

Experts Dispatch: Islamophobia in the UK

Welcome to Experts Dispatch, your go-to source for in-depth discussions on critical national and global issues. I'm Mary Hunter, a visiting research fellow at the Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research and a PhD graduate from the University of St Andrews. Today, I'm discussing Islamophobia in the UK with Professor Tahir Abbas.

Recent Events and Context

Beginning at the end of July and continuing into August, the UK witnessed shocking riots. The catalyst for these was the murder of three young girls at a dance class in Southport on July 29th. Misinformation and disinformation about the identity of the attacker as a Muslim asylum seeker resulted in an attack on a mosque and the police in the same town. Over the next week or so, more anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and racist riots were held around the UK, some of which were spearheaded by far-right groups.

Islamophobia was, sadly, a significant aspect of a number of these riots, with more mosques and Islamic centres attacked and Islamophobic slurs and rhetoric used widely. On a positive note, there were much larger anti-racist counter-protests that protected asylum seeker accommodation and opposed hate.

Islamophobia in the UK is not isolated to these riots. It was also a mark of this year's general election campaigns, particularly by the Reform UK party. The party characterized young British Muslims as opposed to so-called British values. There is also a wider history of Islamophobia within politics, as exemplified by the inquiry into Islamophobia and racism within the Conservative Party in May 2021, though such rhetoric has continued within the party.

More widely, it is not unusual to hear conspiracies shared by the general public and politicians about Muslim "no-go areas" or plans to enforce Sharia law in the UK. Prominent Muslim politicians like the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, are often the victims of such unfounded claims.

As of the year ending March 2023, Muslims were once again the most commonly targeted group in religious hate crime offenses in England and Wales, at 44% of all recorded offenses of this nature, increasing from 42% the year before.

Introduction of Professor Tahir Abbas

Joining me today to discuss this issue of Islamophobia in the UK is Professor Tahir Abbas. Professor Abbas is Professor of Radicalization Studies at Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs in The Hague, having held the post of

Sociology professor at two other universities. Professor Abbas has a PhD in Ethnic Relations, and his current research topics include Islamophobia, radicalization, polarization, and extremism. Published in 2022, his most recent book is entitled “Islamophobia and Securitization: The Dutch Case.”

Definition of Islamophobia

Mary Hunter: Thank you for taking the time to share your insights on this topic, Professor Abbas. I think it’s really important that we begin with the basics of this issue. The term “Islamophobia” itself is a contested one, with politicians reluctant to even use it to describe anti-Muslim rhetoric or actions. There is no official definition of the term in the UK after the one offered by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims in 2019 was rejected by the Conservative government. However, it was adopted by other political parties and organizations. This definition states, and I quote, “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.” End quote. I wanted to begin by asking you whether you agree with this definition in the context of the UK and how you, based on your expertise, would define the term, maybe touching on some recent examples.

Professor Tahir Abbas: Thank you for that, and thank you again for this opportunity. I think this definition very much is fit for purpose. It recognizes Islamophobia as a form of racism, and it acknowledges that anti-Muslim prejudice is also something that intersects with racial and ethnic discrimination. So, there’s lots of room there, and what’s also there that provides room is this idea of perceived Muslimness because sometimes people are attacked because the assumption is that they’re Muslims. Sikhs, for example, or gurdwaras because they’re confused for mosques. We’ve seen this happen routinely and systematically, and so Muslimness is also a broad category because there are a lot of perceptions around what characterizes a Muslim. Sometimes it’s the obvious sort of physical appearances that sometimes lead to attacks. Muslim women are often most likely to face these kinds of attacks when there are attacks. So I think this definition works, and I think it’s broad enough and expansive enough to take on board all the variations of ethnic, racial, cultural discrimination that comes into play.

Root Causes of Islamophobia

Mary Hunter: In the wake of the summer riots, you were quoted in an article in Hyphen. You criticized the response of the Labour government, suggesting that their idea of so-called “community cohesion” was not sufficient in light of the root causes of the riots. It’s been suggested that the government’s fiscal discipline might render a public inquiry unlikely. There was no official inquiry following the 2011 riots either. This will complicate attempts to truly understand the root causes of the riots. In the above-mentioned article, you name these causes as material deprivation, exclusion, poor policing practices, and bad housing policies. Could you talk a bit

about how you think Islamophobia in the UK is also related to these root causes and the issues of class? There were attempts to link Islamophobia primarily with the working class, but the rhetoric of prominent and wealthy politicians suggests that it's more complex than that.

Professor Tahir Abbas: Well, it is multi-faceted. I mean, it's difficult to isolate Islamophobia to just one or two factors. In fact, there are multiple factors. In terms of the New Labour response to the northern disturbances in 2001, there was a sense that these are about values not quite cohering, and therefore there's a problem of cohesion. So, if we fix that, we fix all the other problems. But of course, that's nonsensical. A lot of these issues are deeply rooted in material deprivation and perceived material deprivation too, of course, but actual measurable outcomes in terms of disadvantage and discrimination, whether it's housing, education, employment, or health. And there's plenty of data, plenty of official statistics that support that.

