Islamophobia(s) In the Aftermath of the Nice Attack

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/28/islamophobias-in-the-aftermath-of-the-nice-attack/

AURELIEN MONDON AND AARON WINTER, JUL 28 2016

On the 14th of July 2016, the Bastille Day celebrations in Nice ended in a carnage. Eighty-four people were killed when Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel drove his truck through a crowd of bystanders, men, women and children, who had gather on the Promenades des Anglais to watch the fireworks. Within hours, the French media and politicians denounced yet another 'Islamist terrorist' attack, despite the lack of evidence present at this early stage. Even though it appears increasingly that Lahouaiej Bouhlel's links to terrorism and IS were indeed tenuous at best, Islam, once more in the spotlight in France and Muslim communities in the country (and wider Europe), remain under collective suspicion and as the target of fear and hate.

Islamophobia(s)

Islamophobia in France is nothing new, from its colonial heritage to the more recent focus on terrorism. In the years since 9/11, Islam and Muslims, and closely linked, the issue of Islamophobia, have become central to public, policy and research debates and agendas in France as well as in Europe and the wider West (Levey and Modood 2008; Morey and Yaqin 2011). Various surveys have shown in recent years that 'anti-Muslim biases' (Taras 2013, 426-31) have been prevalent across much of Europe (for a more thorough overview in France, see (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013, 37-68) and in Britain and the United States, see (Kundnani 2014)). Many have argued that this trend has increased, as have anti-Muslim hate crimes, in France and elsewhere in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks in the past 18 months (LeMonde.fr July 17 2015; Mark November 18 2015; Al-Othman December 1 2015).

While some repercussions took the form or traditional far right hate and violence, what we have witnessed recently in France, and consolidated in the wake of the first attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, is a form of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate that far from traditional racism, appears liberal and progressive, attacking Islam in the name of secularism and free speech (as well as women's rights in the case of banning the hijab and burka (Delphy 2006; 2015)), thus making it more acceptable in mainstream French society, as it hijacks once progressive concepts such as the Republic, *laïcité* and the popular motto *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. This has allowed parties on the far right, such as the Front National, to normalise their neo-racist discourse as much of their criticism of Islam could now be couched in mainstream terms (Mondon 2014; 2015).

The intersection between traditional far right forms of racism and the subtler mainstream Islamophobia, which has become increasingly prevalent in our societies, has been the basis of our current research project (Mondon & Winter 2015, 2016). The aim of the present article is to illuminate the current situation in France using part of the theoretical framework we are currently developing. Our research argues that to understand the changing nature and articulations of, as well as debates about, Islamophobia in the current context, it is necessary to understand it in the plural, and in particular to differentiate between what we have called its illiberal and liberal forms.

The distinction between the two forms of Islamophobia we identify begins with what appears to be an analytical distinction and disagreement, albeit a functional one. The main debate amongst academics, the media and within civil society (for different reasons from understanding to hate), has been whether Islamophobia is about religion or race, based on whether Islam relates to a race/people or religion/belief system. This is less about definitions than whether anti-Muslim discourses and rhetoric are a form of racism and unacceptable or about belief and thus acceptable. As such, it is not really about what Islam is or Muslims are, but how the definition allows people to say

