



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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To cite this article:

Gabsi, Zouhir. "Towards Demystifying Islamophobia: A Muslim's Perspective." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 1-18.



Published online: 30 December 2019



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TOWARDS DEMYSTIFYING ISLAMOPHOBIA: A MUSLIM'S PERSPECTIVE

Zouhir Gabsi*

Abstract: Islamophobia has been a recurrent socio-political narrative for some time now, and exacerbated since the aftermath of 9/11. Despite the plethora of studies on the subject, little is known about Muslim scholars' perception of this phenomenon. This is due primarily to the language barrier, since the Arabic language is the code for their discourse. It is essential to consider Islamic and Western perspectives to understand the problem thoroughly and suggest solutions, as relying on one approach is biased and uncompromising. Accordingly, this paper's purpose is threefold: first, it explains how Islamophobia should be defined contextually. It frames its arguments within three contexts: a historical setting (Meccan and Madinah period), Islam in the Arab world and Islam in the West. Second, the paper demonstrates how the Muslim perspective contrasts with the Western narrative. It critically challenges some of the arguments put forward in social sciences and intellectual discourses and adopts an unapologetic and non-defensive approach in the treatment of Islamophobia. Third, the paper discusses the variables that affect Islamophobia, such as Western media and terrorism (including state terrorism). Finally, the paper proposes some approaches to mitigating the situation.

Keywords: *Arabic, Islam, Islamophobia, Islamic discourse, ideology*

INTRODUCTION

Most scholars agree that Islamophobia – ‘fear of Islam and Muslims’ – reached its peak in the aftermath of 9/11. It was a significant event that has affected and been used as an opportunity to shape Western nations' foreign policies, with the USA in the lead, followed by Great Britain and Australia. Islamophobia was not part of the scholarly narrative before 9/11. While the representation of Muslims in the West is complex, early Western interest in the Orient was not primarily politically motivated, but “rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts.”¹

After 9/11, a state of moral panic took hold, not only in America but also in Europe. This “marks a turbulent and exaggerated response to a perceived social problem whereby there is considerable concern and consensus that such a problem actually exists. Blame is then shifted

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¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), 12.

to suitable villains who absorb societal hostility.”² The division between ‘US’ versus ‘THEM’ has emerged, as Morgan & Poynting argue:

In the global ‘West’, the racialized ‘Muslim Other’ has become the pre-eminent ‘folk devil’ of our time. This process did not begin with 9/11, but since then has expanded rapidly to reshape the politics of multiculturalism in various societies.³

This moral panic has affected Muslims globally. Muslims have been randomly searched, watched, abused verbally and physically. The *European Monitoring on Racism and Xenophobia* reports numerous instances of discrimination; as one respondent comments:

We face Islamophobia in daily life: small incidents, small things. For example, somebody jokes or comments with another, but in a very loud voice, so you have to listen to this, ‘Oh somebody who wears a headscarf has nothing to do in this country.’ Or somebody walks his dog and says ‘Fass!’, which means ‘catch this’, to a Muslim. You try and not let these things get to you but some days they wear you down. (Female, Austria).⁴

More recently, moral panic has been exacerbated by the simplistic association of criminality with the Arabic language, and of Islam with terror groups. In a few recent occurrences, Muslims were prevented from travelling by air after being viewed with suspicion and reported by fellow passengers when they heard ‘dangerous’ Islamic expressions such as *Insha Allah* – ‘God willing’.⁵ The criminalisation of Arabic is the new face of Islamophobia and “in the past, skin color and other signs of faith, such as facial hair, have been used as profiling tools, language has now joined them as a new profiling index.”⁶

Muslims are seen as threatening and undermining Western values. They “appear as a corrosive influence, refusing to integrate, and undermining national values.”⁷ This moral panic is exacerbated by media reporting. Media – “the CNNs and Foxes of this world” – has played an important role in demonising Muslims and inflaming anti-Muslim sentiment.⁸ For instance, in the United Kingdom, 74 per cent of British people assert they know almost nothing about Islam and what is even more astounding is that 64 per cent of the population formulate their opinion on Islam solely on the media.⁹

² Michael Welsh, *Scapegoats of September 11th: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 13.

³ George Morgan and Scott Poynting, “Introduction: The Transnational Folk Devil”, in *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West*, ed. George Morgan and Scott Poynting (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1.

⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Perceptions of Discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from Members of Muslim Communities in the European Union* (Vienna, Austria: EUMC, 2006), 44.

⁵ Liam Stack, “College Student is Removed from Flight after Speaking Arabic on Plane,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/student-speaking-arabic-removed-southwest-airlines-plane.html>.

⁶ Yasir Suleiman, “After Islamophobia Comes the Criminalisation of Arabic: Who will Rescue Western Societies from their Islamophobes?” *aljazeera*, March 20, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/03/islamophobia-criminalisation-arabic-160320073445033.html>.

⁷ Morgan and Poynting, “Introduction,” 2.

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, xv.

