



2019_05_15_Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama Helps Shape British Government Policy Through High Profile Commentary and Policy Exchange Report *On Islamophobia*

General Secretary of the World's Largest Muslim Organization Warns Europeans Against the Horrors of Weaponizing "Tribal Identity"

Joins UK center-left and center-right opinion leaders in derailing a concerted effort "to strip Western societies of the freedom of speech required to challenge ethnic and religious supremacism"

LONDON, United Kingdom: On May 15, 2019, the British government rejected calls to adopt a vague yet sweeping definition of the term "Islamophobia," that would undermine counterterrorism policy, empower Muslim extremists, enable media censorship and open the door to criminalization of frank discourse about Islam, including the crystal-clear links between jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy and certain problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy and its historic practice.

The move follows a series of [high-profile interventions](#) in continental Europe and the UK by Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). In his latest intervention, Mr. Staquf supported a broad cross-section of British civil society and its political establishment, who warned the British government not to adopt the policy recommendations of an informal grouping of UK parliamentarians—the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPG)—that seeks to weaponize a highly problematic definition of Islamophobia as "a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."

The APPG definition would, in effect, equate criticism of Islamist ideology and practice with racist hate speech, which is subject to criminal sanctions under UK law. The NU General Secretary joined several prominent figures—including Lord Carlile of Berriew, Baroness Falkner of Margravine and Labour MP Khalid Mahmoud—in endorsing an extensive report published by the influential think tank Policy Exchange, titled *On Islamophobia*. Authored by Sir John Jenkins, former UK ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Trevor Phillips, former Chairman of the Runnymede Trust, which first popularized the term Islamophobia in the UK in the 1990s; and historian Dr. Martyn Frampton, *On Islamophobia* contains a detailed analysis of the problematic history and weaponization of this term, as well as a set of policy recommendations, including the last paragraph of its executive summary, which reads:

Finally, government should embrace those voices who are determined to challenge *both* anti-Muslim hatred *and* Islamist extremism – recognising the extent to which these two forces feed off one another, and together stand implacably opposed to a vibrant, liberal and successful multicultural Britain. It should heed the words of Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (an Indonesian Sunni Muslim organisation that claims more than 50 million members), who has urged western politicians to "stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy... The West must stop ascribing any and all discussion of these issues to 'Islamophobia'."

Opposition to the APPG definition also came in the form of an open letter (above) signed by over forty public figures, including: Professor Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and prominent atheist author; Pragna Patel, director of Southall Black Sisters; Hardeep Singh, of the Network of Sikh Organisations; Dr Lakshmi Vyas, President of the Hindu Forum of Europe; and Ade Omooba, Co-Chair of the National Church Leaders Forum. Martin Hewitt, the leader of Britain's police chiefs, added his voice to the chorus by writing to the British Prime Minister, cautioning that adoption of the APPG's definition would hinder counterterrorist policing powers and tactics.

As the Policy Exchange report states, "this issue [Islamophobia] has been politicised and instrumentalised by a number of organisations, which emerged from the broader Islamist movement," including Muslim Brotherhood-, Deobandi- and Jamaat-e-Islami-affiliated groups which embrace obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that also underlie and animate *jihadi* movements, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. In the UK, as in the United States and continental Europe, a long term, systematic campaign is being waged by an opportunistic alliance of Islamist supremacists, authoritarian Middle East governments, political activists and politicians to weaponize Islamic identity and induce Muslim communities to participate in the highly polarized and increasingly lethal "culture wars" roiling much of the West.

Nahdlatul Ulama—a 93-year-old organization which helped lead Indonesia's struggle for independence from Dutch colonialism from 1945 to '49—is the primary guardian of the ancient traditions of religious pluralism and tolerance that distinguish the world's largest Muslim-majority nation and democracy. Like many countries in the West, Indonesia is under severe threat from transnational Islamist movements that seek to revivify problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that enjoin religious supremacism and foster enmity towards non-Muslims.

Mr. Staquf—who serves as a senior advisor to Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Emissary of Indonesia's largest Islamic political party (PKB), to the world's most extensive political network (Centrist Democrat International)—explains the NU's intervention on the issue of Islamophobia as follows:

Nahdlatul Ulama is engaged in Great Britain because of the UK's role as a global opinion leader, capable of projecting strategic influence to the United States and the English-speaking world at large, both positive and negative. The steady erosion of free speech in the birthplace of Milton and John Locke undermines the international community's ability to discuss and address issues of critical importance to the future of humanity. The fate of Muslims living in the West—including how they relate to Islamic teachings and interact with non-Muslim populations—is one such crucial issue.

