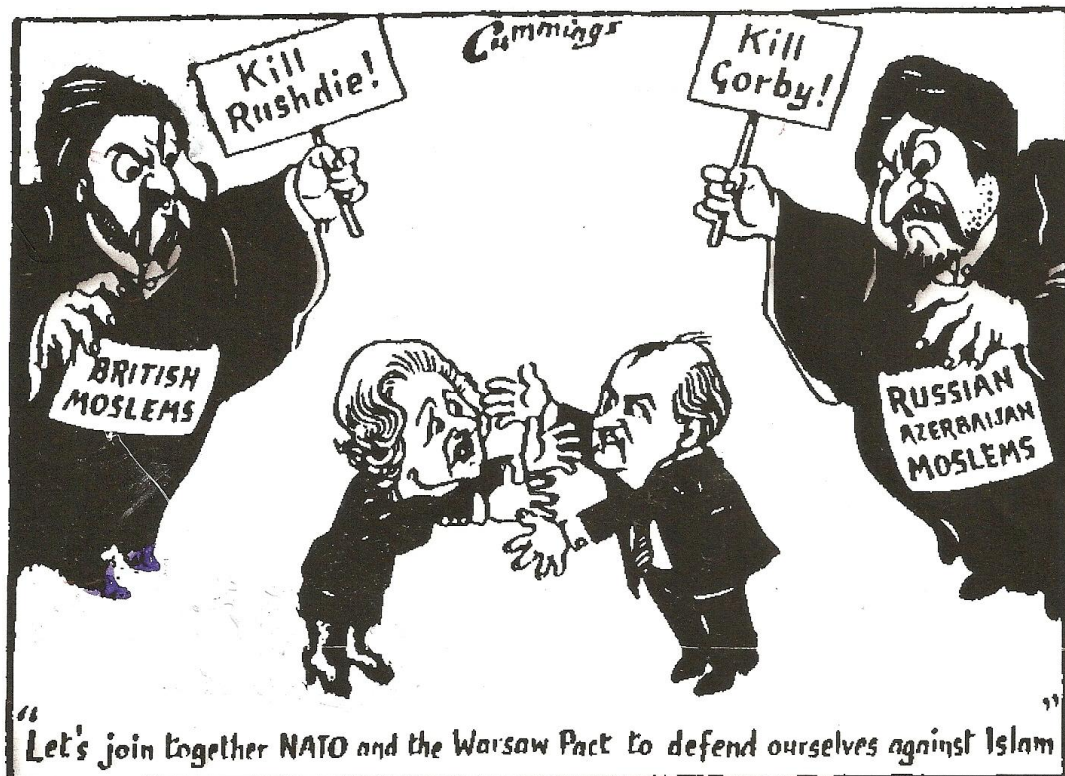


Cartoons, causes and counter-narrative

Robin Richardson (robin@insted.co.uk)

Summary and introduction

1. These notes begin by recalling problems of definition (paragraphs 3–5) and continue by recalling the principal manifestations of Islamophobia (paragraphs 6–7). A definition is then proposed for our purposes here today (paragraph 8). A comment on the definition (paragraph 9) leads to consideration of causal, contextual and exacerbating factors, and there's a list of various things that people say (paragraph 10). The notes conclude by listing briefly the key components of a counter-narrative about Islam and Muslims (paragraph 11).
2. First, to help us get our bearings, there are two visual images:
 - **A cartoon by the British artist Michael Cummings in 1990** shows the prime minister of the United Kingdom (Margaret Thatcher) and the president of the Soviet Union (Mikhail Gorbachev) embracing each other and saying 'Let's join NATO and the Warsaw Pact to defend ourselves against Islam'. Behind each of them there is a stereotypical Muslim. The one behind Thatcher says 'Kill Rushdie!' The one behind Gorbachev says 'Kill Gorbby!'



The cartoon expresses the popular view that all Muslims are the same, all are different from 'us', all are violent, all are primitive, all are powerful, all hate 'us'. Also, the cartoon suggests that such 'Muslims' are figments of the western imagination – they are phantoms, bogey figures, fantastical monsters, genies out of bottles, bad, unwanted, unstoppable. It follows that if non-Muslims wish to address Islamophobia a first priority must be to examine themselves, their own society, their own history and culture, their own self-definitions.

