

CSI 35: Islamophobia

Summary

- Islamophobia is a complex phenomenon and consensus on its definition exists neither in the political nor academic sphere
 - Negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam are prevalent in the British public
 - Negative attitudes appear to be persistent over time
 - Overall, the UK is unexceptional in the extent of negative attitudes by European standards
 - Muslims experience economic and social disadvantage in a number of areas, including employment and social mobility
 - Part of this penalty may result from discrimination, though further research is needed
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Introduction: What is Islamophobia?

In recent years, the issue of Islamophobia and its consequences has attracted increasing attention in UK politics. Following a report by the APPG on British Muslims calling for the adoption of an official definition of Islamophobia¹ that was discussed extensively^{2,3}, Parliament's Home Affairs Committee launched an official enquiry into Islamophobia to investigate the extent of the phenomenon in Britain, the role of the media and politics, and the potential impact of adopting an official definition of Islamophobia⁴.

In academic circles, the definition of Islamophobia is equally contested, and no widely accepted definition exists. An active debate on the definition of Islamophobia has emerged, with some, such as the Runnymede Trust, arguing that it should be defined as anti-Muslim racism⁵, since Islamophobia may be best considered as involving both racial and religious discrimination⁶. However, the definition of Islamophobia as a form of racism is not universally accepted. For instance, some social scientists have driven forward a definition of Islamophobia as fear, rather than racism, towards Muslims and Islam, which results in a form of social stigma⁷. In this briefing paper, Islamophobia is broadly understood as negative attitudes, stereotypes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslim, which are indiscriminate in nature⁸. While acknowledging that no definitive conceptualization of Islamophobia exists, this definition is judged to be broad enough to capture the complexities of the phenomenon for comparative research while evading the as-yet not universally accepted definition of Islamophobia as racism.

What is the extent of Islamophobia in the UK?

A meta-analysis of opinion polls in Britain from 1988 to 2010^{9,10} indicated that knowledge of Islam and direct contact with Muslims had grown over the years. While the majority of the population retained a broadly favourable view of Muslims, there was also mounting concern among the British public about the extent to which British Muslims had integrated into mainstream British society, their perceived limited patriotism and anti-Western values and accommodation of Muslim agendas, such as Islamic schools. In addition, the perception of Islam or Muslims was increasingly determined by fear of Islamic fundamentalist extremism and terrorism. The scale of Islamophobia appeared to have been higher in the period 2007-10 compared to 2001-6. Other data based on nationally representative social surveys tell a similar story. Thus, in the Citizenship Survey conducted in 2005 and 2009/10 (Figure 1), respondents were asked to evaluate which groups they felt had experienced an increase in racial prejudice in the past five years. In both survey rounds, Muslims were in the top two groups for whom this was indicated most frequently, alongside Asian people.

Figure 1: Muslims are among the groups cited most frequently with regard to a perceived increase in racial prejudice in the past five years¹¹.

