

Background Briefing:

Islamophobia

By Dr Muhammad Rakib Ehsan

September 2021



Dr Muhammad Rakib Ehsan is a Research Fellow at Henry Jackson Society (Centre on Radicalisation & Terrorism). He specialises in the socio-political behaviour and attitudes of British ethnic minorities, with a particular focus on the UK's Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic groups.

He holds a BA Politics & International Relations (First-Class Honours), MSc Democracy, Politics & Governance (Pass with Distinction), and a PhD in Political Science, all from Royal Holloway, University of London. His PhD investigated the effects of social integration for British ethnic minorities.

Rakib has had research published by a number of UK-based think-tanks, including Runnymede Trust, Policy Exchange and Intergenerational Foundation, as well as the Mackenzie Institute, an independent security think-tank based in Toronto, Canada.

Problems with APPG British Muslims definition

Overview

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims have produced a working definition of “Islamophobia” which is hugely undesirable in a number of ways. Therefore, the UK government was correct in rejecting the “Islamophobia” working definition.

Free speech and intellectual inquiry

The “Islamophobia” working definition proposed by the APPG on British Muslims is incredibly problematic from an academic perspective.

Page 56 of the report includes this provision as a “contemporary example” of “Islamophobia”:

‘Accusing Muslim citizens of being more loyal to the “Ummah” (transnational Muslim community) or to their countries of origin, or to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.’

Being a researcher by trade, this section of the working definition strikes me as deeply complicated from an academic perspective. British-based academics ought to be free to conduct research into [British Muslim identities and sense of belonging](#) without facing the prospect of being accused of being ‘Islamophobic’. This is vitally important work, from a national cohesion point of view. But this definition risks making it very difficult.

Indeed, the report makes exceptionally strong claims which are not rooted in robust investigative research. Located at the centre of Page 55 and presented as a “standout point”, is the claim that:

“Muslims are more likely than the British public as a whole to say that their national identity is important to the sense of who they are”

The research linked above (which Dr Ehsan produced for All in Britain) relies on survey data from the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study (2010 EMBES – a dataset used by Dr Ehsan for his PhD thesis). There are two tables of relevance which run against the claim made in the APPG British Muslims report.

Table 1: Percentage of people reporting stronger religious identification (traded-off with British national identification)

	Stronger British Identity	Equal British and Religious Identity	Stronger Religious Identity
Black Caribbean	16.1%	52.9%	29.9%
Black African	7.1%	38.0%	53.8%
Indian	13.2%	50.1%	35.7%
Pakistani	5.0%	41.1%	52.5%
Bangladeshi	5.9%	38.6%	55.5%

*Black Caribbeans as a group have a relatively high level of people who report no religious affiliation. The figures provided are for Black Caribbeans who did report a religious affiliation. Percentages may not total to 100 as small number of cases categorised as “Other” are also included in the analysis.

2010 EMBES respondents were asked:

Some people think of themselves first as [religion i.e. Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc.]. Others may think of themselves first as British. Which best describes how you think of yourself?

- British, not [religion]
- More British than [religion]
- Equally British and [religion]
- More [religion] than British
- [Religion], not British

Table 1 presents an overview of the trade-off between British and religious self-identification for five non-white ethnic minority groups. The table shows that **British Bangladeshis are most likely to report stronger religious identity when traded off with British identification**, followed by the Black African and Pakistani ethnic groups. The British Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups – which are near-universally Muslim - **contain majorities that express stronger religious identification. British Indians are less likely to report a stronger religious identity than their South Asian counterparts by some margin.** Indeed, as a group, UK Indians are more in line with religiously affiliated Black Caribbeans in this analysis, with majorities in both groups reporting equal British and religious identification.

