammed by Alphonse Etienne Dinet. English translators rendered the word "islamophobie" as "feelings inimical to Islam" (Richardson, 2012, p. 3).

Edward Said, the Christian-Palestinian scholar famous for his critique of orientalism, seems to have been the first to use the word "Islamophobia" in English, in a single sentence without definition, arguing that Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are "nourished at the same stream (Said, 1985, p.9)."

It was only by 1997 that the word "Islamophobia" began to be used more widely in the English language, being popularized by a UK-based think tank, the Runnymede Trust. A Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, chaired by Professor Gordon Conway, published Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All (Runnymede, 1997). It defined Islamophobia as a "dread or hatred of Islam and therefore, [the] fear and dislike of all Muslims," and as involving eight distinctive features:

1. Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change;

2. It is seen as separate and "other." It does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them;

3. It is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist;

4. It is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a clash of civilizations;

5. It is seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage;

6. Criticisms made of "the West" by Islam are rejected out of hand;

7. Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society;

8. Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal.

While many policy-makers, activists and scholars subsequently adopted Runnymede's definition, others thoroughly criticised it. Christopher Allen (2010) argued that Runnymede's model was flawed since it was based around "open" versus "closed" views of Islam, created an essentialised "good" Muslim which then placed the blame on extremist Muslims for engendering negative stereotypes, rather than innocent victims as in anti-Semitism, and failed to distinguish between religion and race/ethnicity.

A NEW FIELD OF STUDY: "ISLAMOPHOBIA"

A new field of "Islamophobia" studies has arisen since 1997, with UC Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender publishing a journal, Islamophobia Studies Journal, since 2012. With an exponentially expanding number of contributing scholars, nevertheless the field is very young, and still sorting through definitions and scope. Questions that are explored include: Is "Islamophobia" new or a continuation of historical Western antagonism to Islamdom? What counts as "Islamophobia"? How do we define the term? Is it a "phobia" or are there better terms? Is it connected to racism? How does it relate to other forms of bigotry? Is it similar to anti-Semitism? What is the relationship between anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobia?

The academic debates have not mirrored closely the Canadian public debates over M103. Perhaps because scholars inimical to Islam enter other fields of study most scholars of "Islamophobia" do not see attempts to develop the field as encroaching on freedom of speech, nor as part of "creeping shariah." However, the term "Islamophobia" itself does not actually have widespread acceptance.

For many scholars the discomfort with the term stems from an imprecision built into the syllables themselves: "Islam," "phobia." The effects of the "phenomenon," as Allen (2010) points out, are easy to pinpoint (a physical assault; a verbal assault; vandalism; job discrimination, etc.). Defining and comprehending it is less easy. These scholars note that "Islamophobia" is meant to cover possibly too wide a range of phenomena, from speech to actions, to capture a singular thing. They wonder if discrimination is a "phobia" or something else, if it is Islam being targeted or Muslims, if there are other relevant elements, such as immigrant and class status, race, ethnicity and gender to consider, or if its manifestation is a form of governmentality meant to keep Muslims in line with neoliberalism (e.g: Abbas 2011; Allen 2010; Carr 2016; Cesari 2011; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2011; Kaya 2015; Richardson 2012; Sayyid 2010).

ISLAMOPHOBIA: A CONTESTED TERM

Some scholars, like Allen, Gottschalk and Greenberg, Kaya, and Richardson, argue that since the word is in popular use, we have to resign ourselves to it in spite of our discomfort, and then they attempt better definitions. Allen's (2010, p. 190) definition is a long one (a quarter of a page): an "…ideology… similar in theory, function and purpose to racism and other similar phenomenon, that sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam…" Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008) suggest that since the phenomenon is based on a "social anxiety," the suffix "phobia" is not misplaced.

Dekker and van der Noll (2012, p. 112) define the term as "having a negative attitude toward Islam

and Muslims." They argue that "Islamophobia" is not a phobia because it is not a mental illness, and while having a negative attitude may be normal and rational, they worry that increasing negative attitudes toward Islam and Muslims among non-Muslims is a problem as it may result in increased social exclusion and discrimination against Muslims by non-Muslims.

Erik Bleich (2012) locates Islamophobia in the cognitive realm as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims" in order to try and address some of the above concerns. We can worry about the actual individuals or groups who are violent, but we should not broaden our concern unfairly to all Muslims, the majority of whom are innocent of crime.

Stolz (2012, p. 5) suggests that "Islamophobia is a rejection of Islam, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes. It may have emotional, cognitive, evaluative as well as action-oriented elements (e.g .discrimination, violence)."

Others eschew the word completely, seeking alternatives, such as Fred Halliday's suggested "anti-Muslimism," arguing that "Islamophobia" incorrectly locates the phenomenon in an anti-religious identity, whereas Islam is a belief system and people are discriminating against individuals rather than criticising ideas (Halliday, in Allen 2010).

Scholars of racism see Islamophobia as located more in the realm of discrimination – it is a new form of racism, not focused on criticising a religious belief system, rather the cultural attributes and customs of Muslim peoples, thus Muslims have become "racialized" (Meer and Modood, 2010). Some accept the term Islamophobia, with this understanding of it, but other scholars, like Maleiha Malik (2010 in Kaya) prefer the terms "anti-Muslim prejudice" and "anti-Muslim racism," thus "rejecting the pathos and seeming irrationality of the use of the term 'phobia' to describe hostility towards Muslims in favour of a calculated prejudiced orientation (Kaya, 746)."

