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Islamophobia and Attitude of the Western World Media: Exploring Counterstrategies in the Prophet's Seerah Perspective

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Abstract

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The interrelation of media, public, and policy agenda has been well-established and widely debated in media and political circles. Islamophobia, a hard-core reality of the Western world is one such grave reflection of the phenomenon. Most of the Western misconceptions about Islam such as oppression, terrorism, fist-waving, and/or jumping on burning flags, reiterated through media channels, socio-cultural stereotypes and discriminatory legislation have collectively contributed to widespread hatred among the masses there. The history of Islamophobia traces its roots in medieval Mecca soon after the proclamation of Prophethood by Almighty's last messenger Muhammad (PBUH). The Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) provides us reflections on guidance and strategies to deal intelligently with this contemporary challenge of Islamophobia, which had turned enemies of Islam in the medieval ages, into his best companions. The case study qualitatively investigates the literature on anti-Islamic sentiments in the contemporary West and suggests potential strategies to counter the phenomenon of Islamophobia in the light of the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Introduction

The intricate liaison between media, the public sphere, and policy formulation spheres has long been acknowledged as a pivotal determinant of modern-day societies. The phenomenon of Islamophobia has sparked as a stark illustration among these multifaceted societies due to the symbiotic relationship between media representatives, opinion leaders in the societies, mainly clergy in this case, and legislators in the Western world¹. It not only has highlighted the thoughtful impact of media accounts on public perception but also has underscored the complex interplay between public perception and the policy agenda of the respective societies, giving

rise to discrimination, hatred, and sentimental exploitation of Muslims worldwide². Islamophobia, a multilayered manifestation of prejudice and discernment appears as a poignant case for worldwide discussion among the scholarly debates and provides a lens that helps people critically examine the dynamics of public sentiment of the Western societies, the legislative bodies, and courts, and the sentiments among the general public³.

Media is regarded as the agenda setter for and mirror image of the societies simultaneously. It not only influences the public and the ones in power but also influences both⁴. In the case of Islamophobia, the media greatly influenced both the public and the policymakers and spread that could have been prevented had the media played a constructive role in society⁵. They further elaborate that unfortunately, the mass media, especially electronic media, became an instrument and a cause of Islamophobia across the globe, mainly through the canals of news on violence, radicalism, and terrorism which are often prejudicially associated and identified with Islam.

Islamophobia is characterized by racism, hatred, and hostility against Islam and its followers⁶. Conducted a study seeking a new paradigm to address Islamophobia in the light of the last messenger of God, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This study sheds light on different methods applied by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to deal with racism, hatred, and various myths and stereotypes. These mentioned elements, otherwise would lead the societies to develop animosity based on color and creed⁷.

Islamophobia is an irrational fear and hatred developed by the West towards Islam and Muslims, greatly impacted and mobilized by the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks in the United States, the subsequent rise of the radical Islamist movements, and the Western media portrayals of Muslims as terrorists⁸. Analysis of the Western and other non-Muslim societal infrastructures depict this interplay among the media, public, and policy agenda that has given rise ⁹to Islamophobia¹⁰. Islamophobia-oriented trends in the non-Muslim world, as advanced by the media, clergy, and the policy-makers alike in the shape of Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West, a movement in Germany, the Christchurch terror attack in New Zealand, the anti-Sharīah movement in the United States, attacks on Muslims in France after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, criticism and discrimination regarding Muslim clothing, especially hijab, laws banning the construction on new minarets in Switzerland, attacks on mosques, and the anti-Muslim campaigns on digital media including offensive tweets, have given rise to the identity crisis for Muslims ¹¹living in the non-Muslim¹² world¹³.

Out of fear of extinction, many Muslims have started hiding their identities publicly, identifying themselves with nicknames, sometimes pronouncing distorted versions of their Islamic names, and avoiding wearing hijab in public places. Media's negative portrayals, clergy's extremist role, and misperceived public insights have infused unseen insecurities in the non-Muslim world where the existence and growth of Islam and its followers have been taken as a threat to the existence of those societies¹⁴. The anti-Islam Western elite belonging to a church and the power corridors took benefit of the situation, using media representation to fuel public sentiment at one end and influencing media at the other. Similarly, the Muslim world has failed to build any solid narratives that could counter Western propaganda in the name of Islamophobia¹⁵. To counter Islamophobia, Muslims need to interact within societies with people belonging to other religions, at the regional and international levels, working on interfaith dialogue for engagement and collaboration in different walks of life¹⁶.

