



Home Affairs Select Committee - Islamophobia Inquiry Submission

1. About Runnymede:

The Runnymede Trust is the UK's leading race equality think tank. We were founded in 1968, to provide evidence on racial inequalities, to inform policymakers and public opinion about the reality of those inequalities, and to work with local communities and policymakers in tackling those inequalities.

We hold the secretariat for the APPG on Race and Community, chaired by David Lammy, and organised three major events this year on: the hostile environment - putting people first, Windrush Lessons one year on and the new science of race and equality. We also published a 1997 [report](#) on *Islamophobia*, and a 20 year update in 2017:

2. Overview:

The Runnymede Trust has [defined Islamophobia](#) as anti-Muslim racism. Our longer definition is based on the UN definition of racism that the UK government has signed up to for over 50 years: 'Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life'.

Our 2017 report explains how despite the widespread use of the term Islamophobia, there is very poor understanding of its impact on individuals and communities. Racism as a concept is poorly understood within this country, with a tendency to focus on individual speech acts or extreme or rare acts of violence. Conversely, defining Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism has been long accepted within the race-equality sector.

Islamophobia has a large and varied effect on Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims. Economic disadvantage of these groups is central to understanding the wider context of Islamophobia: 46% of the Muslim population live in the 10% of the most deprived [local authority districts](#). Over half of Muslim children live in poverty, which will have effects on their wellbeing and opportunities [throughout their lives](#). Such disparities and their interconnectedness to Islamophobia must be explored in greater detail rather than continually and simply engaging with the Muslim community from a securitisation perspective.

Discrimination - including in all of Britain's institutions, and in covert as well as overt ways - needs to be at the heart of any understanding or definition of Islamophobia. A definition cannot and should not focus just hate crime; the Islamophobic discrimination faced by people is much deeper and widespread than just hate crime. It pervades the job market, the housing environment and access to healthcare. Ruling out racism as a concept and ruling out certain considerations regarding the definition of Islamophobia will hinder both policymakers and the public in understanding what anti-Muslim racism *is* and in designing the appropriate *responses* to it. The fact that we are still debating what Islamophobia is or whether it exists is a sad reality, and one that prevents us from taking action against it.

Islamophobia - or anti-Muslim racism - is not simply the work of a few 'bad apples' nor is it just a hate crime. Furthermore the racist tropes that underpin hate crimes don't arise from nowhere, nor are they found only among those with a criminal aptitude. All forms of racism, whether Islamophobia, antisemitism or anti-black racism, are based on the *same* tropes across our society, and within our collective cultural and intellectual history, and held by middle class managers and newspaper columnists as well as far right activists. Hate crimes are hugely important. However, if we make a definition that narrows it to hate crimes we are ignoring the reality of what Islamophobia - and all forms of racism - is, but more importantly, how we *tackle* it.

Islamophobic discourse has undoubtedly become more prevalent and has been given insufficient attention. There is often a '[religious conveyor belt](#)' theory whereby society has come to intertwine the religiosity of a Muslim, or indeed how 'Muslim' they look with the likelihood of them being a terrorist. Much of this rhetoric continues unchecked because Islam is a religion and focus is placed on 'criticising ideas', when in fact the issue is harming people or individuals. As we have previously put it, criticizing ideas is a hallmark of a free society, but discriminating against people is a marker of an unjust one. And there is little reason to think that Islamophobes are motivated principally in terms of theological debates, instead of seeking to justify their discrimination against all Muslims, whatever their beliefs.

Of critical importance is a need to delineate the many issues that are placed as problems for Islam and feed into a deep, civilizational divide between 'the West' and 'Islam'. This argument is obviously inaccurate historically, but also in terms of peoples' attitudes and actions in Britain today. There are of course people who reject values such as equality, anti-discrimination, and freedom, and they should be challenged. But in the Islamophobic narrative only and all (or most) Muslims are always viewed as violating such norms, while ignoring the various ways in which inequality and unfreedom, racism, sexism and homophobia persist across society. As a chapter in our 2017 report put it '[everyone's a feminist when it comes to Muslim women](#)'.

The lack of understanding and concern about Islamophobia is not linked simply to public or newspaper rhetoric, but extends to politics and policy. The lack of independent investigation into Islamophobia in the Conservative party is just one example of the failure to even acknowledge much less address the extent of anti-Muslim racism in our country. [Over 100 internal complaints of Islamophobia](#) have been brought against the party; there is no denying that the issue exists or that it deserves a full and comprehensive investigation. The party has often chosen to dismiss or malign those who have raised the issue, instead of engaging with the substance of claims that the Conservative party may be institutionally Islamophobic. This is a particularly inadvisable stance when so few Muslims - around 10% - vote for the Conservative party, and is electorally speaking analogous to Donald Trump dismissing concerns about racism by African Americans.

