

# Deconstructing Hungary's Drift Towards Islamophobia





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## Introduction

Islamophobia has many definitions, but an ideal, most-comprehensive definition has been provided by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), in its [European Islamophobia Reports](#) (2015-2019). Islamophobia “*has become a well-known term used in academia as much as in the public sphere. Criticism of Muslims or of the Islamic religion is not necessarily Islamophobic. Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilizing and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat – real or invented – and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed ‘we’. Islamophobia operates by constructing a static ‘Muslim’ identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalized for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts, because Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam.*”<sup>1</sup>

In his address to the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in September 2021, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan [said](#) “Islamophobia is another pernicious phenomenon that we all need to collectively combat.”<sup>2</sup> Further, Khan, who vociferously speaks against stereotyping Muslims, lamented how right-wing, xenophobic, and virulent nationalists have wrongly associated Islam with terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Khan made these remarks at a time when the scale and intensity of Islamophobia, especially in Europe, had increased precipitously. According to eminent scholar Farid Hafez, Europe’s rightward shift represents a “McCarthyism against Islam” given that government policies are presenting Muslims as security threats and untrustworthy. Though the threat of Islamophobia grew around the world in 2021, it became a more subversive phenomenon in Europe, as evidenced by policies aimed at institutionalizing it.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, Islamophobia not only manifested itself more conspicuously in France and Austria but also affected other European countries. One of the countries where Muslims, despite being a negligible minority, are being victimized and targeted is Hungary.

Over the past decade, Hungarians have changed their views about, and attitudes towards, Muslims. This change has to be seen in the context of Hungary’s unwelcoming approach towards migrants, who are seen as a veritable threat to the country. Though there are no legal bans on any of the Islamic practices in Hungary, Muslims face a number of challenges there. A combination of factors, ranging from the evisceration of civil liberties to the increasing preponderance of right-wing populism, have intensified attacks against Muslims. Hungarian Muslims face discrimination at their workplaces and are portrayed as proponents and abettors of terrorism. In addition, Islamophobic sentiments are



on the rise in Hungary's neighborhood. This makes it doubly important to analyze the conditions of Hungarian Muslims through a broader prism that looks at the spread of Islamophobia in Europe. This report seeks to deconstruct Hungarian Islamophobic trends by contextualizing Islamophobia in the larger European context by exploring the following questions:

- What are the regional and global contexts that have shaped and given rise to Islamophobia in Europe?
- How have Islamophobic narratives constructed and gained acceptance in Hungary, and how do they relate to those in its neighborhood?
- How should Islamophobia be countered and inter-faith and intercultural harmony fostered?

Drawing on official data and secondary sources, this report traces the antecedents of Islamophobia in Europe, assesses the rise of Islamophobic practices in Hungary and its neighboring countries, and recommends a set of interventions to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to counter it. The findings of the report contribute towards developing a nuanced discourse on how to increase harmony and reduce conflicts going forward.

## Islamophobia in Europe: Regional and Global Context

Defined by the [OIC](#) as “a combination of hate, fear, and prejudice against Islam,” in addition to Muslims, and their religious symbols, Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> If anything, it is a product of centuries of hostility towards Muslims and Islam. In his book *Islamophobia: History, Context and Culture*, Zafar Iqbal comprehensively examines the genesis of antagonism towards, and repudiation of, Islam and Muslims. It is research like this which adds important perspectives on fathoming the origins of Islamophobia<sup>6</sup> which necessitates a critical assessment of the factors that have led to Islamophobia becoming a major part of the European story.

### 1. The Catalysts of Islamophobia

#### The Colonial Hangover

One of the factors contributing towards the rise of Islamophobia is colonialism. Though Islamophobia only became an important part of the political lexicon of Europe in the late 20th century, prejudice against Muslims is a heritage of colonialism. According to Tatia Tavkheidze, colonialism not only caused great cultural antagonism between Europeans and Muslims but also led to the subjugation of Islam.<sup>7</sup> The process of colonization was rapid. It is noteworthy that between 1830 and 1915, a number of countries, like Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco, were either under British or French rule. Colonial powers not only resorted to military invasions of the Islamic world but also looked at Muslims as backward, corrupt, and fanatic people. The hatred towards Muslims during the colonial era fed into the scaffold of Islamophobia we witness today. For example, France's ongoing clampdown against Muslims cannot be fully explained without looking at its colonial past. French colonization of Algeria in 1830 was the first colonization of the Arab world. As painful and insufferable as it was for the Algerians, French colonizers aimed at breaking down the soul of the Algerian national

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identity in their attempts to subjugate them. The French colonial settlers and administrators wanted to make Muslims politically irrelevant. Further, they deemed it advantageous to denigrate Islam so as to present it as a credible threat. This was complemented by laws and decrees that stifled Algerian Muslims, something that led many of them to flee the country. One of the first steps by the French government to reshape the Muslim identity of the native Algerian Muslims was to pass the Code de l'Indigéna which denied the natives ownership of land, or full citizenship rights or even French nationality by birth. Apart from setting harsher punishments for Muslims, the Code also forced them to reject Islamic courts in favor of French secular courts.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the process of 'othering' Muslims in France can be traced back to the French rule in Algeria post colonization. Abdulaziz Ahmet Yasar, in his research examines the French hatred towards Muslims during the colonial era, and [writes](#): "they (Muslims) were seen as too attached to their religion and unqualified to participate in a state built on strict adherence to an ideology built on the separation of state and church, known as laicite."

