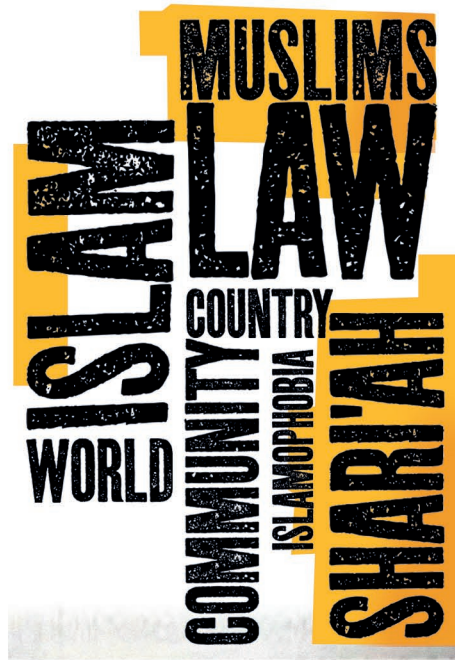


CONCEPT SERIES 3

ISLAMISM AND LANGUAGE

HOW USING THE WRONG WORDS
REINFORCES ISLAMIST NARRATIVES

GEORGE READINGS, JAMES BRANDON AND RICHARD PHELPS



Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, George Bush described the ‘war on terror’ as a “crusade”. By doing so, he quite literally echoed the language of Osama bin Laden who had himself described western countries as ‘crusaders’. Indeed, bin Laden later remarked that Bush “has taken the words out of our mouth”.¹ This is an example of how western politicians can inadvertently strengthen the narratives and arguments of Islamism, a modern political ideology that is distinct from Islam the faith, by adopting Islamist vocabulary. Although the US administration has long since stopped using the word ‘crusade’ to describe its foreign policy, it, and many other governments, individuals and institutions, nonetheless still regularly use language that may accidentally strengthen the ideas and worldview of their opponents. This concept paper cites five examples of how this can happen and suggests alternative language that can be used to avoid unwittingly reinforcing Islamist narratives and beliefs.

The examples provided in this report are not exhaustive. However, they aim to illustrate the importance of language when discussing issues affecting Islam and Muslims. The issue is not one of political correctness; it is about avoiding inaccuracies which unwittingly endorse and strengthen extremist narratives. For instance, the term *shari’ah* is understood by most Muslims to be a wide-ranging and often contradictory body of scholarly opinions. However, by discussing this term in a simplistic and uncritical manner, we may risk popularising the key Islamist belief that *shari’ah* is a single universally-agreed upon code of ‘Islamic law’ which can and should be enforced by a state. Similarly, by describing a country such as Egypt as a ‘Muslim country’ and part of ‘the Muslim world’, we may reinforce the extremist narrative that the world is divided into two opposed camps – one of Muslims, one of non-Muslims. Given the major security and integration challenges presented by Islamism, it is vital to challenge and undermine the narratives which underpin it. The first step towards doing so is to avoid echoing Islamist language.

'The Islamic/Muslim World'

Islamists believe that 'the Muslim world' is a homogenous bloc with a shared political agenda. Uncritical use of phrases like 'the Muslim world' or 'the Islamic world', which can suggest that all Muslim-majority countries are part of a monolithic bloc, risks reinforcing a key aspect of Islamist narratives.

The term

The two terms 'the Islamic world' and 'the Muslim world' are regularly used interchangeably by politicians and commentators, often as shorthand for countries in which the majority of inhabitants are Muslim or to simply refer to Muslims around the world.

In many cases, the terms are used in contrast to 'the West' or Western countries. For example, President Obama has said "there are misapprehensions about the West on the part of the Muslim world."² Similarly, in the UK, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) established an 'Engaging with the Islamic World' programme '[t]o support the FCO's lead within government to encourage positive engagement with the Islamic world and political and economic reform in Arab countries.'³ Likewise, in a blog entitled 'Forging coalitions with the Muslim World' the then British Foreign Secretary David Miliband wrote that 'Britain has historical baggage in the Muslim world. We have to overcome it.'⁴ Another minister, Hazel Blears, said in a 2006 speech that "[w]e are working hard on the global front to cement ties with the Muslim world."⁵ Even the British government's *Prevent* strategy for countering violent extremism states that 'the wider strategy looks to other governments and communities overseas, in and outside the Islamic world, to contribute.'⁶

