

# Islamophobia and Anti-Pakistani Sentiment: European Origins, Developments and Preventative Strategies

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## Abstract

*Despite lack of an accepted international definition of the term, 'Islamophobia,' has been used widely to describe the fear that people have of Islam, Muslims or a perceived Muslimness; a mindset which often manifests in religiously aggravated hate crimes and anti-Muslim discrimination. It has also become associated with the views and policies expressed by the European leaders, including the Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, and France's re-elected President, Emmanuel Macron. While many pinpoint 9/11 as precipitating a great deal of Islamophobia, its European origin is far older and will be traced back to Colonialism and Orientalism, the product of which was an Islamophobic mindset that remains strong today. This Paper is an attempt to explore this development and its relationship with anti-Pakistani sentiment, the preventative strategies of cultural influence through soft power and counter-disinformation will be presented as suggestions for tackling Islamophobia.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid war, Economic security, India, Pakistan, Psychological warfare, Informational warfare.

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## Introduction

Islamophobia is a global phenomenon, from the United States of America to the Republic of India, and manifests in a variety of ways. For Pakistan, as an Islamic Republic, this represents a moral problem with regards to the protection of its diasporas and the wider Islamic *Ummah*, but also an ideological threat given that Pakistan was made in the name of Islam. Though Islamophobia in India is often a subject of discussion in Pakistan, many concerns have been raised over Islamophobia in Europe and France specifically. In the wake of the conflict between the freedom of speech and blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), media outlets widely reported the eruptions of the protests across Pakistan in late 2020 and throughout 2021. Some of the larger and more violent protests in April 2021, were orchestrated by the then-banned far-right party, *Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan* (TLP). Pictures and effigies of French President Emmanuel Macron, as well as French flag, were being burnt as part of the protests calling for the boycott of French goods and the expulsion of the French ambassador. Such images play into the hands of the Islamophobes across Europe who perceive Muslims as inherently violent; a fact which was not lost on the Pakistani leadership. Pakistan's former Interior Minister, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, was reported as saying that the demands of the TLP "could have portrayed Pakistan as a radical nation worldwide".<sup>1</sup>

This perception of the Muslims as violent is a stereotype which has become a commonly held opinion as well as a frequent characterisation in international media outlets and the entertainment industry. This is in part as a result of 9/11, and consequent terror attacks which, for Islamophobes, validated and justified the claim that Muslims and Islam are violent. Such attacks have, in some instances, been followed by hate crimes against the Muslims. COVID-19 has also provided another excuse due to which Islamophobia has appeared in the form of scapegoating. However, to suggest that terror attacks are the main cause of Islamophobia would be

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<sup>1</sup> "France urges citizens to leave Pakistan amid anti-French protests," *BBC News*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-56760224>.

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short-sighted. Though they have certainly been a factor which contributed to Islamophobia since 2001, the stereotype of Muslims as violent and as a people that ought to be feared, is part of a larger narrative that can be traced back to European Colonialism and Orientalism.

Though the burden of change should not fall upon the Islamic countries or Muslims, the pervasive nature of Islamophobia suggests that more conscience must be realized in order to tackle it. Countries in which Muslims are a minority ought to be held accountable for the existence of institutional or systemic Islamophobia. However, given the links between Islamophobia and anti-Pakistani sentiment across Europe in particular, it is more in Pakistan's interests to develop strategies to address Islamophobia. These strategies such as, soft power through cultural influence and counter-disinformation, can be used to challenge centuries-old stereotypes and to identify disinformation through which Islamophobia is being transmitted so that its influence can be limited.

### **The History of Islamophobia in Europe**

*In a letter submitted to a British newspaper in 1989, an anonymous contributor wrote the following in response to the protests by the Muslims against Salman Rushdie's blasphemous book, 'Satanic Verses':*

*All this from leaders of a religious sect who have shared our country for many years, yet have made little effort to integrate their way of life with ours, preferring to abide by their own fanatical tenet.*

*I presume the Koran is somewhere on the shelves in Britain, yet it is well known as an offensive book other than to those who wish to follow its rigid doctrine.*

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*The Koran incites violence as a means of reaching the Zenith and is profoundly anti-Christian in its text. Yet notwithstanding, in our democracy it is allowed to be sold to anyone who wishes to buy it.*<sup>2</sup>

The explicit assumptions about Islam in this letter have changed little up to this day. Islam is perceived as fanatical, inspired by a violent and rigid *Qur'an* that inherently opposes Christianity, and as not only different to the British way of life, but a threat to its core principles. In these few lines, the essence of Islamophobia is incorrectly captured; the narrative that Islam is violent, a threat to the Western way of life and something to be suspicious of.

