

## **ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ITS HISTORICAL ROOTS CONTENT, CONTEXT, AND CONSEQUENCES**

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The present study aims at exploring and analysing the contemporary Islamophobia and its historical perspective tracing down through to the eleventh century Crusades. It illustrates that Islamophobia or “fear of Islam” is not a new phenomenon; the prejudice and negative construction of Islam as an existential threat developed in the eleventh century in context of the Crusades. Islam/Muslims were diabolised in the popular consciousness, a propaganda pursued and deployed with great zeal by the ruling elite and clergy at particular moments. In this background, the paper discusses among other things the Western Europeans’ anti-Islam discourse formation, its influence on the contemporary Western policies and attitudes towards the Muslim world. However, unfortunately this legacy of bitterness is overlooked by most Europeans. Many Muslims see “Islamophobia”, “war on terror”, “colonialism”, “imperialism” and other Western policies and hegemony over the Muslim world as neo-Crusades. This paper argues that today Islamophobia serves the US and its allies politically, economically in the same way as the Crusades served the medieval Christian Europe against the Muslim world. Diabolising Muslims and Islam is central to the discourse. The paper advocates the intellectuals and academics to critically investigate and demystify the Western misconceptions and negative image of Islam/Muslims because Islamophobia is not only a threat to Muslims but also to the rule of law and democratic values the world over.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Threat, Muslim, Islam, Fear, Crusade, Discourse, West, India.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that in the West, Islam is the most misunderstood and misrepresented religion. Prejudice, hatred, fear against Islam and the Muslims are pervasive in the Western discourse of Islam. Headscarves, *hijab*, *burqa*‘, harem, beard, cap, *madrasah*, mosques, minarets – like other symbols identified with the Muslim culture are abuzz in the Western media and other conservative works are increasingly seen as a rejection of Western democratic values or, even worse, as a direct threat to the West. The integration of Muslim immigrants has been on the political agenda of European democracies for several decades.<sup>1</sup> However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have only brought a significant change in the Western imagination and perception of Islam so much so that “Muslim men are so dehumanized that since 9/11 they have become less than zero ... stripped of all legal rights afforded under US domestic and international law, force-fed like animals”.<sup>2</sup> Considering Carl Ernst’s statement, “It is safe to say that no religion has such a negative image in Western eyes as Islam”, and thus has surprised many as why Islam is perceived negatively or misunderstood/misrepresented even in this age of post-modernism. Emphasizing the point, Ernst says, “It still amazes me that intelligent people can believe that all Muslims are violent or that all Muslim women are oppressed, when they would never dream of uttering slurs stereotyping much smaller groups such as Jews or blacks. The strength of these negative images of Muslims is remarkable, even though they are not based on personal experience or actual study, but they receive daily reinforcement from the news media and popular culture”.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars<sup>4</sup> are of the opinion that such negative stereotyping against Islam and the Muslims have their origins in the medieval time when the Christian Europe orchestrated for the first time such a successful campaign known as the “Crusades” wars against the Muslim world in the eleventh century. The contemporary fear of Muslims that exemplifies bigotry, prejudice, discrimination, violence against Muslims could be seen as the modern manifestations of age-long hatred and hostility of the Western European Christian world. The ban on the Muslim immigration in the US recently imposed by the newly elected US President Donald Trump clearly typifies the bitter legacy of West’s prejudice against the Muslims.

Why is this so? How have the relationships between the Muslim world and Western Europe and the United States impacted perceptions of Islam, in the past and the present? How the anti-Islam discourse took formation, and by whom and why is it produced and perpetuated; and who benefits from its survival and consistency? These are some but important questions, which have been raised by many scholars in the recent past.

There have been only a handful of good scholarly works, which take these considerations into investigation and have attempted to demystify the West's traditional worldviews toward Islam/Muslims, in order to present the factual and real experience of Islam and the Muslims, the victims of Islamophobia: the particularistic attitude toward Muslims that scholars have often described as an aversion to or "anxiety of Islam".<sup>5</sup> Before we unveil the contemporary manifestations of the anti-Islam sentiments, and the perpetrators of Islamophobic monsters, it is significant to cast enough light on the history and background of anti-Islam discourse; how and why it emerged in and propagated by the Christian world.

