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## Issue Brief

# Islamophobia: Roots and Emergence of Violent Extremism

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Islamophobia is recognized as a phenomenon that is directed against Muslims and hence, Islam, by non-Muslims. A generally established notion in the West is that Islam is a monolithic and violent religion, political ideology and it does not share common values with other religions. Hate speeches of Christian Zionists and hardliner preachers against Muslims attract media attention. In response, a section in the Muslim world believes that the religious right in the West has a role in spreading disinformation about Islam and in promoting Islamophobia in the Western countries. The history of demonization and the marginalization of Islam in the West since colonial times and more so after the incidents of 9/11, as well as the resultant violence in the name of Islam, are concerns not only in the Muslim world but also in certain quarters of the West.

The nature of anti – Muslim prejudices, based on closed as well as open views on Islam emerged as a result of ‘new racism’. It is widely believed that Islamophobia as a concept as well as neologism has its roots in the UK. In the past, there were grassroots publications on anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments but the coinage and origin of the term are openly disagreed (Allen, 2010).

The term, Islamophobia, was initiated as a concept in 1991 Runnymede Trust Report and defined as, ‘unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’. Islamophobia as a term was coined in the context of Muslims in the UK in particular and Europe in general and it is seen as special, sophisticated form of racism (Islamophobia: A challenge for us all., 1991). Since then the term has received some socio – political discursive resonance.

One of the hitches in the debates on the subject is that many in the West deny that there is anything called Islamophobia, because they believe that Muslims believe in and pursue violence (Esposito, 2010). A few scholars term this conflict as not between Islam and the West but between the fundamentalists in Muslim, Christian, Jewish and modern world.<sup>1</sup>

Academic writings present distinct forms and factors contributing to Islamophobia and the interests of various stakeholders contributing to the spread of the phenomenon. Europe as a socio-political entity fears that Islam might transform European multicultural environment. In response to this, the way Europe acts has alienated Muslims in a Christo centric European environment and Islamophobia is part of this process and has socio-political effects that are affecting both Muslims and non-Muslims. (Marranci, 2004).

Similarly, American Christians tend to stereotype Muslims, out of pain and anger. This feeling did not only appear after 9/11 but has been there since the colonial era. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Americans still lived mentally in a European world carried memories of hostilities dating back to the Crusades and the spread of Muslim religious influence. (Kidd, 2009).

Additionally, the perceived oppression of women in Islam and the hype about it by religious and political elites (Jean-Marie Le pen in France, Jorg Haider in Austria, religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, Terry Jones in USA and many others) is another form of cultural racism that contributes to Islamophobia (Grosfoguel, 2006). Although this may be true, the irony is that the Christian fundamentalism, opposing abortion and women's civil and social rights is not highlighted as much as the cases of discrimination against women in any Islamic society.

It is significant to understand that a civilization can only fully develop itself if it is able to relate to other civilizations (Koechler, 2007). The 1990s witnessed the ascendancy of Huntington's thesis of the universal threat to Western civilization, which reinforced the mistrust between Islam and the West and deeply influenced policy making in the West. The anti-Islamic prejudice of the West has been termed as reification of 'radicalization theory' through which they view Muslim populations in the post 9/11 (Kundani, 2014) and 7/7 bombing in UK.

Muslim identity in the form of their rituals, the color of their skin, their apparel or association with any Islamic institution evokes various forms of discrimination and religious intolerance against Muslims. Yet, the concerned governments never systematically report it. Following 9/11, the terms extremism and terrorism were used synonymously and were associated with Islam, because the 9/11 perpetrators were from the Muslim countries and the methods used by militants in the name of religion, as well as the names chosen by them for their outfits – Al-Qaeda, Taliban, al-Shabab, Boko Haram and ISIS – drew global attention.