Carr (2016, p. 42) argues that "anti-Muslim racism" is a better term than Islamophobia because it "alerts us to the underlying processes of racialization that inform contemporary perceptions of Muslimness and Islam," and because the term "racism" is already part of "common-sense" understandings of combating discrimination, therefore easier to mobilise wider society in mitigating prejudice towards Muslims.

In "Thinking Through Islamophobia," Sayyid (2010, p. 2) argues that given the difficulties around the term "Islamophobia," it is "[t]empting to 'clear the decks' and try for a better definition as a solution." However, he suggests that "rather than try and focus on a forlorn quest for the essence of Islamophobia," it is better to study the "range of phenomena marshalled by and mobilisations around references to Islamophobia." A case in point would be the debate surrounding M103.

The point of this brief is not to journey through a "forlorn quest" but to contribute to some understanding of important key terms that are part of the debate over anti-Muslim bigotry. Space limitations mean that all separate definitions of "Islamophobia" cannot be enumerated let alone discussed. Above all, scholars recognise that the phenomenon in question, whatever it is called, is ultimately about exclusion (e.g. Allen 2010; Kalin 2010, Sayyid 2010, Werbner 2005).

Addressing exclusion requires precise responses, at the governmental and societal level. The better the definition of the key term, the easier it is to formulate policy responses and to rally public

support. Thus, even if only strategically, avoiding the concepts of "irrationality" in relationship to the phenomenon is preferred.

There are many definitions of Islamophobia or its alternatives from which to choose, and those emphasising purposeful rejection, bigotry and exclusion are best. Unfortunately many scholars seeking precision in their delineation of Islamophobia develop long definitions. Anti-Semitism is defined simply as "hostility to or prejudice against Jews." Perhaps we could start with something similarly simple: Anti-Muslim bigotry: hostility or prejudice against Muslims.

REFERENCES

Abbas, Tahir (2011). "Islamophobia in the United Kingdom: Historical and Contemporary Political and Media Discourses in the Framing of a 21st-century anti-Muslim Racism," in John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (eds), *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Allen, Chris (2010). *Islamophobia*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

Annan, Kofi (2004). "Press Release. Secretary-General, Addressing Headquarters Seminar On Confronting Islamophobia, Stresses Importance Of Leadership, Two-Way Integration, Dialogue," http://www.un.org/press/en/2004/sgsm9637.doc.htm.

Bleich, Erik and Rahsaan Maxwell (2012). "Assessing Islamophobia in Britain: Where do Muslims Really Stand?" in Marc Helbling, *Islamophobia in the West: Measuring and Explaining Individual Attitudes. Oxon: Routledge.*

Carr, James (2016). *Experiences of Islamophobia: Living with Racism in the Neoliberal Era*. Oxon: Routledge.

Cesari Jocelyne (2011). "Islamophobia in the West: A Comparison Between Europe and the United States," in John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (eds), *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Cotler, Irwin (25 Feb, 2015). Press Release: House Unanimously Adopts Cotler's Historic Motion Condemning "Alarming Rise Of Global Anti-Semitism," https://irwincotler.liberal.ca/blog/press-release-house-unanimously-adopts-cotlers-historic-motion-condemning-alarming-rise-of-global-anti-semitism/

Elghawaby, Amira (February 19, 2017). "Anti-Islamophobia motion offers a chance to take a stand against hatred. Why quibble over semantics?" CBC News Opinion, http://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/m103-stand-against-hatred-1.3988771.

Gottschalk, Peter and Gabriel Greenberg (2008). *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy.* Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Hall, Stuart, (2007). "Encoding/Decoding," in Simon During (ed), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd edition. London: Routledge.

Harris, Kathleen, (February 19, 2017), "5 things to know about the Commons motion on Islamophobia: Liberals, Conservatives debate whether M-103 would tackle prejudice or impede free speech," CBC News http://www.cbc.ca/news/cbc-news-online-staff-list-1.1294364.

Kalin, Ibrahim (2011). "Islamophobia and the Limits of Multiculturalism," in John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (eds), Islamophobia: *The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kaya, Ayhan (2015). "Islamophobia," in Jocelyne Cesari (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam.* Oxford University Press, pp.746-769.

Meer, Nasar and Tariq Modood (2010). "The Racialisation of Muslims," in Sayyid S and AbdoolKarim Vakil (eds), *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives.* London: Hurst and Company.

Richardson, Robin (2012). Islamophobia or Anti-Muslim Racism – or What? – Concepts and Terms Revisited, *www.insted.co.uk/anti-muslim-racism.pdf.*

Runnymede (1997). *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All,* http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/17/32.html.

Said, Edward (1985). "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Race & Class*, Volume 27(2), pp. 1-15.

Sayyid, S (2010). "Thinking Through Islamophobia," in Sayyid S and AbdoolKarim Vakil (eds), *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*. London: Hurst and Company.

Southey, Tabatha, (Friday, Mar. 03), "Will #M103 be the first hashtag nominated for a Hugo Award?" *The Globe and Mail,* http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/will-m103-be-the-first-hashtag-nominated-for-a-hugo-award/article34204500/

Werbner, Pnina (2005). "Islamophobia: Incitement to Religious Hatred: Legislating for a New Fear?" *Anthropology Today,* 21 (1), Feb. pp 5-9.