

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7129>



Racism and Islamophobia

# Islamophobia in Europe

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV556 - May 2021 -

Publication date: Monday 3 May 2021

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**While Islamophobia, connected to forms of anti-Arab racisms and colonial and imperial histories, certainly existed prior to 2000, it exploded in Western countries after the attacks of September 11, 2001 by the jihadist organization al-Qaida. A new enemy had been found and laws discriminating against Muslim populations blossomed in Europe, North America and Australia, but also elsewhere, such as in India, Russia and China.**

Western states built up Muslims as a dangerous “other” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The so-called “War on Terror” helped the USA and its allies to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) under the guise of combating terrorism.

At home, in both Europe and the United States, new counterterrorism policies and measures very largely targeted Muslims, who have been treated as legitimate objects of suspicion, and other non-white populations. Building on this “otherness” and “dangerousness,” authorities have increased laws and means to monitor Muslims, to control their every move, and to constantly ensure their adherence to so called “Western Values” or in France “Republican Values.”

Islamophobia has continued to grow in the USA and European countries over the past decade, with governments exploiting the rise of a new jihadist organization, the “Islamic State” (IS), and the arrival of millions of refugees from the MENA region to deepen their racist and repressive policies. The refugees of course are fleeing the deadly repression of authoritarian and despotic regimes, such as in Syria, the rise of the IS in Syria and Iraq, along with foreign interventions.

European Union (EU) countries are home to 20 million Muslims. Increasing number of far right and fascistic political parties throughout the continent have scapegoated Muslims and other non-white populations. National Rally (formerly known as the National Front), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the English Defense League, Spain’s Vox Party and the Austrian Freedom Party are some of the political parties that share a common discourse and policy to rid Europe of its “Muslim issue.”

These far-right political movements, however, are not the ones that have implemented the racist and exclusionary policies against Muslim populations. It’s the social liberal and right-wing governments that have done so. Successive center-right political leaders have, for instance, repeatedly spoken against “Islamist terrorism” (German Chancellor Angela Merkel) and the incompatibility with European values of so-called “Islamist separatism” (French President Emmanuel Macron).

The article will discuss the growing Islamophobic political atmosphere and rising violence against Muslims in Europe, which also served to attack more generally the democratic rights of wider sectors of the society, especially leftist groups and activists.

Continuation of Racism

Islamophobia does not measure a person’s religiosity. It’s a form of racism against individuals and populations considered or perceived as Muslims, whether he or she is a practicing believer or an atheist, but bearing a Muslim name.

Racism is not an opinion located in a psychological and individual level, but a relationship of domination: racialized

groups are not simply perceived and thought of as citizens entirely apart, but also treated in a particular way. This difference, which should rather be characterized as unequal treatment, translates very concretely into denial or at least inequality of rights and opportunities — for example when one is Muslim, Arab or Black to find a job or housing, or for Muslim women the right to wear a headscarf in public school.

After World War II serious attempts to classify people according to race ended, but racism took on other forms. The conservative “revolution” of the 1980s reinforced the official rhetoric of governments with the promotion of “culturalist” explanations to promote discriminatory and racist policies. This was accompanied by the implementation of neoliberal policies. It was also connected to the ascendance of Samuel Huntington’s concept of the “clash of civilizations.”

Neoliberal policies in Western countries led to further precariousness and a massive impoverishment of working-class populations. As trade unions and resistance from below were being crushed, competition between workers rose. In working-class circles, those who pay the most for these neoliberal policies were women, young people and populations with immigrant and/or minority backgrounds.

Under these circumstances inequalities in society could no longer be denied — but their causes were located in “cultural factors” supposedly specific to a person or a minority group. Inequalities were therefore explained by a group’s culture which was regarded as homogeneous.

In France, for example, Arab/Muslim populations (or those considered as such) were accused of “insufficient integration.” Their cultures and/or religions were seen as “incompatible” with “French culture.”

In Great Britain, similar dynamics were at play. The “War on Terror” in the 2000s was built on an older idea that Muslims “self-segregate” and don’t accept “British values.” This actually became a cornerstone of the Prevent strategy (see below), which pushes public sector workers to spy on Muslims for signs of radicalization and “non-violent extremism.” [\[1\]](#)

Inequalities in society are no longer understood or seen as produced by the state’s social, political and economic policies. The objective is to disqualify the legitimacy of the claims and demands denouncing the inequalities in a particular society.

