ipi Islamabad Policy Institute

islamabad policy institute

Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Rising Islamophobia in Europe

Mobeen Jafar Mir

Rising Islamophobia in Europe

Mobeen Jafar Mir
February 4, 2021

**Islamabad Policy
Institute, Pakistan**

Rising Islamophobia in Europe
Mobeen Jafar Mir*

Whenever a Muslim person is gunned down, or killed in an apparent anti-Islamic act, various deceptive terms such as 'racist killing',[1] are used by the media to divert attention from the surging Islamophobia across Europe. It was on display in the aftermath of the horrific incident of the Muslim massacre in Hanau, Germany, in February, 2020 when various European states deliberately avoided associating such an obvious anti-Islamic incident with rising Islamophobia in Europe.[2] The attack was downplayed despite the attacker publishing a controversial manifesto laden with conspiracy theories against Muslims.

The attacks on Muslims across Europe are on the rise[3] and findings of an Ankara-based think tank SETA claim that in 2018 alone, anti-Muslim incidents in France increased by nearly 52 percent with as many as 676 Islamophobia incidents documented in the year against 446 in 2017. The research also reveals a sharp spike of 74 percent in Islamophobia incidents in Austria where 540 cases were documented in 2018 in contrast to 309 cases in 2017.[4] There exists a growing reservation in Europe that Islamic values are in stark contradiction to European norms and culture. For instance, there are around 44 percent of Germans who believe Islamic values are opposed to prevalent German norms and, thus, slowly undermining German culture.[5] Similarly, around 62 percent Finns and 53 percent Italians share concerns about the growing footprints of Islamic culture in Europe. [6]

---

[1] Lois Beckett, "Hanau Attack Part of Pattern of White Supremacist Violence Flowing from US," The Guardian, February 21, 2020, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/21/hanau-attack-part-of-pattern-of-white-supremacist-violence-flowing-from-us.

[2] "Germany Shooting: 'Far-Right Extremist' Carried out Shisha Bars Attacks," BBC News, February 20, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51567971.

[3] "Anti-Muslim attacks in France soar 54% in 2019," *Daily Sabah*, January 28, 2020, https://www.dailysabah.com/europe/2020/01/28/anti-muslim-attacks-in-france-soar-54-in-2019.

[4] Ayhan Şimşek, "Turks in Europe face systemic racism: Turkish FM," *Anadolu Agency*, October 02, 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turks-in-europe-face-systemic-racism-turkish-fm/1600006

[5] Neha Sahgal, and Besheer Mohamed, "In the U.S. and Western Europe, people say they accept Muslims, but opinions are divided on Islam," Pew Research Centre, October 8, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/08/in-the-u-s-and-western-europe-people-say-they-accept-muslims-but-opinions-are-divided-on-islam/

[6] Neha Sahgal, Alan Cooperman, and Scott Gardner, "Being Christian in Western Europe" (Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018), 21, https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/.

As a consequence of such deep prejudice, Muslims are ending up more vulnerable, and unprotected in the European societies. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, a principal institution affiliated with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and working for the "human dimension" of security, has corroborated the reports of rising attacks on Muslims in Europe.[7] Similarly, the Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium (CCIB) has time and again expressed deep concerns about anti-Muslim incidents taking place in Europe. [8]

All this anti-Muslim rhetoric was not generated overnight, but was in the making for quite some time. There has been a significant presence of Islamophobic organizations and individuals who have pushed their notorious agendas through fanning anti-Muslim sentiments. Lately, a popular support for Islamophobic street movements and threatening emergence of anti-Islamic political parties, like Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Alternative for Germany, and the Sweden Democrats, have transformed them into major political parties. [9]

The 'War on Terror' discriminately singled out Muslims as an imminent threat to the Western world. The rise of the Islamic State and unending chaos in the Middle East further marginalized Muslims in the European societies. The fact that the interminable mayhem in many Islamic countries, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya and Palestine, inflicts more harm on Muslims than it affects Europeans is largely ignored. Increased stigmatization of Muslims in Europe has further aggravated the situation. Islamophobic ideas and rhetoric spearheaded by ever-increasing anti-Islamic political parties in Europe are absorbed into political discourse and translated into national policies.

The mission of stigmatizing Muslims is accomplished through a body of right-wing think tanks working in the U.K., like Policy Exchange and the Centre for Social Cohesion, which have now merged with the Henry Jackson Society that holds a long history of generating anti-Islamic rhetoric. Through successful lobbying of right-wing think tanks, the neo-conservative elements

---

[7] "Countering discrimination against Muslims," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe,* n.d.
https://www.osce.org/odihr/countering-discrimination-against-muslims.