Furthermore, the mass media and other publications concerning Islam have tried to explain a distorted and grotesque image of Islam to the non-Muslims. Hence, Islamophobia also prospers on the wrong assumptions about Muslims or Islam. While many of the Western scholars criticize and condemn violence, they consciously ignore the fact that the ideological war between United States and the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan contributed to creation of religiously inspired militant groups who subsequently joined Al-Qaeda and Taliban cadre.

The wars on terror after 9/11 have not only influenced views about Islam but have changed the course of international relations. It is unfair to equate Islam with violence as a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in spring 2014 shows that more than 70 percent of population in Muslim countries rejects extremism. Though this percentage is in effect much higher. A Pakistani journalist based in Washington D.C., while discussing political Islam, points out that the most familiar face of political Islam is neither a mullah nor a religious scholar but a militant, because of the violence that they commit in the name of Islam. (Iqbal, 2014). At perception level this may be true in the West, but it is far from reality.

There is a deep concern in the Muslim world regarding radical elements who have been misrepresenting them and Islam. To rephrase it, one cannot blame a religion for the criminal act of individuals and groups. If certain individuals and groups, as are found in the Muslim World including Pakistan, distort the image of Islam by their extremist acts then the other societies and countries must distinguish between them and the large majority of peace loving and law abiding Muslims.

More importantly, Esposito's argument that political disputes and not religion beget violence may be correct, but the lack of an intellectual base has created a vacuum in the Islamic world that extremists try to fill. Nonetheless, these groups choose violence, and not intellectual arguments, for spreading their message.

The Islamophobia found in the West has, thereby, established a fear that peaceful co-existence between Islam and the West may not be possible. The centuries old rivalry between the West and Islam is becoming more bitter and that hostility appears in different forms. For a peaceful and stable world order, scholarly writings emphasize on religious pluralism and for that interfaith dialogue is important for mutual respect and understanding. Also, it can be one of the tools of public and relational diplomacy and negotiation and can help in fostering peaceful coexistence in this era of extremism.

The inter-civilizational and interfaith initiatives after 9/11 include the World Economic Forum's Council of 100 leaders (C-100), the UN Alliance of Civilizations, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz International Center for Inter-cultural dialogue at Vienna, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Building Bridges project, the Vatican-al- Azhar Dialogue, the Parliament of the World's Religions, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In the US, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the Georgetown University and the Hartford Seminary's Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations are joined by numerous new centers and international initiatives dedicated to promoting interreligious understanding. The positive aspect of these efforts is

that people from all faiths see religious plurality as a necessity, a matter of faith and citizenship. This interaction is producing new ideas and actions as well as dialogue and exchange programmes are set for mutual respect and understanding.

It is equally important that the terrorist minority must be distinguished and isolated from the mainstream Muslims in the same way as Christian or Jewish terrorists are separated from the mainstream. Religious extremists have appropriated their theological worldview to demonize others and justify their acts of terror. In support of the argument, Islamic religious scholar Yusuf Qaradawi noted that equating Islam with terrorism is analogous to describing the acts of violence committed by Christian individuals or groups as being identified with Christianity as a religion (Larssen, 2011).

Islamophobia has become a growing international issue effecting hundreds of millions of Muslims across the world. Codes of conduct for the media, politicians and religious leaders exist but they are still consciously fueling Islamophobia for vested interest. Muslims living in Western countries are the victims and experience discrimination and hostility there. Human rights are integrated, interrelated but the West does not seem to be doing enough to address Islamophobia. In fact, some would brush the term under the carpet and not recognize the rising toxic tide of Islamophobia. The approval of freedom of speech as fundamental human rights is fueling hatred and violence with regard to freedom to practice religion. If one freedom violates another freedom, if it threatens peace and peaceful coexistence, there should be some lines drawn for the former to avoid violation of the latter. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is there and many Islamic human rights organizations and regional organizations raise the issue but the Human Rights Council is only ineffectually dealing with the issue.

#### **Notes and References:**

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Unger. (2008). *op. cit.*, p. 15.