The term 'Islamophobia' has been defined in a variety of ways. Though it had been used several times earlier also, it gained formal recognition in a flagship report written by the *Runnymede Trust* (a British race equality think tank) in 1997, which stated:

The word is not ideal, but is recognisably similar to 'xenophobia' and 'Europhobia', and is a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims. Such dread and dislike have existed in the western countries and cultures for several centuries. In the last twenty years, however, the dislike has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous.<sup>3</sup>

This definition rightly emphasises that, despite recent manifestations, Islamophobia is by no means a new phenomenon in Europe. As a result of migration, Muslims from many countries, including Pakistan, came to settle in the European countries where they became religious minorities. Given the differences between them and the host religion or culture, Islamophobia became a manifestation of the fear of the 'other' in which Islam was viewed as a potential threat to the host country's way of life. A

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, "Letters Extra," *The Staffordshire Sentinel*, February 23, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Richardson *et al*, "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All," (Runnymede Trust, 1997), 1.

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long-standing concern that has exacerbated this, as exemplified in the letter above, is integration whereby the continuing strength of Islamic traditions among the diasporas is perceived, by some quarters, as inappreciable of the host country. These narratives have been promoted by Islamophobic and far-right groups, such as *Britain First* and *Stop Islamisation of Europe*, who allege that Muslims aim to convert pockets of the society and then the society itself to Islam. Consequently, Muslim communities in Europe have commonly faced discrimination, racism and hatred.

Though Islamophobia may have become more explicit with the 20<sup>th</sup> century migration, such as by Pakistanis to the UK in the 1960s onwards, the hatred and fear of the Muslims is deeply rooted within the larger pre-existing European narratives, particularly those of Colonialism and Orientalism. In terms of colonialism, commentators suggest that Islamophobia in the modern European states is a legacy of their colonial pasts in which Islam was perceived as inferior to Christianity and European civilization; a perception that justified their subjugation of indigenous Muslims across the world. One-sided characterisations of Islam were also pervasive in Orientalism, which was the study of Asian civilizations through the Europocentric lens. Most of the academics in this area of study: the Orientalists, did not perceive Islam in a positive way.<sup>4</sup> As a majority of Europeans at this time had not encountered Islam or Muslims, and probably never would, one of their only reference points came from the Orientalists. This depiction of the 'Orient' was widespread, reaching academia through 'Oriental Studies' but also art through paintings and architecture, which sought to imitate their Eastern counterparts.

It was Edward Said who decisively challenged these narratives and characterisations, suggesting in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, that the

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<sup>4</sup> "Orientalism and Islam," Oxford Bibliographies, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0058.xml>.

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Eastern world was being defined by an outsider perspective that subordinated it. He also criticised those Orientalist academics who were considered top experts in their fields for their underlying biases against Islam. For example, the honoured and acclaimed Bernard Lewis was referred to by Said as one of the “aging Orientalists” who used “generalizations... to slap against the whole of the Islamic world without bothering to inquire whether such vast platitudes always accounted for the behaviour of every Muslim.”<sup>5</sup> These generalisations constitute a major element of Islamophobia and tend to conform to the narrative that Muslims have an inherent tendency towards violence. A strong definition of Islamophobia which makes sense of this contextualisation is as follow:

*Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve “civilizational rehab” of the target communities (Muslim or otherwise). Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended.*<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, though the stereotype Muslims is predicted as violent partly due to 9/11, the portrayed pre-dates significantly throughout Europe. This definition is not only right to emphasise the relationship between Islamophobia and Orientalism, but it also accounts for the fact that Islamophobia is often directed as a “perceived” Muslim threat. Perception, in this sense, has two facets. Firstly, those targeted in Islamophobic attacks are not always Muslims but are mistakenly identified as such since

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, “Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World,” (London: Vintage, 1997), 31.

<sup>6</sup> “Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project,” University of California, Berkeley: Center for Race & Gender, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/islamophobia-research-documentation-project/>.

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they are extremists. The intended targets, however, are still Muslims. Secondly, what people may perceive as ‘*Muslimness*’ may not correspond with reality, which will be borne out through the one-sided depiction of the Muslims by Orientalists.

Though Colonialism and Orientalism are often condemned in the modern intellectual discourse, Islamophobia has remained a serious problem within Europe. In a poll conducted by *CNN* in 2018, 37% of Europeans said they have unfavourable views of the Muslims.<sup>7</sup> This is an alarmingly high number and is notably higher than the 10% of Europeans who “admitted they had unfavorable views of the Jews...”<sup>8</sup> In some European countries, dislike of the Muslims is far stronger. For example, *Pew Research* found that, in 2016, 72% of Hungarians held unfavourable views of the Muslims as a minority group in Hungary.<sup>9</sup> These worrying statistics suggest the European nations that they must take proactive steps to combat Islamophobia, and this will require a dissection of how Colonialism and Orientalism continue to define anti-Muslim perceptions today.