### **Historical Background of Anti-Islam Discourse**

#### *East and West-Image and Interaction*

The recent past has witnessed an exponential growth in the anti-Islam discourse – the notions of Islam as violent, corrupt, deceitful, tyrannical, and perverse – in Western Europe. Consequently, Muslims are projected as fanatic, barbaric, extremists, backward, and uncivilized.<sup>6</sup> As a result, violence, discrimination, surveillance, public profiling against the immigrant and domestic Muslim population particularly in the US and the UK have increased at a tremendous rate. The Western hostility toward Islam and Muslims is not just a post 9/11 phenomenon rather its seeds have been sown in the Middle Ages as ample precedents and evidences point that the Crusades and Europe's imperialist ventures are important historical points of intersection between the West and Islam, encounters that led to exaggerated stereotypes and caricatures of a violent Islam.<sup>7</sup>

However, it was the launch of Pope Urban's Crusade in 1095 A.D. that marked the beginning of Islam becoming the "normative, fundamental,

quintessential, universal enemy".<sup>8</sup> The socio-political context of the eleventh century Europe was quite dark; the Pope needed an enemy to divert the conflicting groups; to claim and maintain the Papal supremacy by reuniting the Latin and Greek Church, in the East. On receiving a request to help the Byzantine Empire against the Muslims, Pope Urban II brilliantly converted it into an opportunity towards achieving his objectives. The Muslim was made an enemy. Pope Urban II invented and employed various symbolic and religious tools to malign Islam and the Muslims when he spoke of them as an evil or an alien race occupying their lands. The same discourse has survived down through the present age. Religion played a comparable role to that of political ideology today. To put it simply in the words of Todd H. Green, "Western perceptions of Muslims as religious and political rivals drive most of the antagonistic rendering of Islam throughout history," however, "with political rationales increasingly dominating religious ones in the modern period".<sup>9</sup> In reality, religious concerns were rarely the all important motives of the Crusades.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the present anti-Islam discourse is so powerful that it has distorted the Western understanding of the Muslim world and its culture to the level that the indebted genius and creativity of the great Muslim minds which a large section of Western scholarship still acknowledges have been thrown into shrouded mystery. Since the historical evidences trace the Christian animosity toward the Muslims prior to the preaching of the Crusades by Pope Urban II, as early as in the seventh and eighth centuries but that hostility was quite moderate in tone. It began to shift in the mid-ninth century.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Lyons, in his *Islam Through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terror*, has put it:

The Christian experience in both Muslim-ruled and Orthodox Byzantium instead helped lay the groundwork for a later Western anti-Islam discourse that had very little to do with what Muslims actually said, did, or believed. What ultimately emerged was a rigid and long-lasting corpus of polemical and apologetic works, defensive by nature and not overly concerned with anything but ridiculing the Muslim faith and discouraging conversion on the part of Christians and cultured Arabization in general.<sup>12</sup>

In general, before the onset of the Crusades at the end of the

eleventh century, Christian animosity toward Muslims was diffused. Muslims were not yet an enemy-in-waiting and certainly not a threat to the very survival of Christendom, for the broader society Islam remained much an “undifferentiated experience”.<sup>13</sup> A drastic change occurred with the onset of the Crusades. Pope Urban II fixed the image of the Muslim as the focal point for Christian animosities. It was at this point of time in history that Muslims became the fundamental enemy of Christianity and Christendom: “the Muslim world became no less than ‘the antithetical system, the social Antichrist’”.<sup>14</sup> It is demonstrated that the Crusades would not have been possible without creating an imagination of Muslims as enemy – as an alien and evil race. Paradoxically, Crusades entailed cross-cultural exchange between the Muslims and the Christians that potentially contributed to the development of the Western European “civilization”. Mastnak goes on to claim that the “European history” is indeed the history of anti-Islam discourse which lies at the core of the European imagination.<sup>15</sup> Mastnak further writes:

At the close of the eleventh century the Latin West was coming out of a deep social transformation and redistribution of power that had taken place in an atmosphere overflowing with millenarian, eschatological, apocalyptic, and chiliastic fears and expectations and was determinedly striving for unity and peace among Christians. It was then that Muslims were made the enemy of Christianity and Christendom. Constructing the Muslims as the Enemy was, in fact, constitutive of the formation of Christendom –the unified Christian society that found its realization in the Crusades. This new holy war, in turn, would have been impossible without the elaboration of that enemy image.<sup>16</sup>

The anti-Islam propaganda, however, has not been monolithic throughout its history, rather the attitude toward Islam encompasses diverse forms in medieval and Renaissance Europe; it is observed:

