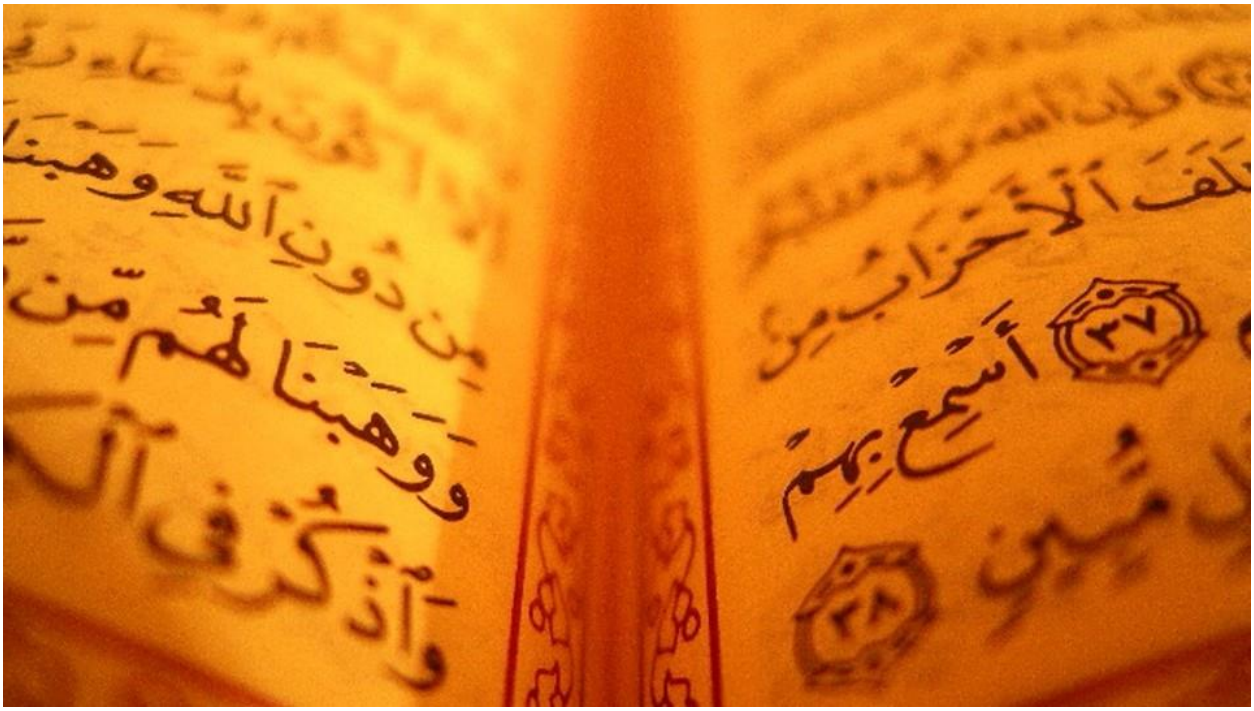
What Does 'Islamophobia' Actually Mean?

A brief history of a provocative word

By Tanya Basu



When I recently asked Sam Harris what he thought of the word 'Islamophobia,' he directed me to a tweet that noted the following: "Islamophobia. A word created by fascists, & used by cowards, to manipulate morons."

"I don't think [the tweet] overstates the case by much," said Harris, the atheist author whose sweeping critique of Islam (and the "meme of Islamophobia") on *Real Time With Bill Maher* has sparked a broader

debate about Islamophobia—both the phenomenon and the term itself—in the age of ISIS and Islamist politics.

“Islam is not a race, ethnicity, or nationality: It’s a set of ideas," Harris told me. "Criticism of these ideas should never be confused with an animus toward people. And yet it is. I’m convinced that this is often done consciously, strategically, and quite cynically as a means of shutting down conversation [on] important topics.”

Some chart the popularization of the term 'Islamophobia" back to a series of studies in the 1990s by the Runnymede Trust, a left-leaning British think tank. A 1997 reported entitled “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All” documented “closed” views of Islam in the U.K., including perceptions of the religion as a single bloc that is barbaric, sexist, and engaged in terrorist activities.

But Robin Richardson, who edited the Runnymede report and currently works for the educational consultancy Insted, maintains that the think tank simply borrowed the term from previous usage. In a recent paper, he traces the phrase to Alain Quellien's use of the French word *islamophobie* in 1910 to criticize French colonial administrators for their treatment of Muslim subjects.

