3 Assessing Islamophobia in Britain

Where do Muslims really stand?

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Over the past decade and a half, the concept of Islamophobia has received an increasing amount of public attention. Islamophobia has been defined as a set of closed attitudes toward Islam as a religion or toward Muslims as adherents of the Islamic faith (Runnymede Trust 1997). Yet—much like its cognates sexism, racism, and homophobia—the word Islamophobia is often entangled in symbolic political struggles that lack analytical clarity. On the one hand, antiracist NGOs and liberal scholars use the term to mobilize sentiment against prejudice (Runnymede Trust 1997; Geisser 2003). On the other hand, skeptics of various stripes challenge the usefulness of the term and claim that anti-Muslim attitudes and actions are rare (Malik 2005; Joppke 2009b; see also Oborne and Jones 2008: 14). Unfortunately, these discussions often contain too little concrete evidence to permit an assessment of the level and nature of Islamophobia in a given society. In this chapter, we respond to this problem by examining survey evidence to address the crucial question of just how much Islamophobia exists in Great Britain and how it has evolved over time. For the purposes of this chapter, we define Islamophobia as undifferentiated negative attitudes or emotions concerning Islam or Muslims.¹

We focus on Britain for several theoretical and practical reasons. The concept itself emerged from a British antiracist NGO report in 1997 entitled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All (Runnymede Trust 1997) and it therefore seems useful to begin by investigating its prevalence there. Admittedly, most aspects of Islamophobia are not specific to Britain. There are bodies of scholarship that trace the roots of Western Islamophobia back through centuries of history (Said 1978; Matar 2009) and that identify elements of Islamophobia in the United States and other societies (Geisser 2003; Goldberg 2006; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008; Love 2009). Yet, since the contemporary concept grew out of an assessment of British society in the 1990s, our chapter examines the extent to which this concept is useful for understanding social and political developments where they have been deemed to be extremely significant.

Another key reason to assess Islamophobia in Britain is the growing chorus of observers who claim that Muslims are more discontented and extreme in Britain than anywhere else in Europe (Borger 2006; Pew Research Center 2006; Policy Exchange 2007; Joppke 2009b; Hansen 2011). These authors generally point to Pew surveys from the mid-2000s, which found conservative and critical attitudes among British Muslims. In addition, multiple terrorist attacks by British Muslims
Examining all of the data suggests that Islamophobia is present in British society, and has risen gradually over the past decade by some measures, but that it is not a dominant or overwhelming vector of discrimination in Britain today. The evidence helps us flag particular ways in which Islamophobia continues to be a concern that require sustained attention. Yet it also identifies domains where British Muslims appear to be especially well integrated into their country. In sum, the data dispel the myth of runaway Islamophobia in Britain while reinforcing the notion that Islamophobia is a real phenomenon that poses specific challenges for British society.

British Muslim demographics

Although Islam has occupied a central place in recent public debates, the Muslim population in Britain is actually one of the smallest among the traditional immigration countries in Western Europe. According to a 2009 Pew Study, Muslims comprise 2.7 percent of Britain’s population, compared to roughly 6 percent in France and the Netherlands, roughly 5 percent for Germany, roughly 4 percent in Austria and Switzerland, and 3 percent in Belgium (Pew Research Center 2009a). Nonetheless, according to the 2001 UK Population Census, Islam is the second-largest religion in Britain, after Christianity (which represents 71.6 percent of the population) and ahead of Hinduism (1.0 percent), Sikhism (0.6 percent) and Judaism (0.5 percent).

Britain’s Muslim community has developed over several centuries but the most recent large-scale migration occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. This was the period when migrants from Britain’s former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean arrived to fill labor shortages in low-skill, low-wage jobs. The majority of these Muslim migrants were from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Since the 1980s and 1990s, there have been more Muslim political and economic refugees from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Balkans (Ansari 2004). Yet, according to the 2001 Census, the majority of British Muslims are still South Asian, with roughly 43 percent of Pakistani origin, 16 percent of Bangladeshi origin and 9 percent of Indian origin.

