

PAKISTAN'S ROLE IN COMBATING ISLAMOPHOBIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon that involves hatred, fear, and prejudice towards Islam and Muslims, including their places of worship, religious texts, and cultural practices. The term 'Islamophobia' stands for the fear of and aggression toward Muslims and Islam which arises from racism and culminates in violent, discriminatory, and exclusionary behaviour towards Muslims and those perceived as Muslim.¹ It also encompasses stigmatization, racism, and discrimination in various aspects of life, including the media, workplace, and political sphere. These attitudes can be expressed through violent actions such as burning mosques and vandalizing properties, as well as abusive behaviour towards Muslim women who wear headscarves. Islamophobia is identifiable through a range of perspectives, statements, behaviours, and gestures, and can be seen not only in isolated incidents but also in broader societal trends.²

Western discourse has a long history of Islamophobia, dating back to the Middle Ages when negative stereotypes about Muslims were used to garner popular support for the Crusades. Such stereotypes also served to justify European colonial domination of the Muslim-majority world, portraying

¹ Todd Green, "Islamophobia," Oxford University Press, October 27, 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0285.xml>

² "Islamophobia," Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), March 22, 2023, https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=182&p_ref=61&lan=en

Muslims as 'violent' and 'uncivilized.' The fear has not been born in thin air; indeed, the actions of many key individuals, think tanks, media outlets, and political leaders are involved to promote false and inflammatory ideas about Islam and Muslims, contributing to the growth of the phenomenon.³

The term "Islamophobia" gained prominence following the release of a 1997 report by the British think tank, the Runnymede Trust,⁴ which focused on racism and ethnic prejudice. Similar to other forms of prejudice such as anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism. Islamophobia is often used to promote discriminatory policies that serve political interests.⁵

Studies indicate that the American media had a bias against Muslims even before 9/11, and Muslims have consistently been portrayed in a negative light, making them one of the most negatively depicted minority groups in the US.⁶ After the 9/11 attacks, however, the organized mobilization against Islam and Muslims in liberal democracies intensified, giving rise to transnational anti-Islamic movements. These movements have both taken to the streets and spread their message online.⁷

Pakistan's Role against Islamophobia:

Pakistan has played a significant role in raising the issue of Islamophobia at the international level, which resulted in the adoption of OIC and UN resolution declaring March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. These have played a crucial role in combatting discrimination and violence against persons based on their religion or belief and to promote respect, understanding, and dialogue among different religions, beliefs, and cultures.

Pakistan's efforts to combat Islamophobia were reinforced in 2019 when then-Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and raised the issue. During his speech, he emphasized the need to address the issue of marginalization, which often led to

³ Mohd Yaseen Gada, "Islamophobia and Its Historical Roots: Content, Context, and Consequences," *HamdardIslamicus: Quarterly Journal of the Hamdard National Foundation, Pakistan* XL (2017)

⁴ "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All," Runnymede Trust, 1997, https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/617bfd6cf1456219c2c4bc5c_islamophobia.pdf

⁵ "What Is Islamophobia? - Bridge Initiative," Bridge Initiative, March 22, 2023, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/about-us/what-is-islamophobia/>

⁶ Azka Mahmood, "Countering and Dismantling Islamophobia: A Comprehensive Guide for Communities and IndividualsISPU," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, February 23, 2021, <https://www.ispu.org/countering-islamophobia/>

⁷ "Lars Erik Berntzen and Astrid Hauge Rambøl, "What Is Islamophobia?," Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo, September 7, 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-islamophobia.html>

radicalization. He also pointed out that terrorism has nothing to do with any religion and that no religion preaches radicalism. He criticized those political leaders who equated terrorism with Islam.⁸

Pakistan further raised the issue at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference in Niger in 2020. Pakistan's proposed resolution aimed to declare 15 March as the 'International Day to Combat Islamophobia,'⁹ because on this day in 2019, a right-wing extremist launched a terrorist attack on two mosques in New Zealand, resulting in the death of more than 50 Muslims.¹⁰ The Prime Minister wrote to all Muslim rulers, emphasizing the need to move a resolution on Islamophobia in the UN.

