



NGO Paper: What Does “Islamophobia” Mean?

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Freedom of religion or belief
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Material supplementary to ICLA’s intervention

Introduction

The International Civil Liberties Alliance notes with concern a growing tendency in public discourse to use terms that are poorly defined or even undefined. This practice is especially worrisome when the topics being discussed are contentious, as it destroys clarity and hampers mutual understanding. Under these circumstances, it is crucial that precise, unambiguous definitions be provided, and that all parties discussing the issues agree on those definitions.

One such term that has seen frequent use in articles, publications, papers, and interventions is the word “Islamophobia”. Although opposition to its use is usually thought of as a “conservative” position, among those who find its use objectionable is also the British Muslim socialist Romy Hasan:¹

Since 11 September 2001, the epithet ‘Islamophobia’ has increasingly become in vogue in Britain — not only from Muslims but also, surprisingly, from wide layers of the left, yet the term is seldom elaborated upon or placed in a proper context. Invariably, it is used unwisely and irresponsibly and my argument is that the left should refrain from using it.

Shockingly, some on the left have, on occasion, even resorted to using it as a term of rebuke against the left, secular, critics of reactionary aspects of Muslim involvement in the anti-war movement. So what does the term mean?

As an example of its widespread usage, consider “Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education”, published jointly by OSCE/ODIHR, the Council of Europe, and UNESCO in 2011.² The document contains 49 instances of the word “Islamophobia” (including those used in footnotes and cited URLs), yet the closest it comes to a definition of the term is this brief description found on page 17:

“‘Islamophobia’, a term which is widely used by NGOs and frequently appears in the media, tends to denote fear, hatred or prejudice against Islam and Muslims.”

The above passage does not qualify as a usable definition of “Islamophobia”, yet surprisingly, the concept forms the basis for an official OSCE guideline book. It is not appropriate that an undefined term is used as basis for educational guidelines, especially when the topic referenced is controversial.

¹ Hasan, Romy, “‘Islamophobia’ and electoral pacts with Muslim groups”, Birmingham Socialist Alliance, July 2003, reproduced in *Shiraz Socialist*, September 21, 2007 <http://shirazsocialist.wordpress.com/2007/09/21/romy-hasans-lost-article-on-islamophobia-part-1/>

² <http://www.osce.org/odihr/84495>

At the Supplementary Human Dimension meeting in Vienna on July 12, 2013, in response to the repeated use of the term “Islamophobia” during various OSCE proceedings, Mission Europa Netzwerk Karl Martell requested a definition of the word.³

In response, the Turkish government representative Mr. Umut Topcuoglu quoted a definition⁴ of “Islamophobia” originally presented by Turkey at the OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. The definition itself⁵ was written by Ömür Orhun, the former Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, and currently the Advisor and Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While there is no officially announced OSCE definition of “Islamophobia”, the fact that OSCE materials make use of the term, combined with the lack of alternatives or criticism, makes the definition presented by Turkey the default for comprehending what the educational guidelines on combatting “Islamophobia” are seeking to achieve.

Below is the definition of Islamophobia provided by Umut Topcuoglu. Emphasis has been added to words or phrases that deserve further attention:

*Islamophobia is a **contemporary form of racism and xenophobia** motivated by **unfounded fear, mistrust, and hatred of Muslims and Islam**. Islamophobia is also manifested through **intolerance, discrimination, unequal treatment, prejudice, stereotyping, hostility, and adverse public discourse**. Differentiating from **classical racism and xenophobia**, Islamophobia is mainly based on **stigmatization of a religion and its followers**, and as such, Islamophobia is an affront to the human rights and dignity of Muslims.*

The wording of this definition bears a close resemblance to that of an earlier definition of “Islamophobia”, which was also written by Ambassador Orhun and published by the OIC in 2011:⁶

“Islamophobia is a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by unfounded fear, mistrust and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia is also manifested through intolerance, discrimination and adverse public discourse against Muslims and Islam. Differentiating from classical racism and xenophobia, Islamophobia is mainly based on radicalisation of Islam and its followers.”

