



ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE USING CRISES TO SPREAD HATE

DR. IGNACIO GUTIERREZ DE TERAN GOMEZ

Professor of Arabic Literature and Contemporary History of the Arab and Muslim World, Autonomous University of Madrid (AUM), Spain.

Once again, it is Islamophobia that triggers increasingly massive waves of hate across Europe, US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand for Muslims and their beliefs, attracting the attention of analysts and politicians. The number of attacks on Muslims performing rituals in these countries is on the increase, including the shooting of Muslims while praying in mosques, or simply attacking anyone thought of to be part of the Muslim community. Such attacks often occur on the street or on transportation means, by using verbal abuse and calling Muslims names in public places, and on social media platforms.

Indicators of Increase

In terms of verbal attacks and threats across networks, official indicators confirm the increase since 2017 to date. These statistics are issued by associations to closely observe Islamophobia in Europe, such as “Citizenship Observatory against Islamophobia”. Most of such incidents in Spain occur in the virtual world, at an average rate of 70%. A British organization has recorded a steady increase of 26% annually as reported between 2016 and 2017.

Such figures did not differ significantly from their counterparts in France, as the National Assembly against Islamophobia recorded a steadily growing increase, as it is deeply ingrained in specific social circles, with several terrorist attacks adopted by jihadist groups across several major European cities, such as Paris, London and Manchester, gaining wider media echoes. In Britain, the Islamic Council has warned that representatives of political parties outside the far-right circles stoke up hate fraught with Islamophobia. The Council has documented 300 Islamophobic cases, which reveal that Islamophobia is rampant across the British political elite.

It is reported that Islamophobia is not associated only with a group of British politicians; rather, it has also become a case for European leaders distancing themselves from the far-right. It is, of course, a strategy shrewdly instrumentalized by all European far-right powers, which have made remarkable progress in voting entitlements.

Dangerous Pandemic

One of the dangerous notoriety for Islamophobia is that it is no longer confined to some politicians or ordinary citizens; rather, it has ubiquitously extended to schools and universities, as a spate of offensive comments are made by many professors; Muslim students are badly treated given infamous Islamophobia. In the United Kingdom, an elementary school teacher was fired after describing Islam as “world cancer” and “malignant religion” on networks, and the teacher encouraged his students to share his extremist views! These telling examples are just the tip of the iceberg of implacable and downright enmity towards Muslim communities.

No doubt that the series of terrorist attacks carried out in a number of Western capitals over the recent five years has fueled the spreading of hate among specific groups of Europeans; however, there are many factors that have nothing to do with the actions of extremists that offend Islam and Muslims, spearheaded by the inability of the European authorities to develop a cogent speech, help Muslims to restore their honor and to stave off strong-minded jihadists. Regrettably enough, the government policies often inadvertently spread Islamophobia, after insisting on the use of terms such as “Islamic”, “extremist Muslims” and “Islamic militancy”, associating such terms with counterterrorism.

Such speeches included statements and slogans that were initially developed by parties close to stubborn far-right groups, such as “Islamofascism”, a term that some of them use to refer to dictatorial jihadist groups. Strangely enough, such western terms attach negative overtones to everything coming from the east. It should be also noted that “fascist” turned into a term with various connotations that go beyond the ideological level.

These movements, which attracted followers from the left due to their speech calling for the protection of freedom, feed on the heinous acts of extremist groups that describe themselves as “Islamic”, especially the bombings in western cities, and the killing of western hostages in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to a sympathetic relationship between advocates of Islamophobia and jihadist extremism, as they catalyze each other. The reference to the concept of advocating freedom.

Field research studies carried out in Germany, France and Britain have revealed that the democratic legitimacy attributed to these societies claiming their right to criticize Islam as “a dogmatic system that does not respect diversity and the values of civilization” makes it permissible to be financed and supported for their activities. Here lies the great failure of governments, official institutions and civil society in general, as they failed in ending the speech that criminalizes Islam criminalization; they all failed to develop a speech that seeks to distinguish between Islam and Muslims on the one hand, and religious extremism and jihadists on the other.

Image of Muslim Women

There is an explicit focus on anti-Islam speech manifested in the image of Muslim women. More so, the authorities concerned with observing manifestations of hate towards Muslims allude to diagnosing such hostile views towards Muslim women, especially veiled women, who are easily distinguished from other women. Anti-Islamophobic societies affirm in many western countries that three physical or verbal attacks out of four against Muslim communities is directed at women. This is also seen in other countries, such as Australia.

