

Islamophobia – On the Career of a Controversial Term

Introductory Remarks

What is Islamophobia?

Since the early 1990s, the term "Islamophobia" has cropped up in numerous self-presentations and explanations from Muslims living in Europe as the designation for "anti-Islamic" attitudes and "anti-Islamic" conduct. In Germany, "Islamophobia" has long since replaced the older term, "Feindbild Islam" (demonization), which had been in popular usage until then.¹

"Islamophobia" has been used in the western political debate at least since 1997, when the renowned Runnymede Trust published its famous yet notorious paper "*Islamophobia: a challenge for all of us*". The Runnymede Trust authors sought to introduce "Islamophobia" as a distinct category in its own right, to be distinguished from other forms of xenophobia. They defined Islamophobia as "*unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims*" and defined the following eight categories:

1. Islam is seen as a [monolithic](#) bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
2. Islam 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. Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and [sexist](#).
4. Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a [clash of civilizations](#).
5. Islam 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.

Within ten years these eight categories have been elevated to the status of an almost undisputed truth. The statement made by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan during a UN sponsored conference in December 2004 confirmed it. Since that time "Islamophobia" is an official political, but not yet legal term:

"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.' The word seems to have emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today, the weight of history and the fallout of recent developments have left many Muslims around the world feeling aggrieved and misunderstood, concerned about the erosion of their rights and even fearing for their physical safety."²

¹ A crass example is: JOCHEN HIPPLER/ANDREA LUEG, Feindbild Islam oder Dialog der Kulturen. Hamburg, 2002

² FrontPage Magazine, 16 December 2004.

If one googles the term "Islamophobia" today, the result is 1,250,000 references, and WIKIPEDIA offers a quite informative article giving various attempted definitions and also criticisms of the term. Organizations such as "Islamophobia Watch" and "FAIR" are keen to spread their positions on and ensure ongoing discussion of the term, and also list allegedly "Islamophobic" attacks. After the 11 September 2001, the "European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia" (EUMC) made a long compilation of a whole range of very different anti-Islamic incidents in the various EU member states, extending from verbal abuse to physical assault. Although, given the heterogeneity of these incidents and many examples of resounding criticism thereof and solidarity with affected Muslim communities, the EUMC could have produced a more differentiated portrayal, it identified in the 15 EU member states investigated the *"deep-seated nature of Islamophobia and xenophobia."* It offered no substantial definition of "Islamophobia".³

Since then, the political discourse on Islam, Islamism and terrorism has been characterized by a dangerous polarization which harbors the threat of immutable mindsets:

- Every new terrorist attack with an Islamist-Jihadi background brings out politicians, experts on Islam and journalists who identify a dynamic and inevitable tendency to political violence within the religion of Islam itself. Islam is perceived as a whole as a violent religion. Terrorism as manifested in the Jihadi ideology is seen as the logical consequence of Islam's claim to superiority and truth.
- At the same time, diverse organized Muslim groups, from the USA to Indonesia, fiercely contest this. They claim that terrorism has "absolutely nothing" to do with religion. They try to furnish the proof that it is ultimately "the West" itself with its failed integration policy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and its unilateral sympathy for Israel as the "aggressor" in the Middle East conflict which is to blame for the terrorist attacks and lament the increase in "Islamophobia". These tendencies are best in evidence in real-time on the internet: innumerable blogs take sides with Muslims suffering "discrimination" and "persecution" and denounce Islamism and critics of Islam as "racists" and "fascists" (one example of many: <http://www.blogger.com/profile/18931349>)

There is no appetite here to conduct a sober causal analysis of the emergence and spread of Islamist ideology and movements and the growing radicalization of Muslims, particularly in Europe, towards Jihadi terrorism.

Of course I cannot attempt to undertake such an analysis here, nor indeed is this the intention of this brief introduction. I am concerned instead with the term "Islamophobia" and its misuse to prevent legitimate criticism of the religion, culture and civilization of Islam, not just of Islamism and Jihadism. For some time now I have observed, not just in Germany, that even the attempt to analyze links between certain interpretations of Islam and Islamism or Jihadi terrorism is denounced with the allegation of "Islamophobia".

The term "Islamophobia" is older than its usage by the Runnymede Trust in 1997 and it also emerged within a quite different context. The mullahs of Iran spoke of

³ EUMC (ed.), Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001. Vienna, May, 2002, p. 54.

