

Islamophobia: An Impediment for Freedom of Religion and Harmonious Co-Existence in Pluralistic Societies

Unsa Jamshed*

Amar Jahangir[†]

Syed Mudasser Fida Gerdazi[‡]

Abstract *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other international legal instruments provide freedom of religion to individuals and communities globally. Therefore, all the nations of the world agree to allow and respect the relevant religious practices for the followers of any particular religion. By virtue of its teachings and values, Islam was found as a religion of peace and harmony. But unfortunately, since the last two decades, especially after 9/11, the sentiments of Islamophobia have been rising. The existing literature shows the emerging Islamophobia is causing victimization of Muslims all over the world and particularly in the west, which is escalating with the passage of time. This victimization has created feelings of hatred among the various communities and has an impact on global peace. This study analyses the factors that lead to Islamophobia and its implication on the harmonious co-existence of societies.*

- DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2021(VI-IV).16
- Vol. VI, No. IV (Fall 2021)
- Pages: 168 – 173
- p- ISSN: 2520-0348
- e-ISSN: 2616-793X
- ISSN-L: 2520-0348

Key Words: Islamophobia, Religion, Minority, Peace, Humanity, Freedom, Societies

Introduction

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, protect freedom of religion or belief. Moreover, the International Human Rights Law protects various associated factors like worship, places of worship, religious symbols, holidays and days of rest, clergy, and teaching or disseminating materials (Bielefeldt, 2010). The list of protected elements is long; however, it remains a question whether all protections are physically accessible everywhere and for all individuals and groups.

On a similar side, Islamophobia may be interpreted as intolerance towards the Muslim community or Islam. The term Islamophobia is not the new one, it has existed for centuries, but this phenomenon intensified in the west after the terrorists attack on the American twin towers 9/11 (Lean, 2012). The growing sentiment against Muslims or Islam is a threat to the peaceful co-

existence of societies as well as it poses a challenge to the survival of universal democracy. The state where Islamophobia is strengthening is actually the culprit of basic human rights that is the base of the formation of the United Nations to provide basic human rights to all humans irrespective of gender, caste, and creed, and all member states of the UN are bound to follow.

Islamophobia indicates an era of racism in many European countries and America (Kumar, 2012). These states considered the values of Islam as incompatible to their secular system. It is widely argued that there are many organizations working globally on the promotion of Islamophobia, which is backed by their respective governments. American President Trump, during his election campaign, highlighted his anti-Muslim sentiments. He promised to ban Muslim immigrants, shut-down many mosques, proposed to issue special identification cards for Muslims, and ban the entry of Muslim women in Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

* Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, Women University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Bagh, Pakistan.

[†] PhD Scholar, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: amirjahangir82@gmail.com

[‡] Assistant Professor, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Pakistan.

After coming into power, he fulfilled some of his promises. American National Security Advisor Michael Flynn also served as an advisor to the anti-Islam group that was founded by Brigitte Gabriel. Flynn also called Islam a "Malignant Cancer" (Mangle, 2016). Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) figured out only thirty-seven such organizations involved or worked on the anti-Muslim and anti-Islam activities in America. According to the Director CAIR-St. Louis, Syed Faizan, in twenty-nine States of America between 2011 and 2013, anti-Islam bills were passed, and in 2013, seven states had adopted such discriminatory laws ([Report of CAIR, 2015](#)). The government of France had also taken such measures that promoted anti-Islam sentiment in society. If the top leaders or officials of the world have such discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims or any particular religion, then what would be the behavior of others because they are claiming themselves to be the Champion of Human Rights. Foregoing in view, one may imagine the behavior or intolerance of citizens of the west towards other communities in their societies.

Measures taken to Promote Islamophobia

It is evident from the last two decades that Europe and America had taken such measures that had promoted anti-Islam sentiments in the West. Followings are a few such steps.

