

TERRORISM, HATE CRIMES AND WESTERN POLITICS: ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION AND THE MEDIA

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 **Analysis**

The recent hate-filled terrorist attack targeting Muslims in Christchurch mosques, New Zealand has not only horrified the whole world but it has also started a serious debate on religious terrorism, white supremacist, racism, hate and prejudice against refugees, gun laws and so on. But what could be considered as one of the major reasons behind this attack is the increasing Islamophobia in the world in general and particularly, in the West. Hating 'Muslims' and 'Islam' has become a common phenomenon in Europe and the US to say the least. The aftermath of the Christchurch attack witnesses rising hatred and crimes against Muslims in other Western countries especially in the United Kingdom. This clearly proves that Islamophobia does not only exist, but it has a grip in the society at large.

Days following 9/11, Muslims or those who looked like Muslims, became victims of hate

crimes. Since 9/11 the anti-Muslim prejudice in the US and around the world has increased in an extreme and hasty way. Until today no action has been put to effect since the alarm was first raised concerning the devastating effects of Islamophobia. The media, perhaps as the most vital agent of globalization in the modern world, has played a key role in spreading Islamophobia in the society. Although the mass media has particularly played its role in the shaping of wars, conflicts and its resolutions, it has also often failed to reflect objectivity towards Islam. Dominant global media networks have been criticized to have biases towards the political agendas of the "Western world" or more specifically, the first-world nations. The US is one of the nations influenced enormously by the media (Saeed, 2007)¹. Both the old and the young have access to media systems and devices. Young people, who lack adequate skills and qualifications, heavily rely on preconceptions

in an attempt to understand the globe (Revell, 2010)². This makes them as easy targets of certain media propagandas.

In the case of Islamophobia, the media is used as a larger platform of globalization to spread hatred, prejudice and stereotypes towards Islam and Muslims. A majority of the mainstream media usually describes most Muslims as extremists. For example, the *Time* magazine published a photograph where Muslim soldiers were shown to perform prayers while carrying guns. The caption on the bottom of the picture said, “Guns and prayer go together in the fundamentalist battle”. The part that the magazine failed to state was that those soldiers were praying on a battlefield in Afghanistan. Common sense of the situation meant that the soldiers had to remain armed at all times in case of unpredictable ambush.

Another statement made in 2009 by a British political journalist Mehdi Hasan in the *New Statesman* criticized the Western media for over-reporting about a few Islamist terror incidents but under-reporting the much larger number of planned non-Islamist terror attacks carried out by “non-Irish white folks”. A 2012 study indicates that Muslims across different European countries, such as France, Germany and the United Kingdom, experience the highest degree of Islamophobia in the media.

What Is Islamophobia?

The term “Islamophobia” has a fairly recent origin. The term itself describes the prejudgment and stereotypes that a Western world has about Muslims and their faith. Islamophobia is defined as acts of fear or hostility towards followers of Islamic religion. This unjustified fear has contributed immensely to the discrimination of Muslims across the globe. It is a base point for isolation of Muslims in the political arena and affiliate social classes in the society. This term frequently appears in the media and tends to denote fear, hatred or prejudice against Islam and Muslims. “When the Runnymede Trust issued its landmark report in 1997, “Islamophobia” meant a “shorthand way of referring to dread

or hatred of Islam and, by extension, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word means “Intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims”. The Berkeley University Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project suggested the working definition:

“Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve ‘civilizational rehab’ of the target communities (Muslim or otherwise). Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended.”

Turkish government representative Umut Topcuoglu defines islamophobia as:

“...a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by unfounded fear, mistrust, and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia is also manifested through intolerance, discrimination, unequal treatment, prejudice, stereotyping, hostility, and adverse public discourse. Differentiating from classical racism and xenophobia, Islamophobia is mainly based on stigmatization of a religion and its followers, and as such, Islamophobia is an affront to the human rights and dignity of Muslims.”

