



Defining and Researching Islamophobia

Erik Bleich
Middlebury College

Islamophobia was originally developed as a concept in the late 1990s by political activists to draw attention to rhetoric and actions directed at Islam and Muslims in Western liberal democracies. In recent years, Islamophobia has evolved from a primarily political concept toward one increasingly deployed for analytical purposes. Researchers have begun using the term to identify the history, presence, dimensions, intensity, causes, and consequences of anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments. In short, Islamophobia is an emerging comparative concept in the social sciences. Yet, there is no widely-accepted definition of the term. As a result, it is extremely difficult to compare levels of Islamophobia across time, location, or social group, or to levels of analogous categories like racism, anti-Semitism, or xenophobia.

This essay reviews prevailing usage of the term Islamophobia, offers a definition that will be useful to social scientists in many circumstances, and briefly outlines the ways in which scholars have studied Islamophobia in the West.

Islamophobia as a Concept

Islamophobia emerged in contemporary discourse with the 1997 publication of the report “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All” by the Runnymede Trust, the British race relations NGO. Since then, and especially since 2001, it has been regularly used by the media, by citizens, and by NGOs, particularly in Britain, France, and the United States (Lee et al. 2009: 92-3; Zúquete 2008: 321-2).¹ Although the term has become relatively common, there is little agreement

about Islamophobia's precise meaning. Some authors deploy Islamophobia without explicitly defining it (Bunzl 2007; Cole 2009; Kaplan 2006; MacMaster 2003; Poynting and Mason 2007; Halliday 1999). Others use characterizations that are vague, narrow, or generic. Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008: 5), for example, call it "a social anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures." Geisser (2003: 10) discusses a "rejection of the religious referent...the Muslim religion as an irreducible identity marker between 'Us' and 'Them.'"

Even when definitions are more specific, there is still significant variation in the precise formulations of Islamophobia.² Lee et al. (2009: 93) define the term as "fear of Muslims and the Islamic faith." Similarly, for Abbas (2004: 28), it is "the fear or dread of Islam or Muslims." Zúquete (2008: 323) describes Islamophobia as "a widespread mindset and fear-laden discourse in which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the 'other,' as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners." Semati (2010: 1) calls it "a single, unified and negative conception of an essentialized Islam, which is then deemed incompatible with Euro-Americaness." In one of the most carefully-considered definitions, Stolz (2005: 548) asserts that "Islamophobia is a rejection of Islam, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes. It may have emotional, cognitive, evaluative as well as action-oriented elements (e.g. discrimination, violence)." In sum, for Lee et al. and for Abbas, Islamophobia is exclusively about fear (or dread), directed at either Islam or Muslims. For Zúquete and Semati, it involves either more than fear or perhaps excludes fear, and is directed uniquely at Islam and not at Muslims. For Stolz, it is rejection of either Islam or Muslims that extends beyond thought-processes to include concrete actions.

Because the term Islamophobia has at times seemed too imprecise or politically loaded, some observers propose avoiding it altogether. Authors have criticized it for being applied to widely divergent phenomena (Cesari 2006: 5-6; Zúquete 2008: 323), because it implies fear of Islam as a faith when the "true" problem is negative stereotyping of Muslims as a people (Halliday 1999: 898), and because it risks stigmatizing all critiques of Islam (Halliday 1999: 899; Zúquete 2008: 324). Some will agree with John Bowen (2005: 524), who has observed that, "because the term has come to be used in this overly broad way and is highly polemical, using it as an analytical term is a bit dicey." At the same time, Islamophobia has taken root in public, political, and academic discourses. It exists not only for political reasons, but also because it attempts to label a social reality—that Islam and Muslims have emerged as objects of aversion, fear, and hostility in contemporary liberal democracies. As Gerring (2001: 67) has argued, "to deprive the social science community

of certain words, or of certain uses of commonly understood words, is bound to create confusion, and also to limit the usefulness of social science as a way of apprehending the world.” Under these circumstances, there is substantial merit to making Islamophobia a comprehensible and meaningful concept for social scientists as well as for political actors.

