

## **Islamophobic rhetoric in the wake of the Orlando mass killing**

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**Abstract :** *This paper seeks to identify Islamophobic terms which are directed at Islam and Muslims in a highly pejorative manner. The data was collected from [www.yahoo.com/news/us](http://www.yahoo.com/news/us) for a duration of one week following the massacre of nearly 50 members of the LGBT community in a gay club in Orlando, Florida, by a single radicalized Muslim of Afghan descent. Articles related to the tragic incident which appeared in the abovementioned website were perused for Islamophobic language. It was found that there is a tendency to overgeneralize Islam and its followers on the basis of the actions of a few radicalized individuals and organizations which abused Islam by their activities which were not condoned by the religion. The lexical collocation of words including Islam and other religious terms were used without a proper understanding of what they really meant and showed much bias towards Islam and its followers.*

**Key words:** *Islamophobia, Islamophobes, rhetoric, radical Islam, Islamist*

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### **I. Background**

Islam is spreading rapidly in the West. It is acknowledged to be the second largest religion, only next to Christianity. Many Muslim-majority countries were former colonies of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, etc. There has been a lot of migration from these countries to those which had colonized them. As a result, we see large Muslim communities in the West. The Muslims have integrated in the countries of their former colonial masters. Since the culture and religion of the two are different, successful integration has not been easy. There is disenfranchisement and disillusion by the immigrant communities for various reasons. The young people feel marginalized and racist tendencies by segments of the majority population are very much alive. It is not difficult for them to be religiously radicalized when they are discriminated socially, educationally and when seeking employment. They feel that there is nothing much for them to do, and as a consequence feel alienated. Some young Muslims have become successful sports personalities and helped their adopted countries to win coveted championships in sports.

Some older Muslims have entered politics and have been elected to parliaments and legislative assemblies in their countries. Australia and Canada have Muslim representatives in their legislature. The mayor of London is a Muslim. There are Muslim members of parliament in UK. Muslims have become very visible all over the West. This is causing some discomfort and resentment among the indigenous population. They want to take their country back, which could only mean that they do not want immigrant communities anymore. What used to be monolingual societies many years ago are now multilingual. Instead of monocultural societies we now have multicultural ones. The landscape has changed to include mosques, Hindu temples and gurdwaras.

There are acute cultural differences between the West and East. These differences are keeping the communities apart. While pre-marital sex is nothing unusual among youths in the West, it is sinful and abhorrent to those from the East. Homosexuality is tolerated and recognized as a way of life in the West, but it is despicable among

people from the East. The differences in clothing have been a bone of contention. For Muslim women, wearing the hijab is an Islamic identity marker. It covers the part of their body which should not be exposed. They don the hijab for religious and cultural reasons. The hijab is not a piece of clothing which is provocative. But because such clothing are only worn by Muslim women and hardly worn by their own, it has become a symbol of hatred. Muslim women have been abused physically and verbally for wearing something they are comfortable with.

Most of the Muslim countries have experienced the downside of European colonialism. Resistance to foreign occupation had been dealt with mercilessly. There is also the phenomenon of ruling by proxy where the preferred local rulers are supported and are helped to oppress even legitimate dissent. Interference in Libya has rendered the once prosperous country into a failed state. Worse still is the blatant invasion of Iraq under the guise of getting rid the country of weapons of mass destruction. It was bandied about that Iraq possessed biological and chemical weapons and posed a grave threat to its neighbours. Presently Syria is going through a human catastrophe. Cities have been bombed, thousands of civilians killed and the residents forced to seek refuge in Europe and elsewhere. The Syrian people have lost their dignity in the fight by non-Syrians to control them. The issue of Palestine is heartbreaking for Muslims worldwide. The Palestinians continue to suffer and are evicted from their lands. The illegal settlements continue to be built with the benign support of US and EU, although there is now a small shift towards justice for the Palestinians. The US has continued to use the veto power over many resolutions critical of Israel.