### **The Impact of 9/11 and the Spectre of 'the Muslim Terrorist'**

The dastardly 9/11 attacks and the recently concluded U.S.-led Global War on Terror to avenge 9/11 gave impetus to the menace of Islamophobia. Apropos of Europe, it is reasonable to argue that Islamophobia increased exponentially post-9/11. Europe, once reputed for its commitment to pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law, has witnessed gross marginalization, targeting, and victimization of Muslims since 9/11. Incidents of violence against Muslims have not only increased but also become more brazen, simply because communities in Europe have conflated Islam with terrorism. From firebombing cultural centers and mosques to stabbing Muslims, Europe has seen it all. Ironic and unfortunate as these events have been, such behaviors and actions are not only acceptable but also replicated in states across Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Radical right-wing populism is intrinsic to the rise of Islamophobia in Europe. Its supporters use the 'Clash of Civilizations' refrain to negatively frame Muslims and Islam. Taking Denmark as a quintessential case study, [Kristin VandenBelt](#) dissects how the said argument has been used to mount a campaign against Muslims and Islam. He asserts that in "all aspects of their message, the Danish People's Party (DF) paints Islam as an evil, primitive civilization that is a threat to the Western culture and values that Danes, as proud members of 'the West,' hold dear."<sup>11</sup> That most Europeans feel strongly about their being Westerners is one of the reasons why they are apprehensive of the so-called threat from Islam. Moreover, what governs the approach of the European countries towards Muslims are apprehensions about radical Islamic terrorism. For instance, the European Union (EU) [fears](#) that second and third-generation Balkan Muslims will wade into Islam-infused terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Across Europe, Muslims have been castigated; their presence in Europe has often been identified as an inveterate threat to the region. Lashing out at Islam, President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman said "radical Islam, which is funded by Saudi Arabia, is spreading throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, ISIS black flags are already flying in several towns."<sup>13</sup> According to a 2019 report, 22% of the EU voting population, ahead of the polls for the European Parliament, dubbed Islamic



radicalism the biggest threat to Europe's peace, stability, and security.<sup>14</sup> The perceived threat from Muslims and Islam has been firmly ensconced in the anti-Muslim tirade. If anything, it is one of the major propellants of Islamophobia in Europe.

## Refugees, Islamophobia, and the Image Problem

Interlinked with terror and identity-related concerns about Muslims is the increasing European discomfiture with refugees and migrants. It has been observed that Islamophobic sentiments have increased ever since the beginning of the refugee crisis in 2015. According to report by Pew Research Center on Europe's Growing Muslim Population, "even if all migration into Europe were to immediately and permanently stop – a "zero migration" scenario – the Muslim population of Europe still would be expected to rise from the current level of 4.9% to 7.4% by the year 2050. This is because Muslims are younger (by 13 years, on average) and have higher fertility (one child more per woman, on average) than other Europeans." These statistics are often cited to further constrict space for Muslim refugees.<sup>15</sup>

Some European countries, citing security reasons, have refused to accept Muslim refugees. In recent years, European leaders have been more insistent in articulating that they prefer hosting non-Muslim refugees. However, it is important to note that, even before the refugee crisis erupted in Europe, influential public office holders spoke against accommodating Muslim refugees.<sup>16</sup>

