Muslims’ Coherent Strategy Against the Rise of Islamophobia in France

Bukhtawer Pervaz\textsuperscript{1} and Tahama Asad\textsuperscript{2}

ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDIES JOURNAL
VOLUME 7, NO. 1 Spring 2022, PP. 56–65.

Published by:
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,
Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley

Disclaimer:
Statements of fact and opinion in the articles, notes, perspectives, and so on in the Islamophobia Studies Journal are those of the respective authors and contributors. They are not the expression of the editorial or advisory board and staff. No representation, either expressed or implied, is made of the accuracy of the material in this journal, and ISJ cannot accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made. The reader must make his or her own evaluation of the accuracy and appropriateness of those materials.

DOI:10.13169/islastudj.7.1.0056
ABSTRACT: Islamophobia is one of today’s most divisive terms. Some claim that there is no such thing as the “fear of Islam,” as it is literally translated. Islamophobia, or anti-Muslimism, is a visible fact, not an academic debate. Since the 9/11 attacks and the 2005 London bombings, Muslims in the West and wherever they live as a minority have been subjected to intense scrutiny. Islamophobia in France is not a new phenomenon and the recent murder of Samuel Paty in France is undoubtedly tragic, but the rise in Islamophobia needs to be discussed by the Muslim World. This article further analyzes the French President’s reaction towards Muslims, which has brought the attention of the world towards the realization that Muslims and religious security is of great concern and needs to be protected. The article aims to explain the strategy of Muslim World about the rise of Islamophobia in France and also discusses what Muslims need to do to take immediate measures against France and the rise of Islamophobia.

Key words: Islamophobia, Muslim World, diplomacy, coherent strategy, peace

INTRODUCTION

“A city that was once so flourishing has been captured, ravaged, despoiled and completely sacked by the most inhuman barbarians and by the fiercest of the wild beasts,” says an excerpt from the letter written by the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople Cardinal Bessarion to the doge of the Venice, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. This perception about the Muslims of the Middle Ages depicts the deeply rooted fear, hatred, and loathing against Muslims in the hearts of other religions. The literal meaning of the term Islamophobia is “the baseless fear of Islam.” Different dictionaries lay out different definitions of the term, which eloquently define the historic as well as contemporary baneful attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. In order to comprehensively understand this concept and its connotations, it is important to look up these definitions. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary: “Islamophobia is the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or the people who practice Islam.” The Cambridge Dictionary also undertakes a similar approach on Islamophobia as: “Unreasonable dislike or fear of, and prejudice against Muslims or Islam.” According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary this irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or the people who practice Islam is called Islamophobia. However, Oxford Dictionary and Collins Dictionary adopt broader and relatively more adequate definitions considering the present realities associated with the concept. The Oxford Dictionary adds the political undercurrent to the concept and defines it as: “Intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims.” Whereas Collins Dictionary gives the most succinct and all-encompassing account of all: islamophobia is “Hatred or fear of Muslims or of their politics or culture.”

Examination of the attitudes of notables towards Islam and Muslims, from the inception of Islam, through the Crusades, through the golden century, through the enlightenment
and industrialization of the Western world, to the present day, makes it very clear that Islamophobia has persisted through many ages and stands today at its apogee.

The world is facing many challenges, including the threat of Islamophobia to interfaith harmony. Islamophobia is an unnecessary and baseless culture of fear against Muslims and Islam. Recent events indicate that Islamophobia is on the rise over the world, which has serious repercussions not only for the Muslims but is also a major concern of the non-Islamic states. Moreover, Islam has been facing many challenges for many years from the wider world and every Muslim is considered as a terrorist. The hate against Islam and Muslims is not new and has its roots in historical events such as the Crusades and early interactions between Muslims and the West, the events of 9/11, increasing Muslim population in Western countries. Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon, and the following are historical perspectives that date back to the 11th century.