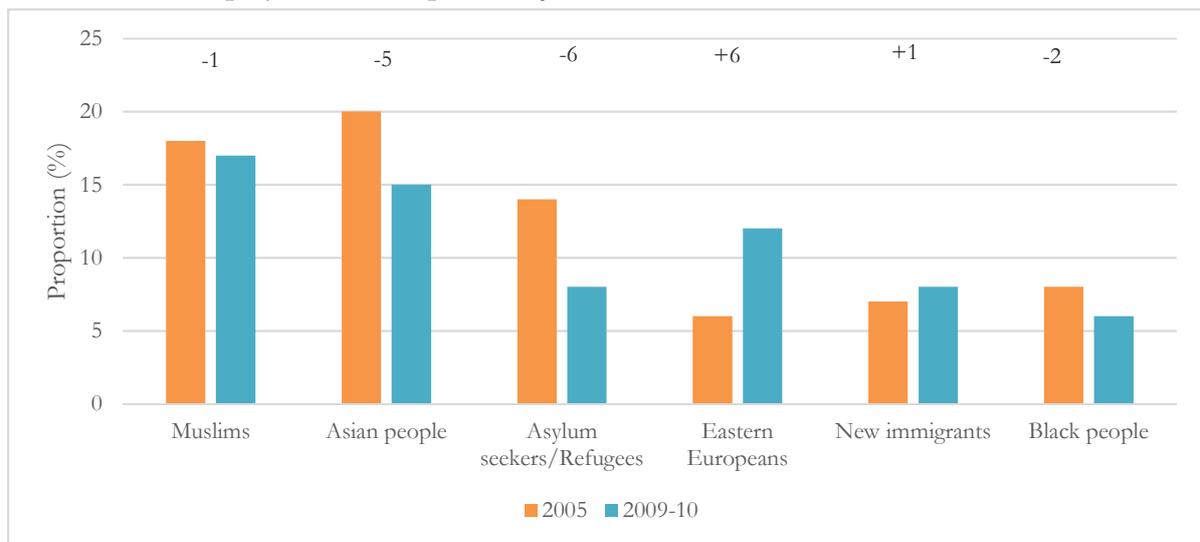
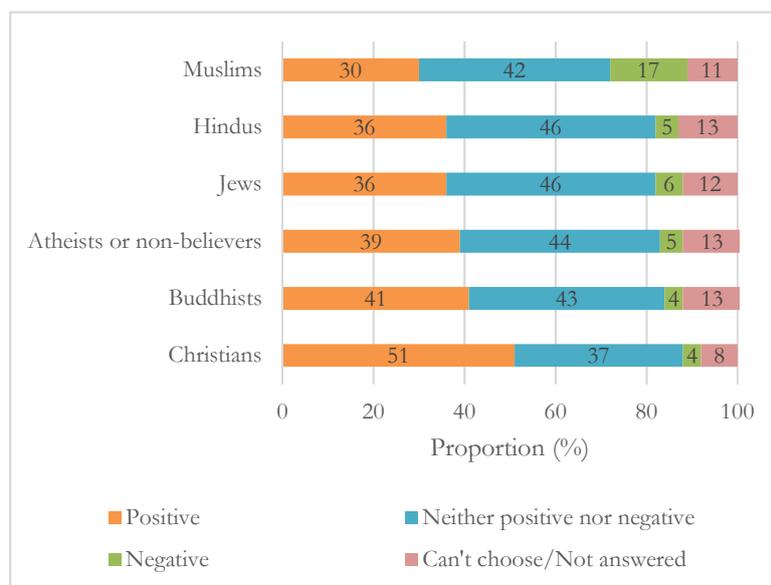


Figure 2: Muslims are rated the least positively of all major religious groups in Britain (2018)¹²



In addition to perceptions of racial prejudice, some surveys directly examine attitudes within the British population towards Muslims or Islam. Respondents to the 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) were asked to indicate whether they felt positively or negatively towards different faith groups. As Figure 2 shows, Muslims are the group that the most people in the population have negative feelings towards and the least people have positive feelings towards. These attitudes appear to be consistent over time.

In the earlier BSA from 2008¹³, respondents were asked to indicate their feelings towards religious groups on a feelings thermometer from 0 (worst) to 100 (best). All other specific religious groups scored at least 10 points higher on the scale than Muslims. Therefore, negative attitudes towards Muslims as compared to other religious groups seem to have persisted. In 2008, these negative attitudes were also held more concretely in relation to religious buildings: Half of the sample was asked whether they would be bothered by the construction of a large mosque in their community, while the other half was asked the identical question for the case of a large church. While 55% said they would be bothered by a Mosque being built, only 15% said they would be disturbed by a church¹⁴.

Figure 3: Perceptions about Muslims ‘fitting in’ are highly split in Britain (2008)

Another way of measuring Islamophobia is to ask specific questions about perceptions of the Muslim population. Respondents to the 2008 BSA were asked whether they believed that all Muslims living in Britain really want to fit in. Figure 3 reveals that opinions were very split in the British population. While nearly forty per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that British Muslims do want to fit in, a very similar proportion either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

