

## Islamophobia and the Intellectuals<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *In a widely-read report, Islamophobia has been defined as “an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread or dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”. Yet, it has led to considerable controversy among intellectuals in Britain recently. A number of writers and journalists have openly defended Islamophobia and identified themselves with it, expressing frankly racist attitudes towards Muslims in the process. This, in turn, has led a number of other writers and intellectuals to respond and to condemn those standpoints. What is interesting is that awareness of the racism inherent in Islamophobia, in its European as well as its American forms, has spread among mainstream public opinion in addition to the intellectuals. As for the academic circles, at least one full-length book on the subject plus numerous articles have been published in recent years and a number of conferences have been held devoted to it. This paper, focusing specifically on the British context, will trace the background to Islamophobia and gives other examples from Europe and the United States.*

A well-known report from the Runnymede Trust in 1997 defined Islamophobia as “an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”. Yet, although it is clear from this definition that Islamophobia is a form of racism, it has been adopted without embarrassment or secrecy by some who are considered to be intellectuals.

The well-known British Columnist Polly Toynbee was one of the first such writers who declared openly nearly a decade ago in *The Independent* newspaper, “I am an Islamophobe”. Similarly, Rod Liddle, writing for the *Sunday Times* had asked that he be “counted in” among the Islamophobes.

The most celebrated recent case of Islamophobia, however, remains that of the novelist, Martin Amis, who in an interview with *The Times* newspaper, declared that: “The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order. Not letting them travel. Deportation; further down the road. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or Pakistan. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children.”

It is to be expected that these declarations by Amis should create a stir in British intellectual circles which have come to reject such openly declared racist positions. It is also to be expected that other intellectuals and journalists should respond to him. What is surprising, however, is that another well-known

novelist, Ian McEwan, has defended him and expressed views that are no less weird and racist than his.

In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, McEwan, according to a report in the *Independent*, had said “I despise Islamism” because it wants “to create a society that I detest”.

According to the British journalist, Peter Popham, who has published an article on this subject, McEwan’s words could “lay him open to being investigated for a ‘hate crime’”. According to the Italian newspaper, McEwan, who does not like interviews normally, consented to this interview to defend his “old friend”, Martin Amis, who had been accused of racism because of his anti-Muslim remarks and because he shares those views with his friend.

It is worth recording that this cultural Islamophobia, if such racist remarks could be linked to culture at all, has not passed unnoticed by British intellectuals and writers themselves. In an article titled, “Fear of Islam: Britain’s New Disease”, published in the *Independent* last summer, and made into the basis for a film screened on channel 4 of British TV, “It shouldn’t Happen to a Muslim”, Peter Osborne proclaimed that “suspicion of the Muslim community has found its way into mainstream society – and nobody seems to care”.

The truth of the matter is that opinions and arguments that are against racism and against Islamophobia, as a form of racism, whether cultural or religious, do not receive full support from the mainstream media nor from the powers that be which may well seek to encourage racist hatred as a way of controlling their populations and diverting their attention from the primary issues.

Any simple review of what has been written on this subject in the last few years will reveal the degree of the antipathy of the educated public opinion to Islamophobia, beginning with Juan Cole’s presidential address to the Middle East Studies Association in 2006, titled “Islamophobia as a Social Problem”, and passing through the five pages devoted to Islamophobia in Ali Rattansi’s book on *Racism* in the Oxford very short introduction series in 2007, and ending in the first full-length book devoted to the subject, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (2008), by Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg. Significantly, two European conferences on the subject have also been held in recent years, “Racism, Postcolonialism, Europe” in the University of Leeds, 15-17 May, 2006, and “Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe”, University College London, 22-24 June, 2008.

What is worthy of attention, as well as gratification, is that the awareness of the racism inherent in Islamophobia, whether in its European or its American form, has spread among the people and in the public opinion as well as among intellectuals.

