Defining Islamophobia, take two

stereotypes marginalization profiling
racism misinformation attacks fear
prejudice ignorance bias radicalism
terrorism hijab far
hate media violence
intolerance cultural Muslims right harassment
discrimination Islam
bigotry xenophobia
association ethnocentrism

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Dr Mamnun Khan is the author of *Being British Muslims: Beyond Ethnocentric Religion and Identity Politics*. He is a British Muslim thinker and writer who explores identity, Islam, and the social integration of Muslims in contemporary Britain. His work critically examines the challenges and opportunities faced by British Muslims, advocating for a balanced God-centred approach that transcends ethnocentrism and ideological extremes. In his spare time, Mamnun advises a number of UK organisations on projects and strategy. He has over 20 years of experience in corporate management and strategy in the science and tech sector.

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Defining "Islamophobia", take two

By Dr Mamnun Khan

1. Executive summary

A definition of Islamophobia has long been seen as a powerful tool in promoting accountability, fostering understanding, and protecting the rights and dignity of British Muslims as individuals and communities. This paper examines the contentious and evolving discourse surrounding the definition of Islamophobia in the UK, particularly in the aftermath of the rejection of the APPG on British Muslims' earlier proposed definition. The paper critiques previous efforts for being overly broad, legally ambiguous, and politically divisive, while also acknowledging the urgency of addressing the documented rise in anti-Muslim sentiment and hate crimes.

Drawing on Islamic legal and moral frameworks, the paper proposes a definition that is practical, just, balanced, and inclusive, one that distinguishes between legitimate criticism and hate, avoids conflating religion with race, and remains compatible with British democratic values. The author sets out three evaluative tests or principles that any definition must pass: (1) the definition must serve the public interest (*maslaha*), (2) be just (*'adl*) and balanced (*qist*) by preserving freedom of expression, and (3) uphold the dignity (*'izzah*) of Muslim communities. A new, clear, and workable definition is proposed that avoids problematic terminology and is rooted in behavioural outcomes, not ambiguous perceptions.

The paper calls on the Government, the Working Group on Islamophobia, civil society, and Muslim communities to adopt this definition while concurrently promoting social cohesion and internal reform. It emphasises the importance of counter-narratives, intercultural dialogue, and public trust in institutions to build a more inclusive and resilient society.

2. Introduction

It has been over 5 years since my appearance on the BBC One's *The Big Questions* in a debate titled "Will defining Islamophobia undermine free speech?" aired on 16 February 2020.

At the time, I argued that any definition of Islamophobia must strike a careful balance, protecting individuals from genuine harm while also safeguarding freedom of expression and the principles of an Open Society. The definition proposed by the APPG, in my view, failed to achieve that balance. I stressed that in a secular country like the UK, where freedom of the press is deeply embedded and where the majority of non-Muslims have never even visited a mosque, it is vital to develop a definition that commands broad consensus. We cannot conflate a wide range of unrelated issues, be they about race, faith, or identity, under a single label like Islamophobia. These issues are too varied and require distinct responses. The APPG's definition, I contended, is not adequately practical, pragmatic or precise."[1]

The backdrop was that the APPG on British Muslims had proposed a definition for Islamophobia which had been unanimously rejected by many on the centre right of politics, free speech advocates, the UK Government at the time, the Conservative Party, Humanists UK, Network of Sikh Organisation (NSO), the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), and a broad range of think tanks and academics including Civitas, Policy Exchange, Professors at

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[1] BBC One – The Big Questions, Series 13, Episode 3 – no longer available on the BBC's website archive but the clip can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNcMc37TY5w.

universities   etc. Their objections were grounded on a range of valid concerns, primarily focused on:

1. The definition did not align with the Equality Act 2010, which risked creating legal complexity that undermined broader rights for all people.
2. The definition's overly broad scope risked impeding counter-terrorism efforts and exacerbating community tensions.
3. The definition did not adequately distinguish between prejudice against individuals and legitimate criticism of religious beliefs, thereby stifling free speech/expression.
4. The definition conflated race and religion, and the vagueness of the term "perceived Muslimness" risking widespread confusion, misuse and unintended consequences.
5. The definition inappropriately treated British Muslims as a racial group, and subsumed the distinct phenomena of Islamophobia as racism.

Since then, critical publications and public debates on the definition have continued, highlighting how deeply the APPG's definition has been contested. Notable examples are "Islamophobia revisited"[2] (2023) by Civitas's, the Policy Exchange's publication "A definition of Islamophobia?"[3] (2024) and televised discussions, such as the BBC One's *The Big Questions*.

Unsurprisingly, the proposed definition was rejected by the then Conservative Government, and subsequently, the new Labour Government has also rejected it.

From an Islamic scholarly or theological perspective, there were, as far as I can recall, only two clear public rejections of the definition in the UK – by me and Shaikh Mohammed Nizami. While I found it frustrating at the time, I was not surprised by the lack of additional critical Muslim voices. Most Muslims have a poorly grounded theological understanding of their religion (*deen*), even fewer in public engagement are trained in Islamic theology, and Muslim institutions and standards remain under-developed to take nuanced positions with untested, populist ideas. Some Muslim organisations, such as the An-Nisa Society, criticised the definition and called for the removal of the racialisation of Muslims, and have since also published their concerns in a well-argued report.[4] You can read my article "The trouble with 'Islamophobia' 20 years on"[5] which was published at the time and then incorporated into the book Being British Muslims.[6]

By 2025, reports of police recorded crimes for anti-Muslim hate has increased significantly. 3,866 cases were recorded in the year up to March 2024 (38% share of all hate crimes), which is a 13% increase on 2023.[7] In the context of overall police recorded crimes which stands at 6.64 million offences in the year to March 2024, hate crimes at 140,561 are about 2.1%. This might seem like a small share of total crime, but it is worth bearing in mind that whilst there are many different types of crimes, hate crimes targeting particular communities can have far greater collective social impact than crimes like robbery and online scams which affect all people on an individual level.