At the same time, the terms 'the Islamic world' and 'the Muslim world' are also used by Islamists. For example, in *Milestones*, a book which has been massively influential on modern Islamist movements and thought, Sayyid Qutb wrote that 'Europe entered into the period of scientific revival, which led it step by step to great scientific heights. Meanwhile, the Muslim world gradually drifted away from Islam.'⁷ More dramatically, Osama bin Laden has declared, "I say that there are two sides in the struggle: one side is the global Crusader alliance with the Zionist Jews, led by America, Britain, and Israel, and the other side is the Islamic world."⁸ Similarly, in early 2010, Anwar Awlaki, the Yemen-based pro-al-Qaeda preacher, described what he saw as "American occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq and other pictures of occupation in the rest of the Muslim world."⁹ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, often cited as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood has, meanwhile, called on 'the Muslim world' to acquire nuclear weapons.¹⁰ These Islamists use the terms 'the

Muslim world' and 'the Islamic world' not because they are a useful shorthand, but because they fit in with their own ideological understanding of recent history and current affairs.

Consequences

Adopting language which contrasts 'the Muslim world' with 'the West' carries some risks:

- It reinforces the unhelpful and inaccurate suggestion that the 'Islamic' or 'Muslim world' is a homogenous bloc united by a single political and religious outlook. This can be manipulated by Islamists to support their belief that 'the Muslim world' constitutes a monolithic religious bloc with a shared political agenda – and that it should consequently be united into a single supra-national state.
- Some Islamists exploit the idea that 'the West' and 'the Muslim world' are in a state of religious, spiritual and political competition to argue that Muslims must band together to defend the 'Muslim world' against 'the West', potentially using violence.
- Islamist and far-right extremists may use this language to support their argument that Muslims can never truly be at home in western countries in which most people are not Muslim. Wherever these arguments spread, they damage national cohesion on all sides.

Of course, most people who use the terms 'the Muslim world' and 'the Islamic world' are not Islamists. However, it is worth remembering that commentators only rarely talk about 'the Christian world' or 'the atheist world' because such a phrase would imply far more unity and cohesion than is in fact the case. The same should apply to discussions of Muslims around the world. This is not to say that, when speaking in a purely religious context, the phrase 'the Muslim world' cannot be usefully employed, just as the phrase the 'Catholic world' can be used in some religious contexts.

Alternatives

In place of using terms like 'the Muslim world' or 'the Islamic world', a more accurate phrase would perhaps be 'Muslim communities worldwide', 'Muslim-majority countries' or 'Muslims around the world'. The last phrase was used by Barack Obama in his 2009 Cairo speech.¹¹ Another comparable phrase was used by British Foreign Secretary William Hague when he addressed "Muslims across the globe".¹² At the same time, it is helpful to acknowledge that Islam is not 'other' and overseas but is in fact part of 'the West', as Barack Obama did in the same Cairo speech when

he declared that “Islam is a part of America”. Similarly, to mark the Islamic festival of Eid in September 2009, the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown addressed “Muslims throughout the United Kingdom and around the world”, a phrase that neither implies that Muslims are a political bloc nor suggests that they are somehow unable to fully integrate into western countries.¹³

‘Muslim Countries’

Islamists believe that the world should be divided into rival and competing political blocs, with Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other. When used by non-Islamists, phrases such as ‘Muslim countries’ and non-Muslim countries’ can inadvertently reinforce this worldview and bolster Islamists’ arguments.

