

Islamophobia

English summary

Introduction

The overarching objectives of the research presented below, which has been conducted on the commission of the Living History Forum, have been to discuss both the concept of Islamophobia and Islamophobic attitudes among young people. This work has been carried out in the form of two studies.

The first study (presented in Chapter 2 of the report) comprises a discussion of and reflections upon the term Islamophobia, its emergence and what it means. The objective here has been to clarify what the term Islamophobia refers to and to explain the factors underlying the different ways in which the word is used and understood.

The second study "Young people's attitudes towards Muslims, and Muslims' exposure to antisocial behaviour" (Chapter 3) presents and then analyses in more detail the results from a report entitled *Intolerance* (2004), which was published jointly by the Living History Forum and the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention.

The *Intolerance* report was based on the most comprehensive questionnaire survey ever conducted in Sweden on attitudes towards Muslims. The study presented in this report proceeds on the basis of this same material, but the data are analysed by means of a different methodology.

In addition to these two studies, the research presented below contains an introductory section on Sweden's Muslim population and a concluding section on the work being conducted within the EU to combat Islamophobia. This final section of the report includes suggestions for further reading on existing research into the subject of Islamophobia.

Sweden's Muslim population

The size of the Muslim population in Sweden has grown substantially over the past 60 years. The number of residents from a Muslim background increased from just a few individuals and families prior to 1950, to approximately 100,000 by the end of the 1980s, to 200,000 by around 1996, and had reached approximately 350,000 by the year 2000. Slightly over 85 percent of Sweden's Muslim population, or 300,000 of 350,000, have arrived in Sweden, or been born here, subsequent to 1985.

Somewhere approaching one-third of the Muslim population is of school age or younger.

The Muslims living in Sweden have their roots all over the world, not least in Turkey, the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, Iraq and Iran. Islam has undergone a transformation from being an exotic sibling to Christianity and Judaism that was practised “over there” to become a religion that is practised “at home” here in Sweden.

As Swedish central government has successively lessened the extent to which it has legitimised its authority and decisions by reference to religion, so tolerance towards religious minorities has increased. At the same time, this trend has led to a situation where religious ideas and practices are more often subjected to harsh criticism. The manifestly free discussion of religious issues in Swedish society, and the ability to make use of religious symbols in the context of comedy, satire, art and literature, may be regarded as characteristic features of Sweden, and ones that, globally speaking, are not shared by many other societies. It is also significant that the Swedish statute book contains no law against blasphemy.

In Sweden today, there is a constant stream of attention being focused on Islam and Muslims. There has been a good deal of discussion of such subjects as male circumcision, female genital mutilation, the slaughter of animals in accordance with religious requirements, religious private schools, the wearing of religious dress in public places, honour violence, Sharia laws and the granting of planning permission for mosques. In some instances the debate has been balanced and reflective, in others careless and sensationalist. Websites maintained by right wing extremists present an image of Sweden as a land under occupation by Muslims. But the discussion of Islam and Muslim issues has roots that go back a long way. Islam has long been the focus of criticism and derogatory comments, and has been perceived as representing something radically different. Between the late seventh century and the nineteenth century, Muslim dynasties were perceived as representing a military threat to southern and eastern Europe, which to some extent they did. This can be seen in religious writings and sometimes in the state policy of Sweden from the sixteenth century onwards. But there was also an admiration of the culture and political power of the Ottoman Empire among the Swedish political elite, particularly during the eighteenth century. During the colonial period, Islam and Muslims came to be perceived as “the inferior other”. In the popular culture of the twentieth century, Islam, Muslim environments and Muslims themselves have been viewed as charmingly exotic, erotic, threatening and radically different. Islam and Muslims have also been described as being aggressively missionary, warlike, as oppressors of women and as undemocratic etc. Still others have viewed Islam as a doctrine of Oriental wisdom and as a point of departure for critiquing the “western world”.

Islamophobia – a word that has been the subject of much debate

The word Islamophobia has appeared from time to time throughout the twentieth century. Up until 1997 it was used with a form of *common sense* significance without any detailed explanation. The oldest evidence of the word's usage this study has been able to find comes from 1918, when the word appeared in French. In 1997, however, something happened. The British think-tank the Runnymede Trust published a report entitled *Islamophobia – a challenge to us all*, which had a major influence on the discussion of Islamophobia. The report attempts to take a holistic approach to Islamophobia, and portrays it as a major problem in British society. The Runnymede Trust's definition of Islamophobia reads:

The term Islamophobia refers to an unfounded hostility towards Islam. It 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." (The Runnymede Trust p. 4)