Crusades and Ottoman Conquests

The discrimination and negative construction of Islam as a threat developed in the 11th century in the context of Crusades. Nowadays, Islamophobia serves politically as well as economically in the same way that the Crusades served medieval Christian Europe against the Muslim world. Tensions between Muslim countries and the West have existed ever since the Muslims occupied southern Europe, the Christian Crusades, and European colonization of Muslim countries (Ahdad 2019). The Crusades of 11th and 12th centuries defined Muslim contact with Europe. The author Christopher Tyermon (2005) explains that the Muslims have had a profound impact on the West. In addition, the West sees Muslims and Islam as a threat to their existence and this fear is seen in their discrimination against Muslims. In the past, only Christians fought Muslims, but today Jews and Hindus are fighting against Muslims around the world. Moreover, they see Muslims as rising Ottomans after centuries.

Colonialism and Orientalism

For many years, scholars and writers have been presenting Islam in a negative way. Karen Armstrong (1991) recounts that till the 18th century most of the western literature about Islam portrayed it as a religion that promotes violence and barbarism and Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) illustrates how the West has stereotyped Islam, Muslims and the Arab world (Syed 2019). Such misunderstandings contribute to anti-Islamic racism and to Islamophobia. The idea of savage, uncivilized, fanatical Muslims was used to conquer Muslim land and justify colonialism to its people. Colonialism was a mission to civilize the inhabitants of distant lands (Syed 2019). During the colonial era, Orientalists became more active and began to project a negative image of Islam and Muslims (Syed 2019).

Post-9/11 Events

Islamophobia flourished during the European colonial era and returned in full force after 2001, when the infamous “war on terror” began. The threat of Islam became a broader ideology and even officially found its way into French dictionaries, describing it as a special kind of hatred against Muslim minorities of North African origin. Since September 2001, many Muslim communities have faced an increasingly hostile environment, characterized by ignorance, hatred, physical and verbal abuse. In many European countries, Muslim communities and people associated with Islam often face acts of discrimination and hatred to varying degrees.
and dimensions, but it is a form of prejudice against Islam as a religion or practice. Whether it takes the form of daily racism and discrimination or violence, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion.

In short, Muslims were considered savages in previous centuries, Islam is now considered an internal enemy in Europe and the United States, and anti-Muslim sentiment has taken on a certain dimension as a result of attacks on the world trade center.

**FRANCE LEGALIZING ISLAMOPHOBIA**

For much of the 20th century, France was a colonial power, occupying largely Muslim-majority lands in Africa and the Middle East. Muslims came to France after the French colonization of North Africa. Contemporary relations between the French state and its Muslim population are conditioned by imperial history and economic exploitation. While most of these territories were ruled as colonial territories, Algeria was incorporated into the French state as an integral part of the country, which means that Algerian Muslims could come freely to live in France (Syed 2019). The state’s citizenship rights, however, rarely extended to Muslim Algerian subjects. Muslims were seen as belonging to their religion and disqualified from participating in a state that strictly adhered to the ideology of separation of state and church (Syed 2019). In fact, the French political structure is hostile to the Muslim population: the constitution that established the Fifth Republic was designed to resolve the state crisis that stirred up Muslim resistance to colonialism. The French invaders in North Africa called for detachment from the symbols of Islamic culture and religion, sometimes forcibly campaigning for women to be unveiled, and for the Arabic language to be allowed in the private sector.

France has the largest Muslim population in the Western world and Islam is the second most widely professed religion in France. The rise of Islamophobia is not a recent trend, but is deeply rooted in the history of the French Empire. France’s colonial past determines how a large section of the French elite and locals view Muslims. The perception of Muslims as second-class citizens is as prevalent as in the days of French Algeria.

**FRANCE AND SECULARISM**

The French law of 1905 limits the power of the church by three key principles: separating the church and the state, freedom of conscience, and freedom to exercise any faith (Evans 2006). In addition, state schools became religion-free zones and education was about promoting the principles of and allegiance to the French nation (Evans 2006). These foundation stones of the republic were non-negotiable, although they contained important warnings. According to modern schemes, secularism is about avoiding Anglo-Saxon-style ghettos; coming together as citizens; and overcoming narrow religious differences. That is why all symbols of religion are still banned in public schools and the French state does not classify people according to their ethnicity when it comes to French census data. Similarly, in the days following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, protesters stormed a large statue of Marianne on the Place de la République, a secular symbol of secular sensitivity indicates that Marianne’s base was ornamented with copies of Voltaire 1763 Treatise on Tolerance (Evans 2006).