[8] "Warning against Islamophobia in Belgium," *The Brussels Times*, September 05, 2016
https://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/38986/warning-against-islamophobia-in-belgium.

[9] Narzanin Massoumi, "Why Is Europe So Islamophobic?", *The New York Times*, March 6, 2020,
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html.

of the counter-jihad movement are reinforced. This, moreover, encourages vigilantism by emboldening ordinary citizens to assume the role of 'police operatives' and look down upon Muslims as a security threat. [10]

Such divisive policies have not only targeted Muslims but have, alarmingly, also choked the voices of dissent and delivered a severe blow to the freedom of expression in Europe. These measures are aimed at achieving the twin goals of fueling anti-Islamic sentiments and coming hard on political ideologies considered divergent from the conservative outlook. As a result, the phenomenon of 'counter-jihad movements'[11] has surfaced all across Europe.

It has helped the right-wing political parties to take forward the anti-Muslim rhetoric from European streets to the executive arm of the governments, like German Chancellor Angela Merkel using the expression 'Islamic Extremism' and French President Emmanuel Macron highlighting the incompatibility of European values with Islamic teachings by using a controversial term 'Islamic Separatism'. This resulted in linking of Islamophobia with an outright ban on face-coverings in different states of Europe.[12]

Explaining an organized plan to give birth to an anti-Islamic atmosphere, Liz Fekete, the Executive Director of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), an European-led initiative that works towards struggle for racial justice in Britain, Europe and other parts of the world, rightly says that 'street-fighting forces (are) at one end and cultural conservatives and neo-conservatives writers at the other.'[13] He stresses the importance of understanding how the Islamophobic groups, like Stop Islamization of Denmark and English Defense League, have remained active at igniting anti-Muslim sentiments through street movements in Europe.

Meanwhile, a controversial theory that Europe will be colonized by the Arab world one day,

---

[10] Narzanin Massoumi, "Why Is Europe So Islamophobic?," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html

[11] Hilary Aked, Mel Jones, David Miller, "Islamophobia in Europe: How governments are enabling the far-right 'counter-jihad' movement", *School of Policy Studies, Bristol University,* March 30, 2019, https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/publications/islamophobia-in-europe-how-governments-are-enabling-the-far-right.

[12] Narzanin Massoumi, "Why Is Europe So Islamophobic?," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html

[13] Liz Fekete, "The shifting shape of the European far right", *Sicherheitspolitik,* March 17, 2016, https://www.sicherheitspolitik-blog.de/2016/03/17/the-shifting-shape-of-the-european-far-right/

'Eurabia',[14] has been popularized by a British author Bat Ye'or. It was used as a justification by the Norwegian killer Anders Breivik who killed 77 people in 2011 by bombing central Oslo, followed by opening fire at an island youth camp. When a Norwegian court found him sane and sentenced him to 21 years in jail, he refused to plead guilty and said that attacks were necessary to stop the 'Islamization' of Norway.[15]

It lends credence to the fact that public discourse is being manipulated to create an atmosphere hostile to Muslims and Islam.

Islamophobia in Europe is, however, not limited only to anti-Islam street movements and policy prejudice against Islamic values.[16] It has recently taken the shapes of confrontational attitudes and behaviour towards Muslims in public spaces, a dramatic rise in both verbal and physical attacks on Muslims, their properties and mosques, and a marked spike in online threats directed at Muslims. As a consequence, Muslims appear vulnerable to evident discrimination when it comes to the provision of education, employment, and other social benefits.

Several reasons can, therefore, be identified for understanding the emergence of recent wave of Islamophobia in Europe:

➢ First, Europe began facing a rise in Islamophobia after Muslim migrants started flooding into European lands in the aftermaths World War II, as reaching out to Europe for economic prospects was feasible than embarking on a long journey across the Atlantic to the US. Muslim emigrants were initially welcomed with a warm embrace as they played a constructive role in the reconstruction of post-war Europe. In the 1970s, however, the European economic boom came to a halt and the migrants were looked upon as a heavy burden on European exchequers. Similarly, European states started enacting strict immigration laws to curb the arrival of migrants after the oil crisis of 1973.

---

[14] Andrew Brown, "The Myth of Eurabia: How a Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Went Mainstream," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2019, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/16/the-myth-of-eurabia-how-a-far-right-conspiracy-theory-went-mainstream.

