A WORKING DEFINITION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Written Evidence Submission prepared

For the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

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By

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Executive Summary

Drawing on our research and empirical findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups with both Muslim and non-Muslims, in the UK, we believe that a new working definition of Islamophobia is much needed. Our findings show that for those that have experienced Islamophobic hate crime because of the intersections between gender, race/ethnicity, appearance and space are often ignored within the criminal justice system. From being verbally and physically attacked, threatened and harassed as well as their property being damaged individuals have experienced a spate of online and offline hatred. These incidents usually happen in public spaces, on trains, buses, shopping centres as well as workplace – often when other people were there yet did not intervene. Attacks against participants also take place near mosques or areas with high population of Muslims. The impacts upon victims included physical, emotional, psychological, and economic damage. These experiences are also damaging to community cohesion and lead to a polarisation between different communities. Our recommendations for a new working definition of Islamophobia are based on participants' views and opinions for tackling this problem and the need for policy-makers to be better informed about how to deal with the problem. We make the case that the new Hate Crime Action Plan, which has incorporated ideas around intervention, should also include our working definition of Islamophobia as a means to provide better services.

Recommendations

The following is our working definition of Islamophobia, which we recommend should be adopted by the British Government as a working definition of Islamophobia:

"A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim."

A Working Definition of Islamophobia

Hate crime is the umbrella concept used in its broadest sense to describe incidents motivated by hate, hostility or prejudice towards an individual's identity. Definitions of 'hate crime' vary from one country to another. In England and Wales, the central point of reference is the operational definition offered by the College of Policing (2014), which earmarks hate crime as offences that are motivated by hostility or prejudice on particular grounds – race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender status and disability. From this perspective, Islamophobic hate crime is defined as any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated wholly or partly by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion or perceived religion that is, their Muslim religion. However, this definition fails to capture the specificities of Islamophobic, anti-Muslim hostility, bias and prejudice.

In 1997, the publication of the Runnymede Trust report entitled **Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All** was the first report to raise awareness about the problem of Islamophobia in the UK. It defined Islamophobia as 'the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims' (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 1). Building upon this definition, and the new definition which the Runnymede Trust have adopted, we argue that the British Government should adopt our working definition of Islamophobia, which is defined as follows:

"A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim."

The significance of this definition is two-fold: firstly, it emphasises the link between institutional levels of Islamophobia and manifestations of such attitudes, triggered by the visibility of the victim's (perceived) Muslim identity. Secondly, this approach also interprets Islamophobia as a 'new' form of racism, whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to the British/Western values.

Accordingly, this conceptual framework indicates that victimisation can be 'ideological' and institutional (for example pertaining to ideas and concepts that victimise individuals or groups) or it can have material consequences for those who are victimised (for example through verbal and physical abuse). Within this

framework, Islamophobia can be interpreted through the lens of cultural racism whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to 'British values' and 'national identity', whilst 'visible' Muslims are viewed as 'culturally dangerous' and threatening the 'British/Western way of life'. The notion of cultural racism is largely rooted in frames of inclusion and exclusion, specifying who may legitimately belong to a particular national, or other community whilst, at the same time, determining what that community's norms are and thereby justifying the exclusion of those whose religion or culture assign them elsewhere. From this premise, there is such a strong attachment to 'our' way of life that creates boundaries between 'them' and 'us' founded upon difference rather than inferiority.

In light of popular debates about British values and national identity, immigration and community cohesion, colour racism has ceased to be acceptable; nevertheless, a cultural racism which emphasises the 'Other', alien values of Muslims has increased. In this context, cultural difference is understood as 'cultural deviance' and equated with the notion of cultural threat. Law (2010) observes that racism takes many forms and links this reality to contemporary perceptions of Western superiority and to this end, legitimised violence towards Muslims. This new form of racism can be interpreted as racism of 'reaction', based on the perceived 'threat' to traditional social and cultural identities. This form of racism can also be understood as a racism of 'surveillance' on the premise that cultural difference slides into the demonisation and stigmatisation of 'Other' cultures in the interests of protecting 'us' (the non-Muslim Self) from 'them'. This line of argument suggests that the key element of contemporary racism is the attribution of negative cultural characteristics to 'Other' minority groups.

In this context, Islam and Muslims find themselves under siege. Muslim men have emerged as the new 'folk devils' of popular and media imagination, being portrayed as the embodiment of extremism and terrorism, whilst Muslim women have emerged as a sign of gender subjugation in Islam, being perceived as resisting integration by wearing a headscarf or face veil. Such stereotypes provide fertile ground for expressions of Islamophobia in the public sphere. Following this line of argument, Islamophobia manifests itself as an expression of anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim hostility towards individuals identified as Muslims on the basis of their 'visible' Islamic identity. Expressions of Islamophobia include verbal abuse and harassment, threats and intimidation, physical assault and violence (including sexual violence), property damage, graffiti, offensive mail and literature, and offensive online and internet abuse.