#### **France: A Case Study**

In a letter addressed to *Facebook*’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, and published on *Twitter* on October 25, 2020, Pakistan’s former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, called for Islamophobia to be treated with the same severity as Holocaust denial. In suggesting that Islamophobia must be tackled on platforms like *Facebook*, Khan compared the current treatment of the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Allen Greene, “A Shadow Over Europe,” *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2018/11/europe/antisemitism-poll-2018-intl/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Manevich, “Hungary Less Tolerant of Refugees, Minorities than Other EU Nations,” *Pew Research Center*, September 30, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/30/hungarians-share-europes-embrace-of-democratic-principles-but-are-less-tolerant-of-refugees-minorities/>.

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Muslims with the “Nazi pogrom of the Jews...”<sup>10</sup> In the context of Europe, Khan singled out France, where

*Islam has been associated with terrorism and publication of blasphemous cartoons targeting Islam and our Holy Prophet (PBUH) has been allowed. This will lead to further polarization and marginalization of the Muslims in France. How will the French distinguish between radical extremist Muslim citizens and the mainstream Muslim citizenry of Islam? We have seen how marginalization inevitably leads to extremism – something the world does not need.*<sup>11</sup>

Historically, France had both Colonial and Orientalist traditions, with the former facilitating the outreach in which the depictions of the latter were constructed. In response to recent spates of Islamophobia, the French human rights activist, Yasser Louati, suggested that the treatment of the Muslims in France today is in part defined by the actions of the French in Algeria.<sup>12</sup> Just as Imran Khan compared Islamophobia to anti-Semitism, so did Ethan B. Katz. He posited that the common analyses that Muslims are the “new Jews” of Europe and that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are “coterminous hatreds” are inadequate because the two phenomena, “defined substantially by the colonial context, constitute an *entangled*

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<sup>10</sup> Letter attached to Imran Khan’s tweet: Imran Khan, “My letter to CEO Facebook Mark Zuckerberg to ban Islamophobia just as Facebook has banned questioning or criticising the holocaust,” October 25, 2020, [https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1320440661385093121?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1320440661385093121%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelondonconomic.com%2Fpolitics%2Fimran-khan-implores-zuckerberg-to-ban-islamophobia-on-facebook-206984%2F](https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1320440661385093121?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1320440661385093121%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelondonconomic.com%2Fpolitics%2Fimran-khan-implores-zuckerberg-to-ban-islamophobia-on-facebook-206984%2F).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Abdulaziz Ahmet Yasar, “France’s Islamophobia and its roots in French colonialism,” *TRT World*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/france-s-islamophobia-and-its-roots-in-french-colonialism-25678>.



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*history of Othering.*"<sup>13</sup> With the example of the French colonisation of Algeria (dating back to the invasion of 1830), Katz suggests that anti-Semitism was a more common sentiment of the population than Islamophobia, but in terms of government policy, Algerian Jews later enjoyed equal French citizenship while "Islamophobia was a legally encoded assumption crucial to the colonial enterprise."<sup>14</sup>

An example that serves to display the way in which the French authorities perceived the indigenous Muslim population is a letter written by Lieutenant Colonel Lucien-François de Montagnac in 1843, who was a part of the French invasion of Algeria. He wrote:

*Here it is, my brave friend, how it is necessary to wage war on the Arabs. Kill all the men up to the age of fifteen, take all the women and children, charge the buildings, send them to the Marquesas Islands or elsewhere; in short, annihilate everything that will not crawl at our feet like dogs.*<sup>15</sup>

Here, the local population is reduced to 'dogs' who are to be killed or sent away from their own land. This dehumanisation and abhorrent treatment of the Algerians, which in reality amounted to massacres, would certainly suggest that Islamophobia in France is part of a historic narrative that Muslims are inferior to the French. The way in which Katz describes historic Islamophobia in Algeria, "wherein the inferiority, opaqueness, and violence of Islam and Muslims are widely assumed,"<sup>16</sup> is therefore in part exemplified by Montagnac.

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<sup>13</sup> Ethan B. Katz, "An Imperial Entanglement: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Colonialism," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 123, Issue 4 (October 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhy022>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Translation of excerpt from Lucien-François Montagnac, *Lettres d'un soldat: neuf années de campagnes en Afrique* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1885), 299.

