

Examining the Trends of Islamophobia: Western Public Attitudes Since 9/11

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Abstract

This article examined the trends of Islamophobia by looking at the changes in Western public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam that have occurred since 2001, in addition to the factors that have influenced such changes. It employed both qualitative and quantitative analysis in analyzing current public opinion poll data borrowed from: Angus Reid Global, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, the National Association of Muslim Police and the Arab American Institute. In addition, it analyzed current media reports that similarly illustrate Islamophobic trends after 9/11. Results indicate that the most dramatic increase in Islamophobic attitudes towards Muslims and Islamic institutions occurred in the UK immediately after 9/11, with a common theme exhibiting itself in comparing the various country reports and public opinion poll data examined in this study – namely, the involvement of factors such as Islamic clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims in inciting Islamophobia. In addition, results indicate that rather than decrease over time, as was initially hypothesized, Islamophobic attitudes are currently on the rise.

Key words: Islamophobia, Public opinion, Western attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

A. Conceptual Origins and Terminological Legitimacy

The conceptual origins of ‘Islamophobia’ are as debated among scholars as its terminological legitimacy. Most scholars attribute the term’s first usage to Alphonse Etienne Dinet, a French Muslim convert and orientalist painter who used the term in his book *The Life of Mohammad the Prophet of Allah* in 1918 (2009, p.3). Recent usage of the term, however, is credited to Edward Said’s article *Orientalism Reconsidered* (1985, p.99). However, not all scholars agree on the legitimacy of its usage, seeing it as a means by which to prevent any and all criticism of Islam. For example, Roger (2006) writes, “the word ‘Islamophobia’ is a misnomer. A phobia describes an irrational fear, and it is axiomatic that fearing the effects of radical Islam is not irrational, but on the contrary very well-founded indeed, so that if you want to speak of a legitimate phobia...we should speak instead of Islamophobia-phobia, the fear of and revulsion towards Islamophobia” (p.4). Likewise, Paul (2011) discusses how “[the term ‘Islamophobia’] can be used by jihadi Islamists to close down discussion on genuine areas of criticism regarding threats or actual acts of violence that jihadi ideologies promote” (p.11). Novelist Salman Rushdie (2009), as well, has engaged in criticism of the term’s usage in labeling ‘Islamophobia’ “a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatisation of those who believe in it” (p.104). Regardless, however, of arguments over its conceptual origins and terminological legitimacy, Islamophobia has undoubtedly become a more marked phenomenon in recent years—namely, after 9/11. This article seeks to examine the trends of Islamophobia by looking at the changes in Western public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam that have occurred since 2001, in addition to the factors that have influenced such changes. To do so, it will rely on

current public opinion poll data borrowed from: Angus Reid Global, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, the National Association of Muslim Police and the Arab American Institute. In addition, it will analyze current media reports that similarly illustrate Islamophobic trends after 9/11. It hypothesizes that the more recent public opinion poll data will exhibit less Islamophobic attitudes.

B. Contextualizing Islamophobia in the Post-9/11 World

Curtis IV (2009), in *Muslims in America: A Short History*, illustrates well the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans immediately in the wake of 9/11. These examples provide good context for this study not only because they depict Islamophobia but because they also depict the Muslim American response to both 9/11 and Islamophobia itself. The author begins this illustration by discussing a situation that occurred between one of his neighbors, a Baptist preacher who had lost a son in Iraq, and another local church leader, the Rev. Dr. Henry Gerner (2009, pp.ix-x). Curtis' neighbor had opposed the idea of the Indianapolis International Airport allowing the installation of ablution stations, or footbaths, to accommodate Muslim taxi cab drivers (2009, p.ix). The arguments put forth in support of them, aside from attitudes that sought to foster religious freedom and tolerance, were quite practical: 1) the footbaths were more sanitary than the alternative, which involved many taxi cab drivers being forced to perform their ablutions with empty plastic bottles outside of the airport and 2) "The money would come from airline-generated revenues, not taxes" (2009, p.ix). What occurred thereafter was a "citizens' rally" set up by the author's neighbor as well as a counter-protest by Gerner (2009, p.x). According to Curtis, "[Gerner] held a sign in his hand and stood outside the preacher's church. One churchgoer attempted to force the sign out of Gerner's hand, but Gerner... would not yield the sign. As the hand-to-hand struggle ensued, Gerner eventually fell to the ground..." (2009, p.x). Just as important as this account is the reason behind the Baptist preacher's opposition to the installation of the footbaths. According to the preacher, such an action would entail "fraternization with the enemy" (2009, pp.ix-x). Curtis adds, "[the preacher] opposed the addition of the sinks on the basis that this was a first step toward 'Islam's desired goal, which is to thrust the entire world under one single Islamic caliphate under sharia law'" (2009, p.x). This is just one of the examples that Curtis provides in illustrating the antagonism between non-Muslims and Islam immediately after 9/11. Interesting to note is that obviously neither of the parties involved were Muslim, yet the conflict between them had nonetheless been rooted in Islamophobia - in this case, in the Baptist preacher's fear of Islam and what he had perceived as being Islam's "desired goal" (2009, p.x).