The focus on Islamophobia has been heightened by the riots that followed the tragic Southport stabbing on 29 July 2024. They had a profound and alarming impact on anti-Muslim sentiment across the UK, leading to a significant surge in anti-Muslim hate crimes and a heightened sense of fear within Muslim communities. Tell MAMA, an organisation monitoring anti-Muslim

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[2] https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Islamophobia-Revisited.pdf.
[3] https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-definition-of-Islamophobia.pdf.
[4] https://khansistersblog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/an-nisa_islamophobia_report_aug24-di-2.pdf
[5] https://beingbritishmuslims.com/2018-islamophobia/.
[6] https://wembleymatters.blogspot.com/2019/07/an-nisa-urge-brent-council-to-reject.html; https://www.amazon.co.uk/Being-British-Muslims-Ethnocentric-Religion/dp/1728382645.
[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024

incidents, reported a record high of 5,837 anti-Muslim incidents in 2024,[8] marking a significant rise from previous years. Police forces across the UK, too, documented a notable spike in Islamophobic offences, with some regions reporting incidents more than doubled in the months following the riots.[9] Hate crime stats for the year-ending March 2025 have yet to be published, so these numbers are a reasonable indicator of the numbers that may be reported in police recorded hate crimes for year-ending March 2025.

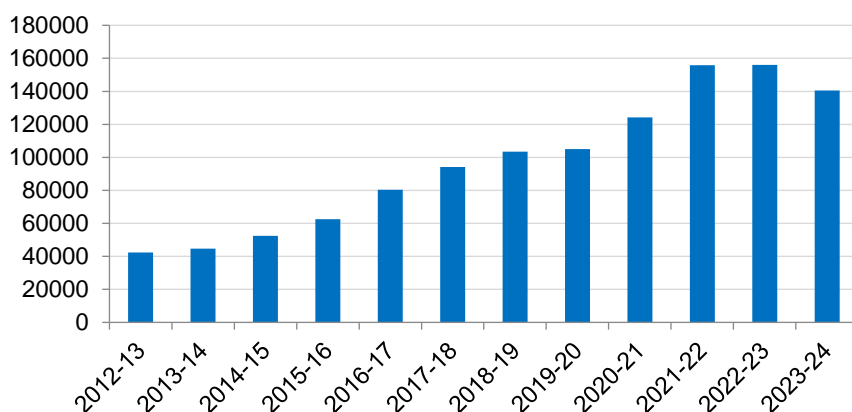Graph 1. Total number of recorded hate crime in England and Wales.

Table 1. Hate crimes recorded by the police by monitored strand, year ending March 2021 to the year ending March 2024. % change from 2020-21 to 2023-24.

Hate crime strand	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	% change
Race	92,063	109,843	103,625	98,799	7%
Religion	**6,383**	**8,730**	**8,370**	**10,484**	**39%**
Sexual orientation	18,596	26,152	24,777	22,839	19%
Disability	9,945	14,242	14,285	11,719	15%
Transgender	2,799	4,355	4,889	4,780	41%
Total No. of motivating factors	129,786	163,322	155,946	148,621	13%
Total No. of offences	124,104	155,841	147,645	140,561	12%

Graph 2. Total number of cases reported to Tell MAMA (2012-2024).

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[8] https://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/TheNewNormofAnti-MuslimHate-TellMAMAReport2025.pdf
[9] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/32530304/religious-hate-crimes-spike-war-southport-killings/
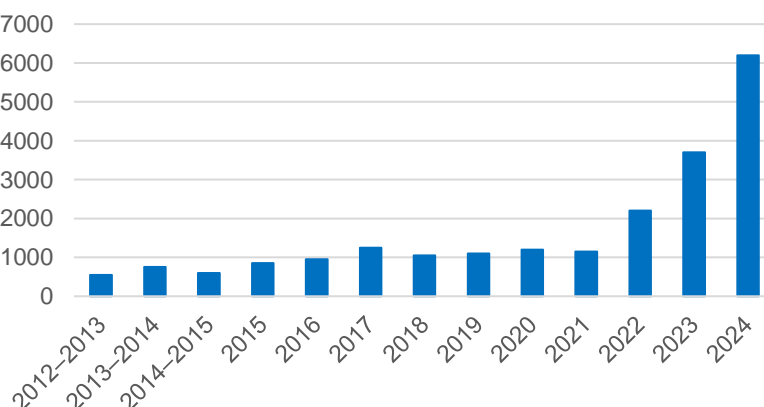
Anti-Muslim sentiment has been steadily rising over the years, but recent events have intensified this trend. In particular, Israel's brutal war on Gaza since October 2023 has triggered a surge in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the UK, alongside a rise in anti-Jewish incidents. Additionally, the growth of far-right extremism and the spread of conspiracy theories, such as the so called "Great Replacement,"[10] have contributed to anti-Muslim rhetoric. Moreover, politicians frequently use coded language or populist framing such as "failed-multiculturalism" or the need to protect the nation's cultural identity, which, while not overtly xenophobic, subtly reinforce the idea that Muslims are outsiders or a threat. This kind of messaging, particularly when coming from those in positions of power, helps to legitimise and amplify anti-Muslim attitudes across society.