⁹ Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), 96.

The media discourse is often carefully crafted and suitably conveyed. There is a plethora of examples of this type of biased reporting; for instance, in the aftermath of significant events, media outlets seize any opportunity to associate acts of violence with an Islamic celebration. For instance, on Australian commercial channels (namely channels Seven, Nine and Ten), one finds a terrorist act is conflated with an Islamic event, such as Eid celebrations. Another notorious Australian example is the pack rape committed by the Skaf brothers; immediately after the event, media rushed to a Lakemba mosque in Sydney to solicit information from worshippers about the stance of Islam towards rape. This attempt to associate the Islamic faith with the acts of ‘lone-wolves’ is subjective and likely to demonise Islam and Muslims further.

A third and most interesting example in Australia deals with the terror suspect Abdel Nacer Ben Brika, who was jailed for 15 years in 2010. Ben Brika was initially interviewed on the program *Today Tonight* on commercial channel Seven, with concealed intent, as the program aimed to single out some elements of his speech. His speech, introduced by the broadcaster, sets the scene after a scuffle that occurred between Ben Brika’s supporters and the media. The presenter announces, “this is what they think of us, a law unto themselves outside Melbourne courts with charges laid, Australia was about to discover what Muslim Cleric Abdel Nacer Ben Brika has in store for us.”¹⁰ With his limited command of English, and unaware the interview could incriminate him, Ben Brika states “anyone who fight [sic] for the sake Allah, the first, when he dies the first drop of blood that comes [sic] from him out [sic] all his sin will be forgiven.”¹¹

Richardson explains how ‘speech-acts’ can be manipulated to serve an ideological purpose.¹² This is problematic for some Muslim clerics who, when invited to present Islam’s stance on an issue, may be unaware of the real intentions of the interviewer or program. Hence, the audience may perceive the interviewee’s stance as threatening and shocking. More eloquent clerics or sheiks such as Hamza Yusuf (formerly known as Mark Hanson) or Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens) have rarely been invited to present their views about events. Another example is with interviews with spokespersons for the Palestinian people who use fragmented and less eloquent English – usually with a heavy accent – compared to their Israeli counterparts, who are usually American graduates and highly fluent in English. Hence, their arguments appear logical, persuasive and credible. For instance, a comparison could be drawn between the assassinated Al-Rantīsī, co-founder of the Palestinian Resistance Movement Hamas, and his Israeli counterpart Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel. There is a strong negative link between speaking with a thick accent and credibility.¹³ First, accents signal the speaker is an ‘out-group member’ and second, “accents are harder to process.” This “reduction

¹⁰ allahu akbar, “Abdul Nacer Benbrika Terrorist on Today Tonight,” YouTube video, 4:58, November 14, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dskYut3Qn3o>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John E. Richardson, “Who Gets to Speak? A Study of Sources in the Broad-sheet Press,” in *Muslims and the News Media*, ed. Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 114.

¹³ Sheri Lev-Ari and Boaz Keysar, “Why don’t we Believe Non-native Speakers? The Influence of Accent on Credibility,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010): 1093.

of credibility may have an insidious impact on millions of people, who routinely communicate in a language which is not their native tongue.”¹⁴

Language and power are interrelated dimensions and power commands the structure of discourse. Institutions “have considerable control over the shaping of our routine experiences of the world and the way we classify the world.”¹⁵ Language can be used to control the masses, manipulating the truth by omitting it, cutting it, emphasising marginal details or by ignoring what matters. Journalism is “about bravely finding the facts and delivering them to the public with neutrality so that the truth can be known,” but reality dictates otherwise.¹⁶ Machin emphasises a point “that news footage we see, should be thought about first not as about representing reality but as the products of an institution.”¹⁷ Machin and Jaworski develop this further:

When the events in the world are chosen as news they need to some degree fit in with such existing accepted discourses or news frames such as terrorism. So, we can think of the archive as providing visual realizations of particular established discourses. The owners of the archive might argue that rather than being political, they are supplying what customers require.¹⁸

For instance, crimes such as theft or cheating on the welfare system are usually associated with the working-class. However, these are rarely interpreted as the inevitable outcome of inequality in wealth distribution, government policies and privatisation.

Machin explains succinctly the three main criteria for a news item to be qualified as newsworthy: personalisation, dramatisation and fragmentation.¹⁹ With personalisation, significant events such as famine get extraordinary attention when a famous pop star or actor visits an impoverished nation. Dramatisation occurs when reports of a terrorist group are associated with archival footage of their alleged training. With fragmentation, the whole picture of an event is often reduced and decontextualised. For instance, terrorism is not linked to biased foreign policy and poverty is not related to the greed of major corporations who want to control developing nations. Machin points out that “news outlets that are part of massive corporations will be unlikely to be critical of views that are favorable to corporate capitalism.”²⁰ This view is supported by Mayr, who states “they [institutions] have considerable control on the shaping of our routine experiences of the world and the way we classify the world.”²¹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Andrea Mayr, “Introduction, Power, Discourse and Institutions,” in *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse*, ed. Andrea Mayr (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 1.