The term

As a subdivision of the ‘Islamic world’, Islamists often speak of ‘Muslim countries’. Senior al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has said: “Reform and expelling the invaders from Muslim countries cannot be accomplished except by fighting for the sake of God.”¹⁴ Likewise, Omar Bakri Mohammed, the former leader of the now-banned extremist organisation al-Muhajiroun, once said: “any place Islam conquered or where Islam was implemented or where the majority of people embraced Islam on it. If the signs of Islam become prevalent [...]then it will become a Muslim country.”¹⁵ Muhammad Qutb, the brother of Sayyid Qutb, said: “The Islamic press, in a Muslim country, has a way of presenting the news that makes the reader feel that he is a Muslim.”¹⁶

The use of the term ‘Muslim country’ is common among non-Islamists too. For example, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) frequently uses the term ‘Muslim country’ to describe nations in which the majority of the population are Muslims. Its website contains a profile of Algeria, for example, which states that ‘[l]ocal laws reflect the fact that Algeria is a Muslim country’.¹⁷ The Conservative minister, Sayeeda Warsi, has also publicly referred to Pakistan as a ‘Muslim country’ while, elsewhere, the Australian Prime Minister has referred to Indonesia as a ‘Muslim country’.¹⁸ A number of permutations of this phrase are also widely used. For instance, the FCO’s profile of Egypt states that ‘Egypt is an Islamic country. Religious conversion is a sensitive issue in Egypt’.¹⁹ The mirror image of this phrase is also commonly used when referring to countries whose population is mostly non-Muslim. For instance, the British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia has described the UK as ‘a non-Muslim country’ in the Saudi press.²⁰

Consequences

Categorising countries as being ‘Muslim’ or ‘non-Muslim’ carries certain risks:

- Islamist and Wahhabi narratives may be strengthened, in particular the idea that the world is divided into two rival political camps: Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries. It may also strengthen perceptions that these two groups of countries are, and should be, mutually antagonistic or in competition with each other.

- It may reinforce the idea that the government, leaders, and laws of a 'Muslim' or 'Islamic country' should be 'Islamic' – a phrase that Islamists have largely appropriated to mean living under a single, state-imposed interpretation of *shari'ah*.
- The false impression is given that a shared religious identity equates to a shared political agenda. This is particularly the case where such phrases are used in a political context. Thus, even when describing a country whose citizens are virtually all Muslim, as in the cases of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, such phrases can still be unhelpful and actually hinder understanding and effective communication.
- The existence of large non-Muslim populations in countries like Egypt, Malaysia, Syria and Pakistan is ignored by using such terms. By considering these countries to be 'Muslim' or 'Islamic', commentators ignore their internal diversity and unconsciously help to sideline religious minorities.
- Muslims living in so-called 'non-Muslim' countries like the UK and USA may feel there is a disconnect between their individual identities and their national identities and that their countries do not fully represent them. Individuals who adopt such an outlook may be more susceptible to overtures from extremist recruiters who encourage them to reject their national identity and to consider themselves to be exclusively Muslim instead.

Alternatives

In place of designating a country as 'Muslim' or 'non-Muslim', it may be more appropriate to talk of 'Muslim-majority' or 'predominantly Muslim' countries and societies, thereby acknowledging the diversity within them. To some extent, this change of language is already happening. For example, the Associated Press news agency has used the phrase 'Muslim-majority country' or society for a number of years. In his Cairo speech, President Obama referred to Indonesia as where 'devout Christians worshipped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country'.²¹ In the UK, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, has also used the phrase 'Muslim-majority country', for instance to describe Turkey.²²

'The Muslim Community'

Islamists of all backgrounds believe that a Muslim's political concerns and behaviour should be determined by their religion alone. This leads them to believe that Muslims have a united political agenda that is separate from that of other citizens. Using the term 'the Muslim community' as shorthand for all Muslims within a certain country risks supporting this belief and also overlooking the diversity amongst Muslims.

The term

Many Islamists use the term 'the Muslim community' to refer to all the Muslims within a certain country. For example, Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemen-based pro-al-Qaeda preacher, recently said in the aftermath of a series of anti-terrorism raids and arrests in America: "This campaign that these [federal] agencies are leading against the Muslim community has outraged the community, and is an indication of the dangerous route this war on terrorism is taking" and also "[t]his was an attack on every one of us. This attack was on the Muslim community and all of us are part [of it]."²³ Similarly, the executive summary of a report entitled 'Radicalisation, Extremism & 'Islamism'', published by Hizb ut-Tahrir in July 2007, opens by claiming that "[t]he Muslim community in Britain has been under a continuous spotlight since the events of 9/11 and 7/7 in particular."²⁴ In the same way, in 2003, then Assistant Secretary General of the 'Muslim Council of Britain' Unaiza Malik gave a speech in which she claimed that there was a need to "tell people what the Muslim community stands for."²⁵ In all of these examples, 'the Muslim community' is used in a way which implies that all Muslims share a single political agenda.

