

# A definition of Islamophobia?

Old problems remain, as new problems emerge

Khalid Mahmood MP, Sir John Jenkins  
and Dr Martyn Frampton

Foreword by Rt Hon Sir Sajid Javid MP





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## Foreword

Rt Hon Sir Sajid Javid MP  
Former Home Secretary

The horrific attacks of October 7 have caused incredible tension within communities, sparking a wave of hatred and abuse. Hostility on the streets, racist abuse and empowered extremists now feel almost commonplace. No group has been unaffected, and there has been a deplorable increase in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

Quite rightly, this has caused serious reflection about social cohesion, and how as a country, we reached this point. Clearly, underlying causes need to be addressed. But alongside this, we also need more robust and immediate protections for individuals.

Within this debate, the call for an updated definition of Islamophobia has been renewed. In 2019, the APPG on British Muslims proposed this new definition, and as Home Secretary at the time, I considered it carefully.

This definition would make 'Islamophobia' coterminous with 'anti-Muslim racism', and in their view, reduce anti-Muslim prejudice. The intention in wanting to combat this vile discrimination is absolutely right. It is one that is shared by so many others across different communities. But then, as now, accepting a new definition would be the wrong decision.

This new definition would make efforts to tackle hatred more difficult, it would be a serious threat to free speech and actually exacerbate existing divisions.

This refreshed Policy Exchange report makes this compelling case again, at a worrying time when numerous councils and politicians have waved it through, with seemingly little consideration for its implications.

No religion should be immune from criticism. Yet this definition would risk creating a blasphemy law via the backdoor by targeting legitimate speech. Critics are right to question how such a definition would be consistent with freedom of expression, and also the potentially dangerous consequences of suppressing it.

Further to this, I remain concerned about the significant risk that counter terrorism powers and policies will be undermined on the basis they are 'Islamophobic'. As a former Home Secretary, I know the government duty to protect its citizens is of supreme importance. Anything that puts that at risk must not be allowed to happen.

Many who propose this new definition have good intentions. But the nakedly political motivations from organisations like CAGE and MEND are all too clear. Too often, Islamophobia has been weaponised as a political football, to the detriment of a meaningful conversation that can enable

positive change.

According to ‘Tell Mama’, anti-Muslim hatred has increased by 335% since October 7. Too often, the narrow debate on definitions offers far more heat than light. We can and must do better.

Since my childhood our country has, in many ways, become more resilient and cohesive. We should be proud of our progress, but recent events have highlighted the dangers of a creeping complacency.

Extremists will always seek to sow seeds of division. But alongside targeting their hate, we urgently need to strengthen our communities, encourage greater integration, and come together under a shared sense of what citizenship of this country means — and requires.

A new definition of Islamophobia would make meeting that objective more difficult, and if introduced, I fear the consequences.



# A definition of Islamophobia? Old problems remain, as new problems emerge

In late 2018, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims proposed that there should be a “legally binding definition of Islamophobia.”<sup>1</sup> There is already, of course, a substantial body of law prohibiting faith-based hate crime or discrimination on the grounds of religion. But the new definition, the APPG report made clear, should be used to control and police a much wider range of activity, extending “far beyond” anything that can currently “be captured as criminal.”<sup>2</sup>

The new definition should, the APPG argued, prevent “negative attitudes that would not be classed as crimes by police.”<sup>3</sup> It was “required in order to bring about a transformation in social etiquette.”<sup>4</sup> It should set “appropriate limits to free speech”<sup>5</sup> when talking about Muslims, and create “tests... for ascertaining whether contentious speech is indeed reasonable criticism or Islamophobia masquerading as ‘legitimate criticism.’”<sup>6</sup>

Who would adjudicate these tests and decide whether criticism was “reasonable”? On this, the report was silent. But the APPG was clear in its judgement that the “supposed right to criticise Islam results in nothing more than another subtle form of anti-Muslim racism.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, the Government rejected the APPG definition.<sup>8</sup> The sweeping nature of the group’s demands had sparked a backlash from a remarkably wide range of critics, including from human rights activists such as Peter Tatchell,<sup>9</sup> freedom of speech bodies like Index on Censorship,<sup>10</sup> secularist organisations,<sup>11</sup> and many Muslims themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Policy Exchange had published the first comprehensive study of the APPG proposal, describing it as unnecessary and counterproductive in the fight against anti-Muslim hate.<sup>13</sup> These arguments were then substantially developed in our May 2019 text *On Islamophobia: The problem of definition*.<sup>14</sup>

We are republishing the text of that substantive report here, with some new material included dealing with developments since it was published. It asks core questions which remain as urgent – and as unanswered – today as they were in 2019: what specific problem is an Islamophobia definition designed to solve and how does it propose to do so? What behaviours not captured by the Equality Act 2010 would be captured by such a definition, and why? And what would be the wider impact on freedom of expression?

We argued previously that an Islamophobia definition would undermine free speech, social cohesion, and counter-extremism policy.

1. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cfffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> - page 27
2. *ibid*, page 32
3. *ibid*, page 32
4. *ibid*, page 33
5. *ibid*, page 11
6. *ibid*, page 36
7. *ibid*, page 35
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-process-set-out-to-establish-a-working-definition-of-islamophobia>
9. <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/islamophobiaanathologyofconcerns.pdf>
10. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/05/proposed-definition-of-islamophobia-could-deter-people-from-criticising-the-religion-of-islam/>
11. <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2019/08/islamophobia-definition-cur-tails-free-speech-campaigners-warn>
12. <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/islamophobiaanathologyofconcerns.pdf>
13. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/defining-islamophobia/>
14. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/on-islamophobia/>

We also highlighted the links between the APPG and bad-faith actors, such as the Islamist groups MEND and the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC). We exposed the selective and slanted nature of the APPG report's evidence. And we showed how the term "Islamophobia" was often used by Islamists (or those involved in controversy who happen to be Muslim) to smear and intimidate their critics, including critics who are themselves Muslim.

Among those nominated as "Islamophobe of the Year" in the IHRC's annual "Islamophobia Awards" (a real event, with a real award ceremony) have been Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London,<sup>15</sup> Sajid Javid, the then Home Secretary,<sup>16</sup> a former Islamist turned critic, Maajid Nawaz,<sup>17</sup> Louise Casey, for her inquiry into the Rotherham grooming scandal,<sup>18</sup> the Labour MP for Rotherham Sarah Champion,<sup>19</sup> Ofsted's Michael Wilshaw, for his investigations into the Trojan Horse school takeover in Birmingham,<sup>20</sup> Charlie Hebdo magazine (two months after eight of its staff were murdered by Islamist terrorists),<sup>21</sup> and Barack Obama. Significantly, a guest speaker at the ceremony that awarded the 'accolade' to Obama would go on to co-author the proposed APPG definition.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, we pointed out that the text of the proposed definition - "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" - substituted assertion for argument and rested on a fiction that would undermine existing equality law. The reality is that Islam is multi-racial, and Muslims are not a race.<sup>23</sup> This has remained the Government's position for the last five years, though a small minority of local authorities have adopted the APPG definition.

Now, however, with the rise in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred after events in Israel and Gaza, and the anti-Muslim remarks of the former Tory MP Lee Anderson which were widely held to be unacceptable, the call for the APPG Islamophobia definition is back. The co-chair of the APPG when it produced the report, Labour's Wes Streeting, has demanded the Government "revisit" its rejection of the APPG report, saying he was "proud" of it.<sup>24</sup>

Streeting is now a senior Shadow Cabinet Minister. Labour, which endorsed the APPG definition in the Corbyn years, has retained the policy under Sir Keir Starmer's leadership. Under severe pressure from his own party over Gaza, Starmer may bring the definition into force if, as seems likely, he enters No. 10. Those who would argue in favour of such a move perhaps see it as an 'easy give' - something to offset the putative damage done to Labour's relationship with British Muslim communities by its policy on the Middle East conflict.

This would be an even greater mistake now than before. All the same arguments that were pertinent in 2019 still apply today. But in the last five years the conflation of criticism with bigotry, and the use of the term "Islamophobia" to attack people with whom you disagree, have become both more prevalent and more menacing. Now, as we show below, even asking a terrorist group to de-escalate its violence, can be condemned as

15. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/event-report-islamophobia-awards-2018/>

16. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-release-uk-nominees-announced-for-islamophobia-awards-2018/>

17. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/On-Islamophobia.pdf>

18. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/On-Islamophobia.pdf>

19. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-release-uk-nominees-announced-for-islamophobia-awards-2018/>

20. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-releases/press-release-uk-nominees-announced-for-islamophobia-awards-2016/>

21. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/event-report-islamophobia-awards-2015/>

22. <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/ihrc-newsletter-2014/> and <https://twitter.com/SSPLeeds/status/1068537026461556737>

23. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Defining-Islamophobia.pdf>

24. <https://twitter.com/wesstreeting/status/1733074328625754459>

“Islamophobic.”

Politicians associated with the APPG, such as the former Tory co-chair, Sayeeda Warsi, have recently sought to claim that any Islamophobia definition would be “non-legally binding”<sup>25</sup> and would “protect believers, not beliefs.”<sup>26</sup> To put the kindest possible interpretation on the matter, they do not seem to have read their own report. The APPG repeatedly referred to the definition as “legally binding” and stated that “there is a clear need for a working definition that is widely accepted and adopted across public sector organisations, government, and within the legal and policy frameworks [emphasis added].”<sup>27</sup>

Advocates of the APPG proposal typically now frame it as offering merely a “working definition”. But that formulation simply begs the question: what work, specifically, is this definition meant to be doing?

Those who raise such queries are invariably dismissed as scare-mongers – or, as Warsi put it to Kemi Badenoch, purveyors of “absolute nonsense”.<sup>28</sup> Yet there is an obvious tension here. On the one hand, its advocates claim that the APPG definition will carry no legal weight; on the other, they insist that any failure to adopt the definition will cripple the struggle against Islamophobia. How is this circle to be squared? It is not hard to find the answer. Advocates of an Islamophobia definition have explicitly stated that adoption will be the first step towards its wider operationalisation.