The wording of this definition bears a close resemblance to an earlier definition of “Islamophobia”, written by the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the OSCE Ambassador Omur Orhun and published by the OIC in 2011:

“Islamophobia is a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by unfounded fear, mistrust and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia is also manifested through intolerance, discrimination and adverse public discourse against Muslims and Islam. Differentiating from classical racism and xenophobia, Islamophobia is mainly based on radicalization of Islam and its followers.”

Similarly, there are other definitions of Islamophobia. The definition of Islamophobia used by the European Islamophobia report (EIR) is as follows,

“When talking about Islamophobia, we mean anti-Muslim racism. As Anti-Semitism Studies has shown, the etymological components of a word do not necessarily point to its complete meaning, nor 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, stabilizing 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 generalized for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts, because Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam”

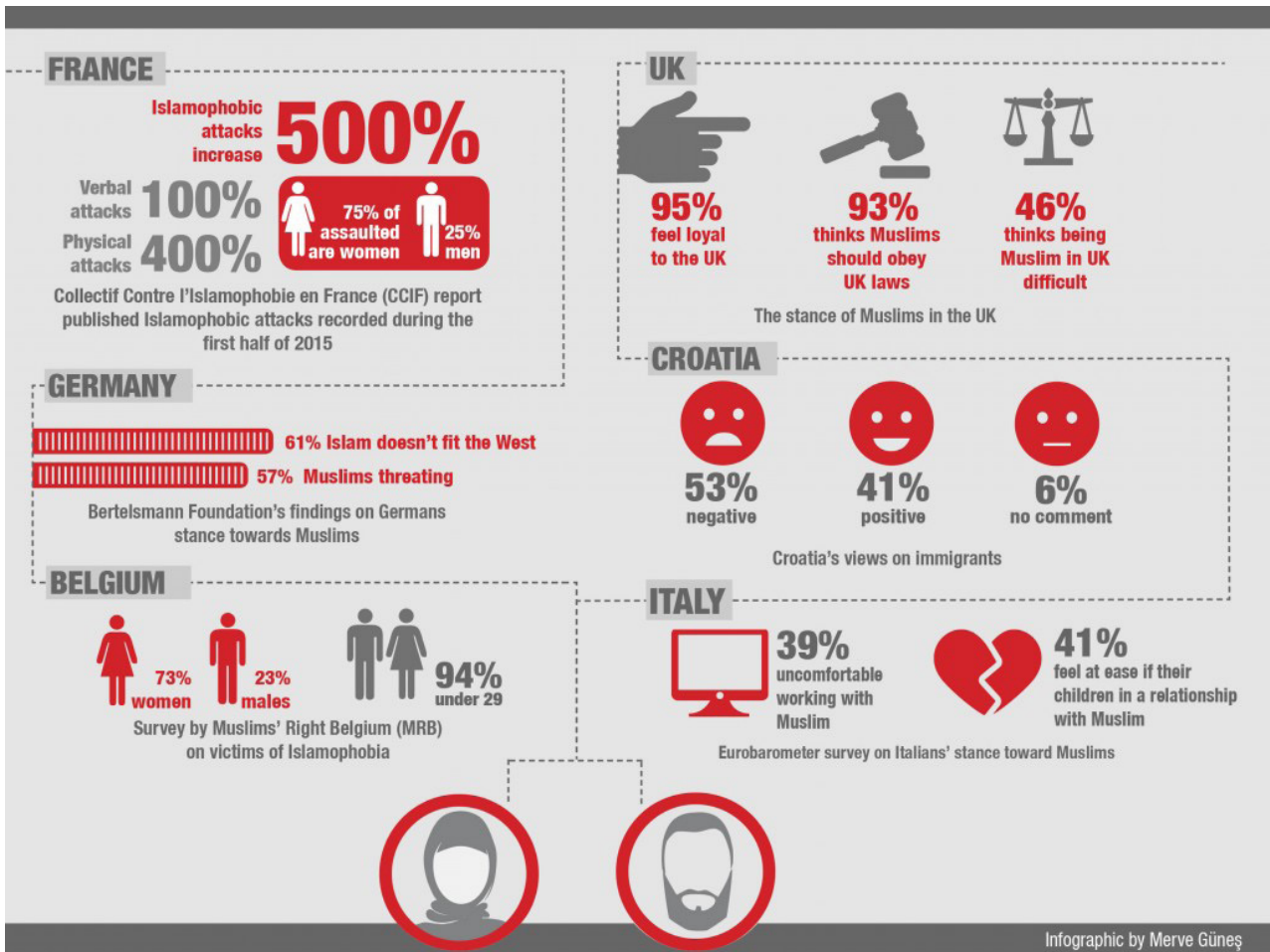
“Islamophobia” was not recorded in English until the second half of the 20th century. The term “Islamophobia” was first used in print in 1991 and was defined in the Runnymede Trust Report (the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997)