Curtis illustrates, also, that Islamophobia is not limited to adults. For example, he discusses how some Muslim boy scouts were discriminated against at a national convention. He writes, "At the 2005 National Scout Jamboree...not all non-Muslim boy scouts were ready to accept Muslim scouts as equals. As Shemaz Hemani waited his turn at the jamboree's shooting range, a white boy teased him, asking, 'What's up, Jihad?'" Another Muslim scout was called 'Saddam' by one of his peers" (2009, p.110).

Curtis provides examples, however, not only of Islamophobia but of Muslim-American responses to the tragedy of 9/11. He illustrates these responses in writing:

For many Americans, including Muslim Americans, the attacks inspired national solidarity in the face of fear and insecurity. After the attacks, for example, some Muslims placed flowers and cards outside of the Muslim Council Center mosque in Washington, D.C., where a large American flag hung in the entrance to the building. In Paterson, New Jersey, Muslims hoisted a banner on Main Street proclaiming that "The Muslim Community Does Not Support Terrorism." All across the country, mosques and Islamic centers flew the American flag and opened their doors to non-Muslims. Muslims sought to educate their non-Muslim neighbors about Islam and reassure the public about their loyalty to the United States and their love of the American dream. Many Americans visited a mosque for the first time, often attending information sessions on Islam in which Muslim leaders explained that Islam is a peaceful religion that does not condone terrorism (2009, pp.97-98).

Indeed, it is important to note that although the tragic events of 9/11 served as a catalyst for the incitement of hatred towards Muslims and Islam through acts of violence, discrimination and hate crimes - i.e., Islamophobia - it also, as illustrated above, provided an opportunity for both non-Muslim and Muslim Americans to come together and learn more about one another in order to combat the very racism that is Islamophobia.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Allen (2010) conducted a study in partnership with the National Association of Muslim Police (NAMP) that investigated the findings of recent research conducted on Islamophobia in order to establish greater evidence of its existence as a social phenomenon. To do so, the results of some of the works published from 2002-2010 by the European Monitoring Centre for Racism & Xenophobia (EUMC), the Commission on British Muslims & Islamophobia, the Open Society Institute, the European Muslim Research Centre and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights were examined. Much of the report's findings confirm the direct relationship between the events of 9/11 and the subsequent rise in Islamophobia as well as its associated acts of violence and discrimination. For example, with regard to the EUMC's 2002 report, it states, "research undertaken across the breadth of the European Union (EU) showed

that following the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11), Muslim and other vulnerable communities became targets of increased hostility” (2010, p.5). Interestingly, however, in referencing a report made by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), it states, “anti-Muslim sentiment has emanated from a vast array of sources and taken on a range of manifestations building upon premises that were already pre-existent to the events of September 11 and may even have been strengthened by them” (2010, p.7). Nonetheless, the report concludes with good evidence that supports the existence of Islamophobia as a social phenomenon. It concludes with recommendations to target inequalities not only within the Muslim community, but within society as a whole, as well as to conduct more extensive research into Islamophobia in order to enable us to more effectively combat it.

