

Briefing on ISLAMOPHOBIA

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, 2.8% of Britain's population (1.6 million people) said they were Muslim, in response to a voluntary question on religion in the census. By comparison, 72% described themselves as Christian, 15% said they had no religion, and 2.7% said they were other religious believers; 8% did not answer the question. Some estimates place the size of the Muslim population much higher, because of the recent arrival of Muslims from the former Yugoslavia.

The largest Muslim communities are in Greater London, the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and central Scotland. The local authorities with the largest Muslim populations were Tower Hamlets (36%), Newham (24%), Blackburn (19%), Bradford (16%), Waltham Forest (15%), Luton (15%), Birmingham (14%), Hackney (14%), Pendle (13%), Slough (13%) and Brent (12%).

Most Muslims in Britain belong to the Sunni tradition of Islam, which accounts for 90% of Muslims worldwide. Only a small proportion of British Muslims are Shi'as.

Muslims in Britain are from diverse ethnic backgrounds: 43% have origins in Pakistan; 17% in Bangladesh, and 9% in India; 6% have Black origins; 4% White, and 21% other origins.¹ Around a quarter of Muslims in Britain have origins in the Middle East and North Africa.

Despite the considerable contributions made by Muslims in Britain, they experience various forms of alienation, discrimination, harassment and violence, rooted in misinformed and stereotyped representations of Islam and its adherents – the irrational phenomenon that has come to be known as Islamophobia.²

DEFINITIONS

Islamophobia has been defined as the fear and/or hatred of Islam, Muslims or Islamic culture. It can be seen in the belief that all or most Muslims are religious fanatics, have violent tendencies towards non-Muslims, and reject as directly opposed to Islam such concepts as equality, tolerance, and democracy. Islamophobia is a new form of racism, whereby Muslims, an ethno-religious group, not a race, are nevertheless constructed as a race; a set of negative assumptions is made of the entire group, to the detriment of members of that group.³

1. Muslims In Britain: A Journey To Self Awareness, 2004 www.siyassa.org/esiyassa

2. FAIR (Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism) www.fairuk.org

3. Definition from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia>

The Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All* (1997) identified eight attitudes, perceptions or responses that may be attributed to Islamophobia:

- Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
- Islam is seen as separate and 'other'. It does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them.
- Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive, and sexist.
- Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, and engaged in a 'clash of civilisations'.
- Islam is seen as a political ideology and is used for political or military advantage.
- Criticisms made of the West by Islam are rejected out of hand.
- Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
- Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural or normal.

Islamophobia can lead to a wide range of incidents, including arson, bomb hoaxes, criminal damage, graffiti, assault, abuse and threats. Attacks on people from other groups apparently mistaken for Muslims have also increased. While there is no reliable central collection of data on Islamophobia, these trends were acknowledged by the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee of 2005, and have also been highlighted by independent organisations, such as Minority Rights Group International.

MYTHS AND REBUTTALS

All Muslims are terrorists

Terrorism cannot be justified under any valid interpretation of the Islamic faith.

Terrorism is a criminal offence, which all law-abiding British citizens (including Muslims) condemn. The small number of extremists who claim to act in the name of Islam do not represent the views held by most Muslims living in Britain. Muslims were among the victims of both the New York attacks and the London bombings.

Only three Muslims have been convicted under the 2000 and 2001 Terrorism Acts, and two of them have been given leave to appeal their convictions. Six of the people convicted under the Acts were white, and were convicted of offences such as exhibiting symbols of banned Loyalist organisations. One of two further convictions of non-Muslims under the 2001 Act was for sending a racist letter containing white powder to the office of a Muslim MP.⁴

Muslims worship a moon-god

Some non-Muslims mistakenly believe that Allah is an 'Arab god', a 'moon god' or some sort of idol. In fact, the most basic belief of Islam is that 'there is only one god', the same god worshipped by Moses, Abraham and other prophets mentioned in the Bible. 'Allah' is simply the Arabic word for god and is often used by Arab Christians as well.

4. Institute of Race Relations, 'Study into use of anti-terror laws', 2004

Islam is intolerant of other faiths

Throughout the Qur'an, Muslims are reminded that they are not the only ones who worship God. Jews and Christians are called 'People of the Book', meaning people who have received previous revelations from God. The Qur'an commands Muslims to protect from harm not only mosques, but also monasteries, synagogues and churches, because 'God is worshipped therein'.⁵ It also encourages Muslims to work together with people of other faiths and look for common ground.

Islam is a faith that promotes violence through jihad

Islam is an Arabic word, the root of which is *silm* and *salam*. It means, among other things, peace and submission to the will of God. The Qur'an preaches that all of humanity belongs to one family and that mankind is honoured. It emphasises the value of human life, and respect for people of other religions.

The word jihad stems from an Arabic word meaning to 'strive' or 'struggle' at all levels, in order to get closer to God. It could be an internal struggle, against one's own selfish tendencies, to become more spiritual and moral. It could be a struggle, at the level of one's community, for goals such as social justice and human rights. It could also mean taking up arms in self-defence or to deter an aggressor. The Qur'an never uses the term jihad to mean armed struggle.

Islam oppresses women

There is a difference between what the Qur'an says and custom and practice by Muslims across the world. For example, in Turkey or Malaysia women can have highly influential social roles, whereas in other, especially rural, environments, women are not even allowed to be educated.

Practices such as forced marriages, spousal abuse and restriction of movement directly contradict Islamic law governing family behaviour and personal freedom.⁶

FURTHER INFORMATION

- **Muslim Council of Britain** (main representative body of Muslim organisations in UK)
www.mcb.org.uk
- **FAIR** (Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism)
www.fairuk.org
- **Muslim Association of Britain** (MAB)
www.mabonline.net
- **FOSIS** (Federation of Student Islamic Societies)
www.fosis.org.uk
- **Islamic Foundation**
www.islamic-foundation.org.uk

5. Top 10 Myths About Islam <http://islam.about.com>

6. Top 10 Myths About Islam <http://islam.about.com>

