

Walking the Line Between Islam and Fear - Islamophobes on a Shrink's Couch

Islamophobia is a topic that elicits strong emotional responses from all fronts. In this debate, centered on suspicions, fears, and stereotypes it is often hard to step out of the vicious cycle that pits 'us' against 'them'.

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In the case of extreme fears, patients are often advised to visit a psychotherapist in an attempt to overcome them. Therapists, using behavioral approaches, try to break down the fear into manageable problems that can be overcome by identifying the thoughts and perceptions that underlie them. The fears in question are not mere anxieties, they are phobias: extreme, irrational fears of particular things or situations.

Phobias exist not only on the personal level, but also in the public realm. One social phobia that has caused substantial divisions across a wide range of countries is the fear of Islamic terrorism, the invasion of Islamic values and general Muslim predominance in Western societies. Fueled by news of terrorist attacks and security alerts across the world, xenophobic fears relating to Muslims and Islam have been labeled "Islamophobia" and used in a variety of heated political debates.

From the minaret ban in Switzerland, to the New York mosque controversy and the Danish cartoons, the conceptual construct of Islamophobia has become a reality, even though the term itself remains contested. Is it really an unreasonable fear and thus a phobia? What exactly is the object of that fear and where does it come from?

By examining the roots of the fear, we aim to put this phobia to the test, and to put the 'Islamophobes' on a proverbial 'shrink's couch'. Informed by original research, as well as

interviews with a variety of stakeholders this article seeks to identify innovative solutions that will help address this rising tide of intolerance.

Islamophobia as a controversy in itself

The word "Islamophobia" combines the words "Islam" and "phobia". While "phobia" refers to an unreasonable fear, as previously noted, "Islam" refers to Islamic culture. "Islam" is not to be confused with "Muslim" as the latter refers to religious beliefs and the individual believer. The term is, however, fundamentally judgmental, conceptually confused and deeply contested. To what degree, for example, does the fear or phobia refer to Islamic culture as a whole or to the religion specifically? In academic debates prominent experts such as Samuel D Huntington and Edward Saïd have observed that Islam has become the new "threatening other" to the West, long before the first utilization of the term "Islamophobia" in print by the Runnymede Trust in 1997. Both the common understanding and academic use of the term "Islamophobia" thus seems to favor an interpretation that signifies a fear of Islamic culture in general.

According to Reinhard Schulze , Professor of Islamic Studies and Oriental Philology at the University of Bern, until the 1980s the term was used mainly to describe the historical attitudes of political actors towards Islamic institutions and claims of universal validity of their teachings by Muslim intellectuals. Back then, it denoted not a fear of Islam itself but rather a negative attitude toward the individual Muslim. The fear of Islam in a broader sense has been fostered through incidences like the 1990-91 Gulf war or the 2001/2004/2005 terrorist attacks, Schulze adds. Those events resulted in the rationalization of the feeling of the 'threat'.

It has become "one of these things that you can feel in the air - in the headlines of newspapers, the way media reports on Islamic affairs, the way Islam is being discussed in forums and talk shows and even in potential love relationships", says Khaled Al-Berry, an Egyptian-born journalist and writer, and former member of the terrorist organization Jama'a

Islamiya. He claims that when media reports on Muslim countries, it almost "seems as if Muslims there don't lead the kind of ordinary lives others do". Headlines always suggest that there are "Muslims on the one side and You on the other". This argument is supported by Nicolas Blancho, the head of the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland, who states that most movies stereotype Muslims as the 'bad guy' whereas the Western hero is always the 'good guy', making symbolic cultural expressions of the "battleground of these anxieties".

Schulze and Al-Berry both come to the conclusion that the fear in itself does not necessarily embody the problem society is facing today, which is derived much more from feelings of separation, alienation and the potential creation of "enemy-within groups". The real problem is the way people handle fear or suspicions, by claiming a definitive interpretation of Islam without a solid basis. Yet, because the discussion is an exchange of opinions and not facts, it is immune to re-examination. Moreover, if actors in the public sphere put forward their own interpretations or narratives, this discourse is widely perceived as legitimate, and facts are pushed to the side. Thus, a long-term effort to counteract the fear can be destroyed very quickly by politically motivated maneuverings.

The end result is that arguments in favor of fearing Islam outweigh arguments that try to alleviate the fear or constructively address it. And, as psychology and behavioral therapies tell us, these perceptions lead to a situation in which the person concerned does not even realize that his or her opinions have been formed as a result of fears, instead of rational analysis. This phobia then gets 'institutionalized' in a process that rationalizes the thoughts through radically selective perception; what Schulze calls a "tunnel-mentality". Al-Berry notes that this applies to both sides: Muslims "interpret what is happening in different areas of the world as aggression towards Islam. They react aggressively", and so the destructive pattern is repeated.