This research study attempts to counter the prejudiced Western lens on Islam, its teachings, and the socio-religious lives of Muslims, the misrepresented image of Islam and Muslims among the general public in the non-Muslim world, the loopholes in the legislative infrastructure in the West that fuel Islamophobia and the anti-Islamic portrayals in the Western media in the light of Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Literature Review:

A lot of literature is available that provides insight into Islamophobia and conveys that it is not a modern-day phenomenon. History research depicts that it began with the inception of Islam and the proclamation of prophethood by the last messenger of God, Muhammad (PBUH) in Mecca¹⁷. Post 9/11 scenario has sparked a new wave of extremism and violence across the globe that is often associated with Islam and its followers by the West¹⁸.

Edvardsson (2008)¹⁹ linked this rising trend of Islamophobia to augmented Muslim immigration presence in Western multicultural societies. She further argued that Islamophobia found its roots in a spectrum of expressions where the orthodox West-Christian point of view and the Occident versus the Orient appear to surface. Hunter (2022)²⁰ in her study termed Islamophobia a widely-used phenomenon to express the fear that the people in the West have of Islam and its followers. She described it as a mindset that is manifested in religiously aggravated hatred, criminal activities, and discrimination against Muslims. This phenomenon was often advocated and advanced by the Western leaders of the likes of Boris Johnson, former UK prime Minister, and Emmanuel Macron, the French president.

Istriyani and Yuliatun (2016)²¹ described in their study the mythical Western concepts of linking Islam to a series of terrorist activities and prejudiced suspicions imbued among the public about the Muslims as root cause for the rise of Islamophobia. They further claimed that media as an instrument acted as an object of analysis given its latent and manifest functions. Ciftci (2012)²² in a research paper on threat perceptions in the context of Islamophobia explained the anti-Muslim sentimentality of the Western world, focusing on the particular attitudes that linked Muslims to extremism, terrorism, and violence. This research took into account countries like the United States, Spain, Germany, France, and Great Britain to claim that the perceived realistic and symbolic menace was the most substantial source of anti-Muslim sentiments in Western societies that consider Muslims as violent people.

Rahman and Qamar (2017)²³ conducted explanatory research focusing on negative international media portrayals of Islam and Muslims, discussing the importance of media in terms of its influence, and role in shaping public opinion. Media, keeping in view the socio-cultural context of the societies builds its agenda for the members of the society letting them accept the salience and framing of issues as contextualized by newspapers, TV channels, and digital platforms. The authors highlighted the Western media representing Muslims as "other aliens", backward and violent. Sherazi and Zahid (2023)²⁴ claimed in their research that the phenomenon of Islamophobia was ideology-driven. They identified the role of socio-political framing and language used by the French leadership in portraying Islam as a threat to the French society. Furthermore, they highlighted that the media's selective representation of Muslims led to their unacceptability for the native French. The study also explored that by using the symbols of the beard, Azan (call for prayer), and Hijab, the French elite used to generalize Muslims as criminals, and such portrayals through media led to violent manifestation against the Muslim minority in France.

Tariq and Iqbal (2023)²⁵ defined Islamophobia as a collaboration of racism, prejudice, racism, and securitization that functions at cognitive, socio-cultural, and structural levels of Western societies. They quoted modern research to state Islamophobia as a collective behavior of Western societies that has defined their respective social order. The researchers debated the concept of neo-Islamophobia, a threat to the socio-political order of the West, particularly the American society. Mujahidin (2023)²⁶ conducted a study on Islamophobia in the Sri Lankan context highlighting the anti-Muslim sentiment among the majority Buddhist population giving rise to violence against minority Muslims during the last decade. He explored that the anti-Muslim campaigns focused on *Halal* food labels, Hijab, slaughtering livestock as Islamic rituals, attacking mosques and businesses owned by the Muslims, closure of Muslim schools, and cremation during the Covid pandemic that was made mandatory for every Sri Lankan

citizen regardless of his/her religion. Ejiofor (2023)²⁷ in his study viewed Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism that affected Muslim living across the globe regardless of their geographic ethnicities. Siddiqui et al. (2022) conducted research on anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States, taking into account the CNN effect concerning politics based on anti-Muslim phenomenon. They counted the nexus of media, public, and policy agenda as the root cause of global Islamophobic trends.