In recent work (Bleich 2011), I have drawn on scholarship on concept formation (Goertz 2006) to develop a definition of Islamophobia that can be useful in social scientific analysis. I propose that Islamophobia can best be understood as *indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims*. Because not all criticism constitutes Islamophobia, terms like *indiscriminate*—or cognates like *undifferentiated* or *un-nuanced*—cover instances where negative assessments are applied to all or most Muslims or aspects of Islam. As with parallel concepts like homophobia or xenophobia, Islamophobia connotes a broader set of *negative attitudes or emotions* directed at individuals or groups because of their perceived membership in a defined category. Viewed in this way, Islamophobia is also analogous to terms like racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism. Aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility give a sense of the range of negative attitudes and emotions that may constitute Islamophobia. Finally, *directed at Islam or Muslims* suggests that the target may be the religious doctrine or the people who follow it (or whose ancestors have followed it, or who are believed to follow it). This recognizes the multidimensional nature of Islamophobia, and the fact that Islam and Muslims are often inextricably intertwined in individual and public perceptions.

Two insights can help determine the degree to which a statement or a person can be classified as Islamophobic. In their discussion of anti-Americanism, Katzenstein and Keohane identify the intensity of an individual’s adherence to a particular position. They assign changeable opinions less weight than more durable predispositions, such as distrust or bias (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007: 19–24). For Sniderman and his colleagues, the more frequently and consistently an individual offers a negative evaluation (or withholds a positive one) of a group or its members, the more prejudiced he or she is (Sniderman et al. 2000: 23–5). Following these insights, a one-off negative opinion about Islam or Muslims constitutes low-level Islamophobia. At the other extreme, expressions of unshakable hostility are high-level examples of Islamophobia. The more consistently an individual expresses a greater number of such intensely held biases, the more Islamophobic he or she is. The greater the prevalence, consistency, and intensity of Islamophobic expressions and individuals, the greater the Islamophobia is in a given social group or society. Drawing on the concept formation literature and on the scholarship on racism,

sexism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and homophobia makes it possible to construct a definition of Islamophobia that is useful in a number of different contexts. Building a clear and justifiable definition of Islamophobia is itself a first step toward comparing its levels across time, space, and social groups.

Measuring Islamophobia

Beyond simply identifying its key definitional components, social scientists also need to measure Islamophobia. To date, most observers, scholars, activists, and politicians have provided evidence of Islamophobia that suffers from one of three weaknesses. Some authors rely on extremely indirect indicators of contemporary Islamophobia, such as noting its deep historical roots (Matar 2009) or identifying current socio-economic disadvantages concentrated in Muslim communities (Tausch et al. 2007). Others provide examples of Islamophobia that are anecdotal or symbolic, such as examples of violence directed at Muslims (EUMC 2002: 13–30, 2006: 62–89) or the use of “Bin Laden” as a schoolyard taunt (Cole 2009: 1682). A third type of research conflates Islamophobia with attitudes toward overlapping ethnic, national-origin, or immigrant-status groups. In these cases, contemporary histories of anti-Arab, anti-South Asian, or anti-immigrant sentiments and policies (MacMaster 2003; Poynting and Mason 2007; Vertovec 2002) or examples of discrimination or attacks against groups that are predominantly Muslim (EUMC 2006: 44–62), or composite measures that mix together responses about Islam/Muslims with those about national origin or ethnic groups (Stolz 2005: 555–56) serve as indicators of Islamophobia. These approaches and observations are each useful to a degree. Yet, because they use indirect, anecdotal, or conflating measures, they cannot provide a systematic base line for analyzing and comparing Islamophobia across time, location, social group, or to intolerance directed at other minority groups.

What are the indicators that best reflect “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims?” The best ones are direct survey, focus-group, or interview data. The ideal measures involve carefully tailored questions through which respondents accurately reveal the extent of their indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims. Of course, this data is hard to come by. It is not my goal here—nor do I have the space—to spell out exactly which questions should be asked of respondents or which experiments should be undertaken. But it is helpful to note that there are precedents for students of Islamophobia in the form of longstanding scholarship on racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, anti-Americanism, xenophobia, sexism, and other types of negative attitudes and emotions (among others, see Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn 1993; Smith 1993;

Beere 1990; Katzenstein and Keohane 2007; Sniderman et al. 2000; Kleg and Yamamoto 1998; Echebarria-Echabe and Guede 2007: 1078).