In an article in the *Guardian*, titled “Demonstrators force far-right to halt launch of anti-Islam talks”, Jess Smee reported on September 20, 2008, that “a far-right group was forced to abandon a press conference launching a campaign against plans for a new mosque and Muslim immigration in the German city of Cologne yesterday, when protesters targeted them with stones

and paint .... Nearby around 500 of the protesters formed a human chain to defend the site where the city plans to build the mosque, Germany's largest ... According to the organizers, the aim of the conference was to forge a "European, patriotic, populist rightwing movement" by uniting far-right speakers and supporters from across Europe. Among plans for yesterday was a tour of "multi-ethnic hotspots" .... German government officials spoke out against the talks, saying it would be divisive for the city where more than a third of the 1 million residents are not German, but mostly of Turkish origin".

In fact, when the event did take place, it was attended by only 50 people when the organizers had expected 1500 people. Moreover, a very big counter-demonstration encircled the leaders of the right who had come by boat, threw stones at them and prevented them from landing. This was regarded as a great victory against the extreme right which received more than one slap in the face particularly when ordinary citizens also refused to have anything to do with them. Taxi drivers, it was reported, refused to take them away from where they were encircled. And police, too, refused for hours to help them leave the place.

One of the first writers to stand up to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism was Paul Kivel, who in an important early study titled *Uprooting Racism: How White People can work for Racial Justice* (2002), had made these interesting remarks: "Such a climate of anti-Arab racism was much in evidence during the Gulf War against Iraq. For example, in a nationally televised briefing on NBC, February 27, 1991, General Norman Schwarzkopf, head of our military operations, stated that the Iraqis "are not part of the same human race as we are". *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, and many other media carried editorials, articles, and cartoons describing Arabs as less than human ... Arab Americans have reached the highest levels of professional achievement throughout the United States and Canada, have been political and social leaders, and have contributed to the arts and sciences. However, they continue to be vilified in the media, left out of mainstream political and social affairs, misrepresented in textbooks, and excluded from multicultural curricula. They are also readily blamed for the actions of Arabs and Muslims in any part of the world, and are vulnerable to verbal and physical attack simply for being of Arab descent... A final issue to consider is how anti-Arab racism allows us to be manipulated around foreign policy issues. In the last few years we have bombed Iraq, the Sudan, and Afghanistan, invaded Somalia, and supplied arms and other supplies to Israel ... without a high level of anti-Arab feeling in the United States it would be impossible for our governments to justify destroying a civilian hospital in a foreign country (Sudan); invading and occupying a country we were not at war with (Somalia); maintaining a boycott of food and medical supplies that international observers report kill up to 5000 children a month (Iraq); or ignoring the occupation of, settlement in, and violence against the civilian population of yet another Arab country (Palestine) – all in clear breach of international law".

Four years later, during which period the racist anti-Muslim anti-Arab trend has strengthened, Juan Cole, as president of the Middle East Studies Association in the USA, in his "Islamophobia as a Social Problem" address, later

published in the MSA bulletin in June 2007, bravely addressed the issue again and put it in its proper perspective: “Although a handful of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims have formed political and religious organizations that deploy terror as a tactic, it is a vanishingly small even if destructive minority. Nor is the adoption of this tactic confined to Muslims. In the 1970s, the German Baader Meinhoff Gang, the Japanese Red Army, the weathermen in the US, and the Irish Republican Army all used terror as a tactic and none was Muslim. Suicide bombing was pioneered not by Muslims but by the Tamil Tigers, leftists of Hindu heritage. In 1995 – the Japan-based Om Shinrikyo let sarin gas loose in the Tokyo subway, hoping to kill thousands. They killed 12, but temporarily sickened thousands. Yet the American standup comedians do not make jokes about Japanese being terrorists, or about the Irish as terrorists, or about upper middle class anti-war white Americans as terrorists. They should not, of course, but it would not even occur to them that what they are doing is proactively marking Muslim as a distinctive social identity around which they are creating anxiety.

Timothy McVeigh would never be called a “white” terrorist, nor would it ever be intimated that whites have a tendency to terrorism. This is so in part because whiteness itself is a construct, one purpose of which is to create an unmarked identity with all its privileges”.

Finally, it is important to point out the scholarly work that has come out in recent years on racism and on Islamophobia as a racist phenomenon, which unfortunately indicates the spread of this dangerous trend in the “advanced” western societies. Among these studies is Ali Rattansi’s *Racism* (2007) mentioned earlier, which deals with contemporary as well as modern social and intellectual issues related to racism, and George M. Fredrickson’s *Racism: A Short History* (2007) which deals with the new forms of racism and what he calls cultural racism as a new phenomenon in which,

“the line between “culturalism” and racism is not difficult to cross. Culture and even religion can become essentialized to the point that they can serve as a functional equivalent of biological racism, as has to some extent occurred recently in the perception of blacks in the United States and Britain and of Muslims in several predominantly Christian nations” (145).