As Streeter and his co-chair, Anna Soubry, put it in their Foreword to the APPG report, they want the definition to be “adopted by Government, statutory agencies [and] civil society organisations” so that Islamophobia, as defined by the APPG, could be “challenged using every available lever in Government, politics, policymaking, media, society and education.”<sup>29</sup>

In a follow-up report in 2021, the Muslim Council of Britain echoed the APPG’s call for a definition to capture and prohibit behaviour which “goes beyond anti-Muslim hatred.”<sup>30</sup> The MCB directly said that adopting the APPG’s race-based definition of Islamophobia “facilitates its operationalisation, given that many large organisations already have in place mechanisms and protocols for dealing with racism; therefore, by articulating Islamophobia as a type of racism, there is no need to invent new procedures to deal with complaints and concerns that arise”. It went on to add pointedly,

“Definitions are a means to an end, not ends in themselves. Once a definition is accepted in the culture, the real work comes from the investments we are prepared to make in its institutional embedding and purchase.”<sup>31</sup>

The MCB further continued that,

*“the real test of a definition... hinges on whether it addresses two questions. Does it give a victim who would otherwise suffer in silence the language and the confidence to bring forth their grievance and seek recourse? And, does it make it more likely that in each sphere of life, work and social interaction, those in bodies committed to enforcing the principles and laws (our italics) of equality,*

25. <https://twitter.com/SayeedaWarsi/status/1761815230152085662>

26. <https://twitter.com/wesstreeter/status/1761872518388875320>

27. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> p. 25

28. <https://twitter.com/SayeedaWarsi/status/1762025641124253743>

29. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> - page 8

30. [https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport\\_020321\\_compressed.pdf](https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport_020321_compressed.pdf) - pages 12, 138

31. *Defining Islamophobia*, MCB, see [https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport\\_020321\\_compressed.pdf](https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport_020321_compressed.pdf)

*inclusiveness and diversity will the more readily recognise and act upon such grievances? If the answers are yes, then this definition has met its only real test.”<sup>32</sup>*

Clearly, then, even if it is not legally binding to begin with, any officially endorsed definition is intended swiftly to become so. And from the beginning it will in practice have a chilling effect.

It is, in fact, already having that effect. Though the words “Islamophobia” or “Islamophobic” appear nowhere in any law, the police, who are supposed to apply the law, have started using them anyway. The Met publishes monthly statistics for “Islamophobic crime”<sup>33</sup> – by which it presumably means anti-Muslim crime. On February 27, for instance, the force’s Assistant Commissioner, Matt Twist, spoke of its “decisive action and arrests” against “Islamophobic offences.”<sup>34</sup> It would be interesting to know precisely what falls within that category.

It may be unfair to blame the police for this confusion. In 2019, when it rejected the APPG report, the Government left a hostage to fortune. It said that although it disagreed with that particular definition of Islamophobia, some other definition of Islamophobia was needed. But unless we wish to rip up the Equality Act 2010, and key tenets of our tradition of free speech, the reality is that no definition is possible. Indeed, leaked Government Equalities Office advice of 15 April 2019 stated:<sup>35</sup>

*the definition is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines “race” as comprising colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins - none of which would encompass a Muslim or an Islamic practice. This means that, over time, there could be tensions between the Act and the official definition of Islamophobia.*

None of this is to dispute in any way that anti-Muslim hatred, abuse and violence is real, and serious, and needs to be challenged. But what needs to be done is the same thing that needs to be done about, for instance, hatred, abuse and violence against Jews: more consistently and firmly enforcing the perfectly adequate existing laws and describing any offences in the terms that Parliament applied to them.

Anderson’s claim that Sadiq Khan was under the “control” of Islamists was widely viewed to be anti-Muslim hatred, factually wrong, and playing into the hands of genuine Islamists, who constantly seek to blur the line between them and the non-Islamist British Muslim majority. There is no doubt that had any MP said something similar about a Jewish Mayor and Jewish extremists it would, rightly, been condemned as antisemitism. But if Khan believes he has been defamed, he already has legal recourse. In the meantime, action was understandably taken against Anderson through the means of party discipline, rather than law, with the withdrawal of the Conservative whip. It is hard to see what an Islamophobia definition could add to these options, unless we wish to criminalise offensive remarks.

In the absence of any single definition, the authorities should maintain their efforts to tackle anti-Muslim – as indeed any - prejudice, bigotry, and hatred in all its forms. But on this, alas, there is no silver bullet. And this

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32. *ibid*

33. <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/metropolitan.police.service/viz/MonthlyCrime-DataNewCats/Coversheet>

34. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/13990/html/>

35. Government Equalities Office, Islamophobia definition, 15 April 2019. Copy in the authors possession.

work is scarcely likely to be impacted one way or another by any remotely acceptable resolution of the definitional question.

The polarisation caused by the crisis in Israel and Gaza, and the fear and hurt felt on all sides, demands measures that will reduce divisions, not increase them. It makes it less advisable, not more, to create a special statutory regime for Muslims alone. And it makes it less advisable, not more, to give official sanction to a term like Islamophobia, which remains so contested and open to abuse.

Finally, none of this is in any way to dispute that many people, including the police, may well use the term “Islamophobia” with the best of intentions, to describe and deplore anti-Muslim hatred, abuse and violence. But those people should also know how others use it for very different purposes. They should be conscious that definitional slippage has real world consequences. And they should therefore perhaps think of different terms to use: terms whose meaning everyone accepts and understands, or whose meaning is already set down in statute. Terms, in short, which do not need a new and highly contested definition.

