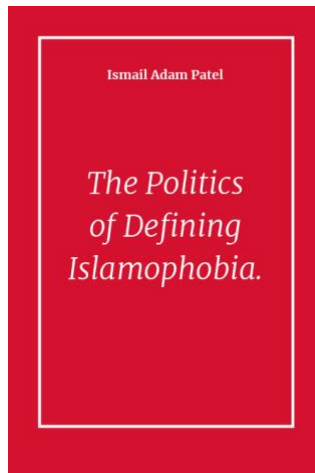


ARTICLES

The Politics of Defining Islamophobia

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ABSTRACT

The escalation of Islamophobia in contemporary societies, particularly in the UK, requires a comprehensive understanding and a proactive intervention . Far from being an abstract concept, Islamophobia manifests itself as a tangible form of discrimination, rooted in historical prejudices and exacerbated by modern political discourse and constructed narratives . This essay will delve into the undeniable reality of Islamophobia, document its increasing incidence, analyse the UK government's perceived failure to adopt an agreed-upon definition, and critically examine how the government's approach to defining Islamophobia undermines Muslim agency and itself exhibits Islamophobic tendencies . It will also argue that while a formal definition offers crucial inroad towards redress, it alone cannot eliminate the deeply entrenched nature of Islamophobia . Finally, it will assert that the politics surrounding the definition of Islamophobia often inadvertently fuel it, emphasising the imperative for Muslim communities to reject imposed definitions and collectively organise to advocate for genuine justice and recognition.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslims in UK, UK government's perception and treatment of Muslims.

The Reality of Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a pervasive and lived reality for British Muslims, ranging from everyday micro-aggressions¹ to overt acts of violence and institutional discrimination.² Measures of social inequality, crime surveys, and polling data consistently demonstrate that Muslims face significant obstacles that impede their full and equal participation in society.³ This prejudice is not confined to isolated incidents but includes every aspect of life; it is everywhere and experienced everyday. It affects a wide-range spectrum of people, from children in nursery schools to adults in universities, and from the workplace to recreational centres and

individual interactions. Muslims often find themselves framed by Islamophobia through discussions concerning national security, social cohesion, freedom of speech, gender inequality, cultural belonging, their names, attires and even the type of food they consume . The Runnymede Trust, a leading UK racial justice think tank, noted in 2017 that Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism.⁴ Its work highlights that despite not being a single race, Muslims are racialised, meaning that their treatment is based on assumptions about their beliefs, behaviour, and politics . For the Muslims of colour, this racialisation is compounded by racism and all Muslims suffer from the long shadow of the “War on Terror”⁵ which has scrutinised Muslims as suspects until proven otherwise .

Despite this, the legal framework in common law jurisdictions like the UK has struggled to categorise Muslims as a racial group, leaving a gap in their legal safeguard. Traditionally, common law jurisdictions define “race” in a way that includes colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin, a definition rooted in the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965).⁶ Under this framework, groups primarily perceived in religious terms, such as the Jews and Sikhs, have successfully been recognised as racial groups based on their “ethnic” or “ethno-religious” origin for discrimination law purposes . However, this interpretation has not been extended to Muslims.⁷ This means a Muslim can seek protection if an attacker calls him/her a P... B... . . but there will be no protection for them if they are verbally assaulted because of being a Muslim B... .

A significant barrier for Muslims is the “self-identification” requirement established by courts. To be considered an “ethnic” group and be entitled to racial discrimination protection, a group must not only be perceived by others but also regard itself as a distinct community beyond merely religious terms.⁸ Critics argue that this requirement misconceives how racial groups are constituted and ignores that racial discrimination often precedes racial self-identification. This denial of Islamophobia as racism, often based on the assertion that Islam is a religion and Muslims of various ethnicities cannot be considered to be constructed as a single culture, is seen as a fundamental misunderstanding of how race is socially constructed and how groups can be racialised along cultural lines . Ultimately, the current legal approach fails to adequately capture the dynamic nature of racialisation and the real-world impact of discriminatory attitudes and beliefs vis-à-vis Muslim communities in the United Kingdom.⁹

The Increasing Incidence of Islamophobia

The incidence of Islamophobia has risen to alarming levels in the UK, which signals a deepening crisis for Muslim communities. In 2024, Tell Mama, an organisation that monitors anti-Muslim hate crimes, recorded 6,313 cases, representing a 43% increase from the previous year, with 5,837 of these reports verified.¹⁰ The Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) reported an even more dramatic 763% increase in Islamophobic incidents in October 2024 compared to the previous year, largely following the Israel-Gaza conflict.¹¹