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the definition of “Islamophobia” implicitly accepted by the OSCE is essentially the same as the definition promulgated by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

This is a clear conflict of interest, in that organizations with a vested interest in defining a particular term to their own advantage should not pen the official definition of said term.

Six of the terms highlighted in Mr. Topcuoglu’s definition are “biased”, in the sense that they are either of recent coinage or have recently acquired new meanings, and are commonly used to demonize, intimidate, and marginalize people who hold certain political opinions. These words are controversial, and thus should not be used in any official definition without themselves being defined:

*Racism
Xenophobia
Intolerance
Discrimination
Prejudice
Stereotyping*

The other seven words and phrases are problematic in various ways, even when the words themselves are well-defined and uncontroversial in their common usage. For a detailed examination of the highlighted terms, see the International Civil Liberties Alliance white paper, “The Problematic Definition of ‘Islamophobia’”.⁷

³ See the ICLA video of the intervention by Harald Fiegl: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMg5zTFxZlc>

⁴ See the ICLA video of the intervention by Umut Topcuoglu: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nk8uxyK8L5U>

⁵ <http://www.osce.org/cio/101935>

⁶ <http://www.oicun.org/74/20120116050228155.html>

⁷ ICLA Research Group, “The Problematic Definition of ‘Islamophobia’”, <http://libertiesalliance.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/islamophobia-definition.pdf>

The History of the Word “Islamophobia”

“Islamophobia” was not recorded in English until the second half of the 20th century. Its use became more widespread in the late 1980s, in the wake of the Iranian fatwa against Salman Rushdie over his book *The Satanic Verses*:⁸

The term Islamophobia seemed to first appear in Britain during the Rushdie affair in the late 1980’s. This was an attempt by fundamentalist Muslims to silence critics such as Rushdie and his supporters for free speech by arguing that only the wider ‘Islamophobia’ of British society and state allowed this to pass unpunished. The implication was clear: criticism of Islam is tantamount to ‘Islamophobia’ and is therefore out of bounds.

When the Runnymede Trust issued its landmark report in 1997, “Islamophobia” meant a “shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam — and, by extension, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims”.⁹

As the British sociologist Chris Allen later wrote,¹⁰

However both the [Runnymede] report and its model have failed to stand the test of time and a detailed analysis highlights a number of serious flaws. The most obvious disadvantage of the term is that it is understood to be a ‘phobia’. As phobias are irrational, such an accusation makes people defensive and defiant, in turn making reflective dialogue all but impossible.

... the instruments we have to define, identify and explain it neither measure up to the theory nor are they entirely bias-free.

Dr. Allen here highlights the most intractable problem with the term: a *phobia*, by definition, is irrational. Not only does the use of the word stigmatize those so designated — which was as far as the author cared to take his objection — it requires that those who apply it demonstrate the irrationality of the purported fear. In order to make the case, one would, logically, have to prove that the designated “phobic” had in fact nothing to fear from Islam. In most cases this would be difficult to do, and any attempt to examine the data needed for such a proof would subject practices justified by Islamic tradition to scrutiny, which would cause controversy — and would in itself be considered evidence of “Islamophobia”.

The increasing use of an ill-defined word in heated polemics becomes significant when the term is meant to punish, intimidate, and silence those who criticize Islam and Shariah. If the word cannot be avoided, it is absolutely essential that it be precisely defined, and that the definition be acceptable to Muslims, critics of Islam, and disinterested parties alike.

Conclusions

The definition of “Islamophobia” as presented by Umut Topcuoglu fails to meet even minimal standards of logic, coherence, and objectivity. As such it must be rejected for any further usage in OSCE proceedings as well as in educational and official publications in participating States.