One concern that has been overlooked is how Muslim communities are engaged principally if not exclusively through the lens of counter-terrorism and security. This means both that Muslims are not engaged on other issues - tackling child poverty and racism in the labour market, for example - and that government does not have a wider community engagement programme with all minorities who are experiencing racism. This not only prevents groups from coming together to tackle injustice, but instead creates competition and division between those groups.

Government must engage with a wider range of Muslims, and those tackling racism more generally. Whether Runnymede's 2017 report or the work of the APPG on British Muslims, there is a clear consensus on what Islamophobia is and how it manifests itself. More widely, the government should engage a wider range of Muslims, even those who are

critical of it. Dissent is not only legitimate but a sign of a healthy democracy; where racism and discrimination remain, complacency about those wrongs itself contributes to those injustices. It is particularly surprising and concerning to see government officials suggest, contrary to decades of race relations legislation, that the government can never be racially discriminatory, and further to imply that those of us who highlight this possibility are somehow playing into the hands of ‘extremists’.

There is a wider, connected problem with assuming government can never be racially discriminatory, and that is framing the issue within the context of ‘extremism’. The problem here is that it profoundly and dangerously mistakes the nature of racism, including Islamophobia: ‘extremists’ aren’t picking up their ideas and attitudes from obscure 8chan sites, but rather from a deep, rich vein within our collective intellectual, cultural and social life.

We instead need to start from the position that we are *all* vulnerable to racist thinking and action because of this heritage, and its ongoing resonances and effects. We won’t be able to tackle racism if we so underestimate and misunderstand its sources, roots, and what continues to give it sustenance. It is therefore inadvisable to start from the position that the ‘mainstream’ right, liberals, left or whoever are on one side, wholly untainted by racist thinking or actions, with the ‘far right’ (or ‘far left’) the only ones contaminated by it. This is wishful and naïve thinking. If we don’t know the racism in our own tradition or movement, then we don’t know our own movement or we’re being dishonest. It is a nice story to think that racism isn’t at the heart of our history and who we are, but it’s a story that prevents us from spotting the dangers and understanding the deep, wide roots in our society. Of course there are some who are principally motivated by racism, and they are more dangerous still. But their relatively greater success recently proves the breadth and depth of the ideas in our wider culture that they’re effectively tapping into.

3. Current extent of Islamophobia in British society and barriers to social mobility

With [3.3 million](#) Muslims living in the UK, consisting of almost 5% of the population (or the same size as Wales), the issue of Islamophobia is not a small matter. The Muslim community, when surveyed, stated that for them Islamophobia was a top priority. Below will follow an exploration of how Islamophobia impacts upon the daily life of British Muslims and those caught in the crossfire of anti-Muslim racism.

A recent YouGov poll from 2019 found that [31%](#) of the population believe that Islam poses a threat to the British way of life. Such opinions and widespread Islamophobia is not born in a vacuum. The reality is that tropes have been the same for centuries - hate crime doesn’t derive merely from rising criminal aptitude, they are picking up tropes that have existed for centuries. These views have been spread by the persistent demonisation of Muslims and Islam through both the media and political discourse. The Muslim Council of Britain (2019), found that [59%](#) of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour. Over a third of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Muslims, with terrorism being the most common theme. Such overt demonisation of a large number of people plays in to the psyche of the general public. Polls indicate how this negatively effects the wider population’s perceptions. In a poll carried out by ComRes in 2016, [28%](#) of people in the UK thought that Islam was not compatible with ‘British values’. Furthermore, [43%](#) of respondents said that Islam was a negative force in the UK.

This is not however an issue that is isolated to the media world. The political spectrum has also for some time now been inextricably linking the dangers of terrorism with ‘Islamist extremism’. David Cameron, in 2015, accused Muslims of [‘quietly condoning ISIS’](#) and referred to a misleading Sun newspaper poll that stated that 1 in 5 Muslims sympathised with jihadi’s. Furthermore, consecutive governments, whether Labour, the Conservatives

and the Liberal Democrats, have all extolled the virtues of dealing with 'Islamist extremism', stating that it is the 'biggest issue of our generation'.

In the most recent [NatCen report from 2019](#) regarding religious attitudes, they found that respondents had the most negative view towards Islam regarding their 'personal attitudes towards members of different religious groups'. In other words, 17% of respondents had a negative view towards Muslims compared with only 4% towards Christians.