The Southport riots prompted deeper soul-searching in British society, and the need for Government to address challenges to social cohesion.

3. The need for tolerance, resilience and strong, positive counter-narratives

Voltaire noted in 1763 in his *Treatise on Tolerance* the idea that the infancy of the Open Society is captured in its inherent vulnerability. "Are we," Voltaire questioned, "justified in believing that tolerance might excite the same revolutionary spirit as has been provoked in the past by persecution?"[11] In this sense, the philosopher Dani Rodrick rightly suggests the necessity to appreciate "the fragility of liberal democracy, [so that] we can perhaps avoid the lassitude induced by taking it for granted."[12] Appreciating the fragility of liberal democracy should bring into focus the need to balance, tolerance, resilience and promotion of positive and productive social cohesion norms.

In a cosmopolitan society, like Britain, where diverse cultures and identities intersect, the promotion of tolerance, resilience, and strong, positive counter-narratives is essential to enhancing social cohesion. Tolerance fosters mutual respect and understanding across differences. Resilience, meanwhile, equips communities to withstand and recover from divisive challenges such as hate speech or social unrest. Positive counter-narratives play a vital role in challenging harmful stereotypes and extremist rhetoric, reinforcing shared values and promoting a collective sense of belonging. Together, these elements help build inclusive, stable societies where diversity is embraced rather than feared.

There are many emerging sources of tension that are increasingly testing the boundaries of established notions of tolerance and social resilience, affecting both those who perpetrate Islamophobia and those who experience it. Selected examples are presented in the tables below for illustration purpose.

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[10] https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/feb/19/uk-islamophobic-assaults-surged-by-73-in-2024-anti-hate-charity-reports.
[11] Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, edited by Simon Harvey, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.18
[12] https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/why-liberal-democracy-is-both-rare-and-fragile-by-dani-rodrik-2019-10, accessed 11 October 2019.

Table 2: Prominent examples of new sources of tension for perpetrators of Islamophobia.

Source	Description
Social media influence	Today, a large proportion of social interaction between people take place over social media, in faceless, often anonymous and trolling engagements, through text which lacks intonation and context. Its sheer volume and intensity can be overwhelming. Perpetrators often form biased perceptions of Muslims through negative portrayals in the media, and narratives associating Islam with extremism and backwardness. These skewed perceptions (most Muslims are peace-loving and do not subscribe to radical or violent interpretations of Islam) dehumanise Muslims, making prejudice and hate more justifiable in the perpetrator's mind.
Biases in the flow of information	When news or social media exposure does take place, viewers are often ill-equipped to critically interrogate the information, and therefore fail to ascertain where the information is coming from, distinguishing fact from opinion, checking for context, identifying bias in language and imagery, and exploring different perspectives.
Fear of the "Other"	Islam is often perceived as alien or incompatible with Western values. This perception is amplified by conspiracy theories that present Muslims as a threat to national identity or security.
Confirmation bias	Once someone believes Islam is inherently dangerous or inferior, they often interpret neutral or even positive Muslim behaviour as threatening or insincere, reinforcing their Islamophobic worldview.

Table 3: Prominent examples of new sources of tension for victims of Islamophobia.

Source	Description
Heightened awareness and vigilance	Victims of Islamophobia often develop a heightened sense of vulnerability. They may perceive public spaces, interactions, or even political discourse as potential threats, leading to anxiety, self-censorship, or social withdrawal. This can then have knock-on impact on social integration.
Internalisation of stigma	Repeated exposure to, or news of, Islamophobia often causes victims, or those watching, to internalise negative stereotypes, damaging self-esteem or identity, especially among younger Muslims.
Distrust of institutions	When Islamophobic incidents are ignored, dismissed, or inadequately addressed by authorities, victims may perceive systemic bias, leading to a lack of trust in law enforcement, media, or government.

Much like in an Open Society, the starting premise in the Islamic paradigm is that provided that the overall integrity and fundamental rights of people in society are not unduly curtailed, individuals have the right to determine their own purposes and ideas. That is, to put it bluntly, individuals, whether Muslim or not, have the freedom of conscience, or right, to sin and even the freedom to choose their path, even if that means rejecting moral guidance in religion. Equally, people have the right to choose moral responsibility (*taklif*) based on what they know to be right and wrong, and to be individually accountable (*Qur'an*, 41:46). Choices exist for people to strive for virtue, truthfulness and sincerity that differentiates and elevates themselves from others.

Sometimes what appears to be anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim rhetoric stems from a broader context that gets lost when statements are taken in isolation. This often happens when inductive reasoning (drawing generalisations from specific experiences or observations that may hold some truth but not universally so) is expressed without nuance, often spontaneously or in emotionally charged moments. When such remarks go unchallenged or are met only with outrage rather than engagement, they can feed into a wider cycle of misunderstanding and

hostility. A lack of exposure to and familiarity with British Muslims, along with limited understanding of diverse perspectives, weakens the social resilience needed to break cycles of hate. Building genuine connections and encouraging open, informed dialogue are essential steps toward undoing harmful narratives and fostering mutual respect.