Non-Islamists have echoed this usage of 'the Muslim community'. In the aftermath of the London bombings in July 2005, for example, British MP (and later Mayor of London) Boris Johnson wrote: '[w]e have reached a turning-point in the relations between the Muslim community and the rest of us.'²⁶ Similarly, a British Home Office document referred to a 'Call for an Inquiry mainly coming from the Muslim Community'²⁷ and one publication on the British Department for Education's website describes 'a shared vision for the future of the Muslim community in the UK.'²⁸ Previously, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, a British Cabinet Office document stated 'amongst the Muslim community, there was strong feeling about the fact that there was no representative body in the UK.'²⁹

Consequences

Implying the existence of a single homogenous group known as 'the Muslim community' carries certain risks:

- There is a great diversity among Muslims, a fact which is ignored by commentators who imply that all members of ‘the Muslim community’ share similar concerns and are undivided by differences in individual religiosity, age, wealth, geography, cultural or religious background. Ignoring this diversity can bolster the Islamist argument that all Muslims are united by a single political agenda.
- It treats Muslims according to the assumption that their engagement with politics is pre-defined by their professed or nominal religion. This risks encouraging some Muslims to engage with politics and society along purely religious or sectarian lines.
- This synchronisation of political and religious identities may feed divisive, far-right and Islamist extremist narratives. Specifically, it allows the possibility for extremists of both kinds to foment divisions in society by alleging that ‘the Muslim community’ has received better (or worse) treatment than other ‘communities’.

Of course, most people who use the term ‘the Muslim community’ are not Islamists, and not all uses of these phrases are as problematic as others. For instance, saying that ‘ramadan is an important time of year for the Muslim community’ is not as unhelpful as usages which imply a political unity and unanimity within ‘the Muslim community’.

Alternatives

When discussing political and social issues, rather than talking about ‘the Muslim community’, it would be preferable to talk about ‘Muslim citizens’, thereby emphasising their shared citizenship. For example, President Sarkozy of France has used the phrase ‘French Muslim citizens’.³⁰ The phrase ‘Muslim Brits’ could alternatively be used to highlight that being Muslim is often only one part of a larger identity. To an extent, such phrases still delineate citizens along religious lines. However, they avoid giving the false impression that such citizens form homogenous, religiously-defined blocs. In the same way, rather than using the divisive language of talking about a separate ‘Muslim community’, it is possible to use ‘community’ in a wider sense which includes all people of diverse backgrounds. For instance, Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, has said: “[Muslims] are, and want to be, a part of the mainstream community”.³¹ Alternatively, some commentators have used the phrase ‘Muslim communities’ to highlight the diversity among Muslims. Whilst this phrase, like ‘the Muslim community’, may run the risk of implying that ‘Muslim communities’ are separate to the rest of society, it is a particularly useful alternative when discussing religious subject matters.

'Islamic Law'

Islamists believe that a single interpretation of shari'ah, the collection of Muslim moral codes, can and should be imposed on society as state law. By translating shari'ah as 'Islamic law' and using this phrase in a way which inaccurately implies that there is a single code of state law agreed by all Muslims, non-Islamist commentators risk popularising this belief which, whilst being rejected by most Muslims, is a key aspect of Islamist ideology.

The term

Shari'ah, rather than being 'law' in the sense of rules enforced by a state, has traditionally been understood by Muslims as a broad and diverse set of scholarly opinions that can be observed or disregarded according to personal preference. Indeed, in Arabic, the word *shari'ah* is always used as a noun, never as an adjective to describe 'law'. Islamists, on the other hand, believe that *shari'ah* is a single, universally-agreed upon code which can and should be directly enforced as state law (although, ironically, they even disagree among themselves about what that code would look like).