As most studies in these cognate fields have emphasized, the key to uncovering reliable indicators of Islamophobia lies in consistency. The more consistently negative the attitudes and emotions of respondents to a series of questions, the more confident we can be that they are expressing Islamophobia. Questionnaires can also aim to discern different levels of intensity of responses (aversion versus fear versus hostility) and of intensity of adherence to Islamophobic positions (an opinion versus a predisposition such as a bias). One good starting point for further discussion and testing is the Islamophobia Scale, developed by Lee et al. (2009). These researchers used a 5-point Likert-type scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on which 223 undergraduate students responded to questions such as “If I could, I would avoid contact with Muslims,” and “Islam is a dangerous religion.” These types of questions may have diminished utility if expressing open Islamophobia becomes less socially acceptable, but in the current historical context, they are direct measures with a high probability of accurately revealing Islamophobia.³

There have also been a number of surveys undertaken in the United States that ask similar questions over a number of years, or that ask a suite of related questions specifically about Islam and Muslims in a given year. These types of surveys allow researchers to gather and to analyze systematic data on Islamophobia, and permit them to assess the correlates of Islamophobia. Nisbet et al. (2009) and GhaneaBassiri and Gronke (2011) offer comprehensive literature reviews in this vein and have themselves overseen data collection that permits analysis of factors associated with Islamophobia in the United States.⁴ In contrast to these positive models, it is important to remember that the fewer and the more indirect are the questions asked in surveys, focus groups, or interviews, the more difficult it is to measure the consistency, intensity, and nature of Islamophobic sentiments. In particular, any arguments about Islamophobia that rely on a single survey question should be viewed with skepticism.

Looking beyond survey, focus group, and interview data, one can also measure Islamophobia by examining unsolicited statements proffered by politicians, civil servants, public figures, religious leaders, journalists, bloggers and others whose words are recorded for posterity. It is possible to undertake systematic analyses of news content about Islam and Muslims (Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008), or to examine the changing nature of far-right political rhetoric vis-à-vis Muslims (Zúquete 2008), or to discuss the interpretation of Islam by a prominent writer such as Oriana Fallaci (Talbot 2006). To the extent that projects like these are systematic—by reviewing all major news stories, far-right rhetoric,

or best-selling authors—they can convey important information about the prevalence and nature of Islamophobia at specific times and places.

Because consistent and reliable indicators like those cited above are difficult to come by, we often have to infer the presence of Islamophobia from its effects. The key is to understand the quality of the indicator and the likelihood that it reveals the underlying phenomenon. Experiments can be a fruitful means for uncovering attitudes and emotions toward particular out-groups. For example, Adida, Laitin, and Valfort (2010) have developed a series of experiments to gauge non-Muslim French participants' generosity toward French Muslim participants. They found that non-Muslim French exhibit less generosity toward Muslims under a variety of circumstances, and that this outcome depends more upon emotional sense of threat than upon rational beliefs about expected Muslim behavior (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010: 4, 20).

Some behavioral effects of Islamophobia, like hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims, are typically tightly connected to underlying attitudes and emotions.⁵ Others, like a low percentage of Muslims in public office in some countries (see Abdulkader Sinno's contribution) or significant socio-economic disparities between Muslims and non-Muslims, are much less direct indicators of Islamophobia as they may be largely explained by other causes. While it is important not to ignore such indirect indicators, they have to be assessed carefully in order to avoid overstating the role of Islamophobia in determining these outcomes. Wherever possible, it is best to establish the presence, extent, and dimensions of Islamophobia using the most direct indicators available, and to specify the precise mechanisms that connect that Islamophobia to the precise outcomes of interest.