<sup>16</sup> "An Imperial Entanglement."

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The Orientalist art world also provided a platform upon which Muslims could be stereotyped according to the European mindset. Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) was a leader of the French Romantic School of art and even travelled to Morocco initially as part of a diplomatic mission, but mainly to see more “primitive” people.<sup>17</sup> Delacroix famously painted “The Fanatics of Tangier,” which reflected upon the Moroccan mystical brotherhood of the *‘Isawiyya*. Delacroix described what he witnessed saying that, at “certain times of year, they meet outside towns; then, their enthusiasm excited by prayers and wild cries, they enter into a veritable state of intoxication, and, spreading through the streets, perform a thousand contortions and even dangerous acts.”<sup>18</sup> This language of fanaticism, wildness and danger would likely convince the European populations that the subjugation and the civilizing missions of the indigenous people by their imperial powers was not only understandable but necessary.

The key problem in France, in the eyes of Pakistan’s former prime minister, is the potential to cause further extremism through marginalisation when people fail to make the distinction between “radical extremist Muslim citizens and the mainstream Muslim citizenry.” The lines between the two are shown to be blurred above in both the Colonial and the Orientalist traditions, which appears to be occurring once more through the recent legal developments in France.

On the August 24, 2021, France promulgated a law which purports to strengthen the integrity of the Republic’s principles, partially in response to radical Islamism.<sup>19</sup> It cannot be forgotten that French lives have been

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<sup>17</sup> Hubert Wellington, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1980), xv.

<sup>18</sup> “Delacroix, Eugène,” Web Gallery of Art, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/d/delacroix/3/314delac.html>.

<sup>19</sup> “Loi du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République,” Vie Publique, Dernière modification: 25 août 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/277621-loi-separatisme-respect-des-principes-de-la-republique-24-aout-2021>.

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lost as a result of terror attacks that have been enacted in the name of Islam, such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the November attacks of 2015, and the murder of a teacher for showing caricatures of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Such acts should be unequivocally condemned as abhorrent, but the subsequent law changes have the potential to embolden Islamophobia, if not condone it. Under this law, there is a section on controlling religious associations and places of worship, which includes new rules such as the requirement of associations to register every five years, the declaration of foreign funding above 10,000 Euros and greater transparency on the granting of the construction of the places of worship by local authorities.<sup>20</sup>

To some, these laws are merely a natural extension of France's secularism, known as *laïcité*. As clearly argued by Barbara De Poli, not all Muslims are inherently opposed to *laïcité* and so it cannot be characterised as antithetical to the spirit of the Muslims. She states that Europe, "as a place of birth or immigration of Muslim intellectuals, is presented as one of the main centres for the development and promotion of Islamic thought on *laïcité* and secularism."<sup>21</sup> For De Poli, Islam represents a medium through which France's understanding of *laïcité* is being tested and reshaped:

*The requests made by the Muslims to the institutions, based on the freedom of religion, imply some religious legal issues alien to European culture (from the use of the veil to halâl food) or concessions that change Europe's social-spatial and cultural orders (from the building of mosques to Islamic religious instruction in the schools), and force the countries of the Old World to redefine and confirm the terms of laïcité, rethinking their own relationship with religious identity. In the past centuries, this was*

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<sup>20</sup> "Loi du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République," Vie Publique, Dernière modification: 25 août 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/277621-loi-separatisme-respect-des-principes-de-la-republique-24-aout-2021>.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara De Poli, "Muslim Thinkers and the Debate on Secularism and Laïcité," in *Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Gabriele Marranci (London: Springer, 2010), 42.

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*measured having Christian institutions (and a small number of subjugated minority groups such as the Jews) as a unique counterpart. Such a confrontation conditioned it greatly: both when it turns into laicism (anti-clericalism) as in France, and when effective political and institutional interference by the ecclesiastic hierarchies is present, as in Italy, for example. Islam seems to unhinge this relationship and establish equilibrium, introducing new issues relating to social co-existence and the institutional relationship between the State and the religious community.*<sup>22</sup>

Thus, under the concept of *laïcité* which was developed with Christianity in mind, the overwhelming perception of Islam as a political ideology seems to threaten the very separation of the State and religion in France. De Poli rightly adds, however, that the “European culture can hardly absorb Islam by minimizing it or banning it from the public space...”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is becoming harder for the religious associations to operate in France without state involvement. Various bodies have criticised this new law as aiming to introduce unnecessary restrictions to prevent harm by religious forces which would otherwise be preventable under existing laws. For example, the *Expert Council on NGO Law* had aired its concerns for the bill in March 2021, which included that:

*The generalized control of religious or mixed associations with foreign resources raises questions. It is intended to prevent funding whose harmfulness is expressed by the actions of its recipient, when they reflect a real, current and sufficiently serious threat affecting the fundamental interest of the society. It is difficult to imagine that such actions cannot be covered by criminal law or current administrative police provisions.*

*Moreover, it is difficult to understand the choice of a negative presumption affecting all foreign funding, rather than a mechanism targeting the suspect association because of its actions. The condition of public order could justify measures imposed on associations suspected of*

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara De Poli, “Muslim Thinkers and the Debate on Secularism and *Laïcité*,” in *Muslim Societies and the Challenge of Secularization: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Gabriele Marranci (London: Springer, 2010), 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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*endangering public order, but not a general regulation imposing on all associations, whatever their purpose and activities, the declaration and publicity obligations in question.*<sup>24</sup>

This Expert Council thus suggested that the requirement of the religious associations to declare foreign funding above 10,000 Euros is controversial because all associations will be more greatly regulated even if they do not present actual threats to public order. Rather, it is assumed that these religious associations should be treated with suspicion because they *potentially* represent a threat to public order. Imran Khan's question about how France will distinguish between so-called extremists and mainstream Muslims is thus an accurate one because the actions of a few extremists have been used as a justification to treat Islam with greater suspicion in France.

Though the now promulgated law relates to all religions, it singles out the threat of 'radical Islamism' and so it would not be illogical to suggest that Islam was the primary religion that the French government had in mind when it sought to regulate religious associations in this way. In this sense, the law is Islamophobic by the standards of the above definition which states that Islamophobia is "directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations..."<sup>25</sup> Though this law will apply to all religions equally, they were formulated with Islam in mind. The very dealings of the authorities with Islamic associations in France will be defined by suspicion over whether they are inclined to threaten the secularism of France through violence or restrictions on freedom of expression.

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<sup>24</sup> Expert Council on NGO Law, "Opinion on the compatibility with the European standards of the bill to ensure respect for the principles of the Republic by all," (*Council of Europe*, 2021), 4.

<sup>25</sup> "Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project," University of California, Berkeley: Center for Race & Gender, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/islamophobia-research-documentation-project/>.

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As well as adjusting the law, institutions in France which provide assistance to the victims of Islamophobia are disappearing. The Council of State, a French court, approved the dissolution of the *Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF)* on September 14, 2021, which, according to researcher Eva Cossé at *Human Rights Watch*, “played a key role in providing legal support to people facing anti-Muslim discrimination and documenting the discriminatory impact on Muslims of France’s counterterrorism measures.”<sup>26</sup> Given that President Macron defended the freedom of expression. This move is hypocritical, with Cossé warning that the dissolution “weakens the country’s credibility as a champion for rights and sets a dangerous example for government’s quick to use vaguely defined laws to silence critics. French authorities should stop pushing censorship on civil society organizations and instead demonstrate their commitment to freedom of expression and association, and their determination to fight discrimination.”<sup>27</sup> So, not only is France creating arguably Islamophobic laws, but it is also limiting the means by which the government can be held accountable for Islamophobia within its counterterrorism measures.

### **Islamophobia and Anti-Pakistani Sentiment**

COVID-19 has presented a justification for further Islamophobia in Europe, with communities scapegoating the transmission of the virus on the local Muslim minority. In some cases, this has acted as a reminder of the historical connection between Islamophobia and anti-Pakistani sentiment or racism. In an analysis of four British mainstream newspapers, Elizabeth Poole and Milly Williamson set the treatment of the Muslims during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, within a larger context in which Muslims are dichotomised:

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<sup>26</sup> Eva Cossé, “French Court Confirms Dissolution of Anti-Discrimination Group,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/27/french-court-confirms-dissolution-anti-discrimination-group>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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*In the context of a tumultuous political landscape, where the politics of immigration have been linked to the politics of austerity, Muslims have been scapegoated as a threat to the nationalist project. In this context, the identifier 'Muslim' is only deemed relevant if it signifies 'difference', or to distinguish between good versus bad Muslim/immigrant. Hence, in the context of the reporting of Coronavirus, racist discourses have been reshaped as Muslim key workers are distinguished in the reporting from other Muslims.*"<sup>28</sup>

The dichotomy is between a 'good' Muslim, who dies on the medical front line saving lives, and a 'bad' Muslim, who does not. In celebrating the former at the expense of the latter, the criteria for judging the character of a Muslim or immigrant becomes dependent on whether they can make a notable sacrifice for others. The feeling is then that human value and a life free from prejudice has to be earned. But a majority of UK citizens are not judged by the same standard and would expect respect as a sign of human decency. Poole and Williamson go on to suggest that, even the times in which the British media condemned Islamophobic rhetoric in relation to COVID-19, the media depends upon a "neo-orientalist framework":