Attacks on Muslim communities also surged following the Southport murders in July 2023 which were falsely claimed to have been perpetrated by a Muslim, predominantly on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter).¹² This is further exacerbated by the normalisation of Islamophobic rhetoric in political discourse and the spread of far-right conspiracy theories such as the “Great Replacement.”¹³ Instances of political figures, like Boris Johnson, comparing veiled Muslim women to “letterboxes” or “bank robbers,” were followed by a

375% increase in Islamophobic incidents, many targeting visible Muslim women.¹⁴ The Runnymede Trust's report also cited a 335% increase in hate cases against Muslims in the year leading up to February 2024, with most cases affecting women.¹⁵ This relationship between discriminatory public statements by influential figures and Islamophobic preponderance is incontrovertible .

The Failure of Government to Adopt a Definition

Despite the escalating incidence and common currency of the term Islamophobia, successive UK governments have consistently failed to adopt a formal, agreed-upon definition of the term. The term "Islamophobia" itself has a genealogy and started to become popular in the early 1990s and was later adopted by the Runnymede Trust's 1997 report, "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" . A Google search shows that, within the twelve months¹⁶ to August 2025, the term Islamophobia appeared over 400,000 times as compared to anti-Muslim at 140,000 . Despite its widespread application and the everyday experiences of Muslims, the term Islamophobia has generated intense debate within the political circle. The contention often revolves around a literal or etymological reading of Islamophobia as a "fear of Islam." Critics propose alternative terms like anti-Muslim hatred . However, introducing alternative terms when Islamophobia is used by the majority of people is resisted, as it deflects from the politics of addressing the prejudice just as it also hijacks the language of the sufferers to explain the symptom. The saturation of the term "Islamophobia" suggests that efforts should focus on the work Islamophobia is employed to carry out.

Further, in the decades since the 1997 Runnymede Report, there has been a persistent obfuscation by the governments of both the Conservative and Labour on endorsing a definition. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims undertook an extensive review in 2018, consulting academics, civil society organisations, and faith groups, proposing the definition, 'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness .' ¹⁷ This definition has been adopted by many councils around the country, trade unions and institutes including the Labour Party when it was in opposition.¹⁸ However, once in power, the current Labour government reneged on its pledge and opted instead to establish a new working group to advise on an alternative definition.

The Government Not Accepting Mainstream Muslims and APPG Definition

The government's decision to create a new council and working group rather than adopting the APPG definition has been met with significant disappointment, particularly from mainstream Muslim organisations . The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the largest umbrella body representing over 500 Muslim affiliates, has urged the government to adopt the APPG definition instead of 'reinventing the wheel.'¹⁹ This suggests a perceived 'rowing back'²⁰ on previous commitments .

Labour's faith minister, Lord Khan, stated in September 2024 that the APPG definition 'is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race in terms of colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins.' He also claimed that the government's approach would not

‘inhibit the lawful right to freedom of expression.’ This stance reflects the criticisms that the APPG definition might stifle criticism of Islam. The APPG definition does not define race in terms of colour, rather states Islamophobia as ‘a type of racism’ indicating Islamophobia has a family resemblance with racism and as such it is ‘rooted in racism.’ Neither does it in any way restrict any criticism of Islam, making it very clear that Islamophobia targets ‘expression of Muslimness.’ That is, aspects of what is considered Muslim-centric are problematised and targeted.

Crucially, the Labour government has now launched a new working group called British Muslim Network (BMN). It has appointed a new chair, the former Conservative attorney general Dominic Grieve, invited a select group of Muslims, and other non-Muslims of its choice, while side-lining mainstream Muslims and Muslim organisations, including the Muslim Council of Britain.

