

TOWARDS DEMYSTIFYING ISLAMOPHOBIA: A MUSLIM'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Islamophobia has been a recurrent socio-political narrative for some time now, and it has been exacerbated since the aftermath of 9/11. Despite the plethora of studies on the subject, little is known about Muslim scholars' perception of this phenomenon. This is due primarily to the language barrier since the Arabic language is the code for their discourse. It is essential to consider both Islamic and Western perspectives to understand the problem thoroughly and suggest solutions, as relying on one approach is both biased and uncompromising. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is threefold: first, it explains how Islamophobia should be defined contextually. It frames its arguments within three contexts: a historical setting (Meccan and Madinah period), Islam in the Arab world, and Islam in the West. Second, the paper demonstrates how a Muslim's perspective contrasts with the Western narrative. It critically challenges some of the arguments put forward in social sciences and intellectual discourses and adopts an unapologetic and non-defensive approach in the treatment of Islamophobia. Third, the paper discusses the variables that affect Islamophobia, such as Western media and terrorism (including state terrorism). Finally, the paper proposes some approaches to mitigating the situation.

Keywords: Arabic, Islam, Islamophobia, Islamic discourse, ideology

INTRODUCTION

Most scholars agree that Islamophobia 'fear of Islam and Muslims' reached its peak in the aftermath of 9/11. It was a significant event that has both affected and been used as an opportunity to shape western nations' foreign policies, with the USA in the lead, followed by Great Britain and Australia. Islamophobia was not part of the scholarly narrative before 9/11. While the representation of Muslims in the West is complex, early Western interest in the Orient was not primarily politically motivated, but "rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts."¹

After 9/11, a state of moral panic took hold, not only in America but also in Europe. This "marks a turbulent and exaggerated response to a perceived social problem whereby there is considerable concern and consensus that such a problem actually exists. Blame is then shifted

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¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

to suitable villains who absorb societal hostility.”² The division between ‘US’ versus ‘THEM’ has emerged, as Morgan & Poynting argue:

In the global ‘West’, the racialized ‘Muslim Other’ has become the pre-eminent ‘folk devil’ of our time. This process did not begin with 9/11, but since then has expanded rapidly to reshape the politics of multiculturalism in various societies.³

This moral panic has affected Muslims globally. Muslims have been randomly searched, watched, abused verbally and physically. The *European Monitoring on Racism and Xenophobia* (EUMC) reports numerous instances of discrimination; as one respondent comments:

We face Islamophobia in daily life: small incidents, small things. For example, somebody jokes or comments with another, but in a very loud voice, so you have to listen to this, ‘Oh somebody who wears a headscarf has nothing to do in this country.’ Or somebody walks his dog and says ‘Fass!’, which means ‘catch this’, to a Muslim. You try and not let these things get to you but some days they wear you down. (Female, Austria).⁴

More recently, moral panic has been exacerbated by the simplistic association of criminality with the Arabic language, and of Islam with terror groups. In a few recent occurrences, Muslims were prevented from travelling by air after being viewed with suspicion and reported by fellow passengers when they heard ‘dangerous’ Islamic expressions such as *Insha Allah* ‘God willing’.⁵ The criminalization of Arabic is the new face of Islamophobia, and that “in the past, skin color and other signs of faith, such as facial hair, have been used as profiling tools, language has now joined them as a new profiling index.”⁶

Muslims are seen as threatening and undermining Western values. They “appear as a corrosive influence, refusing to integrate, and undermining national values.”⁷ This moral panic has been exacerbated by the media’s reporting. Media is “the CNNs and Foxs of this world” have played an important role in demonizing Muslims and inflaming anti-Muslim sentiment.⁸ For instance, in the United Kingdom, 74 per cent of British people assert that they know almost nothing about Islam and what is even more astounding is that 64 per cent of the population formulate their opinion on Islam solely on the media.”⁹

The media discourse is often carefully crafted and suitably conveyed. There is a plethora of examples of this type of biased reporting, for instance, in the Australian media. In the aftermath of significant events, media outlets seize any opportunity to associate acts of violence with an Islamic celebration. For instance, on Australian commercial channels (namely channels Seven, Nine, Ten), one finds that a terrorist act is synchronised with an Islamic event, such as Eid

² Welsh, *Scapegoats of September 11TH: Hate Crimes and State Crimes in the War on Terror*, 13.

³ Morgan and Poynting, “Introduction: The Transnational Folk Devil”, 1.

⁴ European Monitoring on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), *Perceptions of Discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from members of Muslim communities in the European Union*, 44.

⁵ Stack, “College Student Is Removed From Flight After Speaking Arabic on Plane”, *New York Times*, April 17, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/student-speaking-arabic-removed-southwest-airlines-plane.html>.