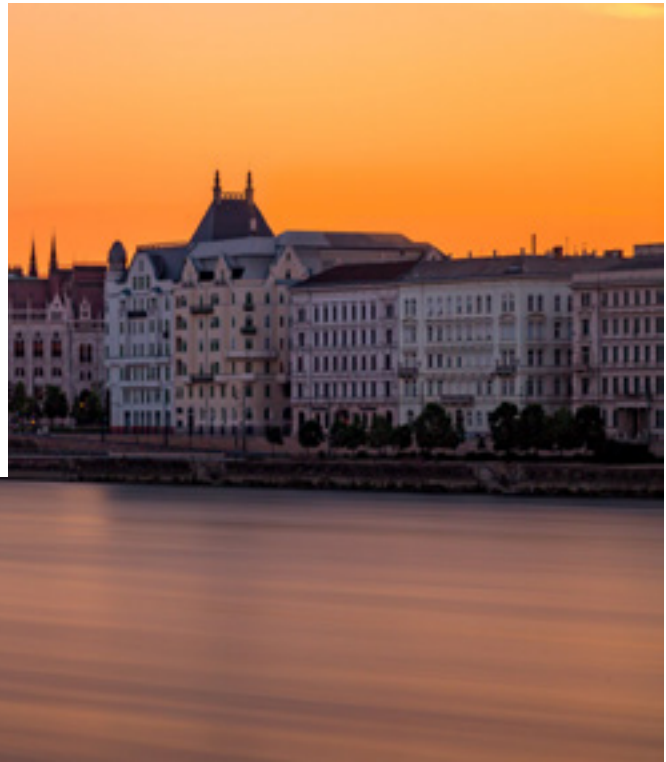
One of the episodes that highlighted how pervasive and deep-seated Islamophobia had become in Europe was the 2015 refugee crisis. Despite the fact that the numbers of Muslims in Eastern Europe are negligible, Islamophobic attitudes were central to the debate on refugees in that region. For instance, in countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic, prospective Muslim refugees were not only vilified but also termed as potential terrorists.<sup>17</sup> The anti-migrant view gained great traction amongst publics across Europe. According to a 2017 survey, approximately 55% of people across 10 European countries wanted a complete ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries.<sup>18</sup>

It is instructive to note that the anti-migrant stand is not a newer shade of Islamophobia. In fact, Europe has been experiencing it for the past two decades and it has deep historical, social, and cultural roots. According to Fabio Perocco, one of the reasons why Europeans detest Muslim migrants is the fact that they "make up the first, largest, and most rooted non-European population which arrived and settled in contemporary Europe for work reasons."<sup>19</sup> He adds that because Muslim migrants are stronger, tougher, and less docile, they are not enthusiastically embraced.

At present, a reticence to welcome Muslim migrants is fast-becoming an important component of the burgeoning Islamophobic industry in Europe. Thus, Muslims in Europe have an image problem, something which makes perception management all the more critical.



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## **2. Islamophobia in Practice: The Rise of Anti-Muslim Prejudice**

Over the past many centuries, the mosaic of Islamophobic practices has morphed. History is replete with examples of prejudice against Muslims. Even a cursory look at the history of Muslim-West relations is enough to suggest that since the inception of Islam, Muslims have been on the receiving end of the hate for them. From the very beginning, ridiculing Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was one of the foci of the Church. Virulent campaigns were launched in a bid to distort the image of Islam in front of non-Muslims. For example, in the 7th and 8th centuries, Saint John of Damascus used his scholarly prowess to defame Islam and its symbols.<sup>20</sup> Assessing the plethora of anti-Muslim literature, Zafar Iqbal argues that in the 9th century, the “political and propagandistic onslaught on Islam as a religion and its Prophet (PBUH) seems unparalleled to even some of the literature produced in modern times.”<sup>21</sup>

Other than running smear campaigns against Islam, efforts were made to bring converts back to Christianity. With a view to roping in converts, a push was made to taint the Prophet (PBUH) and misinterpret the Holy Quran. In addition, Muslims were dealt with harshly. They were not only considered inferior citizens but also disallowed to freely practice their religion. There was no respite for Muslims as the milieu worsened by the century. Muslims were persecuted with impunity, especially in Spain. In the ensuing centuries, anti-Muslim stances became entrenched in Western social and political settings. The 20th and 21st centuries saw increasing acceptance and institutionalization of hatred and prejudice against Muslims.

It is noteworthy that Islamophobia is being promoted and spread through a variety of means. Apropos of Islamophobic behaviors in Europe, two things are significant. One, disparaging Islam and Muslims is becoming an integral part of the politics of populism in Europe. Two, the avenues to

infuse hatred towards Muslims are increasing given the weaponization of social media platforms. It would not be wrong to argue that safe spaces for Muslims are shrinking. In other words, the environment is propitious to disseminate Islamophobia. According to the 13th OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia, the way Islamophobia has been bolstered “is particularly alarming these days, for it has emerged as a new form of racism characterized by xenophobia, negative profiling and stereotyping of Muslims.”<sup>22</sup>

Muslims in Europe confront a number of problems, with reports pointing to a rise in attacks against them. Incidents that fall in the ambit of hate crimes have become commonplace across Europe. Other than being abused and humiliated publicly, Muslims have also been physically assaulted. For example, in Belgium, there has been a spike in stabbings, forced removal of headscarves, and physical violence.<sup>23</sup>

Islamophobia is also being espoused by an array of media outlets and social media platforms. By virtue of being connected to power structures in the European polity, media organizations have accentuated the Islamophobic content. Media’s coverage on Islam and Muslims in Europe is focused on presenting them as a security challenge to Europe. Similar to how Islam was projected in yesteryears, print and electronic media channels are reinforcing the clash of civilizations thesis and presenting Islam as a so-called challenger to other religions.<sup>24</sup>

