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Islam in Britain from the Christian anti-Muslim Prejudice  
to a Modern Form of Bigotry: Islamophobia

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**Abstract:**

Islam is the second largest religion in the United Kingdom after Christianity. The nature of the relationship between Islam and Britain has been constantly changing, from periods of conflict like the crusades to others of cooperation like trade. Hostility towards Muslims has risen in the British society after 9/11 and it was fully developed after the 7/7 London bombings, in addition to many other world events. Hence a modern form of bigotry has appeared; it was Islamophobia or the fear and hatred against Islam. In the past British Muslims faced offline islamophobic hate crimes like physical abuse, mosques being targeted and Muslim women being spat at and having their veils being pulled off. Nowadays, they are more likely to suffer from the online islamophobic hate crimes such as, threatening

behavior, bullying and intimidation of persons via all platforms of social media. Britain is a multicultural society and British Muslims are an established part of this very society. However, “Britishness” and “Muslimness” are often perceived to come in conflict, leading to an identity crisis.

**Keywords: : Islam, Britain, Bigotry, Islamophobia, Identity.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Islam and Christianity are the two largest religions in the modern history. Christian Muslim interaction was all the time trundling from periods of conflicts to others of agreements. In the context of the world today, Christian Muslim relations have become such a stressed and troubled topic. Britain like the vast majority of the European countries has encountered Islam before and after the Crusades. The treatment of Muslims in Britain has evolved from prejudice to a modern form of bigotry which is Islamophobia. Exploring British Muslims’ perspectives nowadays, on a factual point there is a rising hate crime and growing islamophobia towards Islam. Many world events like the Saudi oil embargo in 1970’s, the Iranian Revolution 1979, the Satanic Verses affair 1980’s and recently the 9/11 attacks in America and the 7/7 bombings in London have depicted Muslims as barbarian, ignorant and closed-minded religious zealots.

This research paper aims to investigate how Islam and British Muslims are treated in the age of Islamophobia. Besides, it explores the various events that have led Islam to become hyper-visible over the past two decades. This increased interest makes the need for this

research timely. There is an avalanche of researches trying to address Islamophobia in Britain. However, the number of works which incorporate the interaction between Christianity and Islam are still few. That is why this paper is an attempt to shed the light on the hostility towards British Muslims so as to investigate the reasons behind including intolerance and bigotry against Islam. It also deals with the representation and treatment of British Muslims as the “others” through discussing the identity debate and how Muslims are being portrayed as the “enemy within” which is an inherent stereotype of anti-Muslim expression.

### **1. Muslim Communities in Britain: Development, Integration and Key Issues**

*Anas ibn Maalik (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessing be upon him) said: “There will come upon the people a time when holding onto the religion will be like holding onto hot coal.” (Tirmidhi)-*

The prophet of Islam was gazing into the future while he talked to his followers early in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Arabia. “Would this mean there would be very few Muslims?” someone asked later. “No” replied the prophet, “they will be large in numbers, more than ever before, but powerless like the foam on the ocean waves.” After September 11, 2001, the prediction of the prophet seemed to be coming true. Islam became as hot as a piece of coal for its followers. Muslim societies everywhere appeared to be in turmoil and Muslims felt themselves in the dock, accused of belonging to a “terrorist”, “fanatic”, and “extremist” religion (Ahmed,12).

Britain has had contact with the Muslim world since the seventh century through trade contacts with Egypt and Palestine. From the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, British relations with the Muslims were cordial. It is generally believed that

Muslims share all aspects of Islamic culture – names, dress code and eating and drinking habits – and that they are a distinct non-Christian cultural group, separate from the mainstream British population. However, Muslims in Britain are ethnically diverse and heterogeneous in language, skin color and culture. The only element they have in common is their religion (Kabir, 29).