As seen in the other chapters in this volume, the national-origin profile of Muslim immigrants varies considerably across West European countries. In addition, the strategies used to integrate Muslim migrants vary across West European countries (Laurence 2012). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the British dynamics examined in this chapter may not necessarily apply elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, our approach of empirically analyzing surveys in order objectively to assess the levels of Islamophobia can be fruitfully used in other locations.

Attitudes toward Muslims

The Citizenship Surveys were among the first major surveys to provide a set of consistent questions about attitudes toward Muslims in Britain, especially in comparison to attitudes toward other minorities. For example, since the 2003 survey, they have asked respondents which group they felt was the target of more racial prejudice today compared to five years ago (Figure 3.1). Although it may
There is overwhelming evidence that Muslims are considered the most disliked and discriminated against group in Britain when compared to other religious groups. Viewed from the long-term perspective of religious persecution and discrimination against Catholics and dissenters in Britain, it is striking that Muslims have become the primary religious outsiders by a wide margin. It is particularly revealing that attitudes toward Muslims are significantly more negative than those toward Jews, who were very low on ethno-racial hierarchies throughout the twentieth century.

The 2005, 2007, and 2009 Citizenship Survey respondents who believed there was more religious prejudice today than five years ago overwhelmingly believed that this prejudice was directed toward Muslims. Just over 90 percent in 2005 and just under 90 percent in 2007 and 2009 identified Muslims as the targets of such prejudice, with fewer than 12 percent in each year selecting Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, or Jews as the victims of increased prejudice. Again, these surveys suggest a widespread belief in Britain that Islamophobia is a rapidly growing problem within the country.

Dislike and suspicion of Muslims has also been revealed by the Pew Surveys from 2004, 2005 and 2006. These surveys asked respondents which religious groups they had unfavorable opinions of (Figure 3.2). Significantly higher numbers had unfavorable opinions of Muslims than of Jews or Christians. In addition, just under half of all Pew respondents in 2005 thought that certain religions were prone to violence and, of those who did, over 60 percent believed Islam to be the most violent religion, with fewer than 10 percent citing Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism. Moreover, in Pew Surveys from 2005 and 2006, 63 percent and 69 percent of respondents respectively believed that Muslim identity was growing and of those that thought it was growing, 36 percent and 59 percent of Britons viewed this to be a 'bad thing' (Figure 3.3). Islam and Muslims are clearly objects of fear and aversion, when the comparison group is other religions.
While these surveys reveal beliefs about the presence of substantial anti-Muslim prejudice in Britain when compared to attitudes toward other religious groups—and the fact that Muslims have displaced religious outgroups of previous eras—they do not address Muslims’ status compared to racial or ethnic groups. It may appear self-evident that Muslims have become the ultimate outsiders in Europe in the wake of 9/11, the Madrid train bombings, the assassination of Theo van Gogh and the London transportation system bombings of 2005. But are they more stigmatized than blacks, Jews, immigrants, Roma and other ethnic minorities in Britain? Most of the polling evidence suggests that they are not, or at least not yet.

This argument may seem to contradict some evidence presented above. After all, in 2007, a thin plurality of Citizenship Survey respondents identified Muslims as the group experiencing more prejudice now. However, the phrasing of this question—comparing the present day to the recent past—does not ask respondents to evaluate the relative position of these groups, but rather to assess which groups they feel are sinking most quickly on status hierarchies. These survey results support the argument that there is more anti-Muslim prejudice now than in the past, but they do not provide direct information about Muslims’ current status compared to other groups.

The bulk of the direct evidence suggests that Muslims are perceived as lower on status hierarchies than other important ethno-racial groups, but that they are almost never the lowest ranked group. For example, Britain’s 2005 National Survey shows that 10 percent of respondents had negative feelings about blacks, whereas 19 percent admitted to negative feelings about Muslims. Yet 38 percent of those responding to a similar question had negative feelings about asylum seekers, placing them lower on the hierarchy than Muslims (Abrams and Houston 2006: 34). Of course, it is true that there may be some conflation between the category of ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘Muslim’, yet these results suggest that immigration status is a more significant vector of aversion or dislike than religion.