"Islamophobia" as early as 1979 with an explicitly misogynist intent. "Islamophobia" served to condemn unveiled women as "bad Muslims" and was to denounce their refusal to adhere to the dress code of Islam.⁴

The way the term "Islamophobia" is currently being used in the political debate shows that it is supposed not only to denote anti-Islamic attitudes and actions but also serve to suppress in advance any undesired, fully legitimate criticism of Islam as a religious system with specific cultural manifestations. Kenan Malik has cautioned against assuming "Islamophobia" to be the cause whenever and wherever Muslims are the targets of rhetorical or physical attacks. He aptly speaks of the deliberate contrivance of a "*culture of victimhood*",⁵ which leads to self-isolation, the formation of parallel societies and increasing sympathy for political extremism.

The criteria advanced by the Runnymede Trust for Islamophobia are too general, very heterogeneous and cover so broad a range of postulated humiliations, insults and forms of discrimination that one gets the impression that everything negative that Muslims experience from their non-Muslim environment is "Islamophobic".

Let us take a closer look at the Runnymede Trust criteria:

1. **Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.** It is perfectly apt to describe parts of Islam as static and unresponsive to change, as indeed the well-known "Arab Human Development Report" and, following that up, Dan Diner and others have done. The ultraconservative and Islamist refusal to apply modern hermeneutic methods to obtain a contemporary interpretation of the wording of the Qur'an is a particularly clear indication of the ossification of thought in Islam.
2. **Islam 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.** It would be very surprising if we in the West, with our longstanding Judeo-Christian history and tradition, did not see Islam as "separate" and "other". What is "Islamophobic" about seeing one's own identity in critical distinction to another? Muslims call for exactly that – recognition of and respect for their "identity". To deny Islamic influence on the "West" and the possibility of developing a shared set of values would be disingenuous and indeed does not occur in rational discourse.
3. **Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist.** Providing one does not assume a general inferiority "of" Islam, it is absolutely correct to call elements of Islam, particularly the *hadd* punishments of sharia law, primitive and barbaric – as indeed human rights organizations have done for a long time. The charge of sexism is voiced fully appropriately by innumerable women's right initiatives operating in Islamic

⁴ See EBERHARD SEIDEL, Die schwierige Balance zwischen Islamkritik und Islamophobie. in: HEITMEYER, Deutsche Zustände 2, S. 261. On the term: CAROLINE FOUREST/FLAMETTA VENNEN, Islamophobie? Über die Karriere eines Begriffs. <http://www.jungle-world.com/seiten/2003/50/2221.php>

⁵ KENAN MALIK, The Islamophobia Myth (February 2005) www.kenanmalik.com/essays/islamophobia_prospect.html

countries. Sexism is a dominant attitude in Islamic countries and is fully and wholeheartedly endorsed by the predominant interpretations of the Qur'an.

4. **Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a [clash of civilizations](#).** One does not need to belabor Huntington's hypothesis of the "clash" to argue that there are numerous suras (the so-called "sword passages", e.g. sura 9:29 ff.), which classify violence against infidels as the duty of the Muslim. To take issue with this and urge Muslims to undertake a critical analysis of their Qur'an-based traditions of violence is not tantamount to Islamophobia.
5. **Islam is seen as a political [ideology](#), used for political or military advantage.** Islamism without doubt fits the bill exactly for a political ideology which calls for the political hegemony of Islam and seeks to establish that hegemony by violent means. Islamism derives its justification from Islam, whether rightly or wrongly is the subject of controversy. But to see that Islam is used by Islamists as a political ideology is correct and not Islamophobic.
6. **Criticisms made of 'the West' by Islam are rejected out of hand.** Wherever this occurs without self-criticism and in one-sided self-overestimation, there is undoubtedly evidence of an Islamophobic tendency. But the voicing of this type of criticism is confined to only a few groups belonging to the ultraconservative and right-wing end of the political spectrum.
7. **Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.** Wherever there is proof of discrimination, there is a need first to establish whether such discrimination is really founded on religion or whether ethnic and cultural factors also play a role. And where discrimination on religious grounds is found to exist, the West is taking numerous initiatives to remedy it. The best example here is the EU's very wide-ranging anti-discrimination directive and its transposition into national law in the EU member states.
8. **Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal.** The wording here is very strange. I am not aware of any serious and rational political discourse which countenances this claim. By contrast, there is no doubt that such Islamophobia exists in unsophisticated minds. The only remedy here is political education.

These only very brief comments on the criteria set out by the Runnymede Trust suffice to show that only three of these criteria are valid for identifying Islamophobic tendencies and that the others are at best very ambivalent and some simply wrong and ideological.

