Sectarianism and the Politics of Hate

Islamophobia, Security Narratives and Countering Violent Extremism: Dangerous Liaisons

Lurdes Vidal Bertran

**Director of the Arab & Mediterranean Department
European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed),
Barcelona**

After the Arab Spring avalanche and the resurgence of ISIS as the new global threat, the last couple of years have enshrined new dynamics in the world of narratives and policy-making –the interplay between Islamophobia, security and the flourishing Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) 'industry.'
Feeding on Orientalism and Colonialism, post-Cold War 'civilizationalism' has paved the way for identity politics to construe a new enemy: Islam and Muslims. The post-9/11 securitization of domestic and foreign policies has been the perfect hotbed for increasing claims of constant suspicion and growing hostility suffered by Muslims, a situation aggravated when combined with racial, gender or class discrimination. Today, Islamophobia is the perfect toy in the hands of far-right populist leaders in Europe and the US. Narratives that convey a message of mistrust towards Islam and Muslims are spreading to mainstream politics, thus widening acceptance in the media and public opinion at large. Islamophobia is also a double-edged sword as it also serves the purposes of jihadists who use it in their narratives of victimhood and self-defence – be it in the Middle East, Europe or the US – as a tool to achieve their recruitment goals.
Islamophobia, increased securitization and a greater focus on identity politics have given rise to new flourishing fields of study and action, namely radicalization and de-radicalization, lately reworded as CVE. Despite its very much needed existence, CVE has yet to decide whether it targets extremist thought and/or extremist action, whether it intends to deal with all forms of violent extremism or solely that of jihadism, and to what extent the current CVE paradigm is capable of overcoming the temptation of securitization or policing Muslims.

From Arabs to Muslims

Islamophobia is not just an issue of recent years – particularly in Europe –, but rather can be traced back to the early 20th century, and is rooted in colonialism and the idea of the superiority of a hegemonic culture (Western) over a 'different' one. This difference, as described by Orientalists, might be exotic, even appealing, but, in all cases, is also less civilized and enlightened than their own societies. In fact, as a system of meaning, the "old Islamophobia," as defined by Vincent Geisser (2003), is a predominant mindset that still permeates much of our understanding of diversity. The new Islamophobia emerged later, coupled with anti-immigration narratives and terrorist threats.
Up until the end of the 1970s, the difference was mainly perceived as a matter of ethnicity. While in the US the construction of 'Otherness' was usually linked to the negative perception of Arabs due to their opposition to Israel – and thus, Arab 'bad guys' started to emerge in Western imaginaries associated with Palestinian militant organizations or other 'rogue' leftist Arab regimes –, in Europe, narratives were mainly focused on ethnicity and socio-economic status of migrants and citizens from a diverse origin.
The Iranian Revolution in 1979 allowed the emergence of a new sort of rival – the Muslim enemy. Coupled with the rising challenge posed by Islamist movements within Arab countries and the spread of Salafism, the latter blessed with increased funding from conservative Gulf regimes, Muslim identity be-

gan to occupy the centre of the debate over security at an international level.

If up until then, ideology had been placed at the heart of terrorist motivations, the post-Cold War period, with Francis Fukuyama's "End of History," entailed the death of ideology and the birth of identity as the new grail for interpret violence. Assuming Bernard Lewis' arguments on identity as the core of the Middle East's problems, Samuel Huntington gave birth to the idea of civilizations as new political global actors, Islam and the West being indefatigably destined to clash. By 9/11, al-Qaeda embodied the 'Muslim enemy' but it held a whole community of believers hostage. This focus on identity as a source of violence and the sedimentation of the Muslim enemy through the literature on radicalization provided the ideological foundation for both the 'war on terror' and Islamophobia (Kundnani, 2012).

