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# Muslims and Jews should be fighting hate together

## Anti-racism built on Muslim and Jewish identity entrenches the differences that drive Muslims and Jews apart

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Islamophobia became a matter of public debate in the 1990s and ever since then its congruence with antisemitism has been a recurrent theme. Scholars and public figures have emphasised the common roots of antisemitism and Islamophobia in a conception of Europe as a Christian continent in which Jews and Muslims were unwelcome strangers.

Most recently scholars have argued that Islamophobia and antisemitism have changed over time but they have changed together. Jews and Muslims were jointly expelled from Iberia in 1492. Jews were 'the other' within, Muslims the external 'other', one that appeared increasingly threatening following the Ottoman seizure of Constantinople in 1453. In the nineteenth century Jews and Muslims were jointly conceived as Semites, bound by a linguistic and racial heritage as well as by Abrahamic monotheism. Arabs were Jews on horseback, as Disraeli wrote. It was only in the twentieth century, following the alliance in 1917 between the British Empire and Zionism, James Renton suggests, that European notions of Muslims and Jews enter a new period: Jews ceased to be seen as 'Oriental' and Islam was reconceived as a political problem.

These efforts to draw Muslims and Jews closer together in the present by highlighting the combined development of antisemitism and Islamophobia are a political intervention as well as an intellectual project. By insisting on the histories and challenges shared by Muslims and Jews, scholars and activists have pushed back against the currents that pull them apart.

Distance between Jews and Muslims is created by their divergent social experiences. 50% of UK Muslims live in poverty, and are the religious group most likely to do so; Jews are the least likely, with just 13% living in poverty. At the upper end of the scale, Muslims are the religious group least represented in 'top professions' in England and Wales in proportion to their total number and Jews, proportionately, are the most highly represented.

Differences in social class are supplemented by political divergences. Most British Jews are now supporters of the Conservative Party, whereas Muslims tend to support Labour. Jews and Muslims tend to have contrary and, often, deeply felt allegiances in the conflicts produced by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, its policies since that date, by the Nakba, and by the development of the Palestinians' national movement.

Muslims and Jews are also represented within UK political debate in very different ways. Jews have been portrayed by political leaders as a model minority - law-abiding, aspiring, with a strong sense of collective identity that dovetails with patriotism. Muslims, by contrast, are often presented as a group that is poorly integrated and a source of sympathy for terror and for the nation's enemies.

These social and political differences are matched by the suspicion with which significant elements in the Jewish and Muslim populations regard the other. Some Jews assert that Muslims are responsible for the perceived rise in antisemitism in Britain and Europe. This suspicion of the Muslim population among some Jews is returned in kind by a significant minority of Muslims. The most recent and extensive survey of antisemitism in Britain, conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, found that most Muslims do not respond positively to antisemitic statements but, at the same time, antisemitism 'is consistently higher among the Muslim population of Great Britain than among the population in general.'

In the face of much that pulls Jews and Muslims in different and sometimes opposite directions, when scholars and activists point to the shared foundations of Islamophobia and antisemitism they highlight common sources of prejudice that have afflicted both groups. Nevertheless, the terms that we use in these discussions – Islamophobia and antisemitism – are now employed in ways that subvert this fragile solidarity. A greater awareness of where the terms come from and how they are used will make us more aware of the pitfalls and complexity we face.

The term 'antisemitism' was first popularized in Germany in the late 1870s and 1880s. Here self-proclaimed antisemites argued that equal rights for Jews – which had been decisively achieved only in 1871 - had been a grave mistake and that the state should take urgent action to protect Germans and Germanness from Jews and Jewish influence. It was only at this point that the word 'antisemitism' was taken up by Jews and their allies. The new term spread rapidly across languages as Jews struggled to sustain and vindicate their equal rights. 'Antisemitism' meant something very specific: the attack on the Jews' legal and political rights.

Campaigns against antisemitism have always invoked a set of rights that was being violated. In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries antisemitism was identified with an assault on equal rights. This conception of antisemitism did not disappear. In the interwar years the victories of National Socialism in Germany and Austria illustrated its continuing relevance. After 1945 the campaign against antisemitism extended to Jews in the Soviet Union. For some, this was a fight to secure Jews their rights under the Soviet constitution, for others it was Jews' human rights that were at stake, and for others still, the campaign for Jews to be allowed to leave the USSR and go to Israel, was a struggle for Jewish national rights.

What then of Islamophobia? As presented by the Runnymede Trust, in its path breaking study published in 1997, Islamophobia was identified and opposed in the context of liberal and social democratic values. The harms identified then as Islamophobic make no sense without these other, positive values. 'The term Islamophobia', the Runnymede report stated, 'refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam' which leads to unfair discrimination against Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. This is the liberal characterization of Islamophobia, derived from a tradition of late twentieth century responses to racism. The root of the problem is seen to lie in prejudice and the solution found in respect for empirical diversity (which will undermine negative stereotypes) and rational debate. The goal of policy should be to promote equal opportunities and the report's key recommendation was to extend anti-discrimination legislation to cover religious as well as ethnic minorities

In the years that followed the Runnymede report's publication the charge of Islamophobia began to be articulated in a new register. Tariq Modood has reflected that the expression of grievances concerning Islamophobia in Britain is now closely connected to a rise in Muslim consciousness and a 'struggle for recognition'. Salman Sayyid similarly proposes that 'an understanding of Islamophobia in absence of an understanding of the way in which there has been a global reassertion of Muslim identity is difficult to sustain.' The universalism that shaped the attack on Islamophobia in 1997 has been supplemented by one that privileges specifically Muslim interests.

We can see something similar in the case of antisemitism. Through much of the twentieth century the meanings attached to antisemitism rested on universal ideals as well as Jewish interests – upon the ideas of equality vested in Jewish emancipation and minority rights. This concept has not disappeared but it has been supplemented and sometimes overshadowed by a concept of antisemitism that is attached to the defense of policies which privilege specifically Jewish interests. When Israel is the subject of debate in the UK the charge of antisemitism may still invoke the rights of a historically persecuted minority, such as whenever Jews are libeled as a uniquely self-interested and darkly conspiratorial force. However, when Israel is the subject, the charge of antisemitism also arises in the context of a state in which non-Jewish minorities suffer systematic disadvantage and which, since 1967, has exercised dominion over subjects beyond its internationally recognized borders. In this situation the connection between opposition to antisemitism and support for universal ideals can be hard to locate.

Taken together, these changes render common cause between the opponents of antisemitism and Islamophobia harder to build. Paradoxically, one tendency held in common among Muslims and Jews in recent decades only serves to deepen separation: namely, the politics of identity. 93% of British Jews report that Israel forms part of their identity as Jews and 90% support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. This is one potent reason why rhetorical attacks on Israel are experienced by them as attacks on their identity as Jews and are labelled as antisemitic. In the case of Islamophobia too, AbdoolKarim Vakil notes, 'Where Islam is integral to Muslim identities, the denigration of Islam impacts on Muslim respect and self-worth.'

An anti-racist politics built on the language of rights may (just) be able to negotiate the space between Jews and Muslims both in British society and as they respond to conflict in Israel/Palestine. But an anti-racist politics built on the politics of Muslim and Jewish identity will help entrench those domestic and international differences that currently drive Muslims and Jews further apart.

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