Islamophobia(s) In the Aftermath of the Nice Attack

Written by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter

certain things about it and avoid less palatable ones. While many scholars and activists, as well as Muslims on the sharp end of Islamophobia, see it as a form of racism directed at a people and often based on physical or cultural markers and signifiers (to use the traditional understanding), the religious argument does provide a convenient cover for those wishing to argue that they are attacking a belief and not people or 'race'. In a mainstream context where racism is allegedly unacceptable and associated with the far right, this focus allows Islamophobes to wriggle out of or deflect such charges, as well as permitting the far right to recast themselves as legitimate and mainstream through simple rephrasing. In this context, it is thus not surprising to hear prominent mainstream commentator Elisabeth Badinter declare: 'we should not be afraid to be called Islamophobes'. Obviously, defining and seeing Islamophobia only through the prism of religion ignores many of these and others issues, processes and effects, most notably racialisation (Meer and Modood 2009; Garner and Selod 2015). It is in fact particularly functional and politically expedient in so-called liberal secular societies such as France, Britain and to a lesser extent in the US, where criticism of religion is considered a healthy and necessary practice to allow for freedom of thought and expression, and central to the conception of the nation and national identity, as the case of France highlights particularly well. Muslims are not French, not because of who they are, but because of what their beliefs are believed to be and the values this imagined and caricatural belief system prevents them from accepting. This is where the distinction and intersections of the liberal and illiberal qualities of Islamophobia become particularly relevant.

The illiberal type of Islamophobia or 'anti-Muslim' hate, is closest to traditional racism based around exclusivist, essentialised notions and concepts of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and religion, as well as identity itself, and is commonly associated with the far right and authoritarian treatment of minority groups and rights. It presents Islam as monolithic and innately threatening and inferior (in terms of 'race' if not also culture). Like traditional forms of racism, it views Muslimness as an immutable characteristic (akin to biology), Muslims, and not just Islam as a religion, as a problem, and can be seen for example in calls for repatriation, genocide or violence against Muslims and mosques. As such, it falls outside the remits of what is considered acceptable in the hegemonic discourse and apart from the most ideologically-focused groups on the right, most have tried to distance themselves from such labels. Yet this type of Islamophobia is essential to allow for the very existence of the liberal form as it acts as a unifier within mainstream society: it binds the norm within boundaries by drawing a clear line of demarcation between the extreme and the norm. It is the construction and containment of a clearly delineated type of Islamophobia at the margins of the political spectrum, one which falls outside of the liberal ideal because of its essentialism, unmediated call for violence, total rejection and open discrimination, which make it possible for subtler forms of Islamophobia to enter the mainstream discourse due their apparent allegiance to liberal democratic rules.

Liberal Islamophobia is based on the construction of a pseudo-progressive binary and narrative. It creates a loosely defined Muslim culture and community inherently opposed to some of the core values espoused in a mythical essentialised culturally homogenous, superior and enlightened West, or specific western nation, based on specific examples where the West embodies progress, such as democracy, human rights, free speech, gender and sexual equality and rights, and ironically tolerance. As David Theo Goldberg (2006, 345) argues, 'Islam is taken in the dominant European imaginary to represent a collection of lacks: of freedom; of a disposition of scientific inquiry; of civility and manners; of love of life; of human worth; of equal respect for women and gay people'. Criticism of Islam and Muslims is praised as an example and defence of liberal free speech. Nowhere is this clearer than with the example of Charlie Hebdo with its satirical cartoons of the Prophet, designed to express free speech and provoke to prove the point about a fantasised version of Islam and Muslims' backwardness.

Of course, the construction of a liberal West standing unified behind equality and freedom willfully ignores the tensions within liberalism itself in terms of the legacy(ies) of the Enlightenment, universalism, racism, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy, as well as increasing inequalities and curtailment of freedoms within the 'West'. Liberal Islamophobia thus acts as a decoy to provide 'Us' with a righteous sense of self as the defenders of a more progressive vision of the world, and displace tensions, failures and inadequacies inherent to our societies onto Islam. This is particularly important and even ironic considering that much of the Muslim population in France and other European countries originally come from former colonies, such as the Nice attacker who was from Tunisia, and have been subjected to racisms that both represent a reaction to the loss of empire and reassert the racist colonial schema of the civilised vs the primitive.

