



## ISLAMOPHOBIA

### ANALYSIS OF THE TERM AND ITS CONTEMPORARY DEFINITION

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**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to investigate the origin, meaning and definition of contemporary Islamophobia in the academic literature. It discusses how the term originates in a French context and has been adopted in English usage as researched by scholars. Moreover, it gives a comparative analysis of the various definitions and meanings provided by scholars and organizations on Islamophobia that manifests in contemporary times. Although, in its most basic sense, Islamophobia is a fear and hatred towards Muslims and/or Islam the causal factors and its relation with Xenophobia, Racism, Geo-Politics, Culture and Religion are the areas much debated in the academia as regards what constitutes Islamophobia. As such, the meaning and definition of Islamophobia is a much debated topic.

**IndexTerms – Islamophobia, Origin, Definition**

#### I. INTRODUCTION

'Islamophobia' is a novel term for the phenomenon of fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims that has been prevalent since the time of the rise of Islam in the 7th century. The nature of Islamophobia, however, has varied over time. Events such as the World Trade Centre attack, the 2005 attack in London, the 7/7 Madrid Bombings, and the subsequent West's 'War on Terror' mark a threshold in the contemporary global positioning of Islam and Muslims. Terms such as "Islamic terrorism", "Islamic extremism", "Islamic bombs", "Islamic fascism", "violent Islam", Jihadism etc. have come to be related with Muslims and the Islamic ideology creating a negative and threatening identity. Perceptions of stagnation, barbarism, backwardness and hostility have been developed towards Muslims and Islam resulting in an increasingly chaotic and dreadful political and social environment, both at the national and international level. The recognition of Islamophobia as an identifiable phenomenon of anti-Muslim discrimination emerged in London in the late 1980s(Allen, 2010). Its abrupt public emergence in the USA is directly linked to the aftermath of 9/11(Moffic, et. al., 2019). Contemporary reports such as that of the Pew Research Centre (March 2021) provides empirical evidence of the intensity and nature of Islamophobia (tracked by hate crimes, verbal and physical abuse and institutional discrimination) in the West, whereas much as 78% of the citizens acknowledged discrimination against Muslims. Similarly, the SETA European Islamophobia Report identifies Islamophobia in as many as 32 (out of the 44) European countries(Bayrakli & Hafez, 2019). Islamophobia is thus a critical Global concern, with calls for regarding it as a 'Humanitarian crisis' from some quarters(Hussin, et. al., 2014). Although Islamophobia is common parlance in the media and public discourse, the precision of the term and the phenomena it depicts are among the highly debated aspects among the academia. This is important because it pertains to not only a very crucial aspect related to Muslim socio-religio-political identity particularly in the West and at the Global level, but also pertains to the local and global integration among Muslims and other cultures in contemporary times and a matter of concern for global peace.

In this regard, this paper seeks to portray the vital issues in contemporary discussions among the academia viz. what is the meaning of Islamophobia? Whether the term 'Islamophobia' truly depicts the undercurrents of socio-political factors causing it or it only portrays a religious and ideological conflict? And How should it be defined? These are the questions that this paper seeks to discuss. The current paper has undertaken an analysis of the term 'Islamophobia' as it is deemed important to determine the precision and suitability of the term for the phenomena it represents. Also, the conception of Islamophobia has been examined through a review of the meaning and definition of the term in contemporary literature. For this purpose, the paper has adopted the descriptive-analytical method of inquiry.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section traces the origin of the term 'Islamophobia'. The second section deals with the analysis and meaning of the term and the last section reviews the definitions of Islamophobia in contemporary literature.

#### II. GENESIS OF THE TERM 'ISLAMOPHOBIA'

This section aims to analyze the origin of the term 'Islamophobia'. It is well known that the term came into the limelight through print media and is a new terminology belonging to the modern period. It came into popular use in 1997 after the publication of a report entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" by a British NGO named 'The Runnymede Trust'.

Especially after 2001, it has become widespread, mostly in its socio-political connotation, largely due to media hype, the NGO's, other institutions and the public worldwide. However, the context of its initial use and the source in which it originated is contested. In the following, a chronological review of the opinions on its origin and first use is made.

