



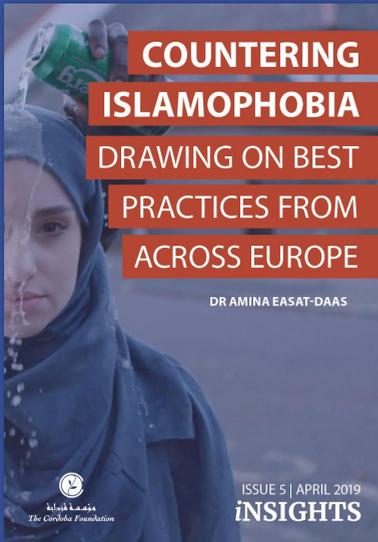
**COUNTERING
ISLAMOPHOBIA
DRAWING ON BEST
PRACTICES FROM
ACROSS EUROPE**

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COUNTERING ISLAMOPHOBIA

DRAWING ON BEST PRACTICES FROM ACROSS EUROPE

DR AMINA EASAT-DAAS*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is an alarming proliferation and intensification of Islamophobia and it increasingly permeates a range of spheres. Islamophobia affects (but is not restricted to) policy and legal measures, media and also verbal and physical violence against Muslims, perceived Muslims, and Islamic spaces.

Statistical evidence demonstrates the consistent growth of Islamophobic incidents. For example, in France the *Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France* reports an 18.5 percent increase in recorded Islamophobic incidents between 2015 and 2016, during the year the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks, and in Belgium the *Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique* reported 36 incidents in a one-month period during March-April 2016 in the period following the attacks on Zaventem airport and Molenbeek station in Brussels. More recently, in the one-week period following the attacks on Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand by a white supremacist, Tell Mama in the UK reported an increase of 593% in reported Islamophobic hate crimes. Yet, since these figures are often based on victim reporting, undeniably they represent just the tip of the iceberg.

More specific examples of Islamophobic incidents include attempted arson attacks on mosques and Muslim cultural centres, attacks on Muslim women – including the forced removal of Muslim women's headscarves, such as in Belgium where in 2018 alone women and young girls had their headscarves forcibly removed in car parking lots, on school trips or on the streets in front of their young children. And – at their most abhorrent, Islamophobia leads to the murder of Muslims, including three members of the Barakat family in Chapel Hill, N.C., in February 2015 and Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham, England, in April 2013.

Similarly, and most recently, due to growing Islamophobia and the globalisation of far-right anti-Muslim movements terror attacks on the Linwood Islamic Centre and Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15th March 2019, which ultimately resulted in the killing of over fifty Muslim men, women and young children. Notwithstanding, Islamophobia also affects non-Muslims both directly and indirectly – directly via the aforementioned hate crimes and indirectly through the promotion of Islamophobia narrative and policy. In sum Islamophobia represents a threat to society, its values and ideals.

Islamophobic narratives frame Muslims and Islam as the “other”, they are seen to be carriers of violent threat, demographic threat, a cultural and moral threat, an economic threat, a threat to sexual freedoms and gender equality, and a threat to national peace and security.

Islamophobia is spread via narratives of Muslim “otherness” promoted online, in media and popular culture, examples of which are often found in the satirical comics of Charlie Hebdo in France, or the sensationalist headlines of tabloid newspapers such as The Daily Mail or The Sun in the UK. Whilst these are not solely responsible for the creation of such narratives, these media create channels for the widespread diffusion of Islamophobic narratives, and exacerbation of cases that involve presumed Muslims by the emphasis on a Muslim frame. Civil society initiatives increasingly seek to challenge this. For example, the British group Muslim Engagement and Development

has devised the Holding our Media to Account: The Media Monitoring Toolkit and also regularly circulates calls to action to its members. Additionally, the Assistant Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain, Miqdaad Versi, has notably campaigned against Islamophobia in British media.