¹⁶ David Machin, “News Discourse I: Understanding the Social Goings-on Behind News Texts,” in *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse*, ed. Andrea Mayr (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., 63.

¹⁸ David Machin and Adam Jaworski, “Archive Footage in News: Creating a Likeness and Index of the Phenomenal World,” *Visual Communication* 5, no. 3 (2006): 351.

¹⁹ Machin, “News Discourse I,” 96.

²⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹ Mayr, “Introduction, Power, Discourse and Institutions,” 1.

So far I have outlined the main arguments put forward in the general and academic narratives on Islamophobia. The internal dimension to how Muslim scholars view this phenomenon will now be theorised and considered. The paper aims to answer three interlocking questions: First, how is Islamophobia conceptualised within the binary notion of ‘US’ versus ‘THEM’? Second, how does the Muslim view differ from the ‘Western’ and Orientalist perspectives on Islamophobia? And third, what are the identifiable variables that are used to fuel Islamophobia? The paper will also suggest some strategies to combat and lessen the impact of Islamophobia.

TOWARDS THEORISING ISLAMOPHOBIA

In theorising the concept of Islamophobia, I propose two loosely connected dimensions: the *internal* and *external* views of Islamophobia. For the *internal* view, understanding the phenomenon of Islamophobia is framed by a Muslim’s perspective. This perspective hinges not solely on the Qur’anic and prophetic traditions but also engages with various Islamic scholars’ interpretations, philosophies and Islamic history. In other words, the Muslim perspective “hinges upon the dialectics of the past, present, and future creating a new consensus or a confirmation of *who* Muslims are, *what* they want to be, and *how* they want to be.”²² In this existentialist pursuit of what forms a Muslim identity, Mohammed Arkoun, an influential Algerian intellectual, warns that Muslim intellectuals should move away from being mere offensive or defensive apologists and should fight “against social sciences as practised by orientalism, in a disengaged, narrative, descriptive style.”²³ The *external perspective*, however, does not engage with Islamic sources. It scrutinises the phenomenon within the frameworks of identity politics, ethnicity, anti-Muslim racism and power.

With globalisation and the rise in social movement and immigration, since the 1970s, the concept of identity politics has emerged. It is founded on the premise that the identity of cultural communities needs recognition.²⁴ However, these cultural communities may cause problems in contemporary liberal democracies because “the recognition these groups’ claim appears in the current view as a threat to public order and community life forms.”²⁵ However, in Muslim identity politics, there is a move not merely to consider Islamophobia as religious discrimination but also to recognise that Islamophobia “refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.”²⁶ Islamophobia has also been associated with expressions of racism and antisemitism. The Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism pointed out that Muslims and Jews experience

²² Amr G. E. Sabet, *Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance, and International* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 62.

²³ Quoted in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ramin Johanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 2010), 225.

²⁴ Daniel Cojanu, “Cultural diversity and the new politics of identity,” *Revista De Stiinte Politice* 50 (2016): 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶ Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism. *A Very Light Sleeper: The Persistence and Dangers of Antisemitism* (London: Runnymede Trust, 1994), 4.

exclusion and marginalisation because they are both treated as “intruders,” with Jews considered “Christ killers” and Muslims as “infidels.”²⁷

Whether to link Muslim identities with race is moot. Tyrer professes, instead of engaging in a discussion about the positioning of Islamophobia within the sphere of racial politics, one should put forward the premise that Muslim identities “acted as a device that could drive forward a wider narrative of denial while foreclosing politicisation around experiences of Islamophobia.”²⁸ What complicates the blurring of the link of Islamophobia with the concept of race is Islamophobia’s inherent ambiguity. However, calling a Muslim ‘the Other’ “does not dispel its racial intent, but it does open up a new form of racial politics ...”²⁹ Tyrer adds:

the attempt to deny the racist nature of Islamophobia is of utility in extending a particular racial politics without risking the accusation of racism, and in doing so it also centres problematic ideas of phenotypal racial difference, not by labelling Muslims as biologically bounded but by contrasting Muslims against other minorities who are held as such.³⁰

When racial politics implements its agenda, especially with far-right groups, it is argued that what is considered to be ‘fear of Islam’ is, in their understanding, a critique of the religion, a democratic right that does not hint at racism. This contrasts with clear attacks on Muslims, such as by Roberto Calderoli, an Italian politician, who asserts “let them [Muslims] return to the desert and talk with the camels, or to the jungle and talk with the apes.”³¹

Islamophobia also extends to issues such as nationalism. The ‘Other,’ in this case Islam and Muslims, threatens the homogeneity of the nation. This is reflected in the act preventing the erection of minarets in Switzerland. This ban was “significant for it represented an attempt to squeeze out of public space and visibility this jarring, alien presence.”³²

Switzerland’s action is an exercise of power, for the common good, according to its race politics. Racism “is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern states.”³³ Racism is defined as “a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die.”³⁴ Foucault concedes his own interpretation calls for ‘biopower’ where “the death of others makes one biologically stronger as far as one is a member of a race or a population ..., which is an aberration from the common understanding of racism that is based on “mutual contempt or hatred between races.”³⁵

The analysis of Islamophobia in this paper does not adhere to Foucault’s reasoning, but more closely to identity politics and racism. However, in the Islamic narrative, racism is not

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ David Tyrer, *The Politics of Islamophobia* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Ibid., 28.