According to López (2010), the first use of the term is said to be in 1910 in the French language as '*Islamophobie*' in an article entitled '*l'état actuel de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*' (trans. The Current State of French West Africa) published in '*Revue Du Monde Musulman*' (trans. Review of the Muslim World). It was used in the context of French Colonialism in Africa. It was again used in 1910 in the same context in a book entitled '*La Politique Musulmane Dans l'Afrique Occidentale Française*' (trans. Muslim Politics in French West Africa), as well as in a PhD. Dissertation by Alain Quellin. The latter portrayed Islamophobia as a religious prejudice between Christians and Muslims. However, according to Allen, the French word '*Islamophobie*' was first published in print in the 1920s and then in the 1970s wherein both the cases it referred to disputes and differences within Muslims rather than a force against Muslims. According to him, it referred to the fear of adopting a traditional way of life after the Iranian Revolution of 1970. However, this view opines for a much later date of the emergence of the term than the one previously mentioned. It is also less probable that the term was used for fear of Islam among Muslims and highly unlikely that it was later translated into English to use for a phenomenon considerably different in nature - a hostile attitude and action of non-Muslims towards Muslims. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word Islamophobia was first used in 1923 in English, in the Journal of Theological Studies in an article by Stanley A. Cook entitled 'The History of Religions'. Here, it was used in the context of a critique of Orientalists' peculiar 'rationalizing' of Islamic Theology and History. In another opinion, the term was used in 1925 by Etienne (Nasiruddein) Dinet and Sliman Ben Ibrahim in French in an essay entitled '*L'Orient Vu de l'Occident*' (trans. 'The East seen from the West'). In their work, they defined Islamophobia as the "*persistance of Europe's more or less disguised hostility against Islam.*" To them, Islamophobia was not in connection to specific colonial policies but was used to describe the general ill-treatment directed at the colonized Muslim subjects. In yet another view, its first use was in 1985 by Edward Said in his article 'Orientalism Reconsidered' in the light of his 'Orient vs. the Occident' thesis.

Further, it is also opined that the term was coined by Muslim scholars to depict the rising anti-Muslim/Islamic sentiments and threats in the US. Another opinion suggests that Islamophobia is a term invented by Islamists who promote the idea of Islam that seeks political domination. While Muslims who oppose this view are called heretics, non-Muslims who challenge it are labeled 'Islamophobes'. While anti-Islamic/Muslim sentiments are not rejected as myth, a new term "Islam-bashing" instead of Islamophobia is suggested to depict the phenomenon.

Thus, there is no consensus on the origin and the originator of the term in contemporary literature. The word appears to have been coined as analogous to Xenophobia, but exactly when, where and by whom, remains uncertain.

### III. A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE TERM 'ISLAMOPHOBIA' AND ITS DEFINITION

The term 'Islamophobia' is a compound word made from 'Islam' and 'phobia' which is a Greek word used as a suffix in the English language to portray 'fear' or 'aversion' towards something. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), 'Phobia' is defined as "*a persistent and irrational fear of a specific situation, object, or activity which is consequently either strenuously avoided or endured with marked distress*". A phobia is classified as a type of anxiety disorder as anxiety is the chief symptom experienced by the sufferer. In a phobic attack, while the initial fear produced by an original threatening situation is often repressed or forgotten, its memory is transferred to other similar situations resulting in a 'perceived fear' while the situation may not be dangerous. Phobia is thus a learnt response, however manifesting abnormally. Normally, the phobic person tries to avoid that situation in the future which helps in reducing anxiety. It is noteworthy that although Islamophobia is a behavioral problem and strongly linked to underlying attitudes and emotions, it does not emerge from purely cognitive or psychiatric issues. In psychological phobia, it is a negative attitude affecting the cognition, health and behaviour of a patient. As such, in the opinion of some scholars, Islamophobia, as it manifests, is not a psychological fear because in a phobia it is the sufferer who feels distressed which causes an abnormal behaviour to take place, often in the form of avoidance or repulsion for fear of encountering the feared object. In Islamophobia, it is the object of fear such as a person perceived to be Muslim or an object associated with Muslims or Islam that come into distress as they become the targets of attack. In several instances, these attacks are tagged hate crimes by the police, i.e. an action that emanates from hate. Thus, the action in Islamophobia is not that of repulsion or avoidance but that of verbal or physical assault and confrontation. Moreover, (Iqbal, 2010) criticizes the use of the word 'phobia' to describe antagonism towards Islam as it stands for strong irrational fear while the manifestations of Islamophobia involve more than mere negative emotions including deliberate offensive actions and attacks against Muslims.