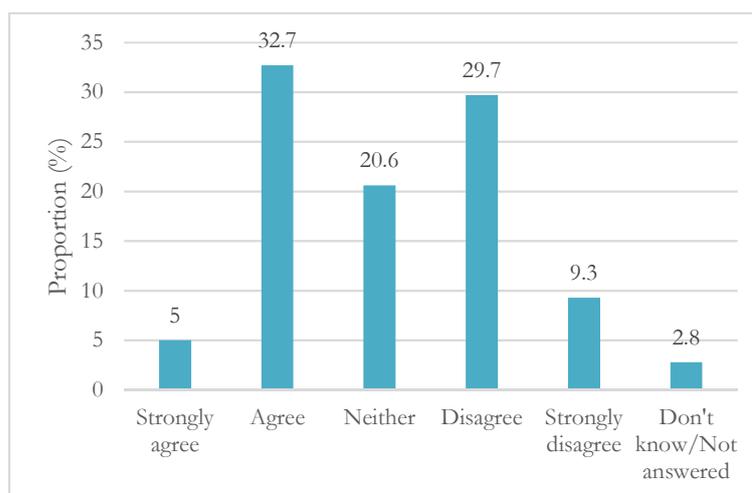
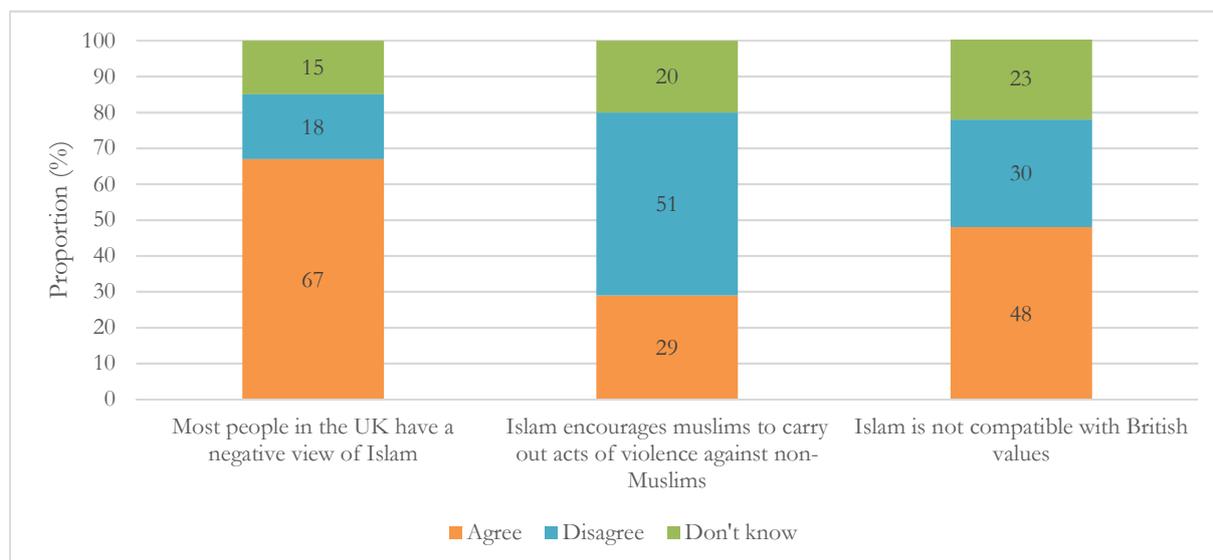


Figure 4: Online survey data also reveal negative attitudes towards Islam in Britain (2019)¹⁵¹⁶



In addition to representative national surveys, opinion polls have been used to establish to what extent negative attitudes towards Muslims persist in Britain. A recent 2019 ComRes online survey points towards the persistence of negative attitudes towards Islam in the British population (Figure 4). For instance, 48 per cent of respondents stated that Islam was not compatible with British values, though a majority disagreed that Islam encourages Muslims to carry out acts of violence against non-Muslims.

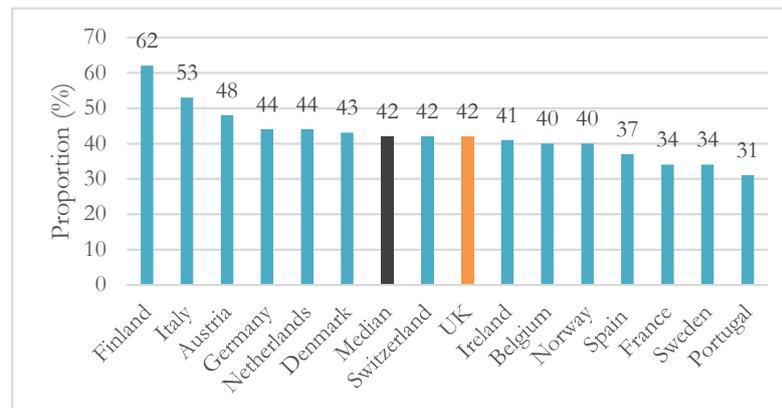
Given the changes in question wording, it is unwise to make definitive statements about trends over time in Islamophobia. However, negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam certainly continue to be expressed by the public and remain substantial in magnitude. Muslims continue to be the most negatively perceived religious group in the UK.