The development of racist discrimination in all spheres of social life leads to a triple process of precariousness, ghettoization and ethnicization of minority and/or migrant populations.

## Attacking Democratic and Social Rights

The so called “War on Terror” led to justifying two massive wars, the occupations Afghanistan and Iraq, and other military interventions in Muslim majority countries, while criminalization and exclusionary policies against Muslim also increased.

Over the past two decades, the prohibitions on forms of Muslim veiling in various public spaces has gone from the hijab ban in French schools and restrictions for teachers in some parts of Germany to an outright interdiction of the face-covering niqab in public spaces in Denmark, Belgium, France and more recently in Switzerland.

This has been accompanied by rising violence targeting Muslims, mosques and their symbols. This demonstrates

how anti-Muslim feelings have penetrated far beyond certain limited sections of society, to reach wider sectors.

In a report published in 2012 titled “Choice and prejudice: discrimination against Muslims in Europe,” Amnesty International was alarmed by the Islamophobic climate. Many European countries (France, Switzerland, Austria, etc.) were singled out for their practices, while political parties quietly encourage them in their quest for electoral votes, the report adds.

The editor of the report describes, for example, how “Muslim women are denied jobs and young girls are prevented from going to school simply because they wear traditional clothes like headscarves...Men can be fired for wearing beards associated with Islam.” Muslims in Britain are generally paid 13-21% less than others with equal qualifications, while Muslim job seekers were three times less likely to be offered an interview. [2]

This has continued throughout the continent. In France, numerous laws in the past two decades directly or indirectly targeted Arab/Muslim populations, starting with the ban on the hijab in schools in 2004 and the niqab face veil in all public spaces in 2011. The burkini (swimwear for conservative Muslim women) clampdown followed in 2016.

The Collective Against Islamophobia in France on numerous occasions accused the French state and public authorities of participating, through their action, in the spread of Islamophobia. The implementation of the state of emergency and more broadly the anti-terrorism policy conducted since 2015 have led, according to the Collective to “the emergence of a security Islamophobia.” [3]

French President Macron announced a “separatism” law on October 12, 2020, and it was adopted on February 16, 2021, by the National Assembly. The discussion and adoption of the law were the pretext for all kinds of racist declarations by a majority of deputies of the right and far right. Unfortunately, some sections of the left joined in too.

[Now pending in the Senate and sharply criticized by Amnesty International, the sweeping “anti-separatism” law imposes regulations on religious organizations and allows the state to ban preachers for alleged extremism — ed.]

Meanwhile, the government-owned and mainstream media accused organizations and individuals opposing this law of “Islam-leftism.” It sought to delegitimize any solidarity the left shows to the Muslim population.

In France’s new “anti-separatist” law, 51 articles provide more security tools. To receive grants from the state, associations will have to sign a “Republican engagement contract on respect for the principles and values of the republic.” This is accompanied by an extension of the grounds for dissolving associations which “threaten public order,” just as the government banned and dissolved certain Muslim associations in the past few months, such as the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, whose role is to provide assistance to victims of Islamophobia. [4]

At the same time, the so-called “religious neutrality” required of public service agents is extended to private sector agents entrusted with a public service mission, with all the obligations that go with it, in particular the headscarf ban. There will be increased control over mosques, an obligation to declare donations received from abroad, a change in the status of Islamic worship activities from the 1901 law to a more restrictive “separation” law of 1905, and increased control over all the activities of their cultural associations.

More generally, this new law is about silencing Muslims and their organizations, harassing them by making them responsible for the discrimination they denounce.

Similarly in the UK, the British government also stigmatized Muslims through various so-called “security” policies

such as the “Prevent” security program, which began to be implemented in 2005. This program, redesigned by the Conservatives in 2011 but first launched by Tony Blair’s New Labor in 2007, aims to “fight terrorism” and “extremism.”

The program allows British authorities to put under surveillance anyone who disagrees with government policy and the actions of the British state, such as opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bombing of Libya or support to the Palestinian cause, and “British core values.”

