



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Islamophobia: Hostility and Prejudice against Islam

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Twenty-five years ago, the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan. The invasion has several aspects, including the resistance, the collapse of the previous political order after 20 years of full international support, and what many regard as America's humiliating defeat. During the 20 years of the American occupation of Afghanistan, a term that was frequently heard on media was Islamophobia. But the question is what exactly is Islamophobia?

What Is Islamophobia?

Islamophobia refers to prejudice, hostility, and hatred directed against Islam and Muslims. It includes hatred, discrimination, humiliation, or the restriction of a person's rights simply because that person is Muslim. Fear and hostility towards Islam have exposed Muslims in Western societies to discrimination, hatred, economic disadvantages, social isolation, and mistrust. Since the beginning of this century, many Western governments and political circles have frequently linked terrorism with Islamophobia, often reinforcing the association between Islam and terrorism in public discourse.

The term terrorist is among the most frequently used—and most controversial—terms in contemporary international politics. Those who defend their homeland and values against foreign colonialism and aggression may be labelled “terrorists” by the occupying or invading power. In countries under colonial domination, occupying forces

have often described liberation movements as terrorists, insurgents, or extremists. Yet the very people colonial powers denounce may be regarded by their own communities as freedom fighters, mujahideen, heroes, and patriots. Thus, one party may label the same individual a terrorist, and another celebrate them as a hero.

History offers numerous examples of individuals and armed movements that adversaries once branded “terrorists” but later entered peace negotiations, were recognized as patriotic forces, or even assumed political power. Nelson Mandela, as an individual, and the Taliban, as a movement, illustrate different aspects of this historical phenomenon. Nelson Mandela, who struggled against the racial discrimination imposed by South Africa's ruling white-minority regime, was once described as a terrorist. He spent twenty-seven years in prison. Eventually, circumstances changed: he was released, negotiations took place, and he became President of South Africa. He was no longer treated as a terrorist; instead, he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Another example is Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's leader.

A comparable political transformation occurred with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Initially, the United States designated them as terrorists and fought against them. Eventually, the U.S. entered negotiations with them, and some came to regard them as a nationalist or patriotic movement. Today, they exercise power in Afghanistan, and former adversaries engage with them.

These examples illustrate how the political use of the term terrorist can change as political power, strategic interests, and circumstances evolve. One reason for the continuing controversy is that, at the international level, no single, comprehensive definition of terrorism is accepted by every country. Although the United Nations has adopted numerous counterterrorism conventions, agreement on a single, universally accepted, all-encompassing legal definition has remained elusive.

September 11 and the Political Association between Islam and Terrorism

On 11 September 2001, the United States suffered devastating attacks. The American government attributed responsibility to al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. It accused Afghanistan of providing sanctuary to al-Qaeda and bin Laden and subsequently launched a military invasion of the country.

Some people, however, advanced a different allegation: that the attacks had been orchestrated by elements within the United States itself to create a pretext for invading Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the Muslim world, while mobilizing international support by presenting America as the victim of a grave act of aggression entitled to retaliate.

According to these allegations, the full truth about who carried out the attacks was never established to the satisfaction of those who questioned the official account. Critics argued that the American government had not presented sufficient evidence to resolve their concerns that no international tribunal had been established to adjudicate the dispute, and that serious questions remained about how an attack of such magnitude could have occurred without America's powerful intelligence agencies preventing it. They also questioned why no one in the United States appeared to have been punished for the alleged failures that permitted the attacks to take place. These allegations remain matters of controversy and should be distinguished from the established findings concerning the attacks.

Before the total collapse of the World Trade Centre, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister at the time, appeared on television

and described the events as a 'clash of civilizations', Islamic and Western civilization. Silvio Berlusconi, then Italy's Prime Minister, also characterized the situation as a clash of civilizations and asserted the superiority of Western civilization over Islam. President George W. Bush described the military campaign in Afghanistan as a "crusade" and claimed that God had instructed him to attack Afghanistan. Sometime later, Masooda Jalal, who served as a minister in President Hamid Karzai's government, stated at the Canadian Embassy in Kabul that, during a meeting with President Bush, he had told her that the United States had gone to Afghanistan under divine instruction to support women's rights, defend minority rights against the Pashtuns, and introduce what he considered a moderate form of Islam.

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the relationship between Islam and 'terrorism' became a major subject of international political, media, and academic debate. Muslims in Western societies increasingly found themselves subjected to suspicion and, in many instances, labelled as potential terrorists. Numerous Western media outlets and political groups associated terrorist incidents with

Muslims in general. Some critics went further, alleging that certain incidents had been engineered by Western actors to discredit Islam and that responsibility had subsequently been attributed to Muslims. They argued that a broader propaganda campaign against Muslims contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion, prejudice, hostility, and Islamophobia in several Western countries.