As a result of Pakistan's efforts, on 15 March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the resolution, declaring this day as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia.¹¹ The resolution strongly condemns all acts of violence against individuals based on their religion or belief, including attacks on places of worship. The resolution also highlights the need for international cooperation to combat Islamophobia and calls for increased efforts to promote tolerance, dialogue, and mutual respect.¹² Pakistan has repeatedly stressed the need for operationalization of the international legal framework as a means to combat Islamophobia to evolve legal deterrence for cases where individuals hide behind exercising or the existing Free Speech laws.¹³

During the OIC 47-member Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva in April 2023, Pakistan highlighted the Desecration of Holy Quran as the latest manifestation of racial hatred and

⁸ "Takeaways from Imran Khan's Speech at UN General Assembly," Gulf News, September 28, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/takeaways-from-imran-khans-speech-at-un-general-assembly-1.1569641835080>

⁹ "Statement by the Foreign Minister at the 47th Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers Niamey, Niger 27-28 November 2020 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://mofa.gov.pk/statement-by-the-foreign-minister-at-the-47th-session-of-the-oic-council-of-foreign-ministers-niamey-niger-27-28-november-2020/>

¹⁰ "UN Makes March 15 International Day to Combat Islamophobia," Arab News, March 15, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2043146/world>

¹¹ "General Assembly Unanimously Adopts Texts on Combating Islamophobia, Protecting Rangelands, Tackling Difficulties for Widows, Bicycles as Public Transportation, UN Press," United Nations, March 15, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12408.doc.htm>

¹² "PM Felicitates Muslim World as March 15 Declared Islamophobia Day," Express Tribune, March 15, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2348100/pm-felicitates-muslim-world-as-march-15-declared-islamophobia-day>

¹³ Roundtable Discussion "International Day to Combat Islamophobia," Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, March 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WHD8UngJyk>

xenophobia and stressed on the absence of preventive legal deterrence, inaction, and shying away from speaking out encourages further incitement to hatred and violence.¹⁴

Commemoration of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia:

On March 10, 2023, a special event was held in the UN General Assembly Hall to commemorate the first-ever International Day to Combat Islamophobia (15 March). The event was aimed at addressing the rising hatred, discrimination and violence against Muslims and to promote tolerance, peace, and respect for human rights and religious diversity. Pakistan, which initiated the move, co-convened the event where Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari emphasized Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance, and pluralism.¹⁵

While referring to Islamophobia as a virus spreading faster than we have been able to react, he urged the international community and the UNGA to have an action plan that should include the appointment of a UN special envoy to combat Islamophobia.¹⁶ The framework he suggested for the action plan called for the adoption of measures to protect holy sites and worship areas, the adoption of laws – at the national and international level – to outlaw hate speech, Holy Quran's vandalism, and discrimination and violence against Muslims and other communities.¹⁷ He also called for the provision of legal assistance and appropriate compensation to those subjected to such Islamophobic acts; and the establishment of national and international judicial mechanisms and laws to hold those responsible for acts of Islamophobia accountable.¹⁸

The UN Secretary-General highlighted the diversity among the nearly two billion Muslims worldwide and their frequent experiences of bigotry and prejudice solely because of their faith. The linkages between anti-Muslim hatred and gender inequality were also noted, with Muslim women facing triple discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, and faith.¹⁹

¹⁴ Pakistan slams desecration of Quran at Geneva moot, Tribune, April 2, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2409516/pakistan-slams-desecration-of-quran-at-geneva-moot>

¹⁵ Anwar Iqbal, "Bilawal Lands in New York for Women in Islam Moot," Dawn, March 8, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1740997>

¹⁶ Bilawal calls for global unity to curb Islamophobia, Tribune, March 10, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2405417/at-un-bilawal-calls-for-global-unity-to-combat-islamophobia>