## A creeping malaise: The ever-widening use of “Islamophobia”

### Criticising a Muslim minister for overruling his officials is Islamophobic

On March 9, the Telegraph reported that the First Minister of Scotland, Humza Yousaf, had overruled his officials’ advice to give between £100,000 and £200,000 to Unicef, the UN agency for children, for water relief works in Gaza, and had instead directed that a larger sum, £250,000, be given to a different Gaza UN agency, UNRWA, which has been accused of links with Hamas.

Stephen Kerr, a Conservative MSP, said: “The First Minister has some serious explaining to do starting with why he overrode officials ...It looks as if the money was not budgeted and that the First Minister was prepared to bend the rules and not follow procedure. Humza Yousaf has a clear conflict of interest in the awarding of aid to Gaza. Clearly the fact that so many members of his family are either living in Gaza or are involved with Palestinian organisations raises significant questions about what his motivation is for using taxpayers’ money in the area.”<sup>36</sup>

Yousaf responded with the following tweet: “Most of my political life, I’ve battled insinuations from sections of the media desperate to link me to terrorism...The latest smear from the Telegraph is just a continuation of these Islamophobic (sic) attacks.”<sup>37</sup> As one commentator, Iain Macwhirter, has since said, “it is emphatically not Islamophobic to call for scrutiny of the use of public funds... This catch-all term is increasingly being used to close down debate and silence criticism of politicians who happen to be Muslims.”<sup>38</sup>

### Asking an MP to agree that terrorists should attack fewer people is Islamophobic

On 15 January 2024, the Labour MP Zarah Sultana asked the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, if he would “seek to de-escalate the situation [in the Middle East] and call for an immediate ceasefire?” Sunak replied: “Perhaps the honourable Lady would do well to call on Hamas and the Houthis to de-escalate the situation.”<sup>39</sup>

The Labour Muslim Network, the party’s main Muslim representative body, posted on X: “The Prime Minister demanding a Muslim member of Parliament ‘call on Hamas’ to de-escalate in Gaza is clear Islamophobia. This form of rhetoric is dangerous to the safety of Muslim public officials

36. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/03/08/humza-yousaf-gave-250k-gaza-despite-official-advice/>

37. <https://twitter.com/HumzaYousaf/status/1766400280055197735>

38. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/humza-yousaf-wrong-accuse-critics-islamophobia-b3sq6x73q>

39. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-01-15/debates/52945864-28EB-49AC-B933-33B546DF75B6/DefendingTheUKAndAllies>

and our communities at large.”<sup>40</sup>

Even before the 2023 attacks the Labour Muslim Network, whose 2021 virtual Ramadan iftar was attended by Sir Keir Starmer,<sup>41</sup> issued a document called *Islamophobia in the Palestine Debate*, claiming that any “demand for activists to disavow/explain Hamas activity in any discussions surrounding Palestine” was an “example of Islamophobia.” Asking Muslims to condemn Hamas attacks was also, said the paper, was one of the ways in which Muslims are “constantly harassed.”<sup>42</sup>

### Commemorating victims of terror is Islamophobic

To express sympathy, Wembley Stadium’s famous arch has often been lit in the colours of countries which have suffered terrorist or military attack - including, in recent years, Belgium, Turkey, France and Ukraine. But according to Abdullah Afzal, a comedian and writer from Manchester, extending the same gesture to Israel would have been “Islamophobic.”

As he tweeted, a week after the October 2023 attacks (and before Israeli ground attacks on Gaza): “Well done to the FA for not succumbing to the pressure from the uneducated, Islamophobic and entitled individuals who are calling for you to light up Wembley with [the colours of] the Israeli flag. To do that would be a huge insult to the innocent lives lost in Gaza over the last 70 years.”<sup>43</sup>

### Banning terrorist sympathisers is Islamophobic

On 19 January 2024, ministers proscribed the Islamist organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir as a terrorist group.<sup>44</sup> Home Secretary James Cleverly had earlier stated “Hizb-ut-Tahrir is an antisemitic organisation that actively promotes and encourages terrorism, including praising and celebrating the appalling 7 October attacks.”<sup>45</sup>

The website Islam21C organised an event on 18 January opposing the ban, entitled ‘Muslim community response to Hizb-ut-Tahrir Ban United We Stand.’<sup>46</sup> Speaking in support of the event, Professor David Miller commented: “Seems like a good event this evening. Banning Hizb-ut-Tahrir an indication of the Islamophobia at the heart of the British ‘counter-terrorism’ apparatus.”<sup>47</sup>

### Suspending a non-Muslim MP is Islamophobic

Last October Labour withdrew the whip from its MP Andy McDonald after he told a rally: “We won’t rest until we have justice. Until all people, Israelis and Palestinians, between the river and the sea, can live in peaceful liberty.” He went on to shout “free Palestine.” The term “from the river to the sea” is often interpreted as a call for the destruction of Israel. Labour described the comments as “deeply offensive.”<sup>48</sup>

