

Defining Islamophobia



A Policy Exchange Research Note

Sir John Jenkins KCMG LVO

Foreword by Trevor Phillips OBE

About the Author

Sir John Jenkins spent a 35-year career in the British Diplomatic Service. He holds a BA (Double First Class Honours) and a Ph.D from Jesus College, Cambridge. He also studied at The School of Oriental and African Studies in London (Arabic and Burmese) and through the FCO with the London and Ashridge Business Schools. He is an alumnus of the Salzburg Seminar. He joined the FCO in 1980 and served in Abu Dhabi (1983-86), Malaysia (1989-92) and Kuwait (1995-98) before being appointed Ambassador to Burma (1999-2002). He was subsequently HM Consul-General, Jerusalem (2003-06), Ambassador to Syria (2006-07), FCO Director for the Middle East and North Africa (2007-09), Ambassador to Iraq (2009-11), Special Representative to the National Transitional Council and subsequently Ambassador to Libya (2011) and Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2012-2015). He took an active part in Sir John Chilcott's Iraq Inquiry and was asked by the Prime Minister in March 2014 to lead a Policy Review into the Muslim Brotherhood. Until his departure from the FCO he was the government's senior diplomatic Arabist.

Trevor Phillips OBE is a writer, broadcaster and businessman. He is the Chairman of Index on Censorship, the international campaign group for freedom of expression, and was chair of both the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Runnymede Trust.

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Foreword

by Trevor Phillips

What exactly is “Islamophobia”? In 1997, when I was chair of the Runnymede Trust, we published the report that introduced the word into Britain’s political lexicon. It encompassed the overt, covert and sometimes unwittingly unfavourable treatment of people from a Muslim background.

At the time, we were naturally worried about specific individual acts of rudeness and hostility, which seemed to be intensifying. But the research for that report also pointed to broader concerns including the social and economic exclusion to which British Muslims were subject then and now. In fact, I came to believe that, as heinous as some of the physical attacks on Muslim families and businesses were, it was the wider, and often subtler effects of social exclusion and segregation that would have the greatest impact on the lives of British Muslims.

In many ways, our findings mirrored the experience of several immigrant groups, including the Windrush generation to which my own parents belonged. It seemed obvious that Muslims would deserve similar legal and political protection provided to us by race relations laws. Yet, when we finalised the Runnymede report in 1997, we specifically rejected the notion that Muslims should be characterised as a racial grouping; in fact we sought a very different set of legal and policy solutions, for three compelling reasons.

First, Muslims themselves rejected the idea that they constitute anything like a single separate “race” in the way that, say, black Africans might. In fact, it is a central tenet of Islam that all who submit to the faith are equal in the eyes of God irrespective of origin, ethnicity or geography. Possibly the most famous converts of our time, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, both celebrated their membership of a pan-racial global faith community as a liberation from a purely racial identity.

Second, the UK itself is home to a uniquely wide range of Muslim communities. They differ in origin, with sizeable contingents with roots in the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Central and South-Eastern Asia, and Europe itself. And third, the facts of race are, in essence, not a matter of personal choice; we cannot simply declare ourselves to be white, black or Asian when our families and friends know that we are not. On the other hand, most of those who follow the faith of Islam rightly pride themselves on the fact that they have actively chosen to adhere to a centuries old belief system.

It is therefore all the more puzzling that the All Party Parliamentary Group should call for the government to adopt a definition of Islamophobia as “rooted in racism” and “a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness” – a definition of Islamophobia which, in their own words, “racialises” Islam. Yet their report even quotes the distinguished Professor Tariq Modood condemning such racialisation as a “specific process” that characterises Islamophobia.

Unfortunately, the APPG’s confused report *Islamophobia Defined* demonstrates that its authors appear to understand neither the concept of racism nor the meaning of Islamophobia. As Policy Exchange’s Research Note explains, despite the undoubted good intentions of MPs on the committee, the adoption of this definition would be a grave mistake, undoing much of the good work to integrate Muslim communities during the past quarter century or so. The MPs who have put their names to this report have proud records of concern for the needs of minorities. But I fear that they have been persuaded to recommend a course that far from supporting the integration of British Muslims will isolate them and make them the object of continuing hostility.

My biggest concern is that instead of protecting Muslims, defining Islamophobia as the APPG does – as anti-Muslim racism – will actually make life harder for them. To define Islamophobia as “anti-Muslim” racism means, in effect, that all Muslims should be treated exactly as others are. Tackling Muslim disadvantage demands *different* treatment for those who declare themselves to be Muslims – with prayer rooms, holiday arrangements and so on. Combating racial disadvantage necessitates the opposite, ensuring that people are treated similarly irrespective of their ethnicity.

