

U@live National University of Singapore Essay Competition

Islamophobia – Do Two Wrongs Make a Right?

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In Primo Levi's autobiographical work If This Is A Man, he wrote: "*a country is considered more civilised the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a weak man from becoming too weak or a powerful one too powerful*" (1958). While Levi was referring to his brutal incarceration in Auschwitz, direct parallels can be drawn between the Nazism's systematic dehumanization of Jews and the extent to which the West's blatant oppression of Muslim minorities today succeeds in unintentionally renewing the momentum of extremist terrorist organizations' causes. It is no coincidence that Mr Donald Trump's idea to set up a database that identifies all Muslims in America (Timmons, 2015) drew swift comparisons to the yellow Star of David badges Jews were forced to wear during the 1941 Nazi era. Global prejudice against Islam and the subjugation of Muslims is manifestly unjustified.

Islamophobia nourishes Radical Islam's anti-West sentiment and ideology. Can the seemingly stark differences between Islamophobia and Islamic Radicalism be reconciled? First, global leaders must refrain from capitalising on peoples' fear by perpetuating the mistruths about Muslims. Second, mass media representation of Islam must avoid augmenting the false terrorist narrative. Third, greater government-

backed inclusion of and education about Muslims will mitigate disinformation and shift public sentiment towards them. If we are to pave a way for a progressive and cosmopolitan world, we cannot allow irrational fear to subsume us.

Global leaders must refrain from perpetuating Islamophobia. Western structural Islamophobia fuels Islamic Radicalism's cause. Acts of Islamic Radicalism also increase Islamophobia, revealing the vicious cycle of this divisive problem. Both labels thrive on fearmongering and rely on grossly unsubstantiated mistruths about the other. As American journalist Mohamad Bazzi (2015) perfectly elucidated, Islamophobia thrives on "*a social climate in which all Muslims and Arabs are treated as potential terrorists*". Likewise, the foundation of the Islamic State's (ISIS) ideology is built upon the idea that Western powers are profoundly hostile towards Muslims. When bigoted leaders like Trump endorse anti-Muslim prejudice to forward their populist agenda through political opportunism, they inadvertently garner greater legitimacy for ISIS' cause. This causal link between Islamophobia and Islamic Radicalism has been reaffirmed in a recent American Department of Homeland Security intelligence assessment which proved that "*government treatment of Muslims drives radicalization in both native-born and foreign-born violent extremists*" (Myers, 2017). Furthermore, the study confirmed that better treatment of refugees and immigrants decreases violence amongst these groups. Thus, it is evident that the West has been both a victim and perpetrator of Islamic Radicalism. Hence, to preserve harmony, global leaders must avoid breeding the fear and distrust of Muslims.

Mass media representation of Islam has heightened Islamophobic tendencies. The issue of Islamophobia is bigger than simply being characterised as a labelling issue.

The word “*Muslim*” has, unfortunately, as Owen Jones (2015) explained, become synonymous with “*extremist* and “*potential terrorist*”. The more the West ostracises Muslim immigrants or migrants living there, the greater the incentive Muslims living in hostile environments have for joining extremist groups. According to Dr Yusuf Nebhan Aydin (2016), Muslims are the fastest-growing cultural minority in the West, highlighting the urgency for leaders to refrain from returning to nativist sentiments. Islamophobia fuels an unhealthy obsession with terrorism creating a plethora of methods to demonize Muslims, lock them out of equal job opportunities and subject them to hate-crimes. Examples of this would be when Cambridge University researchers concluded in a 2014 study that 88% of people stopped in UK airports were Muslim (Sabbagh, 2019). The University of Bristol’s study found that job seekers with Muslim names were 76% less likely to be employed than their Caucasian counterparts (Adesina & Marocico, 2017). Furthermore, in 2015, a 14-year old Ahmed Mohamed was transported to a juvenile detention facility for bringing a homemade clock to school mistaken for a bomb (Matyszczyk, 2014). These few examples barely capture a robust picture of the pervasive discrimination Muslim ethnic minorities face. This also compels us to ask: how far have we really come since the 2010 Equality Act? Closer to home, Minister of Home Affairs K. Shanmugam emphasized that Singapore itself is not immune to Islamophobia, citing a recent harrowing example of a local Muslim woman being singled out for wearing a tudung (Ng, 2018). Shanmugam emphasized that the government will continue to work closely with local groups and religious organizations to protect Muslims (Ng, 2018). Singapore can act as an ideal model for the globe by being at the vanguard of upholding racial and religious tolerance by using an inclusive national identity to unite rather than divide people.

As the number of Muslims in the US and globally continue to grow, a sustainable solution to Islamophobia would be greater government-backed education about and appreciation for Muslims and Islam. There is only so much that name-blind university or job applications can do towards creating a fairer system if a wide majority of the population are still Islamophobic. According to the Pew Research Centre's (2017) study, Republicans, white evangelicals and those with less education express the strongest reservations against Muslims. Correcting public perception towards Muslims is key. A deeper understanding of Muslims and Islam will alleviate the conflict between Islam and Democracy by increasing accurate public knowledge of what Islamic faith is. Furthermore, this ensures Muslim minorities do not question their place or value in society and instead feel like they truly belong in the national fabric of whichever nation they inhabit.

Islamophobia fans the flames of Islamic radicalization. To combat this, a more sophisticated understanding of Muslims and Islam will raise greater public awareness about the insidious consequences of Islamophobic beliefs and rhetoric, both of which are never justified. Moreover, we must reflect upon whether we ourselves subscribe to discrimination and put a stop to it. If we are to have any hope in ensuring Islamophobia becomes a relic of the past, constantly educating ourselves and actively shifting our own xenophobic attitudes is paramount towards shaping a far more inclusive world where Muslims can feel safe, respected and valued.

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