Those who have no love for Muslims have come up with numerous derogatory terms in discourse. They take the worst examples of supposedly those who are Muslim, and overgeneralize it to all Muslims, all over the world. The most recent example is that of the Nice mass murderer in France, LarouaiejBahlel, a Tunisian who was reported to have led a sordid life as a hustler. He was a very unstable person and led a troubled life. He was estranged from his wife and children. He had eaten pork, drank alcohol and practiced free sex ([www.thedailybeast.com/articles](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles)). None of the aforementioned are endorsed by Islam. How may then this person be representative of Islam or Muslims? The Brussels airport bombers were two brothers who had criminal records as carjackers and bank robbers ([www.nytimes.com/2016](http://www.nytimes.com/2016)). Islam does not exhort its followers to indulge in such activities. Sadly, the Islamophobes take such people as the above as representing Islam and paint a most gory picture of the religion and the vast number of Muslims around the world.

Muslims living in the West today are in a dangerous and pitiful situation. For every extreme incident carried out by so called Muslims, the vast majority of law abiding, peace loving citizens pay a heavy price. In France, the ultra-right nationalist parties are clearly anti-Muslim and anti-immigration. In the US presidential election, Muslims have become whipping boys and girls for Islamophobes. There have been calls for surveillance of all mosques and a ban on Muslim immigration. These calls have been made by those standing for the Republican Party, notably Donald Trump, the nominee for the Party. He has been very vocal on making harmful comments on Islam and Muslims. He has advocated having a database and special identification cards for American Muslims. He has proposed shutting down mosques which are considered "extreme." He believes that Islam hates US and Muslims have tremendous hatred for Americans. He has ominously predicted there would be something similar to 9/11 carried out by incoming Syrian refugees resettled in US ([www.islamophobia.org](http://www.islamophobia.org)). There have been instances where media personalities have also made unsavoury remarks on Muslim migration. Muslims live in a climate of fear and intimidation. They have to put up with physical abuse, insults to their religion and their beloved Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) in the name of free speech and creative expression. Educated Muslims need to engage with the Islamophobes intellectually and have a civilizational discourse with them. They should not give up trying to improve the image of Muslims and Islam.

## **II. Research methodology**

The paper explores the language of prejudice and hatred against Islam and Muslims, particularly in USA following the mass killing in a gay club in Orlando, Florida. The news items were identified by their headlines from [www.yahoo.com/news/us](http://www.yahoo.com/news/us). The data was gathered for a period of one week, from 13 to 19 June, the duration was felt to be sufficient to gauge the overall immediate reaction to the stark incident. Moreover the US Presidential election and Brexit news, whether the UK wanted to remain in the EU (European Union) or leave was also dominant at the time.

This study employs a conventional approach to content analysis "Conventional content analysis is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon..... This type of design is usually appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited....." (Hsieh, H.F & Shannon, S.E. (2005) The theoretical framework for the study has been adopted from HajaMohideen&ShamimahMohideen (2008). They studied the language of Islamophobia in internet articles. They wanted to study how known Islamophobic terms were used with the help of the search engines of .Google, MSN and Yahoo.

### III. Results and Discussion

There has been much anti-Muslim rhetoric in the media following the infamous 9/11 episode and other terroristic attacks. Expletives are freely used against Islam and its adherents in public gatherings and demonstrations, no thanks to the far right racist and extremist groups. The harsh language used reflects poor character of the users.. The entertainment media too revels in bashing them. The social media unabashedly mauls them.

We are going to identify expressions of bias and prejudice, given here within quotes, in the target news items and then go on to respond why they are just not fair or inaccurate. Whether the expressions are representative of Islam/Muslims or a misrepresentation will become evident.