Thus, under the APPG’s definition, the average employer would have every right to say to a Muslim employee, “I’m sorry, we do not differentiate by race in this workplace. We don’t give anyone else special breaks to go to the prayer room – I just can’t treat you as a special case.” Today, many schools allow uniform variations that permit the wearing of headscarves, but not full-face veils; would the prohibition of the niqab become an example of “anti-Muslim racism”? The APPG report’s authors may not have researched the topic sufficiently to know that the wearing of the headscarf required a change in the law, which I helped to engineer as chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Importantly, it’s not racial discrimination law that permits this kind of flexibility; it’s religious discrimination law that does.

Justifiably, no Muslim employee or parent would let such cases go unchallenged – and this points to another concern. Any definition of Islamophobia needs to be

clear, capable of practical interpretation and consistently applicable. Crucially it should not constantly be open to contestation. Without this clarity, instead of protecting Muslims, it could make them the subject of continuous dispute and actually worsen relations with others around them, at work and elsewhere. Is the aim of the MPs on the APPG to give lawyers, courts and regulators more work? Of course not, but there are many questions that need to be asked about the possible unintended consequences of the definition proposed in their report.

If the unequal treatment of people is to be tackled – as it should be with great determination – we need to be clear about what we think is producing it. To put this another way, the APPG's report does not explain to what problem this definition is supposed to be the answer. There are two possibilities. If we think Islamophobia is a problem suffered by all Muslims as a single group because of their "Muslimness", it would be very hard to argue that this is about "racism", since Muslims are a conspicuously multiracial group. They're also multicultural – some are secular, some highly devout, many in-between, some drink alcohol, some wear head coverings, others don't.

If on the other hand, we do think it is about "racism" then the APPG should have explained why it thinks that Muslims are a "race" and offered a new definition of a racial or ethnic group, alongside its definition of Islamophobia. Otherwise, it is difficult to see why the existing anti-racism law and the definitions it encodes shouldn't be applied in the sorts of cases they outline in the report.

There's a final, important lesson to be learnt from the APPG's report. It is profoundly Eurocentric, defining Muslims exclusively in terms of their treatment by non-Muslim, mainly white Britons. In doing so, it misreads the attitudes of most Britons. And it reduces the lives of British Muslims – the vast majority of whom feel strongly attached to the UK – to the status of perpetual victims and pawns in some wider battle. British Muslims are so much more than this, and before the Government or any institution adopts a definition that treats them in this way, much deeper thought is required.

The spectacular misreading of both Muslim needs and non-Muslim attitudes to which the APPG's report has fallen prey may well serve the interests of sectarians and those hostile to integration between Britain's communities, especially the Far Right and Islamists; but it will do little to advance the prospects of those who follow the faith, and who want their sincerely held beliefs to find a respected home in British life, just as other faith groups have done over the centuries.

Executive Summary

1. Last month, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims published a report containing a new definition of Islamophobia.
2. The APPG urges the Government to adopt this definition as a means of countering anti-Muslim hatred.
3. There is no doubt that the MPs involved had – and have – the best of intentions. Anti-Muslim hatred and bigotry is a problem that needs to be addressed both politically, societally and individually. But the proposed definition of Islamophobia is not only inadequate but divisive and potentially damaging to social cohesion.
4. Should the Government accept this highly partial definition, which reflects an agenda unrepresentative of the expressed concerns of many, if not most, British Muslims, they would risk endangering free speech, press freedom and open the door to an assault on current counter-extremism policy.
5. Many questions need to be asked about how the report was compiled; whether due diligence was carried out on its authors and their sources; and what the definition of Islamophobia could mean in practice.

Introduction

On 27th November, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims published a report¹ titled *Islamophobia Defined: the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia*. It contained the following definition:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

In order to tackle anti-Muslim hatred, the APPG urged the “Government, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and principally, British Muslim communities” (p. 8) to adopt this “working definition of Islamophobia”, which emerged from its inquiry. The report’s launch was well attended, including by the Home Affairs Select Committee chair Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP; Shadow Home Secretary Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP; and Lord Bourne, Minister for Faith at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

At first glance, the matter seems uncontroversial. It should be beyond question that anti-Muslim hatred must be tackled with the same determination as any other form of prejudice, bigotry or racism in Britain. The question that matters, however, is whether this initiative will help or hinder that broader effort. There are important questions about the report itself – and how it was compiled – that need to be asked, especially by those in Government who are being urged to adopt the definition it proposes.

First, does the APPG's report contain an accurate or balanced portrayal of the experiences and position of Muslim communities in modern Britain, or does it feed into a more divisive narrative of separateness and exclusion? This research note sets out some serious concerns. Secondly, has due diligence been carried out on those who contributed written and oral evidence to the APPG's inquiry – and on those who authored the report? Again, there are serious concerns here, set out below, which suggest that the goodwill of politicians is being exploited to serve a sectional and divisive purpose.