The Internet is becoming one of the easiest conduits of carrying out Islamophobic actions. The Internet has been instrumental in floating mendacious conspiracy theories about Muslims and Islam. Online Islamophobia has gained prominence ever since the outbreak of COVID-19. The European Islamophobia Report 2020 outlines that, in some countries, with the forced retreat of everyday life to the intimate private sphere, physical Islamophobia has decreased. Yet, at the same time, Islamophobia has moved to the private sphere and is being especially in social media.”<sup>25</sup>

The justice and education systems across Europe have not been immune to the forces of Islamophobia. In fact, Islamophobes have used these spheres against Muslims. Over the years, European lawmakers have legislated against Muslims. The ratification of the controversial anti-separatism bill in France, coupled with bans and other kinds of restrictions on Muslims, is aimed at institutionalizing Islamophobia in Europe. That said, it is heartening to observe that some legislators in Europe have criticized discriminatory laws, and termed them as a blow to religious freedom and democracy. In Switzerland, for example, the Federal Supreme Court, rejecting an appeal by advocates for banning hijab, confirmed that wearing hijab was protected and allowed under the Swiss constitution.<sup>26</sup>

As for education, it has become a profitable medium to make Islamophobia more lethal. As per a recent study conducted in France, the scourge of Islamophobia has permeated French educational institutions. The said study revealed that education directors of 607 graduate programs in 19 universities across France were less forthcoming and responsive towards Muslim applicants.<sup>27</sup> Educational institutions across Europe are fast-becoming a forum for ridicule, intolerance, and prejudice. According to a 2021 study authored by Sofia Akel, “5.4% of students felt that their contributions to academic discussions were disproportionately scrutinized due to prejudices held against their religion.”<sup>28</sup>



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### 3. Islamophobia and Populism

With the institutionalization of Islamophobia manifested in its expanded outreach, it is reasonable to predict that Islamophobia-induced terrorism will also increase going forward. Gory acts of terrorism against Muslims, like the one that took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, may become more frequent. This is primarily because of Islamophobia and right-wing populism.


Characterized by ultra-nationalism and resentment against Muslim migrants, far-right tendencies and populism are becoming influential variables in not only the European polity but also in the wider Islamophobic ecosystem. Europe's pandering to the right has changed the pace and magnitude of Islamophobia. Far-right groups and bodies in Germany, for instance, were apprehended and charged for planning to launch terrorist attacks in Berlin. In the context of Islamophobia, it is alarming to note how German politicians are looking at ways to tinker with Islam.

Growth of a united front against Muslims and political Islam has taken shape of a political alliance in Europe. The OIC Observatory, in its 13th report on Islamophobia, made a mention of how stifling Muslims across the spectrum was critical to establishing a governing coalition in Austria. Populism and right-wing politics have been critical to solidifying Islamophobic traditions and practices across Europe. In this regard, it would be instructive to understand the role of the Danish People's Party (DF) in Denmark. Founded in 1995, DF has continually expressed its animosity and abhorrence towards Islam and Muslims. In addition to positing Islam as a big threat, DF was at the center of the highly controversial blasphemous cartoon episode in 2005. Rather than condemn the release of blasphemous caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), DF used them in its election campaign. Apart from Denmark, a Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilder has boisterously insulted Islam and Muslims, with a view to gaining electoral support. He championed freedom of speech and expression, by arguing that it must prevail over violence and Islamic edicts.

Therefore, it is abundantly clear that populism and an ongoing drift towards the right have greatly vitiated the situation for Muslims in Europe. Right-wing political parties and dispensations, especially in Austria, have exposed Muslims to more hatred and violence, something which does not augur well for pluralism and democracy in Europe.

#### Islamophobic Narratives in Hungary

Home to a very small Muslim population, Hungary finds itself in the grips of Islamophobia. Unlike some European countries, Hungary was not known for having negative views about Muslims. Generally, the attitude towards Islam and Muslims was friendly. Interestingly, despite the fact that Hungary was occupied by the Ottomans for a good part of 150 years, Hungarians do not see that period through a religious lens. Discussing how Hungarians remember the Ottoman rule, Omar Sayfo writes that, it is "not remembered as a Christian-Muslim conflict, but rather a foreign occupation, in which religion



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played a secondary role at best.”<sup>29</sup> After the Ottoman era, Hungarians did not look askance at Islam. Hungarian scholars not only empathized with Islam but also helped build diplomatic relations with Muslim countries.<sup>30</sup> During the Cold War, Hungary built healthy political and economic relations with Middle Eastern countries. This was evidenced by the fact that thousands of students from Algeria, Syria, and Iraq studied in Hungarian universities. Though the end of the Cold War brought about a number of economic changes in Hungary, Islamophobia was not a force to reckon with in that country in the 1990s and 2000s. However, even though Islamophobia was not dominant in Hungary, it was certainly not absent altogether in the public discourse.