The intent of the think-tank was to create a concept that would capture a wide variety of Islamophobic phenomena, including for example exposure to verbally and physically offensive behaviour, attacks against mosques and burial sites, discrimination in the employment process or against employees, and laws or policies that do not take the problems faced by Muslims seriously or that do not provide protection against discrimination and so on. There was also an intention to criticise stereotyped, simplistic conceptions of Islam and of Muslims. The Runnymede Trust's approach to discussing Islamophobia has been adopted by many, but has also been the subject of some criticism. Amongst other things, some have argued that the term "unfounded hostility" is rather difficult to understand. Is there an implicit acceptance of the possibility of "well-founded hostility" towards Islam? The think-tank has also been criticised for relying too heavily on the British multicultural debate, which often views ethnic, cultural or religious groupings as collective actors, thereby obstructing a more individualised view of the phenomenon.

In a publication from the EUMC (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia) Åke Sander, Professor of religious studies, suggests a definition of Islamophobia that is consciously different from that of the Runnymede Trust. Sander's definition proceeds from the individual's sense of having been wronged or offended against, and is inspired by amongst other things the legislation on sexual harassment. Sander's objective has been to create a conception of Islamophobia that can function as a point of departure for work in the legal, social and political arenas. There are of course also other definitions and uses of the term Islamophobia.

Three alternative positions have emerged from the discussion of the utility of the term Islamophobia. These comprise those who are positive towards the use of the term Islamophobia, those who are sceptical about the term, and those who reject its use. The principal argument from the positive camp is that we need a term of this kind in order to be able to talk about the offensive behaviour and discrimination that Muslims are subjected to. Representatives of this view often assume that

Islamophobia is a widespread phenomenon and that it exists in many different forms. Those who reject the term argue, however, that those who are positive towards its use exaggerate the extent of the victimisation suffered by Muslims, and that Islamophobia is primarily used as an argument to shield Islam from criticism. They often contend that Islamism – i.e. radical, political Islam – is something that should be both criticised and feared. The sceptics note rather that the term Islamophobia is a poor construction in the sense that it suggests the idea that Islamophobia is primarily about a fear of the religion of Islam, something which they argue is a relatively marginal phenomenon. They argue that the central issue is rather that of protecting Muslims against discrimination and other forms of offensive behaviour.

Which of these positions dominates varies across different countries. In the UK and Sweden, the struggle to combat Islamophobia has achieved widespread acceptance as something positive and morally correct. France, by contrast, is dominated by a sceptical attitude, which instead tends to link the term Islamophobia to the attempts of certain Muslims to shield Islam from criticism.

Forerunners of the Islamophobia concept

The various definitions and discussions of the suitability of the use of the term Islamophobia are more easily understood if we examine a number of similar concepts such as: Orientalism, anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia. As concepts, each of these terms can improve our understanding of how different people perceive the meaning of Islamophobia. Even though the widespread use of the term Islamophobia is a relatively new phenomenon, those who do use the term draw their inspiration from other, older discussions of discrimination and stereotypes. A number of the central ideas in this area are presented below.

Cultural racism

In the context of research into racism and xenophobia, there are now many who see cultural racism as the dominant form of racism. Cultural racists conceive of cultures as distinct, fixed entities, with different intrinsic value. "Western culture", as it is commonly termed, ranks highest on this value scale, whereas Islam occupies a much more lowly position. That which is different and inferior is often linked to determined characteristics that individuals are deemed to possess as a result of a shared mentality, culture or religion. Cultural racism transforms culture – or a religion – into the functional equivalent of race. Some researchers working in this field argue that for some time to come, "religion" rather than "culture" or "race" will constitute the most important category in relation to the formulation of racist views.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia is viewed as part of the universal human condition and is considered to be grounded in the essential structures of human thinking. It is commonplace for a group that is established and occupies a position of power in a certain place to have an idealised image of itself. Furthermore, such groups tend to feel that the values held by the group are self-evident and beyond question. At the same time, they construct an unfavourable image of newcomers, economically inferior groups, or any other group that can be portrayed in terms of being "the others". These images may be founded in real conditions, but selection principles are always such

that examples which tend to confirm these images weigh more heavily than those that do not serve to confirm them. More advanced analyses of power relations emphasize the way in which those who are subjected to domination also construct stereotyped conceptions of “the others”, including both other weak groups and those who dominate.

The critique of the colonial mentality

Part of the discussion around the Islamophobia concept has been inspired by the critical perspectives on power that are to be found in certain discussions of racism, Orientalism and anti-Semitism. The European nation states and their colonialism are viewed as constituting the basis of a racist and Eurocentric mentality that has amongst other things produced a situation where those who deviate from a religious, ethnic or appearance-based norm are perceived as inferior. The elite is attributed responsibility for the existence of racism.