Moving beyond this, there is another practical set of questions on the likely impact of this definition of Islamophobia being adopted by Government and institutions. What would the effect be on Government counter-extremism and counter-terrorism programmes (CONTEST)? Would it diminish media freedom in the UK by encroaching on existing conventions of free expression that already take account of hate crime legislation? What would be the effect on individual Muslims and different Muslim communities, including those engaged in counter-extremism or who might contest the highly politicised definition offered here? Does it represent a genuine attempt to promote integration of Muslims into British society or does it encourage the creep towards communal identity politics? Finally, is there a risk that this definition opens the door to an underlying Islamist agenda that purports to represent the interests of British Muslims but is in fact partisan and divisive?

A Vague and Impractical Definition

The report does not include “a list of essential features” (p. 56) of Islamophobia, which could provide a standard against which to test the report's definition, which is as follows: “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.” It also claims that listing Islamophobia's essential features would “confine a prescriptiveness to its understanding to the detriment of contextual and fluid factors which continue to inform and shape manifestations of Islamophobia” (p. 56). But a central feature of any definition in this highly contentious area should precisely be clarity about its semantic field and who exactly has the authority to manage it. Manifestations of Islamophobia may indeed evolve, but is there also a danger of a ratchet effect – that the definition will inevitably continue expanding to include language and incidents that cannot by any reasonable measure be considered to constitute anti-Muslim hatred? The report makes the further remarkable and unevicenced claim that: “...failing to adopt a definition of Islamophobia leads to vicious circle [sic] in which no community wins and our

society becomes more and more fragmented.” (p. 49) Would this definition achieve the opposite?

A Balanced Portrayal of Modern Britain?

There must be no tolerance of anti-Muslim hatred or bigotry in Britain. Likewise, one should be cautious about simplified narratives that the overriding experience of British Muslims is a feeling of communal victimhood. In a country where the Home Secretary is of Pakistani Muslim heritage; where the winner of *The Great British Bake Off*, a family TV show watched by millions of Britons, can be a hijab-wearing second generation Bangladeshi immigrant²; where 93% of Muslims say they have a strong sense of belonging to the UK³; where 94% of Muslims feel able to practise their religion freely⁴; and where Muslims have a long and distinguished record of service in the British armed forces, it is clear that anti-Muslim hatred runs completely counter to our established national culture.

The APPG’s report does touch briefly on the more positive aspects of being a Muslim in the UK, with evidence cited that British Muslims are “more likely than the British public as a whole to say that their national identity is important to their sense of who they are” (p. 55). But overall, to read it is to encounter a bleak and depressing picture of life for Muslims in modern Britain, one in which “structural anti-Muslim racism” that “impacts the lives of Muslims and leads to unequal outcomes” (p. 58) is pervasive. There is an overwhelming and unbalanced emphasis in the report on how negative life is in the UK for Muslims, with dozens of unfavourable opinions quoted without any critical scrutiny (see below). The cumulative effect is that the report promotes a sense of difference that goes far beyond the precise question of Islamophobia.

Notably, the APPG’s report states:

*“The evidence we have heard suggests Islamophobia manifests in a wide array of contexts, from casual stereotyping to **rampant dehumanisation of Muslims** as a collective group and from incidents of workplace discrimination to institutional dynamics which reproduce unequal outcomes for Muslims in policy design and implementation.” (p. 13)*

Is this a reasonable evidence-based assessment of life in the UK? There are ample reasons within the report to doubt this.

1. The report’s Executive Summary claims that “Muslim students who fail to secure entry to Russell Group universities” (p. 8) are victims of

- Islamophobia. There is not a single piece of evidence in the report to support this claim.
2. Elsewhere, anecdotal and insubstantial evidence of “Islamophobia” is offered without any attempt to evaluate it.
 3. In Chapter 4, “Ofsted questioning the wearing of hijab” (p. 55) is cited as one person’s view of what constitutes Islamophobia. What about those Muslims who feel differently, and who feel more favourable towards Ofsted’s interventions? The report implies that what appears to be Islamophobic to one person is Islamophobic to all.
 4. There are further examples of unsupported assertions of this nature. Paul Giannasi, who is on the advisory board of the Centre for Hate Studies of the University of Leicester and works on Hate Crime for the Ministry of Justice, is quoted saying, “When Andrew [Anders] Breivik kills lots of people because of racist sentiments, we see him as a disaffected loner with mental health issues. But when it’s a Muslim lad that does the same activity, we see it as a fundamentalist ideology that the communities are responsible for.” This is simply not true. Newspaper profiles of the Norwegian terrorist and mass murderer from the time are clear that he was a “right-wing extremist who hated immigrants and multiculturalism”⁵ (*Daily Mail*) and “a right-wing fundamentalist”⁶ (*Guardian*). Much of the subsequent analysis of the Breivik case has sought to connect it with the wider issue of extreme anti-immigrant and white power politics in Europe and elsewhere.