¹⁷ Bilawal calls for global unity to curb Islamophobia, Tribune, March 10, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2405417/at-un-bilawal-calls-for-global-unity-to-combat-islamophobia>

¹⁸ Bilawal calls for global unity to curb Islamophobia, Tribune, March 10, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2405417/at-un-bilawal-calls-for-global-unity-to-combat-islamophobia>

¹⁹ "Secretary-General's Remarks at High-Level Event to Commemorate the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, United Nations Secretary-General," United Nations, March 10, 2023, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-03-10/secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-event-commemorate-the-international-day-combat-islamophobia-bilingual-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english-and-arabic>

The President of the UN General Assembly, Csaba Kőrösi, recognized that Islamophobia is deeply connected to xenophobia, which can result in discriminatory practices such as travel bans, hate speech, bullying, and targeting of others.²⁰

On March 8, 2023, a conference titled "Women in Islam: Understanding the Rights and Identity of Women in the Islamic World" was held in New York. The event was hosted by Pakistan in its capacity as the chair of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers presided over by Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. The conference took place on the sidelines of the 67th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

The main objective of the conference was to address the misperception and misconceptions regarding the rights of women in Islam. It also aimed to celebrate the experiences and successes of iconic Muslim women and establish an annual policy dialogue to address challenges and explore opportunities to advance the role of women in OIC countries.²¹

The Foreign Minister emphasized the importance of distinguishing between Islamic principles and law and patriarchal social practices to fully understand the rights of women in Islam. He stated that those who promote discrimination and tyranny would not like to make such a distinction between the two.

Conclusion:

The rise of Islamophobia is a complex and troubling phenomenon, rooted in centuries-old prejudices and has been fuelled by the actions of extremist groups, as well as by the political interests of certain individuals and organizations. Pakistan has played an instrumental role in shaping a consensus resolution in the UNGA to recognize March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia and the commemoration of this International Day every year would help shape the global discourse and normative framework.²²

Pakistan is equally a firm believer in inter-faith harmony and believes in the practice of one's own religion without interfering in other's religions and actively promotes dialogue culture, tolerance and harmony among all religious believers within the country as well as globally. In context of inter-faith

²⁰ "UN Observes First International Day against Islamophobia, United Nations in Türkiye," United Nations Türkiye, March 14, 2023, <https://turkiye.un.org/en/223089-un-observes-first-international-day-against-islamophobia>

²¹ "FM to Preside over Conference on Women in Islam," Radio Pakistan, March 5, 2023, <https://radio.gov.pk/05-03-2023/fm-to-chair-special-event-in-commemoration-of-intl-day-to-combat-islamophobia>

²² Roundtable Discussion "International Day to Combat Islamophobia," Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, March 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WHD8UngJyk>

harmony, Pakistan undertook the landmark initiative to open the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor between Pakistan and India. Pakistan was also the co-sponsor of the resolution on the “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue,” adopted by the UNGA on December 9, 2021 and reiterated its stance on culture of regional peace and the pluralistic, multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of its society. It also highlighted that Pakistan seeks to build its relations with its neighbours, and with other members of the international community, on the basis of mutual respect and inter-religious and inter-culture tolerance and cooperation.²³

The negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media has also contributed to the growth of Islamophobia, with Muslims often being depicted in a negative light. However, efforts are being made to combat Islamophobia and promote greater understanding and acceptance of Islam and Muslim communities. Pakistan has considered it its prime responsibility to raise its voice against the unjust happening with Muslims merely based on religion. It is due to the tireless efforts of Pakistan that 15 March has been successfully declared as the ‘International Day to Combat Islamophobia’. However, Islamophobia is still a challenge and threat to the Muslim Ummah that still needs to be addressed and fought.

²³ “United Nations adopts Pakistan-Philippines jointly sponsored resolution on “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue” in the General Assembly,” Press Release, New York, December 9, 2021, <https://pakun.org/press-releases/2021/12092021-01.pdf>