It is important, in conclusion, to point again to those western intellectuals who have openly stood against the racist Islamophobe trend in Britain and against writers like Martin Amis in particular. Among these Ronan Bennett stands out who in a brave article titled “Shame on US” published on November 19, 2007, in *The Guardian*, declared that “Amis’s views are symptomatic of a much wider and deeper hostility to Islam and intolerance of otherness... Amis should have been taken to task by his peers for his views. He was not ...” He continues to explain that Amis’s attempt to portray western societies as “more evolved” than Muslim societies is another clear racist formulation that contains echoes of the older anti-African, social-Darwinist, racism. He also uncovers the hypocrisy of those journalists who criticize Muslims for their Muslim schools while they

“send their children to Christian or Jewish faith schools”. He asserts that “this is a community under attack, and not just by novelists”, and an environment has been created where we see “a major cultural and literary figure endorsing prejudice against Muslims”. He concludes with these powerful words that contain a message to every British, American and western intellectual:

“why did writers not start writing? There is Eagleton and there is the Indian novelist and essayist Pankaj Mishra, who took apart Amis’s strange and chaotic essay on the sixth anniversary of 9/11. But where are the others? ... I can’t help feeling that Amis’s remarks, his defense of them, and the reaction to them were a test. They were a test of our commitment to a society in which imaginative sympathy applies not just to those whose lives and beliefs run along different lines. And I can’t help feeling we failed that test. Amis got away with it. He got away with as odious an outburst of racist sentiment as any public figure has made in this country for a very long time. Shame on him for saying it, and shame on us for tolerating it.”

In an article, published in *The Guardian*, July 7, 2007, Terry Eagleton laments the fact that “British literature’s long and rich tradition of politically engaged writers has come to an end”(the subtitle of the article), and locates a body of contemporary reactionary writing to which Martin Amis’s racist remarks might be said to belong:

“The knighting of Salman Rushdie is the establishment’s reward for a man who moved from being a remorseless satirist of the west to cheering on its criminal adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. David Hare caved in to the blandishments of Buckingham Palace some years ago, moving from radical to reformist . . . Martin Amis has written of the need to prevent Muslims travelling and to strip-search people “who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan”. Deportation, he considers, may be essential further down the road”.

Eagleton traces this trend back to the fifties, which he regards as the beginning of the end of a previous radical tradition in English literature. “In the postwar welfare state, however, the rot set in”, he explains, “Philip Larkin, the period’s unofficial poet laureate, was a racist, who wrote of stringing up strikers. Most of the Angry young Men of the 50s metamorphosed into Dyspeptic Old Buffers”.

In the American context, the issue of Islamophobic racism made interesting dramatic appearances during the 2008 presidential campaign and Barack Obama’s candidacy. Those events are too close to be forgotten, or to need any refreshing of the memory. The rampant racism openly expressed with regard to Obama being a closet Muslim and having an Arabic middle name was nauseating enough. One remembers the mind-boggling response of John McCain (when someone had protested that Obama was an Arab) that on the contrary he was a good family man. Remarks like these even forced such an establishment figure as Colin Powell to ask and since when has being a Muslim become a crime in the United States. The best intellectual response to this phenomenon, however, as our paper is about Islamophobia and the intellectuals, may be Naomi Klein’s article, “Barack Obama ignores Islamophobia”, published in *The Nation*, March 8, 2008, the concluding paragraph of which might be a suitable conclusion to this paper:

“As the most visible target of rising racism, Obama has the power to be more than its victim. He can use the attacks to begin the very process of global repair that is the most seductive promise of his campaign. The next time he’s asked about his alleged Muslimness, Obama can respond not just by clarifying the facts but by turning the tables. He can state clearly that although a liaison with a pharmaceutical lobbyist may be worthy of scandalized exposure, being a Muslim is not. Changing the terms of the debate this way is not only morally just but tactically smart—it’s the one response that could defuse these hateful attacks. The best part is this: unlike ending the Iraq War and closing Guantanamo, standing up to Islamophobia doesn’t need to wait until after the election. Obama can use his campaign now. Let the repairing begin”.

