

From Islamophobia to Separatism, What The War of Words Reveals

Houda Asal

At the time of publication of the original French essay that we had commissioned independent researcher Houda Asal to write, the European Council had yielded to the pressure of the French government, and had withdrawn a campaign celebrating “diversity” and individual freedom to wear the veil. The event is unfortunately symptomatic of the climate of growing hostility towards Islam and Muslims, that initially prompted us to commission Houda Asal to write a contribution tackling Islamophobia and the neologisms of “Islamism” and “separatism” that have been plaguing the public debate in France, and slowly invading the sphere of academia. This shortened English translation by Mary Foster is published here on Qalqalah قلقلة few months after a symposium confusing decolonial thought, cancel culture and the vague neologism “wokism”, took place at the prestigious Sorbonne. This tendency to confuse various polysemic, vague and sometimes new terms is at the core of Houda Asal’s text: she dissects how these attacks on language ultimately relate to stigmatizing certain people and communities dubbed dangerous by those in power. Attempting to reclaim certain terms, she highlights the misunderstandings such politicise and practices have entailed. Following a public discussion organized in May 2021 by Qalqalah قلقلة and Hostile Environment(s) with Sara R. Farris (senior lecturer in sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London) and Edwin Nasr (author and independent researcher), this text is an opportunity for Asal to discuss her own journey as a researcher and to look back on vocabularies hijacked by neoliberal and neoconservative voices, in order to call for “changing the terms of the debate [to] impose our words and our struggles.”

From Islamophobia to Separatism: Behind the War of Words

Since 2011, I have studied, mainly in an academic context, the uses of the term Islamophobia, the scope of the phenomenon and its particularities, political and legal mobilizations against this form of discrimination (especially those led by mothers banned from accompanying their children on school outings in France because they wear hijab), and hate crimes and hate speech in Quebec. I have received funding to carry out field research, published articles on the subject, participated in public talks, and done media interviews.

Ten years have passed and I observe that the question still holds an extraordinary place in France: it arouses great interest and remains a focal point of public debate; indeed, it has only increased in intensity, becoming ever more polemical and sensitive. Those who dare broach it somehow become “suspect” themselves, even when this is precisely their topic of inquiry: the connotations, shortcuts, and exclusions faced by Muslims. Whether expressed openly or implicitly, this suspicion has overshadowed my career, despite the academic rigor of my work.

For Qalqalah قلقلة, I have chosen to go beyond the neutrality that is demanded with particular insistence of us as racialized researchers working on racism. Although it is based on referenced, factual data, my

analysis here is meant to highlight the seriousness of the current situation. It is in fact urgent to reappropriate the terms of the debate as it is imposed in France, with its vacuous terminology, racist logic and perpetual blackmail. This work of reappropriation lies at the heart of this article.

Introduction

For several decades now, we have witnessed the development of a multitude of new words in French to designate, more or less explicitly, a group marked by increasingly blurry boundaries: Islamists, extremists, radicalized, “communautaristes” (essentially, advocates of closed, illiberal communities, *TN*), Islamo-leftists, separatists ... No one is able to define these neologisms but everyone understands that these internal enemies are hiding among the “Muslims of France.” These words refer to a very broad range of people: depending on the context, they may mean those who practice Islam, those who wear the hijab, those who have an “Arab-sounding” name, those who are racialized, those who live in poor neighborhoods, those who are perceived as foreigners, etc. At the same time, and to “avoid generalizing” (!), these same discourses make a point of distinguishing between “good Muslims,” who love France, and “bad Muslims,” who refuse to integrate and embrace the values of the Republic. In short, a permanent confusion is maintained between the “Muslim” group in general and all of these ill-defined words describing people with some kind of link to Islam (Islamists, fundamentalists, separatists ...).

Such connotations are precisely what fuel Islamophobia: with its speech marked by prejudice, hostility or even hatred; and, even more significantly, acts of discrimination and violence, and specific laws targeting this very ill-defined group. Starting with two examples of public debates over the word Islamophobia, which describes a social phenomenon, and the term separatism, which aims to enshrine these connotations in law, we will expose the power relations currently at play in France.

Use of the Word Islamophobia: a War between Two Camps

Let's begin at the beginning: Islamophobia is a form of racism. Like numerous other sociologists, I analyze Islamophobia through theories of racism, defining it as a social construct distinguishing groups according to markers of belonging, such as skin color, national origin and religion.

Racism is a power relationship involving:

an ideological construct (biological racism, replacement theory);

prejudices (generalizations, stereotypes, etc.);

— discriminatory practices (inegalitarian treatment, exclusions);

— institutional (police, justice system, prison, etc.) and social (insults, vandalism, assault) violence.

