

# **Background Briefing:**

## **What is Islamism, and why should it concern me?**

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### **What is Islamism, and why should it concern me?**

This document seeks to answer basic questions about a term that is widely used in the media, contemporary political debates, and across society, yet is not always fully understood - Islamism.

#### **What is Islamism?**

Islamism is best described as the desire to put forward an ideological view of Islam, one that is in practice binding not only on all Muslims but increasingly on non-Muslims. Azim Nanji observes that an Islamist works to: “enforce an ideological view of Islam in the political and social life of Muslim societies.”<sup>1</sup> Islamists also “seek to establish norms of Muslim conduct in the affairs of society without necessarily seeking to challenge those in authority or encouraging extremism, including the use of violent means.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Azim Nanji, 2008. Dictionary of Islam. London: Penguin, p.83

<sup>2</sup> Nanji, op cit

## **Is there a difference between Islam and Islamism?**

Religious faith centres on the relationship between the individual and God. Islam means submission to God. But Islamists intercede in this relationship, looking to determine the nature of social relationships across society. To Islamists, the Qur'an is more than a religious text shaping personal behaviour but serves as a political manifesto shorn of nuance or debate. Their interpretation of the Qur'an forms a guide for government.

## **Where do we find Islamism?**

Increasingly, this ideological approach is being applied by a minority, not simply to those living in Muslim-majority countries or self-declared Islamic Republics such as Iran and Pakistan, but also in western liberal democracies. The 1989 campaign to ban Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* on the grounds that Rushdie was guilty of blasphemy, was the first example of a series of very public Islamist demands. Subsequent examples include the 2005 campaigns opposing depictions of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad in the Danish press, to sustained controversies concerning the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in France. To Islamists, norms of Muslim behaviour are now expected to be upheld in countries which are not Islamic, and to be accepted and followed by non-Muslims.

## **The Victims of Islamism**

Often the first targets of Islamists however, are those within Muslim majority countries, or in multi-cultural societies in the west, who do not wish to follow each and every one of their diktats. These may be practising Muslims of a different affiliation or tradition, or those who opt to pursue more secular lifestyles. Their existence is often overlooked, and their voices unheard. They are of little interest to lobbyists or community representative organisations. But in a liberal democracy, the individual should be free to follow whichever path they choose.

## **Liberal democracies and Islamism**

In societies whose political and legal traditions are usually a combination of the secular and the Christian, the space for Islamists to campaign, for example around issues such as censorship of particular publications, will normally exist. That a work of literature or a drawing may be sacrilegious to some Muslims, however, is not legal grounds on which a book, newspaper or drawing may be banned. Instead, the expectation in a liberal democracy is that someone who risks being offended chooses not to purchase the book or magazine concerned, or if so motivated sets out a written critique of why they disagree with its contents.

## **Islamists and racism?**

An Islamist political or legal order appears a numerical impossibility in the Western world. Concessions that have been given to activists, such as allowing sharia courts to decide issues around inheritance and family matters, have been strongly contested - not least by women from minority backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps because Islamist demands are unlikely to be fully accommodated in liberal democracies, and because Islamists lack significant electoral weight, that their discourse has increasingly shifted towards campaigning around concepts of racism and 'Islamophobia.' These arguments are then deployed to criticise behaviours that are seen as blasphemous, but where legal redress is unlikely. Alleged racism for example becomes the grounds by which the censorship of publications such as *Charlie Hebdo* may instead be justified.<sup>4</sup>

## **Islamists demand not equality, but difference**

Whilst earlier political movements campaigned for equality before the law as a method of eliminating disadvantage and deprivation, Islamist demands are frequently the exact opposite. They call for separation and difference for

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<sup>3</sup> See for example One Law for All, 2010, *Sharia Law in Britain: A threat to one law for all and equal rights*, One Law for All: London and Elham Manea, 2016, *Women and Shari'a Law*, London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>4</sup> Felicity Morse, 2012, *The Right to Offend? Mehdi Hasan denies 'absolute right' to freedom of speech*, Huffington Post, October 12, available at <http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/mehdi-hasan-takes-on-david-aaronovitch-over-innocence-of-muslims-and-charlie-hebdo-cartoons/> last accessed: 8 December 2020.

what is viewed as a single, coherent community which they claim to represent. Islamists have two primary locations. They work within Muslim communities, seeking to uphold what they see as the 'correct' standards of Islamic behaviour,<sup>5</sup> and outside of the Muslim community where they seek to 'represent' Islam or Muslims to wider society.

### **Why should Islamism concern me?**

In a multicultural society, Islamism and its demands weaken social cohesion, accentuating difference and increasing suspicion between people of different backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> This should worry us all. Additionally, the concept of group rights, where accepted, weakens the relationship between the individual and the state, empowers 'community leaders' who often lack any democratic mandate, and risks adversely shaping the structure of relations between Britons of different racial and religious backgrounds.