Moreover, majorities of Muslim and Asian respondents—two overlapping but not identical categories of people—said they had personally suffered discrimination based on ethnicity, whereas only minorities of those groups claimed to have suffered it based on religion (Abrams and Houston 2006: 42–3). Only further research can determine whether Muslims feel that discrimination against them was due to a perceived ‘Muslim ethnicity’, but it is most likely the case that victims feel they were targeted because of their Asian ethnic appearance or membership rather than on the grounds of their religious affiliation. This suggests that straightforward ethnicity was a more important vector of real-world discrimination than Islamophobia. Showing a similar low-but-not-lowest status for Muslims, close to 14 percent of British respondents to the 1999 World Values Survey identified Muslims as a group they would prefer not to have as neighbors. Yet, British respondents had a slightly greater aversion to immigrants than to Muslims, and a much stronger aversion to ‘Gypsies’ as neighbors compared to any other ethno-racial group. As above, there is undoubtedly some overlap in attitudes toward immigrants and Muslims, but there is no perceived overlap between Muslims and ‘Gypsies’.

In a parallel vein, according to the 2006 Eurobarometer survey, belonging to a minority religious group is considered significantly less of a disadvantage than belonging to several other categories, most notable of which for the purposes of this essay are minority ethnic origin and Roma (Figure 3.4). Finally, it is not the case that the increasing stigma associated with the public’s mind with being a Muslim has a dramatic effect on attitudes about immigration from predominantly Muslim countries. Pew research data from 2002, 2005 and 2006 demonstrate that respondents had identical and generally positive attitudes toward immigrants from the Middle East/North Africa as compared to attitudes toward migrants from Eastern Europe, who are presumably white and Christian (Figure 3.5). This suggests that there is a limit to the intensity of Islamophobia in Britain, at least in certain respects according to the measures analyzed here.

Data on public attitudes toward Muslims thus reveal that there are significantly negative attitudes toward Muslims, but that these are strongest when Muslims are compared to other religious groups. When compared to other ethnic, racial or immigrant groups, attitudes toward Muslims are typically negative, but are almost never the most strongly negative. By most measures, the attitudinal aversion and concrete disadvantages of discrimination accruing to minorities remain most powerful toward people defined by some measure of race, ethnicity or immigration status, rather than by religious affiliation. Islamophobia exists, but older forms of racism are still deeply entrenched and appear to be more substantial problems for British society.
Muslims' attitudes toward British society

Analyzing Muslims' attitudes toward British society suggests that Islamophobia and discrimination are problems in British society. However, there are also many encouraging signs of Muslims being positively attached to mainstream British political institutions and identities. This suggests a complex and nuanced role for Muslims in British society, one that involves both criticism and commitment.

One of the most sensitive issues in the public debate around Islam in Britain is the extent to which Muslims' religious views and perceptions of Islamophobia have reduced their likelihood of identifying with the mainstream national community. However, evidence from the Citizenship Surveys suggests that Muslims' levels of positive British identification are similar to - if not higher than - those of non-Muslims and the overall population. Figure 3.6 presents responses to the question: How strongly do you belong to Britain? from four different years of the CS. The results indicate that across all four surveys Muslims are only slightly less likely than non-Muslims to respond that they 'very strongly' belong to Britain - moreover, none of the differences is statistically significant at p<.05. When the two positive categories are combined, Muslims and non-Muslims have the same levels of belonging to Britain or, at times, Muslims even have slightly higher levels of belonging, although these differences are also not statistically significant at p<.05. These results run directly counter to fears about Muslim alienation from the mainstream national community in Britain.
The results in Figure 3.6 may surprise some readers but they are consistent with a growing body of research arguing that most Muslims feel attached to mainstream British identities even if they recognize that there are often barriers to being recognized as fully British by others (Maxwell 2006; Hopkins and Gale 2009; Open Society Institute 2010a; Open Society Institute 2010b). Admittedly, Muslim respondents in the CS are consistently more likely than non-Muslims to claim that religion is an important – or even the most important – part of their identity. This suggests that when Muslims claim a strong attachment to British identity it may not mean the exact same thing as when a non-Muslim claims that identity. However, this is to be expected and is a fairly common dynamic among minority communities that seek to shift and redefine the dominant social categories. Moreover, research suggests that the best predictor for the intensity of Muslims' identification with Britain is the intensity of their neighbors' identification, irrespective of religion (Maxwell 2010a). Therefore, even if Muslims' conception of Britishness is not exactly the same as non-Muslims' conceptions, evidence suggests that most Muslims are engaged in a broader mainstream identity and not secluded in alienated isolation.