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975–1976* (London: Penguin, 2003), 254.

³⁴ Ibid., 254.

³⁵ Ibid., 258.

considered an underpinning for Islamophobia; rather, it is the “religious framing for Islamophobia” that comes into play.³⁶ This view is bolstered by some Muslims’ violent reaction to what they perceive as an attack on Islam, rather than an attack on Muslims. There are many instances of this perception; for example, the killer of Teo van Gogh, the Dutch film director, was not motivated by Teo’s racial slurs against Muslims, but by the production of the film *Submission*, which denigrates Islam and its assumed stance towards women.

ISLAMOPHOBIA: A MUSLIM’S PERSPECTIVE

Numerous Muslim preachers, educators and academics have discussed the phenomenon of Islamophobia. However, some of these views, particularly those emanating from preachers, tend to be apologetic and reactionary, in contrast to academic discourse.³⁷ The works by Bakr Zakī Awad, an Egyptian Islamic theologian, tackle the problem of Islamophobia at its roots. For instance, in his work *Fighting the Legality and Etiquette in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, Awad emphasises that Islam has been perceived as the religion of the sword.³⁸ He explains that jihad must be understood on the bases of the Meccan and Medina periods. Each period offers a unique context.

Ben Tamsuk, a Tunisian academic, has put forward some valid points in his article “Islamophobia, a Geo-Political Analysis” published on the Mominoun Without Borders site.³⁹ He stresses Islamophobia is “an ideological trick to control the resources of the Middle East.”⁴⁰ He believes it is not a new phenomenon as it began with the denial of the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad by the Christians and Jews. Islamophobia’s strongest expression was manifested in the periods of the Crusades (1096-1292), the expulsion of Muslims from Granada in 1492, the colonisation of Arab lands, the Sykes–Picot Agreement in 1916 and the Occupation of Palestine after the 1917 Balfour Declaration.⁴¹ He adds that Western media, framed by xenophobic Orientalist thinking, has tended to paint an image of Islam that constructs a Muslim as an animal, blood thirsty, sexual and terrorist who despises women and adores power, killing and beheading.⁴²

Ben Tamsuk has also tackled the question about who fuels and benefits from Islamophobia. He maintains Islamophobia has unintentionally empowered extremism. Muslims have been enraged by attacks on their sacred Islamic religious symbols; hence, they have been mobilised globally to attend angry street demonstrations and some cases have led to the burning of flags

³⁶ Tyrer, *The Politics of Islamophobia*, 32.

³⁷ Zouhir Gabsi, “Response to Islamophobia in the Arabic Islamic Discourse: A Critical discourse analysis”, *Intellectual Discourse* 23, no. 2(2015): 229-254.

³⁸ Bakr Zakī Awad, *Al-Qitāl: Machrū‘iyyatan wa ‘ādāban fi al-Islām w al-Yahūdiyyah w al-Nasrāniyyah* [Fighting the Legality and Etiquette in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity] (Qatar: University of Qatar, n.d.), 251.

³⁹ Mustapha Ben Tamsuk, “Al-Islamophobia: Muqārabah Geo-Siyāsiyyah” [Islamophobia: A Geo-Political Approach], *Mominoun Without Borders*, February 6, 2017, <https://www.mominoun.com/pdf1/2017-01/islamofoubia.pdf>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 (my translation).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

and assassination of foreign ambassadors. For instance, the publication of abusive pictures of the Prophet serves not only the purposes of extremist groups, but is a pretext to pressure Muslim communities living in the West to assimilate. Islamophobia tends to be inflamed at the time of elections, especially by the extreme right of politics that blames Muslims for problems related to rising unemployment, the spread of crime, terrorism and clandestine migration. Increased economic hardships, recessions and the failure of capitalism have prompted some Western countries to create a virtual and illusory war by doing two things: directing internal public opinion to fight virtual struggles with migrant Muslim communities and blaming these communities for capitalism's failures. Another strategy is to convince the Western voter that the country's problems could only be solved by the expulsion of Muslims from Western countries.