Muslim students were particularly targeted in this campaign. The Prevent program also asked teachers to denounce the signs of “radicalization” of young Muslims...

According to a study published in 2017, the vast majority of teachers and school employees affirmed their concern about the stigmatization of Muslim students in the “Prevent” program strategy and on the contrary undermines inclusion efforts in schools, while being ineffective against religious extremism. [\[5\]](#)

As Narzanin Massoumi explained, “a Pakistani citizen is 150 times more likely to be stopped and searched under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act — a draconian piece of legislation that allows people to be stopped at ports without ‘reasonable suspicion’ — than if you are white.”

The law allows officers to detain people without suspicion and hold them for up to nine hours at airports, ports and international rail stations. Yet only 100 people have been charged and 44 convicted since the law came into force in 2001.

In both, France and Britain the rise of Islamophobic policies also played an important role in a process of controlling and limiting the political rights of everyone — not only Muslims. In France, so called “anti-terrorist” and “security” laws targeted leftist and ecologist activists and group. On November 28, 2020, massive demonstrations occurred in France against “the global security law” uniting various democratic and progressive forces — from journalist organizations to the radical left — to fight the impunity of the police and the extension of surveillance power.

More generally this demonstration was to struggle for self-defense against the state apparatus and policies that deny liberties. These rank high among the instruments of the ruling class in the period of global crisis.

Similarly in England, the “Prevent” security program did not stop with attacks against Muslims, but later on targeted the left — ecologists, left groups, pro-Palestinian movements etc. For example, Marxist teaching texts are for marked as potentially radicalizing tools and therefore school teachers can no longer use anti-capitalist material.

## Demonizing Muslims

The policies of governments and mainstream media have participated in the demonization of Muslims. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the display of negative portrayals of Muslims in the media make the population more likely to support government policies that are detrimental to Muslims and an erosion of their rights.

In 2007 a Greater London Authority report exposed that in a week’s coverage by the British media, 91% of the stories about Muslims were negative. A more recent study by the Muslim Council of Britain revealed last year that not much had changed.

An Arab News/YouGov poll in 2017 pointed out that the majority of British people supported racial profiling against Arabs. In 2019, YouGov found that 38% of British people believed that Islam was not compatible with Western values. A much higher proportion of respondents had an unfavorable view of Islam compared to any other religion. [6]

In addition, after Boris Johnson's comments comparing women in burqas to "letterboxes" and "bank robbers," Islamophobic incidents reportedly jumped by 375% in the following week. An internal inquiry by the Conservatives, however, characterized them as "respectful and tolerant."

In 2019, research conducted for the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Religion Monitor yet again confirmed large mistrust towards Muslims across Europe. In Germany and Switzerland, every second respondent declared they considered Islam as a threat. [7] Forty-four percent of Germans, for example, saw "a fundamental contradiction between Islam and German culture and values." The figure for the same in Finland was a remarkable 62%; in Italy, it's 53%.

In Spain and France, about 60% thought Islam is incompatible with the "West." In Austria, one in three didn't want to have Muslim neighbors. [8] In Hungary, which has seen growing anti-immigrant and racist policies since 2015, 72% had unfavorable views of Muslims in 2016 according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, while in a survey in 2017, 64% of respondents from Hungary agreed with the statement that "all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped." [9]

More broadly, a new report by Amnesty published in the beginning of 2021 describes how discrimination in European counter-terrorism policies has promoted an environment where Muslims are more likely to be the subject of hate speech and attacks, while reinforcing the racist view that Islam is a "threat." Muslims continue therefore to suffer ethnic profiling and are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, limitations on their movements, arrest and deportation. [10]

## Explosion of Violence

The constant criminalization and racist policies against Muslims led to an explosion of Islamophobic acts in recent years, including killings and forms of terrorism by far-right movements and/or fascist individuals and organizations.

In 2018 alone, France saw a 52% increase of Islamophobic incidents while in Austria there was an increase of around 74%, with 540 cases. In Germany, the number of crimes classified as Islamophobic rose by 4.4% to 950 offenses in 2019, according to German police statistics.