We believe it is disingenuous for Islamists and their political allies in the West to claim to "defend Muslims," when in fact their use of Islam as a political weapon drags Muslims into the West's increasingly bitter culture wars, and thereby threatens the long-term safety and security of this highly vulnerable minority. The history of the 20th century illustrates the horrors that often ensue when an ethnic or religious minority is portrayed as a threat to the security and way of life of a majority population. Yet these sentiments rarely emerge in a vacuum, and it is essential to understand the underlying dynamics thereof, if we wish to avoid a repetition of history.

If we truly seek to eliminate "Islamophobia," we must acknowledge an obvious truth: i.e., that contemporary animosity towards Muslims, in the West, is primarily triggered by terrorist acts and other appalling crimes committed by certain Muslims themselves, and reinforced by the historical memory of violence that characterized relations between Muslims and non-Muslims for over 1300 years.

We find ourselves in a perverse situation, wherein many who claim to be concerned about the welfare of Muslims are, perhaps unconsciously, aiding the rise of white supremacism. Instead of wielding Islam—and indiscriminate claims of racism and Islamophobia—as a political weapon, those truly concerned for the welfare of humanity would be well-advised to foster the societal consensus and political will necessary to address the very real threats posed by *all* forms of ethnic and religious supremacism.

Rather than pit one identity group against another, we urge people of good will of every faith and nation to seek common ground on the basis of our shared humanity. The alternative is not only a breakdown of civility in the West and the undermining of liberal democracy, but also the unleashing of “tribal animosities” not seen for generations in Central and Western Europe, but all too familiar to those who follow events in the Muslim world, Sub-Saharan Africa, Myanmar, Xinjiang and on Europe’s own Balkan faultline.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s intervention in the UK is integral to the strategy of the Humanitarian Islam movement headed by NU spiritual leaders Kyai Haji A. Mustofa Bisri and KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf. The movement seeks to restore *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) to its rightful place as the primary message of Islam, while positioning these efforts within a much broader initiative to reject any and all forms of tyranny, and foster the emergence of a global civilization endowed with noble character.

The Report

Foreword

by Khalid Mahmood MP

The shocking events at Christchurch, New Zealand, earlier this year brought home to many the existence of anti-Muslim bias, prejudice and discrimination and their capacity to metastasize and manifest in the most extreme and violent ways.

But as equally terrible atrocities at the Poway synagogue in California and, especially, Sri Lanka, have since reminded us, anti-Muslim bigotry does not exist in isolation. It is bound up with a broader menace from far-right, white nationalism; and it exists in symbiotic relationship with Islamist extremism. The latter cannot be erased from the equation. And we do ourselves no favours, if we try to ignore the fact that anti-Muslim hatred is continuously nourished by the scourge of Islamist extremism.

Two years ago, the UK witnessed a series of terrorist attacks that bore out this reality. 2017 was truly an *annus horribilis* for the British security services. Five terrorist attacks were carried out on British soil: four inspired by the poisonous strains of Islamist radicalism, and one at the hands of a far-right, anti-Muslim extremist.

Since then, there have been renewed efforts to combat this many-headed beast of extremism – and in recent times, there has been much focus on its anti-Muslim variants. How, then, should we deal with anti-Muslim bias, prejudice and discrimination?

Some of my colleagues on the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims have become convinced that the answer lies in the adoption of a particular definition of Islamophobia – as outlined in the report that was released late last year. This makes ‘Islamophobia’ coterminous with ‘anti-Muslim racism’. For my part, I have always retained my doubts. I applaud the sentiment and appreciate the sincerity, with which many MPs and commentators

approach this issue. But equally, I am troubled by the way in which the definition has been framed and seems intended to operate.

At the broadest level, it has long been clear to me that the term ‘Islamophobia’ has – as this excellent new Policy Exchange report makes clear – a deeply problematic history. For all that it speaks to genuine problems in our society, it is a word that has been weaponized by some of the most controversial groups within British Muslim communities in order to exert power and influence over those same communities. Organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), whose pretensions to be the representative voice of British Muslim opinion remain deeply questionable, seek to police the rhetorical and intellectual boundaries of our diverse communities. They use the cry of ‘Islamophobia’ as a ‘heckler’s veto’ to shut down alternative points of view. Moreover, in levelling the accusation they arrogate to themselves the right to define what Islam is – and what Muslims think – thereby engaging in the ultimate form of gatekeeper politics.