as “unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.” The word has been coined because there is a new reality which needs naming — anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed so that it can be identified and acted against (Sajid, 2005 Vol. 12, No 2&3)³. Now, the word has been used more and more since 2000 in the discussions and works of international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (OIC) (Richardson 2007:3).

Islamophobia In Western Countries

“Islamophobia has been fixed in the Western psyche more in the European than in the American worldview for centuries. There are a number of reasons for this: the early triumph and rapid expansion of an emerging Islam among Christian entities in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) right up to the Iberian Peninsula from the 8th to the 12th centuries; the onslaught of the European Crusades, their re-conquest of Jerusalem and their subsequent defeat at the hands of the Muslims between the 10th and 13th centuries; the rise of Western colonialism from the 16th century onwards which led to the subjugation of most Muslim polities in Asia and Africa; and the re-assertion of these polities from the middle of the 20th century as they seek to establish their own identities within a global order that centers around US dominance. All have contributed, in different ways, to the spread of a negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims in the West” (Global Research, 2012).

History also shows that Islam spread quickly to the West thus threatened the position of the Christian Church and the ruling class. The Western elites, mainly the governments and the churches, became highly involved in projecting negative images about Islam. As a result, not only were battles were fought against Islam, but a war of words was also initiated to make sure that Islam would not have any converts or sympathizers in the West.



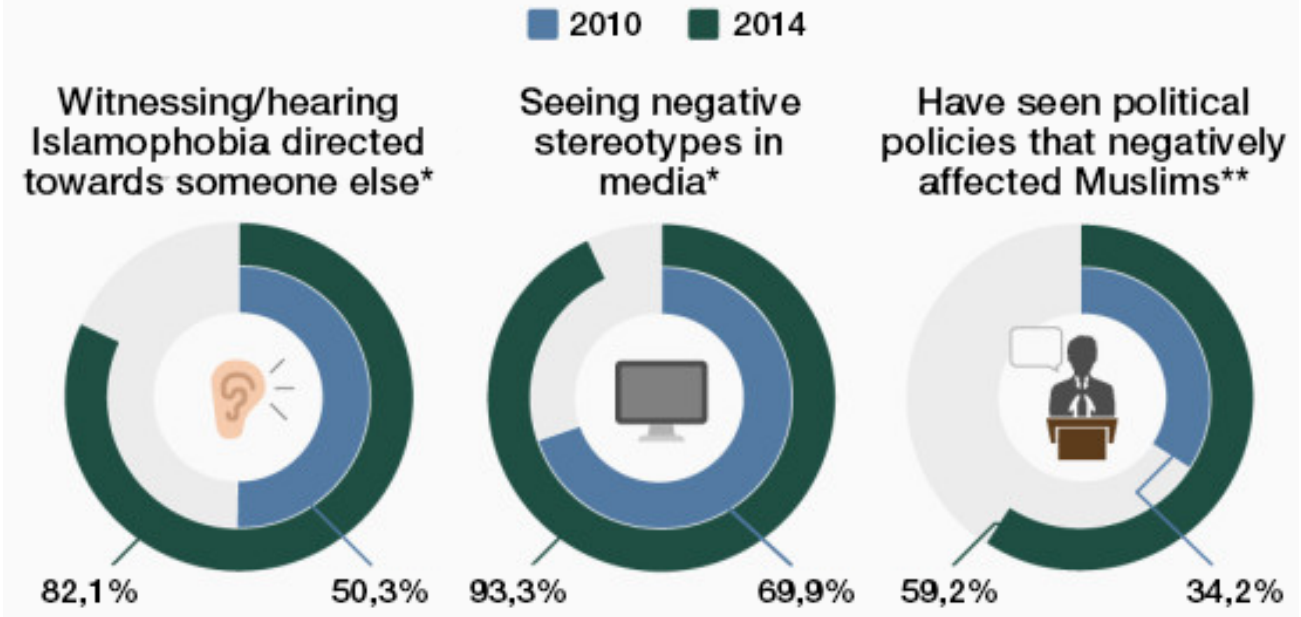
Source: SETA, Ankara, Turkey (2016).