The intensification of Islamophobia is also seen at the institutional level in political discourse, at the judicial and executive levels, and in the enactment of legislative measures. Examples of this include the 2004 French *Loi Stasi* regarding “ostentatious faith symbols” which has disproportionately affected young Muslim women in

education, and the recent European Court of Justice preliminary judgments regarding the permissibility of the dismissal from the workplace of Muslim women who wear the headscarf. Or, markedly less gendered, was the recent unanimously supported bill set to outlaw religious slaughter (both *halal* and *kosher*) in Belgium’s Flemish and francophone regions.

There is a range of academic research and also civil society initiatives dedicated towards recording, reporting and theorising Islamophobia and its diverse manifestations, much of which reaches the conclusion that more should be done to effectively and systematically counter Islamophobia. In this regard, we observe that although the aforementioned endeavours constitute an essential and indispensable aspect, there remains limited research and outputs in the field of countering Islamophobia. In this regard the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project sought to respond to this apparent gap and through analysis of the best practices in countering Islamophobia.

BACKGROUND

The Counter-Islamophobia Kit project is a two-year European Commission action grant-funded project (JUST/2015/RRAC/AG/BEST/8910). The primary objective of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project was to create a transferable toolkit that could be employed to effectively counter Islamophobia. The project draws on best practices as seen across the European Union. It is based on the detailed examination of eight case studies: the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This selection of cases offers an exciting range of examples, varying from the study of those with large Muslim communities arising from post-colonial migration (UK, France, Germany, Belgium), to countries with a distinctly newer and comparatively smaller Muslim presence (Hungary and Czech Republic), and finally those with

“Islamophobic narratives frame Muslims and Islam as the “other”, they are seen to be carriers of a violent threat, demographic threat, a cultural and moral threat, an economic threat, a threat to sexual freedoms and gender equality, and a threat to national peace and security”

comparatively small Muslim communities but also some degree of historical relationship and national imagination with Muslims (Greece and Portugal). Nonetheless, whilst these cases form the basis of this project, it is envisaged that the findings, which emerge from the work, are not limited to these countries, or indeed even just the European Union. Rather the messages that emerge are of global significance.

The project began with the systematic analysis of the nature of the dominant Islamophobic narratives in each case study. The dominant Islamophobic narratives that emerged were shaped by national histories and collective national imaginations, so for example in Greece the historical Greco-Turkish relations coupled with the recent influx of Syrian refugees to the country affected the narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims, whereas in France colonial histories and the national secular project, or *laïcité*, shapes the popular image of Muslims and Islam in the nation.

In spite of the geographical, historical and normative differences across the eight cases studied within the remit of this project, convergences in the nature of Islamophobic narratives emerged. These include the fixed construction of Muslims as posing a demographic threat, as having a desire to “Islamise” the West, and as posing risk of violent threat. The dominant Islamophobic narratives identified also construct Muslims as having non-normative values surrounding gender and sexuality: Muslims are seen as being promoters of gender inequality and quashing women’s rights along with the rights of sexual minorities, and also are seen as being sexually perverse.

Ultimately, prevailing Islamophobic narratives construct Muslims as being culturally or morally incompatible and therefore incomplete citizens, unable to assimilate with Western society. In turn, the normalisation of perceived Muslim alterity is then cited as justification for regulating the Muslim community at various levels.

BEST PRACTICES IN COUNTERING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Having established the nature of the dominant Islamophobic narratives in each of our case studies, each national team conducted a range of fieldwork activities, including interviews and focus groups with key experts and activists, to establish the best practices in countering Islamophobia. In total, over 270 field interactions across the eight case studies were carried out. Subsequently, a detail meta-analysis of the eight national case studies was carried out and has revealed a series of convergences in the best practice in countering Islamophobia in the field.