[15] James Robbins, "Anders Behring Breivik: Norway court finds him sane." *BBC News,* August 24, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-19375965

[16] "What Is Islamophobia?," *Open Society Foundations*, May 2019, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/islamophobia-europe.

> ➤ Second, the Muslims in Europe were singled out in the aftermath of 9/11. The September 11 attacks brought Muslims under suspicion as the biased media went on to play an instrumental role in highlighting Muslims as a threat to the European way of life.

> ➤ Third, the global financial crisis of 2007 also proved a turning point when various political leaders blamed Muslim emigrants for exacerbating the economic crisis of European states. Inadvertently, it laid foundations for the rise of populist nationalist politicians, who left no stone unturned to use Muslim bashing as an electoral leverage.

> ➤ Fourth, the ongoing disturbance in many Muslim countries, notably in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Libya, sent waves of immigrants to Europe[17] where fears over their integration into European cultures have increased manifold. Muslims have, meanwhile, developed a sense of detachment from Western ideals following Western interventions in Muslim countries and the occupation of Palestine by the West-backed Israeli regime.

> ➤ Fifth, there exists a perception that because of rare interracial marriages in Europe, the migrants retain a strong sense of belonging to their native countries and cultures. The phenomenon played its part as a hindrance in the assimilation of migrants into European culture. As a consequence, the marriage immigration peaked in Europe. Robert Leiken says, "So unlike American Muslims, who are geographically diffuse, ethnically fragmented, and generally well off, Europe's Muslims gather in bleak enclaves with their compatriots: Algerians in France, Moroccans in Spain, Turks in Germany, and Pakistanis in the United Kingdom." [18]

> ➤ Sixth, there has been a constant effort aimed at overestimating the population of Muslims to create anxiety among the masses.[19] For instance, the Social Research Institute (SRI) in its poll of 2014 claimed that the share of the Muslim population in France is 31%, while the actual ratio remains below 6%. Likewise, SRI put the Muslim population in Germany at 19%, though they constitute not more than 4% of national population. Such

---

[17] Jeremy Bowen, "Migrant Crisis: How Middle East Wars Fuel the Problem," *BBC News*, September 9, 2015, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34193762.

[18] Robert S. Leiken, "Europe's Angry Muslims*," Foreign Affairs,* July 2005, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2005-07-01/europes-angry-muslims.

[19] Pamela Duncan, "Europeans Greatly Overestimate Muslim Population, Poll Shows," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2016, sec. Society, https://www.theguardian.com/society/datablog/2016/dec/13/europeans-massively-overestimate-muslim-population-poll-shows.

---

misinformation is rolled out in a well-planned manner to whip up fears about the possible threat of Islamic encroachment on Western lands.

➢ Seventh, it appears that European governments have miserably failed to integrate Muslim communities into European cultures leaving them exposed to extremist ideologies. When they are discriminated against, marginalized, and singled out; little room is left for them but to resort to 'cultural identity'.

➢ Eighth, geopolitics also strengthens linkages between European Muslims and their sympathizers all across the Muslim world. With world transforming itself into a global village, the geopolitical factor has become indispensable to understand increasing radicalization in the Western world as a notable Greek sociologist Anna Triandafyllidou maintains, "With today's global-local connections rather than with failed integration or ethnic penalty".[20] The existing hostility between Muslims and Europeans goes back to the centuries when both remained at daggers drawn to prove the superiority of their respective cultures. [21]

Foregoing makes it evident that instead of the perception that Muslims pose threat to the European values, it is in fact the marginalization of Muslims in Europe that is weakening their societies and the ideals they proudly profess. The profiling of Muslims in Europe has intensified to such an extent that the EU 2017 Minorities Discrimination Survey[22] confirms that one in three Muslims face discrimination and as many as 27% of them experience racist crimes perpetrated against them.

In addition to undermining European human values, Islamophobia would in particular adversely impact the working women, European Network Against Racism finds in one of its research projects. Since Muslim women are at the forefront of facing Islamophobia due to their Islamic countenance, they will be highly vulnerable in the ongoing anti-Islamic drive in Europe.

---

[20] Bichara Khader, 'Muslims in Europe: The Construction of a "Problem"' *OpenMind*, n.d. https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/muslims-in-europe-the-construction-of-a-problem/.

[21]Jonathan Phillips, "The Crusades: A Complete History" *History Today,* May 5, 2015, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/crusades-complete-history.

[22] "Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey - Main Results," European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, December 6, 2017, https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-main-results.