Even if Muslims appear to identify positively with Britain, another fear is that a combination of radical religious views and Islamophobia-induced alienation has led Muslims to disregard democratic institutions and the mainstream political process. Yet, evidence from the CS suggests that Muslims' levels of trust in British political institutions are similar to or more positive than non-Muslims' levels of trust in the same institutions. Figures 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, and 3.10 present data from the CS on levels of trust in the courts, the police, Parliament, and the local council. Across each institution and each survey year, Muslims are more likely than non-Muslims to indicate the most positive response: 'A lot' of trust. When the two positive responses are combined, Muslims' levels of trust in the courts, Parliament, and the local council are still slightly higher than those of non-Muslims.

These results might not be intuitive for readers who imagine that Muslims are deeply skeptical of Western democratic institutions. Yet, the data in Figures 3.7 and 3.8 are consistent with a growing body of research on British Muslims' political trust (Maxwell 2010b; Open Society Institute 2010a; Open Society Institute 2010b). One of the key explanations for British Muslims' higher levels of political trust is that Muslims are more likely than non-Muslims to be immigrants and immigrants in general have higher levels of political trust than natives (Maxwell 2010b). This, too, may be surprising but is part of a broader and well-established dynamic in which first-generation immigrants are more likely than natives to be optimistic about the host society because they made a conscious decision to leave their home and migrate in search of a better life. First-generation migrants across a wide range of national contexts tend to be more patriotic and positive than natives, although these optimism effects decline across time and across generations (de la Garza et al. 1996; Kao and Tienda 1995; Michaelson 2003; Wenzel 2006; Maxwell 2010c; Roder and Mühlau 2010). One of the key implications of this research is that Muslims' political attitudes to and integration in British society may be best understood as a function of their migration status and slow acculturation over time as opposed to as a distinct and permanently segregated minority.

Source: Citizenship Surveys

Note: Data indicated are the percentage of responses for the two positive categories; the responses 'not very much' and 'not at all' are not included in the figure.

*Figure 3.7* Do you trust the courts?

*Figure 3.8* Do you trust the police?
In addition, it is important to distinguish between attitudes toward institutions and toward fellow citizens. Results from the 2007 and 2009 CS suggest that about half of Muslims think religious prejudice has recently increased in Britain and of them approximately 95 percent think Muslims have been the biggest target of that increased religious prejudice. Yet, as will be seen below in Figure 3.11, very few British Muslims — generally fewer than 5 percent — expect religious discrimination when interacting with public institutions. This suggests a distinction between the liberal British institutions that have been fairly receptive to Muslim political mobilization — especially when compared to other European countries — and the general British public that greets Muslims with suspicious looks during daily life.

Despite Muslims’ generally higher levels of trust in the courts, police, Parliament, and local councils, it is important to note that, when the two positive response categories are combined, non-Muslims have slightly higher levels of trust in the police. This is not surprising given the intense law enforcement scrutiny of Muslims over the past decade. And given the fact that Muslims as a group are considered prime suspects for terrorist activity, it is even more remarkable that their levels of trust in the police are so high. In each survey, there is an overwhelming majority — between 70 and 80 percent — of Muslims with positive trust in the police.