Media, Globalization And Islamophobia

The modern era is the age of the media. The media has virtually turned the world into a global village of communication. Marshall McLuhan,

often called as the media prophet, in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) coined a phrase 'medium is the message' to explain the influence of mass media on the readers and audiences.

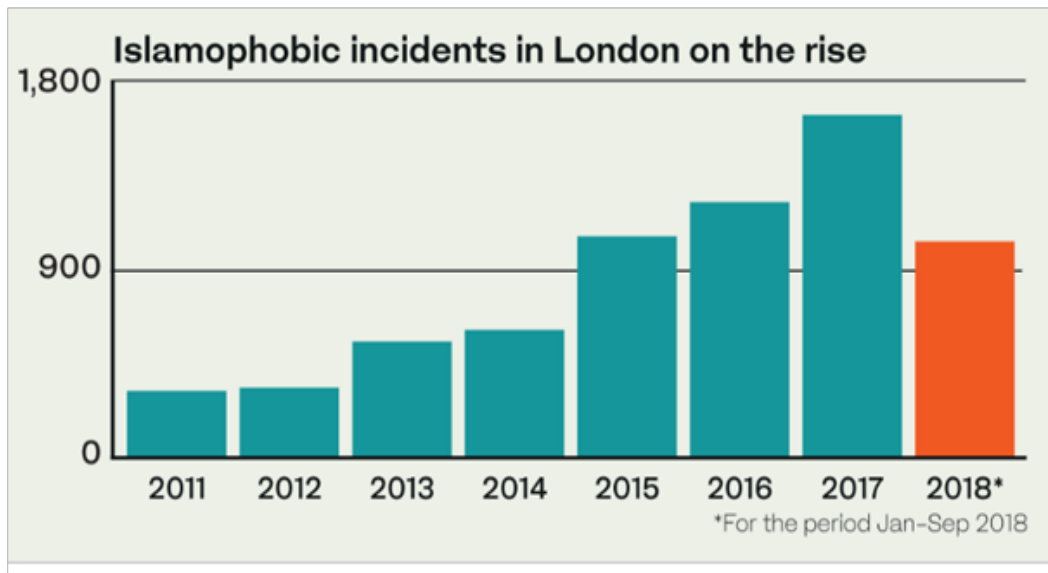
AN ENVIRONMENT OF HATE IN THE UK?



Source: Sarah Ann Harris, The Huffington Post (2015).

The traditional roles of mass media as defined by media persons are to inform, educate, entertain, and to persuade the people. The media can bring change in the behaviour and attitude of the people by emphasizing certain issues. Meanwhile, with the revolutionary progress

of mass communication, an unprecedented opportunity has been created to share and exchange information for knowledge and social change. But, the media has turned the affairs into a war of words.



Source: London’s Metropolitan Police Force (2018).

“The books, newspapers, magazines, video cartoons, movies, radio, television and internet-based websites are now widely used to manipulate the information, facts and beliefs. The instrument of mass communication in the modern world has an enormous potential for inducing newer images in shaping global politics, culture and the public beliefs. Mass media is both a force for integration and for dispersion and individuation in society. The

society as a whole is now a simple hostage at the hands of the media. This is the time to ask whether the people are being managed, manipulated, massaged and brainwashed by the media. Media men with a biased mind often become propagandists of their personal opinion, using the media as their vehicle. The media is also controlled by their sponsors” (Institute of Hazrat Muhammad (SAW).