- 1) Trump.....said he was “right on radical Islamic terrorism” and called on Obama to resign because he did not say the words “radical Islam” in his statement.....
- 2) .....whether red flags were missed in the depth of his apparent sympathies for “Muslim extremists”
- 3) The FBI twice interviewed Mateen for having suspected ties to “Islamist militants.”
- 4) Trump says Florida massacre proves he’s right on “Islamist threat.”
- 5) .....by asserting that the attack in Orlando was the work of a “radical Islamic terrorist.”
- 6) .....the Republican nominee sees the problem is “Islamic terrorism”
- 7) Trump reiterated his call for a “ban on foreign-born Muslims” entering the country.
- 8) Orlando nightclub killer Omar Mateen had expressed sympathy for a variety of “Islamist extremists,” including groups in the Middle East that are sworn enemies.....
- 9) Mateen had made comments favorable to multiple “armed Islamist movements” and people.....
- 10) Republican Donald Trump on Monday placed responsibility for a mass shooting in Florida at the feet of “radical Muslims,” who he said were entering the country amidst a flood of refugees and “trying to take over our children.”
- 11) .....drew on the country’s deadliest mass shooting to sharpen his vow to “ban Muslim immigrants.”
- 12) They’re trying to take over our children and convince them “how wonderful ISIS is and “how wonderful Islam is.”
- 13) .....screen these people coming into our country. “They’re pouring in”.....
- 14) .....for allowing its citizens to fund mosques and schools that train “jihadists.” “Radical Islam is anti-woman, anti-gay and anti-American,”
- 15) To me “radical jihadism, radical Islamism.” I think they mean the same thing, Clinton told Savannah Guthrie on NBC’s *Today* show.....
- 16) .....”Islamist militant groups”.....
- 17) Trump had criticized Obama for not using the term “radical Islamic terrorism” to describe “violent Islamist militants”.....
- 18) In the article “Obama, Clinton criticize Trump for proposed Muslim ban”.....”radical Islamic terrorism” .....”to bar all Muslims from immigrating to America,”
- 19) .....the FBI had investigated him in the past for possible ties to “Islamist militant groups.”
- 20) Trump..... also called for “surveillance of mosques as part of US counterterrorism efforts.”
- 21) .....”Islamist extremist groups,” including al Qaeda, Hezbollah, al-Nusra and Islamic State.
- 22) He also said “radical Muslims’ were entering the country amid a flood of refugees.....and “trying to take over our children.”
- 23) ..... his rants to hostage negotiators about US bombings in Afghanistan and his allegiance to “militant Islamic groups.”
- 24) O’Reilly: It’s the President’s job to lead the world against the “jihad.”
- 25) Former CIA officer: “Stop calling Islam a religion of peace.”.....politicians should stop referring to Islam as an agent of peace and say it is “a religion in crisis.”
- 26) He also accused the Muslim-American community of “broad complicity in attacks such as the Orlando shooting” carried out by a gunman pledging allegiance to Islamic State and threatened “ big consequences for those who fail to inform on their neighbors.”
- 27) .....Trump’s demand that members of the American Muslim community “cooperate with law enforcement and turn in the people who they know are bad or else they will be brought to justice themselves.”
- 28) ..... the vicious slaughter at the Pulse nightclub by a homophobic wannabe “jihadist” with an AR-15.
- 29) Even in broad daylight, someone drove by and yelled “[Expletive] Islam!”
- 30) .....no one saw the warning signs of a man filled with hatred and preparing for a “jihadi-style” attack.
- 31) Condemning “radical Islamic terrorists” should not offend mainstream “Islamic non-terrorists.”

- 32) .... banning Muslim immigrants and even “killing the families of Islamist terrorists.”
- 33) .....a fifth-grader told a Muslim student that he was supporting Donald Trump because he “was going to kill all of the Muslims” if he became president.
- 34) “Islamists,”.....”radical Islamist terror attack,” ...” Islamic extremist,” .....”Islamic extremism,” .....”Islamic terrorism,”.....”radical Muslim extremists,” .....”Islamic terror” (all these terms appeared liberally in an article written by Joe Bilello in Fox News (June 18, 2016).

There has been a lot of misrepresentation of Islam as a religion of violence. There are adherents of any religion who resort to violence and activities filled with hatred. In Myanmar, for example, Buddhist monks are at the forefront of instilling violence and hatred against the local Rohingya who are Muslim. The latter have lived in Myanmar for decades beginning with the British occupation of Burma (the former name for Myanmar). The Rohingyas have been given asylum and refugee status in many countries. The continued persecution of this ethnic minority has received worldwide attention.