Digging for roots

"The source of Islamophobia is religion and religious doctrines - one could say. Yet Islamophobia is also present in non-religious societies," comments Al-Berry. When analyzing the fear of Islam, it becomes evident that to a large degree Islam is being repelled because people feel threatened. They are experiencing fear of change, instability and of losing their "Western identity". According to Yahya Pallavicini, the Imam of the Al-Wahid mosque in Milan and vice-president of the Islamic Religious Community of Italy, changes in communication and technology can lead to social uncertainties that are especially hard to handle for the older generation, currently in control of policymaking. This is reinforced by a general " globalization anxiety ", which "refers to fears regarding the loss of collective identities as a result of increasing flows of people, things, ideas, or creative expressions". Lilo Roost-Vischer, Lecturer in Ethnology at the University of Basel, supports this reasoning and compares it to the fear of losing one's homeland. Another reason why Islam in particular is perceived with such fear is its image of rigidity. In essence the concept has little to do with Islam as such. Indeed, Muslim societies have also experienced the phenomenon of "Westophobia" as an equal, mirrored construct to Islamophobia.

Moreover, the diversity of culture within Islam is neglected and simplified by 'labeling' Islam dangerous as a whole. According to Pallavicini and Blanco, the lack of knowledge concerning Islamic culture is another key source of Islamophobia. This ignorance gains expression in laws that ban open religious expressions like the construction of minarets in Switzerland. Despite the fact that 57 percent of Swiss voters supported the ban, there is evidence that "people who had more contact with Muslims tended to vote no". Most worryingly, a number of national polls around the world, indicate support for a similar ban in other Western countries, from 38 percent in Germany, and 27 percent in Canada and the UK, to 21 percent in the US.

Overcoming fears

To cure a phobia two things are necessary: self-realization and therapy. It is clear at this stage that most 'Islamophobes' still have a long way to go on their path to self-realization. For instance, European right-wing parties claim that Islamophobia is a made-up construct, while at the same time using these very fears for political ends. This underlines the need for new tools of self-realization both at the individual and collective levels. This argument is supported by Blanco, who says that a more fruitful approach would be to support Muslims in their emancipation through better education, giving them better economic opportunities, the ability to participate in political discussions and to make use of their civil rights and duties. Such a self-realization could put Muslims on par with Swiss - or indeed any other western - citizens, and thus encourage dialogue that works directly against Islamophobia.

Furthermore, while safeguarding the need to be sensitive about religious identities and beliefs, another possible avenue for progress and self-realization for both sides is the use of satire and humor as a platform for interaction and learning, an idea supported by Pallavicini, among others. This may already be happening in the form of so-called "stand-up diplomacy". One example from the US is the "Axis of Evil" comedy group. Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian-American member of the group quotes a comedy colleague who is a rabbi: "He always says you can't hate anybody when you're laughing with them." In Europe, Turkish-German comedians have been gaining popularity. For instance, Kerim Pamuk's "most important topic on stage is the relationship between Germans and Turks, something he compares to a dysfunctional marriage". Just as ancient humoristic fables were used to highlight the wrongdoings of the powerful through an "innocent story", humor could become a platform through which self-realization can occur for both sides.

While many call for more dialogue, according to Pallavicini, dialogue in itself is not the goal. Rather, the aim is to open minds in the framework of a multi-disciplinary approach that includes comedy, art, music, conferences, round-tables, education and research. This

corresponds to the second part of the suggested therapy: breaking down the fear into smaller parts. By bringing efforts down to the grassroots level of society, through individual bridge builders, civil society, schools, sports-clubs and other community institutions, successful problem-solving and the alleviation of fears and alienation could be achieved. An elitist approach does not reach all the people concerned, as Blanco reaffirms. On the other hand, Al-Berry states that a confident authority, insisting on the rule of law and promoting equality in all things has to be at the basis of the overall effort to rid society of destructive and discriminatory phobias. Looking "at the legitimate grievances of minorities and addressing them in their context" should be part of the solution, instead of ignoring or overemphasizing them.

In breaking down the problem of Islamophobia, attention has to be given to the question of definitions without being trapped by rhetoric, Blanco emphasizes. Moreover, radical differentiation of the parties as 'the West' and 'Islam' - 'us' versus 'them' in essence - has to be avoided. In such a framework, as Roost-Vischer states, the aim is to strengthen individual identities on both sides of the debate without devaluing the foreign identity. Dialogue partners should thus focus on commonalities instead of differences, Schulze suggests. Indeed future generations need to be guided in less 'phobic' directions in general. The 'therapeutic' approach outlined here should thus not only be directed at the ever-present and sadly growing problem of Islamophobia, but also at any new fears that may end up replacing it in the future.

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