Islamophobia in France is part of this racial process; the legacy of orientalism, colonization, the history of immigration, and anti-Arab and anti-African racism. The term has been fiercely challenged, although in the end it has become established in everyday language. For example, as the term began to spread in French in 2003, its detractors immediately charged it with being an invention of Iranian mullahs aimed at preventing all criticism of Islam. While this false origin of the word, referring to a foreign regime already demonized by the press, has been refuted many times, its echoes continue to reverberate.

In reality, the neologism dates back to the colonial period. It was used for the first time in French at the beginning of the 20th century by administrators, ethnologists and scholars, to address the place of Muslims in Africa. The term served to describe “government Islamophobia” involving the differential treatment of Muslims in the colonial

administration; that is, the fact that they were accorded lesser rights than the French because of their religious affiliation. There was also an issue of “scholarly Islamophobia”, referring to the prejudices and orientalism of French scholars writing about Islam and the prophet.

After the 1910s and 1920s, the word all but disappeared, apart from a few rare occurrences. The more recent spread of the term Islamophobia, this time in English, dates from 1997 when a report on the issue was published by the Runnymede Trust, a British anti-racist think-tank. The study, called “Islamophobia, A Challenge for Us All,” made waves and the neologism was accordingly discussed, criticized, and analyzed in anglophone literature.

In France, the word didn’t really catch on until a few years later, during debates over the law to ban religious symbols in public schools (2003-2004). Activists, as well as academics, journalists and people directly targeted by this form of racism, took it up. In 2003, the *Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France* (Collective against Islamophobia in France, CCIF) emerged. It was to become the main organization fighting discrimination against Muslims in France.

Today, the term Islamophobia continues to face intense opposition, but in my view, this is no longer a semantic debate. It is a real war waged against the use of the word, whose goal is to deny the existence of the phenomenon and disqualify those denouncing it. Over the past several years, charges against the word have intensified. Following the 2015 attacks and then the assassination of Samuel Paty in 2020, people denouncing Islamophobia have been accused of complicity with terrorists.¹ A government body recently asserted, “Professor Samuel Paty suffered his tragic fate because he was accused of Islamophobia [...]. It is thus with clarity of vision that the State refuses to use this term ‘Islamophobia,’ which is nothing other than a weapon of the Islamists against freedom and the Republic.”

The disqualification of the word has thus taken the form of blackmail to prevent the denunciation of racist speech and laws, discrimination, and violence against people perceived as Muslim. Anyone who talks about Islamophobia becomes suspect of “complacency” with “Islamists”, of denying the dangers of fundamentalism – in short, of “complicity” with terrorists.

The dissolution of the CCIF in 2020 is undoubtedly one of the most symptomatic affairs of this process. This organization, recognized throughout Europe and internationally, published serious statistical reports on Islamophobic acts in France, offered mediation, and waged legal battles for more than 15 years. It was accused by the French government of being an “Islamist front organization” and of promoting hatred. Although the accusation was neither defined nor substantiated, it succeeded in tarnishing the organization’s reputation and resulted in its dissolution, which was eventually approved by the *Conseil d’État* (state council) on 24 September 2021.² In addition to sending a clear message to anti-Islamophobic activists, this affair stigmatized anyone who dared defend the organization.³ The list of organizations and individuals demonized in this way continues to grow. People are thus blackmailed into choosing their camp: this is no debate over opinion but the imposition of a binary ideological vision pitting those defending the Republic against those criticizing it, characterized as “anti-republican.”

Despite the blackmail and the cost of fighting Islamophobia, the word has become established, drawing its legitimacy from three sources: testimonies, independent studies, and empirical data documenting the phenomenon; reports from diverse international bodies (UN, EU, numerous NGOs); and finally, activists and Muslims who have chosen not to give in, but to continue using the term. As in all struggles for social justice, the way in which those directly affected chose to name themselves and to name the racism they face must be recognized and respected.⁴

Separatism: from State Laws to Discriminatory Practices on the Ground

Alongside challenges to the term Islamophobia, new words, such as “separatist,” have emerged. These not only circulate but have become enshrined in law, a phenomenon specific to France.

In France, religious neutrality, downstream of the 1905 law separating church and state, only affected the state and state officials. The latter were to refrain from manifesting religious opinion in the exercise of their duties; hence the ban on civil servants’ wearing “religious symbols”. In 2004, the first law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols at public schools, this time by students, broadened the ban. Following a bitter debate, this law opened a door that has not yet closed. Today we witness a proliferation of legal measures pertaining to religion, increasingly restrictive and specifically targeting Islam and women, as well as exclusions in various contexts, even where such exclusions are illegal.