⁶ Suleiman, “After Islamophobia comes the Criminalisation of Arabic: Who will rescue Western societies from their Islamophobes?” *aljazeera*, March 20, 2016.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/03/islamophobia-criminalisation-arabic-160320073445033.html>

⁷ Morgan and Poynting, “Introduction: The Transnational Folk Devil”, 2.

⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, xv.

⁹ Allen, *Islamophobia*, 105.

celebration. Another notorious Australian example is the pack rape committed by the Skaf brothers; immediately after the event, media rushed to a Lakemba mosque in Sydney to solicit information from worshippers about the stance of Islam towards rape. This attempt to associate the Islamic faith with acts of 'lone-wolves' is subjective and is likely to demonize Islam and Muslims further.

A third and most interesting example in Australia deals with the terror suspect Abdel Nacer Ben Brika jailed for fifteen years in 2010. Ben Brika was initially interviewed on the program *Today Tonight* on commercial channel Seven, with a concealed intent, as the program aimed at singling out some elements of his speech. His speech, introduced by the broadcaster, sets the scene after a scuffle that occurred between Ben Brika's supporters and the media. The presenter announces, "this is what they think of us, a law unto themselves outside Melbourne courts with charges laid, Australia was about to discover what Muslim Cleric Abdel Nacer Ben Brika has in store for us."¹⁰ With his limited command of English, and unaware that the interview could incriminate him, Ben Brika states that "anyone who fight[sic] for the sake Allah, the first, when he dies the first drop of blood that comes [sic] from him out [sic] all his sin will be forgiven."¹¹

Richardson explains how 'speech-acts' can be manipulated to serve an ideological purpose.¹² This is problematic for some Muslim clerics who, when invited to present Islam's stance on an issue, may be unaware of the real intentions of the interviewer of the program itself. Hence, the audience may perceive the interviewee's stance as threatening and shocking. More eloquent clerics or sheiks such as Hamza Yusuf (formerly known as Mark Hanson) or Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens) have rarely been invited to present their views about events. Another example is with interviews with spokespersons for the Palestinian people who use fragmented and less eloquent English – usually with a heavy accent - compared to their Israeli's counterparts, who are usually American graduates and highly fluent in English. Hence their arguments appear logical, persuasive, and credible. For instance, a comparison could be drawn between the assassinated Al-Rantīsī, the co-founder of Palestinian Resistance Movement Hamas and his Israeli counterpart Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel. There is a strong negative link between speaking with a thick accent and credibility.¹³ First, accents serve as a signal that the speaker is an 'out-group member' and second, "accents are harder to process". This "reduction of credibility may have an insidious impact on millions of people, who routinely communicate in a language which is not their native tongue."¹⁴

Language and power are two interrelated dimensions and power commands the structure of discourse. Institutions "have considerable control over the shaping of our routine experiences of the world and the way we classify the world. Language can be used to control the masses, manipulating the truth by omitting it, cutting it, emphasizing marginal details or by ignoring what matters."¹⁵ Journalism is "about bravely finding the facts and delivering them to the public with neutrality so that the truth can be known", but reality dictates otherwise.¹⁶ Machin emphasizes a point "that news footage we see, should be thought about first not as about

¹⁰ allahu akbar. "Abdul Nacer Benbrika Terrorist on Today Tonight." YouTube video, 4:58. November 14, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dskYut3Qn3o>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Richardson, "Who Gets to Speak? A study of sources in the broad- sheet Press", 114.

¹³ Lev-Ari and Keysar, "Why don't we believe non-native speakers? The influence of accent on credibility", 1093.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1093.

¹⁵ Mayr, "Introduction, Power, Discourse and Institutions", 1.

¹⁶ Machin, "News discourse I: Understanding the social goings-on behind news texts", 62.

representing reality but as the products of an institution.”¹⁷ Machin and Jaworski develop this further:

When the events in the world are chosen as news they need to some degree fit in with such existing accepted discourses or news frames such as terrorism. So, we can think of the archive as providing visual realizations of particular established discourses. The owners of the archive might argue that rather than being political, they are supplying what customers require.¹⁸

For instance, crimes such as theft or cheating on the welfare system are usually associated with the working-class. However, these are rarely interpreted as the inevitable outcome of inequality in wealth distribution, government policies and privatization.

Machin explains succinctly the three main criteria for a news item to be qualified as newsworthy: personalization, dramatization, and fragmentation.¹⁹ With personalization, significant events such as famine get extraordinary attention when a famous pop star or actor visits an impoverished nation. Dramatization occurs when reports of a terrorist group are associated with archival footage of their alleged training. With fragmentation, the whole picture of an event is often reduced and decontextualised. For instance, terrorism is not linked to biased foreign policy and poverty is not related to the greed of major corporations who want to control developing nations. Machin points out that “news outlets that are part of massive corporations will be unlikely to be critical of views that are favorable to corporate capitalism.”²⁰ This view is supported by Mayr who states “they [institutions] have considerable control on the shaping of our routine experiences of the world and the way we classify the world.”²¹

So far I have outlined the main arguments put forward in the general and academic narratives on Islamophobia. The internal dimension to how Muslim scholars view this phenomenon will now be theorised and considered. The paper aims to answer three interlocking questions: First, how Islamophobia is conceptualised within the binary notion of ‘US’ versus ‘THEM’? Second, how does the Muslim view differ from the ‘western’ and orientalist perspective on Islamophobia? And thirdly, what are the identifiable variables that are used to fuel Islamophobia? The paper will also suggest some strategies to be followed to combat and lessen the impact of Islamophobia.