Butler (2022)²⁸ published a book, that took into account the study of 3,759,180 anti-Muslim tweets during 2019-21 and claimed that 85% of the hateful tweets were still available online even after one year. He also found India, the United States, and the United Kingdom as the three main countries responsible for 86% of Islamophobic tweets. He also explored that any untoward developments like terrorist attacks and violence were correlated to Islam and the themes observed depicted terrorism and Islam as synonymous to each other, Muslims as culprits in case of sexual assaults, Muslims putting efforts to impose Shari'ah, Muslim migrants aimed at outnumber the natives in the Western societies and India, harassment of Muslim notables and slaughtering animals as Islamic ritual reflecting barbarity.

Sikander (2021)²⁹ documented that the Muslims in India were numerically the largest in any country amongst the whole South Asia, and also the largest minority in the country. They have suffered Islamophobia since the partition of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. This study highlighted the role of Hindu communal groups, the role of religion-dominated media, and politics in the name of Hindu philosophy. The author also highlighted the relationship between anti-Muslim riots and Islamophobia in India. Kunnummal (2022)³⁰ also conducted his study on the Indian content to find out the denial of the phenomenon in the name of great Indian nationalism. Hussain et al. (2019)³¹ attempted to highlight the problem of Islamophobia depicted through hate crimes against the Muslim population in India. They argued that the political ideology, Hindu hostility towards Muslims, social stratification, marginalization of Muslims at the societal level, and social discrimination of the Muslim community had led to harassment, assault, and even murders of Muslims in India.

Exploratory Case Study as Research Method:

This qualitative study has been an exploratory case study that analyzed the available literature and interpreted information to reach conclusions and develop recommendations. The case study has been recognized in social science research as an appropriate approach to understand and explain an in-depth explanation of the phenomenon under study³². As adopted in this research paper, the exploratory case studies attempt to explore any phenomenon that serves as a point of interest to the researchers. Such case studies deal with questions that are meant to expose different avenues for further research on the phenomenon under observation³³. Given the literature mentioned above, the need to comprehensively address the West's Islamophobia which has affected almost every walk of life ranging from education, community engagement, and government action has been tackled by this study through an exploratory case study. The study builds its argument to counter Islamophobia in the light of Seerah, the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This study will add to the available literature and prove a valuable resource to promote understanding and respect among people, regardless of their color and creed.

The Three Models

The life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from the Meccan time to the establishment of a state in the name of Islam at Madinah provides us with a complete code of life and peaceful co-existence with individuals practicing different religions. Islam (2018)³⁴ has documented historical references to the peaceful coexistence of Muslims with individuals practicing other religious ideologies. The Charter of Medina, announced by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 622 A.D., provides humanity with the perfect framework to establish respectable coexistence regardless of religion and belief³⁵. This Charter worked as a policy framework and

guideline for the Prophet's (PBUH) companions and successive rulers of various Muslim territories. Islam has forbidden hatred for anybody based on race or religion and stresses on safety and security of non-Muslim communities in Muslim societies³⁶. It is evident from the Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that there exists no difference between people based on color or race³⁷.

This exploratory case study has taken the following three productive models into account to depict how Muslim men and women were misjudged and how they struggled to correct the distorted image and ultimately succeeded in their efforts.

- a. **The Meccan Model (610-622):** The Meccan model portrays the life of Muslims during the early days of Islam after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) proclaimed prophethood. It reflects the victimization and persecution of Muslim minorities by the Meccan Islamophobes. During this period, the marginalized Muslim community was afraid of being a victim of hate crime (Qur'an 8:26), verbal and physical abuses, and felt unsafe and fearful of the adverse treatment due to entering a new religion. Serah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during the Meccan life after the proclamation of prophethood provides humanity with a perfect way of survival from the violent aggression by the non-Muslim majority against the Muslim community, and suppression of Islamic beliefs³⁸ and customs³⁹. The experiences of companions of the Prophet (PBUH) as victims of hatred, crime, verbal and physical abuse, and assaults during the pre-migration period further manifest Islamophobia and the line of action to co-exist. The Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) demonstrates a rational response to years of violence in Mecca to spread a greater understanding of Islam among the non-Muslim community by respectfully communicating the message of Islam, stressing the attitude of hope, gratitude, and patience.