The vast bulk of the APPG’s report suggests that the UK constitutes an “Islamophobic environment” (p.49) and that defining Islamophobia is therefore as urgent a task as defining genocide was in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust (p.43). It is as if we live in a country where it is “open season” on Muslims (to quote a phrase used by Fatima Manji⁷). Not everyone who submitted evidence, or who was cited, agreed with this assessment or the proposed remedy. Notable was the position of the Southall Black Sisters. “We worry that the institutionalisation of the term Islamophobia would lead to a specific kind of privileging of victimhood,” says Pragna Patel, the group’s director, in oral evidence. It is striking that while the APPG quotes much evidence of Islamophobia uncritically, it goes out of its way to attack the position of the Southall Black Sisters. The APPG report describes this as “a weak argument against a legal adoption of the term Islamophobia” (p. 43) and the group is described as having “little understanding of the meaning of Islamophobia”.

Throughout the report, evidence of Islamophobia is persistently presented as abuse perpetrated against visibly practising Muslims (often women) by far-right extremists (men) or as the denigration of Islam and Muslims by the State and the mainstream media. So Muslim women are described in the report as “feared, and

seen as the ‘enemy within’ and the veil is “not only taken as a sign of submissiveness but also as a sign of Islamic aggression” (p. 21)⁸. There is reported to be a “dehumanisation of Muslims in the media and by political parties” (p.16) and “state Islamophobia” (p. 29) is uncritically defined as “when the manifestation is driven by the State, either intentionally or unintentionally, through practices that reinforce the discrimination”.

Dangers to Free Speech and Media Freedom

“...the recourse to the notion of free speech and a supposed right to criticise Islam results in nothing more than another subtle form of anti-Muslim racism whereby the criticism humiliates, marginalises, and stigmatises Muslims” (p. 35).

The APPG’s report seeks to head off the charge that its definition of “Islamophobia” – one that is more expansive than the anti-Muslim hatred recognised by existing hate crime and other laws – would have a detrimental effect on free speech. The report thus says (p. 11) that it has no intention of stopping “free and fair criticism or debate” around Islam; and it cites the views of Professor Tariq Modood that space should be preserved for “reasonable criticism” of Islam. But it is the very use of terms like “fair” and “reasonable” that are concerning here. *Who* decides what is fair and reasonable?

Crucially, what the APPG report does not confront is the possibility that the definition it proposes and the processes for managing and applying it may be manipulated in order to control the boundaries of public debate in the service of sectional agendas. One can already see this in the way that “Islamophobia” has sometimes been deployed in Britain in the recent past. **The charge of Islamophobia has been used to attack positions that cannot be said to reach any threshold for a plausible definition of anti-Muslim hatred.**

Those who have exploited the use of this term in this way include groups such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) – highly vocal supporters of the APPG recommendations⁹¹⁰ – but it is used far more widely than by these groups. Some of the public figures to have had the epithet applied to them or been accused of stoking Islamophobic sympathies, include:

- Theresa May – the Prime Minister¹¹
- Yasmin Alibhai Brown – journalist and author¹²
- Sarah Champion, the Labour MP for Rotherham who publicly raised the issue of grooming gangs¹³
- Peter Clarke, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons¹⁴

- Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism¹⁵
- Maajid Nawaz, founder of Quilliam¹⁶
- Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)^{17,18}

The APPG fails to offer any example of the type of criticism of Islam, or Muslims, or especially, Islamists, that might fall outside the definition of "Islamophobia" that they urge the Government and others to accept. Instead, the report makes clear that a new definition could be the prelude to new kinds of "civil offences", pursued through the courts (p. 34).