But there are also these additional layers which are based on perceptions and assumptions and caricatures and stereotypes that are many centuries in the making that stand alongside these deeply held and experienced material deprivation outcomes. And so, it sort of muddies the complexity for sure and adds to more of the nature of the challenges.

So, when I talk about root causes, I think ultimately we're talking about integration that's been limited because it's a problem of racism and discrimination that hasn't gone away. Of course, there have been attempts over the years to introduce anti-racism and anti-discrimination, and it does make a difference here and there, but there are systematic issues that haven't really been fully addressed.

And of course, the British Muslim experience is quite diverse. We do see quite a bit of favourable economic activity. I mean, there are Muslim businesses, there's the Halal economic sector, which is booming, there's a burgeoning middle class, professional, highly professional, well-educated Muslims on high-income salaries who are also thinking about leaving the country because again, there are these kinds of pressures around being valued and being accepted. And British Muslims very much feel that they can make a contribution where they can, but obviously, there are these structural disadvantages that aren't easy to go away so easily.

And then when we think about the political space, all of the political parties except the Conservatives accepted this definition that you introduced at the beginning. The Tories refused to look into it. And Sayeeda Warsi, who's a Tory peer, has talked about Islamophobia passing the dinner table test. She continues to talk about being in an abusive marriage, that is her being part of the Conservative party. And so, she sort of stepped out of the front line of the Conservatives at the moment, but she has a very active voice around trying to make Islamophobia understood, accepted, heard, appreciated.

These challenges aren't going away, and at the same time, the wider discourse, the language used in various media outlets continues to perpetuate the view that Muslims are a problem, that they're not quite adhering or cohering with the values of our dominant norms, and therefore they are a risk, a threat, a danger, a menace. And this is almost like the daily outputs of tabloid newspapers and media outlets. And certain political actors have mobilized this as well for their own ends.

We have had previous Home Secretaries in the UK, Suella Braverman being the recent Tory incarnation, before that Priti Patel, speaking some of the language of the far right and the radical right in an attempt to mobilize certain parts of the electorate. And it's been pretty horrendous...

Addressing Islamophobia in the UK

Mary Hunter: Finally, we should address what should be done in the UK to tackle Islamophobia. The Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group was established by the then Conservative government in 2012 to monitor and address anti-Muslim hate, but The Guardian recently reported that the working group has not met since January 2020, despite the increase in Islamophobic incidents, particularly since the attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023. This reflects a worrying lack of commitment to address Islamophobia under successive Conservative governments. Do you think this attitude will change under the Labour government, and what strategies do you think they should prioritize to address Islamophobia?

Professor Tahir Abbas: Well, I think it has to. I think Labour's already committed to this statement. Labour understands that there is a very diverse electorate out there. I mean, it lost five seats, well, four seats, nearly a fifth one, because of what let's call the Gaza effect in terms of local political mobilization. And that's very interesting indeed, given that traditionally British Muslims have voted Labour for decades, seen as the party of workers and so on.

But the electorate has shifted. The Muslim vote is very significant for certain areas, certain seats. And so, I think there has to be an inevitable response that's about actual change to policies and practices. So clearly, the idea of Islamophobia needs to be seen in really clear terms, and that the government is behind fighting against it. That this needs also to be fused into policymaking and perhaps legal responses, including enhancing the hate crime legislation if possible.

Islamophobic incidents are reported, but more action needs to be done to recognize that. Also, education and awareness – I think there's too much resistance in some spaces around the role of schooling and education to try and ensure that young people are able to fact-check carefully, to filter nonsense and fake content online so as to be able to have their own critical awareness of some of these issues.

And I think there have been various attempts to address some of the media biases, but the problem is the government isn't really talking to those organizations. The

MCB, it's Britain's biggest umbrella group of 600-plus organizations, no conversations are being had. ... [I]ndeed the British government still, or up until recently, has only really had one conversation with its British Muslim community, which is how to fight extremism, how to fight the problems of Islamism, etc. Whereas there are many more concerns for sure that are needing to be heard.

And I think this is an opportunity that I think the government recognizes that it cannot ignore much longer. And I think also realizing that there is a shift in the political landscape given what was in play over the last, well, since 2010 effectively, but before that too, the tail end of the New Labour era. It means that there is an opportunity. So, let's see what happens, and I'm hopeful that there will be a recognition of the need to make substantive change.

Mary Hunter: That brings us to the end of our time today. Special thanks to Professor Abbas for joining me to discuss the issue of Islamophobia in the UK. We look forward to sharing our next episode of Experts Dispatch with you soon. Bye for now.