Until now, ‘Islamophobia’ has been a highly loaded term – used to advance a particular, sectional agenda. It has been deployed to frame the limit of what can, or cannot, be said, about Islam and Muslims – both by non-Muslims and by Muslims themselves.

It is striking that I, a proud Muslim and an MP for the city of Birmingham which has the largest Muslim community in the UK, am routinely labeled an ‘Islamophobe’ by the MCB and its fellow travelers. I know fellow Muslim parliamentarians, like Baroness Falkner, have likewise been targeted; so too have Muslim anti-extremists like Sara Khan. Doubtless, my endorsement of this report will ensure that the word is hurled at me with renewed vigour in the future. But that exactly proves my point: too often, the term ‘Islamophobia’ has been politicised to service the interests of the most controversial sections of our community.

The definition put forward by the APPG seems unlikely to reverse this situation; indeed, if anything it deepens the problem. With its vague references to “Muslimness”, it leaves open the question of what this is, and who gets to define this phenomenon? The risk must surely be that it will serve as a stalking horse for a new form of communalist, gatekeeper politics.

In addition, the attempt to conflate anti-Muslim sentiment with racism seems highly flawed. I know from discussions with my constituents – of all ethnic, national and racial backgrounds – that they simply do not see Islam as a race. The definition therefore creates confusion – when surely the point should be to bring clarity. What, then, is to be gained by this approach?

My doubts on this score have been reinforced by the potential negative consequences of embracing an expansive definition of Islamophobia. As figures like Richard Walton, the former head of Counter-Terrorism Command at the Metropolitan Police, as well as the authors of this current report, have made clear, such a definition imperils a range of government policies – as well as the operation of a free media. The latter strikes me as especially concerning, because of what it means for the broader struggle against extremism.

If we are properly to tackle radicalization and reverse the tide of extremism that is undermining the fabric of our society, then we have to be prepared to have frank and honest conversations: yes, about the prevalence of anti-Muslim bias and prejudice, which has seeped into the socio-political mainstream; but also about the serious and enduring threat posed by Islamist extremism – and the failure of too many in our communities to call out and face that threat. One of the key issues here are the causes of Islamophobia – one of which is the Islamist grievance culture put forward by groups who then insufficiently challenge extremism. This issue is not addressed by the APPG.

To return to where I began, we know that there is anti-Muslim bigotry and hatred in Britain. Organisations like Tell Mama and activists like Fiyaz Mughal have done sterling work to shine a light on the soft underbelly of such bigotry. We should challenge it wherever we find it; it can never be acceptable.

But, we must proceed with care. The first principle of trying to deal with any problem should be: do no harm. Do not make the situation worse. There is a serious danger that initiatives like that upon which the APPG is embarked, will do precisely that.

Second, we should not allow ourselves to be distracted into endless, and ultimately sterile debates about terminology and definitions. We should examine critically those who are obsessed with such issues and ask: why do they invest such energy in these issues? What is it they are really trying to achieve?

For the danger of the definitional cul-de-sac is that, far from ‘lancing the boil’ – as some seem to imagine (or indeed, delude themselves) – it will open us to unending and ever more vitriolic culture wars.

We need to look beyond all of this and instead focus on what really matters: tackling deprivation and discrimination wherever they exist; and improving the life chances and opportunities for British citizens, whether they are of a Muslim faith or not.

The authors of this report have done a remarkable job in laying out the complexities of the debate that surrounds ‘Islamophobia’ – its history, the present realities and the important challenges that policy-makers must face. This is a serious, nuanced piece of work that will enrich a debate that too often degenerates into myopic mud-slinging; and for this reason, I am delighted to commend it to you. ~ *On Islamophobia*, pp. 5-7

What is to be Done?