... although modern stereotypes sometimes resemble those of the past, similar attitudes can arise for very different reasons. From the eleventh through the mid-seventeenth century derisive attacks by Western authors were born of a nagging inferiority complex

vis-à-vis Arab civilization. In the course of the seventeenth century, however, the Muslim states ceased to be a threat politically, and the West began to develop new secular views that demystified religion and diminished the threat of Islam as a rival ideology. So in the modern period, derisive attitudes arise not from an inferiority complex but from a Eurocentric sense of cultural superiority.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, those who hate and fear Muslims do not correspond to a monolithic category but they do so for a variety of reasons and they foster this hostility in a diversity of cultural and political contexts.<sup>18</sup> Owing to its complexity and diverse phenomena, scholars, analysts, politicians, therefore, read the Crusading subject not only in order to reconstruct a narrative of events, but also in order to examine the medieval attitudes toward the Orient and the underlining its repercussions on the future of Islam-Christian relations. Modern observers have described the “Crusades” and their attendant literature – a nexus of knowledge and power – as forms of colonialism and proto-Orientalism.<sup>19</sup> For example, Edward Said sees western imagination of the east in a much wider context; he maintains that Western stereotypes about the East had a very early beginning. If Europe defined itself in relation to another, its oldest other lay immediately to its east. Edward Said writes: “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, hostility towards Islam and Muslims has been a feature of European societies since the eleventh century of the Common Era.

### **Islamophobia in the Modern age of Technology**

Today Islamophobia is a global phenomenon. The term “Islamophobia” has been traced as far back as the early twentieth century in a French article in 1925; however, the term gained institutional importance; popularized and articulated first as a concept in a 1997 report by the Runnymede Trust, a British think tank specializing in ethnic and racial diversity issues. The report defined Islamophobia as “an unfounded hostility towards Muslims” or “... a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and therefore a fear of all or most

Muslims” as well as “the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and ... the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs”.<sup>21</sup>

The introduction of the term was justified by the report’s assessment in the context of Muslims in the UK in particular and Europe in general that “anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed”<sup>22</sup> so that this form of prejudice – a serious social problem can be identified and acted against. It was coined based on more common “xenophobia” and “anti-Semitism” framework. In Britain, the anti-Muslim sentiment had grown considerably following the events: Salman Rushdie affair (1988-1989), the first Gulf War (1990-91), the 9/11, the Madrid bombings (2004), the London bombings (2005), the Danish cartoon controversy (2005-2006), and the more recent Charlie Hebdo – a French satirical magazine with a history of ridiculing Islam – event (2015). All these incidents stoked the flames of Islamophobic acts – physical assaults, verbal abuse, and damage to property, and had fomented and alienated British Muslims, “turned them into a viable political constituency, but one widely viewed as alien in its values and desperately in need of national incorporation”.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Runnymede Trust Report first published, the term “Islamophobia” has gained a far greater recognition and prevalence across both the public and political spaces. Nevertheless, there has been a great amount of opposition and counter claims from politicians and pundits who roundly reject Islamophobia for they would like to reserve their rights to criticise “Islamists” or Muslims or Islam. Daniel Pipes, a neoconservative American writer and political commentator whose views on Islam and Muslims are consistently biased, dismisses Islamophobia and termed it as a disguise that protects Muslim extremists. He questions the idea that “fear of Islam” can be termed as irrational:

What exactly constitutes an “undue fear of Islam” when Muslims acting in the name of Islam today make up the premier source of worldwide aggression, both verbal and physical, versus non-Muslims and Muslims alike? What, one wonders, is the proper amount of fear? ... Muslims should dispense with this discredited term [Islamophobia] and instead engage in some earnest introspection. Rather than blame the potential victim for fearing his would-be

executioner, they would do better to ponder how Islamists have transformed their faith into an ideology celebrating murder (Al-Qaeda: “You love life, we love death”) and develop strategies to redeem their religion by combating this morbid totalitarianism.<sup>24</sup>