### **The Political Context and the Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Hungary**

The proliferation of Islamophobic attitudes and approaches in Hungary cannot be divorced from the changes that the country's political landscape has witnessed in the past two decades. Here, it is important to mention that the linkage between the emergence of the far-right and Islamophobia is not simple. Far-right groups in Hungary have changed their views about Islam over the years. In the post-Cold War period, Hungary has seen politics move towards the right. Established in 1993, the István Csurka-led Hungarian Life and Justice Party (MIÉP) pushed conspiracy theories on the deteriorating economic conditions of Hungary. Those conspiracy theories were directed at Jews and Israel, as evidenced by the very many parallels drawn between the beleaguered Hungarians and Palestinians.<sup>31</sup> Far-right groups like MIÉP even considered groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah as freedom fighters.<sup>32</sup> A focus on berating Israel meant that Hungarian Muslims were not seen as potential targets. Fast forward to the mid-2000s, the Jobbik party, after supplanting MIÉP as the main far-right force in Hungary, established strong relations with Muslim countries. It was because of its fondness of Islam<sup>33</sup> that the Jobbik party was detached from other far-right parties.

The foregoing merits this all-important question: what accounts for Hungary's fast-paced descent into Islamophobia? A number of political factors explain this puzzle. Political vagaries have successfully altered the dominant narratives of far-right groups in Hungary. No longer do far-right groups speak vehemently in favor of Islam and the need for engaging with Muslim countries. Far-right parties have borrowed anti-Islam tropes from far-right parties in Western Europe. This drastic change has been brought about by skillful manipulation of the political system by the current coalition government of the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz Party), and the Christian Democrats (KDNP). This two-party coalition has made several wholesale changes to the Hungarian political structure. According to a report released by the Brookings Institution, the government, by regulating the electoral system and the media, has consolidated control over both politics and the public discourse.<sup>34</sup> At the heart of the government's bid to assert absolute control lies the curtailment of media freedoms since media houses are now given editorial guidelines to follow.

It is interesting how the Fidesz Party has enhanced its Christian-nationalist profile over the years. The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has often projected himself as the sole defender of Christian Europe.<sup>35</sup> Fidesz's decision to give more space to its junior partner, KDNP, has proved critical to allowing Islamophobia to make headway in Hungary. It has introduced, in the Hungarian polity, university students who are committed to protecting Christianity. They have now become the face of Islamophobia in Hungary given that they consider Islam as the principal threat to not only Christianity but also to the overall European security.<sup>36</sup>

With political opposition virtually disarmed, the Hungarian government ensconced itself in a position to exploit societal inhibitions for political gains. Taking advantage of a general increase in the level of xenophobia in Hungary, Fidesz has framed refugees and migrants as enemies. This has directly affected the framing of Islam and Muslims. Due to the impregnable government-media nexus in Hungary, it is becoming easier to talk against Islam in the context of efforts to protect the Hungarians. What has further facilitated the entry of anti-Muslim material in Hungary is the near-absence of Muslim voices. It would be safe to say that present-day Hungarians are neither engaging with Islam or Muslims nor do they have any appetite or curiosity for it. This reality is a boon for Islamophobes, whose tendentious depictions of Islam go unchallenged.

Pro-government and far-right groups in Hungary are fairly unanimous in characterizing Islam. The religion is associated with violence, terrorism, and fundamentalism. The government uses the media to good effect, with a view to discrediting Islam and Muslims.<sup>37</sup> Concomitantly, the Hungarian government has taken a tough stand against migrants and refugees. Fidesz has dovetailed its distaste for Muslims with that for migrants. Defending his country's refusal to partake in EU's resettlement program for refugees, the Hungarian premier launched a scathing verbal attack on Muslims, calling refugees as Muslim invaders.<sup>38</sup>



In sum, Islamophobia is garnering attention and support in Hungary due to the erosion of the symbols of democracy. They, among other things, include a vibrant opposition, an objective media, and a robust process of accountability. The Fidesz-KDNP duo has, by virtue of ruling the roost, is overseeing the incursions of Islamophobia in Hungary.