Sayyid (2014) examines the etymological roots of Islamophobia in relation to orientalism before discussing its contemporary usage as made popular by the 1997 report of the Runnymede Trust, which defines ‘Islamophobia’ as “unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (2006, p.1). The author subsequently discusses the controversy surrounding the term, emphasizing the politics involved in its usage. Sayyid moves on to situate Islamophobia within racism and anti-Semitism in general, arguing that “the invention of Islamophobia enables the analysis of various forms of violence, violations, discriminations and subordinations that are directed toward Muslims” (2014, p.20). Frost (2008) investigated the relationship between Islamophobia and the media’s portrayal of Muslims in Britain. Results confirmed a link between such portrayal and violence against British Muslims. The study concluded with a call for more inclusiveness for all marginalized segments of society.

Lambert and Githens-Mazer (2010) examine the relationship between Islamophobia, violence and hate crimes in the UK. They do so with a view toward factors such as clothing that is commonly known to identify Muslims, the role of groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) in inciting violence and the role of non-politically-aligned groups and individuals who are influenced by the negative stereotyping of Muslims in the media (2010, pp.31-32). Important for the purposes of this study, the authors draw a direct link between the events of 9/11 and an increase in violent activities directed towards both individual Muslims and Islamic institutions such as mosques. They write, “Since 9/11, Muslims in the UK have faced increased intimidation and violence because their faith or political activism has often been maliciously and falsely conflated with terrorism, extremism and subversion... Since 9/11, arson, criminal damage, violence and intimidation against mosques, Islamic institutions and Muslim organisations has increased dramatically. Many mosques in isolated Muslim communities have become particularly vulnerable” (2010, p.32). The

authors conclude by recommending greater governmental efforts to prevent Islamophobia and its associated acts of violence and discrimination towards Muslims and Islamic institutions, greater grassroots involvement in working to combat Islamophobia and more inclusivity on behalf of the government with regard to effectively communicating with and involving representatives of Islamic institutions and the Muslim community as a whole.

2. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative analysis in analyzing current public opinion poll data borrowed from: Angus Reid Global, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, the National Association of Muslim Police and the Arab American Institute. In addition, it analyzed current media reports that similarly illustrate Islamophobic trends after 9/11.

Interestingly, public opinion seems invariably to sway in favor of Christian institutions in contrast to public opinion attitudes towards Islamic institutions. For example, Angus Reid Global states that “Nearly seventy per cent of Quebecers hold an unfavourable opinion of Islam, but a favourable opinion of Christianity” (2013). Similarly, The National Association of Muslim Police (2010) cites the British Social Attitudes Survey as claiming that “more than half would oppose the building of a large mosque at the end of their road as opposed to 15% who would object if it was a church” (2010, p.22). One trend is consistent, however; regardless of whether public opinion attitudes are more favorable towards Christianity than Islam, the majority of these attitudes are Islamophobic to a greater or lesser degree. For example, a poll taken approximately ten years after 9/11 - on September 6, 2011 - illustrates attitudes towards clothing that commonly distinguishes a person as Muslim. It states, “Nearly half of Americans would be uncomfortable with a woman wearing a burqa, a mosque being built in their neighborhood or Muslim men praying at the airport. Forty-one percent would be uncomfortable if a teacher at the elementary school in their community were Muslim” (2011). Indeed, recent public opinion polls seem to show no decrease in Islamophobic attitudes. A 2013 BBC poll, for example, illustrates that “more than a quarter of young Britons [do not] trust Muslims” (2013). A 2006 Washington Post-ABC News poll shows that “[46% of Americans] held unfavourable attitudes towards Islam – compared with 24% in January 2002” (2006). According to the Huffington Post, “One in four young people in Britain distrust Muslims and think the country would be better off without them” (2013). And lastly, the Arab American Institute claims that “there has been a continued erosion in the favorable ratings Americans have of both Arabs and Muslims, posing a threat to the civil rights and political inclusion of both Arab Americans and American

Muslims. For example, in 2010 favorable ratings for Arabs were 43 percent. They have now declined to 32 percent. For Muslims, the ratings dropped from 36 percent in 2010, to 27 percent in the 2014 survey” (2014).