TOWARDS THEORISING ISLAMOPHOBIA

In theorising the concept of Islamophobia, one proposes two loosely connected dimensions; the *internal* and *external* view of Islamophobia. For the *internal* view, understanding the phenomenon of Islamophobia is framed by a Muslim’s perspective. This perspective hinges not solely on the Qur’ānic and prophetic traditions but also engages with various Islamic scholars’ interpretations, philosophies, and Islamic history. In other words, the Muslim perspective “hinges upon the dialectics of the past, present, and future creating a new consensus

¹⁷ Ibid, 63.

¹⁸ Machin and Jaworski, “Archive footage in news: creating a likeness and index of the phenomenal world”, 351.

¹⁹ Machin, “News discourse I: Understanding the social goings-on behind news texts”, 96.

²⁰ Ibid, 84.

²¹ Mayr, “Introduction, Power, Discourse and Institutions”, 1.

or a confirmation of *who* Muslims are, *what* they want to be, and *how* they want to be”.²² In this existentialist pursuit of what forms a Muslim identity, Mohammed Arkoun, an influential Algerian intellectual, warns that Muslim intellectuals should move away from being mere offensive or defensive apologists and should fight “against social sciences as practised by orientalism, in a disengaged, narrative, descriptive style.”²³ The *external perspective*, however, does not engage with the Islamic sources. It scrutinises the phenomenon within the frameworks of identity politics, ethnicity, anti-Muslim racism, and power.

With globalisation and the rise in social movement and immigration, since the 1970s, the concept of identity politics has emerged. It is founded on the premise that the identity of cultural communities needs recognition.²⁴ However, these cultural communities may cause problems in contemporary liberal democracies because “the recognition these groups claim appears in the current view as a threat to public order and community life forms.”²⁵ However, in Muslim identity politics, there is a move not merely to consider Islamophobia as religious discrimination but also to recognize that Islamophobia “refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.”²⁶ Islamophobia has also been associated with the expression of racism and antisemitism. Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism pointed out that both Muslims and Jews experience exclusion and marginalization because they are both treated as “intruders,” with Jews as considered “Christ Killers,” and Muslims as “infidels.”²⁷

Whether to link Muslim identities with race is moot. Tyrer professes that instead of engaging in a discussion about the positioning of Islamophobia within the sphere of racial politics, one should put forward the premise that Muslim identities “acted as a device that could drive forward a wider narrative of denial while foreclosing politicisation around experiences of Islamophobia.”²⁸ What complicates the blurring of the link of Islamophobia with the concept of race is Islamophobia’s inherent ambiguity. However, calling a Muslim ‘the Other’ “does not dispel its racial intent, but it does open up a new form of racial politics (...).”²⁹ Tyrer adds that:

the attempt to deny the racist nature of Islamophobia is of utility in extending a particular racial politics without risking the accusation of racism, and in doing so it also centres problematic ideas of phenotypal racial difference, not by labelling Muslims as biologically bounded but by contrasting Muslims against other minorities who are held as such.³⁰

When racial politics implements its agenda, especially with far-right groups, it is argued that what is considered to be ‘fear of Islam’ is, in their understanding, a critique of the religion, a democratic right which does not hint at racism. This is in contrast with clear attacks on

²² Sabet, *Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance, and International*, 62.

²³ Quoted in Nasr, and Johanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought*, 225.

²⁴ Cojanu, *Cultural diversity and the new politics of identity*, *Revista De Stiinte Politice*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 33.

²⁶ Runnymede Commission on Antisemitism. *A Very Light Sleeper: the persistence and dangers of Antisemitism*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Tyrer, *The Politics of Islamophobia*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

Muslims, such as by Roberto Calderoli, an Italian politician, who asserts “let them [Muslims] return to the desert and talk with the camels, or to the jungle and talk with the apes.”³¹

Islamophobia also extends to issues such as nationalism. The ‘Other’, in this case Islam and Muslims, threaten the homogeneity of the nation. This is reflected in the act preventing the erection of minarets in Switzerland. This ban was “significant for it represented an attempt to squeeze out of public space and visibility this jarring, alien presence.”³²

Switzerland’s action is an exercise of power, for the common good, according to its race politics. Racism “is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern states.”³³ Racism is defined as “a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die.”³⁴ Foucault concedes that his own interpretation calls for ‘biopower’ where “the death of others makes one biologically stronger as far as one is a member of a race or a population (..), which is an aberration from the common understanding of racism that is based on “mutual contempt or hatred between races.”³⁵

The analysis of Islamophobia in this paper does not adhere to Foucault’s reasoning, but more closely to identity politics and racism. However, in the Islamic narrative racism is not considered an underpinning for Islamophobia, rather it is the “religious framing for Islamophobia” that comes into play.³⁶ This view is bolstered by some Muslims’ violent reaction to what they perceive as an attack on Islam, rather than an attack on Muslims. There are many instances of this perception; for example, the killer of Teo van Gogh, the Dutch film director, was not motivated by Teo’s racial slurs against Muslims, but by the production of the film *Submission* which denigrates Islam and its assumed stance towards women.