### **Britain is a welcoming, open country**

The United Kingdom is a country that people wish to come to. It remains an open and welcoming society. It is worth noting that more than three in four Muslims – 76 per cent – think Britain is a good place to be a Muslim.<sup>7</sup> The main reason stated for this is religious freedom.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the view presented by some activist organisations, Muslims are not oppressed in Britain – indeed, Islam is thriving. The popular website Mosque Directory records 578 mosques in London, and nearly 300 in one English county alone

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<sup>5</sup> Ayesha Salma Kariapper, 2009, *Walking a tightrope: Women and veiling in the United Kingdom*, London: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, p.61-62

<sup>6</sup> Nazia Parveen, 2019. Birmingham anti-LGBT school protestors had 'misinterpreted' teachings judge says, *Guardian*, 26 November, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/26/birmingham-anti-lgbt-school-protests-judge-ban-permanent>, last visited: 9 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Clements, T., Forman, D. and Roberts, M. (2020), 'Executive Summary: Listening to British Muslims on policing, extremism and PREVENT', *CREST Advisory*, 2 March. Available at: <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/executive-summary-listening-to-british-muslims-on-policing-extremism-and-prevent>, last visited: 9 December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

- Lancashire.<sup>9</sup> Muslim minorities such as the Ahmadis can practice their faith here in a way impossible in some parts of the world.<sup>10</sup> None of this suggests an inherently racist or anti-Muslim country. The five pillars of Islam - profession of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage - rarely if ever feature in the type of polarising debates which see Islamists clash with their opponents. Such arguments - usually around terrorism, radicalisation and support for extremist groups - should not and usually do not centre on an individual's personal religious beliefs. An English person's home - be they Muslim, Christian or secular - remains their castle.

## **Faith and Race**

As the second-largest religion in the world, with of over 1.8 billion followers of all races on each continent and every corner of the globe, Islam is neither a racial grouping nor a faith associated with any particular race. In the United Kingdom, for example, it is estimated there are over 100,000 converts to Islam - the majority of whom are white.<sup>11</sup> The diversity of British Muslims takes in both indigenous converts plus people whose family heritage may be in South East Asia, West Africa, North Africa, Horn of Africa, south-east Europe, and the Gulf, to give merely a snapshot of Islam's ethnic and geographical breadth.

## **The diversity within British Islam**

When concepts such as class, gender, employment and educational attainment are considered, in addition to the origins of earlier generations listed above, the idea of discussing British Muslims as a distinct group, never mind as a single racial category, is methodologically flawed. Debates about

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<sup>9</sup> See Mosque Directory, nd. Available at <https://www.mosquedirectory.co.uk/> last visited: 9 December 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmadis are considered to be a non-Muslim group under the Second Amendment to the Pakistani constitution of 7 September 1974.

<sup>11</sup> MA Kevin Brice, 2010, 'A Minority within a minority: A report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom,' Faith Matters, available at <https://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>, last visited: 7 December 2020.

the political manifestations and minority trends within such a diverse faith are diverted by the introduction of concepts of race or racism.

### **Is it racist to oppose Islamism?**

Racism is discrimination against a person or group because of their skin colour, racial characteristics or origins. It is often rooted in support for the biological separation of races and explained by a belief in racial hierarchies. Criticising Islamism is not to debate a person's colour or race, or even the tenets of their faith. It is to take part in a political debate about the extent to which the norms held by Islamists may be imposed upon others. Far from being 'racist', taking part in such a debate is to reaffirm the political values of pluralism and democracy. It is entirely different to targeting someone on account of their being a Muslim, which would definitely be discriminatory and would form a constituent part of crimes which should be defined as "Anti-Muslim Hatred".

### **The far-right and Islamism**

A further fear in responding to Islamism is that in doing so, we move onto the political terrain of the far-right. This is inaccurate – upholding the rights of the individual ahead of the group, and speaking up in a liberal democracy, is the antithesis of fascism. Worse, for democrats to depart the stage, leaving opposition to Islamism as the preserve of the far-right, would be a grave strategic error. The United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, the Algerian-American Karima Bennoune, has spoken of the dangers of giving up political space to Islamists, pointing out that the far-right and Islamists have a symbiotic relationship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti and Karima Bennoune, 2015. Your Fatwa Does Not Apply here, Open Democracy, 6 October, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/your-fatwa-does-not-apply-here/> last visited: 9 December 2020.

## Question and Answer:

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Q: What is Islamism?

A: Islamism is a political movement which seeks to enforce an ideological view of Islam in the political and social life of our communities, society and ultimately, government.

Q: Why should I be concerned about it?

A: Islamism is opposed to hard-won liberties in our society such as freedom of expression, and the standing of the individual. Its focus on group identities, and depiction of criticism as racism, is an increasingly destabilising force in our communities.

Q: I'm worried that I'll be accused of being 'Islamophobic' if I speak out about Islamism?

A: Opposing Islamism is an entirely different phenomenon to targeting someone on account of their being a Muslim. The latter is discriminatory and is an example of Anti-Muslim Hatred. The former may well be "Islamophobic" but this shows exactly why definitions of "Islamophobia" are non-sensical because Islamism is a political movement and if it is defended from legitimate criticism like any other political movement, then that is not a sign of a healthy, open liberal democracy. It is a sign our society is in need of repair. Problems and concerns are not addressed by silence – they are resolved by open and full discussion. There is nothing racist about this and attempts by Islamist activists to push definitions of Islamophobia as opposed to the normative Anti-Muslim Hatred can be explained by their desire to ensure that critiquing Islamism is pushed into the column of "racist behaviour". We should all stand against Anti-Muslim Hatred and beware the siren calls of those who wish to impose political ideas about "Islamophobia" instead.

Q: How can I explain that I am focusing on a segment of political belief, and not attacking a religion?

A: Firstly, liberal democracies have always discussed and debated religion. We will continue to do so. But it is the political manifestations of Islamism,

and its desire to categorise, direct and impose, which attracts opposition. Islamism is a political project which challenges the rule of law, individual freedom of choice and social cohesion. An individual's personal faith, however, is their own business.



## **About The Henry Jackson Society**

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