The APPG's definition, if it was officially endorsed, could seriously undermine press freedom, as so much reporting and discussion could potentially be stigmatised as "Islamophobic".¹⁹ Many of those calling for the new expanded definition of Islamophobia have also called for "Leveson II"²⁰ and for a full inquiry into Islamophobia in the British media.²¹ A capacious definition of Islamophobia might make it more difficult to investigate future stories like the Rotherham grooming scandals²². (Recall how the respected *Times* journalist Dominic Kennedy²³ has been accused of "professional Islamophobia" for reporting another story concerning Islamism.) The same may apply to journalistic investigations such as those into Lutfur Rahman, the disgraced Mayor of Tower Hamlets, who was found guilty of corrupt and illegal practices.²⁴ It may even have implications for the Government's capacity to act. Would Eric Pickles, as Communities Secretary, have been able to order investigators to look into the financial management of Tower Hamlets, as he did in 2014²⁵, without falling foul of this definition of Islamophobia? Would the Government have been able to appoint Peter Clarke as Education Commissioner for Birmingham with a remit to investigate "allegations concerning Birmingham schools arising from the 'Trojan Horse' letter" in 2014?²⁶ Would Ofsted have been able to carry out its inspections the same year, after the emergence of the scandal?²⁷ Ministers will have to consider these issues carefully.

It is worth examining this "contemporary example" of Islamophobia in public life, listed in the APPG's report:

*"Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Muslims as such, or of Muslims as a collective group, such as, especially but not exclusively, **conspiracies about Muslim entryism in politics, government or other societal institutions**; the myth of Muslim identity having a unique propensity for terrorism, and claims of a demographic 'threat' posed by Muslims or of a 'Muslim takeover'."*
(p. 56)

What sort of impact would this have on journalistic and official enquiries into these areas? And is there a danger here that the inclusion of “entryism” and “terrorism” would in practice make the government’s counter-extremism strategies “Islamophobic”? It seems that the APPG’s definition could be used as a prelude to a **broader assault on aspects of Government policy, particularly the anti-extremism and anti-radicalisation work that has been painstakingly constructed over the last decade**. Significantly, many of those who are seeking to weaponise this definition already denounce Prevent as “institutionally Islamophobic”.²⁸

‘Muslimness’ and Islamism

A significant problem in the APPG’s report and its definition is the use of the term “Muslimness”. Despite the discussion of “intersectionality” and other jargon borrowed from the social sciences, the report essentialises religious identity in a way that leaves little room for other forms of identity. It is the identity of an individual Muslim as “ a Muslim” which is held to explain his or her interaction with wider British society. But - as the report itself acknowledges only to ignore - the construction of social identity is complex and situational. And what is “Muslimness” and *who*, exactly, would decide what the concept meant in practice? What would be disallowed or banned? These are important questions that are unanswered in the report. They are particularly relevant given the huge diversity of British Muslims - from the Middle East, Turkey and Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Europe itself.

There is, clearly, a risk that such terms would end up being policed by self-appointed gatekeepers. For example, in the Ofsted example mentioned above (p. 55), school inspectors are accused of Islamophobia for questioning the wearing of hijabs by girls at school. The implication is that “Muslimness” must involve wearing hijabs, since only one interpretation of what it means to be Muslim is offered. For all the talk that Muslimness is not a single identity, there is very little pluralism in the report. There is no consideration given to Muslims who may feel that agencies such as Ofsted are protecting them from an attempt to impose a uniformity with which they do not agree. Extensive Policy Exchange polling has shown, after all, that “a clear majority of British Muslims (69%) favour an essentially secular education”.²⁹ This is another sign that the definition may play into the hands of those with a more sectional agenda. It is not inclusive.

There is a possibility that the focus on “Muslimness” turns ascribed religious affiliation or cultural background into a new form of constraining identity, to be given privileged status, in yet another expansion of a divisive form of identity

politics. This only creates new opportunities for self-appointed gatekeepers. The Muslim Council of Britain, for example, which only a small minority of British Muslims regards as representing them,³⁰ have pursued this approach to gain influence over the Government in the past.

Importantly the report systematically avoids making any distinction between Islamophobia and with what might better be described as “Anti-Islamism”. This distinction – between Islam as a lived faith, a complex civilisation and cultural frame and the reductivist socio-revolutionary ideology of political Islamism – is fundamental. It is of long standing. It has been made in different ways by respected Muslim scholars and commentators such as Bassam Tibi³¹, Aziz al Azmeh,³² Reza Aslan,³³ the late Shahab Ahmed,³⁴ the late Mohammed Arkoun³⁵ and others such as Gilles Kepel.³⁶ By conflating Islam and Islamism and protecting both equally from criticism with the defence of “Islamophobia”, the report takes sides.

The term “Islamism”, significantly, does not feature in the report apart from in a quotation from written evidence submitted to the APPG by Bertie Vidgen, a DPhil student at the University of Oxford.³⁷ This states: “Anti-Islamism is not the same as anti-Muslimism, but the two are intimately connected and both can be considered constitutive parts of Islamophobia.” (p. 29) This uninterrogated statement is deeply problematic. It effectively seeks to delegitimize any criticism of Islamism – a sacralised political project that is deeply contentious and rejected by a majority of Muslims around the world. Why should the British government insulate *Islamism* from criticism? Is this a posture with which the Government would want to be associated? It would potentially make much of its counter-extremism programme “Islamophobic”.