Regarding combating the ideological bases of dominant Islamophobic narratives, our reports highlighted the importance of challenging notions of Muslim threat. This narrative of threat could be deconstructed via emphasis on the cultural compatibility of Muslims and Western societies — to state that Muslims are not at odds with society but rather are very much part of society. This would contribute to countering ideas of a desired Muslim takeover or Islamisation of the country or dispelling myths surrounding Muslims and gender/sexuality, or the threat of violent attacks. In addition, since the narrative of threat also functions on the basis of a presumed Muslim monolith, efforts should be undertaken to highlight the plurality and heterogeneity of Muslim communities. In sum, the narrative of threat and “otherness” should be replaced by an increased emphasis on the normalcy of Muslims in order to foster the building of inclusive futures. This proposed method of countering fits well with the understanding of Islamophobia adopted in this project, which recognises that “... more than an expression of hatred or fear, Islamophobia needs to be understood as an undermining of the ability of Muslims, as Muslims, to project themselves into the future.”

In order to maintain optimal efficacy, counter-narratives to Islamophobia should allow for the challenging of institutional

Islamophobia. This strand of countering Islamophobia maps onto wider projects that seek to deracialise and decolonialise the state. Examples of this include actions against direct legal measures that limit Islamic practices, such as the combined lawsuit lodged by the Coordinating Council of Islamic Institutions in Belgium and the Belgian Federation of

“Strategies for countering Islamophobia must allow for the creation of Muslim spaces for the expression of Muslim voices. Such spaces may be ones in which Islamicate feminism may grow and flourish, thus allowing Muslim women to reclaim the currently highly “Orientalised” discourse surrounding their agency and position”

Jewish Organisations, along with the European and World Jewish Congress, against the introduction of a ban on religious slaughter in Belgium. Or alternatively, the way in which the Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France seeks to empower French Muslims with knowledge of their legal rights and facilitate individuals to pursue legal action where appropriate – most often seen in cases relating to Muslim women’s dress.

In the initial phase of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project, it was determined that dominant Islamophobic narratives alleged gender inequality. Therefore, with regards to counter-narratives to Islamophobia across the cases studied in this report it was found that strategies for countering Islamophobia must allow for the creation of Muslim spaces for the expression of Muslim voices.

Such spaces may be ones in which Islamicate feminism may grow and flourish, thus allowing Muslim women to reclaim the currently highly “Orientalised” discourse surrounding their agency and position. These spaces may also allow for the use of creative and artistic expression as a mode of transmission of Muslim voices. One such highly accessible example by Muslim women includes the

Brussels-based initiative *Bruxelloise et Voilées*. The collective uses social media as a tool to diffuse its monthly video recordings in which they profile a Muslim woman who wears the headscarf from the Belgian capital and detail the everyday aspects of her life (without focusing excessively on the headscarf). *Bruxelloise et Voilée* stated;

“The objective is to promote a multicultural society by fighting against discrimination and stereotypes, in particular against Muslim veiled women. It’s both an artistic movement and a militant initiative that aims... to show our diverse identities by speaking about everything but the hijab.”

In a similar vein, an alternative example of countering Islamophobia more broadly is apparent in the 2017 UK-film *Fresia*. The film was funded by the Joseph Rowntree charitable trust. The film’s creator, Conor Ibrahiem of Arakan Creative, asserts that the film is the first specifically counter-Islamophobia film. The film is commendable given its creative, emotive and accessible mode of transmission of narratives that counter stereotypes regarding Muslims, beyond typically academic outputs. Ibrahiem has also stated that he intends to transform the film into a toolkit which can be used by schools to broach difficult issues surrounding Islamophobia, far-right radicalisation and more, thus highlighting the potential longevity of creative endeavours.

Similarly, in the Czech Republic the Amnesty International ‘Human Library’ project was highly regarded by counter-Islamophobia activists and practitioners. The ‘Human Library’ project was inspired by similar work in Denmark. Trained minority individuals (Muslims and also those from other discriminated groups in Czech society) volunteer to engage in facilitated dialogue with community members who might not typically be reached. The personal and emotive connection that the ‘Human Library’ work brings challenges preconceptions about Islam and Muslims (and other engaged minorities) in a novel and effective way.