Orientalism and Islam

There are also links between the Islamophobia concept and the critique of Orientalism, i.e. the critique of the way in which the western world has first created a fictitious geographical area – the Orient – and then produced knowledge about this fictitious creation. One of the central elements in the critique of Orientalism is the discussion of the way Islam has been portrayed in a stereotyped, negative fashion in “the West”.

The critique is founded on a theoretically advanced calling into question of the objectivity of enlightenment thought in its entirety. In this particular context, the argument is that knowledge about Islam is based more on political, social and economic interests in “the West” than it is on any continuous impulses from lived or theological Islam. This Western-formulated knowledge is thus produced first and foremost in relation to itself, and it is this knowledge that experts and journalists primarily enter into dialogue with when making statements about Islam.

Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

While “race” and “foreign” have no self-defined content, both Judaism and Islam are concrete and substantial phenomena. Just as is the case with Judaism and the Jews, it may be difficult to distinguish between criticisms of Muslims as a population, Muslims as a theological label for the followers of Islam, and Islam as a system of religion. The fact that is furthermore common for Islam to be objectified, for Muslims to be perceived as a kind of ethnic group, and for cultures to be perceived as being clearly defined and internally homogeneous, does not make it any easier to distinguish what is well-meaning, ignorant or clumsy from what is malevolent and Islamophobic. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have distinct histories (although they are sometimes interwoven) but may be seen to be based on the same type of thinking. The use of the term Islamophobia is also similar to, and is probably inspired by, the use of the term anti-Semitism.

Recent discussions of discrimination within the EU

Discussions of racism and xenophobia emphasize the individual's right not to be defined in terms of value-based categories that are employed in a discriminatory manner. When a person applies for a job, their sex, ethnicity and religious affiliations should be irrelevant. This idea has been incorporated into the understanding of

Islamophobia. "Muslim" may not be used as a category of significance in relation to a person's attempts to find work or housing, or their status as a student or worker etc. At the same time, all this is complicated by amongst other things the discussion of Orientalism and the ideal of diversity, which often assigns different groups the right to their own identity or culture. Seeing, respecting and appreciating someone for his/her religious affiliation and at the same time ensuring these factors exert no influence can be a difficult balance to strike.

Summary of the forerunners

In combination, the ideas presented by research into racism, Orientalism and anti-Semitism on Eurocentric (cultural) racism, on the individualised focus of anti-discrimination legislation, on the group-focus of multiculturalism, on the Orientalist discussion's demonstration of stereotyped portrayals of Islam and Muslims, and the emphasis placed by the discussion of xenophobia on the existence of a general tendency to shun the unfamiliar, together produce something quite unique. Not all of the possible connotations of "Islamophobia" are employed in the different uses of the word, of course. It is nonetheless often possible to discern several of the above named elements in the majority of definitions or uses of the term Islamophobia. Expressions of Islamophobia have a long tradition of their own, which is distinct from, but to some extent also interwoven with, racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The discussion around Islamophobia also differs in some respects from that surrounding Orientalism. While the former most commonly refers to discrimination against Muslims, the latter focuses rather on a critique of the ways in which knowledge about Muslims and Islam has been constructed.

Legal and moral dimensions

One problem with the discussion surrounding Islamophobia is that the distinction between legal and moral dimensions tends to disappear. Certain aspects of Islamophobia fall under different pieces of anti-discriminatory legislation or legislation on racial agitation, while other aspects may be seen as morally reprehensible (on the basis of e.g. humanist and anti-racist positions) or as being based on ignorance. In this context it is important to clarify what is protected in law and what isn't, i.e. both the forms of expression that are protected by law, and the forms that the law protects against. It is also important that hate crimes with Islamophobic motives, for example, are presented separately in official statistics in order to clarify the extent of the phenomenon. This is something that the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has been commissioned to do beginning in 2006. Events are continuously taking place that put our societies' laws and norms to the test, and we should ask ourselves where we want the limits of the law to be drawn in the future.

One central issue in this context is that of the relationship between criticisms of Islam and of Muslims and the legislation on racial agitation. When seeking to define a legal protection for Muslims against offensive behaviours, society should safeguard the essential freedom to discuss and criticise both political and religious ideas and expressions and the actions and values of those who follow a given religion. At the same time, harsh criticisms directed at a given religion are often perceived as offensive by those affiliated with this religion, and some react in a protectionist manner. A distinction that may appear logical from a legal perspective, between criticisms of ideas on the one hand and offensive behaviours directed

against a given group on the other, is not necessarily easy to apply when we weigh in the arguments and reactions of individuals. If we like Sander feel that we must take the individual's perception of being offended against as the point of departure for a discussion of Islamophobia, how then are we to deal, for example, with differences in conceptions of how religious symbols, persons and dogmas may be represented? In a globalised world characterised by substantial levels of migration, there is a mingling of different viewpoints and the atmosphere easily becomes quite hostile. At the same time it is important to note that conflicts can also lead to an improved understanding of, and insight into, the views held by others.

