

Islamophobia Briefing

Islamophobia Defined

In November 2018, that APPG on British Muslims released a report “Islamophobia Defined” which urged the government to adopt a legal definition of Islamophobia.¹ The proposed definition is:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

Problems with the definition

1. Islam is not a race, and therefore criticism of Islam is not racism.
2. ‘Perceived Muslimness’ is hopelessly vague.
3. The definition conflates the religion Islam with the people Muslims.
4. ‘Islam’ is not defined. This definition could privilege a narrow interpretation of Islam.
5. The report makes clear that the idea is to define ‘Islamophobia’ as a form of ‘cultural racism’ making it unacceptable to criticise Islamic culture, teaching, or practices.
6. Allegations of ‘Islamophobia’ are already being used to shut down legitimate debate.
7. Adoption of this definition will serve to curtail free speech in relation to Islam.
8. Adoption of this definition risks undermining counter-terrorism operations.

In addition, no definition of Islamophobia is needed as we already have laws which cover religiously motivated hate crime, incitement to religious hatred, and discrimination because of a person’s religion or belief. ‘Anti-Muslim’ is a better term as it makes clear that criticism is directed against Muslims as individuals rather than against Islam as a religion.

Adoption of the definition

Notwithstanding the serious concerns with this definition, several political parties rushed to adopt it. The Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalist Party, Plaid Cymru, Scottish Conservatives, and Scottish Greens have all formally adopted this definition.² The definition has also been adopted by 22 local councils to date.³

Objection to the definition

An open letter to the Home Secretary last year objecting to the definition was signed by over 40 leading experts from a range of religious backgrounds.⁴ Signatories included Richard Dawkins, Peter Tatchell, Lord Sing, Baroness Cox, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, and historian Tom Holland. The letter was supported by Christian Concern and the National Secular Society showing the wide range of opposition to this definition.

¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

²<https://www.islamophobia-definition.com/endorsements/political-parties-and-local-councils/>

³<https://www.islamophobia-definition.com/endorsements/political-parties-and-local-councils/>

⁴<https://christianconcern.com/comment/open-letter-to-home-secretary-rejects-islamophobia-definition/>

The government's response

The government announced in May 2019 that it would not adopt the APPG definition of Islamophobia, but that it would appoint two advisers to propose an alternative definition.⁵ In July, Imam Qari Asim was appointed to this role and so far he remains the only appointment to advise the government on defining Islamophobia.⁶ His appointment has attracted criticism after he was found to have argued for exceptions to free speech for things that Muslims find 'offensive or distasteful.'⁷ He has recently faced calls to stand down as a result.

Trevor Phillips Indictment

This week, it was revealed that former head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips, was suspended from the Labour Party over allegations of Islamophobia.⁸ His suspension shows how the definition of Islamophobia adopted by the Labour Party can be used to shut down or stigmatise legitimate debate and discussion about Islam-related issues.

What should be done?

1. Politicians and others should now recognise that the APPG definition of Islamophobia is not fit for purpose and serves to curtail free speech.
2. Political parties that have adopted this definition should quickly move to abandon it. The same applies to local councils.
3. The government should force Imam Qari Asim to step down as adviser on defining Islamophobia because of concerns about how he would like to restrict free speech.
4. The government should abandon plans to define Islamophobia altogether. Any definition of this term is likely to conflate the religion of Islam with individual Muslims and thus risk curtailing free speech. The term 'Anti-Muslim' is clear and sufficient to describe hatred of or discrimination against Muslims.

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⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-process-set-out-to-establish-a-working-definition-of-islamophobia>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-expert-appointed-to-tackle-islamophobia>

⁷ <https://christianconcern.com/comment/government-islamophobia-adviser-should-step-down/>

⁸ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/labour-suspends-race-pioneer-trevor-phillips-over-islamophobia-claims-m7qzzqz8d>