Undermining Muslim Agency and Reflecting Islamophobia

The government’s approach to defining Islamophobia is criticised as being a ‘farfetched box-ticking exercise’ that is ‘structurally rigged to avoid engagement with the very communities whose rights it claims to serve.’²¹

Firstly, the process for submitting evidence has been designed to avoid actual engagement.²² Standard parliamentary inquiries typically allow for around 3,000 words for submissions, recognising the complex and nuanced nature of issues like Islamophobia, which requires in-depth analysis from lived experiences, academic literature, and data. However, the government’s working group imposed ‘tight limits,’ sometimes allowing answers no longer than 70 to 100 characters – ‘barely more than one tweet’s worth of letters.’ This restriction makes it impossible to adequately cover legislative gaps, media biases, hate crime trends, or workplace discrimination, thus appearing more like a “bureaucratic muzzle” than a sincere consultation.²³

Secondly, the working group was reportedly prohibited by the Government from engaging with grassroots civil rights Muslim bodies like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Muslim Engagement & Development (MEND).²⁴ These organisations have a track record of reporting Islamophobia and have extensive ties and trust within British Muslim communities. The exclusion of these credible Muslim voices ‘has been built into the very structure of this process, with the intention of reaching a predetermined outcome.’²⁵

Thirdly, concerns have grown to become ‘consternation and alarm’ when considering ‘who has actually been consulted.’²⁶ Investigations show that the working group sought advice from non-Muslim individuals and organisations who have ‘not only denied Islamophobia in the past, but who themselves have stood accused of promoting Islamophobia.’²⁷ Examples include:

- Trevor Phillips who, in 2020, was suspended from the Labour Party over allegations of Islamophobia.²⁸
- The right-wing “think tank” Policy Exchange, with whom Trevor Phillips was a senior fellow. Policy Exchange has also been accused by Muslim activists of having

an ‘Islamophobic agenda.’²⁹ They were also previously accused by BBC Newsnight of fabricating evidence in reference to mosques.³⁰

- The National Security Society³¹ and Humanists UK,³² both of whom have publicly argued against the APPG definition of Islamophobia.
- The most damning is the revelation that British Muslim Network is in part funded by Together Coalition . This is a charity co-founded by Brendan Cox and chaired by Justin Welby, former Archbishop of Canterbury, who resigned after it was found that the Church of England covered up sexual abuse committed by a barrister who attacked as many as 130 boys and young men,³³ despite the claim of British Muslim Network co-founder Akeela Ahmed that the network was ‘only speaking to potential funders within the British Muslim community.’

This approach of appointing non-Muslims with a track record of rejecting the APPG definition of Islamophobia, some undermining the very term Islamophobia and themselves accused of Islamophobia for their input, is more than an insult to British Muslims . Bearing in mind also that the government is also actively blocking legitimate grassroots Muslims bodies, this is like appointing accused misogynists and rapists to address the problem of violence against women.

A Definition Will Not Eliminate Islamophobia, it will Only Provide Redress

While the adoption of a formal definition of Islamophobia is a crucial step, it is important to recognise its limitations: ‘it will not eliminate Islamophobia entirely but primarily provide a framework for victims to seek redress and for institutions to act.’³⁴ Islamophobia is not merely a collection of individual hate crimes; it operates at deeply institutional and structural levels . Decades of work on Islamophobia highlight that understanding the impact of structural Islamophobia on the everyday experience of Muslims is essential to tackling street-level violence and hatred.³⁵ State-sponsored Islamophobia, as seen in policies like Prevent and incidents like the Trojan Hoax, extends beyond the scope of hate crime legislation.³⁶

A definition, such as the APPG’s ‘Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness,’ places Islamophobia into a broader shared cultural literacy around justice, harms, and recourse.³⁷ It facilitates operationalisation within organisations that already have mechanisms for dealing with racism, thus avoiding the need for entirely new procedures.³⁸ It also recognises “race” as a “loose and mobile set of characteristics” rather than a biological one, acknowledging that individuals are reduced to group identities based on assumptions about their Muslimness .

The real ‘work of definition’ lies in increasing public understanding of the concept.³⁹ This is the first step in recognising Islamophobia and a stepping stone to addressing it. In that sense, a definition provides language and confidence for victims to bring forth grievances and seek recourse, and makes it more likely for those enforcing equality principles to recognise and act upon such grievances. It serves as a catalyst for cultural shifts, challenging dominant narratives and fostering critical reflection on underlying power dynamics and prejudices. Hence, a definition is only the beginning in the process of addressing Islamophobia and one of many tools and, yet, even this is being denied to the Muslims.

