



GROWING ISLAMOPHOBIA AND RESPONSES FROM THE MUSLIM WORLD

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The world is witnessing a surge in Islamophobia once again. Emanating from a liberal, democratic and secular capital of Europe, France is its epicenter once again. Paris was gripped with the frenzy of Islamophobic hysteria when, in a series of speeches delivered in October, President Emmanuel Macron mocked Islam and allowed to republish the caricatures of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). By calling Islam a “faith in crisis all over the world” and announcing his own plan of reforms to free the religion from “foreign influence”, Macron not only divided his country on religious separatism but also caused fissures in inter-civilizational harmony worldwide.¹

The controversial sketches were also displayed on the government buildings “in the defiance of Islamic terrorists” and “preserving the tradition of secularism” in the country.² Exploiting this xenophobic tendency as a handy instrument of far right politics in his country, Macron’s inciteful remarks evoked strong reactions from all across the world which were not limited to the Muslim states and societies only.

¹ Alasdair Sandford, “Macron and Islam: What has French President Actually Said to Outrage the Muslim World”, *Euronews*, 11 November, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/02/macron-and-islam-what-has-the-french-president-actually-said-to-outrage-the-muslim-world>

² Anthony Cuthberston, “Charlie Habdo Muhammad Cartoons Projected onto Government Buildings in Defiance of Islamist Terrorist”, *Independent*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-cartoons-muhammad-samuel-paty-teacher-france-b1224820.html>

The latest condemnation came from French parliamentarian and former presidential candidate, Jean Luc-Melenchon who called this current wave of Islamophobia in France as “disguised hatred”. Macron had justified his inciteful remarks and xenophobic actions under the guise of secularism and the right to freedom of expression. Melenchon decried this hypocritical practice and termed it as “assertive secularism”³ which political figures, in his opinion, use as a justification for pandering to people’s baser instincts: violence and hatred.

Earlier, the United Nations anti-extremism body, the UN Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC), expressed its “deep concern” over growing tensions between Muslim and Western societies.⁴ Head of the UNAOC, Miguel Angel Moratinos called for mutual respect while emphasizing that the right to freedom of expression and religion are “interdependent, inter-related and mutually re-enforcing rights.”⁵

These two perspectives demonstrate that Islamophobia is a distorted socio-political construct in the hands of the populists leaders. In the disguise of defending the right to freedom of expression and secularism, the public figures use this xenophobic tendency for gaining votes and polarizing their own country. In this milieu, it is not shocking why Macron’s endorsed Islamophobic hysteria which has been met with wave of anger and protests from all over the Muslim world.

On October 29, 2020, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) strongly condemned the remarks by the French President. The Organization gave its response in the capacity of collective voice of the Muslim world through its organ of human rights - the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHCR). Offering a strong rebuttal to the populist French leader, IPHCR was forward-looking and solution-oriented in its reproach. Describing Macron’s move as “distortion of Islam” and of “the right to freedom of expression”, the Commission announced to join the “global outcry over French President’s inciteful remarks.”⁶ IPHCR particularly referred to Macron’s remarks that “France would not renounce the defamatory caricatures” and called it an insult to Islam and the Holy Prophet (PBUH).⁷ Urging for moderation and initiation of a comprehensive inter-civilizational

³ Jasper Hamann, “France’s Jean-Luc Melenchon Condemns Political Islamophobia”, *The Morocco World*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/11/325931/frances-jean-luc-melenchon-condemns-countrys-islamophobic-secularism/>

⁴ “A Call for Mutual Respect”, *The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC)*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/29/un-official-expresses-deep-concern-over-prophet-cartoon-row>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHCR) of The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), 28 October, 2020, https://oic-iphrc.org/web/index.php/site/view_news/?id=468

⁷ Ibid.

dialogue, OIC's Human Rights Commission termed stoking such Islamophobic hysteria as an act of undermining religious freedom.

Other than this collective condemnation from the Muslim bloc, various independent statements from leaders of the Muslim world, civil society activists and institutions also poured in. These developments coincided with the call for boycotting French products in Muslim countries.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan was the first who give a seething response to Emanuel Macron and urged his countrymen and women to boycott French products. To his denigrate remarks on Islam being "a faith in crisis all over the world", Erdogan asked Macron to "undergo a mental health check-up and denounced Islamophobia that prevails in the European continent."⁸

Urging the Muslim world to unite against Islamophobia and demanding European societies to put an end to this xenophobic tendency, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote letters to the leaders of Muslim world for effectively tackling the rising threat to inter-faith harmony. In his letters to social media founders, he also demanded a ban on hateful religious contents.

On October 29, Iran's Supreme Leader, Syed Ali Khamenei stated that insulting sacred religious personalities cannot be defined as freedom of expression.⁹ Saudi Foreign Ministry denounced the French leadership's act. Quoted by Saudi press agency, the Ministry condemned the republishing of the caricatures and categorically stated that it rejects any attempts to link Islam with terrorism.¹⁰ In a recent telephonic interaction, on November 2, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed-el-Nahyan conveyed to the French President that, "violence is not representative of the teachings of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)...and under no circumstances should the Prophet be linked to violence and politicization."¹¹ Jordan's Foreign Ministry also condemned the continued

⁸ "Erdogan Says Macron Needs 'Mental Treatment', Blasts Europe's Islamophobia", *DW*, <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-says-macron-needs-mental-treatment-blasts-europes-islamophobia/a-55385180>

⁹ Zehra Nur Duz, "Iran: Supreme Leader Slams Macron for Remarks on Islam", *Andolou Agency*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/iran-supreme-leader-slams-macron-for-remarks-on-islam/2022896>

¹⁰ Tamara Abueish, "Saudi Arabia Condemns Prophet Cartoons, Rejects Attempts Linking Islam to Terrorism", *Al Arabiya*, October 27, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/10/27/Saudi-Arabia-condemns-Prophet-cartoons-rejects-attempts-linking-Islam-to-terrorism>

¹¹ "Tamara Abueish, "UAE's Mohammed bin Zayed Condemns Violence, Hate Speech in a Call to France's Macron", *Al Arabiya*, November 2, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/11/02/UAE-s-Mohammed-bin-Zayed-condemns-violence-hate-speech-in-call-to-France-s-Macron->

publication of offensive sketches of the Prophet (PBUH) under the pretext of freedom of expression.¹²

Scholars at Egypt's world renowned Islamic university, Al-Azhar, described Macron's remarks "racists" and absolutely irrelevant to the "true essence of Islam."¹³ More than 20 European Muslim organizations wrote a letter to French President, condemning his "divisive rhetoric" and urging him to revisit his "unilateral assault on Muslims, Islam and the Prophet."¹⁴ The organizations represented Muslim from a vast section of European societies including Netherlands, Finland and Italy.

In Middle East and other major regions of the Muslim communities, these calls transformed into a popular demand. Moreover, a wave of public protests erupted from Muslim countries in Middle East and Asia in massive numbers including Qatar, Kuwait, Syria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and many others.

It is unfortunate that Islamophobia is surging again but it has been a recurring theme in the world politics especially after 9/11. It can only be put to an end by giving a united response from Muslim bloc and initiating an inter-civilisational dialogue with the western world.

¹² "Several Leaders Condemn Macron's Anti-Islam Remarks", *Iran Press News Agency*, October 25, 2020, <https://iranpress.com/content/29007>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Muslim Groups Urge Macron End 'Divisive Rhetoric, Reject Hatred', *Al Jazeera*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/1/muslim-group-calls-on-macron-to-end-assault-on-islam-muslims>