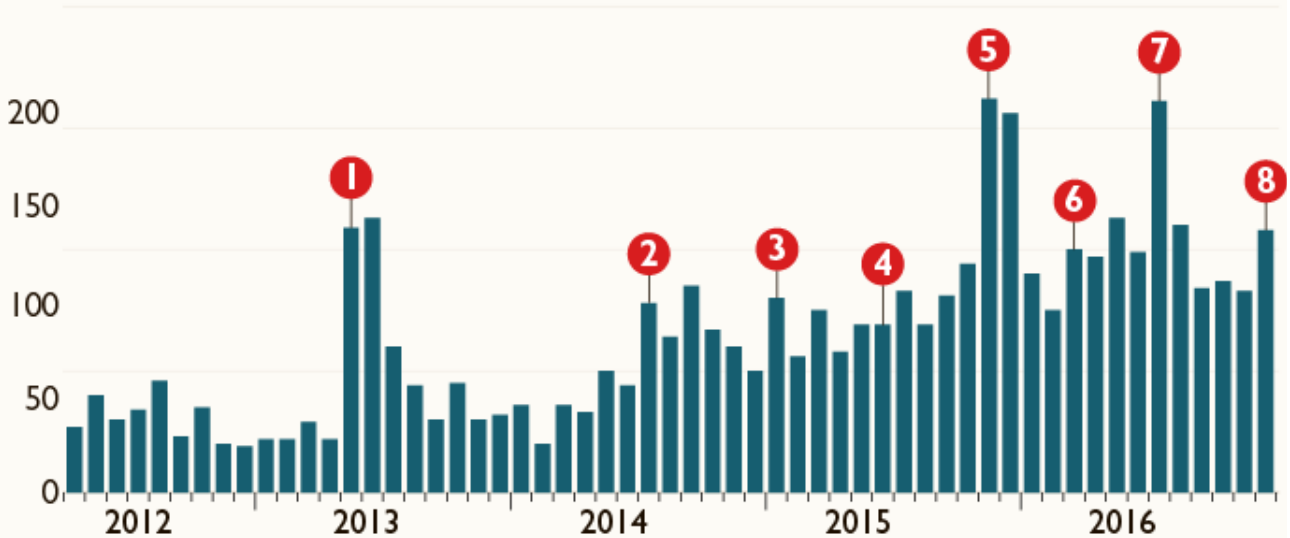
Hate crimes against Muslims

Recorded by the Metropolitan Police

- 1 Murder of Lee Rigby
- 2 Gaza conflict
- 3 Charlie Hebdo killings

- 4 Tunisia beach attack
- 5 Bataclan attack
- 6 Brussels bombing

- 7 Attacks in Germany
- 8 Berlin Christmas market attack



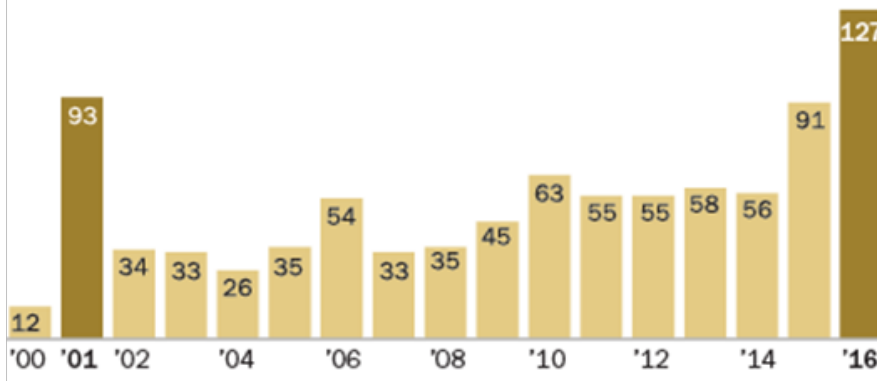
Source: Kaya Burgess, The Times (2017).⁴

“According to Waseem Sajjad, former Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan the Islamic world is poorly represented in the West in terms of press and media coverage. Not only there are just handfuls of news agencies in Muslim countries; there is the concern over the number of inexperienced reporters. Many reporters

don’t understand the local cultures nor speak the language, leaving them with access to only those English or French speaking Westernized elites. Thus, their representation is often a biased account of the political and social events from the point of view of the ruling minority in Muslim countries” (diyxc.org).