Islamophobia as a form of racism

It is important to draw out the differences between different groups. In this respect, a more revealing picture emerges in relation to experiences of victimisation. Prior to 9/11 it could be argued that the status as visibly practising Muslims did not raise the risk of abuse or violence. However, following trigger events such as Brexit, victims of racist attacks – often described by perpetrators as 'Paki-bashing' – in the 1980s and victims of Islamophobia post 9/11. Islamophobic victimisation was understood as a 'new' form of racism on the basis that there was a shift from race to religion. While the 'old' racism was based on an explicit belief on biological superiority, the 'new' racism is based on notions of religious and cultural superiority.

Lambert and Githens-Mazer (2011) point out that 'Paki-bashing' has been replaced by 'Muslim-bashing' as a new dangerous street phenomenon. Whereas ten years ago perpetrators might have focused on black and Asian people as potential targets now their sole focus for attack are Muslims. In light of the recent racist attacks, experiences of Islamophobic victimisation feels like 'history repeating itself'. In our research, converts to Islam have discussed the sharp contrast in people's behaviour towards them after they wore the veil. On one level, when a veiled Muslim woman is targeted the offender will not be aware of the ethnic identity of the victim; however, being white indicates that this person is likely to be a convert to Islam. From this perspective, white veiled Muslim women are routinely perceived as British converts and thus they are targeted for their decision to convert to Islam. In the eyes of their abusers, converts have supposedly betrayed the British values and the British way of life, as the following comments indicate.

For the black and Asian Muslim participants in our research, this notion of 'taken-for-grantedness' of everyday harassment and abuse was relevant to past experiences of racist attacks. Some participants had experienced racism (prior to wearing the veil) within the context of similar incidents of verbal and

physical abuse on the basis of their skin colour rather than their religion. For these participants, any one incident of Islamophobic victimisation added to the experiences of racism that their parents or they themselves had suffered whilst growing up in this country. Within this framework, the correspondence of the individual and the collective experience renders Islamophobic victimisation normative. It happened to their parents and now it happens to them, and therefore it is a 'normal' aspect of their lives (Perry and Alvi, 2012).

It is important to recognise that racism can occur in situations where neither the reality nor concept of race actually exists. As Meer *et al.* (2010) point out, understandings of racism should not focus exclusively on race and thus overlooking religion and culture. According to this line of argument, conceptualising racism exclusively as a form of 'biological determinism' ignores the ways in which cultural racism draws upon other markers of 'difference' to identify minority groups and individuals that do not conform with 'mainstream' society. Modood (1997: 165) states that:

> *Cultural racism is likely to be particularly aggressive against those minority communities that want to maintain – and not just defensively – some of the basic elements of their culture or religion; if, far from denying their difference (beyond the colour of their skin), they want to assert this difference in public, and demand that they be respected just as they are.*

Taking a similar position, Law (2010) highlights the complex chameleon-like character of racism, which changes in terms of form and content across different times and contexts. Law (2010) observes that racism takes many forms and links this reality to contemporary perceptions of Western superiority and to this end, legitimised violence towards Muslims. It can also be understood as racism of 'surveillance' premised on the notion that cultural difference slides into the demonisation and stigmatisation of 'Other' cultures in the interests of 'protecting' the European people, which is a different entity to the European population as a whole (Law, 2010). This line of argument suggests that the key

element of contemporary racism is the attribution of negative cultural characteristics to 'Other' minority groups.

In light of popular debates about national identity, immigration and community cohesion, colour racism has ceased to be acceptable; nevertheless, a cultural racism which emphasises the 'Other', alien values of Muslims has increased (Zebiri, 2008). In this context, cultural difference is understood as 'cultural deviance' and equated with the notion of cultural threat. Parekh (2000: 60) observes that contemporary anti-Muslim racism is 'one of the most serious forms of cultural hostility in modern Europe'. Similarly, Modood (1997) identifies that Islamophobia is at the heart of contemporary British and European cultural racism. In this context, Islam is routinely portrayed as an external 'threat' to distinctly European norms and values. For advocates of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, there is a cultural war between Islam and the West. In the British context, Islam and Muslims have increasingly been seen to be 'culturally dangerous' and threatening the 'British way of life'. Whilst recognising that Muslim minorities differ in the context of European countries – predominantly Algerian in France, Turkish in Germany and Austria, Pakistani in the UK – it is increasingly Islamic religion, tradition and culture that have been seen as a 'threat' to the Western ideals of democracy, freedom of speech and gender equality.

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