Do levels of Islamophobia vary across Europe?

When considering the prevalence of Islamophobia, it is worth considering how the UK compares with other European countries.

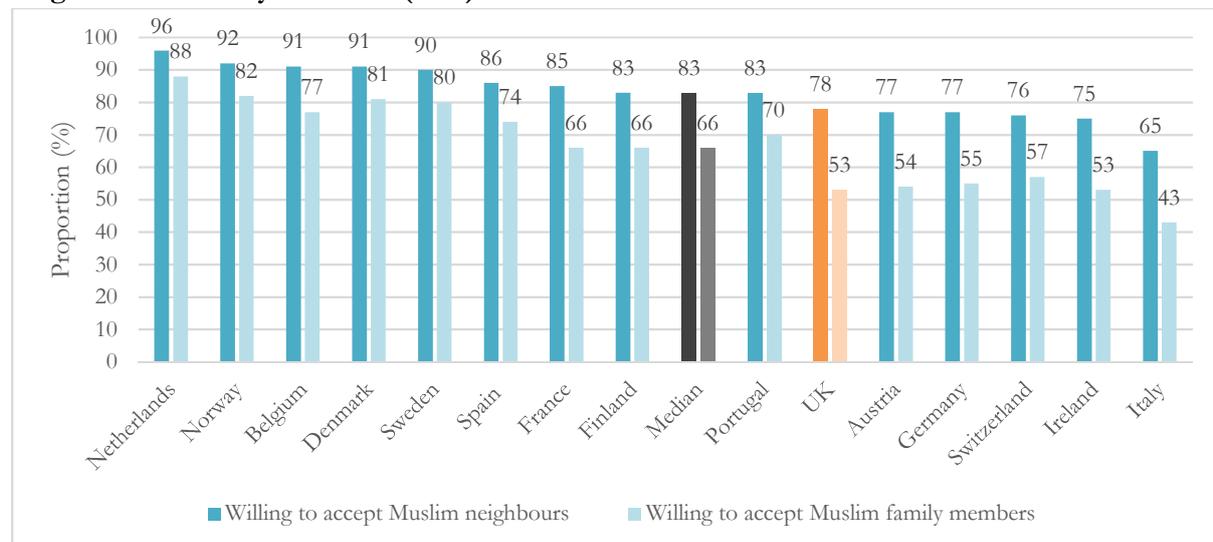
Figure 5: The proportion of the UK population believing Islam to be incompatible with national values mirrors the median across European countries (2017)¹⁷

In a survey for Pew Global Attitudes, respondents were asked whether they agreed that Islam was



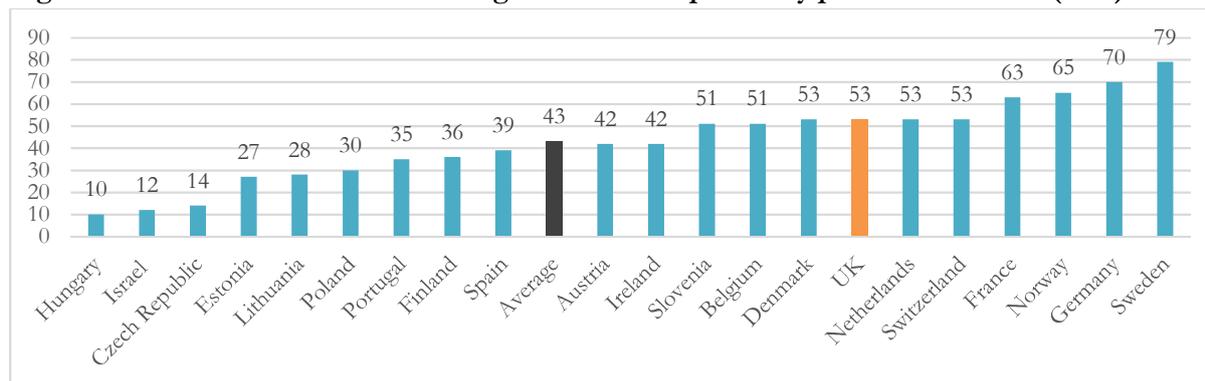
incompatible with national values (Figure 5). 42% of respondents indicated that they agreed with the statement, which places the UK on the median for European countries. The perception of Islam being incompatible with national values appears to be particularly pronounced in countries such as Finland, Italy, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands.