9/11 was the perfect culmination of Huntington's predictions and narratives on radicalization, mainly attributed to and explained by an inherent propensity to violence in Islamic faith. Such an approach was duly reinforced by the fact that terrorists used religious wording and framing in order to give legitimacy and meaning to their actions. This explains why, when analyzing terrorists´ engagement in violence, agency was transferred from individuals – who individually decide to engage in violence – to a collective responsibility that associates all Muslims. In this sense, violence was seen as the choice of a set of individuals with a particular ideology determined by wider circumstances but also rooted in the theological/psychological dimensions of 'Muslimness.' In the US, violence by other groups not based on religious grounds but rooted in political conflicts was interpreted by the same matrix as global terrorism. At the same time, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa that felt threatened politically and socially by Islamist movements – many of them having long rejected violent take-over strategies and now encouraging a bottom-up approach to Islamization – were instrumentally assimilated into global terrorism. In a move to discredit and justify harsh security measures and repression against Islamist – and non-Islamist – opposition movements, authoritarian regimes in the MENA region benefited from the 'War on Terror' to target and blur the lines between non-violent Islamist movements and violent jihadi organizations.

Blurring the lines not only played in favour of authoritarianism, but also connected the threat of global jihadism to concrete Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. As a result, the 'Arab bad guy' became the 'Muslim bad guy.' This way, the term 'Islamofascism,' coined by Maxime Rodinson to describe the Iranian theological-political interpretation of governance, was enlarged to encompass all stripes of Islamisms, regardless of their stance or reasons for violence. This term would also be extended to a great variety of Muslim subjects whose identity would come to the forefront.

The construction of the 'enemy within' was perfect for anti-migration and far-right political groups, who found in this approach the perfect argument to condemn a whole segment of the European population

As Arun Kundnani (2012) argues, terrorist attacks in Europe afterwards added a new layer of comprehension to the religious focus of the phenomenon. The fact that some of the terrorist attackers in London or Madrid were born and raised or lived as immigrants in European societies was a sign of failed integration and incompatibility of Muslim religion and culture with Western liberal values. Robert Leiken (2005) pointed at "Europe's Angry Muslims," while Fukuyama (2006) insisted on the failure of multiculturalism with regard to Muslims. At the same time, while Bruce Hoffman (2008) focused on the role of external organizations, Marc Sageman (2004) emphasized the role of what he called "home-grown wannabes," drawing attention to European Muslims as a source of domestic threat. The construction of the 'enemy within' was perfect for anti-migration and far-right political groups, who found in this approach the perfect argument to condemn a whole segment of the European population.

At that point, traditional anti-Semitic discourse turned into anti-immigration and finally anti-Islam. Violence was a consequence of 'extremist beliefs,' a product of Islamic culture and a result of the failure of integration, while identity and beliefs overshadowed the

weight of the socio-political root causes of terrorism. The historical presence of Muslims in Europe was neglected in favour of an approach that considered Muslims newcomers and alien subjects in European liberal societies. Furthermore, the 'Eurabia' narrative, the far-right conspiracy theory of an attempt from Arabs to replace the European population, was turned into a sort of resistance against an 'Islamic Reconquista of Europe.' On the other hand, this idea matches perfectly well with the arguments raised by jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda or later ISIS, who claimed the need to reconquer Al Andalus, not so much as a real strategy per se as a rhetoric argument to raise symbolism and mobilize followers. Nevertheless, both approaches perfectly complemented and fed into one another.

Islamophobia Is Here to Stay

The period of distention that allowed for the so-called Arab Spring was soon coupled with negative assumptions on the role and capacity of Arabs, and particularly Muslims, to democratize. In this sense, identity politics, which emerged as a core issue after the Arab uprisings, were again instrumentalized, leading to the rise of renewed jihadist structures. As long as ISIS just threatened local populations – Muslims of all sects – external actors had little interest in combating them. Soon after, ISIS attacks against minority groups or foreigners (journalists or humanitarian workers) raised the alarm and brought about the engagement against ISIS on its territorial feud. While the West once again projected 'selective empathies,' ISIS engaged in a dual strategy: one territorial and local, and the other focused on the 'far enemy,' the West, such a strategy leading to a new wave of terrorist attacks and the embodiment of the perfect Muslim enemy in ISIS.

On the other hand, the crisis of the European project, with its core values at stake, particularly facing the arrival of refugees and migrants fleeing from war and deteriorating living conditions, coupled with a certain ideological void and a loss of trust in mainstream politics, converged in the perfect ground for populist rhetoric. This is how terrorist attacks, security narratives and populist discourses have enshrined Islamophobia over the last decade; with a peak during the last couple of years, Islamophobia and anti-immigration narratives have permeated almost all public debates.