Another way of interpreting the climate of suspicion surrounding Muslims is that it could motivate Muslims to provide falsely positive responses in surveys like the CS. Some might doubt that the evidence presented here truly reflects how Muslims feel and wonder if Muslims are exaggerating their allegiance to mainstream British identities and institutions as a way of avoiding stigma as terrorist sympathizers. However, Muslims’ attitudes are relatively consistent across the five surveys. Attitudes from the 2001 survey, which occurred before the September 11, 2001 attacks, are similar to attitudes from subsequent surveys. In addition, attitudes from the 2001 and 2003 surveys that occurred before the July 7, 2005 attacks are similar to attitudes from the 2007 and 2009 surveys. It is impossible to know the exact extent to which Muslim respondents felt pressured to claim more positive British identification and political trust than they truly felt. Nonetheless, when considering the results across five different surveys from 2001 to 2009, there has been no significant change in Muslim national identification and political trust in the pre and post-September 11, 2001 periods or in the pre and post-July 7, 2005 periods.

Muslims may have positive attitudes toward mainstream institutions, but it is important to remember that there are problems and Muslims remain critical about certain aspects of British society. For example, many Muslims are critical of the British government’s policy toward Muslim countries elsewhere in the world. In addition, Muslims may complain about prejudice and discrimination in Britain (Abbas 2007). This raises questions about the potential effect of Islamophobia because if Muslims perceive an increasingly hostile atmosphere they may cease to hold their positive attitudes about mainstream institutions in the future.

However, survey evidence on Muslims’ expectations of prejudice and discrimination provide no evidence of a widespread fear of Islamophobia. Admittedly, about half of Muslims interviewed in the recent 2008/9 CS feel that prejudice
against Muslims has increased in the past five years. Yet fewer than 20 percent of Muslims cite discriminatory treatment when accessing a wide range of services in mainstream society. Figure 3.11 presents data from the 2008/9 CS on Muslims’ expectations of religious and racial discrimination in 12 different scenarios. The results in Figure 3.11 indicate that the overwhelming majority—roughly 80–99 percent depending on the circumstance—of Muslims do not expect religious or racial discrimination when conducting their daily lives. This is especially remarkable given the fact that non-Muslim black Caribbeans—who are generally considered more assimilated than Muslims—expect much higher rates of discrimination in British society (Maxwell 2008, 2009). This suggests that even if Muslims complain of latent prejudiced attitudes in Britain, they do not necessarily believe that those attitudes are affecting their tangible access to society’s services. This is reinforced by the finding from the 2008/9 CS that the overwhelming majority of Muslims—roughly 90 percent—feel that they can freely practice their religion in British society.

Another interesting finding from Figure 3.11 is that racial discrimination is much more of a concern for Muslims than religious discrimination. Aside from the question about treatment in schools, where expectations of the two types of discrimination are roughly similar, Muslims are anywhere from two to ten times more likely to expect racial as opposed to religious discrimination. These differences are quite significant, although it is not entirely clear what they mean. One potential explanation is that Britain’s dominant mode of dealing with migrant issues has historically been through the frame of race relations (Bleich 2003). This may create incentives for Muslims to frame both their perceptions of discrimination and their political claims for action against discrimination in racial as opposed to religious terms (Stratham 1999). However, one of the most important developments during the past two decades has been the rise of claims for greater attention to Muslims’ religious needs and the inadequacy of Britain’s race relations framework for dealing with their concerns (Modood 2005; Modood and Berthoud 1997). The results from the CS suggest that, despite these new claims, the racial frame remains more relevant for British Muslims’ perception of discrimination. In part this may be because when Muslims face discrimination in public services it is based on how they look, which is then interpreted as a racial motivation. In comparison, religious discrimination may cover a narrow set of actions related to the practice of Islam, which the majority of British Muslims claim they are able to do without restrictions. These interpretations are speculative, but teasing out the difference between racial and religious classifications and how they apply to Muslims is likely to be a critical issue for British public discourse in the years to come.

In summary, even though Muslims in Britain are critical of stigmatization and discrimination—much of which could be considered part of Islamophobia—they also have high levels of positive British identification and trust in mainstream British institutions. This suggests that Islamophobia has not alienated British Muslims and that they are capable of being critical yet committed citizens, much like native-origin non-Muslims who can criticize society and the government without automatically being suspected of extremism.