Conclusion

It is possible to conceptualize and to measure Islamophobia, but it is not a straightforward task. I have offered one specific definition of Islamophobia, though I recognize that some observers may find this definition too broad or too narrow for their own purposes. In terms of measuring Islamophobia, it is important to remember that analysts and observers frequently disagree over how to capture levels of any important concept (such as racism, economic health, public well-being, or democracy). This is a standard challenge for social scientists, and it is one that applies equally to Islamophobia. Some may prefer to use methods that highlight Muslims' own responses to perceptions of Islamophobia, or to undertake more contextual analyses of the circumstances that give rise to such sentiments and the ways they can be subverted (see, for example, the contributions to Shryock 2010). I argue here that one extremely productive way to assess levels of Islamophobia is to seek out the most direct

indicators of “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.” Assembling multiple, reliable, and consistent indicators provides a more systematic and accurate sense of Islamophobia within a particular society at a specific time.

It may not be possible to develop a meaningful aggregate index of Islamophobia given the currently available data, and there are some purposes for which attempting to do so would be pointless. But it is vital to move beyond using indirect, anecdotal, or conflating indicators as evidence of contemporary Islamophobia. Once we have a common conceptual language and more consistent tools for measuring Islamophobia, we can more accurately assess its trends over time, its variation over space or social groups, and its intensity relative to negative attitudes and emotions aimed at other status minority groups. Developing Islamophobia as a concrete and usable social scientific concept is not only the basis for meaningful comparative and causal analysis in academia, it is also the foundation for more informed public debates and for more effective policy decisions. ✎

Works Cited

- Abbas, Tahir. 2004. “After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism, and the State.” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21 (3): 26-38.
- Adida, Claire L., David D. Laitin, and Marie-Anne Valfort. 2010. “The Sources of Religious Discrimination: Evidence from a Field Experiment in France.” In *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. Washington, DC.
- Adida, Claire, David Laitin, and Marie-Anne Valfort. 2010. “Les Français musulmans sont-ils discriminés dans leur propre pays? Une étude expérimentale sur le marché du travail.” Paris: French-American Foundation & Sciences Po.
- Beere, Carole A. 1990. *Sex and Gender Issues: A Handbook of Tests and Measures*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bleich, Erik. 2009. “Where do Muslims Stand on Ethno-Racial Hierarchies in Britain and France? Evidence from Public Opinion Surveys, 1988-2008.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 43 (3-4): 379-400.
- _____. 2011. “What Is Islamophobia, and How Much Is There? Theorizing and Measuring an Emerging Comparative Concept.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 55: 1581-1600.
- Bowen, John. 2005. “Commentary on Bunzl.” *American Ethnologist* 32 (4): 524-5.
- Bunzl, Matti. 2007. *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cesari, Jocelyn. 2006. “Introduction: Use of the Term ‘Islamophobia’ in European Societies.” In *Securitization and Religious Divides in Europe—Muslims in Western Europe After 9/11: Why the Term Islamophobia is More a Predicament than an Explanation*, J. Cesari, editor. http://www.libertysecurity.org/IMG/pdf_Challenge_Project_report.pdf.
- Cole, Mike. 2009. “A Plethora of ‘Suitable Enemies’: British Racism at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32 (9): 1671-1685.

- Echebarria-Echabe, Agustín, and Emilia Fernández Guede. 2007. "A New Measure of Anti-Arab Prejudice: Reliability and Validity Evidence." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37 (5): 1077-1091.
- EUMC. 2002. *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*. Vienna: European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia.
- . 2006. *Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia*. Vienna: European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.
- Field, Clive D. 2007. "Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain: The Evidence of the Opinion Polls, 1988-2006." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 18 (4): 447-77.
- Geisser, Vincent. 2003. *La nouvelle islamophobie*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Gerring, John. 2001. *Social Science Methodology: A Critical Framework*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz and Paul Gronke. 2011. "Making Sense of Anti-Muslim Attitudes in Contemporary United States." Paper presented at the Muslims in the U.S. & Europe Conference at Indiana University, September 23.
- Goertz, Gary. 2006. *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gottschalk, Peter, and Gabriel Greenberg. 2008. *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Grosfoguel, Ramón, and Eric Mielants. 2006. "The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist/Patriarchal World-System: An Introduction." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5 (1): 1-12.
- Halliday, Fred. 1999. "'Islamophobia' Reconsidered." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (5): 892-902.
- Kaplan, Jeffrey. 2006. "Islamophobia in America?: September 11 and Islamophobic Hate Crime." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18 (1): 1-33.
- Katzenstein, Peter J., and Robert O. Keohane. 2007. "Varieties of Anti-Americanism: A Framework for Analysis." In *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*, P. J. Katzenstein and R. O. Keohane, editors. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2007. *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kleg, Milton, and Kaoru Yamamoto. 1998. "As the World Turns: Ethno-Racial Distances after 70 Years." *The Social Science Journal* 35 (2): 183-90.
- Kleinpenning, Gerard, and Louk Hagendoorn. 1993. "Forms of Racism and the Cumulative Dimension of Ethnic Attitudes." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 56 (1): 21-36.
- Lee, Sherman A., Jeffrey A. Gibbons, John M. Thompson, and Hussam S. Timani. 2009. "The Islamophobia Scale: Instrument Development and Initial Validation." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 19 (2): 92-105.
- MacMaster, Neil. 2003. "Islamophobia in France and the 'Algerian Problem'." In *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, E. Qureshi and M. A. Sells, editors. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Matar, Nabil. 2009. "Britons and Muslims in the Early Modern Period: From Prejudice to (a Theory of) Toleration." *Patterns of Prejudice* 43 (3-4): 213-31.