Overall, it is possible to detect two primary influences on the report’s authors. The first is the radical chic of critical theory, derived from a particular reading of the Frankfurt School and largely French postmodern theorists (who have curiously wielded more enduring influence in the Anglo-American academy than in France). Critical theorists claim a privileged insight into the structural but hidden discursive codes, power structures and dynamics that shape and control society in the interests of powerful, self-interested but often only vaguely identified elites (in the process, of course, themselves claiming an elite hermeneutical power not available to the rest of us). They purposefully occlude other dispersed systems of power and agency that are at work in complex modern societies. These do not start and end with the state and give modern societies a mobility, dynamism and capacity for self-reflection that they often refuse to acknowledge. This in part underpins the second unacknowledged

influence: the narrative of grievance and structural victimhood espoused by a number of Islamist and Islamist-sympathising groups in the UK who have an interest in promoting the idea of Muslims as a single subaltern community of the structurally oppressed and as a consequence regularly complain, for example, of “the hostile environment faced by Muslims and other minorities in Britain”³⁸.

Dissenting Voices

Apart from the Southall Black Sisters, what is missing throughout the APPG report are any dissenting voices or the views of those Muslims who have either been accused themselves of Islamophobia or have suffered from acts of hatred and bigotry perpetrated by other Muslims. As Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, has written: “A narrow understanding of ‘Muslimness’ leaves behind those Muslims who, because of how they choose to live their lives or practise their religion, don’t have a ‘Muslimness’ that other Muslims find acceptable.”³⁹ She comments:

“Other Muslims boycott Ahmadiyyah businesses and restaurants, bully Ahmadiyyah children at school, and distribute leaflets calling for their death. If this abuse was experienced by Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims, it would be perceived as anti-Muslim hatred; why should it be any different just because the perpetrators are Muslims themselves?”

The report contains no mention of the Ahmadiyya community. It uncritically quotes Professor Tariq Modood’s argument that, as the report puts it, “Islamophobia should be confined to naming the specific process through which Muslims are racialised by non-Muslims, which thus entails categorising sectarian issues under a different terminology”. In Professor Modood’s words: “I think we have to find some other category for that.” (p. 41) Why? According to this definition, it is impossible for Muslims to be Islamophobic. Intra-Muslim sectarianism and attempts by some Muslims to police the behaviour of others is erased from the debate and Islamophobia is explained as being directed solely at Muslims by non-Muslims.

According to the report, an example of Islamophobia is said to be “accusing Muslim citizens of being more loyal to the ‘Ummah’ (transnational Muslim community) or to their countries of origin, or to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.” (p.56) As the polling referred to above clearly shows, Muslims in Britain show an overwhelming identification as British. But the claim of higher loyalties is one made by Muslims themselves. For example, according to Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, a Turkish academic who was Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic

Cooperation and was once invited by Baroness Warsi⁴⁰ to meet David Cameron, the Ummah

"... means the 'community of the faithful'. It is unique bond [sic] that has no similar example under any other political or religious system in the world... It is a belonging to ideals which bring Muslims together in an eternal brotherhood lock which transcends all other considerations of allegiance or loyalties or barriers or nationhood, ethnicity, geography or language."⁴¹

On a personal note, in an official meeting in a Birmingham mosque in 2008 I was told repeatedly by my Muslim audience that Muslim lives anywhere were worth more to Muslims than those of non-Muslims in their own country. These views are common and deserve to be debated. But are they now “Islamophobic”? Would Professor Ihsanoglu’s words be considered Islamophobic if they were uttered by someone else, for example a non-Muslim? There is a risk that the APPG’s definition could be used to close down debate – sending a message that this is terrain where non-Muslims should not dare to tread, even if the issue is of significance to society as a whole.

Due Diligence

The methodology and intellectual framing of the APPG report are worth more scrutiny. What due diligence was carried out as the APPG’s report was compiled? An examination of the written evidence upon which the report relies and the list of community consultation participants raises questions about the claims that the development of its definition was community-led and based on extensive academic engagement.