Critics of the official narratives surrounding September 11 maintained that unresolved questions persisted, and they compared those concerns with other suspicious incidents in Western countries whose perpetrators, in their view, had not been satisfactorily identified. Some even alleged that governments themselves had staged such incidents to discredit Muslims and justify repression against them. These claims require independent evidence and should not be treated as established facts.

Nevertheless, the wider question of how governments, political actors, and media organizations assign responsibility for acts of violence deserves serious scrutiny. A number of major attacks in Western countries became central to public discussions about terrorism and Muslims.

Selected Terrorist Attacks and Their Public Attribution

1. The Madrid Train Bombings — Spain, 11 March 2004

- Reported fatalities: 193.
- Injuries: approximately 2,000.
- Responsibility was attributed to a network inspired by al-Qaeda.

2. The London Bombings — United Kingdom, 7 July 2005

- Four British Muslim suicide bombers carried out an attack on bus no. 30 in London.
- The attacks killed 52 victims, in addition to the bombers, and injured hundreds.

Questions and alternative accounts circulated at the time, including claims concerning an empty number 30 bus near Tavistock Square. Some commentators questioned why such an out-of-route bus was involved and why media personnel were at the scene. They also questioned changes in the early reported casualty figures, which initially cited 13 deaths on a bus, then 26, and later 52 across the attacks. Such conspiracy theories and questions should be assessed without bias against the findings of official investigations. Later, President Karzai was brought to King's Cross to pay tribute to the 'victims'.

3. The Police Shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes — London, 22 July 2005

Two weeks after the 7 July bombings, Jean Charles de Menezes, a 27-year-old Brazilian electrician working in London, was shot dead by police at Stockwell Underground station in front of members of the public. According to

the account presented, police initially claimed that they had been tracking an "Islamic terrorist" for two weeks and that he had been involved in several attempted suicide attacks. They also maintained that officers had attempted to apprehend him but shot him after he ran away and was believed to be armed. However, the case subsequently raised serious questions about police conduct and the accuracy of the initial public account. De Menezes's parents travelled from Brazil and stated that their son was a Catholic Christian, not a terrorist. They maintained that he was an innocent worker who came to Britain to earn a living and send money home to his family. The case became a significant example of premature suspicion of Muslims, and the consequences of counterterrorism practices for innocent people.

4. The Boston Marathon Bombing — United States, 2013

- Fatalities: 3.
- Injuries: more than 260.
- Responsibility was attributed to the Tsarnaev brothers, who were Muslim.

5. The Charlie Hebdo Attack — France, 7 January 2015

- Fatalities: 12.
- Injuries: 11.
- The attackers were claimed to be brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, linked to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

6. The Paris Attacks — France, 13 November 2015

- Fatalities: 130.
- It was claimed that the ISIS claimed responsibility.

7. The Brussels Bombings — Belgium, 2016

- Fatalities: 32
- It was claimed that the ISIS claimed responsibility.

8. The Nice Truck Attack — France, 2016

- Fatalities: 86.
- It was claimed that the ISIS claimed responsibility.

9. The Berlin Christmas Market Attack — Germany, 2016

- Fatalities: 13.
- It was claimed that the ISIS claimed responsibility.

10. The Manchester Arena Bombing — United Kingdom, 22 May 2017

- Fatalities: 22.
- ISIS claimed responsibility.

Under the pressure of such allegations, propaganda, and hostility, many Muslims in Western societies experienced considerable distress. Western media organizations sometimes sought to reassure the public by stating that, although the perpetrators of certain attacks were Muslims or had links to extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, the actions of a handful of extremists could not represent Islam or all Muslims. Yet, in the view of critics, the repeated association of such attacks with Muslim identity could also reinforce the impression that Muslims as a group were implicated in terrorism. Conferences and public discussions were frequently organized to emphasize that not all Muslims were terrorists, while Muslims themselves were encouraged to condemn violence committed in the name of their religion. This implied that the terrorists are Muslims, but not all Muslims are terrorists.

The fundamental principle should be straightforward: responsibility for a crime belongs to the individuals and organizations that commit it, not to an entire religion or the millions of people who follow it. However, when public discourse repeatedly frames Muslims as a potential security threat, even while acknowledging that not all Muslims are terrorists, it can leave a lasting impression that Muslim identity itself is associated with danger. Under sustained pressure from such narratives, some Muslims began to feel ashamed, marginalized, or defensive

about their religious identity, and some were indoctrinated to believe that terrorism was inherently associated with their community.

Is Violence a Problem Unique to Muslims?

History demonstrates that major international wars, colonial conflicts, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and mass killings have been carried out under a variety of political systems and by actors from different religious backgrounds. Many of the most devastating episodes were perpetrated by non-Muslim powers, including Western powers whose populations were predominantly Christian.