With hate crimes continually rising, it is important to deal with this issue now. From 2015 to 2017 there was a [23.7% increase](#) in Islamophobic hate crimes, the starkest rise in comparison to all other categories. This demonstrates the real and prevalent existence of Islamophobia in British society. These are not individualised anecdotal cases of Islamophobia; they are widespread, daily occurrences which must be dealt with not just through individual convictions (though the police should charge people with hate crime offences), but through stronger political leadership to call out and directly tackle racism and its consequences.

A [report from the Social Mobility Commission in 2017](#) found that young Muslims living in the UK 'face an enormous social mobility challenge and are being held back from reaching their full potential at every stage of their lives'. It found that within the economically active population - aged between 16 to 74 years - only 1 in 5 of the Muslim population is in full-time employment. This compares with 1 in 3 of the overall population of England and Wales. This pattern is repeated within the educational sector, with Muslims having lower levels of qualifications. Currently, only a quarter of Muslims over the age of 16 have degree-level or above. The fact that 46% of Muslims live in the 10% of the most deprived local authority districts, and are more likely to be living in poverty, has an impact on school attainment, access to higher education and the likelihood of getting a job.

British Muslims face low employment and earning rates as a result of the socio-economic disadvantages they face. This could also be said about the added barriers that they face to educational progress and overall attainment. The over-arching point should be to question whether Islamophobia plays a part in this. Studies have found that someone with a Muslim sounding name is three times less likely to get an interview. [Inside Out teamed up with Bristol University](#) to explore the discrimination faced by Muslims in the job market. It found that, having submitted identical CVs with the names 'Adam' and 'Mohamed' that for every 100 applications Adam received 12 positive responses with Mohamed only receiving four. A further study this year, by Slater and Gordon discovered that 1 in 3 BAME workers are asked to adopt a Western name.

Evidence of this kind has been reproduced over decades in Britain, and explains why as with other forms of racism, Islamophobia needs to focus on the labour market and day-to-day anti-Muslim racism. Studies by Professor Anthony Heath and other academics demonstrate the very real employment barriers and discrimination that British Muslims face within the UK job market. The perception of Muslims and the fear of discrimination has a very real chilling effect upon Muslims in relation to employment. Muslim women face the largest discrimination within the job market.

Such an analysis of the institutional framework of the UK, the job market and education system suggests that Muslim disadvantage based simply on what they look like or sound like amounts to some form of institutional Islamophobia. Barriers are erected across all sectors of society which prevent them from fulfilling their potential, not because of their academic background but simply because of what they look like and/or sound like. It is equally unconvincing to suggest that Muslims do not speak the English language well enough and this is the main reason they are prevented from achieving. The 2011 Census also found that only 0.2% of the population does not speak English: just 138,000 people.

This on its own cannot account for the extent of the inequalities Muslims face every day within the labour market and their general ‘integration’ within British society. We strongly agree that speaking English is important, not least as our research has found that migrants want to learn English to improve the education and health in their families, to navigate public transport and services, as well as to get a job; they need little lecturing from politicians to see these benefits. Instead of inflating the numbers who don’t speak English and talking ‘tough’ about integration, the government should reverse their decision to [cut ESOL funding by over £138 million since 2010](#).

[The Dame Louise Casey Report from 2016](#) made Muslims the centre of the integration problem. Muslims were singled out on 249 individual occasions. A far greater number than any other groups mentioned in the report. This official government review into integration raises serious questions about the conflation of Muslims with an integration problem. It is also clear from the Casey review and latter statements that policymakers misunderstand the nature of spatial segregation in modern Britain, which has been decreasing since 2001, and shows that Muslims are more likely to have non-Muslim neighbours (and be in relationships with people of a different ethnic background) than are White British people.

[The 2017 Social Mobility Commission report](#) from 2017 found that rather than a lack of ‘integration’, young Muslims feel that their transition into the labour market is hampered by the recruitment process which they come up against. This is then exacerbated by the fact that these young Muslims feel that there is racism, discrimination and a lack of cultural awareness that pervades the workplace. The evidence is clear: Muslims face institutional forms of Islamophobia. By denying such evidence, we create further division between Muslims and non-Muslims, and are unable to grapple with the solutions that might address it.

4. The impact of official adoption of Islamophobia definition

The decision by the government to establish its own definition of Islamophobia, while ostensibly understandable, raises additional questions. First, the government states that the definition should not reference racism in any way. This is very disappointing, and suggests that the government will be unwilling to tackle anti-Muslim racism, or allow for a cross-community response to all the different forms of racism minorities (except Muslims?) experience. Two other criteria are similarly odd: that the definition must not undermine counter-terrorism efforts, and that it must address sectarianism. In our view both are irrelevant. The standard for a definition of any concept should pertain to that concept. It may or may not be the case that counter-terrorism policies are racist; the government must at least *consider* this possibility (perhaps by casting their minds to such policies in other countries if they cannot countenance the idea of state discrimination occurring in Britain).

