

Check against delivery



**Statement of
Ahmed Shaheed
UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief**

46th Session of the Human Rights Council

04 March 2021



Honourable Chair,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Expressions of discrimination, hostility and violence motivated by anti-Muslim bias are serious obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. The dangers of Islamophobia have been vividly manifested through heinous and violent attacks against Muslims across the globe that have captured headlines and international attention, but the majority of the human rights violations and abuses engendered by Islamophobia often gain little media attention, and, by some estimates, largely go unreported.

The key findings offered in the current report are drawn from evidence and insights presented by human rights defenders, scholars, policymakers and survivors of rights abuses by way of 12 roundtable consultations, 15 bilateral meetings and 109 written submissions from states, national human rights institutions, inter-governmental organisations, individuals and civil society actors representing five geographical regions. Experts and rights monitors report that entrenched and widespread essentializations that depict Muslims and their beliefs as cultural “others” and threats have served to perpetuate, validate and normalize discrimination, hostility and violence towards Muslim individuals and communities. Muslim individuals and communities assert that States directly restrict their right to freedom of religion or belief; curtail the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief by limiting Muslims’ other fundamental rights; and securitize Muslim communities and/or their organizations. Members of Muslim communities themselves, especially those living as minorities, also recount alarming tolerance or indifference to their experiences of anti-Muslim bias, discrimination and violence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My report confirms the alarming rise of right-wing extremist groups that peddle conspiracy theories about Muslims and who increasingly transcend borders by propagating hate online, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The dissemination of Islamophobic narratives is not confined to extremist propaganda, however, and extends to the media, academia, schools, healthcare settings, and parliamentary bodies. Muslim men are cast as violent, disloyal, sexist, illiberal ‘others’, while dominant stereotypes about Muslim women oscillate between victims in need of rescue and terrorists hidden behind a veil. As described, such stereotypes are particularly dangerous when they find expression in laws and policies restricting the rights of Muslims; result in the economic, social and political exclusion of Muslims; and justify impunity for violence and hate against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim.

Evidence gathered for this report made clear that Islamophobia is not just an arbitrary and uninformed fear of Muslims among individual citizens. Islamophobia is, in large part, the function of structural discrimination stemming from negative stereotypes of Muslims and their religion. It was clear from the evidence gathered, including the testimony from affected communities, that the challenge before us is deeper than irrational *anti-Muslim bias or hate*. To respect the lived realities of survivors, and to address the institutional nature of the problem, it was necessary to use the terminology that is most widely used by those who endure the human rights abuses caused by the phenomenon and points to the processes that fuel this harm.

My report does not deny that fundamentalists and politicians alike exploit the charge of “Islamophobia” to punish legitimate criticism of Islamic practices and beliefs or even to encourage sympathy for terrorism. Others have responded to Islamophobia with ill-advised campaigns to criminalize expression that is deemed ‘blasphemous’.

Your Excellencies, my mandate has consistently been clear that protection of religion can never constitute a legitimate limitation on expression. Moreover, there are few indications, if any, that blasphemy laws are in any way effective in hindering discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims; in fact, the opposite is the case.

My report recalls State duties under international law to eliminate all forms of discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief and emphasizes a human rights response to Islamophobia. And nothing in the report suggests that the high threshold to impose limits on free speech should be lowered. To operationalise States human rights duties in regard to freedom of religion or belief

and non-discrimination, I offer several practical recommendations to States, civil society, the media and internet companies, employers and the UN system, to work *with* Muslims, rather than *on* Muslims to address and mitigate the impacts of Islamophobia.

And I remind all stakeholders that Islamophobia is not a stand-alone issue —it is a member of and intersects with a number of discriminatory ideologies, including xenophobia, racism and sexism — all of which must be combated.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a world of intensifying bigotry against all who are ‘different’ from the preferred norms of the powerful, we must hold accountable those who seek to divide us and affirm the equality of all regardless of their religion or belief.

I look forward to engaging with States, civil society actors, and private actors alike to address the challenges before us. I welcome your feedback and cooperation.

Thank you.