

Focus paper

Prepared for the Muslim-Jewish Conference 2010



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I. Terminology

Thesis: The term “Islamophobia” is, in the majority of cases, misleading when it comes to denote racist attitudes towards Muslims; it should therefore be replaced by alternative terms.

I.1 | It is (usually) not about “Islam” – it is about racism

Not “Islam” is the object of everyday life discrimination, aggression, or hostility, but the people who are associated with it, be they believers or not. The rejection of these people appears to be primarily motivated by their perceived “otherness” (cf. point II.b). In contrast to the *Runnymede Trust’s* popular definition of “Islamophobia”, discrimination against alleged or actual Muslims is (at least usually) *not* a derivative of “(h)ostility towards Islam” which is then “used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims”¹ – it is the other way around: racists reject people due to a perception of them being different; then, they try to rationalize this rejection by referring to “religion” or “culture”. “Othering” hence does not evoke racist resentment, but constitutes its (pseudo-)rational consequence.

Who wants to “free Europe from Islam” usually strives for a Europe “free” from Turks, Arabs, or Maghrebians (or, more precisely: from people who look as if they came from these regions). This assumption is supported by the fact that also people are targeted by racists as “Muslims” who are not even religious, but may read an Arab newspaper or look as if they were able to read it. As a consequence, if we are dealing with any kind of phobia, it is a phobia of Muslims (or “Muslimophobia”), not of Islam – or, more precisely, a phobia of the “other” (allophobia), this time allocated a “Muslim” label.

I.2 | The term can be (an often is) misused

- I.2.a) Phobia is to be distinguished from critique: The idea that no one can be forced to adhere to a certain religion or religion at all was one of the main attainments of enlightenment and modernity. Freedom of religion necessarily entails the right to freedom *from* religion, the freedom to criticize religion and to confront it with rational thinking and values of modern secular societies. This applies – or, at least, should apply – for Islam as well as for Judaism,

¹ <http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/islamophobia-a-definition/>, Point 7 [page accessed July 13th, 2010].

Christendom or any other religion.² Still, critics of religion in general and of Islam in particular often find themselves confronted with the accusation of “Islamophobia”, especially (but not only) brought forward by representatives of Islamism / political Islam, whose agenda is not to fight racism directed towards Muslims, but to immunize themselves and their political project against critique and delegitimize the critics.³ Science should not assist them by strengthening a misleading discourse.

While it cannot be ignored that occasionally also racists label themselves as critics, it is not too complicated to tell racism from critique: The latter (a) does not have collectivities of people as its objects, but ideas / belief systems and their social consequences (including what actors such as states, political parties, religious organizations or individuals *do* or *demand* from [other] individuals with reference to religion); and (b) it acknowledges the option of individuals to make decisions. Racism, on the other hand, keeps targeting (self-constructed groups of) people, deliberately misinterpreting their thinking and actions as effects of their invariable “nature” or “character”.

- I.2.b | Phobia is to be distinguished from (rational) fear: It is understandable, if not logical, that some people are afraid of, e.g., Islamist terrorist attacks or of the idea of Atomic weapons in the hands of an apocalyptician such as Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad. Such fear is perfectly reasonable, though actions or demands accruing from it might not. “Phobia”, on the other hand, denotes irrational fear, a state of mental illness. Applying, as often is the case, the concept of “Islamophobia” to people with rational (sic) fears of religious fundamentalists therefore means delegitimizing them by declaring justified concerns as pathological and is clearly a move of manipulative rhetoric.

I.3 | Conclusion: There is a phenomenon that can justifiably be denoted as “Islamophobia”: cases in which people fear (not criticize) Islam (not Muslims) without rational reasons. There are obviously individuals out there who can be

² Of course, the particular position of speakers and power relations within a discourse are to be taken into account: e.g. in Austria, where the majority population is Christian, a critique of Christendom can probably be more pointed and aggressive than a critique of Islam. Exempting a Muslim community from critique of religion because it faces discrimination, however, would imply a paternalist or even racist attitude, denying Muslims responsibility for their beliefs and social practices and thus affirming their status as victims and “others”.

³ Cf. the manifest against “religious totalitarianism” published by twelve intellectuals in 2006 in *Charlie Hebdo*, stating that Islamophobia was „a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatisation of those who believe in it” (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4764730.stm> [page accessed July 13th, 2010]).

diagnosed with this pathology, but compared to racist attitudes in general and racist attitudes towards Muslims in particular, they most certainly constitute a minor problem. When it comes to racist attitudes, the term “Islamophobia”, despite its appealing catchiness, is better suited to disguise the real nature of the problem than to describe it. In science, however, terms should be chosen due to what they are able to contribute to an accurate understanding of the phenomenon in question.

In an open society, it must be okay to criticize what someone thinks or does. However, it should not be acceptable to discriminate, attack or oppress people for what they are believed to invariably *be*. That latter attitude already has a name, and that name is “racism”. Thus, if a group’s (or conference’s) common project is not about choking the expression of well-founded critique, holding up to ridicule reasonable fears, fighting individual psychoses or supporting fundamentalist agendas, but to fight racism directed towards actual or suspected Muslims, a first step could be starting to call the problem by its name: *(anti-Muslim) racism*.⁴

II. Socio-psychological differences between anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism

Thesis: While analytical comparison of anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism makes sense in order to gain a better insight into both and discover effective means of fighting them, current debates tend to overemphasize similarities while being negligent of the differences, which can also be a hindrance for proper understanding.