Visa Ban for the People from Muslim Countries

After 9/11, many people applying for a visa for any of the Western or European states did not get it; the reason was they were from the Muslim majority states. If few were succeeded in getting the visa, then many of them were stopped at the airport for so-called security reasons because they looked like Muslims or were Muslims. The Muslims that are coming back from *Hajj* (pilgrimage) or from any other place were stopped at borders or airports and taken them aside and asked them different religious questions to identify that they were more religious, less religious or just cultural Muslims. Because West defined Islam in two terms Radical Islam or Islam and threaten from Radical Islam. They consider radical Islam as an extremist branch of Islam, although there is only one Islam. Females wearing headcover covers also have to pass such treatment even the security personnel can get the intensity of their affinity with religion

by the way they are covering their head or by the colour of their headcover. This discriminatory security check is only for Muslims and not for others. While keeping its security, America after 9/11 imposed visa restrictions on almost twenty-five States. All these states were either a Muslim majority population or a Muslim state except North Korea ([Counihan, 2007](#)). President Trump publicized the "travel ban" in 2018 once again. Under this policy, citizens of five Muslim states, Iran, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, were restricted from traveling to America ([Bier, 2019](#)).

Restriction on Hijab

Islam defined the dress preferences for males as well as for females. According to this dress code, males are restricted to cover themselves from bally button to knees at a minimum while women have been directed to cover themselves completely except their hand's feet, and face (Asser, 2006). The Muslim world that stretched from Indonesia to Morocco observes these Islamic values differently. Such as, in some Muslim countries, women even cover their hand by using gloves and face by a veil, and sometimes they use to cover their eyes either by transparent cloth or cloth having small hole ([Angel, et al., 2004](#)). Hijab (scarf or head cover) and veil (covering the face) comes under severe criticism in Europe. In many European countries, hijab is restricted at public transport, official places and at markets. The official ban on hijab started in 2011 in Europe from France. France is the country that has the largest Muslim population in Europe. Although from 1989 hijab was under discussion and criticism in France, when three girls were expelled from school by their head just because they were wearing hijab ([Grillo et al., 2012](#)). France was followed by Belgium (2011), Russia (2013), Switzerland (2013), Italy (2016), Bulgaria (2016), Austria (2017), and Denmark (2018), respectively ([BBC News, 2018](#)). These states have not only banned the hijab, but a few of them also have introduced a penalty for the wearing of the hijab. France announced a fine of 150 Euros while Netherland exceed to 410. The data in the year 2015 showed that France have collected such fines from 1,546 people. Fine is also introduced in Italy but not imposed in practice, while Bulgaria imposed fine ranging from 15 to 25 Euro, one to seven days imprisonment, and also cut off all the benefits for those females who are wearing hijab ([Gull, 2019](#)).

Denmark also announced punishments for the ones who wear hijab. In the UK, Germany, and Spain hijab is not fully ban, but in many cities, the ban is observed ([Merkel, 2016](#)).

The more discouraging thing is that more than half of the populaces of these states are also favoring the imposition of a ban on hijab. Many feminists and seculars not only from Europe but across the world considered the wearing of hijab as outdated and or a threat to women freedom. Boris Johnson, being former Foreign Secretary of UK, has called women wearing a veil as "Letter Box". He faced huge criticism on such an irresponsible statement ([BBC News, 2018](#)).

Many scholars believed that the imposition of a ban on the veil is a violation of religious freedom. Women in European states have chosen the veil for themselves as religious distinction and repelling sexual attention. Article 9 of 'European Convention on Human Rights' protects religious freedom and the restriction on hijab can also be judged as a violation of this Convention. Although there are very few Muslim women that use to cover their face but the restriction on the veil targeted Islam and promote the marginalization of Muslims in Europe. Muslim women wearing hijab became the victim of abuse and harassment in public places. Females wearing hijab find it difficult to get a good job in Europe, and many are terminated from their jobs either ([Haward 2014](#)).

Impertinent Illustrations of the Prophet MUHAMMAD (SWS)

Homegrown violent radicals terrorize innocent masses in today's world. In January 2015, accused Al Qaeda in Yemen and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) agents assassinated twenty employees of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Previously, Charlie Hebdo had published stories that were brutally critical of Islam, including representations of the Prophet MUHAMMAD (S) that were insulting. In November 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for gunshots and a suicide bombing in Paris. According to critics, many of the criminals were born and bred in France, implying that a growing separation between French Muslims and institutionalized discrimination may be contributing factors to violent radicalization and increased extremist recruitment among disgruntled youth ([Engy, 2017](#)).

Mosques under Attack

Muslim worship places that are called mosques or masjids also come under target in Europe and show the sentiments of Islamophobia or hate for Muslim Community.