Table 2: Percentage of people reporting stronger religious identification within UK Indian ethnic group (traded-off with British national identification)

	Stronger British Identity	Equal British and Religious Identity	Stronger Religious Identity
Hindu	14.8%	52.0%	32.3%
Sikh	13.6%	50.6%	34.0%
Christian	11.5%	44.2%	44.2%
Muslim	5.7%	48.6%	45.7%

Table 2 presents an overview of British and Islamic identification trade-offs within the UK Indian group (based on religious affiliation). **British Indian Muslims are the ethno-religious group with the highest rate of stronger religious identification**, closely followed by co-ethnic British followers of Christianity. In the analysis, **British Indian Hindus report the highest rate of stronger British identification (14.8%) and the lowest rate of stronger religious identification (32.3%).** In the analysis, the figures for British Indian Sikhs are closely aligned with those for the UK Indian Hindu group. The figure for stronger British identification is relatively low among British Indian Muslims (5.7%).

To discuss the place of ethno-religious minorities in modern British society, analysis of how they attach themselves to particularised identities in relation to British national identification is required. How orthodox interpretations of the Islamic concept of “Ummah” – a transnational Muslim community – can be problematic for the cultivation of British national identities, should be robustly investigated. The wording of the “Islamophobia” working definition would embolden those who would use the term to discredit vitally important research which offends their identitarian sensibilities.

Disempowerment of minorities within UK Muslim communities

The APPG British Muslims working definition worryingly conflates genuine anti-Muslim prejudice with perfectly reasonable criticism of orthodox religious doctrines and their social implications. As well as undermining academic freedom and suppressing intellectual openness, it would harm the cause of minorities who are internally victimised by orthodox elements of the broader British Muslim population.

Leading anti-FGM and women’s rights campaigner [Nimco Ali](#) has argued that the working definition would leave secular and feminist Muslim women vulnerable to being slandered as “Islamophobic”, as they seek to uphold the basic human rights and freedoms of women and question the male interpretations of holy text.

This working definition has the potential to empower ultra-conservative elements of Britain’s Muslim population, providing a means to clamp down on important debates that offend their Islamist tendencies. In doing so, the definition would disempower and marginalise progressive Muslims who are trying to expose extremist behaviour and attitudes within their own religious communities.

Homogenisation of British Muslims

The APPG on British Muslims writes in its report's conclusion that:

“In undertaking this inquiry, we are resolved to deliver something that will positively change conditions for Muslims in British society and offer hope of something better”.

This exposes the fundamental weakness of the “Islamophobia” working definition produced by the APPG on British Muslims – **it falls into the trap of treating British Muslims as a homogenous monolithic bloc**. In doing so, it fails to acknowledge the extremist practices, sectarian victimisation and gender discrimination which continue to persist within British Muslim communities. And if it was ever to be implemented in this form, the “Islamophobia” definition would undermine the efforts of those who seek to address these internal problems.

As well as being a fundamental attack on freedom of expression and academic freedom, the working definition unfortunately overlooks Muslims who are routinely labelled ‘insufficiently Muslim’ by orthodox co-religionists: progressive reformers, women’s rights advocates, social liberals, LGBT members and the Ahmadiyya community – a minority sect which continues to suffer appalling forms of persecution and violence at the hands of other Muslims. This included the [sectarian killing of Ahmadiyya Muslim shopkeeper Asad Shah](#) in Glasgow, and literature distributed by Stockwell Green mosque in South London, which called for a [“capital sentence” for Ahmadi Muslims](#) if they did not convert to “mainstream” conventional Islam within three days.

Future Terminology and Definition

The term “Islamophobia” is unhelpful in that it suggests of an irrational fear of Islam. No definition should protect a religious ideology from legitimate scrutiny and criticism.

“Anti-Muslim hatred and prejudice” – which encompasses acts of anti-Muslim violence and harassment, and anti-Muslim-motivated discrimination in markets (such as the [labour](#) and [private rented housing markets](#)) – should form the basis of a future term and definition which focuses on the lived discriminatory experiences of British Muslims on the grounds of their religious identity. Central focus should be addressing entrenched forms of “anti-Muslim discrimination” in the UK labour market and private rented housing sector.