



## What is Islamophobia?

The term “Islamophobia” was first coined in 1997 as an “unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.”<sup>1</sup> However, recent scholarship has expanded this definition to include discrimination against individuals who may also be *perceived* as Muslim. Islamophobia can manifest itself based on dress, race, name, language, accent, or other cultural markers.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Islamophobia must be understood as a racialized discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

Although researchers began reporting a drastic rise in Islamophobic sentiments following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Islamophobia has existed in various forms for many years. Like most racial or religious minority groups, Muslims have long been perceived as “different” from larger society, dating back to the era of European colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Western knowledge about Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community was long shaped by colonial policies which presented indigenous populations as homogeneous, underdeveloped and often “barbaric”. This constructed perception of Muslims continues to be perpetuated by Western societies today.

## Why is Islamophobia an issue now?

In an era of globalization, the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, whereby international events often have lasting effects in countries where they do not even occur. Stories of violent and gruesome acts perpetrated by self-identified “Islamic” groups have appeared more frequently in media in recent years, especially since the spike in attacks on European soil.<sup>5</sup> The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the media coverage they received has played a large role in the increasing acquiescence to negative stereotypes about Islam. While Canadians should condemn terrorist acts committed by such groups, it is unfair to penalize Canadian Muslim citizens for the acts committed by these groups. Muslim Canadian leaders have consistently condemned the actions of groups like ISIS.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, populist parties that openly entertain xenophobic ideologies dominated several elections in Western countries, including France, Switzerland and the United States. In 2017, the Trump administration’s perceived hostility toward Muslim refugees led to a massive surge of asylum seekers crossing the Canadian

border into Manitoba and Quebec.<sup>7</sup> At that time, one-in-four Canadians believed the Canadian government should have responded to President Trump’s executive order by adopting the same policy – a temporary ban on Syrian refugees.<sup>8</sup> This finding was one more instance of Islamophobia in Canadian society.

Despite the increase in Islamophobia, it tends to be an underreported phenomenon in Canada. Many victims of Islamophobic hate crimes do not report the incidents to the police. Canadian Muslims are sometimes fearful of further victimization, believe the police will not take them seriously, or do not believe reporting these incidents to the police will make a difference.<sup>9</sup> Also, there is no definition of a “hate crime” in Canadian law. In fact, “it is up to the judge to decide whether to impose a longer sentence if she or he believes the crime of mischief was motivated by hate.”<sup>10</sup>

## How has Islamophobia manifested itself in Canadian society?

**Barriers to Employment:** Islamophobia is particularly troubling when it threatens access to employment. Many Canadian Muslims face discrimination from government institutions in access to employment. Quebec is particularly notorious for this form of state-sanctioned Islamophobia. In 2013, the Parti Québécois government proposed legislation that would have prohibited public servants from wearing religious garb while at work.<sup>11</sup> Some four years later, the Liberal government tried to pass Bill 62, which would have required that people show their faces when obtaining public services. Now, the current CAQ government in Quebec has introduced Bill 21, which will formally ban teachers, police officers, judges, and other individuals in the public sector, from wearing religious symbols.<sup>12</sup> While the bill theoretically treats all religious symbols as equal, Muslim women who wear a hijab will be most affected by this proposed legislation. These various bills underscore the degree to which currents in Canadian society have become reactive to symbols of Islam and Muslims more generally.

**Barriers to integration:** Another form of Islamophobia exists in terms of barriers to community integration. For example, in the Quebec town of Shawinigan, the city council refused to rezone an industrial park to allow a mosque to open as a result of what the mayor called

“irrational fears.”<sup>13</sup> Similar incidents took place in other Quebec municipalities, despite the fact that such “discrimination by zoning” is strictly illegal.<sup>14</sup>

No long afterwards, a Quebec judge refused to hear the case of a Muslim woman because the woman refused to remove her hijab. Certainly, access to the judicial process is essential for the societal integration of any religious minority.<sup>15</sup>

**Incidents of Hate:** Incidents of hate targeting Canada’s Muslim population increased the most in 2014, with a rise of 141 percent.<sup>16</sup> In 2015, the number of police-reported hate crimes against Muslims jumped by 61 per cent. Some incidents of hate against Muslims in Canada include:

- Since fall 2016, anti-Muslim posters have frequently been plastered at university campuses across Canada, including the University of Calgary and McGill University.<sup>17</sup> In Quebec City, talk-radio stations nicknamed “radios poubelles” (trash radio) have drawn listeners for years by voicing concerns about Muslim immigration and the threat of Islamic terrorism.<sup>18</sup> Far-right groups like La Meute or Storm Alliance have organized multiple anti-immigration protests against provincial and federal studies to eliminate systemic racism.<sup>19</sup>
- Islamophobic rhetoric has the effect of normalizing abuse toward Muslim institutions and symbols. Especially since 2015, mosques and Islamic community centres across the country have become victims of vandalism - one mosque in Calgary had its front door smashed twice in the same week.<sup>20</sup> In 2017, acts of hate were so prevalent that a BC legal group launched a legal assistance hotline for victims of Islamophobia.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most well-known, and most tragic, violent attack against Muslims occurred at a Quebec City mosque in January 2017, where a mass shooting left six people dead and many others injured. One year later, Muslim community members bemoan the fact that they still have to “negotiate casual racism, outright Islamophobia and...still fear for their safety.”<sup>22</sup>

## **What is the Canadian government doing to address Islamophobia?**

Canada ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1970. In 1971, the introduction of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act aimed to preserve and enhance the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society.

Since 2015, the Trudeau government has made attempts to raise awareness of the problem of Islamophobia. The

House of Commons passed motion M-103 in March 2017, calling on federal politicians to condemn Islamophobia and all other forms of systemic racism. Yet as quickly as this motion was introduced, it became a polarizing subject of debate between political parties, and more broadly within Canadian society. Quebec’s Premier Legault, as well as many Conservative politicians, have continued to deny the existence of Islamophobia. For example, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer was recently criticized for his banal characterization of the Christchurch massacre as an attack on “freedom” rather than an attack on Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

In February 2018, the Standing Committee of Canadian Heritage released the M-103 report and recommendations. The Committee encouraged the government to develop a national, concrete action plan to tackle the problem of Islamophobia in Canada. As of February 2018, the government has yet to implement the Committee’s recommendations.

<sup>1</sup> “Defining ‘Islamophobia.’” University of California, Berkely Center for Race and Gender. Accessed January 18, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Semati, Mehdi. “Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire.” *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2, 2010. p. 256-275.

<sup>3</sup> “Observations sur l’aperçu provisoire des grandes lignes du rapport déposé par le Canada auprès du Comité pour l’élimination de la discrimination raciale.” CJPME Foundation. March 2015, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Said, Edward. “Orientalism”. 1978.

<sup>5</sup> “Terror Attacks Timeline.” *Express*. August 18, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Jahangir, Junaid. “Muslims Stand Against ISIS, Too.” *The Huffington Post*. August 27, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Shawn McCarthy. “Sizable minority says Canada is accepting too many refugees: poll.” *The Globe and Mail*. February 20, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Open-door policy? Majority support government decision not to increase 2017 refugee targets.” *Angus Reid Institute*. February 20, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> “Hate crimes against Muslims in Canada up 60%, StatsCan reports.” *CBC News*. June 13, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> “What counts as a ‘hate crime’ in Canada?” *CTV News*. March 1, 2017..

<sup>11</sup> “Projet de la loi n°60: Charte affirmant les valeurs de laïcité et de neutralité religieuse de l’État ainsi que d’égalité entre les femmes et les hommes et encadrant les demandes d’accommodement.” *Assemblée nationale du Québec, présenté à la 40<sup>e</sup> législature, 1<sup>ère</sup> session*.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Uprichard. “What is Quebec’s secularism bill—and how does it affect women?” *Chatelaine*. April 3, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Rukavina, Stephen. “Michel Angers, Shawinigan mayor, explains decision to reject mosque.” *CBC News Montreal*. 13 February 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Van Praet, Nicolas. “Religious tension in Quebec resurfaces over mayoral interference,” *The Globe and Mail*. 19 February 2015.

<sup>15</sup> “Rania El-Alloul hijab ruling draws complaint against Quebec judge,” *CBC News on-line*. 2 March 2015,

<sup>16</sup> “Police-reported hate crime in Canada – 2015”. *Statistics Canada*. June 13, 2017. Accessed January 18, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> “Notley condemns anti-Muslim posters at University of Calgary”. *The Globe and Mail*. October 4, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> “After mosque attack, calls to clean up Quebec City’s radio waves.” *CBC News*. February 3, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> “Des membres de la meute et de storm alliance manifestent sur la Colline du Parlement.” *Radio-Canada*. February 19, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “Calgary mosque vandalized for second time in a week”. *CBC News*. October 16, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> “Islamophobia hotline to help victims launched by B.C. legal groups.” *Globe and Mail*. March 27, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> “Quebec City Muslims alarmed by increasingly public displays of racism one year after mosque shooting”. *CBC News*. January 21, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Althia Raj. “Conservative leader Andrew Scheer rejects accusations he’s soft on Islamophobia.” *Huffington Post*. March 23, 2019.