Anti-Muslim assaults exceed 2001 total

Anti-Muslim assaults in U.S. reported to the FBI



Source: FBI (2017).⁵

Representation Of Islam In The Media

The media has a unique and often gruelling responsibility of reporting fair and unbiased news. However, the global media are now responsible for overseeing the ethical issues especially when it comes to Islam. It is now clear that the Western media has launched an intensive campaign against Islam in the name of a campaign against terror. There is a current obsession on the mainstream media and academic discourse pertaining Islam and the West. This current obsession is tinged with negative signifiers with the global media's dominance of negative portrayal regarding Islam and Muslims.

Since the end of the Cold War, much media attention has focused on Islam as a disruption in the global order. Although Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West, the West has many stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam because of the media, prejudice, and ignorance. Islam is often looked upon as “extremist”, “terrorist”, or “fundamental” religion.

Today, the West, with limited understanding of Islamic history, has identified a new enemy, “radical Islam”, a stereotype common to Western thought, portraying Muslims as fundamentalists or potential terrorists. Some of these ideas that the Western people have developed about Islam are due to the mass media of the West.

Reporters who cover the Muslim world have very little details about it and therefore, develop a distorted image of Islam that the Western culture adopts.

For the media to isolate Islam as a religion that fosters terrorism is biased and just plain irresponsible. In 1995 when Timothy McVeigh committed “the worst

terrorist act in American history” by bombing the Oklahoma City federal building and killing 167 people, many of them children, reporters did not sensationalize the story by referring to McVeigh as a “Christian terrorist.” Instead after the Oklahoma City bombing, the TWA 800 disaster, and the Olympic bombing, Muslims and Arabs were initially blamed, which resulted in the harassment of Arab-Americans and Muslims. After the Oklahoma bombing, this resulted in approximately 220 attacks against Arab-Americans and Muslims.

Interpretation Of Islam By The Global Media

It should also be understood that the media is a profit-seeking organization. Islam has often been presented as a menace or a threat to the West and although negative images do not correspond to Islam but are the belief of certain sectors of a particular society it influences people's views on Islam. The Western media's poor representations of Islam are sometimes caused by poor language translations, the absence of developed news agencies with international networks and native reporters, and biased reporting by reporters.

A negative image of Islam is becoming “normal” in the Western culture from inaccurate media coverage. The Western public is often misinformed about Muslims through the images on television, motion picture screens, magazines, radios, and comic strips on the newspapers, which promote strong messages among their

audiences. Western reporters often say that Muslims are terrorists. This becomes a common image to the general person that all Muslims are terrorists. Edward Said's book, *Covering Islam* (1997), talks about how the media and experts determine how we see the rest of the world. He says that "...today, Islam is peculiarly traumatic news in the West".

But this kind of coverage is fully misleading, and a great deal in this coverage is based on far from objective materials. In many instances Islam has licensed not only patent inaccuracy, but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural, and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility. As well as creating inaccurate images about Islam, the Western media usually identifies Islam in Muslim conflicts. The media hardly points other religions out in their conflicts.

Social Media And Image Of Muslims

Since 9/11, the relationship between Western and Islamic world entered in a new stage, especially from the view of socio-political values. In these conditions, Western world has been linked with individual freedom, tolerance and secularism, while Islamic civilization was linked with collective rights, despotism, individual obligations, and intolerance (Karen 2002).