The point worthy to note is that Muslims are depicted as a collective body that is responsible for the violent acts committed by some individuals or groups who have interpreted and transformed the Islamic faith into an ideology. Moreover, the critics to Islamophobia put the argument that criticism to Islam vis-à-vis antithetical to democratic values, extremism, anti-Christian, oppressive of women, culturally backward, and dedicated to establishing Islamic law around the world, is being falsely labelled as Islamophobia. Similarly, it would be simplistic to suggest that Muslims are presented as the victims of confrontation rather than aggressors – a commonly held view in the West. The ample empirical data and the prevalent social anxiety against Islam in the West put the unfounded views of these pundits in sharp contrast.<sup>25</sup> Muslims have a very different understanding of their traditions and thus strongly disagree with the way these pundits represent them.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, scholars clearly distinguish between legitimate criticisms of Muslims and their acts, which are entirely appropriate and necessary to healthy intercultural and interreligious relationships, and the biases of Islamophobia, which prevent any serious conversation and understanding.<sup>27</sup> Thus, owing to its seemingly problematic nature of defining Islamophobia and in a bid to refute claims of over-generalisation or its non-existence, as highlighted by Allen,<sup>28</sup> this section draws on more definitions and other empirical evidences that underpin the Islamophobic discourse. The *European Islamophobia Report* (EIR)<sup>29</sup> is an annual report, which was presented for the first time in 2015. It currently comprises 25 national reports regarding each state and the tendencies of Islamophobia in each respective country. The current report features the work of 37 scholars who discuss the issue of Islamophobia with the help of qualitative data. The EIR Report defined Islamophobia as:

When talking about Islamophobia, we mean anti-Muslim racism. As Anti-Semitism studies have shown, the etymological components of a word do not necessarily point to its complete meaning, nor to how

it is used. Such is also the case with Islamophobia studies. Islamophobia has become a well-known term used in academia as much as in the public sphere. Criticism of Muslims or of the Islamic religion is not necessarily Islamophobic. Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilising and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat – real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed ‘we’. Islamophobia operates by constructing a static ‘Muslim’ identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalised for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts as Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam.<sup>30</sup>

The EIR Report incorporates other definition from Counter-Islamophobia Collective in France (CICF), which describes Islamophobia as “... discriminatory acts or violence against institutions or individuals based on their affiliation, real or imagined, with Islam. These acts are provoked by ideologies and discourses that create hostility and rejection of Muslims”.<sup>31</sup>

Recognizing the complex and multiple natures of definitions and meaning of Islamophobia, the Runnymede Trust Report identified prevailing attitudes that incorporate the following eight Islamophobic mindsets and beliefs:

- 1) Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
- 2) 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.
- 3) Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist.
- 4) Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a “clash of civilizations”.
- 5) Islam is seen as a political ideology and is used for political or military advantage.
- 6) Criticisms made of the West by Islam are rejected out of hand.
- 7) Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
- 8) Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural or normal.<sup>32</sup>

As we have mentioned the anti-Islam and anti-Muslim propaganda has a historical background that traces its roots primarily to the Crusades. Some scholars argue that Islamophobia is, in fact, a modern phenomenon, a racism which emerges from white America's history of racism and discomfort with people of colour;<sup>33</sup> in Europeans in the hatred of European Jews, was later displaced onto its new Muslim immigrants.<sup>34</sup> This is partially true as it oversimplifies and undermines the historical Christian-Muslim hatred and dissent that is clearly evident from the ongoing discussion. Nevertheless, the modern paradigm shift from anti-Semitism to Islamophobia has been disastrous not only to the Muslim communities living as minority but essentially to the democratic setup of the European countries. Since postwar British fascism was not only a matter of hating minorities but it was also an ideology that sought to explain social dislocation and depredation of working class through a rival narrative to that of the left. It represented immigration from the African and Asian countries as an alien corruption of the British identity and survival, a betrayal which the far Right ideology explained with Jewish conspiracy theory. What actually was the ruling class, in fact, were not the British but a secret Jewish group that pulled the strings of international finance, the media, and the revolutionary Left. This has been revealed in *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the document forged by the tsarist secret police that contends to show how Jews deliberately and deeply manipulated and controlled world events to their advantage. Although popular racism against the immigrants and minorities was the means by which young recruits were drawn into the far Right, but it was anti-Semitism that remained a necessary ideological component which could propel them into a far more visible arena “because only Jews could play a prominent role of the secret source of economic and political power that had weakened and corrupted the nation”.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the British fascist parties such as the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF) were aptly described as Nazi in their ideology. It was in 1999, when BNP's new leader, Nick Griffin, started on a strategy of trivializing this neo-Nazi legacy. According to Kundnani, Griffin though still believed Jews secretly controlled the media, publically tried to:

remodel the party along the lines of more successful European counterparts, such as the Front National in France, using the language

of defending British cultural identity (rather than white racial identity) against a ruling elite that wanted to destroy it through immigration, multiculturalism, and appeasement of the Muslim enemy within. Instead of talk of a Jewish conspiracy, it was about those in power being too “cosmopolitan” to have the real interests of the British people at heart; and Islamic militancy was invoked to illustrate the dangers of immigration, capitalizing on the Islamophobia of post-9/11 Britain.<sup>36</sup>