ISLAMOPHOBIA: A MUSLIM’S PERSPECTIVE

Numerous Muslim preachers, educators and academics have discussed the phenomenon of Islamophobia. However, some of these views, particularly those emanating from preachers, tend to be apologetic and reactionary, in contrast to the academic discourse.³⁷ The works by Bak Zaki Awad, an Egyptian Islamic theologian, tackle the problem of Islamophobia at its roots. For instance, in his work *Fighting Legality and Etiquette in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, he emphasises that Islam has been perceived as the religion of the sword.³⁸ He explains that Jihad must be understood on the bases of the Meccan and Medina periods. Each period offers a unique context. In his other work *Struggle between Islam and Christianity*, Awad stresses that secularism does not target Islam alone, but it targets all other religions.³⁹ He points out that in earlier descriptions of Islam, many orientalist describe the religion of Islam as Muhammadiyyan; inferring that the religion of Islam has human qualities, unlike Christianity.

³¹ Ibid, 28.

³² Ibid, 30.

³³ Foucault, “Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975–1976”, 254.

³⁴ Ibid, 254.

³⁵ Ibid, 258.

³⁶ Tyrer, *The Politics of Islamophobia*, 32.

³⁷ Author (2015).

³⁸ Awad, *Al-Qitāl: Machrū‘iyyatan wa ‘ādāban fi al-Islām w al-Yahūdiyyah w al-Nasrāniyyah* [Fighting the Legality and Etiquette in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity], 251.

³⁹ Ibid.

Ben Tamsuk, a Tunisian academic, has put forward some valid points in his article ‘Islamophobia, a Geo-Political Analysis’ published on the MWB (Mominoun Without Borders) site.⁴⁰ He stresses that Islamophobia is “an ideological trick to control the resources of the Middle East.”[my translation].⁴¹ He believes that it is not a new phenomenon as it began with the denial of the prophecy of the prophet Muhammad by the Christians and the Jews. Islamophobia’s strongest expression was manifested in the periods of The Crusades (1096-1292), the expulsion of Muslims from Granada in 1492, the colonization of Arab lands, the Sykes–Picot Agreement in 1916, and the Occupation of Palestine after the 1917 Balfour Declaration.⁴² He adds that Western media, framed by xenophobic orientalist thinking, has tended to paint an image of Islam that constructs a Muslim as an animal, blood thirsty, sexual, and terrorist who despises women, and adores power, killing, and beheading.⁴³

Ben Tamsuk has also tackled the question about who fuels and benefits from Islamophobia. He maintains that Islamophobia has unintentionally empowered extremism. Muslims have been enraged by attacks on their sacred Islamic religious symbols and hence have been mobilised globally to attend angry street demonstrations and in some cases, have led to the burning of flags, and the assassination of foreign ambassadors. For instance, the publication of abusive pictures of the prophet serves not only the purposes of extremist groups, but is a pretext to pressure Muslim communities living in the West to assimilate. Islamophobia tends to be inflamed at the time of elections, especially by the extreme right of politics that puts the blame on Muslims for problems related to rising unemployment, the spread of crime, terrorism, and clandestine migration. Increased economic hardships, recessions, and the failure of capitalism have prompted some western countries to create a virtual and illusory war by doing two things: directing internal public opinion to fight virtual struggles with migrant Muslim communities, and putting the blame on these communities for capitalism’s failures. Another strategy is to convince the Western voter that the country’s problems could only be solved by the expulsion of Muslims from Western countries.

It is extraordinary, Ben Tamsuk argues, that these ridiculous and childish fantasies have been promoted to the people and largely have ignored the structural corruption of the capitalist system. However, the author adds this ‘Globalized Islamophobia’ (GI) has a direct aim, not hiding behind election narratives. Ben Tamsuk adds that:

GI, as led by the United States and its allies today, harks back historically to the end of the Cold War and the demise of the ‘red’ danger on the global capitalist system. It is only natural the USA aspires to put its hand on all sources of wealth in the world and launch their multinational companies in all directions. [My translation].⁴⁴

Ben Tamsuk argues that since imperialist countries can no longer use their military power as in Vietnam, they look for other ways of getting involved in rich countries to use their resources. Equipped with embedded media, they have searched for “legitimate justification for its interference in the affairs of other countries.”⁴⁵ No one can undermine the role of the media that links Islam with international terrorism. The USA has always supported political Islam in

⁴⁰ Ben Tamsuk, “Islamophobia: Muqārabah geo-siyāsiyyah” [Islamophobia: A Geo-Political Approach], *Mominoun Without Borders*, February 6, 2017, 1-18. <https://www.mominoun.com/pdf1/2017-01/islamofobia.pdf>

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

⁴² Ibid, 4.