1. One of the acknowledged contributors, Dr. Antonio Perra, an academic based at King’s College London, was a senior policy analyst at MEND (until July 2018⁴²). The report states that his “considerable support to the secretariat in the preparation of this report has been immensely valuable” (p. 60). His personal LinkedIn profile goes further and says he “co-edited” the report.
2. Professor Salman Sayyid, the Leeds-based academic who suggested the one-line definition adopted by the APPG has held at least three public events with the IHRC (Islamic Human Rights Commission) in 2011⁴³, 2013⁴⁴ and 2014⁴⁵.
3. The IHRC host annual Islamophobia “awards” and previous winners have included Charlie Hebdo (awarded after the murder of 12 of its journalists), Barack Obama and Polly Toynbee.
4. On a number of occasions, the report makes use of written evidence submitted by a “Professor David Miller of University of Bristol”. He is a

conspiracy theorist recorded as having defended the comments which led to Ken Livingstone quitting the Labour Party (about Hitler supporting a Jewish homeland).⁴⁶ He also called the concept of Israel a “racist endeavour”⁴⁷ and accused the Government of “state propaganda” over its reaction to the Skripals’ poisoning in Salisbury.⁴⁸

It appears that **the goodwill of politicians is being channelled into a sectional and highly divisive agenda.**

The facts above raise the question of whether the definition of Islamophobia offered in this report is so loose and expansive as to create a number of hidden traps for Government policy.

The MEND connection

Despite being mentioned only once in the main body of the report (p. 51), **it is clear that MEND**, an organisation with a tarnished reputation in Government circles, **has exerted an important intellectual influence on the APPG.** Indeed, the group has long been pushing for the same kind of expansive definition of Islamophobia – as reflected in its own lengthy report on the subject earlier this year.⁴⁹ The connection between the APPG report and the MEND agenda is not simply intellectual. As mentioned above, Dr. Perra was, until recently, also a member of MEND but no mention is made of this affiliation.⁵⁰ In a similar vein, the APPG makes reference to evidence it took from the “Islamophobia Response Unit” (IRU). But it fails to mention that the IRU was created in April 2017 by MEND.⁵¹

MEND has long been surrounded by controversy. Earlier this year, a senior MEND representative asserted that Muslims in the UK face a situation analogous to that of Jews in Nazi Germany before the Holocaust.⁵² Its former director of engagement, Azad Ali, is reported to have said in March 2017 that that month’s attack on Parliament, which killed five people, was “not terrorism”.⁵³ In February 2018, Sir Mark Rowley, the outgoing Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and former head of Counter-Terrorism Command, stated that MEND was “seeking to undermine the state’s considerable efforts to tackle all hate crime”.⁵⁴

Conclusion: The Key Questions

The Government must **distinguish between genuine efforts to tackle anti-Muslim hatred and attempts to muddy the waters by those who wish to create and cement division**. When conceived so broadly, there is a **clear risk that the APPG's definition of Islamophobia will be used as a prelude to a broader campaign that goes beyond anti-Muslim hate, with a number of attendant risks**.

1. What due diligence was carried out on those who wrote or contributed to the APPG's report?

Were members of the APPG and other MPs who appeared at the launch of the report fully informed about the connections of those who helped write this report and contribute evidence? Quite aside from the dubious nature of such "expert" evidence, the report contains no reference to the previous campaigns of organisations like MEND to use Islamophobia as a means to attack the Government's counter-extremism strategy.

2. How would the APPG's Islamophobia definition affect the freedom of the media?

Many of those calling for the new expanded definition of Islamophobia have also called for a full inquiry into Islamophobia in the British media and for "Leveson II"⁵⁵. Is the aim state regulation that, combined with an official definition of Islamophobia, could restrict what newspapers and other media outlets are allowed to publish? The APPG report depicts a rampant media that dehumanises Muslims and circulates "racist caricatures" (p. 10). Is this a fair assessment of our free press, a vital democratic asset? Groups like the MCB and MEND have attacked IPSO and called for more assertive regulation of the press: this is despite the fact that – since 2014 – there have been around a dozen IPSO rulings in favour of Islamist complainants. IPSO also considers "third party" complaints, where a group can complain on behalf of an individual about an inaccuracy. Notably, the APPG's report refers uncritically to IMPRESS, which it describes as a "Leveson-compliant independent self-regulatory body for the press in the UK" – though without mentioning that it is a controversial body which, as the *Times* reported on November 30, 2018, "most major publishers have refused to join out of principled objection to any form of state interference". Once again, it appears that another agenda may be at play. Does the Government want to place itself in the position of facilitating this agenda?

3. How would the definition affect the Government's Counter-Terrorism Policy?

Could acceptance of the new definition of Islamophobia narrow Government policy options? How could Prevent and Pursue – key planks of the Government's counter-terrorism policy – survive in their current form once this new yardstick of "Islamophobia" became enshrined in official culture? Many of those who are seeking to weaponise this definition already denounce Prevent as "institutionally Islamophobic".