For example, Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, once said: 'every nation has a body of law to which its sons have recourse in their legal affairs ... the Islamic Sacred Law and the decisions of the Islamic jurists are all-sufficient, supply every need, and cover every contingency.'³² Similarly, South Asian Islamist ideologue, Abul Ala Mawdudi, wrote that his ideal government 'will make it obligatory for non-Muslim women to observe the minimum standards of modesty in dress as required by Islamic law.'³³ Osama bin Laden has stated that the main reason for fighting against the government of Saudi Arabia is "its suspension of the rulings of the Islamic law and replacement thereof with man-made laws."³⁴ In a more recent example, Anjem Choudary, leader of the now-banned group Islam4UK/al-Muhajiroun, states on his personal website: 'I believe that one day Britain and indeed every part of the world [...] will be governed by and under the authority of the Muslims implementing Islamic Law. This is something that I believe in and strive to see Insha'Allah [God willing].'³⁵

Media coverage of *shari'ah* often tends to adopt this Islamist understanding of it as a single 'Islamic law' which can be enforced by a state. For example, in August 2010, the BBC reported on the public caning of five people in Aceh, Indonesia, for various crimes. The report states: 'Aceh implemented Sharia, or Islamic law, in 2002, as part of an autonomy deal offered by the Jakarta government.'³⁶ Similarly, a CNN article from April 2009 described a deal struck between the Pakistani government and the Taliban as 'implement[ing] Islamic law, or sharia, in the Swat Valley region of North

West Frontier Province.³⁷ Such media coverage, which gives the impression that there is only one version of *shari'ah* that is merely awaiting 'implementation' as state law clearly reinforces Islamist ideology. Another example of this can be found in an article on the website of the British Security Service, MI5, which states: 'apostasy [is] an offence for which Islamic law prescribes a death sentence'. This clearly gives the impression that there is only one, particularly hard line, interpretation of 'Islamic law'.³⁸ In the same way, in 2005, Peter Costello, then a high-ranking official in the Australian government, gave a speech in which he stated: "I'd be saying to clerics who are teaching that there are two laws governing people in Australia, one the Australian law and another the Islamic law, that that is false." The contrast he draws between 'Islamic law' and 'Australian law' suggests that 'Islamic law' is a single code which, like 'Australian law', can be enforced by a state.

Consequences

Implying that *shari'ah* is a single and unanimously agreed 'Islamic law', carries certain risks:

- It risks popularising the Islamist belief that there is only one version of *shari'ah*. Islamists may exploit this belief to bolster their argument that this single code can and should be enforced as state law.
- Popularisation of this Islamist belief then undermines the position of traditionalist mainstream Muslims who believe that the *shari'ah* is a diverse body of guidance for individual Muslims, not a single legal code which can be enforced through the institutions of a modern nation state.
- Using terms like 'Islamic law' may unwittingly reinforce the false assumption, key to Islamist propaganda, that enforcing 'Islamic law' through the state is a fundamentally 'Islamic' goal. This assumption hands a propaganda victory to Islamists and undermines the position of non-Islamist Muslims, many of whom actually believe that enforcing a single interpretation of *shari'ah* is un-Islamic.

Alternatives

Rather than echoing Islamist narratives which suggest that there is a single version of 'Islamic law' that is enforceable as state law, it is important to emphasise that there are many different interpretations of *shari'ah*. For example, commentators could refer to Islamists wishing to enforce 'their' or 'an' interpretation of '*shari'ah* as state law' rather than saying they want to 'implement Islamic law'. Where countries claim to enforce *shari'ah* as law, for example in Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is also more accurate to say that these countries enforce as law 'an interpretation of *shari'ah*', 'a version of the *shari'ah*' or that they have 'a legal system informed by interpretations of *shari'ah*'.

Another alternative is to place the term 'Islamic law' in quotes or to refer to 'so-called Islamic law'. This will underscore that Islamist claims or rhetoric should not necessarily be taken at face-value and indicate that such terms are widely contested by other Muslims. It is also useful to acknowledge that, to most Muslims, *shari'ah* refers to personal moral guidance that does not need to be enforced by the state as 'law'. Therefore, in religious contexts, rather than translating *shari'ah* as 'Islamic law', it may be preferable to translate it as 'Islamic teachings' or 'Islamic codes'.