Following measures can stem the tide of Islamophobia in Europe and also lead to improved inter-community relations:

1. There should be a vigorous effort on part of both immigrants and European states to integrate European Muslims into the Europe's mainstream. This can be achieved by adopting more inclusive immigration policies.

2. European states should review those counter-terrorism policies which discriminate or single out Muslims and marginalize them.

3. There is a dire need to expedite efforts for inclusive decision-making processes with active participation of Muslim communities.

4. Legislation should be introduced to facilitate Muslims' integration into European lives. Germany, for instance, remained reluctant for decades to integrate its migrants who were always perceived as 'temporary guests'. It was only in 1999 when the first law was passed that allowed second-generation foreigners to apply for German citizenship. Then migrants were further assisted through a 2005 Immigration law that allowed a provision of funding for 'mandatory integration courses'. Through such continuous efforts, Muslims could also be embraced.

5. Efforts should be made to increase the frequency of inter-faith dialogues between European states and the Islamic world. The German government has, however, already taken a commendable step towards this direction by inaugurating the National Conference or the German Conference on Islam (DIK). The platform was introduced in 2006 by then German interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, to encourage goal-oriented and unbiased dialogues between Muslims and German authorities. Former Interior Minister of Germany Thomas de Maiziere has boasted about the accomplishments of the National Conference on Islam by saying 'We've achieved a lot' and the Conference has remained an 'initiator' and a 'guarantee of tangible results'.[23] Even though Islamophobia remains a disturbing phenomenon in Europe, yet the Conference has over the years achieved significant results to discourage anti-Muslim sentiments, like through

---

[23] "Conference on Islam: Between dialogue and estrangement" *DW News*, September 27, 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/conference-on-islam-between-dialogue-and-estrangement/a-35887717.

introduction of Islamic religious curriculum in schools and creating professorships in Islamic theology at various German universities. [24]

6. Media has played a negative role in stigmatizing Islam and promoting the propaganda against European Muslims. European states should, therefore, provide Muslims with maximum opportunities to express their point of view through media outlets. The Netherlands in past has set up a Muslim-oriented broadcasting organization in 1986 and there also exists a Muslim and government contact group to encourage dialogues on everyday matters. Such models should be replicated to accommodate Muslims in other European states as well.

7. Funds should be allocated for social integration of migrants like Spain launched a Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration and allocated more than €2 billion for programs in social services, employment, women empowerment, health, education, and youth. It helped in addressing the grievances of Spanish Muslims by integrating them into the mainstream Spanish public life.

8. It is important that proactive and influential institutions be set up all across Europe that can coordinate with the respective national governments on behalf of Muslims. For instance, in Spain, the Spanish Islamic Commission (CIE) officially represents Spanish Muslims and deals with the national government of Spain for the matters affecting Muslims living there. These institutions can play a constructive role in addressing concerns of Muslim communities while simultaneously countering Islamophobia and other challenges faced by Muslims in Europe.

9. Europe should make sure that its commercial or strategic interests do not overshadow European values and further alienate Muslims. European Union, though a supporter of democratic norms all across the world, refused to recognize the electoral victory of Hamas in 2006. Likewise, it did not support the first democratically-elected Egyptian president of Egypt Morsi. Its support for Israel, despite the Israeli regime's brutal suppression of the Palestinians, makes Muslims suspicious. Similarly, European sanguinary expeditions in the Middle East make it vulnerable to Muslim doubts. EU has,

---

[24] Hussein Shobokshi, "Islamophobia Is a Symptom of the Disintegration of Human Values" *New Age Islam,* March 28, 2016, https://www.newageislam.com/muslims-and-islamophobia/islamophobia-is-a-symptom-of-the-disintegration-of-human-values/d/106785.

moreover, been silent on massive human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir. European states must, therefore, design foreign policies that are just and do not result in instability in the Muslim world.

10. Using art to dispel negative impressions about Muslims can be a constructive way to enlighten the masses about the positive aspects of Islam. For instance, the 2017 British movie, *Freesia*, and the *Tuffix* comic strips by German artist Soufeina, helped in a great way in highlighting the contributions of Muslims. Such encouraging initiatives are a practical tool to raise awareness about Islamophobia and finding ways to counter them.

11. Islamophobia nurtures on a perception that Islam and Islamic societies are male-dominated with no room for women empowerment. Muslim communities should launch projects which encourage women to take part in everyday life and portray the diversity of Muslim women through media, art, and culture to counter Islamophobia.

Mobeen Jafar Mir is a researcher at Islamabad Policy Institute. His work is mostly focused on Middle East and Muslim Movements.