4. Would it enable an Islamist agenda?

The report makes little mention of Islamism, a mode of politics that is deeply contentious and is rejected by a majority of Muslims around the world – yet how can the question of how to respond to Islamism be disentangled from this issue? As noted, Islamist groups have in the past used allegations of "Islamophobia" to shield themselves from criticism. Islamists inevitably conflate themselves with Islam, like Irish Republicans claimed to defend all Catholics. The same agenda has reappeared in the APPG report, but the connections with MEND and other like-minded groups have not on the face of it been made clear to the parliamentarians asked to support it.

Endnotes

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² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/0/great-british-bake-off-previous-winners-where-are-they-now/nadiya-hussain-winner-series-six/>

³ https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PEXJ5037_Muslim_Communities_FINAL.pdf (p. 41)

⁴ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/review-survey-research-muslims-britain-0>

⁵ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2017962/Anders-Behring-Breivik-Right-wing-extremist-hated-immigrants-multi-culturalism.html>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/23/anders-behring-breivik-norway-attacks>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/20/channel-4-hijab-ruling-muslims-open-season-press-regulator-fatima-manji-kelvin-mackenzie>

⁸ The report cites a 1999 article in the Journal of Personality Social Psychology for these claims.

⁹ <https://mcb.org.uk/press-releases/mcb-welcomes-definition-of-islamophobia-by-the-appg-on-british-muslims/>

¹⁰ <https://www.mabonline.net/press-release-mab-welcomes-appg-definition-of-islamophobia/>

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¹² <https://www.islam21c.com/politics/ch4-niqab-debate-islamophobe-panellists-exposed/>

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¹⁴ <http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news-comment/1492-a-new-wave-of-islamophobia-where-it-rsquo-s-come-from-and-how-to-stop-it>

¹⁵ <https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Sarah-Khan-Final-Overview-MEND.doc>

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/03/30/100867/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/us-liberal-islamophobia-rising-more-insidious> The accusation of Islamophobia was later withdrawn.

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/ofsted-hijab-ban-islamophobia-schools-amanda-spielman-national-education-union-neu-a8283786.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.islam21c.com/politics/ofsteds-amanda-spielman-panders-to-tabloids-in-another-ideologically-driven-speech/>

¹⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/11/25/leavers-remainers-will-reconciled-drop-irish-backstop/>

²⁰ <https://mend.org.uk/news/mend-statement-on-defeat-of-leveson-two-inquiry/>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/27/islamophobia-not-british-press-issue-got-to-be-kidding>

²² *The Times* was criticised by MEND for “racialising” sex grooming
<https://mend.org.uk/news/times-criticised-for-racialising-sex-grooming/>

²³ “Dominic Kennedy belongs to a cadre of individuals that profit from what we can call ‘professional Islamophobia’” – <https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MENDs-response-to-kennedy-allegations.pdf>

²⁴ [https://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2015/1215.html&query=\(Lutfur\)+AND+\(Rahman\)](https://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2015/1215.html&query=(Lutfur)+AND+(Rahman))

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²⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/340526/HC_576_accessible_.pdf

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- ²⁸ <https://theconversation.com/eight-ways-that-islamophobia-operates-in-everyday-life-64444>
- ²⁹ https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/PEXJ5037_Muslim_Communities_FINAL.pdf
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- ³¹ [Islamism and Islam](#), 2012; [Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: From Jihadist to Institutional Islamism](#), 2014
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- ³⁵ <http://www.saqibooks.com/book/islam/>
- ³⁶ [Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam](#), 2009
- ³⁷ <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/people/bertram-vidgen/>
- ³⁸ <https://mend.org.uk/news/wrong-highlight-asian-grooming-gangs/>
- ³⁹ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/islamophobia-extremism-hate-crime-racism_uk_5c0566e8e4b066b5cfa475a3
- ⁴⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20110620210611/http://www.arabnews.com/saudiara-bia/article457836.ece>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDF9mDbVRqU> [from 12.25]
- ⁴² <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/03/30/100867/> and LinkedIn profile
- ⁴³ <https://www.ihr.org.uk/activities/event-reports/9880-event-report-author-evening-with-salman-sayyid/>
- ⁴⁴ <https://www.ihr.org.uk/multimedia/video-multimedia/10790-author-evening-with-salman-sayyid/>
- ⁴⁵ <https://www.ihr.org.uk/multimedia/video-multimedia/11249-author-evening-with-salman-sayyid-recalling-the-caliphate/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/98f75836-5d1c-11e8-9334-2218e7146b04>

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⁵³ Iram Ramzan and Andrew Gilligan, MPs ditch meeting with Muslim group Mend over Islamist claims, 29 October 2017. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mps-ditch-meeting-with-muslim-group-mend-over-islamist-claims-rgxqn0s05>

⁵⁴ Statement on Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley's comments about MEND, 27 February 2018.

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⁵⁵ <https://mend.org.uk/news/mend-statement-on-defeat-of-leveson-two-inquiry/>