The relationship between Britain and Muslims has evolved through history to witness periods of economic and cultural exchanges, like the influence of Islamic culture and scholarship on medieval England periods of religious and political conflicts; the Crusades and periods of military assistance when the Ottoman sultan Murad arranged a defending army with Britain during the Spanish Armada 1588 (Ansari). So the contact between Islam and Britain stretched back to the medieval period when the crusades had created hatred and revenge feelings from Christian people toward Muslims and vice versa.

The nature of the relationship between Islam and Britain has been constantly changing, from periods of conflict to others of cooperation. Despite the turbulent history between Islam and Britain, during the crusades, the Islamic world has been traded with, studied, negotiated with, and written about. The British have therefore apprehended Islam and the Muslim world in multiple and often paradoxical ways. So ever since the first days, Britain had special relationship with Islam. Although the Christian crusades to Jerusalem were characterized by two hundred years of hostility, many historical accounts record cultural exchange between British Christians and Muslims (Wolff).

A Muslim presence in Britain dates back at least three centuries, when small groups of South Asian sailors recruited by the East Indian Company worked in many ports. Yemeni sailors and Indian students were also present in various British cities during the

nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, but it was not until the first decades after the end of the World War II that a sizeable Muslim population permanently settled in the country. As former colonial subjects, Indians and Pakistanis enjoyed commonwealth citizenship and could therefore reside in Britain. Enjoying the economic opportunities of the country's booming economy, mostly seeking low-skilled jobs, Muslim immigrants settled predominantly in London and in the Industrial cities of the North creating large communities in Bradford Leister, Oldham, and Birmingham (The first Muslims in England).

Islam is the second largest religion in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, according to the United Kingdom 2011 Census the UK Muslim population was 2,516,000, 4.4% of the total population (White). The relation between Muslims and the wider British society and British state has to be seen in terms of the developing agendas of racial equality and multiculturalism. Muslims have become central to these agendas even while they have contested important aspects, especially the primacy of racial identities, narrow definitions of racism and equality, and the secular bias of the discourse and policies of multiculturalism (Modood et al.).

There are many key issues and challenges facing British Muslims, which in fact are not exclusive to them. Political, social and economic predicaments are affecting the British society in general irrelevant of their race, religion or background. However, there are challenges which are unique to British Muslims such as anti-Muslim associations, hate crimes and the identity crisis. The Anti-Muslim groups gain ground in Britain, they have staged violent demonstrations across England. Britain today is suffering from a new anger, represented by the far right groups. In the pubs and estates, the cafes and football stadiums, the mood is unsettled. Uncovering disturbing levels of racism in the British society is caused by groups

like the the British National party (BNP), the English defence league (EDL) and the British Patriotic Alliance (BPA).

The United Kingdom and several other countries implemented a policy of multiculturalism, which has influenced how the government engaged with minorities and managed cultural diversity. However, Modood et al. argued that the idea of multiculturalism has been subjected to greater criticism in recent years, especially on the grounds that it was divisive and undercuts other solidarities of society, class or nation. But a fuller understanding of the context in which the arguments for multiculturalism arose and evolved can help both address some of the simplifications that now cluster around it and achieve a more nuanced view. There are various definitions and understandings of what multiculturalism is. However, mainly it has been perceived as a step towards integrating immigrants, accepting all cultural differences, achieving equality, and expanding opportunities for minorities in order to create a sense of belonging.

In the words of Zempi and Awan British Muslims are facing islamophobic hate crimes both offline and online. According to them hate crime falls under the category of religious hate crime, which is perceived by the victims or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based upon a person's religion . Online islamophobia can be defined as islamophobic prejudice that targets a victim in order to provoke hostility and promote intolerance by means of harassment, staking, abuse, incitement, threatening behavior, bullying and intimidation of persons via all platforms of social media. In particular, post Woolwich and death of drummer Lee Rigby in the UK, evidence shows that there has been an increase in online Islamophobia. In terms of Offline islamophobia Muslims have also been victims of physical abuse, assaults, verbal abuse, mosques being targeted and Muslim women being spat at and having their veils being pulled off (p.6-7).