In India, Muslims are targeted by certain extremist groups on the pretext of carrying or consuming the meat of cows. These groups have turned lynch mobs and have taken law into their own hands. This has even prompted Shashi Tharoor, an Indian Member of Parliament to voice his deep concern on the growing intolerance and say that cows are safer in India than Muslims ([www.newsmediaalive.com](http://www.newsmediaalive.com)).The so-called Hindutwa ideology, seeking to establish the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life is becoming a bane for Muslims, Christians as well as the Dalits, the so-called lower caste Hindus in secular India.

Extreme Christians and far-right White men have resorted to verbally abusing and worse still physically and in some cases fatally attacking Muslims and damaging their places of worship. This has become a very common occurrence in the West where the majority population feel the growing presence of Muslims and mosques as a challenge to their way of life. There are caricatures insulting the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and expletives used against the religion and its adherents. A classic example of fatal Islamophobia was the murder of three Muslim students in North Carolina, US, in 2015 ([www.thesentinel.com/mont/news](http://www.thesentinel.com/mont/news)).

As can be understood from the discussion above, Muslims are under siege from the other major religions. What are their problems with Islam and Muslims? Do the non- Muslims think they are militants, extremists and terrorists inspired by the religion they profess? Those who use the target expressions identified here do not have the knowledge, nor the semantics of the lexical items. We shall explain the frequently used contentious terms as follows:

#### **IV. Radical Islam**

This is probably the most common Islamophobic term. Both Obama and Clinton have refused to use this phrase and they have been severely criticized for this. It's not the religion of Islam which is radical. Islam is all for moderation, for example, the concept of *wasatiyah*, which is translated into ‘moderation’ is promoted in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country. True there may be Muslims who have become radicalized after watching the news and videos on social media of the incessant bombing and loss of life of thousands of fellow Muslims in Syria, Palestine, etc. They act as radical individuals and groups to avenge those who die, are maimed and leading lives of desperation. Radical Islam is not a kind of Islam. It is not what the millions of Muslims the world over practice. Nor is the term “moderate Islam” a suitable one. It is divisive to talk about “radical Islam” or “moderate Islam.” Muslims just practice Islam as they are required to.

#### **V. Radical Islamic terrorism**

Islam does not inspire, nor does it aspire that its followers resort to terrorism, radicalism and militancy (HajaMohideen&ShamimahMohideen, 2008). It would be silly to label those who want to own and use guns and behave vehemently as radical Christian terrorists or believing in radical Christian terrorism. Similarly a white person who goes into a black church and guns down many of the worshippers is not one. Practicing Christians do not resort to such violence. We may refer to such people who love violence as extreme far right groups, without associating the religion they supposedly profess.

#### **VI. Muslim extremists**

There are extremists of all kinds, those who target abortion clinics, those who will do anything for animal rights, those who torment members of the gay community and ethnic minorities, for example. The so-called Muslim extremists are usually involved in political violence or sectarian violence. There is national and racial extremism. There are Jewish extremists who want to build more and more illegal settlements in defiance of United Nations resolutions. There is extreme police brutality in US which has given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement in US and followed recently in Britain. Following Brexit non-White and those from EU countries have encountered extremism from many radical groups within UK. There are White supremacist groups in UK who say they want to take back their country whatever it means. In Australia there are groups of

white supremacists who want to “Reclaim Australia.” These extremists forget that they are the descendants of immigrants themselves, albeit their settler ancestors had come much earlier. It’s so much better to name the organizations which abuse in the name of Islam, rather than give a religious label such as **Islamic extremism** or **Islamic extremists**.