'Islamophobia'

There is a good deal of confusion about what the term Islamophobia means. At times, it is used analogously to racism or anti-Semitism to refer to the very real and disturbing phenomenon of bigotry against Muslims. At others, it is used to refer to criticism of certain aspects of Islam or even to criticism of Islamism. This profusion of meanings has made accurate usage of the term problematic and challenging.

The term

The term 'Islamophobia' was popularised by a 1997 Runnymede Trust report entitled 'Islamophobia: a Challenge for us All'. This report bears much of the responsibility for current confusion about the term 'Islamophobia'. It equated 'Islamophobia' with holding 'closed views of Islam' and additionally conflated various separate phenomena including 'anti-Muslim prejudice', seeing 'Islam as a single monolithic bloc' or as a 'political bloc', seeing Islam as 'barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist' or accepting 'anti-Muslim hostility as natural and 'normal'.' The report thus conflated criticism of a religion, or being critical of some aspects of it, with displaying prejudice or hostility towards Muslim individuals – and depicted both as being equally problematic and unacceptable.³⁹

This has led to 'Islamophobia' being used in very different contexts. Some have used the term to refer to the very real and worrying phenomenon of prejudice against Muslims. For example, in April 2010, then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that his government was "determined to tackle Islamophobia", which he clarified as being "blaming, persecuting, or preaching inflammatory messages about [Muslims]."⁴⁰ In contrast to Brown's carefully defined usage, however, some individuals have applied 'Islamophobia' to criticisms of certain Islamic beliefs and traditions. For example, the author Salman Rushdie has been described in a report published by the European Muslim Research Centre at Exeter University as 'the Islamophobic author'.⁴¹ This is presumably a reference to Rushdie's criticism of elements of Islamic belief in his novel *The Satanic Verses*.

Others have used 'Islamophobia' to refer to criticisms of the behaviour of some Muslim individuals and groups. For example, a report on Islamophobia commissioned by then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, included reporting of the sentencing of boxer Prince Naseem, a Muslim, for dangerous driving among examples of 'Islamophobic' media coverage.⁴² Similarly, the writer William Dalrymple has accused historians who describe invasions of India by the Muslim Mughals as 'a long, brutal sequence of pillage' of resting their ideas 'on a set of

mistaken and Islamophobic assumptions.⁴³ By doing so, Dalrymple effectively accused historians with a differing view of historical events involving a group of Muslims of being unduly influenced by 'Islamophobia'. On the other hand, Rod Liddle, the journalist and columnist, has given a speech titled 'Islamophobia? Count me in' and argued that if Islamophobia means being critical of Islam, as of other religions, then it is legitimate, saying: "I've never had a go at Muslims, I've always had a go at Islam."⁴⁴

The use of 'Islamophobia' to refer to several different phenomena has caused widespread confusion about what it actually means and how it should be used. Islamists and Wahhabis have exploited this confusion to accuse critics of their actions or ideology of being motivated by 'Islamophobia', implying that their critics have a bigoted and irrational dislike or hatred for Islam and Muslims. In 2008, for example, Barclays Bank closed the accounts of the 'Ummah Welfare Trust', which was accused of 'channel[ing] funds to controversial Palestinian charity Interpal, which is the subject of a current Charity Commission investigation over alleged improper links to Palestinian "terror" organisation Hamas.' The chairman of Interpal, Ibrahim Hewitt, responded calling this 'the latest case of Islamophobia within the banking sector' and 'purely another attack against the Muslim community.'⁴⁵ Similarly, in 2008, when Shadow British Home Secretary Dominic Grieve criticised the invitation of Yasir Qadhi to a 'Global Peace and Unity' event because of the preacher's extremist views, Qadhi responded saying: 'Islamophobia is defined to be the illogical and irrational fear of Islam, and Dominic Grieve seemed to be a perfect example of it.'⁴⁶ More recently, when individuals in India called for the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, to be banned from the country, the Muslim Brotherhood's official website posted an article headlined 'Islamophobia reaches India calling for the banning of Al-Qaradawi.'⁴⁷

Some non-Islamist sympathisers of Islamism exploit the term 'Islamophobia' in the same way. For example, former Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has accused critics of al-Qaradawi during his visit to the UK, hosted by Livingstone, of 'lies and Islamophobia.'⁴⁸