It is extraordinary, Ben Tamsuk argues, that these ridiculous and childish fantasies have been promoted to the people and largely ignored the structural corruption of the capitalist system. However, the author adds this 'Globalized Islamophobia' (GI) has a direct aim, not hiding behind election narratives. Ben Tamsuk adds that:

GI, as led by the United States and its allies today, harks back historically to the end of the Cold War and the demise of the 'red' danger on the global capitalist system. It is only natural the USA aspires to put its hand on all sources of wealth in the world and launch their multinational companies in all directions.⁴³

Ben Tamsuk argues, since imperialist countries can no longer use their military power as in Vietnam, they look for other ways to get involved in rich countries and use their resources. Equipped with embedded media, they search for "legitimate justification for its interference in the affairs of other countries."⁴⁴ No one can undermine the role of the media that links Islam with international terrorism. The USA has always supported political Islam in the past; for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood against Nasser, the Taliban against the Soviet Union and Khomeini against the Iranian national movement. In other words, the USA and Britain have found political Islam to be the ideal tool to curb communism and Arab nationalism. After the failure of communism and nationalism, political Islam became a problem and previous loyalties became enemies. The USA created seemingly Islamic groups to soil Islam's name and foster sectarian division.⁴⁵

Further, Ben Tamsuk argues, in keeping with the aim of globalised empowerment without borders, Islamophobia has been used as a tool to enhance sectarian violence. Its purpose is to create a 'new Middle East.' The strategy is: first, propagate the view that we live in a world where the clash of civilisations is the norm. Second, present Islam as threatening the principles of secular society. Third, create an illusory clash between 'a humanitarian West' and 'a jihadist Islam.' Other strategies include using the military for pre-emptive strikes. The West knows well that solidarity can only be put asunder from the inside through sectarian violence.

⁴³ Ibid., 10 (my translation).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

Finally, Ben Tamsuk offers some practical and objective solutions to the problem. There is a need for a new discourse where we collectively distance ourselves from soiling Islam's name.⁴⁶ He sees that Muslims are caught between the past that will not let go and the desire to free themselves from a situation controlled by the West. He argues one must renew an existential dialogue between the religions to break up established concepts as promoted by Orientalists, colonialism and evangelism, and break away from the traditional crusades. In a significant statement, Ben Tamsuk states:

it must be underlined that [all] religions unite humanity regardless of colour, race, language, and traditions. And that what is actually dividing humanity is spreading poverty, economic marginalization, political and military occupation, and not the belief system; no matter how strong and powerful it is.⁴⁷

Ben Tamsuk points out that the West has been hostile towards Islam since the end of the two World Wars in the twentieth century and the Cold War. What is more questionable is his claim that the West is behind terrorist groups like Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. The West's ideology is to divide, rule and foster religious tension. Each Muslim sect is convinced it is the only one on the right path. The West, according to Ben Tamsuk, paints Islam as a blind faith, rigid and unchangeable, which implies Islam cannot interact with the 'Other,' is the perfect incubator for international terrorism and embodies the rhetoric of the 'clash of civilisations.' These false notions cause growing Western hostility towards Muslim immigrants, which is expressed by isolating them, excluding them from public space, and not recognising their efforts in the development and progress of society.⁴⁸

Hamdi Zaquq, an Egyptian academic and politician, contributes to the discussion on Islamophobia in several of his books dating from 1979, where he analyses issues that explain the relationship between the East and West.⁴⁹ In his book *Islam in the Perception of the West*, Zaquq mentions the role of Orientalists in shaping and influencing popular views on Islam.⁵⁰ He argues the perception of Islam in the West is not contemporary in its origin, but is an image and product of an old putative clash of civilisations. He proposes to raise Muslims' awareness so they are equipped to defend their Islamic perspectives. He also advocates the creation of Muslim associations to scrutinise and closely monitor the Orientalists' views.

Further, Zaquq's book is significant as he tackles the contribution Orientalist writers have made to shaping people's opinion on Islam.⁵¹ Zaquq's objectivity is apparent when he

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16 (my translation).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹ He is Egypt's former Minister for Religious Endowment, a post he held from 1995 to 2011. Zaquq is known for his 'strong' views on Islamic matters such as the wearing of niqāb, and for his opinions on controversial matters such as women's equal rights to men when bearing witness in courts. See Yasmine Saleh, "Zaquq Supports Calls to Equate Women to Men in Court Testimonies," Daily News Egypt, March 14, 2008, <https://www.dailynewssegypt.com/2008/03/14/zakouk-supports-calls-to-equate-women-to-men-in-court-testimonies/>.

⁵⁰ M. H. Zaquq, *Al-Islām fi Taṣwwurāt al-Gharb* [Islam in the West's Perception] (Cairo: Wahbah Library, 1987).