There is a tendency today to view Muslims as an homogeneous group. Muslim culture is spoken of in a way that suggests the existence of a culture that is common to all Muslims and that affects them irrespective of their origins and irrespective of differences in the way individuals view their religion. By this means "Muslim" becomes a significant category that can be used by politicians, researchers and the media, for example, but also by representatives of Muslims. There is no homogeneous group of Muslims in Sweden, however, but rather only a Muslim population. Viewing Muslims as an homogeneous group may serve to conceal other group affiliations of individual Muslims such as nationality, ethnicity, class and sex, as well as their individual life projects. It is important to be aware that this constitutes one aspect of Islamophobia. The concept "Muslim", perceived in terms of an homogeneous culture-producing identity, becomes the functional equivalent of race. In this context it is interesting to reflect upon the actual purpose of the criticisms of Islam expressed by certain individuals or groups. Criticising Islam may constitute a means of conducting what is commonly referred to as racial agitation whilst staying within the confines of the law.

Satisfying a need

The term Islamophobia has a purpose to serve and has already had a major impact. It has led to debate and to attention being focused on issues relating to discriminatory attitudes and actions directed against Muslims and has succeeded in placing the question of the plausibility of portrayals of Islam on the agenda. As many have pointed out, Islamophobia is a far from ideal term, but it "rolls off the tongue" rather nicely and refers to something concrete that we need to talk about

Young people's attitudes towards Muslims and Muslims' exposure to antisocial behaviour

The principal objective of the statistical study has been to clarify and examine in more detail the results presented in the intolerance report on young people's attitudes towards Muslims, and on the relationships between these attitudes and a large number of background factors. We have also analysed the extent to which Muslims are exposed to offensive behaviour as a result of their religion.

The material employed in the principal analysis comprises a representative sample of 9,498 non-Muslim youths (4,680 girls and 4,818 boys) between 14-18 years of age. The analysis of victimisation as a result of religion is based on those who reported themselves to be Muslims – 565 individuals in total, of whom 56,1 percent are girls and 43,9 percent boys.

The analysis of non-Muslim youths' attitudes to Muslims is based on a section of the questionnaire which included a number of items relating to young people's attitudes towards Muslims in Sweden. These items are often formulated in the form of statements, with the respondents then being asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with these statements.

The statistical method employed in this study (multiple regression) means that we can control for the effects of several different background factors simultaneously. By this means we are able to show which background factors are related to youths' attitudes towards Muslims and can control for the effects of all the other variables included in the model.

The other analysis, which focuses on Muslims' exposure to victimisation as a result of their religion, is based on questionnaire items focusing on the extent to which the respondents feel they have been victimised as a result of their religion by means of having been insulted, threatened, socially excluded, hit or exposed to threatening e-mail, text, or Internet chat messages. Differences in the level of victimisation are analysed on the basis of the respondents' sex, type of school, region and place of birth. We also compare the victimisation of Muslim youth with that experienced by Christian youth.

Attitudes to Muslims – various background factors

Our analysis shows that a large number of variables have a significant positive or negative effect on young people's attitudes towards Muslims, while at the same time controlling the effects of other factors.

We can see that:

- Youths in their final year of secondary education have a more positive attitude than those in other year groups.
- Knowing someone who is a Muslim produces a more positive attitude by comparison with youths who do not know any Muslims.
- Youths born in Sweden have more negative attitudes towards Muslims than youths born outside Sweden.
- The socio-economic background of young people (measured in terms of parental occupation) has a significant effect on their attitude towards Muslims. Youths whose parents have at least intermediate grade academic or white collar occupations are more positive than those whose parents come from other occupational groups.
- Psychological and social psychological factors, in this case increased levels of restlessness and aggression, have a negative effect on attitudes to Muslims.

We have also been able to show that factors associated with the school environment and the school program followed by the youths in question are associated with differences in the youths' attitudes towards Muslims. It should be noted here, however, that the choice of school program is largely determined by the parents' socio-economic background, which is thus the real "explanatory" factor in this regard. Thus we see that:

- The higher the youths' grades, and the more they enjoy school, the more positive their attitudes towards Muslims.
- Students on the individual program present a much more negative attitude towards Muslims than do youths in other secondary education programs.