These stories, while highlighting prejudice towards Muslims, also project violence and conflict onto non-Western countries, obscuring Britain's violent colonial legacy and its role in contemporary post-colonial conflicts. *The Sun's* Kavanagh (2020) also comments on China's brutal incarceration of a million Uighur Muslims in "re-education" camps as 'a blot on the civilized world.' Meanwhile, images of the mass gathering of Muslims, particularly in the build up to Ramadan, proliferate. *The Telegraph* reports that 'Pakistan's government has struggled to enforce social distancing rules at mosques and religious gatherings' (Farmer, 2020) while *The Sun* describes how 'Thousands of Muslim men are seen

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Poole and Milly Williamson, "Disrupting or reconfiguring racist narratives about Muslims? The representation of British Muslims during the Covid crisis," *Journalism*, (July 2021): 1.

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attending a packed Friday prayer service despite concerns of the new coronavirus outbreak (original emphasis) (Lock, 2020)'.<sup>29</sup>

These reflections of Muslims as an unruly mass are somewhat reminiscent of Delacroix's Orientalist painting and has the effect of dehumanising Muslims by only describing them in large groups as opposed to individuals. Once dehumanised, it is easier for the non-Muslims to scapegoat Islamic gatherings as major spreaders of COVID-19. Despite this interpretation, European countries have increasingly professed themselves to be the pioneers of human rights and morality, while ignoring their own unfair past, thereby subconsciously repeating anti-Muslim perceptions they have long held.

As exemplified by Poole and Williamson, some Islamophobic discourses also carry anti-Pakistan sentiments. *The Telegraph* was found to have breached the "Editors' Code of Practice in an article headlined, 'Pakistan singled out as the origin of half of Britain's imported virus cases,' published on June 26, 2020."<sup>30</sup> Complaints were made that the article headline was misleading by implying that it referred to the pandemic as a whole as opposed to a specific period.<sup>31</sup> It was concluded that the publication, while subsequently stating that "there had been "30 cases of coronavirus in people who have travelled from Pakistan since June 4, which is understood to represent half of the incidents of imported infection," this was not sufficient to rectify the misleading impression already given or to clarify to readers that the headline claim related only to this period."<sup>32</sup> Though the report did not confirm that the article was racist, the misleading headline does play into the wider narrative that

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Poole and Milly Williamson, "Disrupting or reconfiguring racist narratives about Muslims? The representation of British Muslims during the Covid crisis," *Journalism*, (July 2021): 1.

<sup>30</sup> "10911-20 The Centre for Media Monitoring v/s The Daily Telegraph," IPSO, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=10911-20>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



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Pakistanis and Islam were responsible for spikes in COVID-19 transmission.

The *European Network Against Racism (ENAR)* raised awareness of Islamophobic scapegoating in May 2020: “Within weeks of COVID-19, hate speech holding Muslim minorities responsible for the crisis spread rapidly online. Some mainstream media have disseminated fear-mongering headlines and, in some cases, letting readers believe that the fasting period of Ramadan could exacerbate the outbreak of the virus.”<sup>33</sup> The UN Secretary-General also condemned what he referred to as a “tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering,” which included attacks on the Muslims.<sup>34</sup> But this is all evidence of an insidious Islamophobic narrative that pre-dates, but was exacerbated by, the COVID-19 pandemic; signaling how there is a tendency to revert to negative perceptions of Muslims when faced with a disaster that seemingly needs a scapegoat.

### **Strategies for Pakistan to Tackle Islamophobia**

It is important to emphasise at this point that the onus for preventing and tackling Islamophobia should not fall upon Islamic countries, like Pakistan. A concerted effort will have to be made by all the European countries to condemn Islamophobia and to formulate strategies for its prevention. Given the deep-rooted origins of Islamophobia in Colonialism and Orientalism, this will require the deconstruction of many institutions and their long-standing perceptions about Islam. Pakistan can take the moral high-ground and embody that most significant of first steps, which is to highlight anti-Muslim injustices when they occur in order to awaken the conscience of Europe. A continent, so ravaged by the Holocaust, is expected to have a heightened awareness of what atrocities religious

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<sup>33</sup> “Addressing Islamophobia: A response to structural racism in the aftermath of Covid-19 crisis,” ENAR, accessed November 24, 2021, [https://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/2020\\_05\\_collective\\_contribution\\_final.docx.pdf](https://www.enar-eu.org/IMG/pdf/2020_05_collective_contribution_final.docx.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> “Secretary-General Denounces ‘Tsunami’ of Xenophobia Unleashed amid COVID-19, Calling for All-Out Effort against Hate Speech,” United Nations, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm>.