⁵¹ Ibid.

mentions Orientalists had a positive impact on the Islamic culture through the preservation of old scrolls and artefacts. The negative side is that some Orientalists use their knowledge of Islam to fight Islam. Zaquq calls on the Muslim community neither to discredit their contribution nor to embrace their work without scrutiny. Zaquq maintains that some Orientalists have used their work to extend the coloniser's outreach and evangelism. Finally, Zaquq calls for a dialogue among the Orientalists who are subjective in their interpretation of Islam and those with an objective view of Orientalism. Zaquq advises:

indeed, it is not surprising that orientalist disagree with Muslims about Islam, because the orientalist's thinking about Islam and its prophet is different from the logic of Muslim thinking. Therefore, the views differ between the two sides and will remain different.⁵²

Zaquq adds “some orientalist discredit that Islam makes any innovative contribution to knowledge. They reduce the Islamic philosophy to mere copying of Greek philosophy, Sufism to a non-Islamic root, and assert that the Sharia in Islam is taken from Roman laws.”⁵³

Some other Orientalists exaggerate the differences between the sects of Islam. Zaquq cites Professor Kesling, who divided Islam in two ways: ‘Living Islam’ and ‘Dead Islam’. He associates Living Islam with different sects or groups and Dead Islam with the Islam of *kitāb* and *sunnah* – ‘The Holy Quran and Prophetic Tradition.’ Zaquq believes this line of thinking makes Islam move away from central issues towards temporary and trivial matters.

In Zaquq's other work, he addresses the problem at its roots by studying the interpretations of Islam, and the persona and conduct of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in Western literature.⁵⁴ He maintains that fear of Islam started with the spread of false rumours about Islam by the Roman Church. He also states misunderstanding the Qur'ān due to difficulty with the Arabic language is an important factor in spreading misconceptions about Islamic teachings.⁵⁵

As for Najm, an advisor to the Grand Mufti of Egypt, most of his writings and talks encourage religious leaders in the East and West to dispel misconceptions about Islam.⁵⁶ He clarifies this by stating we cannot rectify the image of Islam in the media, but we must employ strategies to combat the spread of negative images of Islam and Muslims. Najm also challenges those engaged in modernising Islamic discourse to rectify misconceptions so Islam becomes more open to the world.

⁵² Ibid., 12 (my translation).

⁵³ Ibid., 13 (my translation).

⁵⁴ M. H. Zaquq, “Al-Risālah al-Muhammadiyah fi al-Mu'allafāt al-Gharbiyyah [Muhammad's Message in Western Literature],” *Majallat Markaz al-Buḥūth al-Sunna w al-Seera* 4 (1989).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim Najm lived and worked in the USA as an imam and translator at the United Nations for many years. He also wrote extensively on Islamophobia, see Ahmad Abdul-Bārī, “Dr Ibrahim Negm Talks to Nile TV International about Anti Prophet Film and the Best Way to React to it”, YouTube video, 21:22, September 29, 2012, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkQqJLFkU8U>; Najm, “Mustachār Mufti al-Jumhūriyyah Yuṭālīb al-Qiyādah al-Dīniyyah Bitashīh Sūrat al-Islām [Adviser to the Republic Demands Religious Leaderships to Correct the Image of Islam],” *Masrāwī*, August 3, 2014. https://www.masrawy.com/islamayat/others-islamic_ppl_news/details/2014/8/3/302856.

In response to the Muslims' rage over the cartoons mocking Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), Najm, speaking in English, encourages Muslims to move away from being reactionary.⁵⁷ He asserts:

we should stay away from this vicious circle of action and reaction and we should make a plan, an organized plan to make initiatives, long term initiatives of engagement of clarifications of explanations of what true Islam is about ...⁵⁸

Najm, in a lecture at New York University, emphasised that Islam encourages stability and denounces terrorism.⁵⁹ He also stressed that differences in opinion or stance should not be a reason for conflict, but should be a starting point to spread mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation. What is noteworthy in his speech is his call for integrating Muslims in their communities and respecting the country's laws to rectify the image of Islam in the West. Najm emphasises, in English, that:

I am more concerned about lay people who do not know much about Islam, of course, there are many people who are well-educated but they know very little ... and I found out that even though we are living in the information technology age, but this information technology age has made us ignorant of each other. We are at the mercy of now the computers, and the iPads and laptops. We often take these tools as our window to the world, we [have] lost the engagement. That's why, I think what is at risk now is that we have failed to engage the people, especially non-Muslims at large ...⁶⁰

To curb the spread of Islamophobia, there are three strategies.⁶¹ First, 'corrective' measures where misconceptions about Islam are rectified by responding to anything disseminated against Islam by, for instance, sending letters to Western media outlets. Najm mentions the creation of *dār al-iftā'* (jurisprudence site) in eight languages that aims to provide information about Islam.⁶² The second measure is 'pre-emptive' and 'preventative,' seeking to engage non-Muslims by increasing and spreading awareness. He stresses the need to break the cycle of 'talking to ourselves' and broaden the vision and talk to the whole world instead.

CRITIQUE OF THE MUSLIM VIEW ON ISLAMOPHOBIA

The texts reviewed present reflective views of the phenomenon of Islamophobia. They hinge on numerous doctrines, some of which deserve close attention. The most obvious feature of these texts, in their treatment of Islamophobia, is their divergence from the common apologetic and defensive trend that characterises the speeches of Muslim preachers.⁶³ The first general point to be made is that Islam is a complex religion and Muslims, including Muslim leaders, play a role in raising awareness about Islamic teachings. Second, Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon in which numerous variables play a role, specifically Western media. Third, the

⁵⁷ Abdul-Barī. "Dr Ibrahim Negm talks to Nile TV International."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² <http://www.dar-alifta.org/>.