Islamophobia(s) In the Aftermath of the Nice Attack

Written by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter

The two forms of Islamophobia though are not mutually exclusive as they both target and scapegoat Islam and Muslims, and the liberal form fails to adequately conceal or erase the racism and other contractions in liberalism and the enlightenment project. More explicitly, the Charlie Hebdo attack did not just create an opportunity for liberal opposition to Islam, but led to a rise in illiberal hate crimes and violence. In addition to that, the 'Je Suis Charlie' sentiment expressed by world leaders in the aftermath, many of whom would lead a march through Paris in solidarity, despite leading states with repressive laws, including France which would enact a state of emergency, and engaged in aggressive and imperialist militarism, exposed the hypocrisy if not lie of such liberal framing and rhetoric. Subsequent attacks in France in November 2015 and July 2016, would see an assertion of the more aggressive illiberalism form from hate crimes within civil society to securitization and authoritarian repressive state measures.

Islamophobia(s) in the Context of the Nice attack

Despite the liberal framing and rhetoric, it has been common for Islamist terrorist attacks to be couched by the mainstream western media and some opportunistic politicians and commentators as being part of a broader clash of civilisations between fantasised visions of Islam and the West. This was very much the prevalent narrative after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015: the 'West' represented freedom of speech and progress in line with liberal Islamophobia. 'Islam' (and anyone loosely defined as Muslim) was caricatured as censorious and retrograde. No space was left for nuance or the shortcomings of the 'West' with regard to freedom of speech in increasingly unequal societies. After the November attacks in which 130 were killed, most politicians reiterated that France was 'at war'. Prime Minister Manuel Valls went as far as discussing the 'enemy within' – a phrase with clear connotations with the Second World War. Still reminiscent of France's darkest hours, prominent politicians on the right called for any suspect to be imprisoned without trial in 'interment camps'. The attacks on the Bataclan and wider sites of Parisian nightlife in November 2015 were taken by some to represent an attack on the liberal culture and lifestyle of the young in France by Muslims opposed to drinking, mixed gender socialising, dancing and social pleasure itself. Yet, these events lacked the specificity and iconic symbol of Charlie Hebdo. Instead, repeated attacks and a growing fear, comfort with hate and security measures have hardened politicians, the press and public opinion.

On the 14th of July, within hours of event, terrorism and not the defence of so-called liberal values became the focus as François Hollande declared that this was 'an attack whose terrorist quality cannot be denied… it is the whole of France that is under the terrorist threat'. As demonstrated by *Le Monde*, the 'Islamist terrorist' line remained the preferred explanation for French politicians (and much of the media in France and beyond) for days despite conflicting evidence which should have suggested a much more cautious approach. While, as these lines are written, the links between Lahouaiej Bouhlel and so-called Islamic State remain 'unproven' and in fact increasingly tenuous, the French Minister of the Interior continued to defend on the 18th of July what, at that stage, was mere speculation: the *modus operandi* was reminiscent of IS and, while the attacker seemed to suffer from various mental health issues, he had been 'quickly radicalised' despite no evidence being presented to the public. Of course, this is not to say that this official explanation is not the correct one, but that in the absence of publicly available evidence, one should expect more caution on the part of public servants, particularly in such a delicate context. This simplistic coverage has led opportunistic and demagogic politicians to demand ever more stringent measures to fight terrorism, but also to the further stigmatisation of the Muslim communities in France. This also has acted as a diversion away from real issues. The state of emergency and the call for more policing have been criticised as ineffective as they not only curtail the civil liberties of all but also ignore the root causes affecting millions in France and potentially driving a handful to committing terrorist attacks. In February 2016, Amnesty International denounced the state of emergency, highlighting that only one person had been arrested on terrorism charges out of 3210 often violent interventions. Such policies and the associated rhetoric are likely to feed into IS's propaganda machine as they will no doubt highlight the unfair treatment Muslims are subjected to in France. While most Muslims will ignore such simplistic calls, it will only take one person to answer them to send us further down this infernal spiral of an eye for an eye.