Richardson claims that post-colonial theorist Edward Said was the first to use the word in English, when he wrote in 1985 about “‘the connection … between Islamophobia and antisemitism’ and criticized writers who do not recognize that ‘hostility to Islam in the modern Christian West has historically gone hand in hand’ with antisemitism and ‘has stemmed from the same source and been nourished at the same stream.’”

“In its earliest historical usage, the term ‘Islamophobia’ described prejudice and hostility towards Muslims—not an ‘irrational fear of

Islam,"' Nathan Lean, author of *The Islamophobia Industry*, told me. "Critics of the term often lambast it on the basis of an etymological deficiency, insisting that it thwarts the possibility of critiquing Islam as a religion while simultaneously suggesting the presence of a mental disorder on the part of those who do."

"Religions differ, and their specific differences matter," Harris explained. "And the truth is that Islam has doctrines regarding jihad, martyrdom, apostasy, etc., that pose a special problem to the civilized world at this moment in history."

"We deny this at our peril," he added.

Harris and Maher, who has issued similar criticisms of Islam, have their defenders, but others have challenged their claims. In a testy exchange on CNN, for instance, the author Reza Aslan described Maher's views on Islam as "facile" and called out the media for referring broadly to "Muslim countries" when discussing violent extremism and the oppression of women. "[In] Indonesia, women are absolutely 100 percent equal to men," he observed. "In Turkey, they have had more female representatives, more female heads of state in Turkey than we have in the United States."

"We're not talking about women in the Muslim world, we're using two or three examples to justify a generalization. That's actually the definition of bigotry," Aslan said.

But is the term 'Islamophobia' itself, with its connotations of a psychological disorder, an offensive word?

"Offensiveness is in the eye of the beholder," said William Downes, a linguist with a focus on religion at York University in Toronto. "The key question is offensive to whom?

“The term might be offensive if it reminded the Islamic community ... that there were those in society who actively disliked it and feared it because they identify it with a terrorist threat or an existential threat,” he continued, noting that using the word contributed to “othering” Muslims as a group.

Richardson, for his part, regrets employing the term in his 1997 Runnymede report and has outlined eight problems with using 'Islamophobic' as a descriptor of an anti-Islamic individual or activity. Characterizing someone as an Islamophobe, he says, implies that they are "insane or irrational," which impedes constructive dialogue, obscures the context-specific roots of the observed hostility, and erroneously portrays anxiety about Muslims as a minority condition.

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“The key phenomenon to be addressed is arguably anti-Muslim hostility, namely hostility towards an ethno-religious identity within western countries (including Russia), rather than hostility towards the tenets or practices of a worldwide religion,” Richardson writes. “The 1997 Runnymede definition of Islamophobia was ‘a shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam—and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.’ In retrospect, it would have been as accurate, or arguably indeed more accurate, to say ‘a shorthand way of referring to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims—and, therefore, dread or hatred of Islam.’”

Aslan, meanwhile, is supportive of the term. “It’s the proper word,” he told me. “As with any kind of bigotry, anti-Muslim sentiment is not based on a rational response but an emotional one. Bigotry is a result of fear. Speaking about it as a phobia makes sense.”

“Bigotry resides in the heart, not brain,” he continued. “The problem with an emotional response like fear is that it is impervious to data and information. I would say that all racism and bigotry is phobic in one sense or the other. To me, Islamophobia is a neologism that works.”

In fact, Aslan prefers “phobic” to the related “anti” construction. “To use a word like 'anti-Semitism' doesn’t make sense, because you can be a Jew and not a Semite, [and] be a Semite and not a Jew,” he said. “Like any word, ['Islamophobia'] is ultimately based on a consensus by the people who use it, and despite the fact that anti-Semitism is not a proper word to literally describe vitriol against Jews, it’s come to mean it. In other words, it might not be the most precise term, but it works.”

Nathan Lean isn't enthusiastic about the term, but he hasn't come across a better alternative. “Do some people use the word ‘Islamophobia’ irresponsibly? Sure,” he said. “Does that mean that the word is bad on the whole or that we should ditch it? Absolutely not. Doing so denies the existence of a real threat facing Muslim communities by handicapping the way we talk, write, and think about it. It also prevents [us] from finding a more equitable way forward.”

Tanya Basu, a former editorial fellow with *The Atlantic*, is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn who writes about how we interact with each other