⁶³ Gabsi, "Response to Islamophobia in the Arabic Islamic Discourse: A Critical discourse analysis," 249.

animosity between the Muslim world and West is rooted in history, and bridges of understanding have not been built, which is perpetuated in our time. Fourth, the role of Orientalists is important in presenting Islam objectively and Muslim scholars should monitor their work by actively debunking misconceptions about Islam.

However, some views expressed in these texts need some qualification. For instance, when Najm mentions Egypt's role in fighting terrorism, his views overlook the fact that Egypt has a record of human rights abuses.⁶⁴ According to Human Rights Watch, under Abdel Fattah al-Sīsi, Egypt still uses torture and other forms of abuses.⁶⁵ Najm's lack of objectivity in this matter questions the role of muftis in modern day Egypt. This may open further discussion about whether muftis, especially after the Arab spring, have become mere servants of power.

Other striking examples of unsubstantiated claims that are propagated by Muslim scholars are related to the West's role in dividing the *ummah* – 'Islamic community' – and the emergence of the terror groups such as Islamic State. One may argue, while it is true the West has drawn lines in the sand and created numerous 'statelets,' the blame cannot be put solely on the West for the Arab's failure to unite. What is starkly clear is the role of Western media to expose the truth. Western media has propagated lies and deceit, as in the case of Iraq and the WMD, which has turned out to be weapons of mass 'deception,' not 'destruction.'

What has not been mentioned in the texts is the role of education in combating Islamophobia. To combat it successfully, attention needs to be drawn to those areas of Islam that the West ignores; namely, Islamic ethics. For instance, the importance of respecting and caring for one's neighbour, the merciful nature of the marital relationship, filial piety, charity and animal welfare. Ethical behaviour is cemented and dictated by the Qur'ān and hadīth. Probably the best reference for Islamic ethical behaviour is Imām al-Nawawī's 12th century book *Riyādh al-Ṣāliḥīn* (Garden for the Righteous).⁶⁶

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO AN OLD PROBLEM

As discussed in this paper, Islamophobia is an old phenomenon that it is not likely to cease soon. It is profoundly interconnected with xenophobia, which is a result of prejudice and fear of the unknown. One concedes that combating Islamophobia is a complex challenge and its realisation depends on the outcomes of cooperative work between various government agencies and media outlets. Western media plays a pivotal role in this campaign. Current affairs and news items should be selected and broadcast with sensitivity. For instance, it is highly damaging to broadcast a terrorist act and Muslim festivity in the same context. Awareness of the limitations of media outlets, with all viewers educated to be critical thinkers, is crucial in combating Islamophobia. This is confirmed by Ramberg "even without intentional

⁶⁴ Abdul-Bārī, "Dr Ibrahim Negm talks to Nile TV International."

⁶⁵ "Egypt," Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/egypt>.

⁶⁶ Imam Al-Nawawī, *Riyādh al-Ṣāliḥīn* [Garden for the Righteous] (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1999).

manipulation, insensitive reporting on seemingly trivial matters can promote racism, when multiplied across the media.”⁶⁷

There is a need to revisit and re-define some concepts used today when discussing Islam; for instance, *radical* Islam, *moderate* Islam and *political Islam*.⁶⁸ In her RAND report *Civil Democratic Islam*, Cheryl Benard reports different types of Muslims and suggests strategies to curb Muslim extremism.⁶⁹ She posits a continuum regarding a Muslim’s adherence and attitude towards critical issues such as ‘jihad,’ ‘hijab,’ ‘Islamic State’ and so on. On one end of the spectrum, she includes radical fundamentalists, scriptural fundamentalists and conservative traditionalists, and on the other, she includes reformist traditionalists, modernists, mainstream secularists and radical secularists. Benard’s report, particularly tactics to combat fundamentalism, has raised a few eyebrows among Muslims. Some of her approaches include encouraging Sufism and supporting modernists and mainstream secularists by giving them public platforms, enhancing “facilitating and encouraging awareness of pre- and non-Islamic history and culture, in the media and the curricula of relevant countries.”⁷⁰ Benard’s report may be perceived as an attack on Islam, as it may be interpreted as an attempt to manufacture a Muslim who advocates RAND’s ideals and ideologies.

On the contrary, Siddiqui explains radical religion need *not* be ‘destructive’ or ‘a negative force,’ but it should be understood in the context that the person wants to practise their religion publicly without forcibly influencing others to accept their message.⁷¹ Similarly, the word ‘moderate’ usually refers to ‘Westernised’ Muslims who are good citizens, hardworking people and have a mortgage. However, moderation presupposes another type of Islam that is irrational and immoderate. In this discourse, Rutledge says, Islam is perceived as “dangerous, because it operates outside of reason.”⁷² For instance, while the West may find wearing the *hijab* an unreasonable behaviour, it makes perfect sense for Muslims. Siddiqui argues there is no benefit in seeking to find answers to questions by using reason.⁷³ She provides examples of how some of our actions towards, for instance, ‘love’ and ‘friendship’ are not necessarily guided by reason.

