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Irene Zempi, Imran Awan

The debate over the utility and precision of the term “Islamophobia”

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Nathan C. Lean
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Introduction

Within the academic disciplines that have come to study the phenomenon of Islamophobia in recent years, a trend has emerged: the laborious and ceaseless pursuit of defining the word. In conference talks and in the pages of various journal articles alike, scholars parse its etymological components, problematize its etymological deficiencies, and propose either their own definitions or coin entirely new terms that they believe capture more fully the reality of widespread prejudice that targets Muslims. In a way, much of this is to be expected. The fact remains that Islamophobia is a relatively new form of prejudice, at least in the eyes of the general public. Its drivers are not always easy to pin down. In some instances, it may appear that racism is an underlying motivator for Islamophobic rhetoric or actions, while in other instances, political factors, social dynamics, or actual biases about the religion of Islam itself may be at work. All of this is to say that the complexity of this form of societal prejudice lends itself to scholarly probing and to a natural desire to create clarity regarding the term.

Anticipated as such an academic exercise may be, the resulting flow of writing and scholarship over the past two decades has muddled more than it has clarified. Scholars and on-the-ground activists have butted heads over what to call prejudice that targets Muslims. Despite a plethora of new information, it is not clear at all that the debate is having any effect. This is compounded by an undeniable fact about language that those who have a stake in defining Islamophobia seem to miss: society, not scholars, usually decide what words they will use to identify and describe such prejudices, and usually the matter is simply one of what sticks. In this case, much to the chagrin of those that would argue that there is a better term that must be adopted, “Islamophobia” is the clear victor, and its definition does not matter—the word and its meaning have become clear to the general public and whatever slight variances in understandings of it exist, they do not undercut the basic spirit of the word as it is most commonly deployed. Thus, it is time to move past the hackneyed deliberations about the possibility of alternative words.

In what follows, I will argue precisely that point. To do so, I will invoke to a few different examples—some historical, others contemporary—that show the futility of debates over the definitions of this word. I will also attempt to highlight what I see as some of the blind spots that plague those scholars and activists who insist that the term “Islamophobia” is flawed and
must be reconsidered. Admittedly, this argument is not pillared on an extensive data set or other
irrefutable statistics that “prove” that one word is better than others, or one definition better
than another. Rather it is driven by a common-sense-based approach that takes into consider-
tion the multiple perspectives that have animated this discourse and juxtaposes them alongside
observable realities and trends among the general public’s use and understanding of the word
“Islamophobia.” To begin, we might consider some of the term’s descriptions and definitions
that exist within the academy and non-governmental think tanks.

**Identifying issues of clarity and content**

At their core, virtually all of the extant definitions of Islamophobia point to some negative senti-
ment (usually on the part of non-Muslims, though this not explained) towards Muslims or Islam.
That seems obvious enough, though when one looks closely at various descriptions of the word
more complexities emerge than one might expect. Beyond spelling out the simple etymology of
the term itself—an “irrational fear” (phobia) of Islam—other factors have been introduced that
aim to qualify exactly what is happening when “Islamophobia” is present.

For the Runnymede Trust, who popularized the term in the late 1990s, “dread,” “hatred,”
“fear,” and “dislike” are at play (Runnymede Trust 1997). The Forum Against Islamophobia
and Racism (2018), a London–based Muslim advocacy group, used identical terms but added
“hostility” to the mix. The European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion (2010)
included buzzwords like “fear” and “hatred” in its 2010 definition of the word, but added
that Islamophobia constituted “a form of intolerance and discrimination.” Scholars Peter
Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg (2008) make a similar move when they front their defini-
tion of term with an explanation of Islamophobia as a form of “social anxiety” that is “largely
unexamined, yet deeply engrained” in Americans.

Elsewhere, the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) introduces the notion
of “close-mindedness,” while Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative emphasizes that
Islamophobia affects not only Muslims, but also those with a “perceived religious, national, or
ethnic identity associated with Islam.” Still, other scholars have chosen to situate Islamophobia
in different ways, including: a “fear laden discourse;” a “single unified and negative conception
of an essentialized Islam;” “a rejection of Islam, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals on the
basis of prejudice and stereotypes;” or simply “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions
directed at Islam or Muslims” (Zúquete 2008). One scholar, Chris Allen, who is among the
most respected European academics when it comes to the issue of Islamophobia, has defined
the phenomenon in a staggering 223 words, characterizing it as an “ideology” not unlike racism
that sustains and perpetuates “negatively evaluated meaning” about Muslims and Islam, which
has historical roots and which must also be understood in terms of “social action,” “power and
domination,” “exclusionary practices,” and the presence of such constructions as “Muslim” or
“Islam” to begin with (Allen 2010).