Faulty reasoning has become increasingly sophisticated, particularly with the rise of social media platforms. These tools have significantly expanded both the reach and tone of public discourse, shifting from blaming migrants to undermining mainstream politicians, thereby deepening polarisation and spreading misinformation. A striking example of this can be seen in the viral video *This is England*, which combines powerful visuals with emotive narration.[13] While such content, despite its factual flaws and flawed logic, is legally and culturally permissible as a form of expression in an Open Society like Britain, it nonetheless raises complex challenges. No definition of racism or Islamophobia can ever fully capture it because people must retain the right to express discontent, however uncomfortable, but policymakers must also grapple with the consequences: the erosion of social cohesion and the normalisation of hate.

To counterbalance such narratives, therefore, there must be a proactive promotion of positive, inclusive counter-narratives, along with greater social and political resilience and a renewed commitment to cosmopolitanism and tolerance. This includes reaffirming values historically associated with English, Scottish, Welsh, and broader British traditions, values such as fairness, mutual respect, and civic responsibility.

Table 4. Examples of faulty reasoning that can lead to Islamophobia.

Type	Example breakdown
Media-driven generalisation	**Observation**: "Most news reports about terrorism involve Muslim individuals." **Faulty reasoning**: "Therefore, Muslims are more likely to be violent or extremists." **Issue**: This ignores the millions of peaceful Muslims and the fact that terrorism is committed by individuals from many backgrounds. It is based on selective exposure, not the full picture.
Personal encounter generalisation	**Observation**: "A Muslim colleague of mine was unfriendly." **Faulty reasoning**: "Muslims are unfriendly or unapproachable." **Issue**: Drawing a broad conclusion about an entire group from one interaction, without considering personality, mood, or other factors.
Cultural practice misinterpretation	**Observation**: "Some Muslim women wear face veils and avoid eye contact."[14] **Faulty reasoning**: "Muslims don't want to integrate or communicate with others." **Issue**: This overlooks the religious and cultural reasons behind such practices and assumes intent without understanding context.
Global events misapplied locally to the UK	**Observation**: "In some Muslim-majority countries, there are oppressive laws." **Faulty reasoning**: "Islam as a religion supports oppression or is incompatible with democracy." **Issue**: This conflates political regimes with religious teachings and ignores the diversity within the Muslim world.

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[13] "This is England" – https://x.com/boot15_vu/status/1916207488413622673?s=46&t=nmObiu8qY48quNk0FNb7JQ.

[14] Note: face veils are worn by only a small minority of Muslim women. The mainstream position in Islamic law (across all four Sunni schools of law as well as the Ja'fari Shi'ah school) holds that the face is not a part of the woman's *awrah* (parts of the body that must be covered). Many scholars have issued legal opinions discouraging the practice as it leads to hardship and misunderstanding, especially in non-Muslim majority societies.

Thus, any definition of Islamophobia should be treated as only a piece of the wider social cohesion agenda. It ought to be supported by initiatives for greater intercultural exchange to break the cycle of hate and misunderstanding. More work is needed to fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes and assumptions, and building meaningful connections between individuals and groups from different backgrounds through positive narratives and intercultural exchange.

British Muslims also play a vital role in addressing these challenges. As I argue in Being British Muslims, there is an urgent need for internal reform within Muslim communities to move beyond the current status quo marked by poor religious literacy, ethnocentric interpretations of faith and identity-driven politics. This reform must begin with deeper, more reflective questions about how Islam is practiced and understood in the context of modern Britain, what it means to "do Islam and be Muslim to God" in this setting. Advancing this agenda requires the establishment of credible institutions, the development of clear standards, and the creation of new platforms for engagement and education.

Such introspection, grounded in the *Qur'an* and Prophetic tradition, is a process only Muslims themselves can undertake, but if done sincerely and thoughtfully, it can contribute meaningfully to the wider social fabric of British society. In this context, the conversation around Islamophobia must not be used as a shield against necessary internal critique. Reform and the fight against anti-Muslim prejudice are not mutually exclusive; rather, they must go hand in hand.

4. Is a definition needed?

Having a clear and widely accepted definition of Islamophobia offers practical benefits and promotes social cohesion by ensuring consistent understanding and response across Government, education, media, civil society, etc.; where a shared language will help ensure that Islamophobic acts are identified and addressed uniformly.

A definition also has a some legal and policy-informing value, as it could form the basis for developing anti-discrimination laws and institutional guidelines. This is not to suggest that current anti-discrimination laws are ineffective, which is a broader debate beyond the scope of this paper, but a clear definition can strengthen efforts to counter the denial or minimisation of Islamophobia by explicitly outlining its characteristics and impact. In doing so, making it harder for individuals or institutions to dismiss or downplay the issue.

However, this aspect also raises concerns for many, who fear that a legal definition, particularly if it is too broad or vague, will be used to suppress legitimate expression, debate, or criticism. This fear is not completely unfounded. As the APPG on British Muslims' original attempt demonstrated, there is a natural tendency among proponents to push for a "catch-all" definition of Islamophobia, one that is overly broad, vague, or attempts to capture too many forms of behaviour and experience.