- **A cartoon by the Polish artist Andrzej Krauze in 2006** shows four non-Muslim men all pointing their fingers accusingly, and with enormous self-satisfaction, at a stereotypical Muslim woman. 'There,' they appear to be saying, 'that's the one who did it! That's the one who's the cause of all the trouble!' The men's facial expressions are inane, unthinking and mindless, and self-absorbed, gleeful and triumphalist. They haven't the slightest realisation that the person they are singling out has a mind and personality of her own.



In the private iconography developed over the years by Andrzej Krauze, men with fixed-grin faces represent the dominant conventions and complacencies of modern western societies, daily renewed and reconstructed by most of the western media. Again, it follows that if non-Muslims wish to address Islamophobia a first priority must be to examine themselves, their own society, their own history and culture, their own self-definitions.

Definitions

3. There is an international cluster of terms and phrases referring to negative feelings and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. The most widely known member of the cluster is the word in the title of today's conference, '*Islamophobia*'. But competing with it in certain academic contexts, countries and international organisations, and amongst academic observers, there are several other terms. They include '*anti-Muslim racism*', '*intolerance against Muslims*', '*anti-Muslim prejudice*', '*anti-Muslim bigotry*', '*hatred of Muslims*', '*anti-Islamism*', '*anti-Muslimism*', '*Muslimophobia*', '*demonisation of Islam*' and '*demonisation of Muslims*'.

4. There is a similar range of contested terms in other languages, not just in English. In German, for example, there is a contest between *Islamophobie* and *Islamfeindlichkeit*, the latter implying hostility, not fear. In French, the contest is in part between *islamophobie* on the one hand and *racisme anti-arabe* or *racisme anti-maghrébin* on the other, the latter two phrases indicating that the phenomenon is primarily to be seen as a form of anti-immigrant racism directed towards communities from parts of the former French Empire, not primarily to do with religion or culture. The Scandinavian term *Muslimhat* translates literally into English as 'Muslim hatred', though more accurately as 'hatred of Muslims', with echoes of legal usage in English terms such as 'incitement to hatred' and 'hate crimes'.
5. Whatever word or phrase we use, key questions include the following:
 - Is 'phobia' a more suitable word than terms such as 'fear', 'suspicion', 'worry' or 'anxiety', and in any case are the essential causes of fear (however named) primarily or solely inherent in Islam and Muslims or are there other significant factors at play which, in point of fact, have little or even nothing to do with Islam and Muslims? If so what are these other factors, and how should they be dealt with?
 - Or are the dominant emotions that need to be named more accurately identified as hostility and hatred, not fear?
 - Where are the phenomena that are feared or hated mainly located, both objectively and in perception and imagination? Primarily in one's own country? Or primarily out there in the wider world, and if so in which countries or continents in particular? Or are they located everywhere in the world, without differentiation?
 - Are the phenomena that are feared or hated primarily to do with 'Muslims' or primarily to do with 'Islam'? Namely, is it ethno-religious groups and communities ('Muslims') towards which there are feelings of animosity and anxiety, regardless of whether they are orthodox and observant in their religious practices and beliefs? Or is it a culture, civilisation or religion ('Islam') about which there is anxiety? Or is this distinction invalid?
 - Has hostility towards Muslims been constant over many centuries, or are there distinctive differences between the fears and animosities that existed in the past and those that are prevalent today?
 - How do we identify and describe legitimate criticisms or anxieties as distinct from hate-filled or irrational criticisms and anxieties?

Manifestations

6. The principal phenomena being referred to with the term Islamophobia include the following:
 - negativity and hostility in the media and the blogosphere, in the publications of certain think-tanks and influence-leaders, and in the speeches and policy proposals of certain political leaders, both mainstream and populist
 - hate crimes on the streets against both persons and property, and desecration of Muslim cemeteries, cultural centres and religious buildings
 - harassment, abuse and rudeness ('the unkindness of strangers', as the term might be) in public places
 - discrimination in employment practices and in the provision of services

- non-recognition of Muslim identities and concerns, and removal of Muslim symbols in public space – ‘the best Muslim for us is the Muslim we cannot see’.
7. Such manifestations of anxiety and intolerance contribute to the absence of Muslims from public life, including politics and government, from senior positions in business and commerce, and from high-profile influence in culture and the arts. The absence of Muslims from public life contributes, in its turn, to the continuing prevalence of anxiety and intolerance.