- Moore, Kerry, Paul Mason, and Justin Lewis. 2008. "Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000-2008." Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.
- Nisbet, Erik C., Ronald Ostman, and James Shanahan. 2009. "Public Opinion toward Muslim Americans: Civil Liberties and the Role of Religiosity, Ideology, and Media Use." In *Muslims in Western Politics*, A. H. Sinno, editor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Panagopoulos, Costas. 2006. "The Polls-Trends: Arab and Muslim Americans and Islam in the aftermath of 9/11." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70 (4): 608-624.
- Poynting, Scott, and Victoria Mason. 2007. "The Resistible Rise of Islamophobia." *Journal of Sociology* 43 (1): 61-86.
- Quillian, Lincoln. 2006. "New Approaches to Understanding Racial Prejudice and Discrimination." *Annual Review of Sociology* 32: 299-328.
- Runnymede Trust. 1997. *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*. London: The Runnymede Trust.
- Semati, Mehdi. 2010. "Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire." *Cultural Studies* 24 (2): 256-75.
- Shryock, Andrew, editor. 2010. *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Smith, Tom W. 1993. "A Review: Actual Trends or Measurement Artifacts? A Review of Three Studies of Anti-Semitism." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (3): 380-393.
- Sniderman, Paul, Pierangelo Peri, Rui J. P. de Figueiredo Jr., and Thomas Piazza. 2000. *The Outsider: Prejudice and Politics in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stolz, Jörg. 2005. "Explaining Islamophobia. A Test of Four Theories Based on the Case of a Swiss City." *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 31 (3): 547-66.
- Talbot, Margaret. 2006. "The Agitator: Oriana Fallaci Directs Her Fury Toward Islam." *The New Yorker*, June 5.
- Tausch, Arno, Christian Bischof, Tomaz Kastrum, and Karl Mueller. 2007. *Against Islamophobia: Muslim Communities, Social-Exclusion and the Lisbon Process in Europe*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Vertovec, Steven. 2002. "Islamophobia and Muslim Recognition in Britain. In *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, Y. Y. Haddad, editor. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zúquete, José Pedro. 2008. "The European Extreme-Right and Islam: New Directions?" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13 (3): 321-344.

End Notes

¹There is even a website called <http://www.islamophobia.org>, and the concept has also gained acceptance in official UN discourse: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sgsm9637.doc.htm>.

²Grosfoguel and Mielants (2006) offer four separate perspectives on the meaning of Islamophobia.

³One may also investigate whether the expressed Islamophobia is a constant and durable presence in respondents' lives, or whether it is triggered by or modulated based on particular circumstances such as survey question priming.

⁴Articles that provide meta-analyses of surveys in the United States and Europe include Pangopoulos (2006), Field (2007), and Bleich (2009).

⁵These connections are clearest when the data does not suffer from conflation with other motives for hate crimes or discrimination. The FBI, London's Metropolitan Police Service, and a few other European jurisdictions collect data specifically on anti-Muslim hate crimes (on the FBI's collection of "anti-Islamic" data, see Kaplan 2006); on field audit studies to test for racial discrimination, see Quillian (2006).