The very first Islamophobic incident took place publicly soon after the first sermon by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when he called Meccans to Mount Safa' and preached them to the religion of peace. Upon rejection, Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) remained patient and prayed for a righteous path for the Islamophobes. The hardships bore by the Prophet (PBUH) when he invited the people of Taaif to Hidayah and his directions to military commanders about not killing children, women, children, the elderly, and the monks, are clear examples of how merciful he was to children, orphans, men, women, widows, and even enemies. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught people, talked to them, debated, and negotiated on different matters. It was after the first revelation in 610 A.D. that very few people believed the words of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) but today the Muslim population accounts for more than 1.8 billion individuals, more than 24% of the world population, across the globe. Islam stands second after Christianity in terms of number of followers. It is the most fast-spreading religion in the world. These statistics are self-evident that Islam is the religion of peace.

- b. **The Madinah Model (622-632):** Pre-Islamic Madinah, commonly known as Yathrib, is a diseased city, full of sickness or a cursed one in its literal meaning. It was a divided society. It was renamed as Madinah Tun Nabi after the Prophet (PBUH) migrated and blessed the city. The Prophet (PBUH) was fully committed to building a cohesive society. He (PBUH) established the rule of law as the principle. However, the Muslims were misjudged by the Jews of Madinah, but the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) carried out concrete steps to develop mutually beneficial and stronger relations. The Prophet (PBUH) initiated the 'Charter of Madinah' for peaceful and productive relations. He believed in the power of meaningful dialogue that would signify the shaping of a tolerant, intellectual, and balanced society.

c. The Kingdom of Abyssinian (Modern Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia)

Model: The migration to Abyssinia (615 A.D) was undertaken purely on religious grounds. On the contrary, modern-day Muslim migration to Western societies has been based on voluntary and materialistic grounds. In this view, the spread of Islamophobia is a great challenge for the scholarly circle to understand and work on. The Muslim migrants were well-received and respectfully treated. When the Meccan delegation attempted to portray a negative image of Muslims in the court of the Abyssinian king and wanted to get the immigrants back, Ja'fir bin Abu Tālib bin 'Abdul Muṭṭalib (d.629 A.D) voiced out in the court of Negus and portrayed the true peaceful image of Islam and Muslims that helped minimize the misperception of Islam. It was not that the Muslims had a joyful time in Abyssinia but the strategies adopted by the Muslims there made their survival possible. The Abyssinian model, in this perspective, can be exemplary and adopted to develop interfaith relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and harmony. It illustrates that all anti-Muslim incidents should be reported. The Muslims should know appropriate ways to express their concerns at the right forums as staying silent will pave the way for further persecution.

The Scenario Today

It is evident from the Quran, and the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the last Messenger of God for all the Universe, that Islam is the religion of peace, tolerance, and harmony for humanity without any discrimination of color⁴⁰ and creed⁴¹. It is unfortunate to witness Muslims, under subjugated oppression as part of expansionist strategies of the various countries, with religion-based discrimination against them in the name of Islamophobia. Muslims in various regions including Kashmir, Uyghur, Syria, and Palestine; and India, the United States the Europe face oppression⁴² and discrimination⁴³. Global leaders and forums stay silent and defend miscreants in the name of 'freedom of speech' for Islam and Muslims⁴⁴. Scoundrels have been in the habit of hurting Muslims by publishing hate content and ridiculing Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), teasing and criticizing Muslims for their religious practices, dress codes, and beards⁴⁵.

It is need of the hours to advocate for Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance, and harmony across the globe as one finds the spirit of peace and harmony at the root of every Islamic value and norm⁴⁶. It is necessary to portray that Islam has never taught initiation of war in case of no attack on the sovereignty and the dignity of Islam or Muslims. The manipulation of the term Jihad and its association with violence needs to be corrected in a way that the concept of Jihad is merely a struggle against the oppressors, wrong-doers, and evil⁴⁷.