Repeated or foiled attacks on refugee centers and mosques have multiplied, as with the killing of nine people in Hanau in February 2020 as the most blatant example. [11] The perpetrator of the attack in Hanau possessed what the German authorities have called "a deeply racist mind-set." [12]

In Britain there were 143,920 anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic Tweets sent from the UK — an average of 393 per day between March 2016 and March 2017. The number of Islamophobic attacks also multiplied by five the day after the May 22, 2017 suicide bombing at the Manchester arena.

Islamophobic attacks are also part of an increasingly aggressive and hostile political atmosphere, while the fascist and far-right movements are mobilizing ever more on these issues. In England two fascist group, Britain First and the English Defense League (EDL), have also increased Islamophobic attacks.

Leaders of Britain First have been banned from going to all mosques after a series of attempted intimidation of Muslims in their places of worship. On the other hand, EDL leader Tommy Robinson called for the formation of “militias” to “settle” the issue of Islam in Great Britain.

Muslims and mosques have also increasingly been targets of French far-right and fascist movements and groups. Far-right terrorists have justified their attacks as struggling against a “Muslim invasion.” The fascist Anders Breivik who assassinated 77 individuals in 2011 in Norway, claimed for instance to act to preserve Christianity against multiculturalism and to avert the “Eurabia” — a theory popularized by Bat Ye’or (the writer Gisele Littman — ed.) that Europe will be colonized by the “Arab world.”

The line from policy to act, from rhetoric to violence, is very hard to draw. And the process by which Islamophobia spreads across European society is complex, multicausal, endlessly ramifying.

## Feminism or Femo-Nationalism?

Similarly, there has been an instrumentalization (opportunist manipulation — ed.) of women’s rights to attack the Muslim population, which is widely viewed as more patriarchal, essentializing Muslims as a threat to women’s rights. A form of femo-nationalism has been developing. As academic Sara Farris explained, this is an “instrumentalization” of migrant women in Europe by right-wing nationalists — and neoliberals. [\[13\]](#)

The far right and the right have taken over part of the feminist discourse, not to effectively defend women — they continue to maintain conservative and reactionary positions regarding women’s and LGBTIQ rights — but to erect a barrier between “Us,” the supposed egalitarian and emancipated Western society, and “Them,” an oppressive and threatening Islam. [\[14\]](#)

For example, banning the burqa in several countries in Europe was implemented for the so-called purpose of struggling for women’s rights and equality. The main objective of these interdictions, however, were new campaigns of stigmatization against the Muslim populations.

Other voices claiming to be “left and feminist” also support the initiative in the name of equality, declaring that “the full veil is nothing but a mobile prison for women.” Their paternalistic argument — “we have never considered the fact that certain individuals accept or even adhere to the discrimination they suffer as a reason to stop combating this same discrimination” — denies the agency of women wearing the burqa, and ignores that this initiative will, on the contrary, only reinforce the discrimination to which they are already subjected.

More generally some prominent feminists, although a minority, have supported laws such as the veil and burkini bans in France — for example, the well-known feminist intellectual Elizabeth Badinter — and this has strengthened anti-Islam positions in the name of women’s rights.

It is indeed a real trap for the feminist movement. It breaks the solidarity among women by putting on one side Muslim women, with or without headscarves, portrayed as submissive victims and never as actors of their own emancipation unless they demonstrate their adherence to “Western values.” On the other side Western society, even Western feminism, is considered capable of deciding the norms of gender equality and paths to liberation.

Such orientations are at odds with any idea of ??women’s self-determined action, by anathematizing women wearing the burqa or headscarves, speaking on their behalf and declaring them automatically oppressed without giving them

speech or even listening to them.

Moreover, use of the repressive state apparatus is never a vehicle for emancipation. Muslim women, already sufficiently discriminated against and subject to stereotypes having a considerable impact on the realization of their rights, do not need to have their rights and activity decided for them.

The issue of the veil and the burqa only concerns women; they must decide for themselves and in complete independence whether or not to wear it. Either imposing or removing the veil and burqa by force — by a state and/or an individual — is a reactionary act that goes against any support for women's autonomy.

Tackling the structural problems of sexism and racism cannot be done by choosing to stigmatize a group that is itself discriminated against. Only an anti-racist and anti-capitalist feminist movement can tackle these issues.