Although anti-Semitism has remained central to the European far Right of the twentieth century, but English Defence League’s (EDL)<sup>37</sup> new relationship to the right-wing Zionism reveals its break with conventional fascist ideology. In addition, it has actively embraced militant Zionists against the alleged and false Islamic threat. This change and reversal among the far Right in Europe from its historical anti-Semitic ideology are primarily due to the culturalist politics of the war on terror that nowadays substituted Islamophobia for anti-Semitism.<sup>38</sup> Leaders like Filip Dewinter (Belgium) and Geert Wilders (Netherlands) who eschewed their anti-Semitism ideology often visit Israel to meet right-wing members to foster alliance in order to fight and sabotage Muslims including Palestinians. Like Dewinter and Wilders, the EDL has succeeded in gaining an overwhelming support from the Jews in Israel. It does not stop here, the Jewish lobby has links with far Right Jewish groups such as the Jewish Task Force in the US led by Victor Vancier, who was the national chairman in the 1970s of the terrorist Jewish Defence League.<sup>39</sup> Unlike in the UK, the US Islamophobic far Right functions through networks of bloggers, pundits, activists, and protagonists who vividly shape public opinion through the media. The propagators of Islamophobia have successfully carved their careers; they have been showered with attractive funds to promote their biased thinking in university podiums, public places, and on various social media networks. Consequently, many individuals “consciously manufacture and exploit the fear of Islam in a manner unprecedented in mainstream political and media circles”.<sup>40</sup> The venture of this cadre of individuals who have a profound influence on the public opinion has been termed “professional Islamophobia”. Professional Islamophobia mainly includes conservative politicians, far right-wing activists and bloggers, and even ex-Muslims making highly lucrative career

of diabolizing the Muslims and Arabs. This cadre, in the words of Nathan Lean, is named as “Islamophobia Industry”,<sup>41</sup> or labelled as “Islamophobia Network” by the Center for American Progress.<sup>42</sup> The well-paid beneficiaries of professional Islamophobia have influential political, media and publishing platforms from which they propagate and exacerbate Western irrational anxieties and fear toward the Muslim “Other”.

### **Beneficiaries of Anti-Islam Discourse – Bonanza for its Actors**

The effectiveness, consistency, and the survival of the Anti-Islam discourse have revealed that it is perpetrated by those institutions and social groups that stand to benefit from its longevity. There is a close and well-established relationship between rogue academics, pundits, journalists and government leaders, policymakers, politicians, political operatives, businessmen and industrialists, think-tanks, political action committees, boards, “private clubs,” “commissions,” “councils” and “groups.” In fact, this alliance, between neoconservatives, Democratic hawks, evangelical Christians and hard-line Zionists and their pet “intellectuals” attests to a system by which “political interest groups, political ideologues, economic interests and policymakers symbiotically serve each other’s interests”.<sup>43</sup> The discourse provides long-run bonanza to these social groups and institutions. Writing in the 9/11 context, Lyon writes, it “created a bonanza for the military-industrial complex, with lucrative procurement and service contracts, research-and-development investments ... for the security apparatus, with its expanded powers, larger budget, and growing cadres... and for the politicians who led the charge”.<sup>44</sup>

The far Right, both in the UK and the US, relies primarily on large amounts of funding, support and publicity from different parts of the conservative movements ranging from Tea Party activists to Ultra-Zionists. However, it must be born in mind that the United States’ unshakable and unwavering support for Israel is not because, in the words of Sheehi, “pay to play” politics of corporate and lobby-run Washington. But it is far deeper and more durable than that; it is the ideology that keeps the United States supporting Israel even its gross international human rights violations. It is the same ideology that runs various modulations of Islamophobia to maintain its global dominance. Sheehi states that both the US’ and Israel’s policy makers have admitted that Israel is a

“beachhead” of Western and American values in the Middle East region.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, both the US and Israel have successfully maintained their hegemony in the region for their socio-political and economic interests. To run the business, an enemy was needed that they effectively portrayed in the anti-Islam discourse.