This debate is also rampant on social media, where anybody can post and think with personal and subjective views. When it comes to social media, maybe the famous quote of "Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are" can be turned into "Tell me what you share, and I'll tell you who you are". In Facebook alone the hash tag #Islamic terrorism has been used 97.877 times while #islamophobia has been used 97.482 times.

Mohammed A. Siddiqi, a professor at Western Illinois University, said the coverage of Islam in major US newspapers indiscriminately use the word "fundamentalist" for any dedicated Muslim and they also fail to distinguish between cultural practices that are national or regional in origin

and not observed by Muslims in other countries. The *New York Times* was guilty of the latter mistake in a story from France dated January 11, 1993, about a Gambian woman jailed for mutilating the genitals of two baby daughters. The news said that female circumcision was an "age-old Muslim ritual" that "was originally applied in Muslim countries to control women."

Two anthropologists at Princeton University, Abdellah Hammoudi and Lawrence Rosen wrote in a published letter to the editor, "Nothing in the sacred scriptures of Islam justifies this brutal operation, nor do most Muslims practice it. It is found in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where Islam has combined with local custom, as well as in non-Muslim societies elsewhere." Their letter was done to respond to a *Times* column by A. M. Rosenthal which had condemned the practice as genital mutilation.

ANTI-MUSLIM ATTACKS ROSE BY 26% LAST YEAR WITH MOST OCCURRING FACE-TO-FACE RATHER THAN ON SOCIAL MEDIA



Source: (Tell Mama 2017 annual report)⁶

Islamic stereotyping in the West is due to the media's selection of words in describing Muslims. Some common names heard or seen in the news about Muslims are "extremist" or "terrorist". These words are misleading and are mainly anti-Islamic. The media rarely uses more neutral terms such as "revivalist" or "progressives".

The association of Islam and violence is a common misconception that the general Western public has developed. An example of this misconception is that the Western media and some historians often say that Islam was a religion spread by the sword. The spread of

Islam was not through coercion but through acceptance of the religion. Since the majority of the Western public only gets their information about Islam through the media, they develop a misconception. The media's reports about Arab or "Islamic" events, such as the Gulf War, are often misunderstood. The media infrequently distinguishes between the religion Islam and the political affairs that occur in most Islamic countries.

The notion of associating of Islam and Muslims with the terms Arabs and Middle East is also misleading. Arabs only account for 18% of the Muslim population across the world. In their initial coverage of the Iraq war for example, armed intervention in Iraq was both expected and accepted. The globe witnessed a "pre-emptive attack" on Iraq and the emergence of "embedded journalism". The western media, especially the big ones, also promoted the causes of dehumanization representing the tribes of Afghanistan as warring factions of primitive barbarians.

Media And The Image Of Muslim Women

The media's inaccurate representations about Islam also go to the human rights of women in Islam, such as veils and women's rights. The media often represents Islam as a male dominant religion where Muslim men have complete authority over all groups of people. However, Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) was one the greatest reformers for women. In fact, Islam probably is the only religion that formally teaches women's rights and finds ways to protect them and if practiced correctly, would provide an equal gender society.

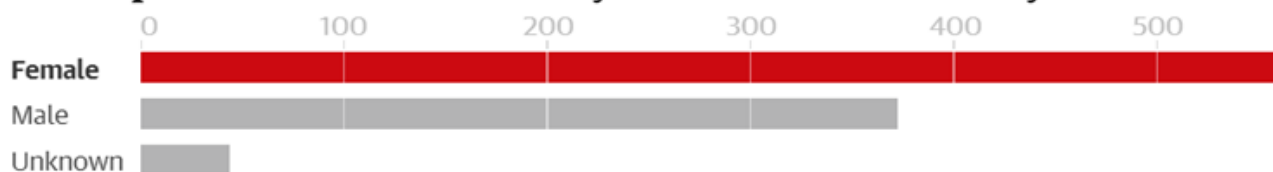
As Islam came around, traditional pre-Islamic roles of women were replaced by new Islamic

roles that women followed. Islam protected women's right of education and the right to participate in political, economic, and social activities. This has created upward mobility in their communities. Women were also given the right to vote, something the U.S. denied until 1919. Women were given the right to inherit property and take charge of their possessions. While some of these rights are denied to Muslim women today as a result of cultural tradition, one should not associate this with Islam, because they do not correlate with it.