Additionally, French secularism or laïcité sees no place for religion in the public sphere. In this way, it is the opposite of the Indian practice of secularism. The principle of laïcité is unique in the world and is an integral part of modern French political DNA (Colosimo 2017). However, this principle is not protected by the fact that it is legal or relatively old. In fact, it is controversial nationally, where it is the subject of controversy, and internationally, where
France is often accused of having a system of intolerance and discrimination (Colosimo 2017). For several years, laïcité has been in conflict with the religious practices of several immigrant groups in France, including the Sikhs. But the biggest clash is with its Muslim citizens.

The suppression of religion in the public sphere has created a great contradiction between the secular state and Muslims. France’s aggressive effort to create national equality has naturally put pressure on diversity, forcing Muslims to retreat to the ghetto suburbs (Colosimo 2017). This has led to fears of discrimination and social rejection of France’s rapidly growing Muslim population (Colosimo 2017). Islam is the fastest growing faith in France, and politicians have used the Muslim population as a way of saving their political careers. Similarly, Macron has been adopting Islamophobic policies to save his political fortunes.

**FRANCE AND RISING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA**

The Western relationship with Islam is complex, seeking to liberate Muslims from their religion, which is seen as an archaeological, obscene, and authoritarian trend. French institutions promote their own concept of a regenerated Islam (Gessier 2010). So there is a constant contradiction in France. Hatred of Muslims is part of the daily speech of the media, but today it is also part of the French government. The constant rise of Islam in France is another reason behind France’s complex relationship with Islam. On October 16, 2020, a French teacher named Samuel Paty was murdered because in a lesson in his class on freedom of expression he used an example from Charlie Hebdo magazine which published an image of Prophet Muhammad.

Recently, the government of France launched a crack-down on Muslim organizations while vigilante groups attacked mosques. Worship places in Beziers and Bordeaux were placed under police protection following threats of violence (Rosman 2020). Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin proposed a ban on the Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), an organization that tracks anti-Muslim hate crimes have been warned (Rosman 2020). Tensions are rising between the state and Muslims in France as Muslims were already defensive after the statement of Macron that highlighted the plan against Islamist separatism and said that Islam was in crisis around the world. Macron is using Islamophobia to power his campaign.

**Islamophobia Wave under Macron**

After the brutal assassination of French teacher Samuel Paty by a Chechen refugee, France is in the grip of shock, hatred, and despair (Saad 2020). Moreover, Muslim citizens of France see themselves at the center of a debate about their religion and defames them in the political arena and the media. Likewise, the ruling class and a large section of French society are denying the real roots of radicalism (Saad 2020). French President Emmanuel Macron became involved in controversy after reprinting cartoons of Prophet Muhammad and a series of brutal attacks (Al Jazeera 2020c). Macron proposed a new bill defending France’s secular values against “Islamist radicalism” and said the religion was “in crisis” around the world. The response he received after the announcement included anti-French demonstrations in Muslim countries and a boycott of French goods. But French Muslims are concerned that Macron’s words are focused on the 2022 presidential election (Al Jazeera 2020c).

President Macron has stepped up the crack-down on Muslims and promised to put more pressure on the Muslim community, ordered the arrest of more than a dozen Muslims, and dissolved several Muslim groups (Ganley 2020). Macron ordered the closure of the grand
mosque in northeast Paris for six months (Ganley 2020). Macron’s recent statements and decisions are moving the current situation towards Islamophobia.

A reason for this posturing is that France is suffering from a long-term social crisis due to the failed policies of Macron’s government. As in 2018 and 2019, major protests took place in France. At the end of 2019 the largest public transportation strike in French history took place which paralyzed the whole country (Saad 2020). The French president Macron is trying to come up with something that can save his position and secure his re-election in 2022.

**MUSLIM DIPLOMACY AGAINST FRANCE: AN APPRAISAL**

French President Emmanuel Macron’s statement following the killing of the teacher and defending the sketches insulting Prophet Muhammad has caused a rift among Muslims across the world, triggering a campaign to boycott French products (Siddiqui 2020).

He received an immediate backlash from the Muslim world after his statement. The French government’s attitude against Muslims has led to an increase in Islamophobic acts and racist attacks in the country. Throughout the Muslim world, some leaders have condemned France and Macron, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. In recent times, Muslims in France are facing challenges and because of ongoing situation in France depicts Muslims are facing racism, discrimination, and even their lives are in danger. The political organizations with Muslim links have been threatened with closure, Pro-Palestinian protests have been banned and the Boycott Divestment Sanction movement has been declared illegal.