In this regard, the migration agenda had a major role to play in the 2016 referendum on Brexit, just as it did in the election campaign in Germany. The result is that the far-right political camp has "moved from the periphery to the centre and become integral to the political landscape in Europe" (SETA, 2017). While most of these parties are still in the opposition, some are becoming governing parties, as is the case in Austria, Bulgaria or Finland. Moreover, many centrist parties have started to assume part of their xenophobic, anti-immigration rhetoric.

The normalization of Islamophobic speech in Italy, along with the strong anti-immigration statements and attempts to criminalize NGOs rescuing people in the Mediterranean made by Vice-President and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, have just added more fuel to an already burning issue. Terrorist attacks in the US, France, Belgium, UK, Germany and Spain inflamed speeches against Muslims, depicting all of them as potential radicals and attackers, or as acquiescent accomplices. The Finsbury Park mosque attack was an example of unbridled Islamophobia, which followed suit regarding many other attacks and incidents reported in Europe and the US. In 2017, Europe witnessed 99 attacks from racist, nationalist and separatist extremists, followed by 27 left-wing extremist attacks and 13 jihadi terrorist attacks (SETA, 2017). Nevertheless, public opinion still sees Europe's Muslim population as the greatest threat to security. Islamophobia has the lion's share of the blame for this perception, even in a country such as Spain, where, after the dreadful Madrid 2004 terrorist attacks, the reaction was somehow exemplary. 13 years later, Islamophobic incidents in Spain have risen by 600% between 2014 and 2016 (Plataforma Ciudadana Contra la Islamofobia, 2017), thus proving that Islamophobia has finally taken root in social and political imaginaries and is here to stay.

From Denial to Acknowledgment of Islamophobia Networks

The first question that emerges when dealing with Islamophobia is whether or not such a phenomenon exists and is different from other kinds of discrimination already in place. Sceptics tend to assume that

Islamophobia is nothing more than an overlapping concept of racism, neglecting its specific form of hostility resulting in the discrimination of Muslims or those seen as Muslims (Runnymede Trust Report, 2017). Islamophobia does not focus on biological differences but rather on cultural and religious ones. It describes Islam as an incomprehensible religion for Western minds, depicting it as a monolithic entity, disregarding the diversity of people who profess such a religion. Islam and Muslims are seen as inferior, barbaric, irrational, sexist, primitive, violent, aggressive, and supportive of terrorism. In fact, whereas there is a de-politicization in the understanding of the root causes of terrorism, Islam is highly politicized by Islamophobes and considered a sort of militant ideology, so that hostility is normalized and discrimination defended.

The 'us *versus* them' narrative is embedded in the discursive tradition of the West, imported from the Orientalists to the Islamophobes, and increased by the degree of hostility and hate. In this context, everything takes on an 'Islamic meaning' and all failures and conflicts are explained through the essentialist, religious-cultural matrix. These ideas circulate vastly through the communicating vessels that connect intelligentsia, opinion-makers, media, policy-makers and society. The effects of Islamophobia are increasingly palpable and still vastly neglected. Hostility against Muslims has an impact on the lives of millions of people, leads to problems of internal security and breaks social cohesion by fragmenting societies, fuels extremist narratives and places Muslim individuals and organizations under suspicion.

2017 has also been the worst year for anti-Muslim violence in the US. Hate crimes against Muslims in the US surpassed post-9/11 levels. The White House Summit of 2015 focused on defining extremism basically from an Islamic perspective, while ignoring other more frequent and dangerous forms of extremism such as white supremacism and far-right extremism. Besides, in many cases Islamophobia in the US interacts with other layers of discrimination, taking into account that 33% of US Muslims are African-Americans and thus, the issue of civil rights and racial segregation also interplays with their Islamic background to conceive of an even more aggressive stance against them. Recent US polls show that 50% of Americans think that Muslim Americans support terrorism and are more devoted to Islam than to the US

or their countries of birth or residence. Moreover, 20% of them would deny Muslims their right to vote (Sides & Mogahed, 2018).

The new US President Donald Trump and his 'Muslim Ban,' along with the massive anti-Muslim propaganda launched from several affiliated media, has contributed to increasing previously mentioned perceptions of hostility towards Muslims. With the surge of 'fake news,' Trump could invent terrorist attacks in Sweden and criticize migration policies in Europe, while he and other relevant figures in the political or social sphere stuff sympathetic media outlets with conspiracy theories (SETA, 2017).