## **2. Islamophobia**

Islamophobia is society's social apprehension towards Muslims and Islamic culture. It is defined by the Open Society Institute as an "irrational hostility, fear and hatred to Islam, Muslims and Islamic culture, and active discrimination towards this group as individuals or collectively." It creates a challenge to the Muslim community that wishes to be integrated into British society. The term Islamophobia, which was used for the first time in a 1997 report created by the Runnymede Trust regarding the anti-Muslim approaches in the UK, is negatively related to multiculturalism. It has been suggested that hostility towards Muslims has risen amongst British society after 9/11 and that it fully developed after the 7/7 bombings . A 2005 survey conducted after the 7/7 attacks showed that Muslim students felt isolated and witnessed a series of extremist acts on campus. It was revealed that 47% of Muslim students have experienced Islamophobia. British Muslims have faced more scrutiny, criticism and analysis than any other religious community after the rise of violent Islamism. However, despite the negative depiction, thousands of Britons are converting every year (Islamic Radicalization in the UK: Index of Radicalisation).

## **3. Exploring the Impacts of Islamophobia: Hate Crimes.**

Demonstrations by far-right groups, such as the English Defence League have caused considerable social and civic unrest in UK cities for nearly a decade. It is only through developing successful countermeasures in the realm of politics, security and community-based politics that politicians, police and state actors will truly get to grips with this new far-right activism. Islamophobia has become the driving force behind the rise of far-right movements in the UK, according to an anti-racism charity. Hope Not Hate says anti-Muslim prejudice has replaced immigration as the "key driver" of the groups.

Islam was "generally a threat to the British way of life". This compares with 30% who thought it was compatible. The State of Hate report blames the 2017 terror attacks in London and Manchester for a "lasting negative impact" on attitudes towards Muslims. It says while the number of people arrested over terror-related offences in 2018 was down on the previous year, the UK was witnessing a growing threat of far-right terrorism.

The report refers to the threat of lone-wolf terrorists and right-wing extremists, who are getting radicalised over the internet. It said the far right has become more extreme, younger and is successfully tapping into the "political rage" felt by many in society. In 2005, the publication of twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in the Danish national newspaper; Jyllands-Posten, was hardly noticed at the time, and no one could have predicted how the ripples would ultimately turn into shock waves. One of these cartoons depicted the prophet with a bomb in his turban. These cartoons aroused anger among Muslims. It has been suggested the affair bears many similarities to the Rushdie affair of 1990, when Muslims campaigned against the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The Danish political elites have taken little notice of the growing Muslim community in Denmark, and public awareness has been based on hearsay and media stereotyping rather than direct experience (Vidino).

Heinemann, Arnim, et al. in his book *The Middle East in the Media: Conflicts, Censorship and Public Opinion*. Stated that Islamophobia was a contested term denoting expressions and actions which often are basically racist but find cover behind a focus on Islam at a time when there is a public perception that Muslims are fair game. In the current case, it has been suggested that often the argument for freedom of the press is a cover for xenophobia, an accusation that has been levelled at the Danish newspaper which



published the original cartoon, particularly graphically in a cartoon published in the British Sunday newspaper *The Observer* on 5 February, depicting a big sinister figure marked ‘xenophobic hiding behind a frightened torch-bearing woman marked ‘freedom of speech’. Heinemann, Arnim, et al. also believed that ‘war on terror’ was mainly targeted at terrorism originating in Muslim network. This theme developed during the 1990 and was sharply focused by the attacks of the 11 September 2001 and reinforced since by the bombings in Madrid and London.