Finally, education plays a key role when combating Islamophobia; education based on interfaith dialogue conducted at various educational platforms from primary school to tertiary.

⁶⁷ Ingrid Ramberg, *Islamophobia and its Consequences on Young People* (Budapest: The Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe, 2004), 13.

⁶⁸ Ghannouchi prefers to use the term *haraka Islāmiyyah* – ‘Islamic Movement’ – in lieu of ‘political Islam,’ because in his view, political Islam connotes a failed system. It is used, according to Ghannouchi, whenever there is a report of a *haraka Islāmiyye*’s failure, such as an unsuccessful election. See Rached Ghannouchi, “Madā Miṣdāq Da‘wā Fachal al-Islām al-Siyāsī [Extent of Credibility of Political Islam’s Failure],” *aljazeera*, September 24, 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/opinions/2013/10/24/السياسي-الإسلام-فشل-دعوى-مصدق-مدى>.

⁶⁹ Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, National Security Research Division, 2003).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷¹ David Rutledge, “Radicals and Moderates: Faith, Reason and Islam,” ABC Radio National, June 14, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/faith-26-reason-pt-2-islam/5378434>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

The programs should focus on debunking some of the established myths and prejudices about some of the religions' ethos and practices. Further, one should question the authority of people who speak or comment on the characteristics of a certain faith without authority or training. For instance, it might be unfitting for a news outlet to broadcast the views of a layperson, for instance, on scientific matters such as a medical breakthrough. Hence, people with little Islamic knowledge, including knowledge of the Arabic language, Qur'ānic Arabic, rhetoric and education on Islamic matters should be discouraged from commenting on the merits of Islam. Their misinterpretations may lead to serious consequences, such as a rise in xenophobia and violence. Propagating peace in the world through, for instance, the dissemination of truthful reporting, should be a perennial human endeavour. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian philosopher and historian, spoke about hypocrisy and applying double standards. In this seminal statement, he provides the ingredients for a peaceful world:

only if the creative and active forces of mankind dedicate themselves to finding gradual and effective restraints against the evil facets of human nature to an elevation of our moral consciousness – only then will a faint, distant hope exist. To embark upon this path, and to walk it, requires a penitent, pure heart and the wisdom and willingness to place constraints on one's own side, to limit oneself even before limiting others. But today that path only elicits an ironic chuckle, if not open ridicule. If so, don't bother calling for "world security."⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines a Muslim's perspective on Islamophobia from known and respected Muslim scholars. Their views represent what I have termed an 'internal' perspective, which contrasts with the 'external' or Orientalist counterpart. In the treatment of this phenomenon, I have noted the internal or Islamic perspective has deep-seated reasons for its existence, some of which are historical, but overall, are predominantly socio-political. Not only does the Western or Orientalist perspective lack deeper knowledge and understanding of the particularities of Islam, but one finds the media plays a significant role in disseminating misconceptions about Islam. The paper attempts to merge the two perspectives, internal and external, to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon. It is important to raise awareness about Islamic teachings by actively correcting the image of Islam using less reactionary and emotive approaches. Equally, it is important to expose the ideology behind Islamophobia when it is used for political aims. This discourse fuels terrorism and is used as a pretext by extremist groups to attack the West. Despite attacks on Islam as not being a religion of peace, advocating terrorism and being incompatible with Western 'values', Islam will remain the world's most established religion because it is not just a conviction, it is a way of life for many Muslims today. The West could benefit from Islam now, just as it benefited from it during, for instance, the heyday of Islamic Spain. Likewise, Muslims have benefited from and been supported by the West and other faiths. A notable and much-quoted example is the story of Al-Najashi

⁷⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The March of the Hypocrites," *The London Times*, August 21, 1997, http://www.lib.ru/PROZA/SOLZHENICYN/s_hypocrit.txt_with-big-pictures.html.

(Negus), the Christian king of Abyssinia, who supported and welcomed the persecuted Meccan migrants and who was quoted as saying “you’re welcome; your Prophet is welcome. I admit that he is the Apostle about whom Jesus had given the good news. Live wherever you like in my country.”⁷⁵ Islam and Christianity or East and West do not embody the much quoted and divisive notion of ‘clash of civilisations’; rather, these two religions should strive to find harmony and continue to build bridges of understanding. The inherent differences are exacerbated by the destructive terrorist actions of individuals, states or groups and conflated by relentless biased Western media networks fuelling the Islamophobic narrative. While facing these challenges in a rapidly changing world, especially the MENA region, it is difficult to predict whether Islamophobia will cease to exist.

⁷⁵ Abu Tariq Hijazi, “Najashi: The King Who Supported Muslim Emigrants,” *Arab News*, March 28, 2014, para. 14, <https://www.arabnews.com/news/546951>.

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