Labour NEC member Mish Rahman joined criticism made of the decision by the Labour Muslim Network, adding the comment ‘Keir Starmer’s Labour Party is institutionally Islamophobic [sic]’.<sup>49</sup> Mr McDonald is not Muslim. He has since been restored to the Labour whip.<sup>50</sup>

40. <https://twitter.com/LabourMuslims/status/1746955428347478160>

41. <https://twitter.com/Afzal4Gorton/status/1385529876556439555?t=0jqM-8jxUYuyzEMqxRCslDg&s=19>

42. <https://www.labourmuslims.org/post/islamophobia-in-the-palestine-debate-a-guide?fbclid=IwAR1oqehc-CJaSC-nOTEs9uJTUqQHmnhF0tZ7HHh-GxEMqajwPxcLoxZoSbY>

43. [https://twitter.com/Abdullah\\_Azfal/status/1713106060918063496](https://twitter.com/Abdullah_Azfal/status/1713106060918063496)

44. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hizb-ut-tahrir-proscribed-as-terrorist-organisation>

45. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-declares-hizb-ut-tahrir-as-terrorists>

46. <https://twitter.com/Islam21c/status/1747704745731502228>

47. [https://twitter.com/Tracking\\_Power/status/1747884861354836378?s=20](https://twitter.com/Tracking_Power/status/1747884861354836378?s=20)

48. <https://news.sky.com/story/andy-mcdonald-senior-labour-mp-suspended-over-deeply-offensive-comments-at-pro-palestine-rally-12996759>

49. [https://twitter.com/mish\\_rahman/status/1719083029203726579?](https://twitter.com/mish_rahman/status/1719083029203726579?)

50. <https://news.sky.com/story/labour-restores-whip-to-mp-andy-mcdonald-after-inquiry-into-river-to-sea-remark-13094044>

### Calling for the release of hostages while visiting a mosque is Islamophobic

On 22 October 2023 Sir Keir Starmer visited the South Wales Islamic Centre. He later tweeted photographs of his visit, and stated “I repeated our calls for all hostages to be released, more humanitarian aid to enter Gaza, for the water and power to be switched back on, and a renewed focus on the two state solution.”<sup>51</sup>

The Muslim Association of Britain responded on X: “The fact that @Keir\_Starmer thought it appropriate to visit a Mosque and demand the release of hostages is deeply offensive and Islamophobic.”<sup>52</sup>

### Not allowing children to wear Palestinian symbols to school is Islamophobic

In December 2023 Barclay Primary School in Leyton was the scene of protests after a Muslim child was disciplined for wearing Palestinian colours and symbols to school in breach of school policies which prohibit political symbols. The key point is that political symbols of any kind, not just Muslim-related ones, were banned.<sup>53</sup> That did not prevent the child’s father, Shahid Acchhala, stating: “I think it’s happening because of discrimination, Islamophobia.”<sup>54</sup>

### The Speaker of the House raising threats to MPs is Islamophobic

The House of Commons speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, has explained his controversial breach of protocol concerning opposition motions on 21 February 2024, in terms of the threats MPs have faced since pro-Palestinian protests began.<sup>55</sup> Hoyle’s actions were denounced in the left-wing Tribune magazine by Nadeine Asbali, in an article entitled ‘Islamophobia: A tool of our political class.’ She wrote of the Speaker: “Hoyle peddled just about every Islamophobic stereotype going: that pro-Palestine supporters (largely portrayed as being exclusively Muslim, although anyone who’s ever been on a march will attest otherwise) are violent and threatening, undemocratic and antisemitic. And, arguably, that the safety of MPs supersedes the safety of Palestinian children decimated by Israeli bombs stamped with British approval.”<sup>56</sup>

### The term Islamist is Islamophobic

One of the key uses of “Islamophobia” is by Islamists who seek to conflate their particular political ideology with the entire faith of Islam, and to claim any attack on Islamism or Islamists as an attack on all Muslims. This explains why even some Muslims themselves have been accused of “Islamophobia” by Islamist groups. The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, and the activist Maaajid Nawaz, anti-Islamist or non-Islamist Muslims, have all been shortlisted for the Islamic Human Rights Commission’s “Islamophobe of the Year” award (along with Theresa May, Rowan Atkinson, Emmanuel Macron, the head of Ofsted, and others.)<sup>57</sup>

As one of the intellectual founding fathers of Islamism, Sayid Abul A’la

51. [https://twitter.com/Keir\\_Starmer/status/1716194231885209795](https://twitter.com/Keir_Starmer/status/1716194231885209795)

52. <https://twitter.com/MABOnline1/status/1716942561045324046?s=20>

53. <https://www.lionacademytrust.net/news/30/37/Press-statement-Barclay-Primary-School> and <https://5pillarsuk.com/2023/12/19/london-school-issues-prevent-referral-warning-over-palestine-comments/>

54. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=7205505466180557>

55. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-02-22/debates/6515BA7F-4BB9-4C2D-8A2A-B38E8AEC-CB33/BusinessOfTheHouse#contribution-FAA6AAE8-521B-4DAE-BBF2-A4D-8521F2A42>

56. <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2024/02/islamophobia-a-tool-of-our-political-class>

57. <https://www.ihr.org.uk/press-release-uk-nominees-announced-for-islamophobia-awards-2018/>



Maududi, himself said, Islam and Islamism are not the same: “Merely believing in God as God and in His law as the true law is not enough. As soon as you believe in these two things, a sacred duty devolves upon you: wherever you are, in whichever country you live, you must strive to change the wrong basis of government, and seize all powers to rule and make laws from those who do not fear God.”<sup>58</sup>

Though Maududi said in this passage that all Muslims have a duty to be Islamists, the vast majority, at least in Britain, are not, making clear in repeated polls their support for the UK’s non-religious democracy where those who “do not fear God” have the same political rights as everyone else.