The Finsbury Park Mosque in the UK became the victim of Islamophobia once in 2017 and again in early 2020. In 2019 attacks on five mosques in the city of Birmingham, UK, were reported. Birmingham is the city where every fifth person belongs to the Muslim faith ([Karasz, 2019](#)). In Norway, Al-Noor Islamic Centre came under attack in August 2019, when a 22-years old Norwegian opened fire, no casualty was reported in response to this attack ([Libel, 2020](#)). An attempt was made in France to set on fire a Turkish mosque in northern France's Chateaudun. This attack on mosque is a series of attacks on Muslims in France. President Emmanuel Macron closed down almost seventy mosques and Islamic schools in France that are run by private owners ([Ozcan, 2020](#)). In January 2017, in Quebec Islamic Centre, Canada, a gunman targeted thirty-five people that were engaged in prayers. This attack left with six dead while five were seriously injured. The mosque in Toronto was closed as it came under attack six times in three months, and the Mosque administrator received severe threats of attacks by email. Before this the caretaker of 'Etobicoke Mosque' was attacked and killed by extremists in Canada ([King, at all, 2020](#)).

The Christchurch Mosques in New Zealand came under attacks in 2019. A gunman attacked two mosques in town and planning to target a third one. Due to this attack fifty-one innocent people offering Friday prayer were killed. This was one of the worst attacks on Muslims in recent history and the attacker had the intention to kill a maximum number of worshipers. This indicates the extreme hate that the attacker had for Muslims ([BBC News, 2020](#)). The Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that the anti-Mosque incidents are increasing in America day by day. Only in 2017, the increase in such incidents are recorded as 125 % from the previous years. Many Mosques in America are victims of vandalism, although many of these mosques served as a shelter for many Americans during the disastrous hurricanes Harvey that hit the south and southeastern region of America ([Arian, 2017](#)).

In many European countries, even the non-Muslim communities have reservations about the call for prayers, and in many countries, the project for the construction of new Mosques in the localities was not approved by authorities ([Engy, 2017](#)).

Factors Contributing Towards Islamophobia Misperception about Islam

There is a misperception about Islam in the West because Islam is related to terrorism and extremism there, especially after 9/11. People in Europe and America think that Muslims hate them and have adverse thinking about them. This perception is based on the fact that many extremist and terrorist organizations are using the name of Islam for their own interests and many of them have their own political motives.

Threat to Secular Values of West

There is a theory prevailing in the West and European countries that the codes and conduct of Islam are against their secular culture. Islam is found as a threat for their secular society. The ban on veil or hijab is supported by such views of people.

Growing In-Tolerance

It comes under observation that the tolerance factor that is essential for the co-existence of diverse culture and religions are eliminated from the young generations. The growing intolerance in the youth of the west is very alarming that indicates the extremism in society. The attacks on worship places, abusing the one who is wearing a veil and job insecurity for such females are few such indicators that show the factor of in-tolerance for peaceful co-existence.

Name of Terrorist Organizations

Another factor that contributed towards the growing Islamophobia in the West was the name of many terrorist organizations are on the name of Islam or reflecting Islamic terminology like "Hizb-i-Islami (HiG), Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Harakat-ul-Mujahadeen (HuM), Tehrik-i-Taliban (TT), Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Sudan-based Islamic Relief Agency (ISRA), Markaz-ad-Dawa-Wal-Irshad (MDI), Indian Mujahideen (IM), Al-Qaeda (AQ),

Anjuman Sipah-e-Sahaba (ASSP), Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafari (TNFJ), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)" etc. Many of these organizations have their base camps or breeding grounds in the different Islamic States, and many of these organizations were banned by United Nations in different times due to their close linkage with terrorist activities or sponsoring terrorism across the world.

Conclusion

Islam is under severe threat and criticism in the West. The reason is that from 9/11, it alleged terrorism and extremism all over the world. The Muslims that are living for centuries and decades in various Western countries are now a victim of discriminatory regulations introduced by several states. The introductions of such laws that particularly target one religious community indicate the extremist mindset of authorities and the masses of the West that lead to the destruction of peace in the world. This also led to clashes of ideologies and threatened the world survival in the broader spectrum. Khaled A. Beydoun and Deepa Kumar also supported this argument. Beydoun described the "war on terror" as the war on Muslims while Kumar described it as an era of anti-Muslim racism.