Linguistically, 'Islamophobia' means irrational 'fear', 'anxiety' or 'phobia' of Islam and so according to some scholars it is a form of psychological phobia. This is substantiated by Lee et al. (2009) who define the term as "fear of Muslims and the Islamic faith." Lee et al. (2009) note that fear 'activates escape and avoidance motivated behaviour' and 'vigilance to stimuli associated with impending danger'. Similarly, Abbas (2004) explains it as "the fear or dread of Islam or Muslims." The definition that is given by the OIC (2015) also portrays the psychological aspect of Islamophobia when it states that, "Islamophobia is a condition of phobia viz.-a-viz. Islam and Muslims, which develops into hostile behaviour, including verbal and physical abuse against Muslims, their scripture, holy personalities and symbols including assault against mosques, cemeteries and religious centers." What these definitions mean are that Islamophobic people have an actual fear of Islam or Muslims. This fear may or may not have any manifest causes or reasons to be felt. This conception of the term may be substantiated based on Islamic theology wherein God is the one who instills fear into people's hearts' although no observable event or evidence to incite this fear exists. Moreover, this conception of Islamophobia as fear and hostility towards the religion of Islam is also the most common perception among the common Muslims. According to Pratt(2016), although the fear of extremists who identify themselves as Muslims and take to violent means is a rational response. However when this threat and the related fear is generalized to all Muslims, this according to him is a typical phobic response that loses the capacity for proper perspective and appropriate discrimination. This generalizing of fear produces pervasive anxiety that in turn breeds phobias in individuals. As such, Islamophobia is a form of phobia generating not from genetic or medical conditions but environmental factors.

However, there are other meanings of Islamophobia in contemporary literature as the phenomenon encompasses aspects such as political stratagem, socio-economic and racial discrimination, prejudice and securitization of Muslims, discrediting Islam etc. emanating not necessarily from (or only from) religious hatred but socio-economic and political determinants. According to Bleich

(2011), Islamophobia emerged as a political term and is used extensively in political discourses, but in academia, it is used to depict a social reality of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments that are multi-dimensional and multi-causal, in Western Liberal democracies. As per Cesari (2006), the term can become misleading as it covers up other reasons for the hostility such as racial or class discrimination under religious discrimination. Similarly, Richardson (2013) suggests that a disadvantage of using the word is the implication that hostility towards Muslims is unrelated and dissimilar to other forms of hostility such as racism, xenophobia and sectarianism. He adds that it may also imply that there is no correlation with issues of class, power, status and territory or with issues of military, political or economic competition and conflict that have a role in generating the hostility and fear of Muslims. In this regard, he argues that the phenomenon to be addressed is 'anti-Muslim hostility' which manifests as hostility towards an ethno-religious identity of Muslims as a social group within Western countries instead of a wider hostility towards the tenets or practices of the worldwide religion of Islam. As per Gottschalk and Greenberg (2007), the central issue is with political Islam and not the Islamic religion. They contend that Islamophobia is not a consequence of a negative personal experience with Muslims but the acceptance and internalization of negative stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in mass media and political discourses, which are concerned with political Islam than the religion of Islam. Hence, they prefer to call it 'a social anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures'. Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary sustains this opinion as it describes Islamophobia as "Intense dislike or fear of Islam, esp. as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims". Others have criticized the term because it is applied to a phenomenon that has diverse causes, and it implies fear of Islam as a faith when the "true" problem is negative stereotyping of Muslims as a people. As such, the term may not be suitable to demonstrate the extent of overlapping factors causing it.

Moreover, the propounders of Islamophobia posit that the term be rejected altogether as no such phenomenon exists. They assert that it is a bogus aiming to silence genuine criticism of Islam and the protection of Western civilization from being infiltrated and overrun by Muslims. As cited by Duderija & Rane (2019), Malik (2005) also opines that Islamophobia only serves as a way for Muslim leaders to secure power and for politicians to demonstrate sensitivity to Muslims while simultaneously approving intervention in Muslim countries or supporting anti-terrorism policies that are sources of agitation among Muslims. Interestingly, the term has been openly embraced by prominent public figures (such as British journalist Polly Toynbee who wrote "I am an Islamophobe, and proud of it," while Sunday Times columnist Rod Liddle presented a talk entitled "Islamophobia? Count me in") which suggests that anti-Muslim / Islamic attitude, genuine or made-up exists for real. Such figures play a crucial role in creating a distrust of Islam as a doctrine rather than hostility towards Muslims as a group (Bleich, 2011).