Since 7/10, some have gone further: not just seeking to equate Islamism with Islam, but claiming that the very term “Islamist” is itself Islamophobic, aiming thereby to toxify it and deter its use. As The Muslim Vote, a campaign to maximise the electoral impact of British Muslims, put it on 23 February: “‘Islamist’. The politically correct term to use when saying Islamophobic things. We see through it.”<sup>59</sup>

Ali Milani, Boris Johnson’s opponent in Uxbridge and South Ruislip at the 2019 general election and now Chair of the Labour Muslim Network, tweeted: “Political commentators think they can mask their rampant Islamophobia by just substituting the word ‘Islamist’ instead of Muslim. Everyone can still see your racism.”<sup>60</sup> An added irony here is that the terms Islamism or Islamist have often been used freely by Muslim representative groups and activists themselves – examples include the Muslim Association of Britain, Cordoba Foundation, Islamic Human Rights Commission, Ikwhan Web (the Muslim Brotherhood’s former English language website), and individuals such as Muhammad Abdul Bari, the former Secretary General of the MCB, the academic Tariq Ramadan, Azzam Tamimi and Anas asl-Tikriti (both former officials in the MAB) and Rachid al-Ghannouchi of Tunisia’s Ennahda party.<sup>61</sup>

### Other recent examples of the abuse of the term

Even before the events in Israel and Gaza, there were numerous recent examples of the term Islamophobia being used to suppress freedom of expression or shield wrongdoing.

### Showing a film is Islamophobic

In 2022, *The Lady of Heaven*, a film about the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, was withdrawn from all its screens by the major British cinema chain Cineworld<sup>62</sup> after the Islamist website 5Pillars campaigned against it, triggering demonstrations outside some cinemas. 5Pillars’ editor, Roshan Salih, attacked the film as “openly Islamophobic,”<sup>63</sup> even though its executive producer was himself a Muslim. The government’s then adviser on anti-Muslim hatred, Imam Qari Asim, was sacked from that role after he helped organise a demonstration against the film. Asim initially also called it “Islamophobic,” though later amended a Facebook post to remove the term.<sup>64</sup>

58. [https://ia600703.us.archive.org/12/items/MawdudiLetUsBeMuslims/Mawdudi\\_Let\\_Us\\_Be\\_Muslims.pdf](https://ia600703.us.archive.org/12/items/MawdudiLetUsBeMuslims/Mawdudi_Let_Us_Be_Muslims.pdf) - page 290

59. The Muslim Vote, 23 February 2024, <https://twitter.com/themuslimvoteuk/status/1760970441227678038?t=iMjIHF3xsX-UgX-tnE7Rh-g&s=19>

60. <https://twitter.com/AliMilaniUK/status/1760648849566159024>

61. For a full list see p. 11-12, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Understanding-Islamism.pdf>

62. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-61729392>

63. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10899449/The-Lady-Heaven-producer-blasts-Muslim-protesters-accuses-mob-poisonous-rhetoric.html>

64. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/%E2%80%98The-Lady-of-Heaven.pdf>

Last year, another film, *The Kerala Story*, was withdrawn by some cinemas<sup>65</sup> after accusations of “Islamophobia” and at least one protest which disrupted a screening.<sup>66</sup>

### Dismissal for making racist comments is Islamophobic

In 2022 the president of the National Union of Students, Shaima Dalalli, was sacked after an investigation into complaints of anti-Semitism against her. She had in 2012 posted an online comment saying: “Khaybar Khaybar O Jews ... Muhammad’s army will return Gaza,” a reference to a massacre, and other offensive posts, though she apologised when their existence emerged.<sup>67</sup>

The Federation of Student Islamic Societies described the investigation as a “clear extension of institutional Islamophobia within the education sector... NUS’ attitude towards Shaima is a manifestation of this oppression.”<sup>68</sup> It said her dismissal reflected the NUS’s “failings towards Muslim students at large” and called on “those who oppose Islamophobia to organise and lead disaffiliation campaigns against the NUS.”<sup>69</sup>

The Muslim Council of Britain also attacked the dismissal as Islamophobic, saying: “Many Muslim students fear the Islamophobia they face on campus. This decision will only heighten those fears and raise questions about their place within the NUS.”<sup>70</sup>

### Defending the rule of law, equality, freedom and rights is Islamophobic

The MCB’s 2021 follow-up to the APPG report introduced the interesting concept of “liberal Islamophobia.” This was said to be “anchored in a pseudo-progressive discourse in the defence of the rule of law based on liberal equality, freedom and rights (e.g. liberal versions of freedom of speech, gender and sexual equality).” As the MCB put it: “We see its clearest articulations in calls to ban the hijab or burka or complaints about the failure to accept liberal norms, often centred around gender and homosexuality.”<sup>71</sup> It is, of course, everyone’s right to hold any views they wish on gender and homosexuality, but it is not Islamophobic to criticise conservative (or any other) views on these subjects. There is no right to have their views protected from criticism.