For example, symbols banned in the context of the national education system were extended after 2004 to include headbands and long skirts on students, as well as on parents accompanying school outings. The debates around each of these measures, often very mediatized, triggered concrete acts of discrimination on the ground, which went far beyond the written texts. For example, the day after the 2004 law was adopted, a bus driver refused to allow a woman wearing hijab to board the bus he was driving. Moreover, the prohibitions sometimes fall into gray areas, particularly in the workplace. For instance, the Baby Loup affair was a long legal saga involving an employee of a private daycare who was fined for wearing the hijab when she returned after a leave of absence. The 2016 labor law also includes neutrality provisions allowing companies to restrict the “display of employees’ beliefs” in such an imprecise way that it is difficult to determine the extent of the resulting discrimination in the hiring process and within the company.

The separatism law is the latest child of this French legislative inflation. The original content of the law, adopted by the National Assembly in February 2021, was a jumbled grab-bag of provisions, from bans on polygamy (already banned for years) and virginity certificates (very rare in France), to stricter supervision of home schooling and control of organizations. In April, discussions in the Senate introduced several cherished demands of the far-right: a ban on religious symbols when accompanying school outings, in sports competitions, and for minors in public space; a ban on religious practice within universities; a ban on foreign flags during civil marriages; greater regulation of places of worship; the dissolution of all groups organizing non-mixed meetings (“which exclude a person based on color, origin, or belonging to an ethnicity, nation, race or specific religion from participating in a meeting”), etc.

In the final version of the law “confirming respect for the principles of the Republic” adopted on 23 July 2021 (by 49 votes against 19), the most liberticidal amendments had been withdrawn, such as the ban on minors wearing religious symbols in public space. However, the damage was done: the abandoned amendments had been discussed in the media, once again giving free rein to racist discourse. As in the past, these proposals may make a come-back and, in the meantime, give rise to concrete discriminatory practice on the ground. Moreover, this law entrenched the confusion between the threat of Islamic radicalism, the non-respect of republican principles and the visibility of Muslim religious practices. The provisions proscribing “separatism” do not target groups fomenting violent acts, but religious, cultural and political practices perceived as anti-republican. In short, this law establishes a new hollow term legitimizing a constant suspicion of Muslims.⁵

**Conclusion:
Refuse the Blackmail!**

In all Western countries (and elsewhere), we see a rise of xenophobia and Islamophobia, with the development of far right ideas and movements, sometimes very violent, which have led to deadly attacks.⁶ Similarities can be observed in different democracies; in the forms taken by reactionary ideas, imperialist policies, militarization of the police, mass surveillance, repression of political dissidence, racism in general and specifically Islamophobia. Fortunately, these very real dangers posing an ever-increasing threat to social justice and fundamental freedoms have been met with an intensification of transnational struggles and resistance to racism, sexism, and police violence—from Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, to denunciations of Israeli apartheid and imperialist wars.

In France, similar to the war-like rhetoric developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, discourses around Islamophobia and separatism adopt an alarmist tone, naming internal enemies who must be combatted. The racist connotations accompanying this rhetoric are all the more disturbing because they impose a binary on political positioning, with the perpetual blackmail of loyalty to the Republic. If you believe that Muslims are victims of discrimination or if you qualify a remark as Islamophobic, if you talk about State racism, if you evoke the colonial heritage or police violence, then you are complacent with “the enemy”: you are against secularism, against the Republic, and against the very identity of France; you become suspect, a potential separatist.

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1. In 2015, two attacks claimed by individuals linked to Al Qaida and the Islamic State threw France into mourning: in January, against the editorial board of *Charlie Hebdo* (a satirical journal that published caricatures of Mohamed) and in November, in Paris (Bataclan theatre and terraces) and in Saint Denis (Stadium of France). In 2020, a teacher was beheaded after messages circulating on social media accused him of having shown caricatures of the prophet to his class. ↩
 2. Decision by the *Conseil d'État*: CE 24 Sept. 2021, CCIF, n° 449215. The dissolution of the organization was based on 6° of Article L. 212-1 of the *Code de la Sécurité intérieure* (Domestic Security Law). ↩
 3. Joint press release signed by numerous organizations, « La dissolution du CCIF validée par le Conseil d'État : les associations en danger ! » (“The *Conseil d'État* Approves Dissolution of CCIF: NGOs in Danger!”), 08/10/2021. ↩
 4. Considered as an epistemological weapon, the legitimization of the word Islamophobia demonstrated Muslims’ ability to act, successfully establishing their voices and countering hostile speech targeting them. See Sayyid S. and Vakil A, *Thinking through islamophobia: global perspectives*, London, Hurst & Company, 2010. ↩
 5. Let’s not forget however that Charles de Gaulle also used the rhetoric of separatism in the 1940s and 1950s to target political opponents: communists and anti-colonialists (notably Aimé Césaire). ↩
 6. Massacre in a mosque in Quebec in 2017; in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019; in El Paso in the United States in 2019; a car ramming into a Muslim family in Ontario in 2021, etc. ↩

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(2019). Her last article analyses the denial of the phenomenon of Islamophobia in France (published in the collective book *Racismes de France*, 2020).

<https://qalqalah.org/en/essays/from-islamophobia-to-separatism>