Needless to say, variety abounds and it is difficult to imagine how the differentiating com-
ponents of each of these definitions would ever come together in any coherent or meaningful
way. In several cases this has led some to suggest an abandonment of the term “Islamophobia”
altogether. In its place, various alternatives have been proposed: “anti-Muslim prejudice,”
“anti-Islam prejudice,” “anti-Muslim bigotry,” “anti-Islamism,” “anti-Muslim hate,” and even,
oddly enough, “anti-Muslimism” (Halliday 2010). As one might expect, however, each of these
iterations have their own respective definitions.

Importantly, the lack of clarity and agreement is not simply a matter that academics hash out
in journal articles or conferences, either. Mainstream Muslim organizations are at odds over
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the term, too. Representatives from groups like Emgage USA (formerly Emerge USA) and Muslim Advocates have made the case that the term “Islamophobia” is less-than-ideal when it comes to meeting the needs of Muslims who are targeted with prejudice, while organizations like the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) have embraced the word institutionally, but have privately encouraged alternatives. In the years that I have spent advocating for programs and policies that combat Islamophobia, I have encountered innumerable instances where conversations with such groups bleed into the late afternoon without ever having moved beyond disagreements over the terminology.

All of this reinforces my point, which is that these debates are mere noise in a world where most people seem to know precisely what they are talking about when they use the word “Islamophobia.” To put a finer point on it, we may think momentarily about the scholarship of Fernando Bravo Lopez, who is widely credited with having unearthed the origins and lineage of the word. Lopez discovered that its first uses in print came more than a century ago when, in 1910, two French writers described the experiences of African Muslims under colonial rule using the variation “Islamophobie” (Lopez 2011). These usages were iterations of judeophobie (which later became “anti-Semitism”) and xenophobie, or xenophobia. The authors did not labor to explain what they meant by the term Islamophobie, or why its usage should be justified. Rather, in describing the circumstances of West African Muslims whose lives were governed by an overbearing French mission, they briefly interjected the words “prejudice,” “fear,” and “dislike,” to communicate the simple idea that Muslims perceived themselves being targeted and judged on the basis of their religious identity (ibid.). Additionally, just as there was no effort to explain what judeophobie or xenophobie meant, it appeared that these authors seemed to think that the term was clear enough, or at the very least that its presence within a family of other similar words that described various prejudices would give obvious clues.

A public problem with an academic solution?

Debates over the term “Islamophobia” may actually be a symptom of a larger problem: the inability of academia to relate to the concerns of people beyond its walls. While I maintain that there is great value in situating Islamophobia as a field of study within various academic disciplines, the fact remains that however the phenomenon is defined, it is affecting ordinary people in the streets of various cities across the globe every day. Thus, to a significant extent, conversations that would explain the case of a Muslim woman whose hijab was ripped off as “anti-Muslim hate” instead of “Islamophobia” are fraught with disconnectedness. We must ask: would she really care what language was used to define the animus directed at her, or would the more important point be that it was animus to begin with and we ought not furrow our brows over terminologies but rather use our creativity and energy to propose solutions?

Admittedly, this may sound a bit rich within a scholarly volume such as this. Yet I would urge my colleagues and readers alike to think carefully about the implications of scholarly debates on topics that are as urgent as Islamophobia, and which are not merely theoretical subjects to be explored but actual manifestations of prejudice that have, in some cases, led to severe destruction and death. The bottom-up direction of information flow is critical here. In this case, I would argue that the general public has established a discourse for identifying, speaking about, and combating Islamophobia, and it is the responsibility of academics to immerse themselves in that discourse rather than dictate, in top-down fashion, its acceptable parameters.