65. Sunday Telegraph, 28.5.23.

66. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12110263/Moment-Muslim-activists-storm-Birmingham-cinema-screening-Bollywood-film-Kerala-Story.html>

67. Times, 2.11.22.

68. <https://www.fosis.org.uk/news/nus-failure-towards-addressing-institutional-islamophobia/>

69. <https://www.fosis.org.uk/news/fosis-statement-on-nus-dismissal-of-shaima-dallali/>

70. <https://twitter.com/MuslimCouncil/status/1587570173699039233>

71. [https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport\\_020321\\_compressed.pdf](https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport_020321_compressed.pdf) - page 84

72. <https://www.mend.org.uk/about-mend/mends-achievements/>

### Exaggeration of anti-Muslim sentiment

Advocates of the term Islamophobia, and of a definition for it, have recently made their case with significant falsehoods or exaggerations. This is not, of course, merely wrong in itself, but increases fear, suspicion and social tension, particularly in Muslim communities.

The annual “Islamophobia Awareness Month,” in November each year, is run by MEND,<sup>72</sup> though other organisations including the Muslim Council of Britain take part. MEND has recently become more reticent about acknowledging its role; IAM now has a separate website which barely mentions MEND. Perhaps because of this, IAM has been able to involve MPs, councils and other official bodies in the promotion of claims

which are grossly untrue.

In Islamophobia Awareness Month 2021, for instance, MPs supporting the initiative were posed in front of a Muslim Council of Britain placard demanding the adoption of the APPG definition and claiming that in 2020/21, “45 per cent of all hate crimes offences targeted Muslims.”<sup>73</sup> The actual figure was 2.2 per cent.<sup>74</sup>

The Islamophobia Awareness Month travelling exhibition has been displayed at dozens of public institutions, including the Victoria & Albert Museum,<sup>75</sup> Bradford Royal Infirmary,<sup>76</sup> Sheffield Central Library<sup>77</sup> and many schools and universities. In 2018 MEND and Network Rail held a joint event for IAM at Network Rail’s headquarters in Milton Keynes.<sup>78</sup> IAM’s travelling exhibition claims that “90% of those stopped under schedule 7 powers [stop and search at airports or ports] were Muslim.”<sup>79</sup> The actual figures show that the largest single group of those stopped, 34%, are Chinese, very few of whom will be Muslim; 21% are white, again few of whom will be Muslim; 7% are black, most of whom will not be Muslim. Only 33% are Asian, not all of whom will be Muslim.<sup>80</sup>

Islamophobia Awareness Month 2018’s official video, “This is Islamophobia,”<sup>81</sup> claimed that Islamophobia was “everyday, everywhere.” It said that society “treats all Muslims as criminal” and “refuse[s] to tolerate us at all.” Interspersed with the regular refrain, “This is Islamophobia,” it claimed that Muslims’ “phone calls and homes are being watched,” that there was a “legal requirement on teachers to monitor the Muslim students that they teach,” and that a Muslim student had had his home “raided over a word googled for a worksheet.” MEND later admitted that this was “artistic licence.”<sup>82</sup>

Incidentally, the APPG report lists “accusing Muslims... of exaggerating Islamophobia” as itself an “example of Islamophobia in public life.”<sup>83</sup> It would presumably therefore be Islamophobic, and prohibited, for organisations such as Policy Exchange or the media to call out these errors.

## Iran and Islamophobia

We also need to consider the extent to which a country hostile to the United Kingdom, the Islamic Republic of Iran, utilises the concept of Islamophobia. On 25 September 2022 there were a series of protests across London in support of Mahsa Amini, a young woman who had died in custody in Tehran after being arrested by the morality police.<sup>84</sup> The protests coincided with a Shia religious procession, and violence broke out in London between pro and anti-regime protestors outside the Islamic Centre of England (ICEL) in Maida Vale. The head of ICEL, Seyed Hashem Mousavi, was appointed in 2019 as the representative in this country of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>85</sup> Mousavi referred to ‘violent Islamophobic riots’, and stated:<sup>86</sup>

“The aim of the rioters was certainly Islamophobic as they chose to attack a number of mourners and their places of worship on a day of grief and sorrow for the Muslim world in an attempt to distort the true face of Islam.”