Examples include:

- **The First World War (1914–1918):** A devastating conflict among European and other global powers, not a war caused by Muslims as a group.
- **The Second World War (1939–1945):** A global conflict initiated in Europe by Nazi Germany's aggression, with no basis for attributing responsibility to Muslims as a collective.
- **The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 1945):** The United States dropped atomic bombs on the two Japanese cities, not the Muslims.
- **European Colonial Empires:** European powers waged prolonged wars and imposed colonial rule across large parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
- **The Transatlantic Slave Trade:** European and American participants sustained the enslavement and trafficking of human beings over several centuries, devastating the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants.

Mentioning these historical events is not intended to promote hostility towards Christianity or Christians. Rather, it is meant to clarify a fundamental truth: warfare, colonialism, and violence have been features of human political history, and they cannot fairly be attributed to one religion alone. No religion or civilization should be judged exclusively by the crimes committed by individuals, governments, or political movements associated with it.

Western Media and Islamophobia

The attacks of 11 September 2001 were among the defining events of contemporary international politics. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the United States, after which Washington declared a “global war on terror.” The United States launched a major military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 and invaded Iraq in 2003. Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defense at the time, spoke of pursuing al-Qaeda across sixty Muslim countries. In many Western countries, governments introduced or strengthened security laws that expanded the powers of security and intelligence agencies to monitor, investigate, and scrutinise individuals suspected of links to terrorism. Security procedures at airports and in visa and immigration systems also became more stringent, especially for Muslims.

Although these measures were presented as necessary to prevent terrorism, their implementation often subjected Muslims and people from Muslim-majority countries to additional screening, suspicion, and harassment. Anti-Muslim hate crimes also became a major concern in the United States and several European countries. Mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslim-owned businesses were targeted in attacks and acts of vandalism. Reports by human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have documented concerns about verbal abuse, physical attacks, workplace discrimination, and unfair security practices affecting Muslims in the United States and Europe. In practice, people with Arabic names, Islamic clothing, beards, or hijabs have frequently reported being subjected to additional scrutiny at airports and border crossings and being treated with suspicion. Incidents involving attacks on mosques and harassment of Muslim women wearing headscarves have been reported in cities including New York, London, Paris, and Berlin, as well as in other parts of the United States and Europe.

Only days after the September 11 attacks, a Sikh man in Arizona, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was murdered by a man who mistook him for a Muslim. Sodhi wore a beard and turban. His killing illustrated how prejudice directed against Muslims could also endanger people

from other communities who were perceived to be Muslim.

The broader concern is that public discourse and media coverage have not always applied consistent standards when reporting violence. When a Muslim commits a crime, the perpetrator’s religion may be highlighted prominently, and the individual may quickly be described as a terrorist. When someone from another religious background commits a comparable crime, that person’s religion may be omitted, while other explanations—such as mental illness—may receive greater attention. Fair and responsible journalism requires consistent standards. Religious identity should neither be used to stigmatize an entire community nor ignored selectively when it does not fit a prevailing political narrative.

The climate of hostility towards Muslims was so intense that, on 12 September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, the spiritual leader of the world’s Catholics at the time, delivered a lecture at the University of

Regensburg in Germany that provoked widespread criticism. His remarks included a quotation from the fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus that Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) promoted violence. Many Muslims considered the remarks offensive and as reinforcing negative stereotypes about Islam.

The Harmful Effects of Islamophobia on Afghan Migrants in the West

More than six million Afghans live as migrants and refugees around the world. Under the influence of Islamophobia, Afghan migrants in Western countries have experienced discrimination in employment, social isolation, harassment related to their beards and religious clothing, and harsh treatment in immigration procedures.

Many Afghan migrants continue to face significant difficulties in Western countries. Some are asked why they came, while others report mistreatment in immigration offices and workplaces. Certain countries are also seeking to return Afghans to Afghanistan, including through involuntary deportation.

These vulnerable Afghans often have little opportunity to explain their circumstances in a language or setting where their experiences will be understood. They might wish to say:

“You invaded our country, changed our governments, destroyed our homes, devastated our livelihoods, and disrupted our security. You brought war and destruction to our homeland, leaving us with little choice but to seek refuge in your countries”. “If you had not destroyed our homes and livelihoods, why would we have come here? Why did we not come before? We did not leave our country because life was easy elsewhere or because we wished to abandon our homeland. We came here seeking safety and survival.” Such words express the frustration of people who believe that the consequences of foreign intervention and prolonged conflict have contributed to their displacement, only for them to encounter suspicion and hostility in the countries where they seek protection.

