

APPROACHING A DEFINITION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Introduction

In November 2018, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims released a landmark [report](#) titled *Islamophobia Defined: The Inquiry into a Working Definition of Islamophobia*. The report proposed the following definition: “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.” Despite the Labour Party [adopting](#) the definition in March 2019, the government has recently distanced itself from the definition, [noting](#) that it is “reviewing our approach and considering various options for how best to tackle Islamophobia and all forms of hatred.”

This position paper argues that the APPG definition of Islamophobia offers a holistic framework that transcends hate crime, making it essential to combatting anti-Muslim racism and discrimination across all spheres of political, economic, social, and public life in the UK. By employing a human rights-based approach, the paper urges the government to adopt the APPG definition, along with the explanatory [guidelines](#) produced by the Coalition Against Islamophobia (CAI), as a crucial foundation for effectively addressing Islamophobia in all its forms.

Approaching the APPG Definition

Despite widespread support, the APPG definition of Islamophobia has yet to be adopted at a government level. It has been [endorsed](#) or adopted by over 850 Muslim organisations, more than 100 academics, over 60 local authorities across the UK, and all major political parties in Westminster, with the exception of the Conservatives. The previous Conservative government not only rejected the definition but also [failed](#) to deliver on its promise to create an alternative. Its own Islamophobia adviser, Imam Qari Asim, who was dismissed in 2022, criticised this inaction, [stating](#) it “shows a lack of political will to define Islamophobia.”

Without a formal definition, Islamophobia remains an ambiguous concept, making it difficult to fully understand its scope and impact. The absence of a definition creates confusion on what constitutes anti-Muslim prejudice or hate, leaving law enforcement agencies struggling to distinguish between Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination. This inconsistency can result in under-reporting, under-prosecution, or uneven enforcement of hate crime laws. Likewise, social media companies face significant [challenges](#) in moderating anti-Muslim content effectively, as disinformation and Islamophobic hate speech may go unchecked. Without clear guidelines, platform moderators may fail to recognise such content as hate speech, leading to inadequate responses when users report it. Moreover, institutions like workplaces, schools, and healthcare providers – many of which are affected by systemic Islamophobia – may struggle to implement effective anti-discrimination policies if they do not know how to classify Islamophobia. This lack of clarity makes it increasingly difficult to identify and address Islamophobia within these environments.

Critics of the APPG definition often argue that it restricts the ability to critique Islam as a religion. A recent letter from Faith Minister Lord Wajid Khan to the Network of Sikh Organisations [claims](#) the definition is “not in line with the Equality Act 2010” and [asserts](#) that the government's efforts to combat religious hatred would “never inhibit the lawful right to

freedom of expression.” We firmly disagree that the definition would prohibit criticism of the religion itself, with the CAI guidelines clearly distinguishing between legitimate criticism of Islam and Islamophobia – hence our support of these accompanying guidelines as they provide greater protection to freedom of expression. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that human rights legislation and treaties, such as the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), stress the need to appropriately balance these rights, rather than place them in zero-sum competition. Like other rights, freedom of expression is not absolute and must be carefully calibrated against other rights, including principles of non-discrimination. The APPG definition is specifically designed to address hate crime, hate speech, and systemic discrimination faced by Muslims, and rejecting it on the grounds of supposedly undermining free speech is highly questionable.

Moreover, while the APPG definition provides a valuable theoretical framework, the accompanying CAI [guidelines](#) are critical in ensuring its proper application. The guidelines illustrate how Islamophobia manifests in practice, helping to capture more subtle forms of anti-Muslim prejudice that might otherwise go unnoticed. They clarify: “While criticism of Islam within legitimate realms of debate and free speech is not in itself Islamophobic, it may become Islamophobic if the arguments presented are used to justify or encourage vilification, stereotyping, dehumanisation, demonisation or exclusion of Muslims.” The definition, together with the guidelines, effectively [distinguish](#) between valid criticism or debate about Islam and “the victimisation of Muslims through the targeting of expressions of Muslimness to deny or impair their fundamental freedoms and human rights.”

Recommendations

1. The government must adopt the APPG definition of Islamophobia and accompanying CAI guidelines, which are essential for fully understanding the wide-ranging manifestations of Islamophobia and developing effective strategies to combat it.

2. The current government must urgently reverse previous governments’ deliberate policy of non-engagement with mainstream Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). By fostering dialogue with these organisations, the government can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Muslim communities and devise more robust policies to address them.

Conclusion

Islamophobia extends beyond individual hate crime and prejudice, impacting Muslims – and those perceived to be Muslim – through structural inequalities embedded across the UK’s political, economic, social, and public spheres. The APPG definition reflects this broader, systemic nature of Islamophobia and should serve as the foundation for a comprehensive government strategy to combat it in all its forms. By rejecting this widely accepted definition, the government is not only obstructing efforts to tackle the entrenched discrimination faced by Muslims but also signalling a troubling lack of commitment to countering the rising tide of Islamophobia in the UK. This falls short of its moral duty to protect and promote the rights of Muslim communities across the country.



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