73. <https://twitter.com/paulbristow79/status/1460955957312299016>

74. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021>

75. [https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IAM\\_UniversityPack-2023.pdf](https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IAM_UniversityPack-2023.pdf)

76. <https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/iam-exhibition-bradford-royal-infirmary/>

77. <https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/iam-exhibition-sheffield-central-library/>

78. List of activities, Inter Faith Week 2018, [https://www.interfaithweek.org/uploads/Full\\_list\\_of\\_all\\_2018\\_events\\_v2.pdf](https://www.interfaithweek.org/uploads/Full_list_of_all_2018_events_v2.pdf) p. 207

79. <https://www.islamophobia-awareness.org/hire-iam-exhibition/>

80. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/operation-of-police-powers-under-tact-2000-to-september-2023/operation-of-police-powers-under-the-terrorism-act-2000-and-subsequent-legislation-arrests-outcomes-and-stop-and-search-great-britain-quarterly-u#other-police-powers>

81. <https://twitter.com/mendcommunity/status/1059067744178573314>

82. <https://www.mend.org.uk/mend-response-allegations-andrew-gilligan-saudis-fund-hardline-british-tv-station-islam-channel-published-18th-november-2018/>

83. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2feb1a90cfffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> - page 56

84. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/25/protesters-clash-with-police-outside-iranian-embassy-in-london>

85. His name is also given as Moosavi. [http://web.archive.org/web/20220620064747/https://en.abna24.com/index.php/news/hujjat-al-islam-mousavi-%E2%80%8Ewill-be-appointed-as-head-of-islamic-center-of-england\\_949193.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20220620064747/https://en.abna24.com/index.php/news/hujjat-al-islam-mousavi-%E2%80%8Ewill-be-appointed-as-head-of-islamic-center-of-england_949193.html)

86. <https://www.aimislam.com/message-of-appreciation-from-the-islamic-centre-of-england-to-the-insightful-believers/>

Whatever the final analysis of the violence which occurred at this protest, some of the dangers inherent in the term ‘Islamophobia’ emerge. If Islamophobia is a ‘type of racism’ as per the APPG definition, observers are expected to agree that if two groups largely made up of Iranians clash in London, the actions of one may be seen as racist, even though more or less everyone involved is of the same ethnic background? And are we comfortable, as a society, with opponents of the Iranian regime being described as ‘Islamophobic’?

As well as the heads of the Islamic Centre of England being appointed by Iran’s supreme leader, the facility has frequently held events commemorating the Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic,<sup>87</sup> and gatherings to mark the 1979 Islamic revolution.<sup>88</sup> As such it is a potential site, alongside the Iranian embassy, for members of the Iranian diaspora to protest against the regime. Would such protests be prevented as being ‘Islamophobic’, following a statutory definition of Islamophobia?

### Islamophobia advocates’ responses to criticism of the APPG report

Perhaps stung by the backlash against the APPG report, Islamophobia definition advocates have since produced at least two substantive defences of it or its key premises. The first, by the MCB in 2021, arguably confirmed, or at least underlined, some of the critics’ fears. As we have seen, it said that the definition was needed to capture and prohibit behaviour “beyond hate crime” and “beyond anti-Muslim hatred.”<sup>89</sup>

The MCB report, and another one by Birmingham University academics for the British Academy in 2022, attempted to address the criticism that Muslims are not a race. The Birmingham report argued that “‘race’ can be better understood as a social process by which groups of people are placed into a hierarchy rather than a natural biological reality... racism is not dependent on the existence of ‘races’, but rather generates classifications by which to organise people and place a value on them.”<sup>90</sup>

Whatever the merits of this argument at a conceptual level, the law – which by necessity demands practicable and clear parameters – defines race as involving “colour, nationality or ethnic or national origins.”<sup>91</sup> The real reason why race has been chosen as a basis of the Islamophobia definition is, in the words of the MCB report, that it makes it much easier to use. As it says, a race-based definition “facilitates its operationalisation, given that many large organisations already have in place mechanisms and protocols for dealing with racism; therefore, by articulating Islamophobia as a type of racism, there is no need to invent new procedures to deal with complaints and concerns that arise.”<sup>92</sup>

In its response to criticism that a definition would undermine free speech, the MCB unintentionally made clear why so many are right to be worried. As it said: “It is not the undoing of Islamophobia but its unchecked continuation that imperils our freedoms. If anything, the fact that so many of the usual suspects oppose this definition of Islamophobia only demonstrates that it has the potential to be a lever for justice. It would

87. <https://en.hawzahnews.com/photo/365078/Photo-33rd-Anniversary-of-Imam-Khomeini-s-Departure-at-Islamic>

88. <https://www.facebook.com/IslamicCentreEngland/photos/on-the-40th-anniversary-of-the-victory-of-the-islamic-revolution-in-iran-the-isl/1685727258196203/>

89. [https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport\\_020321\\_compressed.pdf](https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport_020321_compressed.pdf) - pages 12, 138

90. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-artslaw/ptr/90172-univ73-islamophobia-in-the-uk-report-final.pdf> - page 14

91. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/9>

92. [https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport\\_020321\\_compressed.pdf](https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FULL-SPREAD-IslamophobiaReport_020321_compressed.pdf) - page 10

be worrying if the definition was welcomed by those who are part of the problem of Islamophobia rather than its solution.”<sup>93</sup>

### Conclusion

The debate about a definition of Islamophobia is not abstract. In a general election year this is a substantive question for government, opposition parties and for our institutions. It has serious ramifications for existing legislation and our own individual liberties. As the examples given above illustrate, in the period of emotion and tension since 7/10, the use of the term Islamophobia has become wider, less coherent and at times inflated to a remarkable degree. The threat to freedom of speech could not be more clearly signposted.

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93. *ibid*, page 6



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