Islamophobia in the US and Europe have different origins, but are developing the same characteristics and operate in very similar patterns. It is a complex transnational phenomenon that is hardly dealt with transnationally and without the necessary intersectionality

Islamophobia, therefore, is considered a 'militant term' and those organizations that call for Muslim rights or fight against Islamophobia are considered threatening or violent. Therefore, Muslim organizations such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) are targeted twice as much as individuals, as their militancy is considered a way of defying the West and a device of external actors (Isaacs, 2018). At the same time, the backbone of the US Islamophobia network is being revealed and exposed (McClennen, 2018). A report on 'black money' traced back the funding of $42.6 million to Islamophobia think tanks between 2001 and 2009 (Center for American Progress, 2011). Organizations such as *Stop Islamization of America* or *ACT! For America* are getting stronger under Trump's presidency and the ongoing denunciation campaigns in campuses and universities is becoming more acute, particularly mixing global jihadi terrorism, with Arab-Israeli conflict and conspiracy perceptions on American Muslims (Network Against Islamophobia).

The dismantling of a violent extremist group called *Action des Forces Operationnelles* in France, which was ready to kill Muslims, in July 2018 is evidence of the professionalization of Islamophobia networks and their growing threat against domestic security at large. Ironically enough, they were armed with ammunition and TATP, the same explosive used by jihadists. In fact, they are nothing more than two faces of the same coin, ready to kill in the name of some instrumentalized identity, be it Muslim, Christian, European or Western.

All in all, Islamophobia in the US and Europe have different origins, but are developing the same characteristics and operate in very similar patterns. It is a complex transnational phenomenon that is hardly dealt with transnationally and without the necessary intersectionality. Islamophobia combined with gender, race, income, etc. turns good Arabs into bad Muslims, and Hijabi women into fanatic terrorists or the strife for equality and civil rights into a matter of loyalties and faith. This is why transnational approaches to combat Islamophobia are urgently needed, particularly in the current context of global communications.

Countering Violent Extremism: Is the Cure Worse than the Disease?

After a turbulent decade marked by attempts by scholars and experts to understand the nature, structure, operational mode and funding of jihadism as today's most powerful global threat (and thus setting patterns, trends and profiles), it evolved into a new structure where religion was still the framework, although with less doctrinal depth, and communication strategies were its most outstanding asset. Nonetheless, in most policy-making arenas its focus and main feature was still the religious dimension, while the relevance of socio-economic and political grievances was either neglected or diminished. Therefore, ISIS benefited in its territory from the sequels of conflict, authoritarianism, corruption, discrimination, nepotism, sectarianism and, in general, by the perceptions of relative deprivation. In addition, it was blessed with strong Islamophobia networks in Europe and in the US (those existing in other parts of the world are not covered by this article), and a new CVE industry dead set on de-radicalizing and, incidentally, criminalizing Muslims.

CVE is a sort of catch-all umbrella term encompassing all the different dimensions linked to the fight against terrorism and extremist violence (WANA, 2016). However, most of the work done in this field still neglects other rising forms of violent extremism because their motivation cannot be attributed to their cultural background. Conversely, mental health is very often assumed as the motivation behind the actions of many non-Muslim violent extremists.

CVE programmes in Europe have mainly focused on 'sensitive' populations, combining reinforced surveillance and profiling with reporting hotlines (Hatif, Stop Djihadisme, Stop Radicalismos) and multiple and disconnected de-radicalization programmes (Exit in Germany has already operated with right-wing extremists), many of them navigating between the dichotomies of de-radicalization and disengagement or de-mobilization. CVE strategies suffer from the main conceptual failure in distinguishing between cognitive radicalization and behavioural radicalizacion, as well as in deciding who should come into play in one case or another. Similarly, this same confusion is translated into the configuration of prevention and detection programmes. Most strategies conceived as preventive, such as PREVENT from the British CONTEST programme, have been criticized for their stigmatization potential as they address vulnerable individuals or populations.