As we have established, the word “Islamophobia” has been operational for well over a decade. As scholars Saher Selod and Steve Garner have tracked, between 1980 and 2014, the term appeared in the titles of more than 1,212 books, magazines, and newspaper articles. It was
newspaper articles that comprised the overwhelming majority of such uses—1,121 (Garner and Selod 2014). In a similar vein, Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative has noted that since 2003, nearly 40 books have been written that feature the term “Islamophobia” as a part of their title. That uptick coincides with public paroxysms over Islam, with respect to the 2005 release of the film Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West, the lead-up to the 2006 midterm elections, and the controversy over the Park51 Islamic Cultural Center in New York City, for example. This is an especially salient point, for it suggests that the increase in usages of the word is the result of an increasingly shared recognition about what constitutes Islamophobia.

Even beyond print materials, though, there is good reason to believe that, to state it plainly, “the ship has sailed” regarding the term “Islamophobia.” A simple Google search of the term yields immediate results on social media and mainstream news websites that utilize it in a way that indicates “prejudice” without explaining it beyond a mere clause or two that employs some synonym. Increasingly, television and radio outlets have also discussed prejudice that targets Muslims using the term, whether National Public Radio, Meet the Press, NBC Evenings News, or others. What is so striking about this is the economy of language. Just as the early French writers who first deployed the term did not overly emphasize its particularities, one gets the sense that a certain normalization has come into effect and that word is now so widely used and understood that there is no need to qualify it with excessive descriptions or caveats.

This understanding, I believe, is most often premised on the idea of “prejudice,” and indeed in my own writing I have often used “Islamophobia” and “anti-Muslim prejudice” interchangeably. Without risking an overly psychological explanation, this is an intentional move on my part, and it is based on a cue that popular discourses on the topic have given those of us who write about it: simplicity is unavoidable. To put it differently, it is unreasonable to expect that the general public will grasp long words or expressions to describe behaviors for which they have a pre-existing category. Nor is it reasonable to expect that the general public will conjure up a particularly convoluted and complex definition each time they utter the word “Islamophobia.” Rather, it is more likely that we hear the word “Islamophobia,” think about categories and words that are similar, and place it—along with our understanding of what it is—into that group. Thus, “Islamophobia” occupies in the same mental real estate as anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, etc., though we know that what distinguishes it from those other things is that it relates to Islam and Muslims.

In the end, what more could we ask for? To identify “Islamophobia” immediately with “prejudice” is to legitimize the feelings of animus that Muslims who are the targets of Islamophobia feel, while at once calling attention to the fact that those who are responsible for such feelings (as a result of their words or actions) belong to the same group of people who would express racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic views. The wide net of “prejudice” as the category to which the public believes “Islamophobia” belongs leaves space for discussions about, for instance, the nexus between Islamophobia and racism, while making the topic digestible enough that an ordinary citizen can use it and understand it without having to participate in such discussions.

Of course, there are those who will invariably insist that “phobia” does not indicate “prejudice,” but rather an “irrational fear.” This, as I hope I have spelled out, misses the point entirely. To be sure, “phobia” does not mean “prejudice,” but my argument about the general use of the word “Islamophobia” and the triviality of searching for a perfect alternative or definition is that the meanings of all words are the result of how we—the speakers—use them. They do not have expressive meaning on their own, but rather their meanings are attached externally.

Let us think about this with an abstract comparison for a moment, if only to highlight my argument about language. If I were to ask you to place this book on the “table,” you will likely look
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around the room for a flat wooden surface with four legs, perhaps with a lamp or a placemat on top, and put the book there. Perhaps a kitchen table, or a coffee table. The fact that we both know what a “table” is—that we have developed a shared vocabulary to communicate an idea that we attach to the word—is important. There is no such thing as a “table” in the world, at least not in a sui generis sense; there is only wood that is assembled with a flat top and four legs, and we have agreed to give it this name. In other languages, various other terms are used that communicate a shared idea. Thus, as long as our shared understanding of the concept the same (you placed the book on the table, not in the bathtub), things are just fine. The meaning of the word is a result of how it is commonly understood and used.

“Anti-Semitism,” some critics have rightly noted, refers to people who speak Semitic languages, many of whom are Arab Muslims. Yet, we do not use the word “anti-Semitism” to refer to prejudice that targets Muslims. Instead, we use it to refer to prejudice that targets Jews, almost exclusively. This is despite the fact that its etymology points to something other than that. Here again, though, the point is sharpened into fuller relief: we have a shared understanding of the term “anti-Semitism” and what it means. We have developed our vocabulary to communicate the idea that someone who harbors prejudice towards Jews is “anti-Semitic.” The common usage dictates the definition and ultimately the public’s understanding. This is no different with “Islamophobia,” where, for all the hand-wringing over its etymological deficiencies, the public seems to have grasped the idea that we are referring to a form of prejudice that targets Muslims on the basis of their religious identity, and that this form of prejudice is no more acceptable than others that occupy the same mental category.