A few further examples: The 2004 study of the "*Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*" lists a large number of supposedly "Islamophobic" incidents. These cover the entire gamut: from verbal abuse, physical attack, negative stereotyping by the media and in the speeches of politicians, and alleged or only perceived humiliations, insults and discrimination at the workplace to disadvantage in terms of receiving protection against insulting and denigrating pronouncements against Islam in the public domain. As if this heterogeneous compilation is not already a problem in itself, the term "Islamophobia" becomes totally

vague when, without explaining the specific historical circumstances of its origin, the Commission traces Islamophobia back to the 8th century. "Islamophobia" therefore began with the emergence of Islam! This is a frivolous argument which is in fundamental conflict with any attempt at accurate analysis of the very diverse anti-Islamic phenomena occurring through the course of history.

"Islamophobia" is gradually degenerating into a slogan of battle to be brandished against every allegedly "anti-Islamic" attitude, every form of allegedly "anti-Islamic" conduct. For example, representatives of some Muslim organizations are already demonizing a general skepticism about religion as "Islamophobic". Another example: Ahmed Versi, editor-in-chief of the British publication "Muslim News", recently branded the legitimate call by Franco Frattini, Vice-President of the European Commission, to Muslims to build up a European Islam as "racist" and "Islamophobic". *"Talk about creating a 'European Islam' not only indicates that the EU is planning to impose their own version of Islam on Muslims but will create more anti-Western and anti-Christian feeling in the Muslim community."*⁶

The following charge of Islamophobia set out in the above-mentioned study sounds particularly sinister: *"bureaucratic delay and inertia in responding to Muslim requests for cultural sensitivity in education and healthcare and in planning applications for mosques."* Under these terms, the ban on wearing Islamic headgear applicable to Islamic public servants in several of Germany's federal states would be "Islamophobic" or, more precisely, "institutionalized Islamophobia", so too likewise the refusal of planning permission for a mosque. Again under these terms, legitimate government acts seeking a compromise between the right to freedom of religion for a teacher on the one hand and the statutory requirement of religious and philosophical neutrality in the classroom on the other automatically and of themselves invite the accusation of Islamophobia – an absurd claim! The same applies to the building of mosques: if non-Muslim residents win their case against the construction of a mosque using the remedies offered by the rule of law, they expose themselves to allegations of "Islamophobia".

If one strictly applies the Runnymede criteria and acts on the examples set out in the British Islamophobia study, Islamophobia extends from the cartoons of the Prophet in "Jyllands-Posten" and the verbal attacks voiced by Christian fundamentalist politicians such as Pat Robertson and John Ashcroft and authors such as Oriana Fallaci right through to physical assault, denial of special legislation against denigration of a religion, and social and economic "discrimination".

And as soon as a mere correlation made between Islam and political violence suffices to lend authority to a charge of Islamophobia, such well reputed experts on and scholars of Islam as Bernard Lewis, Malise Ruthven, Dan Diner, Bassam Tibi, Tilman Nagel, Abou El-Fadl, Farid Esack, Nasr Abu Zayd and others can be judged to be "Islamophobic". This is the road to Absurdistan!

An example from Germany

In 2002, Wilhelm Heitmeyer, a very well known sociologist in Germany, launched a comprehensive empirical project to measure "xenophobia". For this purpose he developed a sociological construct which he rather verbosely termed "group-

⁶ Muslim News 19 August 2006.

related misanthropy".⁷ He defines the syndrome which describes this as comprising six elements:

- racism
- xenophobia
- anti-Semitism
- heterophobia (denigration of homosexuals)
- the privilege of incumbency (repression of newcomers by incumbents)
- sexism.

He later added the element "Islamophobia", but through none of his investigations since 2002 has he been able to produce a satisfactory substantive definition of Islamophobia. Nevertheless and despite the fact that empirical findings actually militated against its conclusion, the study claimed that Islamophobia is on the rise in Germany. The questions which were put here in order to identify and measure Islamophobia were extraordinarily problematic. The 2002 study asked for views on the following:

1. "Muslims in Germany should have the right to live according to their own laws.
2. It is up to Muslims alone to decide when they call the faithful to prayer by loudspeaker."

The respondents were asked to reply using a ranking system (I don't agree at all, I am inclined not to agree, I am inclined to agree, I agree fully). The results showed that 29% of the respondents were against Muslims having the right to live according to their own laws and that 44.7% were against the assertion that it is up to Muslims alone to decide on calling the faithful to prayer by loudspeaker. These respondents were therefore qualified as "Islamophobic". To my mind, this is a gross error of judgment, because what does it mean simply to agree that Muslims should have the right to live by their own laws? These laws, the laws of their religion, incontestably include the sharia and all the physical (*hadd*) punishments which this codifies. Of course, one is not Islamophobic if one is against the introduction of sharia law – on the contrary one is defending the universal human right to bodily integrity.