⁴³ Ibid, 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 11.

the past; for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood against Nasser, the Taliban against the Soviet Union, Khomeini against the Iranian national movement. In other words, the USA and Britain have found political Islam to be the ideal tool to curb communism and Arab nationalism. After the failure of communism and nationalism, political Islam became a problem, and previous loyalties became enemies. The USA created seemingly Islamic groups to soil Islam's name and to foster sectarian division.⁴⁶

Further, Ben Tamsuk argues that in keeping with the aim of globalized empowerment without borders, Islamophobia has been used as a tool to enhance sectarian violence. Its purpose is to create a 'new Middle East'. The strategy is as follows: first, propagation of the view that we live in a world where the clash of civilizations is the norm. Second, Islam is presented as threatening the principles of secular society. Third, an illusory clash is created between 'a humanitarian West' and 'a jihadist Islam'. Other strategies include using the military for pre-emptive strikes. The West knows well that solidarity can only be put asunder from the inside through sectarian violence.

Finally, Ben Tamsuk offers some practical and objective solutions to the problem. There is a need for a new discourse where collectively we distance ourselves from the soiling of Islam's name.⁴⁷ He sees that Muslims are caught between the past that will not let go, and the desire to free themselves from a situation controlled by the West. He argues that one must renew an existential dialogue between the religions to break up established concepts as promoted by orientalists, colonialism and evangelism and break away from the traditional crusades. In a significant statement, Ben Tamsuk states that:

it must be underlined that [all] religions unite humanity regardless of colour, race, language, and traditions. And that what is actually dividing humanity is spreading poverty, economic marginalization, political and military occupation, and not the belief system; no matter how strong and powerful it is. [my translation].⁴⁸

Ben Tamsuk points out that the West has been hostile towards Islam since the end of the two World Wars in the twentieth century and the Cold War. What is more questionable is his claim that the West is behind terrorist groups like the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda. The West's ideology is to divide, rule and foster religious tension. Each Muslim sect is convinced that it is the only one on the right path. The West, according to Ben Tamsuk, paints Islam as a blind faith, rigid and unchangeable which implies that Islam cannot interact with the 'Other', is the perfect incubator for international terrorism and embodies the rhetoric of the 'clash of civilizations.' These false notions cause growing Western hostility towards Muslim immigrants, which is expressed by isolating them, excluding them from public space, and not recognizing their efforts in the development and progress of society.⁴⁹

Hamdi Zaquq, an Egyptian academic and politician, contributes to the discussion on Islamophobia in several of his books dating from 1979, where he analyses the issues that explain the relationship between the East and the West.⁵⁰ In his book *Islam in the Perception*

⁴⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁰ He is Egypt's former Minister for Religious Endowment, a post he held from 1995 to 2011. Zaquq is known for his 'strong' views on Islamic matters such as the wearing of niqāb, and for his opinions on controversial matters such as women's equal rights to men when bearing witness in courts. See Saleh, "Zaquq Supports Calls to Equate Women to Men in Court Testimonies",

of the West, Zaquq mentions the role of orientalists in shaping and influencing popular views on Islam.⁵¹ He argues that the perception of Islam in the West is not contemporary in its origin, but is an image and a product of an old putative clash of civilizations. He proposes to raise Muslims' awareness so they are equipped to defend their Islamic perspectives. He also advocates the creation of Muslim associations to scrutinise and closely monitor the orientalists' views.

Further, Zaquq's book is significant as he tackles the contribution Orientalist writers have made to shaping people's opinion on Islam.⁵² Zaquq's objectivity is apparent when he mentions that Orientalists had a positive impact on the Islamic culture through the preservation of old scrolls and artefacts. The negative side is that some orientalists use their knowledge of Islam to fight Islam. Zaquq calls on the Muslim community neither to discredit their contribution nor to embrace their work without scrutiny. Zaquq maintains that some orientalists have used their work to extend the colonizer's outreach and evangelism. Finally, Zaquq calls for a dialogue among the orientalists who are subjective in their interpretation of Islam and those with an objective view of Orientalism. Zaquq advises that:

indeed, it is not surprising that orientalists disagree with Muslims about Islam, because the orientalists' thinking about Islam and its prophet is different from the logic of Muslim thinking. Therefore, the views differ between the two sides and will remain different. [my translation].⁵³

Zaquq adds that "some orientalists discredit that Islam makes any innovative contribution to knowledge. They reduce the Islamic philosophy to mere copying of Greek philosophy, Sufism to a non-Islamic root, and assert that the Sharia in Islam is taken from Roman laws" [my translation].⁵⁴

Some other orientalists exaggerate the differences between the sects of Islam. Zaquq cites Professor Kesling, who divided Islam in two ways: 'Living Islam' and 'Dead Islam'. He associates 'Living Islam' with different sects or groups and 'Dead Islam' with the Islam of *Kitāb and Sunnah* 'The Holy Quran and Prophetic Tradition.' Zaquq believes this line of thinking makes Islam move away from central issues towards temporary and trivial matters.