The phenomenon versus the terminology

It should go without saying that the increased pursuit to define and refine the term “Islamophobia” is a direct result of the fact that there is increased awareness, among scholars and others, of some phenomenon to which we have assigned this label. In other words, its uptick is not merely a matter of an arbitrary decision by media personalities and intellectuals to discuss the topic. Rather, it corresponds with a climate in which we, as a society, have identified that Muslims are routinely on the receiving end of animus and scorn. In response to that, the term has gained ascendancy.

The word “Islamophobia” is used to describe any number of instances where, indeed, Muslims face prejudice: online attacks in the world of social media, physical assaults that are driven by a manifest animus towards the Islamic religion or its adherents, attacks against institutions such as mosques, and the like. Apart from those who perpetrate these crimes (and the fraction of far-right purveyors of prejudice against Muslims), it seems clear enough that American and European spaces have arrived at a place where, at the very least, these types of attacks are collectively recognized as unacceptable. Therefore, whether or not it is “anxiety,” “fear,” “dread,” “hate,” “hostility,” or a “historically rooted ideology” that gives life to “exclusionary practices” and “discrimination,” the fact remains that wherever “Islamophobia” is present, an injustice has occurred and has been enacted upon one group of people by another. In the end, then, the academic debate seems to be less about what actually exists than it does about how we label it. The fact that there seems to be agreement over the presence of animosity or hate towards Muslims, and that this phenomenon is itself significant enough to warrant a special discourse, is all the more reason to focus our attention on how the public sees, understands, and talks about it.

Moreover, taking heed of Karl Marx’s axiom, to “change the world,” not just interpret it philosophically, those of us who study Islamophobia but have qualms about the term would
do well to notice the pushback that the word receives from the very people who actively promote inflammatory material about Muslims and Islam. The reason that American bloggers like Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, conspiracy theorists like Frank Gaffney, politicians like Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen, and others vociferously reject “Islamophobia” as a label is that they see it as a threat to their work. When the public accepts such a term (think of the way that the civil rights era changed when “racism” became commonly applied), it becomes infinitely more difficult to advance the types of ideas that are often associated with it without risking being labeled a “racist,” an “Islamophobe,” a “homophobe,” an “anti-Semite,” or whatever terminology fits the prejudice. The argument could easily be made that continued debate about the word plays directly into the hands of those who would seek to undermine it, and while I am not advocating that we accept it wholesale for this reason, I do maintain that the worst of the anti-Muslim activists and agitators seem to have recognized something that many of us in the academic world have not, namely, that there is increasing public agreement about the word Islamophobia and the phenomenon it describes.

Moving forward

It would not be prudent to intimate the necessity of some coercion such that all who speak and write of prejudice towards Muslims would get on the same page and use the same term. I am aware, for sure, that language does not work that way, either, and that the plurality of expressions, phrases, and terms that form our vocabularies will inevitably come to life when we express our views on this topic or others. By now, the reader will have noted that I, too, have employed synonyms for “Islamophobia” at various places in this chapter, straying from the tendency to use one word in every instance I speak of its associated phenomenon. Still, though, my hope is that this common-sense-based approach will encourage us to think more carefully about the language that we do use, and recognize that no matter how we may feel about the words “Islamophobia,” it is not going anywhere. More to my point, though: if it were to be changed, it would not be changed by scholars who debate its deficiencies in academic circles, but rather by a larger community or public shift. Given what we know about its history, entrenchment in public discourse over the years, and new awakening in the age of increased animosity towards Muslims, that seems unlikely. And thus, the choice for academics and others who nonetheless insist that we must continue to debate it becomes clear: we may chase frantically after a train that has already left the station in hopes that if we run hard enough we may catch it; or we can board the train that is dedicated to moving forward with serious questions about how to ameliorate and end a pernicious form of prejudice that is taking the lives of our fellow citizens as we speak.

Notes

1 See www.islamophobia.org/research/islamophobia-101.html and http://bridge.georgetown.edu/about.
2 See http://bridge.georgetown.edu/islamophobia-the-right-word-for-a-real-problem.
3 For a fuller discussion of the definition of anti-Semitism, see Marcus (2015).

References