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### A Definition of Islamophobia

The study of Islamophobia, which the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights has undertaken, can usefully propose a process for the definition of the term "Islamophobia". The adoption by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) of what is now a widely accepted definition of antisemitism, one that Canada and many institutions and governments in Canada have adopted, provides a useful precedent.

The term "antisemitism", literally, is meaningless, since etymologically antisemitism means being against semitism, and semitism does not exist. Anti-semitism was a term coined originally by Wilhelm Marr who founded the League of Anti-semites in Germany in 1879. He saw semitism as a Jewish conspiracy to control Germany and the world. This semitism, this conspiracy, never existed. The belief in its existence was a fantastical form of bigotry existing only in the minds of antisemites.

The ravages of the Holocaust discredited the term as a form of advocacy. The use of the term "antisemitism" switched sides. The word "antisemitism" today is not brandished by antisemites. Rather, it is a term used by those combating anti-Jewish bigotry, not just the particular form of bigotry of Wilhelm Marr and his colleagues, but rather all forms of anti-Jewish bigotry.

Anti-Jewish bigotry has existed since pre-historic times. Its existence is perennial, but its form is ever-changing. Because of the perennity of anti-Jewish bigotry, the constantly shifting substance of that bigotry, and the use of a term to encapsulate that bigotry which literally refers to nothing, it became useful to define antisemitism. There is a general consensus now about what that definition should be, endorsed by the IHRA, albeit with fringe rejections. We see antisemitism today as not just the particular form of bigotry which the original League of Anti-semites manifested, but rather all forms of anti-Jewish bigotry.

This evolution of the meaning of the term "antisemitism" and the adoption globally of a definition by intergovernmental and expert consensus at a meeting of the IHRA in Romania in 2016 is a useful precedent to follow for the term "Islamophobia". While "Islamophobia", literally does mean something, irrational fear of Islam, its literal meaning is too narrow for the real problem at which it hints. The real problem is anti-Muslim bigotry. Islamophobia is one cause of that bigotry; but it is not the only cause.

It might be simpler to refer just to anti-Muslim bigotry than to refer to Islamophobia. However, since the term "Islamophobia" is now widely used and recognized, it is probably preferable to keep the term, but, like antisemitism, define it beyond its literal meaning.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism is a useful precedent worthy of emulation for a definition of antisemitism in a number of different ways. One is the process, an agreement at an international meeting which brought together both governments and experts. A multilateral acceptance of the definition, at which experts advised, gave the IHRA definition of antisemitism a weight and credibility which has carried it forward. A similar process for a definition of Islamophobia would have a similar impact. It would be going too far for this Committee itself to finalize a definition of Islamophobia. A global process is necessary. But it would not be untoward for the Committee to suggest that the Government of Canada could join with others in initiating this process.

A second feature of the IHRA definition of antisemitism to note is that it is characterized as a working definition. Definitions do not work on their own. The work of a working definition must be done by those who use the definition. The work that is to be done with the working definition is to apply the definition to the situation at hand. The definition is not so clear cut that every alleged instance of antisemitism can be determined as either antisemitic or not antisemitic just by a quick glance at the definition. Rather the definition has to be applied purposively and contextually to determine whether alleged antisemitism is actually antisemitism. A definition of Islamophobia should also function like that, as a working definition.

A third feature of the IHRA definition of antisemitism worth emulating for a definition of Islamophobia, related to its working nature, is stating that the definition is not binding. The Plenary of the IHRA in Bucharest Romania resolved to "Adopt the following non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism." A definition of Islamophobia, like the IHRA definition of antisemitism, is something to be taken into consideration in determining whether an allegation of Islamophobia is made out or not. The definition would be advisory rather than dispositive.

A fourth feature of the IHRA definition of antisemitism which could usefully be replicated in a definition of Islamophobia is a general statement of what Islamophobia is. The IHRA working definition of antisemitism states simply "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews." A general working definition of Islamophobia could say something similar, that Islamophobia is a certain perception of Muslims, which may be expressed as hatred toward Muslims."

A fifth feature of the IHRA definition of antisemitism which can serve as a model for a definition of Islamophobia is the provision of specific examples of what the hatred is. Some of the examples in the IHRA definition of antisemitism could be transferred to a definition of Islamophobia with a mere word change, changing the word "Jews" to the word "Muslims". Other examples the IHRA definition of antisemitism are specific to the Jewish experience and could be replaced by examples specific to the Muslim experience.

A sixth feature of the IHRA definition of antisemitism which could usefully be repeated in a definition of antisemitism is the provision of specific examples of what Islamophobia is not. The IHRA definition of antisemitism, for instance, states that "criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic." A definition of Islamophobia could say something similar, that criticism of Islamic states similar to that levelled against non-Islamic states cannot be regarded as Islamophobic.

A seventh feature the IHRA definition of antisemitism which a definition of Islamophobia could usefully incorporate is this statement in the IHRA definition of antisemitism which precedes the examples: "Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to: .." One could easily say the same about Islamophobia.

This sort of incorporation of structure and wording from the IHRA definition of antisemitism to a definition of Islamophobia is worth doing more than just because the IHRA definition of antisemitism provides a useful example. This Committee is studying both antisemitism and Islamophobia. Because the two studies are being done together, it is worthwhile to point out commonalities in problems and solutions. Adapting the IHRA definition of antisemitism to a future definition of Islamophobia can help to demonstrate those commonalities.

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