Figure 6: The UK ranks below the European median with regard to willingness to accept Muslim neighbours or family members (2017)¹⁸



Another relevant measure is the extent to which individuals are willing to accept Muslims as part of their community or family. Figure 6 compares the willingness to accept Muslims as neighbours or family members in European countries. Compared to the European median, a lower percentage of the UK population would be willing to accept Muslims as neighbours (78%) or family members (53%).

In contrast, the UK population is relatively more favourable towards Muslim Migration. Figure 7 illustrates country differences across European countries in the public's willingness to allow some or many Muslim migrants. Alongside countries such as France, Denmark and Germany, the UK appears to be relatively more favourable towards Muslim migrants. This may be a result of the relatively large Muslim population in these countries, as contact seems to reduce prejudice^{9,19}.

Figure 7: Attitudes towards Muslim migration are comparatively positive in the UK (2016)¹⁶

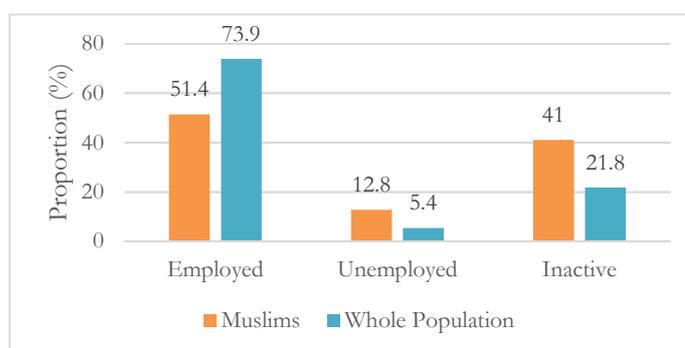
In summary, levels of Islamophobia in the UK are unexceptional by European standards overall, though its international positioning depends on the precise measure examined. Mixed results for different dimensions are also found in other European countries.

To what extent do Muslims in the UK experience social and economic disadvantage?

If the Muslim population is indeed subject to Islamophobic attitudes, then such attitudes may translate into social and economic exclusion. Indeed, research does appear to show that Muslims do worse than the general population when it comes to a range of socio-economic indicators, including poverty rates, educational attainment and upward social mobility^{5,20}.

Figure 8: Muslims have lower labour market participation than the general population (2015)²¹

Muslims also experience disadvantages in the labour market. As Figure 5 shows, Muslims tend to do worse than the general population on all three indicators of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity. Analyses appear to indicate that such penalties are partly related to religion, rather than being only an ethnic penalty²².



From this type of simple comparative analysis, the underlying causes of worse economic and social outcomes are not clear. Difficulties to integrate in the labour market and in society could result from a range of causes, including prior socio-economic disadvantage, language limitations, cultural factors, lack of 'bridging' social networks, and discrimination. Randomized field experiments have been used to explore labour market discrimination against Muslims. In a field experiment to investigate whether employers in Britain discriminate against ethnic minority job applicants when making hiring decisions, 3200 random job applications were sent out, varying only in the ethnicity of the applicant²³. Labour market discrimination was evident against individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds: applicants from countries with Muslim populations had to apply to 80 to 90 per cent more jobs on average than white British applications in order to receive a positive callback from the employer. Further analysis indicated that such a difference was experienced by all applicants from Muslim majority countries, not only those with a clear religious affiliation. Despite strong anti-discrimination laws in the UK and Britain's ranking in the Migrant Integration Policy Index as one of the countries with the most favourable anti-discrimination policies²⁴, labour market barriers were no lower than in other European countries. Meta-analysis also indicates that the level of labour market discrimination has not changed significantly in the UK since the 1970s²⁵.

Conclusion

Islamophobia is a complex and contested phenomenon, and as such measuring its extent or its consequences is a difficult task. This is further complicated by the fact that no consensus exists on the definition of the concept. However, existing data does seem to identify persistently negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam prevalent in the British public over time. As regards social and economic outcomes, Muslims do experience disadvantage in many areas, including educational and labour market success. Available evidence appears to indicate that a proportion of such disadvantage can be attributed to the effect of discrimination against Muslim individuals or those from majority Muslim countries. However, the accumulation of more high-quality data faithfully replicating the questions that had been asked in previous surveys about Islamophobia in Britain will be an essential step for moving towards better academic and political understanding of this phenomenon.

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