The fact is that there are progressive Muslim voices who are ready to challenge *both* anti-Muslim hatred *and* Islamist extremism. They understand that these two phenomena exist in a symbiotic relationship; we should make them our allies. One such voice is that of Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama (an Indonesian Sunni Muslim organisation that claims more than 50 million members) and advisor to the President of Indonesia on religious affairs, who argues that Islamophobia arises in part from the actions of Muslims themselves, motivated by their understanding and practice of Islam, notably those which can give rise to religious extremism and terrorism. As he declared in one revealing newspaper interview:

Western politicians should stop pretending that extremism and terrorism have nothing to do with Islam. There is a clear relationship between fundamentalism, terrorism, and the basic assumptions of Islamic orthodoxy. So long as we lack consensus regarding this matter, we cannot gain victory over fundamentalist violence within Islam. Radical Islamic movements are nothing new. They’ve appeared again and again throughout our own history in Indonesia. The West must stop ascribing any and all discussion of these issues to “Islamophobia.” Or do people want to accuse me—an Islamic scholar—of being an Islamophobe too?

According to Yahya Cholil Staquf, the challenge for British Muslim communities – and Muslims globally – is to re-contextualize the teachings of Islam to remove the underlying cause of Islamophobia. This can only be done, though, by allowing more – not less – space for criticism and dissent. In the wake of the Christchurch terrorist attack, Yahya repeated this call for Muslims “to address those obsolete and problematic

elements of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview, fuelling violence on both sides”. Significantly, he also took the opportunity to critique the proposals put forward by the APPG on British Muslims for a definition of Islamophobia. This was, Yahya declared, “factually incorrect and counterproductive”. The real drive of Islamophobia, he insisted was “the spread of Islamist extremism and terror”; and he called on all people “to renounce the practice of weaponising Islam for partisan advantage”, and instead to support the effort “to reform obsolete and problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, rather than bequeath a tragic legacy of hatred and violence to future generations”. The goal of government policy must therefore be to ensure that Muslim communities do not turn inwards and do not become intellectually monocultural.

~ *On Islamophobia*, pp. 86-87

“The subject of Islamophobia is both complex and controversial. That is why it is so important to have publications like this report from Policy Exchange, which is prepared to ask difficult questions and avoids simplistic answers. Efforts to legally define and restrict “Islamophobia”—whatever their intention—threaten to strip Western societies of the freedom of speech required to identify and address the very real dangers that are posed by Islamist extremism, while encouraging Muslims to identify as victims and further politicizing religious identity. Rather than take sides in the highly polarized and increasingly lethal “culture wars” currently roiling the West, we urge Muslims to join hands with people of good will of every faith and nation who seek to prevent the political weaponization of Islam and curtail the spread of communal hatred. Islamophobia will only be overcome as part of a broader effort to defeat Islamist extremism.”

~ Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary Nahdlatul Ulama Supreme Council

Media Coverage

On May 15, 2019—the day Policy Exchange released its report *On Islamophobia*, and the British government announced its decision to reject the APPG’s proposed definition of the term—preeminent center-right UK newspaper *The Times* led the day’s coverage with revelations contained in a leaked letter from Martin Hewitt, chairman of the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC), to the British Prime Minister warning that: “Anti-terrorist operations would be hampered if [Prime Minister] Theresa May bows to pressure to create an official definition of Islamophobia.” The article continued: “*On Islamophobia*, a report by the Policy Exchange think tank said that criticism of Sharia and Islamic traditions could be forbidden in Britain under the definition.” This [front-page story](#) was followed on the inside pages with an [analysis piece](#) and [editorial](#) (see extracts below), all highly critical of the “dangerously flawed” APPG recommendations.

Opponents of the term Islamophobia fear that it may be used to stifle criticism of religious beliefs and customs because it fails to distinguish between individuals and faith.

Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner, found himself branded Islamophobic when he protested against an Islamic extremist group that endorsed the killing of LGBT people, women who have sex outside marriage and Muslims who turn away from their faith. He has since said he uses the term “anti-Muslim hatred”...

Islam is practised by people of all racial backgrounds. British Muslims come from many ethnic groups such as Pakistanis, Turks, Somalis, Arabs and Bangladeshis.

The source of the term Islamophobia is murky. It has been attributed to French colonial officials in the early 20th century critiquing people who demonised Islam.

The word reached Britain in the 1980s. Both the late sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi and Fuad Nahdi, founding editor of the Muslim-interest magazine Q News, have claimed authorship, according to the Policy Exchange report *On Islamophobia* published today.

Yet it was only made popular in Britain when the Runnymede Trust produced a report in 1997, identifying the prejudice as a major problem.

Internationally, the fight against Islamophobia has been taken up by the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), made up of 57 nations, describing itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world”.