### VII. Islamist militants

The Associated Press stylebook does not allow the use of the word “**Islamist**” to be used synonymously for ‘Islamic militants, extremists or radicals.’ ([www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/)). An Islamist is one who wants to uphold Islam in administration and government in a country which is predominantly Muslim, but not in a violent manner (Hajamohideen, 2013). It is similar to perhaps, the ideology of Christian democrats. In Malaysia, for example, there are Islamist political parties whose political philosophy is to include Islamic laws through the democratic process. In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party which favours the inclusion of Islamic values was democratically elected. As such, it would be meaningless to talk about “**Islamist threat**,” or “**Islamist terrorists**.” Unfortunately **Islamists** are referred to various groups which have little to do with Islam. Those who behead their hostages when ransom is not paid are not Islamists. So are those who commit monstrous activities against women, bomb hospitals and kill people indiscriminately in public places.. Those who kidnap school girls and keep them captive are far from being Islamist. They are armed movements, and are indubitably violent, no doubt, but they do not share the ideals of Islamists. Such fringe groups have little knowledge of the religion and their activities have been roundly condemned by Muslim leaders and scholars worldwide.

### VIII. Islamism

Islam, according to its followers, is a revealed religion. It is not restricted to politics: **political Islam**. It is comprehensive as it covers all aspects of life. To add the suffix –ism to Islam is demeaning as the religion is not simply a doctrine, concept or ideology based on the teachings of certain men/women or terms: Buddhism, Taoism, Leninism, consumerism, capitalism, sufism, etc. Islamism is often used in the sense of extremism. Syed Farid Alatas (2010) considers it offensive because it comes from a God-given term via revelation, it is significantly synonymous with Islam itself, but it is in general used to refer to undesirable individuals, groups and unholy ideas. **Islamism** does not equate with Islamic extremism, terrorism, violence, etc. because for Muslims the term is a non-issue and devoid of meaning..

### IX. Islamic terrorism

The words “terrorist” and “terrorism” are very freely used whenever it suits certain people.. There is transnational terrorism environmental terrorism, drone terrorism, aerial terrorism, etc. Whoever carries out a terroristic act, causing large scale damage and loss of life, or targets certain individuals or groups, clearly abuse their religion. Destruction of places of worship, knifing individuals, and violently targeting people who hold certain opposing beliefs are acts of evil. No established religion exhorts its followers to commit criminal activities. Human life is precious and sacred. In many parts of the world there are disillusioned groups who try to avenge for their suffering through activities causing much pain and suffering to the larger population. Islam exhorts its followers to be patient and strive to seek justice, not resort to violence. There are Muslim youths who are motivated to commit heinous acts, not because of Islam, but through personal motivation. Their violence is not associated to Islam. As such, it is grossly unfair to label acts of terror carried out due to disconnectedness, disempowerment, disillusionment, frustration, etc. as “**Islamic terrorism**”, “**radical Islamic terrorism**” or the perpetrators “**Muslim terrorist**” or “**Islamic terrorist**.” Mateen, the Orlando killer was not a **radical Islamic terrorist**. He was incensed by the behavior of two gay men kissing each other in front of his family. That he had no love for the gay community is obvious. He did not have a stable family life. All these accumulated and reached a breaking point. The attack was personally motivated. It was purely a hate crime against gay people. We do not know if he was influenced by the likes of Chris Kyle in the Hollywood movie “American Sniper” wherein the protagonist takes it upon his mission to wipe out the Iraqis, the bad guys he hated. It must be acknowledged that Christianity too does not approve of homosexuality as evidenced from Leviticus 18: 22 in the Old Testament (<https://bible.org/article/homosexuality>) and there are historical references to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-11.

### X. Radical Muslims

“Radical Islam” is the expression which is frequently and popularly used. President Barack Obama has steadfastly refused to use this term. According to those who do not understand Islam in its totality, they believe radical Islam has produced radical Muslims. Obama has often clarified that Islam is a religion based on peaceful precepts and the acts of terror carried out by extremists are a consequence of their radical interpretations of the religion and have perverted Islam ([abcnews.go.com/politics](http://abcnews.go.com/politics)). Clinton too has distanced herself from using this

expression which Donald Trump is fond of using often. A former president, George Bush too did not associate Islam with radicalism, In September 2011, after the infamous 9/11 episode, he emphasized Americans were not at war with Islam, but against evil. Admittedly, there may be Muslims who are radicals or have been drawn to radicalism, but it was not the teachings of the religion which turned them into radicals. But rather it is due to the many injustices, including political, economic and social factors in their midst. Due to lack of guidance, emotional stability, etc. radicalization sets in. .