The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), in partnership with Allen and Nielsen (2002), conducted a cross-comparative analysis¹ of acts of violence and discrimination in the EU after 9/11 (2002, p.5). While acknowledging pre-existing conditions that set the stage for the rise of Islamophobia post-9/11, the authors do find a sharp increase in Islamophobic trends. They write,

Islamic communities and other vulnerable groups have become targets of increased hostility since 11 September. A greater sense of fear among the general population has exacerbated already existing prejudices and fuelled acts of aggression and harassment in many European Member States (2002, p.5).

Unlike the other reports examined in this present study, the EUMC report also acknowledges the role of Middle Eastern conflict in perpetuating and reinforcing Islamophobia (2002, p.5). The authors analyzed 15 country reports from: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This present study is concerned with those findings that relate directly to the trends of Islamophobia after 9/11- i.e., the changes in Western public attitudes post-9/11.

With regard to Austria, no sustainable change in public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam was noted. The authors write, “It was felt that a sharp rise in suspicion immediately following events caused an initial prejudicial surge before the situation quickly reverted to normal” (2002, p.14). In Belgium, however, a noticeable change in public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam was noted. The authors state,

In the direct aftermath of the attacks on the US, no physical assaults on Muslim communities were reported, although verbal attacks were frequent. Changing attitudes towards ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, especially the Muslim communities were noted. Despite an absence of physical attacks, a growing intolerance of Muslims was acknowledged, especially in Brussels (2002, p.15).

Due to attitudinal conditions already in place pre-9/11, the Denmark report not only illustrated a considerable rise in Islamophobic attitudes but also many instances of violence and discrimination towards Muslims. The authors continue,

Following the attacks on the US the NFP noted a dramatic and prolonged upsurge of both verbal and physical attacks on Muslims in Denmark, although it simultaneously stated that

Danish media were already ‘drenched’ with negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. Typically it was verbal and physical threats being made, particularly to those visually identifiable Muslims, in particular women wearing the hijab. Included in this observation were a significant number of death threats. Attacks were also aimed at mosques and commercial property belonging to Muslims. Graffiti, arson and the use of firebombs were all noted...A number of opinion polls confirmed that the Danish majority believed that September 11 had made them become more negative towards Muslims, where the vast majority of the population felt that Muslims should be made to take lessons in Danish democratic values (2002, pp.15-16).

Finland ranks among those countries with the least noticeable attitudinal changes towards Muslims and Islam post-9/11. The Finland report mainly illustrates incidents involving clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims. In this regard, the authors write,

Few identifiable changes in attitude or acts of aggression were noted by the NFP, although those Muslims who looked ‘different; to the indigenous population acknowledged a difference and became much more visible targets for verbal abuse and prejudice. Incidents were few and tended to be insults in the workplace and on the street. The idea of Muslims as “different” was noticeable in the abuse of women wearing the hijab (2002, p.17, italics added for emphasis).

Interestingly, Finland showed exceptional support towards Muslims and Islam post-9/11. Media, governmental, and grassroots efforts aimed at combating any and all forms of Xenophobia in general and Islamophobia in particular. The authors write,

The media in Finland [acted] with responsibility towards Muslims and other ethnic minorities. Various platforms for Muslim voices were provided, and a strong anti-racist and anti-xenophobic message was expressed in Helsingin Sanomat. There was also a rise in the number of younger people reading newspapers, along with a widespread public demand for more information about Islam, with sales of literature on the topic dramatically increasing (2002, p.17).

Similar to the Austrian report, the report on France illustrated a notable rise in suspicion towards “Muslims and those of Arab descent, in particular North Africans, women wearing the hijab and bearded men” (2002, p.18). In Germany, “A change in attitude in the public domain was...identified where attitudes towards people of non-German appearance deteriorated quickly” (2002, p.19). Interestingly, the Greece report did not show a rise in violence and discrimination or in Islamophobic attitudes towards Muslims and Islam (2002, p.20).