Since 9/11, in the US, cadre of shadowy groups and individuals have spent millions of dollars to disseminate misinformation about Muslims into the mainstream media, body politic and public consciousness in order to provide political cover for both the US’s war on terror, and Israel’s war on Palestinians.<sup>46</sup> According to an investigation by the Center for American Progress, it is revealed that seven<sup>47</sup> top conservative foundations donated over \$57 million to Islamophobia network between 2001 and 2012 that have helped fan the flames of anti-Muslim hate in America.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a 2013 report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) identified thirty-seven US-based anti-Islam groups and estimated their combined revenue at \$119 million between 2008 and 2011.<sup>49</sup>

The in-depth investigation by the Center for American Progress reveals that the funding primarily goes into the hands of five key people and their organizations: Frank Gaffey’s Center for Security Policy (CSP) – “key source for right-wing politicians, pundits, and grassroot organizations, providing them with a steady stream of reports mischaracterizing Islam and warnings about the dangers of Islam and American Muslims”; Daniel Pipes’s Middle East Forum (MEF); Pamela Gellar and Robert Spencer’s Stop Islamization of America (SIOA); Steven Emerson’s Investigative Project on Terrorism; and David Yerushalmi’s Society of Americans for National Existence.<sup>50</sup> However, the social and financial resources do not alone explain the success of these, once small fringe, anti-Muslim organizations. There were other underlining factors working namely, “displays of negative emotion enable fringe organizations to transcend their obscurity and humble resources by appealing to the media’s legendary appetite for drama”.<sup>51</sup> Earlier the “*niqāb* ban” in France and Belgium; and (in 2017) the Muslim “immigration ban” in the US further testify to the fear of a “foreign” culture invading the landscape of modernity.

Earlier in 2007, Islamophobic activists and racists in the US such as Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer had begun showing interests in forming a trans-Atlantic movement, involving various far Right groups across Europe. While attending a 2007 conference on the theme “Counter

*Jihād* in Brussels”, they found the EDL’s protests against Islamisation of Europe a welcome revolt. Geller and Spencer falsely predicted similar warning sign for the US if Muslim and Islamic growth was not halted. By 2008, these well-funded Islamophobic activists joined together to form an organized network. Pamela Geller’s blog *Atlas Shrugs*<sup>52</sup> group began closely work with Robert Spencer, whose *Jihād Watch*<sup>53</sup> website was operative under Dawid Horowitz Freedom Center.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, a Los Angeles-based millionaire couple Aubrey and Joyce Chernick used their foundation to fund Robert Spencer with “close to a million dollars between 2004 and 2009”.<sup>55</sup> The same couple is also ardent supporters of Zionist causes and major funders of pro-Israel groups across the country.<sup>56</sup> Together, these groups of professional Islamophobia and misinformation experts’ push erroneous reports and spiteful narratives and notions that “there is a conspiracy by Muslims to take over the United States and that Islamists have ‘infiltrated’ all levels of society”.<sup>57</sup>

### **Conspiracy Theories**

Conspiracy theories play a dominant role in turning public opinion against Islam and the Muslims. Like *Eurabia* conspiracy theory in Europe, the US developed a new conspiracy theory – *Shari‘ah* conspiracy.<sup>58</sup> In Europe, the infamous Eurabian conspiracy theory holds that there is a secret plot between European politicians and Arab leaders to facilitate mass Muslim immigration, “subjugate Europe, and transform the continent into an Arab colony, Eurabia”.<sup>59</sup> Like the Jewish conspiracy theories in Germany during the 1930s, no evidence is ever offered to prove either the plot or the actual likelihood that Muslims will come to dominate demographically and thus rule over Europe. It is a conspiracy hatched by everyone from the nationalistic English Defence League to the Dutch politician Geert Wilder, and is outlined in great detail in Bat Ye’or’s book *Eurabia: the Euro-Arab Axis*.<sup>60</sup> The objective is to reveal the Islamic enemy under the guise of fighting Islamist terrorism, which is a mere appearance.

In the US, it is the *Shari‘ah* law conspiracy theory, which holds that “alongside the use of violence is the strategy of stealth *jihād*, which aims at the infiltration of national institutions and the assertion of Muslims’ demands through the legal system”.<sup>61</sup> It is a conspiracy pushed by

everyone from the Republican Party to Fox News, and is outlined in-depth in Mark Steyn's book *American Alone: The End of the World As We Know it*.<sup>62</sup> The *Shari'ah* conspiracy gained wider public attention with the distribution of twenty-eight million copies, of a propaganda documentary film (2005), *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West*.<sup>63</sup> The Americans, like the Europeans, were made to believe that the Muslim Americans were seeking to replace the US Constitution with the *Shari'ah* law.<sup>64</sup> However, the *Shari'ah* law conspiracy theory can easily be dismissed as wildly absurd and ridiculous, but it is a theory that has gained footing nevertheless. After the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, there is an unprecedented surge in the anti-Muslim incidents sweeping the US. Tracking anti-Muslim violence, vandalism, discrimination, public policy and political speech throughout 2016, The Islamophobia Project established by *The Huffington Post*, recorded 400 stories of anti-Muslim incidents in one year perpetuated by the supporters of Donald Trump. The project discovered that six major misconceptions are widespread in the American society that must be confronted and dismantled. These "6 Rules of Islamophobia in America" are 1) Muslims are not American; 2) All Muslims are terrorists; 3) Pork is to Muslims as a crucifix or garlic is to vampires; 4) All brown people are potentially Muslim, and are therefore potentially terrorists; 5) Islam is not a religion, it's a violent ideology; and 6) There's a secret Muslim plot to take over and/or destroy the United States and/or Western civilization from within.<sup>65</sup>