The OIC played a key role in having the United Nations recognise Islamophobia as a form of racism at a conference in Durban in 2001.

The all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims is keen for ministers to adopt a new definition of Islamophobia, which describes it as “a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. This is well-meaning, and has been adopted by Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London. Yet, as a new report by the Policy Exchange think tank argues today, the definition is dangerously flawed...

In *The Times* today, a leaked letter shows that similar concerns worry police forces. Writing to Theresa May, Martin Hewitt, chairman of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, representing police forces, warns of problems with a focus on “Muslimness”. It could, he fears, justify hostility from some Muslims towards minority groups such as Ahmadis. Mr Hewitt also tells the prime minister that counterterrorism specialists worry that the definition could lead to judicial review of terror legislation, perhaps rendering even efforts to curb the distribution of extremist material technically Islamophobic. Representatives from counterterror policing, he notes, were not invited to give evidence to the [APPG] parliamentary group.

Another leaked memo shows that the Government Equalities Office fears that the definition of Islamophobia as racial rather than religious hatred makes little sense, and will lead to legal tensions between the act and the definition. Policy Exchange suggests that the word “Islamophobia” itself has a “deeply problematic history” and notes that its use has been promoted by groups that seek laws against blasphemy. There has been no such law in England or Wales since 2008. It would be deeply regressive if one were now to arrive, focused only on one religion. A clearer definition is indeed needed, but not this one.

APPG and Islamists’ Response to the UK Government’s Decision

The British Government’s rejection of the APPG’s proposed definition of Islamophobia was met with incredulity and dismay by the parliamentary group’s leadership and its allies. Baroness Saeeda Warsi, the first female Muslim Cabinet Minister and the only Conservative Party member to hold a position in the APPG, tweeted: “I presume the government is under pressure to find a definition of #Islamophobia that ensures the Islamophobia in @Conservatives is appropriately defined as ‘not really’ Islamophobia. That’s one way of fixing #ToryIslamophobia problems.”

APPG co-chair Anna Soubry, a former Conservative MP who recently defected to join a new pro-EU political party, “The Independent Group,” [asserted](#) that claims the definition would curtail free speech “couldn’t be further from the truth,” and urged the government to “embrace it

and then get on with rooting out Islamophobia in Britain. They could do no better than to start in rooting it out in the Conservative Party itself.”

Labour MP Wes Streeting, who co-chairs the APPG with Anna Soubry, wrote an [op-ed](#) in the center-left *Guardian* newspaper accusing the government of an “abject failure to understand and tackle Islamophobia within its own ranks,” and attacking “a noisy chorus of vocal opposition making arguments in bad faith that accuse us of trying to use the term Islamophobia to shut down criticism of Islam and introduce blasphemy laws by the back door.”

Writing in the leftwing *New Statesman* magazine, Spokesman and former Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), Miqdaad Versi, [claimed](#) that the proposed definition has “no legal consequences” and that the British government “caved” to “sustained pressure from a number of influential figures who appear to not understand the definition’s wording.” MCB has been described by *The Times* as harboring “undeclared links to the Muslim Brotherhood” and by Britain’s first Muslim Interior Minister as unrepresentative, with a history of “favourable comments on extremists.” The Policy Exchange report labels MCB as one of the groups that “have done most to ‘weaponise’ the campaign against Islamophobia for their own sectional purposes – not least to have themselves recognised as the self-appointed gatekeepers of Britain’s Muslim communities.”

Conclusion

Writing in prestigious center-right British newspaper *The Telegraph*, Richard Walton—former Head of Counter Terrorism Command at London’s Metropolitan Police and Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange—[applauded](#) the government decision, providing a detailed overview of how the APPG’s proposed Islamophobia definition would: “undermine our existing counter-terror legislation”; “impair our ability as a society to debate the causes of Islamist extremism”; “result in police interventions and arrests by officers for alleged Islamophobic words and behavior”; and “potentially result in government departments, the police and intelligence agencies being branded and labelled ‘institutionally Islamophobic’ by Islamist campaign groups and others.” Given the serious and far-reaching implications of the APPG definition in undermining the ability of British society and its security services to effectively identify and address the complex array of threats linked to Islamist extremism and white supremacy, Mr. Walton believes “the definition of Islamophobia created by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims... is simply unacceptable in any modern democracy that values freedom of speech.”