In Zaquq's other work, he addresses the problem at its roots by studying the interpretations of Islam, and of the persona and conduct of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in Western literature.⁵⁵ He maintains that fear of Islam started with the spread of false rumours about Islam by the Roman Church. He also states that misunderstanding the Qur'an due to difficulty with the Arabic language is an important factor in spreading misconceptions about Islamic teachings.⁵⁶

<http://www.masress.com/en/dailynews/116127> (originally published in Daily News Egypt on March 14, 2008.

⁵¹ Zaquq, *Al-Islām fi Taṣwūrāt al-Gharb* [Islam in the West's Perception] (Cairo: Wahbah Library, 1987).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁵ Zaquq, "Al-Risālah al-Muhammadiyah fi al-Mu'allafāt al-Gharbiyyah [Muhammad' Message in Western Literature]', *Majallat Markaz al-buḥūth al-Sunna w al-Seera* [Journal of the Centre for Research into Sunna and Seera], 449-457.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 75.

As for Najm, an advisor to the Grand Mufti of Egypt, most of his writings and talks encourage religious leaders in both the east and west to dispel misconceptions about Islam.⁵⁷ He clarifies this by stating we cannot rectify the image of Islam in the media, but we must employ strategies to combat the spread of negative images of Islam and Muslims. Najm also challenges those engaged in modernizing Islamic discourse to rectify misconceptions so Islam becomes more open to the world.

In response to the Muslims' rage over the cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), Najm (2012), speaking in English, encourages Muslims to move away from being reactionary.⁵⁸ He asserts:

we should stay away from this vicious circle of action and reaction and we should make a plan, an organized plan to make initiatives, long term initiatives of engagement of clarifications of explanations of what true Islam is about (...).⁵⁹

Najm, in a lecture at New York University, emphasizes that Islam encourages stability and denounces terrorism.⁶⁰ He also stresses that difference in opinions or stance should not be a reason for conflict, but it should be a starting point to spread mutual understanding, harmony, and cooperation. What is noteworthy in his speech is his call for integrating Muslims in their communities and respecting the country's laws to rectify the image of Islam in the West. Najm emphasizes, in English, that:

I am more concerned about lay people who do not know much about Islam, of course, there are many people who are well-educated but they know very little (...) and I found out that even though we are living in the information technology age, but this information technology age has made us ignorant of each other. We are at the mercy of now the computers, and the iPads and laptops. We often take these tools as our window to the world, we [have] lost the engagement. That's why, I think what is at risk now is that we have failed to engage the people, especially non-Muslims at large (...).⁶¹

To curb the spread of Islamophobia, there are three strategies.⁶² First, 'corrective' measures whereby the misconceptions about Islam are rectified by responding to anything disseminated against Islam by, for instance, sending letters to western media outlets. Najm mentions the creation of *dār al-iftā'* (Jurisprudence Site) in eight languages that aims to provide information about Islam.⁶³ The second measure is 'pre-emptive' and 'preventative', seeking to engage non-Muslims by increasing and spreading awareness among non-Muslims. He stresses the need to break the cycle of 'talking to ourselves' and to broaden the vision and talk to the whole world instead.

⁵⁷ Ibrahim Najm has also lived and worked in the USA as an imam and translator at the United Nations for many years. He has also written extensively on Islamophobia, see Ahmad Abdul-Bārī. "Dr Ibrahim Negm talks to Nile TV International about Anti Prophet film and the best way to react to it", YouTube video, 21:22. Accessed. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkQqJLFkU8U>; Najm, "Mustachār Mufti al-Jumhūriyyah Yuṭālib al-Qiyādah al-Dīniyyah Bitashīh Šurat al-Islām [Adviser to the Republic Demands Religious Leaderships to Correct the Image of Islam]. *Masrāwī*, August 3, 2014. https://www.masrawy.com/islamayat/others-islamic_ppl_news/details/2014/8/3/302856

⁵⁸ Abdul-Bārī. "Dr Ibrahim Negm talks to Nile TV International about Anti Prophet Film and the Best Way to React to It", YouTube video, 21:22. Accessed June 15, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkQqJLFkU8U>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ <http://www.dar-alifta.org/>