Charlie Hebdo published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed just one year after arson attack. The front cover, with the headline “The Untouchables 2” shows the Prophet in a wheelchair saying “You musn’t mock”. Another cartoon inside the magazine depicts the Prophet naked. Riot police deployed around Charlie Hebdo’s offices in Paris and the magazine’s website was attacked. Two Muslim organisations launched legal proceedings against Charlie Hebdo, accusing it of inciting racial hatred. Islamophobia has ultimately increased through the media which was biased against Muslims, and the increase of the faith- hate crimes mainly committed by the far right wing groups. The study also has crucial implications for the direction, level and intensity that islamophobia will display. The concepts that are central to the process of radicalization. Like: terrorism, radicalism and extremism have become entangled with notions of identity, integration, segregation and multiculturalism (Andrew).

#### **4. The Identity Debate: To be or not to be British.**

Identity is always ‘in process’, always ‘being formed’ it is influenced by the surroundings in which people live. The surroundings are influenced by internal and external factors. The internal factors are family and ethnic and religious community settings. External factors are schools, workplaces and institutions,

including government, in the wider community. British national identity or ‘Britishness’ has been variously defined as possessing fluent English skills, loyalty to Britain, integration with the wider community, belief in democracy, tolerance, acceptance of equal treatment for all and respect for the country and its shared heritage(Hall, 122).

Smith observes that it has taken several generations before new immigrants' descendants were admitted into the inner circle of the ‘nation’, and its historic culture through the national agencies of mass mobilization. The Western model of national identity, for example in Western Europe, was seen as cultural communities, whose members were united, if not homogeneous, by common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions. So, even if new immigrant communities were admitted into the Western states, they would not be absorbed as one of ‘Us’ by the wider community over a short period(11).

The West is home to many young Muslims balancing between traditional Islamic culture and the secularized multicultural societies they live in. They are effectively “hybrids”, shaped by two often contrasting forces which structure their identity. In particular, some second and third generation Muslims are not taught the modus operandi to “belong” to the society in which they were born and grew up. Consequently, it is difficult for them to feel British in a way that would not clash with their cultural heritage. Moreover, there are no clear guides that can help them in this path of “socialization” and building an identity. This uncertainty, this incapacity, this lack of knowledge and this state of “not belonging” can turn into anger, frustration, petty crimes and marginality for many young Muslims. This in turn makes them easily susceptible and vulnerable to extremist ideology and radicalization (Where Do I Belong).

To underline that, many of those who join the radicalisation process are often secular and worldly. Quintan Wiktorowicz explains that many members of al-Muhajiroun in the UK were not particularly religious and had not received any religious education before joining the group. They were essentially far from being religious and did not see any ideological reference in traditional faith, let alone an anchor on which to structure one's identity. In seeking an identity, many individuals turn to religion. In certain circumstances, religion itself can guide young Muslim people towards an Islamic counter-culture.

In most cases, it has been noted that in this process of radicalization, young Muslims are generally unable to identify themselves with the "typical profile" or average person in the Western society in which they live. In fact, the lack of strong reference points, the absence of guides that could indicate the appropriate way forward, and the vulnerability generated by failed social integration are all factors which bring British Muslims "in search of an identity" (Diego).

## **CONCLUSION**

Eventually, the British Muslims suffered from offline and online Islamophobic hate crimes. Due to myriads of world events British Muslims reacted in a way that depicted them as violent and barbarians though in fact Islam is a religion of peace. Besides, the 7/7 London Bombings in 2005 was a shock to the Britons since it was really strange that four young British Muslims born and bred in Britain caused such a terrible and horrific bombings. Hence it was high time to ask questions like why would these youngsters commit these actions, and the answer was identity crisis. This new generation was treated as the "other" and British Muslims were in front of a dilemma; whether they were British or Muslim. Though confronting the climate of Islamophobia includes acknowledging that "combating Islamophobia within Britain necessarily involves a distinction

between race and religion. But discussion of these is minimal, and ultimately without consequence to its conceptualisation of Islamophobia or its workings which remains tied to the dichotomy of open and closed views and the bedrock of “reasoned” and “blind hatred against Islam.

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