

# Islamophobia

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### ***Issues of definition***

'The demand, since September 11,' wrote **Arun Kundnani** of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) in January 2005, 'has been for a recharging of the batteries of national belonging, for the state to once again connect with the nation. In response, the government has chosen to bind itself to the people through fear rather than hope; through national security rather than people's security; through the politics of a phoney Britishness rather than a genuine universalism. The result is a mindset that makes Muslims into potent symbols for an apparent loss of national belonging. Instead of asking how society excludes Muslims and how this exclusion contributes to a process of ghetto-isation, the questions asked are about Muslims refusing to integrate; Muslims as a political problem; Muslims having to become more British. It is thus their "alien" values that are the problem rather than our racist values. The shame of it is that these ideas have come from the left as much as the right, and Muslims themselves have been excluded from participating in these debates on equal terms.'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/islam/story/0,15568,1395926,00.html>

'Persistent and untackled Islamophobia in the UK,' reported the **BBC** in summer 2004, 'could lead to "time-bombs!" of backlash and bitterness, according to a major report.' The report in question was from the **Commission on Islamophobia and British Muslims**, originally set up by the Runnymede Trust.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/3768327.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3768327.stm)

The report itself can be downloaded from [www.insted.co.uk/islam.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/islam.html). Also at this site there are two substantial extracts from the report:

**Islamophobia and race relations.** This notes that Islamophobia has been present in western culture for many centuries. It has taken different forms, however, at different times and in different contexts. The current context in Britain includes the international situation, concerns about asylum and refugees, and widespread scepticism and agnosticism in relation to all religious beliefs. The paper then discusses the arguments for seeing Islamophobia as a form of racism and notes that most race equality organisations have not yet adequately responded to the challenges that Islamophobia poses. It closes by discussing the concept of institutional Islamophobia.

[www.insted.co.uk/relations.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/relations.html)

**Debate and disagreement.** It is sometimes claimed that use of the word 'Islamophobia' is a way of stifling legitimate debate and disagreement. This paper starts by quoting a colourful statement of this view and continues by discussing and clarifying the differences between 'closed' and 'open' views of Islam amongst non-Muslims. It points out that the closed/open distinction is relevant to disagreements within communities as well as between them, and to Muslim views of 'the West' as well as non-Muslim views of Islam.

<http://www.insted.co.uk/debates.html>

The report's warning that Islamophobia is a major factor in causing disaffection and alienation in young British Muslims was derived in part from the writings of the journalist **Fuad Nahdi**. 'The war is reshaping our society,' wrote **Nahdi** shortly after the invasion of Iraq, 'and particularly British Islam. For most Muslims it has dramatically exposed how partisan the

western media is - and, for many, how crass western politicians are and how gullible the western public is. However, it is the despair, the frustration and the anger that should be noted. Today, Britain's 1.6 million Muslims are living on a diet of death, hypocrisy and neglect that is traumatising and radicalising an entire generation. His article was entitled 'Young, Muslim, and ready to fight'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,927054,00.html>

But does Islamophobia exist? An article by journalist **Kenan Malik** in early 2005 argued that Islamophobia is a myth invented to suit politicians' needs and silence the critics of Islam. The article was first published in **Prospect** magazine and was also the basis for a TV programme. A shortened version of the argument was published in the **Guardian**.

[http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/islamophobia\\_prospect.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/islamophobia_prospect.html)

A response was made by Inayat Bunglawala on behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain.

<http://www.mcb.org.uk/letter86.html>

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### ***Hate crimes and hostility***

In July and August 2005 the **Institute of Race Relations** compiled lists of news items, mainly from local newspapers, about racist attacks on Muslim people in Britain. Most of the items were about serious crimes. There was reference also, however, to so-called low-level incidents - harassment and verbal abuse, and damage to homes and businesses. By the end of August the following lists had been published:

[The anti-Muslim backlash begins](#) (14 July)

[The anti-Muslim backlash continues](#) (21 July)

[The anti-Muslim backlash intensifies](#) (28 July)

[Anti-Muslim backlash goes on](#) (4 August)

[The racist backlash to the London bombings continues](#) (11 August)

[The racist backlash goes on...](#)(25 August)

An overview of the increase in hate crimes in Britain in summer 2005 was provided by the BBC in early August, following a report from the **Metropolitan Police** that there were 269 religious hate crimes in the three weeks after 7 July, compared with 40 in the same period of 2004.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4740015.stm>

The atmosphere of mutual suspicion that developed in Britain in summer 2005 was well described in another **report for the BBC**, 'The Discomfort of Strangers' by **Sean Coughlan**, on 26 July. It drew several interesting comments and stories from others. For example, someone in Bermondsey wrote: 'I can't avoid carrying a big rucksack with my mobile office in when I travel. As I'm an Asian male that's been getting suspicious looks, I've taken to carrying a bottle of wine as if I'm taking it home for dinner. It's ironic, I don't even like wine, but it's a clear visual symbol that says I'm not a fanatic Islamic bomber.'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4717251.stm>

There was also, on the same theme, a vivid article by **Rabinder Singh QC** in *The Guardian* on 6 August, sub-titled 'An open letter to the person I sat opposite on the tube yesterday'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1543753,00.html>

In summer 2004 the BBC's Radio Five Live programme conducted a small experiment in which they sent fictitious job applications to a number of employers. The applications were identical apart from the applicants' names. Almost a quarter of applications by two candidates given traditionally white names - Jenny Hughes and John Andrews - resulted in interview offers. But only nine per cent of the Muslim applicants, by the fictitious Fatima Khan and Nasser Hanif, were invited for interview.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3885213.stm>

Commenting on the killing by police officers of a Brazilian, **Gary Younge** (*The Guardian*, 25 July) commented: 'Muslims now have to balance their fear of suicide bombers with the fear of a paramilitary-style execution at the hands of London's finest. That the victim was Brazilian will be of little comfort to Muslims. In the few seconds it takes to pull the trigger, nobody is going to ask whether they are Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, British, Pakistani or Peruvian.'

Younge continued: 'For political and emotional reasons it has been necessary for some to dehumanise the bombers - to eviscerate them of all discernible purpose, cause and motivation. Stripped to their immoral minimum, they are simply "evil monsters". For those who wish to vent or need to grieve, such a response is understandable... [But] ... If the security services are going to have any chance of infiltrating the bombers they must first humanise those involved. They need to find out what would motivate young men who apparently have so much to live for to die - and kill - in such a manner.'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,1535624,00.html>

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For further discussions of the issue Younge raises – the motivation of 'young men who apparently have so much to live for' – see the articles grouped elsewhere on this website under the headings of 'Aspects of fundamentalism'. They can be found by [returning to the list of topics](#).