II.1 | Similarities: It is an undeniable fact that anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism partially manifest themselves in similar images, stereotypes, and prejudices (cf. e.g. Benz 2008: 9 et seq. or Farid Hafez’s paper prepared for the MJC). In some cases, a transfer (in the sense of expansion, not replacement) of motives seems to have occurred. Apart from these similarities concerning the methods of *othering* and bogeyman construction, parallels can be observed regarding the socio-historical contexts, too.⁵ Also, people with hostile attitudes

⁴ This term, of course, also has its weaknesses, above all the fact that it acknowledges and thus indirectly affirms the racist rationalization mentioned before (it is not simply about “Muslims”, but more general about people labelled as such). This critique also applies to the term “anti-Muslimism” as proposed by Fred Halliday.

⁵ Modern anti-Semitism evolved in Central Europe at a time where Jews were assimilating and being Jewish became increasingly “normal” (or *de-othered*) in these societies. Similarly,

towards Muslims often hate Jews as well, and vice versa – anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism hence appear to be mutually reinforcing. Still, understanding both phenomena and, as a result, being able to fight them also requires an adequate analytical differentiation.⁶

From an ideal-typical perspective (and, thus, acknowledging the existence of individual cases that contradict the following assertions), there are at least two major differences to be addressed:

II.2 | Chauvinism vs. “Rebellion”⁷: The typical anti-Muslim racist looks down on Muslims in a (post-)colonialist manner, regarding them as inferior, backward, un-/antimodern, uncivilized, unenlightened, and so on. Still, he/she simultaneously perceives them as competitors (for work, housing, property, social transfers, etc.), being aware, though unconsciously, of each individual’s dispensability in the capitalist economic process. To cope with the fear of being defeated, replaced, and deprived of their privileges, racists imagine themselves as “naturally” superior to others, projecting their own substitutability and suppressed desires (e.g. for laziness, unproductiveness and other attitudes forbidden due to capitalist/bourgeois ethics) onto others. In this sense, racism can be described as a “chronical pathology” (Gruber 2004: 18) of capitalist societies.

For the typical anti-Semite, Jews are not competitors – they are the reason why there is competition at all, the architects and engineers of the whole system that sets individuals against one another. They appear as personifications of capitalism and the very incarnation of modernity and of everything it entails (materialism, the compulsion to work for money, capital accumulation, interest, individualization, the replacement of traditional communities by the more abstract social arrangement of “society”, and so on). Jews are believed to control politics, business, and the media. In short, they are regarded as rulers of the world due to extraordinary powers and skills attributed to them.⁸ While racists “kick down” on Muslims, anti-Semites

the rise of anti-Muslim attitudes experienced today in this region can be interpreted as a “rearguard battle” against the normalization of diversity.

⁶ Such differentiation must of course not play communities affected by discrimination off against one another or engage in arguments about “who suffered/suffers most”, although this is unfortunately what frequently happens.

⁷ For this paragraph, dealing with the specific (modern) form of racism under capitalist conditions, cf. Bruhn 1994 (esp. p. 80), Gruber 2004, and Weidinger 2010: 232-236.

⁸ Also Muslims are sometimes suspected to want to “dominate the world” – but are usually not alleged of a strategy of conspiracy, manipulation and subversion from within their “host societies”, but of open violence and/or demographic outnumbering.

“strike upwards” against Jews; while racists believe to defend what they have against usurpers from beneath, anti-Semites see themselves as “rebels” or “freedom fighters” against alleged Jewish oppression.⁹ As racists are normally also Anti-Semites and vice versa, one single person can act as self-proclaimed defender of modernity, progress and “Western values” against Muslims (for Austria, cf. the 2010 IMAS survey, p. 4), and opponent of modernity (as an anti-Semite) at the same time.

II.3 | Domination vs. Annihilation

Racists want the objects of their hate to assimilate (to stop “being different”), accept insults, exclusion, and exploitation, or otherwise to “go where they came from”.

Neo-racists (adhering to the concepts of “ethnopluralism” or “cultural differentialism”) even propagate a “right to difference”, asserting that each and every “culture” is to be preserved in its “natural” habitat, while cultures shall not “mix”.

Consequently, anti-Muslim racists, such as those organized in the *Freedomite Party of Austria* (FPÖ) or its youth organization (RFJ), often claim to respect or even admire “Islamic culture”, as long as it confines itself to countries with a Muslim majority population (cf. FPÖ 2008, RFJ 2006).

For anti-Semites, Jews are not simply a different “people”, but the very “anti-people”; not just “the other”, but the “very other” or “the third” (Klaus Holz)¹⁰; not simply a hostile community (which would still be part of a family of “nations” or “races”), but enemies and decomposers of every community and mankind as such. The combination of evilness and omnipotence that Jews are alleged of lets them appear, in the eye of the anti-Semite, as an existential threat that can be tolerated in no place whatsoever, not even in the one single country where they constitute a majority. While racists want to subjugate and dominate their victims, anti-Semites, in the long run, want to annihilate Jews to “save the world”.

⁹ As far as the anti-Semitism of Christians is concerned, this relation can also have a religious twist to it: For a religious community that started out as a Jewish sect, rebellion against / dissociation from the father (Judaism) became vital, while Islam was perceived as younger brother/sister which was (and is) seen sometimes as a competitor, sometimes as a (potential) ally in the ongoing fight against the father.

¹⁰ Anti-Semitism is hence not a “heterophobia” or prejudice, it is a “Weltanschauung” or “Alltagsreligion” (“functional religion”), a comprehensive ideology that seemingly allows for the explanation of virtually everything that is going on in the world (cf. Holz 2001 and Claussen 1992).

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¹¹ Access date for all webpages is July 13th, 2010.