CRITIQUE OF THE MUSLIM VIEW ON ISLAMOPHOBIA

The texts reviewed present reflective views of the phenomenon of Islamophobia. They hinge on numerous doctrines, some of which deserve close attention. The most obvious feature of these texts, in their treatment of Islamophobia, is their divergence from the common apologetic and defensive trend that characterizes the speeches of Muslim preachers.⁶⁴ The first general point to be made is that Islam is a complex religion and that Muslims, including Muslim leaders, play a role in raising awareness about Islamic teachings. Second, Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon in which numerous variables play a role, specifically the Western media. Third, the animosity between the Muslim world and the West is rooted in history, and bridges of understanding have not been built, which is perpetuated in our time. Fourth, the role of orientalists is important in presenting Islam objectively and Muslim scholars should monitor their work by actively debunking the misconceptions about Islam.

However, some of the views expressed in these texts need some qualification. For instance, when Najm mentions Egypt's role in fighting terrorism, his views overlook the fact that Egypt has a record of human rights abuses.⁶⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, under Abdel Fattah al-Sīsi, Egypt still uses torture and other forms of abuses.⁶⁶ Najm's lack of objectivity in this matter questions the role of Muftis in modern day Egypt. This may open further discussion about whether Muftis, especially after the Arab spring, have become mere servants of power.

Other striking examples of unsubstantiated claims that are propagated by Muslim scholars are to do with the West's role in dividing the Umma 'Islamic community' and the emergence of the terror groups such as IS. One may argue that while it is true that the West have indeed drawn lines in the sand and created numerous 'statelets', the blame cannot be put solely on the West for the Arab's failure to unite. What is starkly clear is the role of Western media to expose the truth. Western media have propagated lies and deceit, as in the case of Iraq and the WMD, which has turned out to be Weapons of Mass 'Deception', not 'Destruction.'

What has not been mentioned in the texts is the role of education in combating Islamophobia. To combat it successfully, attention needs to be drawn to those areas of Islam that the West ignores, namely Islamic ethics. For instance, the importance of respecting and caring for one's neighbour, the merciful nature of the marital relationship, filial piety, charity, and animal welfare. Ethical behaviour is cemented and dictated by the Qur'an and the Hadith. Probably the best reference for Islamic ethical behaviour is by Imām al-Nawawī's 12th century book *Riyādh al-Ṣāliḥīn* (Garden for the Righteous).

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO AN OLD PROBLEM

As discussed in this paper, Islamophobia is an old phenomenon that it is not likely to cease soon. It is profoundly interconnected with xenophobia, which is in itself a result of prejudice and fear of the unknown. One concedes that combating Islamophobia is a complex challenge,

⁶⁴ Author (2015)

⁶⁵ Najm, "Dr Ibrahim Negm talks to Nile TV International about anti prophet film and the best way to react to it."

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt." <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/egypt>.

and its realization depends on the outcomes of cooperative work between various government agencies and media outlets. Western media play a pivotal role in this campaign. Current affairs and news items should be selected and broadcast with sensitivity. For instance, it would be highly damaging to broadcast a terrorist act and a Muslim festivity in the same context. Awareness of the limitations of Media outlets with all viewers educated to be critical thinkers, is crucial in combating Islamophobia. This is confirmed by Ramberg “even without intentional manipulation, insensitive reporting on seemingly trivial matters can promote racism, when multiplied across the media.”⁶⁷

There is a need to revisit and re-define some concepts used today when discussing Islam, for instance, *radical* Islam, *moderate* Islam and *political* Islam.⁶⁸ In her RAND report *Civil Democratic Islam*, Cheryl Benard reports different types of Muslims and suggests strategies to curb Muslim extremism.⁶⁹ She posits a continuum regarding a Muslim's adherence and attitude towards critical issues such as ‘Jihah’, ‘Hijab’, Islamic state’, and so on. On one end of the spectrum, she includes radical fundamentalists, scriptural fundamentalists, conservative traditionalists, and on the other, she includes reformist traditionalists modernists, mainstream secularists and radical secularists. Benard’s report, particularly the tactics to combat fundamentalism, has raised a few eyebrows among Muslims. Some of her approaches include encouraging Sufism and supporting modernists and mainstream secularists by giving them public platforms enhancing, “facilitating and encouraging awareness of pre-and non-Islamic history and culture, in the media and the curricula of relevant countries.”⁷⁰ Benard's report may be perceived as an attack on Islam, as it may be interpreted as an attempt to manufacture a Muslim who advocates RAND’s ideals and ideologies.

On the contrary, Siddiqui explains that radical religion need *not* be ‘destructive’ or ‘a negative force’, but rather it should be understood in the context that the person wants to practise his/her religion publicly without forcibly influencing others to accept his/her message.⁷¹ Similarly, the word ‘moderate’ usually refers to ‘Westernized’ Muslims who are good citizens, hardworking people and have a mortgage. However, moderation presupposes another type of Islam that is irrational and immoderate. In this discourse, Rutledge says, Islam is perceived as “dangerous, because it operates outside of reason.”⁷² For instance, while the West may find wearing the *hijab* an unreasonable behaviour, it makes perfect sense for Muslims. Siddiqui argues that there is no benefit in seeking to find answers to questions by using reason.⁷³ She provides examples of how some of our actions towards, for instance, ‘love’ and ‘friendship’ are not necessarily guided by reason.