Consequences

Given the confusion about the definition of 'Islamophobia', usage of the term is accompanied by certain risks:

- It can undermine freedom of speech by conflating criticism or scrutiny of aspects of a religion or the behaviour of its followers with inciting hatred against individuals on the basis of their religion, in this case Islam. As Tariq Ramadan has said, 'criticis[ing] the religion and Muslims is not Islamophobia.'⁴⁹

- Islamists may exploit this lack of clarity about what 'Islamophobia' means to argue that their critics are motivated by an irrational 'Islamophobia' rather than by legitimate concerns about aspects of their Islamist ideology. This hands a propaganda coup to Islamists who can thereby present themselves as ordinary Muslims who are victims of 'Islamophobia', rather than proponents of an extremist political ideology who are being legitimately held to account.
- Non-Islamists may be discouraged from criticising Islamists and Islamism for fear of being accused of 'Islamophobia', meaning irrational hatred of Muslims, and therefore of inciting hatred against Muslims in general. This can make it harder for ordinary individuals to challenge extremism.
- Misuse of the word 'Islamophobia' has made it more difficult to identify and label genuine incidents of anti-Muslim prejudice. For instance, far-right groups have used Islamists' spurious allegations of 'Islamophobia' to argue that all accusations of 'Islamophobia' levelled against them are similarly spurious.

Alternatives

In order to avoid the confusion which often accompanies usage of the term 'Islamophobia', there are various alternatives to it which can also be used. For example, it is much more accurate and useful to talk of 'anti-Muslim prejudice', 'anti-Muslim bigotry' or 'anti-Muslim hatred' to describe prejudice, bigotry or hatred against Muslims. If the term 'Islamophobia' is to be used despite the consequences outlined above then, as Tariq Ramadan argues, it may be preferable to reserve it for describing bigotry and prejudice against Muslims rather than criticism of Muslims and/or aspects of Islamic belief. At the same time, however, it is important that the freedom to criticise religions is preserved – as long as that criticism is not used, or understood, to incite hatred, violence or prejudice against the individual followers of that religion. It is important for a liberal, democratic society that people are able to publicly criticise Islam and aspects of it, just as they are able to criticise Christianity, Buddhism or Scientology, if they wish to do so.

Conclusion

Using five common examples, this paper has shown how non-Islamists can, at times, echo the language of Islamists. The potential consequence of this can be to unwittingly popularise Islamist narratives and messages and thereby help the spread of Islamism, an intolerant and totalitarian modern political ideology. Whilst this is of importance to anyone commenting on issues related to Islam and Muslims, it is particularly relevant to politicians, policy-makers, civil servants and civil society activists whose adoption of Islamist language can undermine efforts to tackle extremism and terrorism and hamper attempts to create more tolerant, diverse and integrated societies. To avoid some of the inaccuracies and pitfalls associated with phrases like ‘the Muslim world’ and ‘Islamophobia’, the paper also proposes a number of alternatives to them. Using them is not ‘political correctness’; it is a practical step towards undermining the worldview and narratives which underpin the extremist ideology of Islamism.

Don't use	Do use
Muslim/Islamic world	Muslims around the world Muslim-majority countries Muslim communities worldwide Muslims in countries around the world
Muslim/Islamic countries	Muslim-majority countries Predominantly Muslim countries
The Muslim community	Muslim citizens Muslim communities British/American/French Muslims <i>Or, when discussing some of the Muslim citizens of a country, it may be more accurate to say ‘some Muslims’ or ‘many Muslims’.</i>
Islamic law	Their version of shari’ah as state law An interpretation of shari’ah as state law <i>It is important to emphasise that Islamists and the governments of countries like Saudi Arabia are not implementing ‘Islamic law’ but are enforcing their interpretation of shari’ah, a diverse and often contradictory set of religious guidance, as state law.</i>
Islamophobia	Anti-Muslim prejudice Anti-Muslim bigotry Anti-Muslim hatred

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in B. Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: the statements of Osama bin Laden*, J Howarth (trans.), (London: Verso, 2005), p. 121.
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