As demonstrated in the ICLA paper¹¹, six of the terms used in the definition (“racism”, “xenophobia”, “intolerance”, “discrimination”, “prejudice”, and “stereotyping”) are “biased”, in the sense that they are either of recent coinage or have recently acquired new meanings, which alone is reason enough to render the definition questionable for any scholarly use. Words that are commonly used to demonize, intimidate, and marginalize certain viewpoints are always unacceptable in presentations that affect public policy. Unless the controversial “biased” terms are themselves clearly defined, they should be excluded.

The definition fails utterly through its inclusion of three phrases (#7, “unequal treatment”, #13, “stigmatization of a religion and its followers”, and #4, “unfounded fear, mistrust, and hatred”). Specifically:

⁸ Hasan, Romy, *op. cit.*

⁹ Runnymede Trust, “Islamophobia: a challenge for us all”, 1997
<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>

¹⁰ Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150

¹¹ ICLA, “The Problematic Definition of ‘Islamophobia’”, *op. cit.*

Unequal treatment. As described in “Examination of Terms” in the ICLA paper¹², Islam itself (via Shariah) treats non-Muslims differently from Muslims. Under the given definition, Muslims would themselves be guilty of “Islamophobia”. This is a logical fallacy, and the definition fails solely because of this.

Stigmatization of a religion and its followers. The vast majority of Islam-critics do not “describe or identify [the Islamic religion] in opprobrious terms”. Their critiques are focused almost entirely on the tenets of *Islamic law* (and the practical implementation of those tenets), which are not at all religious. Criticism of the religious elements of Islam is rare, mild, and often non-existent. This term therefore deflects the discussion into a “straw man” argument, and the definition fails solely because of this.

Unfounded fear, mistrust, and hatred. This is the heart of the definition of “Islamophobia”. Any fear, mistrust, or hatred of Islam must be shown to be unfounded if it is to constitute Islamophobia. As previously demonstrated, millions of non-Muslims all over the world have well-founded empirical reasons to fear Islam and the behavior of Islamists, and thus cannot reasonably be described as “Islamophobes”.

Furthermore, any investigation into the basis for the fear of Islam — which requires research into and discussion of the collective behavior of self-identified Muslims in real-world situations — is almost always itself condemned as “Islamophobia”. Therefore the definition of “Islamophobia” makes the word into a self-referential term. This is a violation of logic, and the definition fails solely because of this.

Other logical failures detailed in the paper¹³ include those for “racism”, “xenophobia”, and “stereotyping”. Additional logical problems are presented by “contemporary” (incoherent usage in context), and “classical racism and xenophobia” (demands clarification of the meaning of “classical” in this context).

Five other terms (“intolerance”, “discrimination”, “prejudice”, “hostility”, and “adverse public discourse”) were analyzed and shown to be applicable to Islam itself. This is not a logical argument against their appearance in the definition — it would be a *tu quoque* fallacy to make such an assertion — but it adds weight to the failure of the definition on logical grounds. Reciprocity of behavior, commonly referred to as the “Golden Rule”, is a core cultural value in Western societies. Islam’s manifest failure to exhibit normative reciprocity argues persuasively against the inclusion of these five terms in any definition of “Islamophobia”.

We cannot help but conclude that the definition of “Islamophobia” as presented by the Turkish representative in Tirana on May 22, 2013, is *prima facie* void of merit, and must be abandoned.

Recommendations

- 1. To ODIHR:** Based on the above, ODIHR must abandon any discussion of the term immediately. The term must be removed from any existing official publications, and may not be included in any future publications.
- 2. To the Participating States:** Refrain in all circumstances from using the term “Islamophobia” in any public discussions, papers, publications, brochures, and other printed material.
- 3. Alternatively, to ODIHR:** Appoint a committee whose duty will be to establish a definition of Islamophobia that is acceptable by consensus. The makeup of the committee must include Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists. The non-Muslims on the committee should include in equal numbers supporters of Islam, critics of Islam, and people with no opinion on Islam.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*