Among the repairing moves that should be taken to eliminate Islamophobia, one may mention the following measures:

- 1- Recognize Islamophobia as a form of racism and legislate against it by making it punishable by law, like other forms of racism.
- 2- Speed up the entry of Muslim countries, like Turkey, into the EU, and make sure that they are not rejected on racist, Islamophobic grounds.
- 3- Legislate immediately against all forms of inciting hatred against Muslims and racism against Arabs.
- 4- Expose and publicize the cases of such Islamophobic anti-Arab racists as Kilroy-Silk, who said in an article in the Sunday Express, January 4, 2004: “We owe Arabs nothing”, they have made no contribution to civilization. They have given us nothing, only “oil, suicide bombers, limb amputators and women oppressors”.
- 5- And those mentioned in this paper, like Martin Amis, Polly Toynbee, and Ian McEwan. And the Dutch, Geert Wilders, who, according to Taynor in the Observer, February 17, 2008, calls Islam “the ideology of a retarded culture” and says, “there can be no equality between our culture and the retarded Islamic culture”, and concludes,
 

“Islam is something we can’t afford any more in the Netherlands. I want the fascist Koran banned. We need to stop the Islamisation of the Netherlands. That means no more mosques, no more Islamic schools, no more imams . . . Not all Muslims are terrorists, but almost all terrorists are Muslims”.
- 6- Publicize the fact that in January, 2001, at the “Stockholm International Forum on Combating Intolerance”, Islamophobia was recognized as a form of intolerance alongside Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism.
- 7- Put an end to the demonization of Islam and Muslims and expose the strategies of “humanitarian intervention” when they cover up new imperialist wars and adventures.
- 8- Expose Western cultural superiority, Eurocentric racism, and all forms of Western Exceptionalist discourse, for what they are, especially when they hide behind terms like “the Other”, “Difference”, “Multiculturalism”, “Judeo-Christian Culture” (in deliberate exclusion of the Islamic component).
- 9- Explain that Islamophobia is not a spontaneous phenomenon, or one that merely reflects an aberrant aspect of human nature, but that it is a carefully orchestrated industry that serves the purposes of world domination by the big

powers, and one that increasingly uses the forces of the extreme (fascist and racist) Right as its spearhead.

In fact, some may consider Obama's inauguration speech and, later, his speech in Cairo University, in June, 2009, as indications of a change in American (and consequently of generally Western) policy in this regard, signaling, perhaps, the end of Islamophobia. The reality, however, is more complex than that. The persistence, unfortunately, of Islamophobia may be seen in the repeated racist attacks, even if still confined to individual cases, and the continued stream of Islamophobic writing .

One of the examples of the latter may be the book, *America Alone*, by the Canadian writer, Mark Steyn, which has sold widely, and which contains, in addition to the usual Islamophobic declarations, the unabashed call for United States superiority and hegemony. Ideas similar to these are also spread by the British historian, Niall Ferguson, the American diplomat, Timothy Savage, in addition to the British novelist, Marin Amis, the American commentator, Daniel Pipes, and the political leaders of the European extreme Right.

Lately, Kanan Malik has exposed in detail, in a new article published in the magazine, *New Humanist*, May-June, 2009, the recent writings that propagate the fear of the spread of Islam in Europe and of the expected numerical domination of Muslims in the coming decades, and has connected these kinds of writing with their Islamophobic roots in the works of people like Martin Amis, Samuel Huntington, and Bernard Lewis. A similar refutation of these alarmist, Islamophobic views has appeared in the cover article of *Newsweek*, 20 July, 2009, written by William Underhill, under the title of "The Myth of Eurabia: The False Fears of A Muslim Takeover" or "Why the fears of Islamic domination are all wrong: Analyzing the forecasts of an emerging 'Eurabia', hostile to America and western values".

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1. A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the "Fear of the Other" Colloquium, organized by the Paris Sorbonne University / Abu Dhabi and The United Arab Emirates University, Al-Ain, UAE, 17-19 March, 2009.