A proposed definition

8. In the light of the discussions above, a broad definition of the term *Islamophobia* and its close synonyms can be formulated as follows:

Islamophobia is a shorthand term referring to a multifaceted mix of discourse, behaviour and structures which express and perpetuate feelings of anxiety, fear, hostility and rejection towards people of Muslim heritage and tradition, particularly but not only in countries where people of Muslim heritage live as minorities.

9. An explanatory comment may be added:

Some of the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour to which the word *Islamophobia* refers have existed for many centuries. Others are relatively new, and have developed only since sizeable Muslim communities were established in western societies from the 1970s onwards. In all its forms Islamophobia has a range of different causes and drivers, most or all of them more to do with the nature of western societies than with the nature of Islam.

Causal, contextual and exacerbating factors – things people say

10. The explanatory comment above (paragraph 9) requires, of course, clarification. Here are some of the things which people say and which need discussion and analysis. For any one person they are not of equal importance.

a. Legacy of history

‘For many centuries Muslim and other cultures have been engaged in military conflict with each other, and relationships and mutual perceptions have been deeply affected by colonialism and neocolonialism, and by resistance and struggle. Frequently conflicts have been “religionised”. Religion is not, however, the principal cause.’

b. Patterns of inequality

‘There is a desire to justify patterns of inequality in modern western societies which work to the disadvantage of, amongst others, Muslim communities and neighbourhoods.’

c. Fossil fuel supplies

‘There is a desire in western countries to maintain and defend fossil fuel supplies in the Middle East, and to justify the military invasions of Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, and to motivate western troops and security services to mistreat, torture and kill.’

d. Israel/Palestine

‘Western countries, particularly the United States, wish to stand by and support the state of Israel, particularly its current leadership in its dealings with Palestine.’

e. Insecurity

‘Governments cannot control, to the extent they did in the past, economic, financial, cultural and ecological borders. The resulting insecurities lead to

scapegoating and moral panics, with Muslims and other minorities being convenient enemies and targets, though they are not the principal causes.'

f. Ignorance

'Anti-Muslim hostility is caused by ignorance and lack of contact. If non-Muslims were better informed they would be less prejudiced.'

g. Commercial pressures on the media

'Proprietors and editors wish to sell newspapers, and therefore to excite and orchestrate *frissons* of fear, and spread and respond to moral panic, reassuring readers that threats to identity, status and normality are understood and can be dealt with.'

h. Electoral politics

'Political parties wish to gain votes in local and national elections, and to diminish the attractiveness of political opponents. This frequently leads them to play "the Muslim card", sometimes in code ("dog-whistle politics").'

i. Scepticism, secularism and permissiveness

'There is widespread scepticism in western countries towards religious beliefs, identities and institutions – all religion, not just Islam – mixed perhaps with envy towards those who claim religious certainty. At the same time there's a rejection of traditional customs of modesty and reticence in everyday life, not just of Islamic customs in this connection, mixed perhaps a suspicion that western permissiveness has its drawbacks.'

j. Terrorism

'Large numbers of Muslims believe that terrorist acts against the West are justified or encouraged by their religion.'

Towards a counter-narrative

11. The dominant narrative in western countries about Islam and Muslims needs to be replaced with a counter narrative, and the counter-narrative needs not only to be told with words and stories but also to be enacted and embodied in practical deeds and events. The principal threads in such a counter-narrative need to include some of the points in paragraph 10 above, and the following:

A. Diversity and difference

There is and always has been much diversity within Islam and much internal debate and deliberation.

B. Religious observance

People of Muslim background have a range of different attitudes towards religious belief and practice, as do people born into other traditions.

C. Common humanity

Muslims and people from other religious or cultural backgrounds share a common humanity and therefore have a great deal in common

D. Positive interactions

People belonging to differing religious or cultural communities, including Muslims, Christians, Jews and others, and also atheists and humanists with no religion, can and do have positive impacts on each other, and frequently work and live together in close co-operation and partnership.

E. Contributions to world civilisation

Islamic cultures and civilizations have made substantial contributions over the centuries to science and technology, architecture and the arts, and law, ethics and philosophy

F. Joint working

All over the world – locally and nationally, and in international and global contexts
– Muslims and others can and must live and work in cooperation with each other
to deal with shared problems.

Further information and discussion

The ideas in these notes are outlined in fuller detail in a range of papers, articles and reports at <http://www.insted.co.uk/islam.html>.

The papers include a substantial bibliography
at <http://www.insted.co.uk/islamophobia-books.pdf>