The analysis shows that in the West, the governments of many states are also responsible for inculcating extremist sentiments in their populace. In many states, the person who keep beards and females wearing hijab are treated as aliens. Such people have to wait for hours for security clearance during travels. When some particular religion becomes the target, then many people come to defend it of many get against it, so clash or argument leads towards other severe conflicts. This situation would disrupt the peaceful environment of any country and such cases are reported increasingly day by day, which would become a challenge for peace in the future among pluralistic societies, countries and regions.

The study infers on the basis of analysis that no religion of the world promotes terrorism and extremism. The people that are involved in such activities do not belong to any religion actually, and they are against the humanity and also enemy of the collective peace and prosperity. Such people have their own motives which result in their targeted works accordingly. Therefore, mere labeling any religion with few criminal

intimidations would not allow anyone to snatch the freedom of religion and belief from anyone. Neither any racial attitude is in favour of tranquility and human development.

Recommendations

There are few suggestions to promote peace at world level and discourage to target any religion that becomes cause to threaten the world peace and become challenge for peaceful co-existence,

- Any such organization material or site that is promoting hatred against any other community would be restricted.
- All discriminatory laws that target any particular sect, religious group or minority may promptly be abolished.
- The debates, seminars and conferences at national and international level may be organized which promote interfaith harmony.
- The worship places of all communities should be declared as sacred places, and severe punishment is announced for those who try to damage or target the holy place of other communities.
- It is the prime responsibility of all states to provide foolproof security on special prayers days of different communities, like Friday prayers for Muslims and Sunday prayers for Christians.
- All states of the world should develop such curriculum for students that are addressing the tolerance and patience.
- Lesson of humanity must be disseminated at all levels and religious discrimination should be discouraged at very stage.

References

- Abdelkader, E. (2017). A Comparative Analysis of European Islamophobia: France, UK, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden. *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law*, 16(1).
<https://doi.org/10.5070/n4161038735>.
- Angel, M., Rabasa, A. M., Cheryl, B., Chalk, P. C., & Fairs, C. (2004). *The Muslim World After 9/11*. RAND Corporation.
- Arian, Z. (2017). *Religious Principles drive Muslim to respond to disasters*.
<https://www.oilandgasint.com/>.
- BBC News, (2018). *The Islamic veil across Europe*.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13038095>
- BBC News, (2020). *Christchurch shooting: Gunman Tarrant wanted to kill 'as many as possible*.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53861456>
- BBC News. (2018, August 6). *Boris Johnson faces criticism over burka "letter box" jibe*.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45083275>.
- Bielefeldt, H., Jahangir, A., Amor, A., & Ribeiro, A. A. (2010) *Rapporteur's Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief*,
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion>.
- Bier, D. J. (2019). *Travel Ban Separates Thousands of US Citizens from their spouses & Minor Children*. CATO Institute.
- CAIR Report, (2015). *Open Letter to GOP Nomination Hopefuls Urging them to Engage Muslim Voters and Reject Islamophobia*.
- Counihan, C. R. (2007). *American Immigration Policy Since 9/11: Impact on Muslim Migrants*. *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Policy Brief # 19*.
https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2007_American-immigration-policy-since-911.pdf?x10865
- Grillo, R. & Shah, P (2012). *Reasons to Ban? The Anti-Burqa Movement in Western Europe*. Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Queen Mary University of London.
- Gull, M. (2019). Explained: France's problem with the burqa. *The Indian Express*, New Delhi.
- Howard, E. (2014). Islamic veil bans: the gender equality justification and empirical evidence. *The Experiences of Face Veil Wearers in Europe and the Law*, 206-217.
- Karasz, P. (2019). UK Police Investigating Attack on 5 Mosque in Birmingham. *The New York Times*.
- King, A., & Draaisma, M., (2020). *Toronto mosque remains closed after it receives violent threats, police investigating*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/downtown-toronto-mosque-shut-down-violent-messages-police-investigating-muslims-council-1.5759840>.
- Kumar, D. (2012). *Islamophobia and The Politics of Empire: The Cultural Logic of Europe*. Haymarket Books.
- Lean, N. (2012). *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims*. Pluto Press.
- Libell, H. P., & Specia, M. (2020, June 11). *Norway Mosque Attacker Gets 21-Year Sentence*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/world/europe/norway-mosque-attacker-convicted.html>
- Merkel, A. (2016). *Press Talk of Chancellor*.
www.bbc.com/news/world-Europe-13038095
- Ozcan, Y. (2020). *Arson Attack Targets Mosque in France*. Anadolu Agency.