There seems to be a common theme in the country reports with regard to Islamic clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims. The Ireland report, for example, states, “Incidents were restricted mainly to those individuals and groups that appeared to be either of Muslim or Arab descent, where *visually identifiable Muslim women*, asylum seekers and some of the small Sikh community became targets” (2002, p.21, italics added for emphasis). Similarly, in Italy, “A marked change in attitude was noted...towards immigrants and

¹ This study has been carried out on behalf of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). The opinions expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the position of the EUMC.

asylum seekers, as well as those of Arab descen” (2002, p.22). Importantly, the Luxembourg report cites the assimilation of Muslims “into wider society” as a reason for a lack of incidents of violence and discrimination towards Muslims and Islam. They write,

The Luxembourg NFP acknowledged that the low incidence of such sentiment was due to the way in which the Muslim community was well integrated into the wider society, and that there are very few visible identifiers of Islam to be seen. No mosque exists and women wearing the hijab are extremely rare (2002, pp.23-24).

The Netherlands report, on the other hand - and in line with the other country reports - emphasizes the role of Islamic clothing in incidents of violence and discrimination towards Muslims and Islam. The authors state, “verbal abuse and hostile treatment were the most prevalent [incidents], *with visibly identifiable Muslim women wearing the hijab being probably the most significant target*” (2002, p.24, italics added for emphasis). Perhaps the country report most in-line with the Finland report is that of Portugal, where “The overall picture was one of reconciliation between both Muslim and non-Muslim” (2002, p.26). Spain showed no immediate reactions exhibiting Islamophobia immediately after 9/11, although shortly afterward “a shift in attitude towards Muslims was noted in the discourse of individuals ‘on the street’” (2002, p.26). It is unsure, however, how much of these attitudes were a direct result of the events of 9/11 and how much were pre-existing. For this reason, the authors write,

Most of this expression of anti-Muslim sentiment were directed towards those of Moroccan descent, which drew upon a deeply embedded and pre-existent ethnic xenophobia that was in evidence long before September 11. Those who ‘looked’ Muslim were also increasingly discriminated against and issues relating to immigration and asylum seekers became entwined with the entire debate (2002, pp.26-27, italics added for emphasis).

Similar to the reports on Ireland and Portugal, the authors cite with regard to Sweden, “Muslim women and schoolchildren as well as mosques became the most identifiable targets” (2002, p.28). Lastly, the United Kingdom report, in addition to illustrating an increase in violence against Muslims and Islamic institutions, exhibits a trend similar to the previous country reports with regard to Islamic clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims. In this regard, the authors state,

A significant rise in attacks on Muslims was reported across a range of media in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Numbers of incidents of violent assault, verbal abuse and attacks on property were noted, some of which were very serious. Muslim women wearing the hijab were easily identifiable and widespread targets for verbal abuse, being spat upon, having their hijab torn from them and being physically assaulted. A number of prominent mosques around the country were similarly attacked, ranging from vandalism and graffiti to serious damage through arson and firebombs. Threatening and explicitly Islamophobia messages were also widely circulated over the

Internet and through e-mails. Telephone calls, anonymous posts and threatening messages left on car windscreens were observed. Sikh men also found that they became a significant target (2002, p.29).

The United Kingdom report undoubtedly illustrates the most dramatic and violent reaction that occurred as a result of Islamophobia post-9/11. While many of the country reports - such as that on Spain, for instance - emphasized the pre-existence of attitudinal conditions for an increase in Islamophobia post-9/11, most all of the reports exhibit a common theme: that one of the major factors involved in the increase in Islamophobic attitudes towards Muslims and Islamic institutions in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 is the readily identifiable Islamic clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify Islamophobic trends as exhibited in Western public attitudes after 9/11 by examining the possibility of pre-existing attitudinal conditions that contributed to the rise of Islamophobia as well as some of its causal factors. Qualitative and quantitative analysis revealed two major themes in the data: 1) the role of Islamic clothing that commonly distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims in inciting violence and discrimination towards Muslims and Islamic institutions and 2) the steady rise in Islamophobic attitudes more than a decade later - thus contradicting this study’s hypothesis that more recent public opinion poll data will exhibit less Islamophobic attitudes. Indeed, the tragic events of 9/11 not only caused a sharp rise in Islamophobic attitudes in the immediate aftermath thereof, but continue to account for the violence and discrimination Muslims and Islamic institutions still face today. The results of this study point to the necessity of further observational research that will track future changes in Islamophobic trends. It is the hope of the author that such future research will, rather than contradict this present study’s hypothesis, confirm it by illustrating a sharp global decline in Islamophobic attitudes.

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