### **Islamophobia in South Asian Context – India and Burma**

The anti-Muslim hatred certainly exists everywhere yet not necessarily labelled as Islamophobia, for example, the massive anti-Muslim violence and massacre in Gujarat (India) in 2002 and 2004; and against Rohingya Muslims in Burma in 2015-17. It is unclear why these are not referred to as examples of Islamophobia. Apart from the Western European countries, one of the most overlooked forms of Islamophobia is a variety of anti-Muslim prejudice, fear, and acts of terror against the Muslims in South Asia. One of the underlining narratives of the anti-Muslim activists and far Right groups in India and Burma is the fear of increasing Muslim population.<sup>66</sup> By way of this, the anti-Muslim groups perceive Muslims' taking over main positions and intruding in the government services until

a time would come that Muslims would hold control of the administration to transform the country into a Muslim State.

One of the essential features of the Indian community is the Hindu (majority) and Muslim (minority) construction. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, there have been various instances of crimes and violent acts, on record, against the Indian Muslims perpetuated by the Hindu radical groups. Muslims have been persecuted, massacred, raped, tortured, discriminated, detained, and suspected on many occasions. Ayodhya (1992),<sup>67</sup> Gujarat (2002), Muzaffarnagar (2013) to name a few are some of the worst anti-Muslim episodes. It is reported that Babri Masjid's demolition in Ayodhya and the Gujarat Massacre of Muslims were State sponsored to annihilate and oppress the Muslim community.<sup>68</sup>

The situation today is much worse than ten years ago. A public narrative, as in the West, has been in place among the Hindu community fostering stereotypes and negative images against the Muslim community. *Hindutva* or Hinduness is an ideology propagated by the Hindu Right forces in India. Concerning Kandala Singh's statement, "The Hindutva Right discourse's almost obsessive focus on demonizing the other i.e. the Muslim ... The Islamophobia conjured up by this discourse i.e. the negative and fearful characteristics it ascribes to the Muslims, puts the onus of violence on 'the Muslims' ".<sup>69</sup> The cohesive forces of Hindutva – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) – increasingly take on anti-Muslim overtones.

The fears of growing Hindu nationalist militancy under the BJP government, which came to power in May 2014, have brought large scale apprehensions for the Muslim community. Anti-Muslim rhetoric by several BJP leaders, including members of Parliament, stoked insecurities among Muslims. The recent appointment (2017) of hard-line Hindu monk Yogi Adityanāth as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP) has further exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments in the State. An article in *The Washington Post* writes about him:

Adityanath is a controversial and deeply divisive figure for his militant, misogynistic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. He has been a vociferous supporter of a campaign called *Love Jihad*, ostensibly to stop

Muslim youths from marrying Hindu women, claiming, without evidence backing this up, that the intention was to convert them to Islam. His supporters have called for digging up Muslim women from their graves and raping them. In 2015, he said that if he was given the chance, he would install idols of Hindu gods in every mosque. In an undated video uploaded in 2014, he said, “If [Muslims] take one Hindu girl, we’ll take 100 Muslim girls. If they kill one Hindu, we’ll kill 100 Muslims.”<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, whenever any violence or terrorist attacks happen in the country, like in the West, Muslims are the first to be blamed and suspected even without any evidence. On mere suspicions, Muslims have been arrested, tortured, detained for years after the judiciary would acquit them of their charges. It is safe to say that Muslims reel under continuous fear of Hindutva policy. They are labelled as terrorists, anti-nationals, and “Pakistani”;<sup>71</sup> and are treated as second class citizens because discrimination is prevalent in all fields of human index. In addition, the lynching of a Muslim on cow slaughter row by the radical Hindutva group is shocking. Rise of vigilante violence is threatening the rule of law in India.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, in Burma, racial tensions have escalated between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority. The Burmese government treats Muslims’ as the immigrant from the neighbouring Bangladesh; and has refused to grant them Burmese nationality.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, discrimination, stereotypes, and hatred have become natural instinct against the Muslims. Rohingya Muslims are considered as “one of the world’s most persecuted minorities”.<sup>74</sup> The recent rise of the ultranationalist 969 movement, led by the Burmese militant racist monk Ashin Wirathu (who appeared on a July 1, 2013 international cover of *Time* magazine labelled “The Face of Buddhist Terror”), “reignited xenophobic fears about the supposed increasing influence of Islam in Burmese society”.<sup>75</sup> Provocative rhetoric and slanderous images from Wirathu, ‘the Burmese bin Laden’, and other hard-line monks in the self-proclaimed Organization for the Protection of Race, Religion, and Belief, have led to a rapidly worsening situation for the Rohingyas. It is reported that since June 2012, over 140,000 Rohingyas have been displaced and hundreds killed<sup>76</sup> by Burmese security forces. The increasing and unabated