## Islamophobic Behaviors in Hungary

The effects of the spread of Islamophobia in Hungary have, for now, been less deleterious. This is evidenced by the fact that there are no legal bans on any of the Islamic rituals. However, that does mean that Muslims do not bear the brunt of Islamophobia in Hungary. Verbal and physical attacks on Muslims have increased, and what is dismal is the lack of reportage on hate crimes against them. There are news reports of Muslims being flayed publicly. Incidents of spitting, slapping, and shoving have become far more frequent. There has also been an increase in discriminatory and insulting behaviors in the academic and work environments in Hungary. In the academic domain, two developments have taken place and are therefore noteworthy: the quantum of religious studies in curricula has increased, as evidenced by the inclusion of mandatory readings by right-wingers and a revisionist discourse, and an absence of critical insight on Islam. Ostensibly, harassment of Muslims in workplaces is minimal. However, this is not to say that Hungarian Muslims are not desirous of working in safer settings.<sup>39</sup>

As aforementioned, one of the tools that the Hungarian government has used to foster Islamophobia is the media. By effectively co-opting the media, the ruling coalition has been able to establish a direct linkage between Muslim refugees and terrorism. According to the European Islamophobia Report, media outlets, such as Hír Tv, Echo Tv, and 888.hu, “typically depict Muslims as having a hand in terror-related incidents, using their scope and authority to fuel a fake news campaign that draws attention to the securitization of the country.”<sup>40</sup> Local media houses have reportedly aired blasphemous content. The Hungarian Islamic Community has complained that films and interviews in the Hungarian language mock Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).<sup>41</sup> Additionally, social media has been vigorously used to incite violence against Muslims. The following post is emblematic of how Muslims are being labelled as terrorists: “Shoot 99 of them with bullets drenched in pig’s blood. Let the 100th go, and tell the others what happened. That will teach them.”<sup>42</sup>

Such attitudes are enabled by a political structure that emboldens and does not penalize hate mongering, othering, and anti-Muslim sentiments. Hungarian leaders, especially PM Orbán, have encouraged other countries to pull the plug on Muslims. PM Orbán has not only lauded Austria’s fight against ‘political Islam’ but has also sought Austria’s assistance to do the same in Hungary.<sup>43</sup>

If an understanding has to be developed about Europe’s drift towards Islamophobia and what needs to be set right in order to counter it effectively, a brief look at the developing landscape in Hungary’s neighborhood would be instructive.

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## European Islamophobic Narratives: The Regional Context

Hungary shares borders with seven important European countries and Islamophobic proclivities have translated into different kinds of actions in these countries. The variation in the scale, intensity, and reach of Islamophobia in Hungary's neighborhood makes for an important study, one that helps shape better responses to counter this rampant phenomenon.

### Austria

Austria has witnessed an explosion of Islamophobia under the far-right. Instances of violence against Muslims have increased manifold in recent years. Until 2019, when the Austrian People's party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) were running a coalition government, hate crimes against Muslims had doubled.<sup>44</sup> While the end of the alliance did put a hold on some anti-Muslim projects, it did not do much to fundamentally alter the environment in favor of Muslims. As a matter of fact, two of the conditions for a political compromise between Sebastian Kurz and the Greens were to ban headscarves until girls turn 14 and take illegal immigrants to task.<sup>45</sup> As part of Kurz's fight against political Islam, the Austrian government has taken a number of steps to strangulate Muslims. With a view to increasing surveillance of Muslims living in Austria, the government published a map marking the particulars of more than 620 mosques, associations, and officials. The move is widely being seen as anti-Islam, something which the government has not denied outright.<sup>46</sup> Pundits believe that such measures, aimed at chasing an imagined threat, would not make Austria any safer.<sup>47</sup> Islamophobic behaviors are witnessed everywhere in the Austrian society. With reference to anti-Muslim rules in professional environments, it is important to note that Muslim women are disallowed to represent the state if she decides to wear a hijab. In academic settings, Muslims have been browbeaten and abused.<sup>48</sup>

### Croatia

The Republic of Croatia has recognized Islam as an equal religion. This is identified as one of the reasons as to why it has not seen an increase in Islamophobic incidents. According to the European Islamophobia Report, while Islamophobic episodes are far and few, it is difficult to ascertain their complete extent. The Report asserts that it is mainly because of a general unease in expressing religious beliefs.<sup>49</sup> The lack of confidence to report cases of discrimination could, in and of itself, represent trust issues that Muslims might have with the government. That said, voices claim that textbooks on language and religion, in a way, encourage the 'othering' of Muslims. As for the problems in dispensing justice, it has been observed that prosecuting hate crimes is rather difficult in Croatia. Studies show that anti-Islam content was promoted on social media, only to be noted by authorities in Croatia.<sup>50</sup>



## Romania

Romania is home to more than 60,000 Muslims, making them less than 1% of the country's total population. The impediments and barriers to integrating them do not feature prominently in political disquisitions. While anti-Islam rhetoric and activists were present, especially in the cyber domain, their visibility was low.<sup>51</sup> Like in Croatia, the full extent of the ingress of Islamophobia in Romania cannot be determined due to the unwillingness to report cases of hate crimes and discrimination. That said, despite the general absence of discriminatory practices in academic institutions, isolated episodes of criticism of Islamic religion and beliefs have been reported. For example, in a radio show, a Vice-Dean at a varsity argued that Islam views women as a pleasure-seeking object. However, not only was the radio channel sanctioned but also the Vice-Dean was forced to relinquish his position, which is encouraging in comparison to other countries in the region.<sup>52</sup>

