



**Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights**

**Re: "Islamophobia and Additional Measures that could be taken to address the valid fears that are being expressed by Canada's Muslim Community"**

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Canada faces a critical test in how it chooses to tackle anti-Muslim bigotry within its borders. Incidents of discrimination, abuse, and horrific acts of violence against Muslim Canadians, such as the Quebec City Mosque shooting,<sup>1</sup> must be addressed decisively. However, this must be done in a well-balanced manner that does not conflate anti-Muslim bigotry with legitimate secular criticism of certain extremist or fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic doctrines and practices. As a Muslim, I am honoured to submit this deputation and identify appropriate responses.

In finding strategies to protect Muslims, I would caution strongly against partnering with organizations and individuals which have faced scrutiny over the years due to alleged ties to Islamist<sup>2</sup> movements. Such groups seek to enshrine an unchallenged, narrow, and cynical definition of "Islamophobia", which seeks to silence dissent and insulate fundamentalist dogmas from scrutiny by branding any disagreement as hatred. Repressive ideas and practices within certain interpretations of Islam that subvert gender equality, freedom of belief, and other liberal democratic principles must remain open to vigorous debate and critique - not sheltered behind self-serving accusations of bigotry. Moreover, these groups seek to curtail constructive efforts from within Muslim communities to challenge the growing scourge of Islamist extremism in western liberal democracies.

At the same time, there are actors who will leverage pseudo-intellectual arguments around free speech merely to amplify vile prejudices and marginalization of Canadian Muslims as people. Both the cynical Islamists and bigoted anti-Muslim fringes seek to polarize and divide in furtherance of their mutually reinforcing agendas.

I urge this committee, and by extension the Parliament of Canada and the Canadian government, to reject the intolerant fringes from either side of the debate in favour of an ethically consistent approach rooted in human rights, equality, and a society-wide respect for open discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/quebec-city-mosque-shooting>

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer to Islamist political ideology and not the Islamic religion

Definitions are important. It is notable that no western country has a universally recognized and legally binding definition of "Islamophobia". However, there have been some attempts to define the term at the national or regional levels, mostly for the purpose of developing policies and initiatives to address it.

For example, in 2018 the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims proposed a working definition of Islamophobia in the UK<sup>3</sup>. The definition states that "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". While this definition has been endorsed by some organizations and politicians, the current UK Government does not accept it as it fails to align with the Equality Act 2010 and involves "potential consequences for freedom of speech." The combination of race and religion within this definition raised additional "legal and practical issues".<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has developed a working definition of Islamophobia for research purposes. The definition states that Islamophobia is "the fear of, hatred of, or prejudice against the Islamic religion or Muslims, especially when seen as a geopolitical force and social threat". However, neither definition is legally binding, and both groups are currently using the term "anti-Muslim Hatred."<sup>5</sup>

The reason why the term anti-Muslim Hatred was adopted by the UK Government is based on the following rationale:

Islam is a set of ideas and values, and individuals choose to accept a particular set of interpretations of these ideas and values. In a liberal democracy, no set of ideas or values should be beyond critique, criticism, satire, or investigation. However, no individual should be beneath dignity or face hatred. Therefore, a preferred definition is anti-Muslim bigotry / hatred. This way it is defined as the incitement to hatred/bigotry against an individual or group of people based on their faith (Islam).<sup>6</sup>

When tackling anti-Muslim hatred, it is vital to work with Muslims and Muslim-led organizations that care deeply about the treatment of Muslims, but also reject the bigotry and hate injected into Muslim communities by Islamist/fundamentalist agitators. Such organizations and advocates emphasize the Islamic imperative of rejecting racism and prioritize coexistence with Jewish and other minority faith communities.

The deafening silence from eight of the ten prominent Muslim groups active in Canada over Hamas' deliberate targeting of Israeli civilians represents an inexcusable moral lapse. While Jewish Canadian organizations rightly condemned earlier attacks on Muslims, most Muslim leadership failed this ethical test. Only two groups denounced Hamas' tactics, while most rationalized the anti-Semitic violence or stayed disturbingly quiet<sup>7</sup>. Upholding equal human dignity cannot be subservient to perceived grievances.

Empowering the principled voices that emerge from Muslim communities offers our wisest path forward. Instead of ceding legitimacy to groups with ties to illiberal agendas, elevate those

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<sup>3</sup><https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/islamophobia-meaning-definition-theresa-may-government-terror-islam-a8916926.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2020/towards-working-definition-islamophobia>

<sup>6</sup> Islam and the Future of Tolerance, Maajid Nawaz and Dr Sam Harris, Harvard University Press  
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Islam-Future-Tolerance-Sam-Harris/dp/0674088700>

<sup>7</sup> <https://aristotlefoundation.org/columns/jewish-canadians-deserve-the-support-of-muslim-canadians/>

upholding authentic Islamic ethics aligned with modern democratic pluralism. As Canada works to reject tropes perpetuated by reactionary, illiberal fringes, it must do so by elevating Muslim Canadian voices that champion liberal democratic pluralism over supremacist agendas. This is vital for showcasing effective integration and upholding shared national ideals.

My work in the UK, US, EU, and elsewhere, has been defined by a well-calibrated balance between robustly defending the right of Muslim citizens and fostering authentic non-Islamist voices that align Islamic practices with democratic norms.

Canada can pioneer consistent principles in addressing anti-Muslim hatred while also safeguarding minority rights. Reject hatred against people but leave belief systems open to scrutiny. This the path to achieve true ethical pluralism, equality, and justice. Specifically, I offer the following recommendations:

1. Reject the term Islamophobia and clearly define anti-Muslim bigotry as the discrimination and marginalization of, and violence against, people due solely to their Muslim faith identity. Protect the dignity and equality of Muslims as citizens, rather than demanding special deference to an ideology. Ideologies must remain open to scrutiny in a liberal, democratic society.
2. As we have done in the UK, work with non-Islamist linked actors and prioritize public safety by establishing an inter-departmental taskforce that will monitor anti-Muslim crimes, prevention programs, and law enforcement/intelligence partnerships. The outcome in the UK was the Tell MAMA initiative – spearheaded by non-Islamist Muslim organizations.<sup>8</sup>
3. Do not prioritize any ideology over human rights. Empower Muslim Canadian voices that promote coexistence, uphold liberal democratic values, and reject supremacist dogmas. Invest in organizations rooted in pluralism and secular governance, not Islamist / fundamentalist agendas.
4. Invest in civic education initiatives across schools and communities that teach critical thinking, digital literacy, and resilience against all forms of hatred and extremism, including anti-Muslim hatred, antisemitism, and other forms of bigotry.
5. Learn from the recent decision by the UK Government and opposition party to cease working with organizations or individuals that seek to<sup>9</sup>
  - a. negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
  - b. undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
  - c. intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2).
6. Tackle anti-Muslim hatred while rejecting fundamentalist supremacism from all fringes.

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<sup>8</sup><https://tellmamauk.org/>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-strengthens-approach-to-counter-extremism>