But such "catch-all" definitions hinder more than help, especially when it comes to effectively addressing the issue. This is partly because they always flame the worry that challenging religious beliefs, political ideologies associated with Islam, or even engaging in academic or satirical commentary could be misinterpreted as Islamophobic, potentially leading to censorship or self-censorship. Partly it is because a broad definition makes it difficult to distinguish between levels of severity, creates confusion in legal contexts, conflates genuine criticism of religious or political ideas with hatred or bigotry, limits people's understanding and also impedes efforts to identify root causes. As a result, efforts to tackle real and harmful Islamophobia may become mired in controversy and lose public support.

As Dr Chris Allen has repeated pointed out, including in his book *Reconfiguring Islamophobia*, there is "a substantial number of definitions of Islamophobia"[15] that already exist in both political and scholarly areas. These definitions have diverse use and can be drawn upon to fulfil a "whole host of needs," but none of them can fully satisfy all contexts. What Dr Allen insightfully calls out, reflecting my own thoughts published in *Being British Muslims*,[16] unlike other definitions of discriminatory phenomena, there is an expectation that the definition of Islamophobia should be "a sole definition that is consensually agreed," a demand that does not exist for other discriminatory phenomena.

From Islamic theological perspective, a pragmatic approach should be instructive. "Whenever the Prophet was given an option between two things, he selected the easier of the two as long as it was not sinful; but if it was sinful, he would remain far from it."[17]

The Government's indication (see below) that the definition will not be enshrined in statute will help to alleviate some concerns. However, it is still likely to encounter resistance due to fears of "mission creep": the idea that this could be a precursor to a more expansive or intrusive measure in the future. Inevitably, the politics surrounding the definition will come into play. Some critics of earlier efforts to define Islamophobia may remain uneasy about the existence of any formal definition, even one that is narrowly framed and straightforward.

Despite these concerns, for many Muslim communities, and British society at large, a clear definition of Islamophobia offers an important sense of empowerment and protection. It creates a framework within which individuals can recognise, report, and challenge discrimination, promoting greater inclusion and safety. In addition, it will support education and awareness efforts by informing curricula, shaping public discourse, training programmes, and public campaigns aimed at challenging stereotypes and reducing prejudice. It will also facilitate the systematic collection of data on Islamophobic incidents, essential for tracking trends, identifying risk areas, and informing targeted policy responses.

5. Why is there renewed engagement on the definition of Islamophobia?

Fast forward six years, in March 2025, the Government established a working group to produce a definition of Anti-Muslim Hatred/Islamophobia,[18] chaired by the Rt Hon Dominic Grieve KC, and includes other highly respected notables like Professor Javed Khan OBE. The group is expected to advise the Government on how to "best understand, quantify and define prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims." The group is expected to engage widely to ensure the definition accounts for the variety of backgrounds and experiences of Muslim communities across the UK. Regardless of the proposed definition, it is anticipated to remain non-statutory. While this may diminish its significance, a widely-agreed definition still serves as a valuable starting point. Importantly, the group have been asked for a definition that must be compatible with freedom of speech and expression – which, the Government noted, includes "the right to criticise, express dislike of, or insult religions and/or the beliefs and practices of adherents."[19] In this sense the definition is seeking to address the hard concerns of the previous (failed) attempt.

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[15] Chris Allen, *Reconfiguring Islamophobia*, 2020, p. 118.
[16] See: Mamnun Khan, *Being British Muslims: Beyond Ethnocentric Religion and Identity Politics*, 2019, pp. 89-96
[17] Hadith reported by al-Bukhari.
[18] https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/working-group-on-anti-muslim-hatredislamophobia-definition.
[19] Written statements – Written questions, answers and statements – UK Parliament.

This paper thus seeks to:

1. Articulate a series of tests/principle for the definition on Islamophobia to be one that has grounding in Islamic theology; and
2. Propose a new definition that meets the tests.

6. The three tests a new definition must pass

Test 1: Is the definition in the public interest (*maslaha mursalah*) by being practical (*muhafazah*), clear (*bayyinah*), and workable (*qabil li-tanfiz*)?

Maslaha mursalah is the consideration of public interest in Islamic law and plays a vital role by allowing rulings that protect essential objectives of Islamic law, such as life, religion, intellect, lineage, and property, even if no explicit text addresses them. Imam Malik's school of Madina relied upon it most extensively, but other schools developed similar tools such as *istihsan* (juridical preference) in the school of Imam Abu Hanifah. The outcome of *istihsan* is to achieve fairness or to avoid hardship, by preferring an exceptional ruling over a general one when justice or ease demands it. These tools are among a range of tools and techniques (taken from Prophetic teachings) that enables Islamic scholars to adapt legal rulings to new circumstances while preserving the spirit and higher goals of Islam, public welfare, unity and so on.

Islam places great emphasis on truth (*haqq*) and clarity (*bayyinah*) in speech, judgment, and all forms of communication. Accordingly, any definition of Islamophobia must be both truthful and precise, distinguishing clearly between hate or bigotry and legitimate discourse on Islamic ideas, practices, or beliefs. The language used should avoid vagueness or emotionally charged terms that could be misused or misinterpreted. As the Chief Justices of the UK's Supreme Court affirmed in a recent ruling on the biological basis of sex, accurate and clear definitions are essential for practical application. Misinterpreting terms or using overly broad concepts can render them unworkable. The same applies to the use of "perceived Muslimness" in the previous definition.