**Response of Pakistan**

At the 14th session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, in June 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan underlined the issue. He reiterated that the Muslim leadership’s response to blasphemy against the Holy Prophet (PBUH) still appears to be deficient. At the conclusion of the meeting, the OIC requested that the members draft an all-encompassing OIC Strategy on Combating Islamophobia that would be legally binding. Imran Khan condemned Macron’s comments on the blasphemous sketches, calling them encouragement of Islamophobia (Raza 2020). Later, Khan asked the social media giant Facebook to ban Islamophobia and hate speech against Islam just as it had banned denial of the Holocaust (Raza 2020). The Prime Minister of Pakistan Khan has written a letter to the heads of state of all Muslim countries asking them to make the West aware of the importance and value of the Prophet Muhammad in their hearts and to tell the world how painful it is for us to bear it.

**Response of Turkey**

Turkish President Recep Tayyab Erdogan has criticized Macron, saying the French leader needs a “mental examination” of his attitude towards Islam (Al Jazeera 2020b). Erdogan has been at the forefront of the wave of outrage in Muslim-majority countries after Charlie Hebdo choose to release the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, Turkey’s parliament has condemned French Macron’s defense and said his comments were sick statements that could cause a global rupture (Reuters 2020). The four political parties issued a joint declaration saying Macron’s remarks could lead to destructive conflicts between people of different beliefs and negatively impact them (Reuters 2020).
Response of Malaysia

Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishamuddin Hussain also reacted on this matter and said Malaysia is deeply concerned about the growing open hostilities with Muslims following Paty’s brutal assassination. He further said that Malaysia strongly condemns any inflammatory rhetoric or provocative actions that seek to defame Islam. Moreover, Malaysia would work with the international community to promote mutual respect between religions.

Response of Gulf Countries and OIC

Gulf Cooperation Council Secretary-General Nayef Falah Mubarak al Hajrif called Macron’s words irresponsible and said he would increase the spread of a culture of hatred (Ezzeldin 2020).

Moreover, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has called on France to reconsider its separatist policies that target Islam. The OIC said: “We condemn the permanent attack on the sentiments of Muslims by insulting the religious symbols represented by the person of the Holy Prophet.” (Al Jazeera 2020a).

Response of Kuwait

Likewise, the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry warned against supporting abusive and discriminatory policies linking Islam to terrorism, saying that this represents a falsification of reality, an insult to the teachings of Islam, and hurts the feelings of Muslims around the world (Al Jazeera 2020a). In addition, the Wajbah dairy company of Qatar announced a boycott of French products and promised to provide alternatives, and Qatar University also has joined the campaign and postponed a French cultural week event (Al Jazeera 2020a).

Response of Jordan

Jordan’s Foreign Ministry said that it had condemned the publication of blasphemous sketches under the pretext of freedom of expression and any discriminatory and misleading attempts to link Islam to terrorism (Morocco World News 2020).

Response of Libya

In Libya, Mohammad Ammar Zaid, a member of the government’s National Accord Presidential Council, condemned Macron’s remarks. The state council called for an end to economic ties with France and the cancellation of an agreement with French oil giant Total.

Products Boycott

Several Islamic countries, including Turkey and Pakistan, condemned France’s Islamophobic measures, and started campaigns to boycott French products. Some countries have removed French products from supermarket shelves. An Islamist group in Pakistan said the Pakistani government supported a boycott of French goods (BBC News 2020b). Members of the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) group made copies of an agreement, signed by at least two ministers but the government indicated that the issue had not yet been resolved and it also did not confirm how a boycott would work (BBC News 2020b). In Bangladesh, tens of thousands
of people protested, demanding a boycott of French goods. The French Foreign Ministry was alarmed when the demands for a boycott increased dramatically and the ministry issued a written statement calling for an end to the boycott as it was affecting their economy (BBC News 2020a). Libyan social media users have also called for a boycott of French goods, especially food and fast-moving consumer goods.