Following the above, deeper deliberation reveals an apparent conflict in the meaning of the term Islamophobia. It is unclear whether Islam or Muslims portray a threat as a religion and a religious community, or that other socio-economic issues such as Muslim immigration and settlement pose a threat to the political and economic environment of the Western countries. Islamophobia portrays not only political factors but also gives a label to a social reality that Islam and Muslims have become objects of aversion, fear and hostility as well as the subject of discrimination, stereotyping and scapegoating in contemporary liberal democracies. As such, a review of the definitions of Islamophobia becomes important to determine how it is defined and conceptualized. The term is now extensively adopted in public and political discourses across the globe and has become common usage. Although it depicts an incomplete picture of the underlying issues and also risks tarnishing the name of the religion of Islam, nevertheless, it serves as a colloquial term for an increasing manifest and impactful global phenomenon.

In one aspect, while Islam/ Muslims have become objects of fear, they have also become subjects or victims of discrimination, hate and other negative actions. It also remains undecided whether Muslims are feared for being followers of Islam or the religion of Islam is feared for being attributed to Muslims. In this regard, the most common understanding of Islamophobia is that it relates to a perceived fear of Islam and/or Muslims which results in discriminatory, criminal and hate oriented behaviour towards objects and symbols perceived to be associated with Islam and/or Muslims.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF THE DEFINITIONS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

A definition is a statement of the exact meaning of a word. However, concerning Islamophobia, a variety of definitions are found. This affects the clarity and rigour of a concept that is still vague. To define it is analytically important to achieve a scientific and objective knowledge of Islamophobia, that is measurable which can be employed for policy formulation. To conceptualize and measure Islamophobia helps us to compare its levels of intensity, its manifestation across space and in social groups and other factors.

In this regard, Bleich (2011) sees the solution to this problem in a contextual analysis of Islamophobia that has a shifting definition embedded in specific contexts. But, this would not allow for a comparative analysis of Islamophobia across space, and thus a need for a definition arises. Therefore, he defines Islamophobia as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims." There are three main aspects of this definition. First, indiscriminate which means that random judgment is a factor to identify Islamophobia. As such, not all criticism and disagreement constitutes Islamophobia. Second, negative attitudes or emotions include aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger and hostility which may constitute Islamophobia. Third, the negative attitudes may be towards Islam (as religious doctrine) or Muslims (as a people) which means that Islamophobia is multidimensional by nature and that Islam and Muslims are often inextricably intertwined in individual and public perceptions.

As per Allen (2010), 'Islamophobia is an ideology, similar in theory, function and purpose to racism, that sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar ways to that which it has historically, although not necessarily as a continuum, subsequently pertaining, influencing and impacting upon social action, interaction and response shaping and determining understanding, perceptions and attitudes in the social consensus – the shared languages and conceptual maps – that inform and construct thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other.'

The Runnymede Trust (1997) gave the first terminological definition of Islamophobia in its report titled 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All'. According to it, Islamophobia is 'unfounded hostility towards Islam as well as the discrimination against Muslims that result from it.' The phobic dread of Islam is a recurring feature of the closed view. It made a dichotomous division of open and closed views about Islam to define Islamophobia. Its framework distinguished between the two views as follows:

1. Whether Islam is seen as monolithic and static, or as diverse and dynamic.
2. Whether Islam is seen as other and separate, or as similar and interdependent.
3. Whether Islam is seen as inferior, or as different but equal.

4. Whether Islam is seen as an aggressive enemy or as a cooperative partner.
5. Whether Muslims are seen as manipulative or as sincere.
6. Whether Muslim criticisms of 'the West' are rejected or debated.
7. Whether discriminatory behaviour against Muslims is defended or opposed.
8. Whether anti-Muslim discourse is seen as natural or problematic.

Its definition focuses largely on the secondary dimensions of the concept, but it also mixes in some indicators and even effects of Islamophobia (such as discrimination and exclusion) that are best kept separate.