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discrimination and persecution can lead to. Pakistan can also continue to develop preventative strategies which can minimise the impact of Islamophobia.

Pakistan has already taken steps against Islamophobia. The letter written by Imran Khan is one example, with Khan calling on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, to ban Islamophobic content. Though the treatment of the Muslims in Europe cannot, at this moment, be too similarly compared to the genocide of Jews under the Nazis, Islamophobia should be treated with the same degree of severity as anti-Semitism. The current state of Islamophobia is shocking and, if it continues, it will reach even more devastating heights. In March 2021, Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, had warned that anti-Muslim suspicion at an institutional level had risen to “epidemic proportions” since 9/11: “Islamophobia builds imaginary constructs around Muslims that are used to justify state-sponsored discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims with stark consequences for the enjoyment of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.”<sup>35</sup>

Pakistan has also been a part of wider coalitions to raise awareness of Islamophobia. The foreign ministers of the *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)* unanimously adopted a resolution presented by Pakistan in which March 15, was to become the “International Day to Combat Islamophobia.”<sup>36</sup> This initiative was successfully implemented on March 15, 2022, when it was unanimously adopted by the *UN General*

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<sup>35</sup> “UN expert says anti-Muslim hatred rises to epidemic proportions, urges States to act,” OHCHR, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26841&LangID=E>.

<sup>36</sup> “World day to combat Islamophobia observed,” *Dawn*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612771>.

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Assembly.<sup>37</sup> In a statement from Pakistan's Foreign Office, the rationale behind the initiative was that:

*The scourge of Islamophobia, fueled by hate speech and lack of knowledge and disinformation, is causing unimaginable suffering to Muslim minorities around the world... Through the observance of this day, we want to build a better understanding of Islam and Islamic precepts...*<sup>38</sup>

Here, the Foreign Office rightly identified two areas in which Pakistan has and can continue to address Islamophobia: education and counter-disinformation. Ultimately, modern Islamophobia has been shown to be a newer manifestation of deeply held stereotypes and blanket characterisations of the Muslims which must be changed. Firstly, education is the key to influencing how perceptions about Islam in Europe can be changed for the better from the bottom upwards. As has been shown, anti-Muslim perceptions have existed for a long time and continue to influence the people and the governments. There are also inherent connections between Islamophobia and anti-Pakistani sentiment, which means that developing strategies to combat Islamophobia is doubly important for Pakistan.

One strategy could be that Europeans can be educated on Islam, and Pakistan, in order to combat those historic misleading and Islamophobic stereotypes through soft power, involving the use of cultural influence. A way in which this might be achieved by Pakistan is for its cultural institutions and diasporas in Europe to host more events for non-Muslims to learn about Islam and Pakistani tradition through cultural evenings designed to educate the host country on Islamic and Pakistani celebrations or music, for example. Though Islam might be a subject of education in

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Hunter, "International Day to Combat Islamophobia: Responses and Rationales," CSCR, April 13, 2022, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/social-issues/international-day-to-combat-islamophobia-responses-and-rationales/>.

<sup>38</sup> "World day to combat Islamophobia observed," *Dawn*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1612771>.

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many European educational institutions, this would offer a level of authenticity which prevents Islam and Pakistan being defined through a Europocentric mind-set. Instead, Islam and Pakistan will be described and presented by the Muslims and Pakistanis, respectively. Experiences with the Islamic diasporas would most likely foster positive perceptions of Islam and they would provide a cultural exchange that has the power to evade Islamophobia by dismantling concepts of the ‘other’ which exist as a result of a lack of personal interaction between religions and nationalities. Moreover, lack of teaching on Pakistan in the mainstream European education also poses a problem given the significant number and positive contribution of the Pakistani diasporas, particularly in the UK. It is a stereotype in itself that all Pakistanis are Muslims, and so a more accurate education about Pakistan throughout Europe would open many to the reality of Pakistan’s religious diversity and heritage.

