

'Islamophobia' distracts from tackling anti-Muslim bigotry

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We need to tackle anti-Muslim hate, but the politicised and problematic term of Islamophobia should be ditched, argues Nova Daban.

As we reach the end of 'Islamophobia Awareness Month' (IAM), the term 'Islamophobia' itself continues to generate endless debates, leaving it with no agreed definition.

Despite the term being used to describe prejudice and hateful attitudes towards Muslims, it has also been used to shield Islam from criticism, even hampering efforts to challenge extremism. The concept of Islamophobia risks creating a blasphemy code inimical to free speech and a secular liberal democracy.

There are several other terms that could be used to describe the verbal and physical abuse Muslims receive. Anti-Muslim bigotry or hatred, for example. Or even Muslimophobia. So why the insistence on a term that continues to be controversial and continuously fails to gain widespread support from civil society or the government?

IAM aims to "highlight the threat of Islamophobic hate crimes" and "showcase the positive contributions of British Muslims to society". Off the back of this there have been a couple of recent exchanges in Parliament about the failure to establish a working definition of the term. In a House of Lords debate, the [government acknowledged](#) that 45% of religious hate crimes were targeted at Muslims but warned that the term was being weaponised by groups to undermine free speech.

There is no dispute about the need to address anti-Muslim bigotry, but attempting to do so at the expense of freedom of expression will be counterproductive.

Another reason to be cautious around the IAM campaign is that they claim to have been co-founded by MEND. The organisation's former director of engagement Azad Ali has previously [stated](#) that the Islamist-inspired 2017 Westminster attack, in which Khalid Masood killed five people, was "not terrorism". He also [described](#) al-Qaeda terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki in 2008 as "one of my favourite speakers" and spoke affectionately of him, stating "I really love him for the sake of Allah."

The term 'Islamophobia' arms Islamists with a weapon to attack anyone that criticises anything and everything related to Islam, from religious texts to misogyny and even terrorism carried out in its name. [A very recent example](#) of this is a Canadian school cancelling a Nadia Murad event because "it would foster Islamophobia". Nadia Murad, a Yazidi victim of ISIS, was enslaved and raped by the Islamist terrorists during their onslaught in Iraq and Syria. She describes the horror she faced at the hands of the Islamic State's brutality in a new book called [The Last Girl](#).

For many Muslims, there is nothing more offensive than brutal terrorists attempting to hijack their religion and destroy its reputation. So why is it 'Islamophobic' to discuss terrorism, enslavement, and rape?

How far do we go in branding criticism of ancient and regressive religious and cultural practices as Islamophobic? Muslim-majority countries such as Syria, Algeria and Kazakhstan have banned full-face veils (niqabs and burqas) in certain contexts on the basis that they compromise security and symbolise discrimination against women. Suggesting anything along these lines in countries like the UK automatically leads to accusations of Islamophobia. Do you then stay consistent and call Muslims that support such moves "Islamophobic", or do you stop and think about why debates are also taking place in Muslim societies?

The hostility faced by many Muslims just trying to live their lives in peace should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Anti-Muslim bigotry is real, and those championing human rights and a truly secular society should do more to fight it. We need to combat far-right terrorism that targets Muslims, such as the mosque attack in New Zealand. We must confront China's oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang. Muslims should not have to fear for their safety. But this is no reason to promote the double-edged sword of Islamophobia, which is politically loaded and polarising.

The UK government should resist pressure to adopt a working definition of 'Islamophobia' and come up instead with a strategy to tackle anti-Muslim bigotry. This will ensure we can tackle discrimination against Muslims, whilst keeping blasphemy codes at bay and keep everyone safe from extremism.

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Nova Daban is the communications officer at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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