Hafez (2018) has analyzed the schools of thought in studying Islamophobia. He presents the three schools of thought viz prejudice studies, racism and decolonialism, each of which has its definition for Islamophobia. According to Prejudice Studies Islamophobia emanates from social-psychological behaviour. It is an expression of mentalities and actions and a form of prejudice. Two definitions are examples of this approach. According to The Bridge Initiative, a project headed by John L. Esposito at Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding Georgetown University, "Islamophobia is prejudice towards or discrimination against Muslims due to their religion or perceived religious, national, or ethnic identity associated with Islam. Like anti-Semitism, racism, and homophobia, Islamophobia describes mentalities and actions that demean an entire class of people. Jews, African-Americans, and other populations throughout history have faced prejudice and discrimination. Islamophobia is simply another reincarnation of this unfortunate trend of bigotry." According to this definition, Islamophobia is first and foremost about Muslims. Similarly, according to Benz Islamophobia is a form of "resentment." He states that "resentments start as prejudice and can culminate in hatred of stigmatized individuals, groups, and ethnic, religious or national communities; hatred that is released by violence". In the second approach, Post-Coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, inter-subjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. As per this approach, Islamophobia is a mechanism to substantiate power structures that were founded in the colonial period that aim to govern the subjects they have constructed. According to the last approach, Decoloniality, Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations. Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended.

According to Green (2015), 'Islamophobia is hatred, hostility and fear of Islam and Muslims and the discriminatory practices that result.'. According to him, discrimination constitutes part of Islamophobia, although it is one of its consequences. The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (2007) defines Islamophobia as "a baseless hostility and fear vis-a-vis Islam, and as a result a fear of and aversion towards all Muslims or the majority of them" and that it also refers to the "practical consequences of this hostility in terms of discrimination, prejudices and unequal treatment of which Muslims (individuals and communities) are victims and their exclusion from major political and social spheres." Lastly, the OIC (2017) states: 'Islamophobia is a phenomenon related to notions of fear, hate, and anger; of which one sequentially following another. Within such a cycle, 'fear' was the initial reason of Islamophobia, and in this case the fear was against Islam and anything associable with this religion i.e. Muslims, mosques, Islamic center, minarets, the Holy Qur'an, Hijab, and so on. Very often, such a fear is directed towards certain practices like Halal food standard, men with beard, type of dress and clothes, or simply towards names that sounds 'Arabic'. All those things made the Islamophobes to 'hate' the all above-mentioned hence Islamophobia also constitutes racism and discriminations against Muslim individuals in their daily life, in media, in workplace, in political sphere, etc.' this definition includes the psychological aspect, the mechanism and the modes of operation of islamophobia, and regards it as a form of racism that permeates various levels of society and politics, although does not elaborate on how hatred leads to racism while the essence of racism lies in creating self identity by inferiorizing 'the other'.

## V. FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the debate on the origin, meaning and definitions of Islamophobia in contemporary academic literature. Concerning the origin of the term 'Islamophobia', the latest opinion is that it emerged in 1910 in the context of French colonization of Africa, more than 100 years from contemporary Islamophobia, to depict a fear of Islamic resurgence among the Muslim subjects. However, there is scope for further research to identify the inventor as well as an earlier source using the term. Upon analysis of the meaning and definitions of Islamophobia proposed by scholars and organizations, the following main points can be deduced

1. There is debate on whether the primary object of fear is Islam and/or Muslims,
2. Whether it is manifested in discourses, attitudes, sentiments and/or actions, and
3. Whether it is distinctive or indistinctive from other discriminatory phenomena such as racism and xenophobia.
4. All definitions agree that Islamophobia is about a negative attitude such as fear, hostility or hatred towards Muslims and/or Islam and that it results in some form of physical or verbal abuse and discrimination.
5. Scholars differ on the factors causing Islamophobia and a variety of opinions are found in this regard.

As such, the debate on achieving a consensus on the definition and meaning of Islamophobia is still ongoing, and the need to arrive at one is also contested. This is especially in the face of the fact that the factors giving rise to Islamophobia are highly contextual to the situation/ society it manifests in, although its manifestation in different contexts is very similar. Nevertheless, as a global phenomenon, a standardized meaning and definition is the need of the hour for practical management and measures to combat this increasing negative practice, at the global as well as the local level.

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