At a later stage in the project (2003), Islamophobia was characterized by three elements:

1. General rejection of Muslims
2. Cultural disparagement of Islam
3. Hostile conduct to Muslims

Here, the research team found that the highest approval rates (49.7 and 74.2% respectively) referred to the "cultural disparagement of Islam". The two statements used to measure "cultural disparagement" (by the aforementioned ranking system) read as follows:

1. Islam has produced an admirable culture.
2. Muslim culture fits well with our western world.

⁷ Cf. WILHELM HEITMYER, *Deutsche Zustände. Folgen 1-4 (2002-2006)*. Frankfurt/Main.

Nowhere is a definition of "culture" offered. Each respondent could have his or her own idea of what "Islamic culture" was supposed to mean. Any respondent answering "no" to the second statement was deemed to be Islamophobic. But what if that respondent understood "Islamic culture" to include the forced marriages, honor killings and genital mutilation which are anathema to the concept of human rights?

Conclusion: Because of methodological imperfections, Heitmeyer could not demonstrate that Islamophobia exists to any significant extent in Germany!

Despite some dismaying surveys (Allensbach, 2004 and 2006), it cannot be concluded that there is either a demonization of Islam which is *consistent over time* or broad-based tendencies towards Islamophobia in Germany.

In a survey conducted by the opinion-polling Allensbach institute on 17 May 2006, 91% of the respondents associated Islam with "discrimination against women" (compared with 85% in the 2004 survey), 83% (compared with 75% in 2004) judged Islam to be "fanatical", 62% (compared with 49% in 2004) thought it to be "backward-looking", 71% (compared with 66% in 2004) considered it "intolerant", and 60% (compared with 52% in 2004) saw it as "undemocratic": all these as reported in the 17 May 2006 edition of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.⁸

Such surveys are never more than snapshots of public opinion. The image of Islam in the German mind is much more differentiated. Serious attempts are being made to introduce religious instruction in Islam into education in Germany, conflicts concerning the construction of mosques arise only seldom, and innumerable dialogue initiatives are attempting to organize peaceful co-existence through contacts with the communities attached to mosques. But all that is not enough to deter some 30,000 Islamists organized in various groupings, of whom several thousands are classified as inclined to violence and some 300 even as immediate "threats", i.e. people who the police believe capable of committing acts of terrorism. Terrorism is also a serious threat for Germany. There can be no doubt that mistrust has grown in Germany, and there are sound reasons for that growth of mistrust – as the two recent and, at the last-minute foiled, attempted luggage bombings demonstrate.

"Islamophobia" and anti-Semitism

A particularly fatal tendency can be identified in the attempt to see Islamophobia and anti-Semitism as related, if not indeed identical phenomena. At least since the June 2005 OSCE Conference in Cordoba, it has been primarily because of interventions by Muslim representatives that the term "Islamophobia" is today used to mean the same as the term "anti-Semitism". In the explanatory words of the chairman of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony, Imam Abduljalil Sajid: *"The fact is that Islamophobia has replaced anti-Semitism as the new sharp end of racist issues in the world today. Last year at the OSCE I said*

⁸ FAZ, 17 May 2006-

*'Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are two sides of the same coin' and it is an evil plague of Europe which is full of hate and re-emerged during recent years."*⁹

On many occasions German representatives of Islam have pointed out that Muslims in Germany could soon suffer the same fate as that suffered by the Jews during the "Third Reich". This is an outrageous and infamous assertion devoid of any justification. Intellectuals such as the media expert Sabine Schiffer are currently comparing the anti-Semitism debate of the second half of the 19th century with the contemporary debate on Islam and Islamism.

Islamophobia, as I hope to have shown above, is a vague term which encompasses every conceivable actual and imagined act of hostility against Muslims. By contrast, and despite the lack of any scholarly and political consensus on it as a term, anti-Semitism is considerably clearer and less ambiguous. Anti-Semitism is directed, with an ultimately eliminatory aim, uniquely at world Jewry. Anti-Semitism is inspired by the idea of physical destruction, as is demonstrated by its history and spread. Islamophobia does not have as its aim the physical elimination of "the Muslims"; it is instead an undefined *angst* in the face of the negative by-products of a religion, a culture and a civilization. This *angst* needs to be addressed in all its manifestations. One way - among others - of doing this is through a critical and contentious dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims.

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⁹ ABDULJALIL SAJID, A new word for an old fear. OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance. <http://www.osce.org/item/9735.html>