The Afghan people are predominantly Muslim. Consequently, a generalized negative perception of Islam in Western societies can indirectly affect Afghan national identity. When an Afghan declares that he or she is Muslim, and others automatically associate that identity with religious extremism or what they call terrorism, the individual may face difficulties not because of any political act or personal wrongdoing but simply because of religious and cultural identity. This issue matters especially for young Afghans growing up in Western societies. If Islam is consistently associated with war, violence and terrorism rather than knowledge, civilization, ethics, and intellectual achievement, young people may be deprived of the opportunity to study the rich scholarly heritage of Islamic civilization fairly and objectively. Islamic history encompasses substantial contributions to philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, law, literature, and other fields. Prejudice can obstruct an impartial appreciation of this legacy and limit opportunities for meaningful cultural and intellectual exchange.

Politically, Islamophobia has also hindered what I regard as a fair international assessment of Afghanistan’s circumstances and has adversely affected the country’s

international diplomacy. It has indirectly contributed to obstacles in Afghanistan’s economic relations, including foreign trade, banking, and investment. To some extent, the negative perceptions associated with Islam and the security concerns surrounding Afghanistan have formed part of the broader environment in which the current Afghan authorities have struggled to secure international recognition, and Afghan citizens have faced difficulties obtaining visas for education and tourism.

However, we Muslims must also acknowledge our own shortcomings. We have not made sufficient rational, scholarly, practical, and sustained efforts to address these problems. We have not fully utilised active diplomacy to help others understand our values and concerns, identify shared interests, and develop mutually beneficial relations. To overcome mistrust, we must engage the international community through constructive dialogue, credible policies, evidence-based arguments, and a clear understanding of mutual interests. Complaints alone cannot replace effective diplomacy.

From a Clash of Civilizations to Cooperation among Civilizations

Centuries of experience show that the idea of an inevitable clash between civilizations—a concept many Western hegemonic and colonial-minded political leaders promoted after September 11—does not provide a sound foundation for international security. The long history of intellectual, philosophical, scientific, and commercial exchanges between Islamic and Western civilizations shows that the potential for cooperation far outweighs the case for perpetual confrontation. We should therefore work toward cooperation among civilizations rather than confrontation and war.

Today, climate change, poverty, infectious diseases, artificial intelligence, migration, and the challenges of the global economy transcend religious, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. They require shared solutions and collective action. No nation can adequately address these challenges in isolation. Nor can the world afford to let prejudice and ideological hostility prevent

cooperation among people with different religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

The growth of Islamophobia cannot be explained by the manufacturing of security incidents alone. Historical developments, intellectual legacies of colonialism, geopolitical rivalries, prejudiced media practices, and the management of public opinion have all played—and continue to play—important roles. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, a distorted international narrative about Islam and Muslims gained considerable influence. In many societies, this contributed to increased suspicion, fear, discrimination, and hostility towards Muslims. Yet recent decades have also shown that political narratives are neither permanent nor immutable. They change as international politics, strategic interests, and geopolitical circumstances evolve. For example, accusations associating Muslims with terrorism intensified after the American invasion of Afghanistan and were repeatedly reinforced throughout the twenty-year war. Muslims in many parts of the world suffered the consequences of these misperceptions. After the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, however, the intensity of these accusations and their prominence in media coverage declined significantly. This shift suggests that strategic priorities and changing geopolitical circumstances can shape political narratives. It reinforces the need to assess religions, civilizations, and nations through rigorous scholarship, reliable evidence, and historical facts rather than through short-lived political narratives.

At an important conference in London in 2007, I argued that an effective response to Islamophobia cannot rely on emotional reactions. It requires sharing knowledge, rigorous research, fair and responsible journalism, sound educational curricula,

interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and a stronger commitment to the shared values of human dignity across societies.

Building a peaceful, just, and mutually respectful international community becomes possible when people learn to view one another not through the lenses of prejudice, fear, and propaganda, but through the principles of truth, justice, human dignity, and cooperation.

Conclusion

The continuation of Islamophobia harms not only Muslims but also international peace, interfaith understanding, social cohesion, and the universal values of human rights. The most effective response to Islamophobia is to promote knowledge, uphold justice, encourage mutual respect, support rigorous research, strengthen interfaith understanding, and defend the dignity of every human being.

We must reject collective blame, whether directed against Muslims, Christians, Jews, or the followers of any other religion. Individuals and organizations should be held accountable for their own actions, and no entire religious community should be condemned because of the conduct of a particular member or political movements. Likewise, the legitimate struggle against terrorism must not become a pretext for discrimination, collective punishment, or the denial of fundamental human rights.

The future of humanity depends on our ability to replace hostility with understanding, prejudice with knowledge, and confrontation with cooperation. Islamophobia must be rejected and challenged, not through hatred in return but through truth, scholarship, justice, dialogue, and respect for human dignity.