In this context, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far right Front National, kept mostly quiet in the aftermath of the attacks. As mainstream politicians outbid each other in a race towards securitisation and suspicion, at the expense of civil liberties and fostering further discrimination of Muslim communities, Le Pen has steered away from polemical grounds and simply claimed that mainstream politicians had failed in their duty to protect their citizens. Instead of taking the necessary step back which should be expected by politicians in a democracy, the government and

Islamophobia(s) In the Aftermath of the Nice Attack
Written by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter

opposition jumped to radical conclusions early on and called for an escalation of the war against terrorism, playing right in the hand of both so-called Islamic State and the far right and its demand for ever more stringent laws on civil liberties and against immigrants and minorities. Such reactions have further legitimised Islamophobia in France and freed the actions of those espousing its most illiberal forms.

Notes

This short article is part of a larger project studying the rise and interaction of liberal and illiberal Islamophobias in France, the United States and the United Kingdom.

References

Al-Othman, Hannah. December 1 2015. "Anti-Muslim hate crimes in London more than triple in the wake of Paris attacks." *Evening Standard*. London.

Delphy, Christine. 2006. "Antisexisme ou antiracisme? un faux dilemme." Nouvelles Questions Féministes 26 (1): 59-83.

———. 2015. Separate and dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror. London: Verso.

Garner, Steve, and Saher Selod. 2015. "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia." *Critical Sociology* 41 (1):9-19.

Goldberg, David Theo. 2006. "Racial Europeanization." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29 (2):331-64.

Hajjat, Abdellali, and Marwan Mohammed. 2013. *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises construisent le "problème musulman"*. Paris: La Découverte.

Khiabany, Gholam, and Milly Williamson. 2011. "Muslim Women and Veiled Threats: From 'Civilising Mission' to 'Clash of Civilisations'." *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British Media* , edited by Julian Petley and Robin Richardson. Oxford: One World.

Kundnani, Arun. 2014. *The Muslims are coming: Islamophobia, Extremism and the domestic war on terror* . London: Verso.

LeMonde.fr. July 17 2015. "Les actes islamophobes et antisémites en nette progression au premier semestre en France." *Le Monde*. Paris.

Levey, Geoffrey Brahm and Tariq Modood (eds.). 2008. *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mark, Michelle. November 18 2015. "Anti-muslim hate crimes have spiked after every major

terrorist attack: after paris, muslims speak out against islamophobia." *International Business Times*.

Meer, Nasar, and Tariq Modood. 2009. "Refutations of racism in the "Muslim Question"." *Patterns of Prejudice* 43 (3/4):332–51.

Mondon, Aurelien. 2014. "The Front National in the Twenty-First Century: From Pariah to Republican Democratic Contender?" *Modern & Contemporary France*: 1-20. doi: 10.1080/09639489.2013.872093.

———. 2015. "The French secular hypocrisy: the extreme right, the Republic and the battle for hegemony." *Patterns of Prejudice* 49 (4): 1-22. doi: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1069063.

Islamophobia(s) In the Aftermath of the Nice Attack

Written by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter

Mondon, Aurelien & Winter, Aaron (2015), *Breaking taboos or strengthening the status quo – Islamophobia in the name of liberalism in France and America,* BSA conference – manuscript currently under review

Morey, Peter, and Amina Yaqin. 2011. *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Taras, Raymond. 2013. "'Islamophobia never stands still': race, religion, and culture." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (3): 417-33.

About the author:

Aurelien Mondon is a Senior Lecturer in French and comparative politics at the University of Bath. His research focuses predominantly on elite discourse and the mainstreaming of far right politics, particularly through the use of populism and racism. His first monograph A Populist Hegemony?:The mainstreaming of the extreme right in France and Australia was published in 2013.

Aaron Winter is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of East London. His research focuses on the far right in terms of racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and terrorism. He is co-editor of Discourses and Practices of Terrorism: Interrogating Terror (2010) and Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice (forthcoming), and a contributor to Extremism in America (2013) and the Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism (forthcoming).