**MUSLIMS’ COHERENT STRATEGY**

Hate for the Muslims in the 20th and 21st century has multiple reasons. The primary one is that Arab-Muslims own gigantic amounts of natural minerals such as oil and gas preliminarily. Hate for the Muslims belonging to the sub-continent is that they prevailed against the glorious Hindu Empire. Hate for Muslims settled in the Western world emanates from the notion that Muslims are terrorists. Tracing the reason behind this foulest of all affiliations is also very intriguing. Anti-Islamic rhetoric adopted by some of the most influential people in the world has also fueled this fire. Meanwhile enormous funding of the institutions publishing misinformation about Islam and Muslims has also been reported recently. Unawareness about Islam and its commandments by Muslims and non-Muslims is also one of the biggest factors behind Islamophobia. Hence politics, greed, grievance, hate, misinformation, unawareness and populism are some of the reasons which are ostensibly responsible for fear of, aversion to, discrimination against Islam and the people who practice Islam. The remedy to this disease lies in the curing of the most basic wrongs. That will start primarily from educating Muslims properly on what is Islam and its teachings. Secondly, educating non-Muslims about Islam should be a priority. This might be done through a mass international media campaign dispelling all the myths associated with Islam. Lastly, and most importantly, Muslims need to work hard in their respective fields. In reality, Muslims want validation from the West about their religion and way of living by doing nothing. This is not going to happen; Muslims need to wake up. Islam does not prohibit the advancement in life’s outlook, traditional Muslims need to understand this. Though Pakistan recognizes the importance of ensuring the implementation of a global plan of action to combat Islamophobia, it also recognizes the need of an hour is to develop an Islamic counter-narrative by Muslim states. The account from the perspective of those who have been cornered in history is known as counter-narrative. A counter-narrative to Islamophobia will offer Muslims who are marginalized around the world agency and empowerment. The Muslims must demonstrate to the West that different cultures have a different ethos. As a result, just as Muslims value the sentiments associated with the Holocaust, the West should acknowledge the mass killings that Muslims face.

**CONFLICT BETWEEN ISLAM AND OTHER RELIGION**

Due to the rise of this issue in France, the hatred is increasing between Muslims and other religions. Recently, two Muslim women of Algerian origin were left injured after being stabbed near the Eiffel Tower and were insulted by European women just because they are Muslims—they shouted at them to go home. The Islamophobia industry is growing rapidly. Muslims have experienced religious discrimination. It has long been assumed that Muslims will take over society and spread terror, hate, and prejudice. The public believes that Muslims will cause problems. To a large degree, it is not their fault. Extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda are to blame for instilling fear in people’s hearts. Another factor to consider is the media’s position in exaggerating any topic for commercial benefit. The recent actions of so-called Muslim terrorists in the United States and other parts of the world added a lot more fuel to the fire that was already burning, and the stereotype
of Muslims as bad or evil that was already being used by some Western governments got a stamp of approval from many people who are not aware of the facts.

CONCLUSION

Islamophobia is ingrained in the minds of non-Muslims in the West. Islamophobia disrupts the peace of the human mind. For Muslims, Islamophobia and actions linked to it are intolerable for example, displaying portrayals and parodies of the Holy Prophet Muhammad while claiming freedom of speech. There is a difference between hate speech and freedom of speech. Hate speech is followed with ferocity. Muslim supremacists are pursuing anarchy in revenge for hate speech. As a result of this anarchy, Islamophobia emerges, and the cycle begins. Western countries have a chauvinistic attitude. Despicable oratory gives people permission to treat Muslims unfairly. In certain parts of the world, Muslims are stereotyped as arsonists and terrorists. And the natives of those countries are treated with suspicion as foreigners. Bullying is directed at Muslim students and teachers. Together, we must challenge ignorance and prejudice and build a society that respects all religions.

The international community is collectively trying to spread anti-Islamic propaganda around the world. To counter it, the Muslim world should take some immediate steps against France, that include spreading the true image of Islam, unity among Muslims, holding dialogues with the West, and focusing on socioeconomic development. In this regard, the West has to understand that there are so many ideologies and moral values in Islam that the West still shares in all its secularism.

ENDNOTES

1 Bukhtawer Pervaz has her MPhil degree in Government and Public Policy from National Defense University, Islamabad.

2 Tahama Asad is pursuing her MPhil degree in Strategic Studies from National Defense University, Islamabad. She can be reached at tahamaasad15@gmail.com.

REFERENCES