Guidelines for Muslims in Light of Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to Counter Islamophobia

A lot of research studies have been conducted that highlight the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad⁴⁸ (PBUH)⁴⁹ and his commitment⁵⁰ to peaceful⁵¹ co-existence⁵² with non-Muslim⁵³ communities⁵⁴. This study has evaluated the following seven themes that can be worked out to counter Islamophobia in the light of the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

- a. **Education and Awareness:** Muslims across the globe have a fundamental responsibility to emphasize the principles of social justice, peace, and tolerance in the light of the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) who preached and invited people to Islam, held discussions, debated with delegations and convinced enemies during his Meccan⁵⁵ and Madinah⁵⁶ life. The Muslims should narrate stories to their younger generations as well as people of other faiths, based on Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) interaction with people, practicing other religious

beliefs, and commitment to peaceful coexistence through bridging social⁵⁷ and societal⁵⁸ gaps⁵⁹.

- b. **Interfaith Dialogue and Community Engagement:** Organizing interfaith dialogues and community events can promote an understanding between people, practicing different religious⁶⁰ beliefs⁶¹. The Muslims should highlight examples from the Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) where he engaged in dialogues with non-Muslim communities and delegations to foster cooperation⁶² and respect⁶³. Muslims should actively participate in civic and political events organized by non-Muslim communities, work alongside non-Muslims, and address the shared challenges in Western, American, and other societies⁶⁴. They should follow the role model of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to collectively inclusive and diverse society, and his emphasis on collaboration and cooperation with non-Muslim communities to achieve shared goals⁶⁵.
- c. **Empathy and Compassion:** Muslims should engage themselves in acts of kindness and service to humanity, reflecting the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) about compassion⁶⁶ and⁶⁷ benevolence⁶⁸. They should share stories from the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that highlight his compassion towards the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society.
- d. **Counter Misinformation and Disinformation:** We live in a post-truth era, a time characterized by narrative (regardless of being true or false) building through the use of modern digital communication tools⁶⁹ and applications⁷⁰. The rise of Islamophobia is predominantly based on misinformation and disinformation through digital media platforms. Muslims are required to provide accurate and truthful information about Islam and the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through various digital media platforms, mainstream channels, and interpersonal dialogues to address the misconceptions and stereotypes based on misinformation and disinformation. They should share instances from the Seerah that expose false accounts about the Prophet (PBUH) and his life.
- e. **Promote Social Justice:** Muslims should advocate for equality and social justice in line with the commitment and efforts of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in uplifting the oppressed factions of society and addressing systemic injustices⁷¹ in communities⁷². They should keep in mind the role of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a social reformer, as per his Madinah Accord and the last sermon to humanity.
- f. **Muslim Settlement in Western, American, and Other non-Muslim Societies:** The Muslims should keep in mind the first migration of Muslims to Abyssinia that highlights a positive relationship between the Christian king of Abyssinia and the then Muslim migrants⁷³. This migration to Abyssinia showcases a classical example of peaceful religious coexistence, tolerance, respect, and protection⁷⁴. It is the responsibility of Muslim scholars and researchers to draw parallels between the migrants who search for safety and religious freedom in the Abyssinian kingdom the contemporary hiccups to the refugee settlement in different parts of the world and the discrimination faced by religious minorities across the globe.
- g. **Media Literacy and Advocacy:** The Media's role of agenda setting for societies and also influencing the public and policymakers alike is globally acknowledged⁷⁵, and in the case of Islamophobia, the media's destructive role is obvious⁷⁶. To counter Islamophobia, Muslims should develop media literacy skills so that they can differentiate between truthful and false information, know the right use of various media platforms, and critically judge and respond to any biased, prejudiced, or Islamophobic content⁷⁷. They should create ways and opportunities to rightly advocate and promote accurate and truthful media portrayals in media and popular culture.

Conclusion

A careful analysis of the treatment of Muslims by the Western society and media reflects discrimination, commonly known as Islamophobia due to several misunderstandings. The lessons from the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) can guide the followers of Islam to counter such a negative image and handling. Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reveals Islam being all about peace that teaches its followers to be kind to others no matter what they believe in or where they're from. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) exemplified through practical demonstrations through communication with the people, holding different beliefs and ideologies than his and by being caring, understanding and respectful to who opposed him. Prophet's kindness and respectful treatment to non-Muslim communities and abiding by the principle of justice for everyone helped him correct misunderstanding about Islam. Such a guidance from the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) can help amend situation for Muslims in the West.

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