In terms of sectarianism, the issue is somewhat trickier. Sectarianism in Islam is a serious issue. However as the term ‘sectarianism’ suggests, there is already a concept and term for it. Social evils or harms should not all be conflated: poverty is not the same as sexism or alcoholism, but that doesn’t make each social harm any less bad or wrong. It is a mistake to think that sectarianism is the same as Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, but that in no way makes sectarianism any *less bad*. Tackling sectarianism requires real efforts and actions, but it doesn’t help to design and implement those actions if we misidentify what sectarianism is in the first place.

But perhaps just as important is the context for the government seeking to advocate for its own definition of Islamophobia. This was publicly stated: because it was *not* seeking to adopt the definition of Islamophobia put forward by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on

British Muslims. Whatever the government's reasons, and whatever one's views of the APPG definition, this decision, and how it was communicated, has furthered the concerns of British Muslims that the state does not take seriously the issue of Islamophobia. The conditions for that definition that we have criticized above have only enhanced that concern.

Instead of ruling out by fiat in advance, any definition of Islamophobia must accept the reality and prevalence of anti-Muslim discrimination within every aspect of people's lives. One key aim of providing an appropriate definition or diagnosis of the challenge of Islamophobia is to guide the appropriate *response* to that challenge. Following on from the definition of Islamophobia in our 2017 report, there are a number of recommendations that the government, regardless of its politics, should adopt. These include the government reintroducing a target to reduce child poverty, collecting more data in order to adopt a wider strategy to tackle the inequalities that affect British Muslims and engaging more thoroughly with a wide cross section of British Muslim society.

The adoption of an official definition of Islamophobia would go a long way to ensuring that all Muslims in this country feel listened to and cared about. It would put an end to the 'engagement fatigue' that Muslim communities feel and would foster better relations between Muslim communities and the establishment as a whole.

However, we must move on from the semantics of this debate and look to take action. We need communities to understand that the state is engaging with racism. By saying that Islamophobia is not a form of racism they are saying that it is not a serious problem. This excludes people and devalues them by taking away the potential seriousness of this issue.

5. What then can be done to tackle this pervasive and deep rooted Islamophobia?

Our own recommendations from our [2017 report](#) should be revisited. These include:

1. Adopting a definition of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism.
 2. Public services but also private and charity sector employers should collect more data on Muslims and other faith non-faith groups to highlight the 'Muslim penalty'.
 3. Following up on its strong and commendable commitment to collecting race equality data, the government should adopt a wider strategy to tackle those inequalities which particularly affect British Muslims
 4. There should be a full and independent inquiry into the government's counter-terrorism strategy.
 5. Media regulators should intervene more proactively in cases of allegedly discriminatory reporting, and in so doing reflect the spirit of equalities legislation.
- It is a welcome move that the government has appointed an independent advisor to provide expert advice on a definition of Islamophobia to government. We sincerely hope that the new administration of Boris Johnson maintains this appointment and seeks to deepen their involvement. This is an important moment and one which should be looked to be built upon. However, it should be stressed that this move is long overdue. The government has employed successive independent reviewers of terrorism legislation that have acknowledged the existence and prevalence of Islamophobia. Grassroots organisations, including the MCB, Finsbury Park Mosque and others, have explained over and over again the real seriousness of Islamophobia and how it is going on unchecked.
 - The government needs an inquiry into its own party and the growing allegations of anti-Muslim racism levelled against it. This would instill confidence that the ruling

party takes seriously and understands the issue at hand. Subsequently encouraging other parts of the political spectrum to do the same

- The fundamental question is whether Islamophobia can either as a whole or partially explain the disadvantages that Muslims face within all aspects of society. For example 50% of British Muslims experience household poverty. This compares with the national average that stands at 18%. The disparity between employment rates, prisoner figures and household poverty, amongst many others cannot be explained or justified rationally.
- There has been and there continues to be a persistent securitisation of British Muslim communities. The normalisation of Islamophobia is something which our report from 2017 touches on extensively. This has served to isolate and exclude large parts of this country's population and is justified through a 'security' lens. If Islamophobia is to be rooted out and dealt with then top institutions, right the way to the Home Office and the Prime Minister must take responsibility for the rise in Islamophobia.
- The adoption of an official definition would be a very welcome move but more must be done. Throw away comments made by senior politicians must be checked, the inextricable intertwining of Islam and Muslims with security matters must be ceased and government must provide support outside of the toxic nexus which already exists around Prevent. If none of this is done then the rise of Islamophobia will continue and the bile with which Muslims in this country are treated will not cease.