## Serbia

Serbia's socio-political dynamics, coupled with an apparent revival of ideas like 'Greater Serbia', do not bode well for the future of Muslims in that country. With expansionist tendencies, Serbia's attempts to reimagine its genocidal approach of the past will not make Muslims comfortable<sup>53</sup> given that Serbia has baggage that it must carry as far as its relations with Muslims are concerned. However, in order to assess the current level and nature of Islamophobic activities in Serbia, official statistics are needed. And due to the unavailability of data, studies have relied on interviews. Recently, vigilantes have attacked Muslims, forcing them to close their businesses. Incidents of forced bakery-closures gained a lot of press, showing how incendiary the situation could become going forward.<sup>54</sup> Muslims have been discriminated against in their workplaces, owing to their religion. This is evidenced by the fact that the "highest unemployment rates and the lowest monthly income rates are still found in the Sandzak and Presevo regions of Serbia, where majority of the population is comprises Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians."<sup>55</sup> In the field of education, Muslims are troubled by a lack of textbooks in the Bosniak and Albanian languages, a predicament that forces children to study in the Serbian language as their only choice.<sup>56</sup>

## Slovakia

Islamophobia in Slovakia can be ascribed to social media postings, political sloganeering, and conspiracy theories. Once again, due to lack of data, it is difficult to clearly identify Islamophobic trends in various spheres of life in Slovakia. That said, due to the negative portrayal of the Ottomans in textbooks, the image of Islam is tainted. This is something that right-wing parties have taken advantage of, with a view to undermining Islam in general.<sup>57</sup> Anti-Islam slogans were used in election campaigns for the European Parliament by various political parties. It is unfortunate that media projections were critical in reinforcing stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.



## Slovenia

For the past couple of years, new right-wing forces have entered the political fray in Slovenia. This development has, once again, brought to the fore the idea that Islam and Europe are incompatible. Muslims do face some problems in workplaces, such as those that result from their having no legal basis to practice their religion while at work. However, it is heartening to note that schools are becoming more amenable to ideas of adopting a multicultural curriculum. Also, schools have increased possibilities for Muslims to have halal food as an option.<sup>58</sup> Media outlets, however, criticized this initiative, arguing that, in public schools, Muslim way of life must not be adopted.<sup>59</sup>

## Ukraine

Islamophobia has been a latent phenomenon in Ukraine projected through social networks. Cases of physical violence are rare and not linked to a systematic anti-Muslim campaign. Also, Ukrainian Muslims have rejected terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, taking pro-Ukrainian positions. While there has been no persecution of Muslims, tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which arose as a result of the Crimean war, have hurt Muslims. Some episodes highlight the trepidations associated with Muslims. For instance, conversion to Islam and wearing of hijab have resulted in terminations from jobs in certain cases. In addition to this, it is now becoming increasingly difficult to obtain a refugee certificate, or residency in Ukraine if you are a Muslim. After Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Islamic holidays will become state ones, non-Muslims expressed dissatisfaction on social media outlets. Objections to this decision morphed into hatred for Muslims.<sup>60</sup>

While Muslims have not faced systemic oppression in Ukraine, they fear that the ongoing war between Moscow and Kyiv will be a bane for them. This concern is rooted in how the Russians treated Crimean Tartars after they annexed parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Due to the very many instances of repression against them, Crimean Tartars fled to Ukraine. According to influential Muslim figures in Ukraine, if Russia overruns Ukraine, Muslims, especially Tartars, will be targeted.<sup>61</sup> However, even the war-induced influx of refugees has not stopped European politicians from showing disdain towards Muslim refugees. While welcoming Ukrainian refugees, voices in countries like Spain and Bulgaria have severely criticized Muslim refugees. Right-wing political actors have sympathized with Ukrainian refugees, called them decent and educated, and dubbed Muslim ones as invaders, terrorists, and criminals.<sup>62</sup> The continued tirade against Muslim refugees should be seen as all the more troubling in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Muslim communities in Ukraine may find themselves sandwiched between an assertive Russia and an unwelcoming Europe. This, by all means, is one of the negative effects of this military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Consequently, one cannot rule out the possibility of Ukraine becoming one of the most dangerous places to live in for Muslims going forward.

An analysis of the reach and influence of Islamophobia in Hungary's neighborhood suggests that it is a less critical factor in those countries than it is in Hungary. Austria is an exception given its being engulfed and embroiled in hardcore right-wing politics.