### **XI. Jihad/jihadi/jihadist/jihadism**

**Jihad** is a very misunderstood and narrowly interpreted word. It is used synonymously by non-Muslims only with terror, and Muslims who are involved are called **jihadi/jihadists**. Let us look at all the different meanings of this Arabic word where the emphasis is on ‘struggle’:

- 1 to attain ultimate peace on earth
- 2 to establish mercy and love among human beings
- 3 to educate fellow human beings
- 4 struggle for self-purification following shariah laws
- 5 struggle for self-defense
- 6 struggle to forge brotherhood
- 7 to uphold justice and rights
- 8 for nation building and development
- 9 to eradicate poverty
- 10 to fight against evil

(Sayyid Musa Al-KazimAlbukhari, 2001)

Jihad, in Islam, therefore is far from terror. Those who are ignorant of its meaning should understand what it really is. Many have narrowly interpreted it to mean only ‘a holy war.’ It also means a holy war as long as it is in defense of their religion, country and dignity. A jihadist is always used synonymously with ‘terrorist.’ Since the word derives from ‘jihad’, a jihadist is one who struggles to achieve any of the ten forms of struggle aforementioned. ‘**Jihadism**’ is not terrorism. It may be viewed positively as a struggle, effort, perseverance and the pursuit of striving to achieve the goals of jihad.

### **XII. Conclusion**

The call to ban Muslim immigration is an extreme suggestion. To suggest surveillance of mosques is also one. Responsible and level headed leaders should not associate the irresponsible, barbaric activities of misguided individuals and organizations which conduct nefarious activities outside mainstream Islam and interpret Quranic injunctions at will without informed scholarship.

Muslims are not new to US. Many of them have been the earliest slaves who were brought there from regions in the African continent. The TV series “Roots” attests to this. President Obama has acknowledged this on the occasion of his Ramadan speech: “There are those whose heritage can be traced back to the very beginning of our nation.....” He acknowledges there are Muslim Americans who are serving the country as doctors, lawyers, artists, teachers, scientists and military personnel (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>).

US politicians as well as those across the Atlantic must not be quick and eager to blame the entire religion and the whole Muslim population for the likes of those aforementioned who had committed atrocities against humanity. Islam is indeed a religion of peace. Semantically, it means peace, purity, submission and obedience. In a religious sense it means submission to the will of God and submission to His Law for man’s peace and harmony ([www.barghouti.com](http://www.barghouti.com)).

Lies have been perpetrated against Muslim Americans that they are tightlipped about those who have extremist tendencies in their midst. This has been squarely disputed by FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department. FBI director James Comey has commended Muslims thus: “They do not want people committing violence, either in their community or in the name of their faith .....” A university professor, Charles Kurzman, who specializes in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies asserts it is defamatory to the Muslim community to claim there is no cooperation. According to court records, there are multiple cases of Muslim Americans reporting possible extremist threats, Even parents have reported their children of possible extremist links ([www.nydailynews.com](http://www.nydailynews.com)).

According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2011, most people in several countries with Muslim-majority populations do not have a favourable view of ISIS. They are just as concerned about the threat of extremism in Islam’s name as Western nations are. In the US itself, 86% of Muslims opine that suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians in the name of Islam are rarely or never justified ([www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)).

For reasons best known to the Islamophobes, Muslims are attacked physically, emotionally and even fatally. This happens on a daily basis. Anyone who watches the news, reads the papers or surfs the internet will know about the travails facing Muslims. An objective and neutral understanding of the Holy Quran and the behavior of Muslims who lead exemplary lives without infringing on the rights and lifestyle of others will help to dispel much of the hatred that Muslim men and women have to endure with.

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