Islamic women in veils is another commonly misunderstood concept in the West. It is thought of as a harsh custom that Islam requires of women. Although it is claimed that the veil infringes the rights of women, in fact, it is meant to serve just the opposite and protect them. Islam requires women to wear a veil for their own safety, but if a woman chooses not to wear it, it is her choice and it is between her and her God.

Islamic women are indeed supposed to be granted these rights, but the media often fails to inform its audiences about this fact. The media also fails to report that most of the Islamic countries have a high illiteracy rate. This means that it is virtually impossible for many Muslim women to challenge cultural male authority when the women themselves do not know the difference between village customs and the actual Islamic law. The Western media would be able to better represent women's issues in Islamic countries if they could identify how and why governments have limited women's rights that are guaranteed to them by the Holy Quran. It must be noted that four majority Muslim populated countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia and Turkey) have had female heads of states. In contrast, most Westerns nations such as the United States have yet to have a female president.

Islamophobic attacks were mostly directed at women last year



Source: Sarah Marsh, Guardian (2018)

What Could Be Done To Eliminate The Problem?

The inception of mass media has transformed the manner in which information is collected and disseminated. It has been the singular most powerful tool of influence, mobilization and shaping of political, religious, economic, cultural etc. agendas and discourse. As witnessed in the past, such as in the case of World War II and the subsequent wars of the latter century, the use of media propaganda to mobilize a nation is just as prevalent today as it was then. The global media today is a leader in its own accord; its influence surpasses that of any other institution. Therefore, it is vital that they maintain an attitude as a global leader; one that is free of biasness, and has accountability for the news, publications, and media images and photographs that profile the event, its causes and effects.

In this regard, the global media should be an instrument that focuses on its ability to resolve conflicts. In the midst of conflicts between religious groups, there has been an attempt to understand, accept and create dialogue between people of various faiths. The global media can be the most influential medium in which this can be accomplished.

The media should be objective on the universal message of Islam; and by doing so; they can be a medium through which conflicts can be resolved. Moreover, the Media today has the absolute power over all other institutions of religion, politics, societies and culture. It should respect its own influence and role as a universal guardian, an institution that formulates religious, cultural, social and political values. Its role must be played in a positive direction, one of unity and the advocator of the Oneness of all Religions and Faiths.

Finally, Muslims themselves should come forward to deal with the wrong notions about Islam. The mosque is the first place when every

Muslim learns about Islam. They have a right to speak to the people and telling them what extremism and that Islamic faith is not based on terror. This way Muslims may contribute to the tolerance for other religions. Also, young Muslim communities can also make a good use of campaigns using the social media.

Conclusion

Blaming Islam or all Muslims for terrorism is like accusing Christianity for colonialism, world war 1 & II. Each religion has its own extremisms and the majority observers who are peaceful and nonviolent, cannot be declared responsible for the extremist act of the minority. The Jews, Jews, Christians, Buddhist, Hindus, and Other religion observers are also not clean from religious terrorism.

When the media repeatedly portrays Islamophobic news and reports, it would then increase the discrimination and prejudices against Islam and Muslims. Equally, Muslims who are victims of these events may respond similarly or worse way to all the problems they face because of Islamophobia. As a result, our world may be full of hatred, discrimination, prejudice and insecurity.

It is the time for media to be fair and separate Muslims who are different from the extremists. Muslims should not be judged and subjected to Islamophobia. The media must understand the genuine sources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet, that prioritize peace and non-violence approach for all the humanities. The media should look into events of crime as crime rather than using it as a platform to increase for anti-Muslim hatred. Whenever the media reports sensitive areas of Islam and Muslims, it is necessary to include the viewpoints and opinions of Muslim scholars as part of the news and reports. The media should also work on interfaith dialogue to narrow the gaps created as a result of Islamophobia.

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