For a definition of Islamophobia to be practical and consistent, it must gain broad support from society and institutions.[20] An unworkable definition, one that lacks widespread acceptance, can only lead to confusion, division, and hinder meaningful progress in addressing Islamophobia. Without a clear, practical, and universally embraced framework, efforts to combat Islamophobia could become fragmented, ineffective, or even counterproductive.

Additionally, the definition of Islamophobia should not be so ambiguous that it can be easily manipulated to suppress genuine academic, theological, or political critique. There is also a risk that such a definition could be weaponised, not only to silence thoughtful discussion but also to advance the harmful notion that Islam is in an absolutist way incompatible with liberal democratic values. Equally, the definition must authentically reflect the lived experiences of Muslims, considering the complex intersections of race, class, and gender, as Islamophobia manifests differently depending on these factors.

To summarise, for the definition to pass the public interest test, it must therefore:

1. Be acceptable to public institutions and British law, and not create undue complications with existing laws that protect rights.

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[20] Note that the need for broader acceptance of the definition of Islamophobia arises precisely because the definition is highly contested. Had it not been contested there would not have been a need for wider acceptance.

2. Avoid polarising society, by strengthening harmony and mitigating the risk of being weaponised to sow division or pushback.
3. Have the potency to bring divergent sections of society together to tackle social disharmony, and enjoining in common good.

Test 2: Is the definition just (*'adl*) and balanced (*qist*) by upholding people's freedom of conscience and speech (*hurriyah al-i'tiqad & al-ta'bir*)?

Islam places central importance on justice, even, and especially, towards those who disagree with or oppose Muslims. God is very clear on this matter: "Let not hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just: that is nearer to piety" (*Qur'an*, 5:8); "O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for God even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, God is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate (from justice). If you twist or avoid (the evidence), then, Allah is all-aware of what you do" (*Qur'an*, 4:135).

The definition must be fair and balanced (*qist*), applying equally to Muslims and non-Muslims. This means that while protecting against actual harm and prejudice it must avoid suppressing legitimate critique and people's freedom of conscience and speech to say whatever they want about Islam and Muslims, so long as, according to British law, protections are not violated / it is not defamatory, or incites violence and hatred. This would be the case whatever the background of people.

A clear example is this: would a picture of the Prophet, offensive words about God, or even saying "Islam/Allah has no place in British society" count as Islamophobic? Under the earlier definition, free speech advocates thought it might. Their point was, in an Open Society like Britain, the freedom to offend is, in principle, a core part of free expression.

To be clear, Muslims should not be hesitant about this. Islam impels Muslims to grant non-Muslims the freedom to reject or hate God, Islam, and the Prophet, whether that comes from informed beliefs or ignorance. This is because for true virtue and sincere submission to God to emerge, there must be room for criticism, opposition, offence, and even ridicule. God is very explicit on his: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (*Qur'an*, 2:256). The Prophet himself explicitly rejected banning such expressions from his adversaries. Abu Lahab, who died as a non-Muslim, continued to ridicule and be fiercely hostile until he died of natural causes. "May your hands perish!" he said to the Prophet (*Qur'an*, 26:214). Abu Sufyan regularly mocked the Prophet together with his wife (who commissioned the killing of Hamzah, the Prophet's uncle and an early advocate of Islam), both of whom were unharmed in the conquest of Makkah and became Muslim.[21]

What this shows is that, from both Islamic and free speech/expression perspectives, a certain level of freedom to cause offence (Islamophobia if you like), ought to be tolerated in any fair-minded society. Ideally, no one would resort to speech/expression that causes harm or offence. But we do not live in an ideal world, and a functioning pluralistic society requires the flexibility to engage with opposing, even uncomfortable, viewpoints in a nuanced way. The real question is whether there is a line to be drawn – when does freedom of expression go too far and become unacceptable in society?

The answer is yes, there is a limit. English law, history, and society have long recognised boundaries through concepts like defamation, libel, slander and the protection of others' rights.

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[21] There were other opponents of the Prophet who met different fates, often due to the context of war. For instance, the poet Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf was assassinated for treason after he incited the Makkans to wage war against the Muslims of Madina, despite being bound by the Constitution of Madina, which guaranteed peace and security to all its tribes, including his own. However, examples like this are not relevant in the current context, as they pertain specifically to wartime conditions, which involved different circumstances and considerations.

Defamation laws, for example, have roots back to English common law in the 13th century, such as the Statute of Westminster in 1275 (chapter 34). It reads: "...none be so hardy to tell or publish any false news or tales, whereby discord, or occasion of discord or slander, may grow between the king and his people or the great men of the realm..."[22]

In Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and moral tradition (*adab*), too, much has been written by scholars on this topic, which I summarise below.

In the early centuries of Islamic law, there were no criminal penalties specifically designated for anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia, in the way that clear sanctions existed for crimes like theft or robbery.[23] Hostility toward Islam and Muslims was widespread, first in Makkah during the initial 13 years of Islam, and later in Madina, even after Muslims gained political authority.

While verbal abuse and hostility toward the Prophet, God, or Islam were seen as acts of aggression, neither the *Qur'an* nor the Prophet Muhammad explicitly defined "blasphemy" as a formal legal offence, nor prescribed a specific worldly punishment for it. As one scholar observed, "Using foul language against the Prophet, God or Islam, the transgressors were putting themselves on a war footing against Muslims. Despite this, neither the *Qur'an* nor the Prophet stated clearly the existence of an offence called 'blasphemy' or a specific temporal punishment for it."[24] The late scholar of legal theory (*usul*), Taha Jabir al-Alwani (1935–2016), similarly concluded: "It is an established fact that the Prophet never, in his entire life, put an apostate to death."