The potential benefits of this strategy for Pakistan would not only include the prevention of Islamophobia, but cultural promotion which has proven to be beneficial more generally. In a study commissioned by the *British Council*, it was found that countries with a strong cultural institution could positively impact the country’s “international pull.”<sup>39</sup> The report’s author, Director Professor JP Singh, stated:

*Soft power demonstrably matters. The United Kingdom’s soft power assets bring revenues from international students, tourists and foreign investment, and they enhance the UK’s international political influence. Soft power should be seen as a mainstream part of public policy.*<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, if Pakistan commits to the bolstering of existing cultural initiatives across Europe by facilitating more cultural experiences at

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<sup>39</sup> “Soft power today: Measuring the effects,” British Council, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/soft-power-today>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

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Pakistani diplomatic missions, communities or charities; soft power will weaken Islamophobia and potentially anti-Pakistani sentiment too.

Secondly, counter-disinformation is a vital strategy for Pakistan because, as has been shown, disinformation has been disproportionately employed against both Islam and Pakistan, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Disinformation is more malignant than misinformation as a form of propaganda in which false information is used not only to deceive but to influence peoples' opinions for some political end. This is a common scheme used to discredit Pakistan internationally, as exemplified by the sustained, so-called "Indian Chronicles."<sup>41</sup> In this globalised world where effective communication via social media platforms is a day-to-day reality, the ability to proactively identify and prevent disinformation may seem like an impossible task. However, there are counter-disinformation strategies that Pakistan can employ to limit the extent to which they and Islam can be unfairly undermined. Despite the sometimes-differing motivations behind Islamophobic and anti-Pakistan disinformation, a single counter-disinformation strategy can be used to tackle both.

Some strategies depend largely on the removal of disinformation by social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* which now provide links to reliable information when topics that are often central to disinformation are mentioned. These platforms also remove posts that are reported to be sharing disinformation. In the age of COVID-19, this can be a lifesaver because parties have deliberately shared misinformation and disinformation in relation to the vaccine to deter targeted groups from receiving the vaccine. For example, Muslims in the UK, as well as wider ethnic minorities, were targeted with disinformation about whether the

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<sup>41</sup> "Indian Chronicles: deep dive into a 15-year operation targeting the EU and UN to serve Indian interests," *EU Disinfo Lab*, accessed November 24, 2021, <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests/>.

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contents of the vaccine were *halal* or not.<sup>42</sup> However, as shown by the pervasive nature of disinformation about Islam and Pakistan in relation to COVID-19, states cannot rely on these platforms because they can never remove all disinformation and it is not a comprehensive strategy.

One preventive strategy is to train people to identify disinformation, so they know not to blindly accept or transmit it. In a study designed by Stephan Lewandowsky and Muhsin Yesilada to protect people in general from both “Islamophobic and radical-Islamist disinformation,” it was found that people can identify disinformation through the “common markers” of “Hasty generalisations, invoking emotion, and polarisation.”<sup>43</sup> They found that if their study participants watched extremist materials after they had been “inoculated” through training to identify these common markers, they were less inclined to share the disinformation they were being shown.<sup>44</sup> Given that the inoculation was successful against Islamophobic and radical-Islamist disinformation, “two diametrically opposed radicalising positions,” this strategy shows that learning to identify the means by which agents attempt to infiltrate and influence a group is effective regardless of the goal of the disinformation.<sup>45</sup> As we now live in an increasingly technologically advanced era, it would be pertinent for the people of all ages to have such training, perhaps even added to the curriculum of the schools. This would have the benefits of not only tackling Islamophobic and anti-Pakistani disinformation, but it would further refine the research abilities and critical thinking of the Pakistani youth.

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<sup>42</sup> Adam Forrest, “Covid: Fake news causing ethnic minorities to reject vaccine, NHS official warns,” *Independent*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/covid-vaccine-fake-news-ethnic-minorities-b1787746.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky and Muhsin Yesilada, “Inoculating Against the Spread of Islamophobic and Radical-Islamist Disinformation,” *Cognitive Research* 6, 57 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-021-00323-z>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Conclusion**

Islamophobia has a long-established history in Europe which continues to manifest itself in different ways in modernity. Stereotypes about Islam as violent, are legacies of colonialism and Orientalism but continue to plague the Islamic diasporas across the world. France serves as an unfortunate example of where Islamophobia has persisted since its colonial past into the modern day through legal developments which treat Islam with suspicion. Islamophobia is doubly problematic for Pakistan because Islamophobic narratives often relate to anti-Pakistani racism or sentiment which are then borne out through sustained disinformation attacks, as well as more traditional forms of discrimination. Though it ought to be the responsibility of those European states, like France, with Muslim minorities to tackle Islamophobia, its continuing existence in many variations throughout the world show that more has to be done to raise awareness and thus to instigate change. Pakistan has contributed to-date and can further its role through the educational power of cultural influence to alter negative perceptions and by developing counter-disinformation strategies, which prepare current and future generations to identify and tackle Islamophobic and racist disinformation. ■

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