## **The Counter-Islamophobia Narrative: Recommendations for the OIC**

There are many different manifestations of Islamophobia with which the larger Muslim community residing in Europe relates to. Anti-Islamic sentiments, anti-Muslim rhetoric, workplace harassment, media biases and stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists in popular culture, rejection of asylum, anti-Muslim refugee statements and general hate crimes against Muslims are some forms of Islamophobia. As surveyed in this report, majority of Europeans do not have an experience of interacting with a Muslim, or engaging Muslims in conversations about their religion and practices, giving rise to their reliance on stereotypical media projections. In order to generate a counter-narrative on Islamophobia, people-to-people interactions are a must where regular Muslims who are parents, neighbors, doctors, engineers, professors, businessmen, or bankers to name a few, expand their civic engagement with other religions in Europe, with a view to making conscious effort to dismantle Islamophobic typecasts.

Based on the survey of Islamophobic trends in Hungary and its neighborhood conducted in this report, following are the specific recommendations made to the OIC to help generate a counter-narrative on Islamophobia, with a view to dismantling prevalent negative prejudices against Islam, Muslims, their beliefs and religious symbols.



- **Change the lexicon and invent diplomatic portfolio:** Just like the world came together to adopt the terminology of countering terrorism synonymous with universal aversion to terrorism, OIC countries must adopt ‘countering Islamophobia’ with the same resolve and mainstream it. One way of generating new narratives is for the OIC countries to come together and appoint Ministers for Countering Islamophobia in each member country. Until and unless OIC will not put a united front before the world about Islamophobia and how the Muslim world collectively considers it a problem no less than that of countering this form of terrorism particular directed at them, European attitudes in particular and worldwide phobia against Islam will not change. The Ministry for Countering Islamophobia should have a desk in their embassies in European countries.
- **Criminalize Islamophobia:** In order to combat Islamophobia, the OIC member states must legislate anti-Islamophobic laws in their respective countries to discourage the use of Islamophobic language and attitudes. Once the European tourists visiting any of the 54 member states will familiarize themselves with laws against Islamophobia, they will not only respect the Muslims in the visiting countries, but will also develop a sense of respect for Muslims living in their own communities and neighborhoods in Europe. Just like Holocaust denial is now a criminal offense by law in more than sixteen countries in EU, Islamophobia needs to be criminalized too, and OIC countries can play a critical role in this legislation.
- **Reconciliation of Islam and Secularism:** It is not enough for the OIC countries to make statements that Islam is a peaceful religion. It must be demonstrated that secularism and religious values can co-exist and lead to societal harmony. It must be intimated to the European non-Muslim communities that secular ideals are not in conflict with Islamic values and are not a threat to Islam in general. In common parlance, in most OIC countries, secularism is synonymous with ‘un-religious’ automatically translating it into an idea which is ‘un-Islamic’. Countering Islamophobia is a war of narratives and unfortunately, its first casualty is language. OIC needs to mainstream this debate in all member states that secularism is not anti-religion and more so, not anti-Islam. In order for the West to lower its guard, and make an attempt to understand the true spirit of Islam, an effort needs to be made to rid the discourse of wrongful meanings leading to wrongful interpretations, connotations and negative image-building. The current Islamophobic discourse categorizes Muslims as anti-secular and thus anti-freedom and anti-individual values. The Islamic world needs to debate back, break free from this image and generate a discourse on Islam not being anti-secular, anti-democracy, anti-liberal or anti-modernity. This discourse could begin by raising awareness in each OIC member state, at the national level, then collectively OIC countries debating it among themselves, finally leading to a dialogue with the non-Muslim world. Academic research on developing peace models of intercultural harmony are the need of the time.
- **Fight the Stereotypes on Social Media:** Some individuals, groups and entities have given Islam bad press and there is no denying this fact. OIC must come together to condemn terrorism in all its forms, and combat Islamophobic attitudes, hate speech and harassment against Muslims in public and private spaces through social media. There must be a concerted effort and dedicated social media strategy designed by the OIC to counter Islamophobia, with fresh slogans and discourse on Islam being the religion of peace and peaceful co-existence, distancing Muslims from the stereotypes.

If changing the attitude of an entire generation is the goal, then there is no place other than social media which needs to be filled with the counter narrative on Islamophobia. OIC's message to the world through social media campaigns on zero tolerance for Islamophobia must be loud, visible and unambiguous.

- **Reverse the trends of Muslim Migration and Refugees:** In Islam, the concept of migration refers to the helplessness of a community forced to leave their land for a better future elsewhere. Be it escaping autocratic rule, or lack of employment opportunities or absence of the truly Islamic welfare state where human security is supreme above any other political interests of the ruling elite, OIC countries display high percentages of human migration, seeking asylum or refugee status in the developing world. In most cases, brain drain is also a prevalent trend due to lack of strategies to retain talent within OIC countries. If OIC prioritizes human security, it will signal its resolve of retention and curbing migration trends which is a bane for the European countries. In the long run, lesser number of Muslim migrants and refugees will help address some of the challenges European countries are facing resulting in hate-speech and anti-Muslim sentiments.

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