Far-right organizations are constantly working to distort the image of the veiled woman as a woman who denies her femininity, succumbing to the veil and surrendering helplessly to male power. In Spain and other European countries, many telling cases, mostly by young people, attacking Muslim girls on public transport have been recorded, and such attackers often post pics and their acts on the internet. Far-right organizations employ attacking veiled women and demonize the Islamic threat. In France, for instance, the police force a number of Muslim women to take off their headscarves at airports for security reasons.

Far-right propaganda considers the headscarf the most pressing issue, especially in France, where it is an ongoing debate. The irony is that the tendency to accept these harassments against veiled women is clear to far-right organizations that justify them on the pretext of citizens fearing the expansion of “Islamization” in their societies, and of the danger of Europe becoming an Islamic continent.

Here, we need to highlight the concept of democratic rights and freedom of expression in the speech of the far-right, which happily prohibits any statement that offends supreme and sublime values, such as the unity of the country, respect for national rituals, and Christian values, but it is indifferent, slack and sluggish if the victim is a ritual or personality related to Islam. For instance, a support campaign was held by the National Front in defense of a French girl who filmed a video clip to insult and offend Islam. Shockingly enough, the National Front supported the girl’s right to insult Islam, but it does not show the same flexibility if the insult would be hurled at Christianity!

Expansion of Far-Right

The far-right parties start from a racist ideology par excellence, and if they strive to embellish their ideology with a constructive speech, they are basically based on a deceptive concept of citizenship. It stresses the “Muslim Enemy” as an object which manifests the negative overtones of all non-western societies. Such parties were able to create the appropriate turbulent political and social climate, to the extent that the European Council Against Discrimination and Intolerance affirmed in its 2019 Annual Report that Europe is facing a shocking reality, which is the increase in attacks on Muslims in terms of quantity and quality; incitement to abuse by insults and offences towards Islam and Muslims are based on online networking. The report called for the

concerted efforts of all European countries to combat the far-right and to agree on terms that do justice to Islam, and not to misunderstand Islam for extremism inherent in terrorist groups. However, the missing link in these calls is that the far-right has assumed executive and legislative powers in many western countries. The disregard for the danger of Islamophobia has led to the classification of attacks on Muslims by individual incidents that do not express an ideological stream that has a presence in society. The far-right extremist groups that have made significant progress in the elections claim that they do not break the law; rather, their continued interest in immigrants and Muslims and the link between them and criminality and covert or illegal immigration are very harmful to social cohesion.

Instrumentalization of Corona Pandemic

It is glaringly evident that the European and American far-right has been hunting in the murky waters of the “Corona Virus” pandemic, with a lot of talk about the possibilities of biological terrorism. Once again, the current global pandemic gave strong evidence of the convergence of jihadist terrorism and racist far-right on an opportunistic endeavor, aimed at benefiting from a global crisis that has affected hundreds of thousands of people and the collapse of the global economic system. While a number of jihadist and far-right societies have expressly declared their hope that the disease will spread in the enemy countries, there is a palpable fear that the most criminal associations in the two camps have resorted to developing viral weapons.

At the beginning of the crisis, Matteo Salvini, former Italian Prime Minister and Leader of the National Front Elite, notorious for his harsh criticism of Islam, insisted on closing borders and tightening immigration policies, particularly in the face of Africans, despite the low rate of deaths in Africa. Organizations in Austria and Switzerland have stressed that preventing curfews and keeping them under surveillance is the best way to limit the spread of the pandemic. Meanwhile, Leader of the National Front, Marie Le Pen, soon launched a fierce campaign against the European Union, for failing to contain the pandemic and adopt a real immigration control policy. To make matters worse, Hungarian President Viktor Mihály Orbán, who considers himself far from the far-right, declares that Corona Virus cannot make us turn a blind eye to the fact that the immigration per se, not the pandemic, is the main dilemma in Europe today! The leader of the Spanish “Vox” Party, Santiago Abascal, has indicated the necessity of restricting immigration, and called for the imposition of special fees on foreign immigrants.

The far-right is taking advantage of any opportunities to reinforce its anti-Muslim speech, and to create an environment favorable for harsher measures towards foreigners in Europe, while the groups readily willing to translate feelings of hate into terrorist acts are increasingly growing.