In addition to the analysis of best practices employed in relation to countering Islamophobia, the project has also engaged in an ongoing analysis of the use of European human rights law and its existing application in Islamophobia and perhaps most importantly, as the basis of understanding its potential application in the countering of Islamophobia in the future. This legal approach, combined with the meta-analysis of best practices in countering Islamophobia in the field, serves as the basis for the development of a transferable toolkit, which may be applied by policy makers, experts and practitioners in the European Union and beyond.

APPLYING THE COUNTER-ISLAMOPHOBIA KIT

Having established the convergences in best practices in countering Islamophobia, the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project set out to determine the most effective ways of employing these best practices.

The Counter-Islamophobia Kit that emerges from this process is primarily aimed at, but not limited to, application by policy makers, professionals and practitioners across the EU. In spite of the broad range of this target audience, it is intended to be utilisable across levels by a variety of experts and practitioners.

Application of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit must be preceded by two essential elements: firstly there must be some degree of consensus surrounding the definition of Islamophobia. This definition must be the normatively accepted understanding of Islamophobia, within the given context. It must speak to contextual legal and policy measures. Furthermore, it must be one that goes beyond oversimplified narratives of hatred of Muslims, to encompass the subtle nuances and finer complexities of Islamophobia, including reference to embedded legal, structural and institutional discrimination of Muslims and those presumed to be Muslim. In this regard, the recently proposed UK All Party Parliamentary

Group on British Muslims' definition put forward within the report *Islamophobia Defined*, which states "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness and perceived Muslimness", represents an ideal example of such practice. This definition accounts for the racialisation of Muslims (and those seen to be Muslim) and Islamic practices. Furthermore, the adoption of the definition by numerous British local councils and at the point of writing, all mainstream UK parties, except for the Conservative Party, is encouraging. The definition and its growing acceptance represent a positive move forward in the broader process of countering Islamophobia, as it is only with the acknowledgement of the issue can we begin to tackle the prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes it raises.

In addition, the basis of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit is also predicated by the need for systematic and structured recording and documentation of Islamophobia. The reports detailed within the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project highlight various examples of this. However, in particular documentation of Islamophobic incidences, policies and legal measures must overcome current potential shortcomings that already exist within particularly contexts. For example, we recognise that given specificities, such as issues pertaining to limited and discrete categories for the official police recording of Islamophobic incidents, or the lack of recognition of religious hate crimes as an official recording category, or even the difficulties related to highlighting more nuanced, intersectional manifestations of Islamophobia, that it may be difficult to create entirely comprehensive records of Islamophobic events, policies, media and beyond, it is imperative that attempts be made to empirically document the nature of and trends in Islamophobia. One such noteworthy example of this can be seen in the annually published *European Islamophobia Report*, first published in 2015.

The European Islamophobia Report documents Islamophobia within the fields of politics, the justice system, employment, education, media, physical/verbal attacks, online, central national figures in Islamophobia and finally current counter-Islamophobia organisations and activities. Similarly, the US-based Islamophobia Research and

“The Counter Islamophobia Kit is ... based on the reconstruction of normative narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims and thus normalising their presence in diverse fields”

Documentation project represents an alternative. The two aforementioned projects represent different means of documenting Islamophobia, with the European Islamophobia Report representing a comparatively more empirical recording approach, whilst the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project documents Islamophobia with a comparatively more academic and analytically-based approach.

Notwithstanding, both endeavours represent

one of many projects in action centred on the documentation of Islamophobia. Such measures allow for a detailed and evidence-based understanding of the state of Islamophobia, which subsequently legitimates the urgency behind the work of those engaged in counter-Islamophobia work.

The main body of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit can be characterised as being primarily based on two dominant actions, firstly and based on the first phase of the project, the toolkit identifies dominant Islamophobic narratives or myths that require deconstruction. The Counter-Islamophobia Kit is then subsequently based on the reconstruction of normative narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims and thus normalising their presence in diverse fields. The reconstructive action of the toolkit fills the potential void created by the deconstruction of dominant Islamophobic narratives. In addition, the dual approach prevents the

Counter-Islamophobia Kit, and those applying it, from falling into the trap of reactionary-type counter-Islamophobia narratives, which in themselves risk the reproduction of Islamophobic myths.