Of course, modern societies differ vastly from those of early Islam, and any comparison in the realm of public law today must be made with caution and thoughtful deliberation. Nevertheless, the Prophetic precedent in these cases offers a clear and consistent example of tolerance.

Apostasy and blasphemy represent perhaps the more extreme expressions of religious rejection or "offence." To broaden the discussion, below are additional real-world examples of anti-Muslim hatred, none of which were met with punitive measures by the Prophet or sanctioned during Earthly life by divine revelation.

- God gave the Prophet the option to bring an end to Makkan hatred and conspiracies, but the Prophet declined. When the Prophet went to Ta'if to call its leaders to Islam, they mocked him, sent children to pelt him with stones, and chased him out. Injured and humiliated, he took refuge in an orchard. Here, the angel Gabriel (Jibreel) came and said, "If you wish, I can cause the mountains to crush them." But the Prophet replied, "No. I hope Allah will bring from their descendants people who worship Him alone."[25]
- The Prophet is also known to have prevented the Companions from hastily reacting to offensive actions. On one occasion, a Bedouin urinated in the Prophet's mosque, which infuriated some of the Companions who sought to physically remove or rebuke him. The Prophet held them back and said, "Let him finish."
- Abdullah ibn Ubayy (who was the chief of the Khazraj tribe in Madina), was known to have frequently insulted the Prophet, the Prophet's wife A'isha and generally resented Makkan emigrants (*Muhajir*) in Madina. His deep personal grievance against the Prophet stemmed from the loss of his status and influence in Madina following the Prophet's arrival. He

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[22] https://ucadia.s3.amazonaws.com/acts_uk/1200_1299/uk_act_1275_statute_westminster.pdf
[23] https://web.archive.org/web/20150219032457/http:/iiit.org/iiitftp/publications/Bibs/Books-in-Brief Apostasy in Islam A Historical and Scriptural Analysis.pdf.
[24] https://archive.org/details/freedomofreligio0000saee/page/38/mode/2up.
[25] We should not forget God's narrative, when the Angels asked God, "And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we exalt You with praise and declare Your perfection?" He [Allah] said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know" (Qur'an, 2: 30). The Prophet acted here attuned to, and confirming, God's narrative.

sought to create division between Makkan emigrants and residents of Madinah (*Ansar*) using inflammatory language. On one occasion, he said, "When we return to Madina, the honourable (people of Madina)) will expel the lowly (the Prophet and his companions) from it," implying expulsion and his people being more honourable than the Prophet. The Companions asked if they could strike him down, but the Prophet said, "No, let him be. We will deal with him kindly as long as he remains with us." This is a good example of the Prophet's approach of tolerating opposition without resorting to legal sanction.

In later developments in Islamic law, notions of "offence" were incorporated. However, their applicability today is not straightforward. This is because the punishment for these crimes was premised on Islam being the dominant legal and political authority – the land being under Islamic rule. Here, the "protected minorities" (*ahl al-dhimmi*) were expected would not denigrate Islam nor cast aspersions on its major figures and institution, which were seen as hostile acts to the state. Of course, none of this applies today, even in most Muslim countries.

In developing these religious laws for today's societies, the prevailing social norms (*'urf*) and the specific contexts of each case would be necessary considerations for defining what is offensive or hateful, and determine the thresholds and standards by which we collectively judge violations in society.

Even within British law, there are important nuances. While the freedom to offend is recognised, even in the most traditional sense of English and British values, it does not override the moral and legal prohibitions against inciting violence, promoting hatred, breaking the law, or causing psychological harm to people. Similarly, a definition of Islamophobia does not need to explicitly capture every possible expression of anti-Muslim sentiment. In this light, Islam's foundational commitment to liberty aligns with British principles of freedom of conscience and speech.

Lastly, I want to point out that there is a subtle distinction to be made between the law (which is the case of all systems of law, Islamic (*Ahkam al-Shar'iyyah*) or otherwise, which is to provide ultimate protections to maintain a well-functioning society, versus the intent of God for human beings to then strive towards virtue, service, kindness, warmth, sacrifice, gratitude, forgiving and so on. Much of Islam is about guiding "how to" for individuals and society to achieve such virtue.

Table 5. The different layers of outcomes across law and morality, and how they contribute to human flourishing.

Protection level	Legal (incl. religious)	Religious law	Moral (incl. religious morality)	Godliness
Outcomes	• Establish justice and social order • Define rights and responsibilities • Deter crime through enforcement and penalties	• Uphold divine commandments • Regulate both private and public behaviour in line with religious values to enhance human flourishing • Create a cohesive community	• Cultivate personal integrity and conscience • Promote empathy, honesty, and responsibility • Encourage internal regulation of behaviour beyond law	• Achieve spiritual purification • Align the soul with divine will • Seek nearness to God through intention, worship, and character development knowing God is ever-watchful

Test 3: Does the definition protect the dignity of Muslims *('izzah*)?

Human dignity is a foundational principle of any civilised society and must remain central to any definition of Islamophobia. God affirms this universal dignity: "…We have certainly honoured (*karramna*) the children of Adam, and carried them on land and sea, and provided for them of the good things, and preferred them above many of those We created" (*Qur'an* 17:70). This divine recognition of honour applies to all human beings, regardless of religion, race, or status. Every person, and especially those with less power, wealth or socio-economic and political standing, deserves to be defended from humiliation, dehumanisation and neglect of their human needs.