The Politics of Defining Islamophobia Fuels its Increase

The very ‘politics of definition’ surrounding Islamophobia, particularly the government’s approach, risks feeding into its increasing prevalence.⁴⁰ The ongoing debate and the perceived insincerity of the consultation process deepen mistrust among Muslim communities, leading to the conclusion that this consultation is designed to allow Islamophobia to go unchecked.⁴¹

The fact that the government’s working group consults individuals and organisations accused of promoting Islamophobia, while excluding expert Muslim bodies, not only reveals the process as a “charade” but also reinforces the narrative that bigotry and discrimination against Muslims are acceptable.⁴² This aligns with the “normalisation” of Islamophobia, as seen in the Runnymede Trust’s assessment that it is ‘increasingly seen as respectable’ and ‘hegemonic.’⁴³ By engaging with those who deny or promote Islamophobia, the government inadvertently legitimises their views and contributes to an environment wherein Islamophobic sentiments can flourish unchallenged.⁴⁴

The resistance to defining Islamophobia is often framed as a defence of ‘free speech’ or a concern about ‘censorship,’ which creates a ‘deliberately constructed narrative’ that positions Muslims as ‘undesirable victims.’⁴⁵ This narrative, prevalent among British politicians, talking heads and the media, itself is a symptom of Islamophobia. Such arguments deflect from the structural and institutional forms of Islamophobia, reducing the issue to individual acts of bigotry rather than being a systemic prejudice. The ambiguity in defining extremism, for instance, appears to be a ‘strategic move, allowing the standards for what is considered extreme to evolve with political changes,’ which disproportionately targets Muslims. This reluctance to define Islamophobia mirrors the government’s hesitance to adopt a comprehensive definition, making it difficult to dismantle policies that perpetuate institutionalised Islamophobia.⁴⁶

Muslims Must Not Accept Imposed Definitions Without Wider Engagement

It is essential that Muslims do not accept a definition of Islamophobia that is imposed upon them without genuine and broad engagement from Muslim communities themselves. This is not simply a matter of politics; rather, it reflects the principle that only through the unhindered participation of those who experience Islamophobia can the issue be fully understood and addressed. Any definition formulated without the free and active involvement of Muslims risks becoming a mere political window dressing, which offers the illusion of progress without tackling the real problem.

For such a definition to carry real ‘cultural currency’, it must be intuitively meaningful, easy to recall, and grounded in the familiar vocabularies of social justice. In other words, its effectiveness depends entirely on whether it resonates with, and is taken up by, the very people it is meant to serve.

As Islamophobia intensifies and governments show little willingness to protect Muslims, communities cannot afford to wait for salvation from above. A government-led definition of Islamophobia—or any of its derivative terms—will not dismantle the discrimination and

prejudice that Muslims face . The responsibility lies with those affected by it to act collectively, courageously, and decisively . Justice for Muslims begins at the community level . Reviving the principles of solidarity and organising at the grassroots is essential . These grassroots initiatives must also connect with others nationally, building strong internal ties that create a united front against top-down definitions imposed by the state . Yet this struggle is not the burden of Muslims alone . Confronting Islamophobia is part of a broader fight against racism and domination in all its forms . True justice is indivisible, and liberation must be collective . Resistance, therefore, must be both intra-communal and inter-communal, rooted in local action yet extending across the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Islamophobia in the United Kingdom is an escalating reality, which is evident in multiple forms ranging from street-level violence to systemic discrimination . The government's refusal to adopt an inclusive definition and its willingness to engage with individuals accused of perpetuating Islamophobia further entrenches this prejudice and undermines Muslim voices and erodes Muslim identity. At its core, the debate over definition is not neutral. It is rather political. The absence of consensus reflects a broader struggle over whether Muslims are entitled to the same legal protections as other communities . A comprehensive definition must go beyond semantics, it should enable effective monitoring and regulation while recognising how Muslimness is discursively constructed as "Other."⁴⁷ The APPG definition, despite its limitations, remains the most workable option, providing conceptual grounding, legal clarity, and a framework for countering Islamophobia . Yet, while formal recognition is vital for redress and accountability, definitions alone cannot dismantle systemic prejudice . The real struggle lies in grassroots mobilisation, political engagement, and collective resistance to imposed narratives . As history shows, transformative racial justice movements begin at the community level, shifting public consciousness and forcing institutions to act . Only through sustained organisation and solidarity, within Muslim communities and across all racialised groups, can genuine recognition, protection, and justice be secured, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive society.

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