As in most US CVE strategies, reliance on the so-called community is very important. Despite its positive approach as a way to empower citizens to become resilient to extremism, in reality they give social stakeholders the burden of assuming certain surveillance-like activities. Public-private partnerships, which are very common in the US, rely strongly on community trust, engagement and leadership. However, in Europe particularly, there is no such solid consistent and coherent Muslim community. Representativeness is weak at best, and the attempts to institutionalize Islam by the authorities, as in France, have not been very successful. In cases like Spain, religious diversity has had a weak legal and institutional development and in the face of the lack of a joint CVE strategy, local initiatives are so far the most remarkable ones. Nevertheless, such initiatives and the most ambitious plans implement-

ed until now lack the necessary empirical data that enable us to gauge success and impact. Strong intervention in social spheres such as education has been one of the most controversial approaches of CVE in Europe, since instead of implementing long-term sustained prevention mechanisms that address the entire school population, they use flawed indicators to train educators in detecting radicalized students.

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Muslims, places of worship, NGOs and neighbourhoods are put under surveillance and subject to exhaustive profiling. The debate on CVE is still very much attached to the religious factor, mainly at the expense of politics, and tends to focus on predictive rather than explanatory factors. Moreover, it still relies considerably on military solutions as 'neutralizers' of the immediate threat regardless of mid and long-term negative setbacks. Immediateness is precisely one of the main enemies of prevention. The importunate 'if you see something, say something' that is constantly voiced in public transport is the pinnacle of a sort of community-wide surveillance system that is very much in line with the shifting roles between security forces and civil society stakeholders (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018).

Huge Challenges ahead

Obviously there is a strong need for CVE to start building consensus on definitions and creating impact measurement indicators for implemented programmes. While the focus on radicalization is still dominant in CVE and attributed mainly to Muslims, it will be very difficult to disarticulate the mechanisms for gathering grievances that extremist groups instrumentalize. Because even though jihadists use a distorted vision of Islam to indoctrinate followers,

the social and political arguments that they raise are based on realities, and, as disputed as they might be, they are commonly legitimated by an important part of humanity. Moreover, the link between internal and foreign policies in current violent extremism is growing stronger, and therefore approaches to CVE need to be very much all encompassing.

What is clear is that one model cannot fit all cases, and, although interpretation must find consensus, action must be informed and based on a local level. Prevention should remain the realm of civil society intervention, with long-term, sustainable initiatives that address the whole of society. This is why political mandates might not be so interested in investing in such time-consuming strategies, and this is exactly where civil societies must reclaim their space and role. Overcoming the 'Minority Report' dilemma will allow bottom-up approaches and strategies to emerge.

The Islamophobia network is becoming stronger by the day. Well funded and highly infuriated, it targets Muslims and those who are considered Muslims or 'Muslim-friendly' thanks to media outlets, social media and platforms that even target scholars for their ideas or their stances on fairly different issues linked to conflicts in MENA. This Islamophobia network finds a strong echo in and vulgarizes a narrative criminalizing Muslims, which permeates mainstream media and institutional discourses, influenced as well by the energy of the far-right, and opens borders for prejudices, the politicization of Islam (ruling on burkas or burkinis), bigotry in policy-making and disproportionate reactions to terrorism.

So far, such reactions have only served to create virtual geographies in which Ripoll, Rouen or Manchester become very close to Raqqa, and a flawed CVE 'industry' might contribute to increasing the perception of injustice and humiliation that many Muslims already feel. The result is more opportunities for extremists of all natures.

Furthermore, recognition of Islamophobia is still "a challenge for us all," as stated by the 2018 Runnymede Trust Report published 20 years after the first seminal one. Islamophobia cannot only be found in the arguments of ranting politicians, the spray-painting of mosque walls, Quran burning or many other acts of anti-Muslim bigotry in the name of purity, identity, secularism or even feminism (yes, Islamo-

phobia can also be left-wing). Media and public opinion replicate embedded prejudices against Muslims that in the present security context grow stronger by the day. More than 60% of news stories published in six mainstream Spanish newspapers concerning Islam or Muslims were Islamophobic, and news items that dealt with Islam and women or veils were more Islamophobic than those dealing with Islam and terrorism, proving the need for intersectionality and transnationality in the fight against Islamophobia (Observatorio de la Islamofobia, 2017).

In the current security context, Islamophobia is not the last straw but one essential piece in the machinery of violent extremism. Therefore, a responsible approach to CVE should aspire to, at least, breaking this ongoing relationship and making room for citizens to engage.

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