The definition must therefore safeguard the dignity of Muslims and prevent the normalisation of harmful stereotypes or attacks on their identity. It must distinguish between critique and contempt, between fair expression and deliberate provocation. To do so, it must take into account:

1. Intent and context – whether an action deliberately targets Muslims as a group or individuals.
2. Impact – whether it leads to physical or psychological harm, fear, or marginalisation.
3. Proportionality – whether it reflects a pattern of discrimination or is part of a broader, indiscriminate practice.

For example, when the French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, publishes caricatures of religious figures, including the Prophet Muhammad, it may be grossly offensive to Muslims but is not necessarily the kind of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiment that should fall within a new definition. The magazine's ethos is to offend across all religious and political groups equally, where it treats all subjects with equal irreverence. Even if the impact on Muslim communities is severe, the intent is to satirise broadly, not to incite specific hostility toward Muslims. If it could be demonstrated that Charlie Hebdo consistently and exclusively targeted Muslims, one could argue it constitutes targeted marginalisation. But the evidence does not support such a conclusion.

However, when similar imagery is introduced in different contexts, such as a classroom setting where a teacher holds power over students, the impact and implications shift significantly. In such cases, especially when done without cultural sensitivity or pedagogical necessity, the act will reinforce negative perceptions and provoke distress or cognitive dissonance among Muslim students. This can reasonably be interpreted as Islamophobic, as it is very likely to contribute to unequal treatment, exclusion and fear.

Similarly, acts such as the public burning of the *Qur'an*, which have occurred in various European settings, are inherently Islamophobic. Such actions are not neutral expressions of free speech but are deliberately calculated to provoke, humiliate, and dehumanise Muslims by desecrating what they hold most sacred. In these cases, the intent to incite hatred and the disproportionate targeting of Muslims cannot be ignored.

In an Open Society, freedom of expression is essential, but so too is the responsibility to uphold human dignity and foster social cohesion. A nuanced and principled definition of Islamophobia must protect both, ensuring that Muslims are not expected to endure repeated public humiliation as the price of democratic freedom.

7. Proposed new definition

Here's my proposed definition:

"Islamophobia, also known as anti-Muslim hatred, is an irrational fear, hostility, or prejudice toward Muslims that leads to discrimination, unequal treatment, exclusion, social and political marginalisation, or violence."

This definition works because:
- It is **simple** and does not conflate Islamophobia with racism. As is normal for human behaviours, they generally intersect across different categories of experience, but a definition does not need to be all encompassing, which will only complicate things.
- **"Also known as"** unifies the terms "anti-Muslim hatred" and Islamophobia, removing the need for separate terminology.
- **"Irrational"** emphasises that criticism based on fact or political disagreement is not inherently Islamophobic, which helps protect freedom of expression.
- **"Prejudice against Muslims"** distinguishes between ideas (Islam) and people (Muslim), but recognises that it is only the prejudice against people i.e. Muslims as and if it manifests on them through outcomes like discrimination, not at the level of religion.
- **"That leads to"** ensures it **focuses on people's actions and outcomes,** rather than intent or perceptions.[26] This means you can have irrational fear and prejudice (or even hostility if it is not violent) of Muslims so long as it does not lead to outcomes like discrimination, unequal treatment, exclusion etc.
- **"Discrimination, exclusion, or hostility"** anchors the definition in observable behaviour and real-world impacts, not mere feelings or opinions.
- **Avoids overly academic, vague terms like "Muslimness" or activist language like "rooted in"** that might lose people not already familiar with the concept.

8. Recommendations

1. The Government should apply evaluative tests such as the three tests set out in this paper for any definition of Islamophobia.
2. The Government should accept the definition of Islamophobia proposed in this paper or similar wording to this effect.
3. The Government should prioritise social cohesion initiatives and resilience-building (e.g. through intercultural exchange, education campaigns, economic growth, prosperity) for groups and sections of society that are vulnerable to hateful narratives and becoming intolerant of difference.
4. Muslim community leaders, business leaders, scholars and thinkers should encourage Muslim organisations, faith leaders, activists, ethnic leaders, and British Muslim communities at large to drive an agenda for internal reform of Muslim communities to contextualise Islam to the British Isles, and to move beyond identity-driven politics.

9. Conclusion

In the spirit of Voltaire's enduring call for tolerance in his *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), in this paper I urge British society to respond to the growing threat of Islamophobia not with censorship or repression, but with principled, inclusive solutions that reflect the UK's democratic and pluralist ideals. Defining Islamophobia is not merely a semantic exercise, it is

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[26] As Muslims, we ought to remember that intentions while they remain unactioned are not punished by God.

a critical step in affirming the dignity of Muslim citizens of the UK, preserving the freedoms of an Open Society, and fostering collective resilience against division and hate.

A successful definition must be rooted in justice, practicality, and mutual respect. It must avoid weaponisation, safeguard free expression, and reinforce social harmony without compromising truth or accountability. Only then can it serve as a meaningful framework for action, one that is capable of uniting stakeholders across ideological lines and guiding policies that affirm both liberty and human dignity. The time is ripe for a definition that works, and for society to commit to the shared pursuit of fairness, understanding, and peace.