### Conclusion

The continuously growing Islamophobia in Europe over the past two decades is not limited to a reaction to the terrorist Islamic State attacks or due solely to propaganda of far right groups, as claimed by mainstream media and governments, but are above all the result of the increasing authoritarian and racist policies of European governments.

The Islamophobic and racist policies of the ruling classes have the objective of consolidating a nationalist imagination by inviting the majority ethno-racial group to unite against invented threats posed by Muslims and more generally non-white populations.

Meanwhile various European governments are deepening their neoliberal and nationalist agendas, while most of the liberal and social-liberal parties have not opposed them, quite the opposite.

Moreover, it's important to understand how Islamophobia plays a larger social role by trying to normalize attacks by the ruling classes and the expansion of state control, directed not only at Muslim populations characterized as dangerous, but at everyone on the left who challenge the ruling system.

Therefore, struggling against Islamophobia and all forms of racism is also a way to defend the rights of all engaged in challenging this unequal authoritarian system. In this perspective, let us not forget that jihadist organizations and others also feed in part on the racist, anti-social and imperialist policies of Western governments.

At the same time, there has been growing resistance from Muslim, Black and non-white populations and sections of the left against various governments' racist and security policies. The murder of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis in the spring of 2020 sparked a wave of anti-racist mobilization, historic in its scale and duration but above all by its global dimension.

Nearly all the Western countries were affected. In Paris, at the call of the Adama Committee, tens of thousands of people rushed to the court to demand "truth and justice." Demonstrations condemned state racism, socio-economic discrimination and police violence.

Marxists must challenge Islamophobia along with all forms of racism. Similarly, we must defend freedom of religion, and at the same time the right of oppressed groups to self-determination. In his Critique of the Gotha Program, Karl Marx argued that we must reject state interference in matters of belief and worship.

## Islamophobia in Europe

---

Workers' struggles alone will not be sufficient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands of rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society.

The left must indeed understand how beyond capitalist dynamics, gender issues, discrimination based on religion and/or "race" influence the structure and dynamics of our societies, our workplaces and the development of consciousness. It is not whether class issues come before gender/race/religion or vice versa, but how these elements come together in capitalist production and power relations, which result in a complex reality.

Discrimination based on race, gender, economic, cultural and ideological oppression should not be underestimated, at the risk of losing sight of the complexity of the task when building a progressive movement including workers of all backgrounds.

Failing to consider these interconnections will negatively impact the hard struggle to unite the working class and developing the political project for a radical transformation of society.

All forms of exploitation and oppression are opposed by Marxists. As Marx declared: "Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where black skin is branded."

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

---

[1] This duty was made legally binding by the Tories' Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015. But it was first brought in by Tony Blair's Labour government in the wake of the July 7, 2005 bombings in London.

[2] *The Independent*, 3 July 2017 "[East London acid attack: When Muslims are the victims, we refuse to call it terrorism](#)".

[3] See [https://issuu.com/ccif/docs/ccif\\_rapport\\_final\\_complet](https://issuu.com/ccif/docs/ccif_rapport_final_complet).

[4] See "[State Racism, Islamophobia & Religious Fundamentalism](#)".

[5] *The Guardian*, 3 July 2017 "[Prevent strategy stigmatising Muslim pupils, say teachers](#)".

[6] *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2021 "[Defining Islamophobia Is the First Step Toward Addressing It](#)".

[7] Bertelsmann Stiftung, 19 July 2019, "[Religious tolerance is widespread – but it does not extend to Islam](#)".

[8] *The Guardian*, 28 September 2020 "[There's a social pandemic poisoning Europe: hatred of Muslims](#)".

[9] *Brookings*, 24 July 2019 "[Anti-Muslim populism in Hungary: From the margins to the mainstream](#)".

[10] Amnesty International, 3 February 2021 "[Europe: How to combat counter-terror discrimination](#)".

## Islamophobia in Europe

---

[11] *The Guardian*, 28 September 2020 [“There's a social pandemic poisoning Europe: hatred of Muslims”](#).

[12] *New York Times*, 6 March 2020 [“Why is Europe so Islamophobic?”](#).

[13] See Sara Faris, [In the Name of Women's Rights, The Rise of Femonationalism](#) 2017.

[14] We can see for example their defense of the traditional model of the family and against same sex marriage, their willingness to limit abortion rights, support for neoliberal policies, etc.