In sum, the dominant Islamophobic narratives identified initially in the project constitute the narratives in need of deconstruction, whilst those pertaining to dominant counter-Islamophobia strategies as identified via the qualitative fieldwork represent identified means of reconstructing normative narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims. The third strand of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit highlights identified strategies in operation across the eight national case studies examined within the project. Although these dominant narratives, counter-narratives and possible strategies do not, and arguably cannot represent an entirely comprehensive list of Islamophobia and its manifestations, the primary actions of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit remain pertinent.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project, the following recommendations arise:

- Continue standardised and thorough reporting of Islamophobic incidents at the level of victim reporting, and at local and national levels. These endeavours must be supported and legitimised wherever possible. Counter narratives of the alleged Muslim threat by allowing for the expression of Muslim humanity, plurality and normalcy.
- Create projects that stress an inclusive approach, whereby Muslims are constructed as an integral part of both the local/national current and future projections.
- Effective and coherent challenging of institutional Islamophobia, whether it is present political discourses or legal measures. This approach relies on the empowerment of Muslim communities.
- Creation of Muslim spaces - including those which promote and respect Islamicate feminism and also creative expression of Muslim voices.

These recommendations are not exhaustive. Rather, there should be emphasis on continued growth and development of concrete and actionable strategies. Furthermore, the development of the Counter-Islamophobia Kit represents the first step in a long journey of effectively combatting the growing problem of Islamophobia.

This article is adapted from the following pieces: Ian Law, Amina Easat-Daas, and S Sayyid, "Counter Islamophobia Kit: Briefing Paper and Toolkit of Counter-Narratives to Islamophobia," (University of Leeds, 2018) and Amina Easat-Daas, "Toward a Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit: Drawing on Best Practices in the European Union," (USA: The Cater Center, 2018).

AUTHOR PROFILE

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Islamophobia and countering-Islamophobia in Europe, gendered dimensions of Islamophobia and 'European-Islam'. In her capacity as an emerging Islamophobia studies specialist, she has been invited to and presented her research findings to the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, The Carter Center (USA) and the OSCE-ODIHR among others and has appeared on national and international media numerous occasions to discuss Muslim current affairs.

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7. La Capitale, "Une Molenbekoise Victime D'une Aggression "Islamophobe" À Ostende " *ibid.*, 01.04.18.
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10. See the Counter-Islamophobia Kit for regular updates on the project, including downloadable working papers – www.cik.leeds.ac.uk
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16. Originating from within Muslim societies / the 'Muslim world', rather than being externally imposed.
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23. All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, "Islamophobia Defined: The Inquiry into a Working Definition of Islamophobia". See <https://cik.leeds.ac.uk/publications>
24. See Bayrakli and Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report* www.islamophobiaeurope.com
25. See <https://irdproject.com/>
26. Selected examples are considered in this piece, such as countering media Islamophobia or challenging Islamophobia through the use of arts. These were selected since they illustrate and contextualise the main tools identified in the Counter-Islamophobia Kit project. The comprehensive list of identified tools are as follows; 1) Challenging and contextualising constructions of Muslim threat, 2) Building inclusive nations: challenging exclusive and discriminatory national projects, 3) Cultural compatibility and conviviality: challenging the narrative separation of cultural and ethnic groups, 4) Elaborating plurality: challenging the narratives of Muslim singularity, 5) Challenging narratives of sexism, 6) Building inclusive futures, 7) Deracialising the state, 8) Emphasising humanity and Muslim normalisation: challenging the narratives of division, 9) Creating Muslim space(s), 10) Challenging distorted representation: verity and voice, taken from Ian Law, Amina Easat-Daas, and S Sayyid, "Counter Islamophobia Kit: Briefing Paper and Toolkit of Counter-Narratives to Islamophobia,"(Leeds: University of Leeds, 2018)

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