anti-Muslim hostility in the region leaves the broader Muslim community (about 4% of Burmese total population) at risk as well.<sup>77</sup>

In short, the anti-Muslim phenomenon is prevalent throughout the world – from Europe, or India and Sri Lanka to the US and Central Asia, for example. Islamophobia is not a new thing to emerge from vacuum; it has been present in Western culture and society for many centuries; at different times and in varying contexts it has taken a multiplicity and diversity of forms and has fulfilled a variety of functions and interests.<sup>78</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In a summary, while racism, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments have a long history in the Western Christian European Culture starting from the Crusades at the end of the eleventh century, legalized and systematic persecution against Muslims took institutional form in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The same anti-Islam sentiments and anti-Muslims propaganda have served the needs of the emerging global powers post-Cold War phenomena. But, the irrational and exaggerated fear of Islam (Islamophobia) reached a fever pitch of hysteria in post 9/11, which, if not addressed, arrested, and combated immediately, would exacerbate the gap between Islam and the West to an irrecoverable retreat. The Western portrayal of Islamic culture and civilization has gross distortions generated by the fogs of ignorance, hatred, military and cultural wars. The fear has not been born in thin air, indeed, many key persons, think tanks, media outlets, and political leaders plot notorious and ridiculous notions day in and day out which form the backbone of the anti-Islam phenomenon. Moreover, the already existing narrative, or the “Lewis doctrine”<sup>79</sup>, the “clash of civilizations”<sup>80</sup> has become dominant in the aftermath of 9/11 and was the ideological basis for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as for the domestic attacks on Muslims and Arabs. The Islamic threat rhetoric has provided the US legal apparatus to serve the goals of the War on Terror – a process that has led to systematic violations of the rights of Muslims – on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to use overwhelming military force for hegemony to gain access to the vital resources of the Middle East especially the Gulf oil. Muslims, from East to West, have been the long-suffering victims of Western racism, American imperialism, and Israeli Zionism. Broadly

speaking the US foreign policy shaped by the “war on terror rhetoric” has made the US imperialist mission obvious. In essence, the ideology that underpins this policy is that US has a special destiny among nations; and in order to maintain her hegemony on military, economic and political fronts, she can wage preemptive wars on any aggression. “The East is a Career”<sup>81</sup> (from Disraeli’s 1847 novel), brilliantly and briefly fits in the Western European Judeo-Christian intervention in the Middle East.

Today, the West is combating terrorism; and Islamist extremist ideology is seen as the main cause of the violence, which is open to debate. However, they fail to acknowledge the part played by the Western states in constituting the global conflict between the West and Islam. Western states are themselves responsible for creating such an unpalatable belligerent atmosphere resulting in violent conflicts. The US foreign policy is mainly responsible for the contemporary violence both in and out of its nation. America’s unshakable support for Israel has bedevilled relations between Islam and the West. Donald Trump’s victory in the recent US Presidential elections, and his appointments of an Islamophobe, an alleged racist and a defender of torture to key posts, is seen, in various quarters, alarming to the Muslims and black.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the need of the hour is to have a re-look on US policy and a positive approach toward and engagement with the Muslims and their faith. Similarly, in other parts of the world like in India and Burma, a systematic anti-Muslim propaganda is functioning under the patronage of the governments, which is serious if not surprising. Clinging to absurd, fallacious and notorious notions and narratives about Islam only harms intercultural understanding and unnecessarily raises suspicion about Islam and the Muslims.

## Notes and References

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15. Mastnak, *The New Crusades*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
16. Mastnak, *The New Crusades*, *op. cit.*, p. 206; see also, Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 91-100, especially p. 93.
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