⁶⁷ Ramberg, *Islamophobia and its Consequences on Young People*, 13.

⁶⁸ Ghannouchi prefers to use the term *Haraka Islāmiyyah* ‘Islamic Movement’ in lieu of ‘Political Islam’, because in his view, political Islam connotes a failed system. It is utilized, according to Ghannouchi, whenever there is a report of a *ḥaraka Islāmiyye*’s failure, such as an unsuccessful election. See Rached Ghannouchi, "Madā Miṣḍāq Da‘wā Fachal al-Islām al-Siyāsī [Extent of Credibility of Political Islam " Failure], Aljazeera.net, September 24, 2014.

⁶⁹ Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, National Security Research Division, 2003.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁷¹ Rutledge, “Radicals and Moderates: Faith, Reason and Islam” [Transcript]. ABC Radio, June 14, 2014. http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/faith-26-reason-pt-2_islam/5378434.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Finally, education plays a key role when combating Islamophobia; education based on inter-faith dialogue conducted at various educational platforms from primary schooling to tertiary. The programs should focus on debunking some of the established myths and prejudices about some of the religions' ethos and practices. Further, one should question the authority of people who speak or comment on the characteristics of a certain faith without authority or training. For instance, it might be unfitting for a news outlet to broadcast the views of a layperson, for instance, on scientific matters such as a medical breakthrough. Hence, people with little Islamic knowledge, including knowledge of the Arabic language, Qur'anic Arabic, rhetoric and education on Islamic matters should be discouraged from commenting on the merits of Islam. Their misinterpretations may lead to serious consequences such a rise in xenophobia and hence violence. Propagating peace in the world through, for instance, the dissemination of truthful reporting, should always be a perennial human endeavour. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian philosopher and historian, spoke about hypocrisy and applying double standards. In this seminal statement, he provides the ingredients for a peaceful world:

only if the creative and active forces of mankind dedicate themselves to finding gradual and effective restraints against the evil facets of human nature to an elevation of our moral consciousness - only then will a faint, distant hope exist. To embark upon this path, and to walk it, requires a penitent, pure heart and the wisdom and willingness to place constraints on one's own side, to limit oneself even before limiting others. But today that path only elicits an ironic chuckle, if not open ridicule. If so, don't bother calling for "world security."⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines a Muslim's perspective on Islamophobia from known and respected Muslim scholars. Their views represent what I have termed an 'internal' perspective, which contrasts with the 'external' or orientalist counterpart. In the treatment of this phenomenon, I have noted that the internal or Islamic perspective has deep-seated reasons for its existence, some of which are historical, but overall, are predominantly socio-political. Not only does the western or orientalist perspective lacks a deeper knowledge and understanding of the particularities of Islam, but one finds that the media plays a significant role in disseminating misconceptions about Islam. The paper attempts to merge the two perspectives, internal and external, in order to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon. It is important to raise awareness about Islamic teachings by actively correcting the image of Islam using less reactionary and emotive approaches. Equally, it is important to expose the ideology behind Islamophobia when it is used for political aims. This discourse fuels terrorism and is used as a pretext by extremist groups to attack the West. Despite attacks on Islam as not being a religion of peace, advocating terrorism, and being incompatible with Western 'values', Islam will remain the world's most established religion because it is not just a conviction, it is a way of life for many Muslims today. The West could benefit from Islam now, just as it benefited from it during, for instance, the heyday of Islamic Spain. Likewise, Muslims have benefited from and been supported by the West and other faiths. A notable and much-quoted example is the story of Al-Najashi (Negus), the Christian king of Abyssinia, who supported and welcomed the persecuted Meccan migrants and who was quoted as saying "you're welcome; your Prophet is welcome. I admit that he is the Apostle about whom Jesus had given the good news. Live wherever you like in my country."⁷⁵ (Hijazi, 2014). Islam and Christianity or East and West do not embody the much quoted and divisive notion of 'clash of civilizations'; rather these two

⁷⁴ The London Times, August 21, 1997. http://www.lib.ru/PROZA/SOLZHENICYN/s_hypocrit.txt

⁷⁵ Hijazi, "Najashi: The King Who Supported Muslim Emigrants," para. 14.

religions should strive to find harmony and continue to build bridges of understanding. The inherent differences are exacerbated by the destructive terrorist actions of individuals, states, or groups and conflated by relentless biased Western media networks fueling the Islamophobic narrative. While facing these challenges in a rapidly changing world, especially the MENA region, it is difficult to predict whether Islamophobia will cease to exist.

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