The analyses show further that:

- Both boys and girls who have stereotyped, inflexible conceptions of gender roles have more negative attitudes towards Muslims than those who possess other views on gender roles. Interestingly, the differences that previous studies have found between boys and girls are largely explained by differences in gender-role perceptions. When the effects of these perceptions are included in the statistical analysis, sex differences in levels of intolerance disappear.

The analysis also shows that *local/regional* factors, categorised on the basis of various economic, political and population-based criteria have a certain impact on youths' attitudes towards Muslims. Amongst other things, we have found that:

Boys living in municipalities with relatively high levels of unemployment, a high proportion of immigrants in the local population, and with relatively large industrial sectors, have more negative attitudes than boys living in other municipalities. No such correlation was found among girls.

Other factors associated with the local community, such as the presence of populist right wing parties on the local council, were also found to be correlated with youths' attitudes towards Muslims. A higher general level of intolerance was found in those municipalities where Sverigedemokraterna (the Sweden Democrats – currently the largest populist right wing party in Sweden) had seats on the local council than in municipalities where this was not the case.

Finally, youths who feel that they are subject to some form of *exclusion from mainstream society* are more negative in their attitude towards Muslims than are those who lack such feelings.

Victimisation as a result of religious affiliation

The questionnaire also included items on the youths' own experiences of exposure to various forms of harassment and violence as a result of their religious affiliation, and interesting results were also produced by this analysis. Almost one in four Muslim girls and boys has been exposed to some form of offensive treatment at some point during the year prior to the survey. With the exception of exposure to physical violence, girls report higher levels of victimisation than boys. Those living in metropolitan areas report the lowest levels of victimisation. Levels of victimisation are greater among those in compulsory education than among those in secondary education, a finding which is in line with the results from our previous analysis, where youths in their third year of secondary education in particular were found to have a more positive attitude towards Muslims.

The Muslims that perceive themselves as being religious report being exposed to offensive behaviour to a greater extent than those who perceive themselves to be non-religious. Further, Muslim youths are in general subject to significantly more victimisation than other youths, even more so than religious Christian youths, who are in turn exposed to higher levels of victimisation than Christians who do not

perceive themselves to be religious. In addition, it was found that Christian youths born outside Europe or in southern Europe reported the same level of victimisation as Christian youths in general. This may indicate a greater level of intolerance for Muslims precisely because they are Muslims. Evidence that this may be the case is found in the fact that Muslims born in southern Europe were the group that reported the highest level of victimisation among Muslim youths, whereas Christians from this same part of Europe were no more victimised than others. In the same way, Muslims born outside Europe were subject to higher levels of victimisation than Christians born outside Europe

Reflections on the study's findings

Generally, the level of tolerance displayed in the questionnaire data is high, and is higher than that found in data from other studies. It should be noted that the questionnaire on which this study is based focuses primarily on attitudes towards Muslims, whereas other Swedish studies have focused on attitudes towards Islam. We suspect that the generally higher levels of tolerance displayed by the youths in the current study are related to this factor. We discerned a tendency such that attitudes are somewhat less tolerant where questions may be understood as referring to Muslims as religious actors by comparison with questions where Muslims are probably perceived as an "ethnic" category, i.e. where there is a general designation relating to persons from a Muslim background.

The current questionnaire produced results that are similar to those from many other surveys: if you are a female, with a high level of education, and are financially comfortable, you are more tolerant than if you are male, have a low educational level and are not well-off financially speaking. (In our study, though, the sex of the respondents plays a subordinate role.) The critical question that has to be asked is: Do the results reflect a capacity and a desire to fill in a questionnaire so as to appear tolerant, or do the respondents' answers reflect actual opinions and behaviours? If the racism research whose objective is to relate racism to the economic and political power structures of society is to be taken seriously, other types of questionnaire item are needed in order to expose Islamophobic conceptions, since the groups that uphold the system (and their children) generally appear to be very tolerant. Other theories, however, view racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia as an indicator of weakness – as the reaction of the socially and economically oppressed to the situation they find themselves in. These theories resonate well with the results of our own study. More research is needed to cross-fertilize these distinct theoretical perspectives in order to clarify how they relate to one another.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that Islamophobia has quickly become a term that is discussed and employed by large numbers of people. In Sweden there is a desire to work to combat Islamophobia – and this work should be based on a reflective foundation, to which we hope the current study will contribute. By discussing the concept of Islamophobia and presenting an analysis of what everyday conceptions may look like among young people, we want to illustrate the complexity underlying the Islamophobia concept.