Figure 3.11 Percentage of Muslims who expect religious and racial discrimination

Source: 2008/9 Citizenship Survey

Conclusions: piecing together an accurate picture of Islamophobia

In this chapter we have argued that Islamophobia is not as severe in Britain as some critics would have us believe. This should not be interpreted as a rose-tinted view of contemporary British society and we do not ignore the many existing integration problems. Stigmatization and discrimination are problems for British Muslims on a daily basis. Conflicts over how to combine Muslims’ and non-Muslims’ views of society are not always easy and have led to many difficult policy struggles at the national and local levels. These tensions have led to an escalation of alienation on both sides of the divide, with some Muslims and some non-Muslims increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of ever living in harmony.

However, our focus on mass surveys draws attention to the general trends and broad tendencies around the issue of Muslim integration. As such, we find that British non-Muslims do not always place Muslims at the bottom of the minority hierarchy and may be more concerned with other groups. (This may provide little consolation for Roma and asylum seekers, but is nonetheless an important observation.) In addition, we find that despite the tense atmosphere in contemporary British society, Muslims have remarkably high levels of positive national identification and political trust.
It is worth noting that research suggests natives and immigrants tend to have different interpretations of integration dynamics. In particular, natives tend to be more skeptical of immigrants' integration progress (van Oudenhoven et al. 1998). This helps account for the fact that British Muslims are viewed with suspicion in the public debate despite the fact that survey results suggest an overwhelming majority of Muslims are positively attached to mainstream British identities and institutions. Even though evidence suggests that Muslims want to be a part of mainstream British society, the inevitable changes in the definition of 'mainstream British society' that accompany the integration of new immigrant groups is likely to cause further tension in the upcoming years. Nonetheless, the evidence in this chapter suggests that Islamophobia may be a real challenge and an obstacle to intergroup harmony but is not yet the most significant cleavage defining the nature of group divisions in British society.

Notes

1 For a discussion of this definition, see Bleich (2011).
2 The Citizenship Surveys were initially sponsored by the Home Office. From 2001–2005, they were thus known as the Home Office Citizenship Surveys (HOCS).
3 It is important to note that the very definition of who is a Muslim is not always straightforward. In this chapter we use a fairly broad definition that covers anyone who self-identifies as being raised as a Muslim, even if not currently practising. This has the benefit of including the wide range of people who are viewed as Muslim in the British public sphere. For the 2001 CS, this provides a sample size of 2,193 Muslims, along with 1,801 in the 2003 CS, 1,493 in the 2008 CS, 1,784 in the 2007 CS, and 2,135 in the 2009 CS.
4 Source: Census, April 2001, Office for National Statistics.
5 A first question in each survey asked respondents whether they felt there was more racial prejudice today compared to five years ago; if they answered affirmatively, a second question then asked them to identify the groups that were the target of such prejudice. The data presented here represent the answers of non-Muslim respondents.
6 Eurobarometer 65.4, 2006; Eurobarometer 69.1, 2008.
7 The difference in the response rate between the two categories is not statistically significant in either country in 2006 or in 2008.
8 Pew Global Attitudes, release date: July, 2005.
9 In the 2006 and 2008 Eurobarometer surveys, a thin plurality of British respondents topped toward ethnic origin over religion and belief, suggesting – when combined with the Citizenship Survey results – that ethnicity and religion are perceived as essentially equal vectors of increasing prejudice and discrimination.
10 There was no direct comparison to the ethnic group 'Asians' in this question.
11 European and World Value Surveys Integrated Data File, 1996 survey. The 2008 Eurobarometer survey reinforced these findings, with 22 percent of British respondents saying they would be uncomfortable having a Roma as a neighbor, 4 percent uncomfortable with a neighbor of a different ethnic origin, and only 1 percent claiming discomfort with someone of a different religion.
12 For a useful discussion of the relationship between xenophobia and Islamophobia, see Helbling (2010).
13 Some immigrants from Eastern Europe are Muslims but most are not. Eastern European immigrants are thus extremely unlikely to be conflated with the category of Muslims.
14 The question was not asked in the 2001 CS.
15 In addition, it is worth noting that Muslim/non-Muslim group similarities also exist for responses to the additional survey questions How strongly do you belong to England? and To what extent do you agree or disagree that you personally feel a part of British society.
Islamophobia in the West
Measuring and explaining individual attitudes

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