

EVENT

Islamophobia Conference 2024: The Vanishing Public Muslim

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Masjid Sultan, Singapore. Credit: SR/Unsplash

Conference Report

“The Vanishing Public Muslim” conference, organised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in December 2024 in London, focused on the Islamophobia faced by Muslims and those who champion Muslim causes in both the public and private sectors.

Some of the main themes were: Global Policies of Silencing and Suppression; Institutional Silencing in Sociopolitical Contexts; The Culture Paradox of Muslim Representation on Social Media; Pathways Forward: Strategies to Reclaim Civil Rights in Liberal Democracies, and; The Prescriptive and the Problematisation of Islamophobia.

Panellists explored how public Muslims – those who visibly practice their faith, either through their attire, religious observance, activism or simply those who champion the Palestinian cause opposing genocide – are sometimes being marginalised, criminalised, sidelined, or targeted in public spaces. They have also been depicted as threats or as espousing ideas incompatible with societal or Western norms.

Key discussions revolved around the social, political and legal implications of Islamophobia, particularly in Western countries. The conference also touched on the role of the media, government policies and societal narratives in perpetuating anti-Muslim sentiment.

Throughout the event, speakers emphasised the importance of challenging these prejudices through solidarity, advocacy and the promotion of a more inclusive public discourse. The event aimed to empower advocates of freedom to reclaim their presence in public spaces and to resist efforts to “erase” or “disappear” targeted identities from the public sphere.

Assoc Prof Saeed Khan from the Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, introduced the conference, emphasising the evolving nature of Islamophobia and its manifestation in the suppression of Muslim expressions of dissent and advocacy. He questioned whether Western liberal democracies genuinely uphold the values of free speech and other civil rights they so strongly profess – especially when Muslims, and people of all backgrounds championing Muslim causes – have had their citizenship, jobs, livelihoods and, in some cases, lives threatened.

Since this conference, we have seen even more severe examples of silencing in the form of kidnapping and deportations in the United States. We see restrictions against people standing up for freedom of expression and for freedom from oppression in both the public sector (by government policy and legislation) and also in the private sector (by corporates, organisations and institutions).

Prof Anne Norton, author and Distinguished Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, discussed the “Palestine Exception” in the United States, where the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom and freedom of expression are inviolable, except in reference to Palestine. Unfortunately, in the midst of the genocide, many American, British and European state officials refuse to speak of Israel’s genocide. So do rabbis, chaplains and celebrated public figures who choose to remain silent.

In spite of many serious admissions of genocidal intent by Israeli officials, many news media have silenced the word “genocide”. “Who is to speak for the silent voices of those buried in the rubble?” she asked. Students and professors are told they could not chant “from the river to the sea”, say “intifada”, testify to tikkun olam or their own faith, or carry signs, out of concern for the welfare of Jewish students. Administrators fear the state and corporations from whom they receive funding.

Since this conference, we now know that Harvard and Columbia universities, among others, were threatened with the withholding of billions of dollars. So far, Harvard did not succumb to the pressure.

The Gaza encampments on certain campuses were taken down by armed force. Repression on this scale is greater than since the age of McCarthyism (late 1940s through the 1950s). She argued that rights are not gifts of the state but are to be honoured, rightly expressing that the cause of Palestinians and of Muslims is the cause of all people.

Regarding the silencing and erasure of Muslims, “Islamophobia’s most virulent and visceral form,” she said, “is sadly visible in the genocide in Palestine.”

Imam Dawud Walid, Executive Director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), highlighted a surge in civil rights complaints in the United States since 7 October 2023, surpassing post-9/11 levels. He emphasised the conflation of Palestinian advocacy with anti-Muslim sentiment, noting that this association exacerbates Islamophobia and marginalises Muslim voices. He stated that the United States is exceptional in promoting global Islamophobia and the dehumanisation of Palestinians.

Islam in America has been framed as a foreign, non-white religion. There is a dehumanisation project that conflates Muslims and Palestinians, even though around 10% of Palestinians are Christians, who are intentionally being erased in the discourse.

Many of the panellists agreed regarding the notion of cultural imperialism. Walid states that the United States is not only characterised by military imperialism but also as the largest exporter of culture in the world under the pretence of cultural superiority. There is an effort to force Western views and norms of family, family planning or sexuality on the Muslim world in order for countries to receive foreign aid.

Government bodies want to liberate women in Afghanistan, for instance, but have no problem killing tens or thousands of women. Women end up much more oppressed after the wars. Yet, the United States still claims that it seeks to liberate women, to make sure women do not have to wear hijab, for example.

Walid believes that cultural imperialism fuels Islamophobia. It does not just come from the conservative right. It can even come from people on the left who claim they are anti-Zionists. There are those who call themselves liberals, or those who are so-called progressives but really are “progressives except [on the issue of] Palestine.” They will even discuss “DEI” – diversity, equity, inclusion – yet are Zionists and seek to stifle Muslim voices who support Palestinian humanity.

Sandew Hira (pen-name: Dew Baboeram) is an independent scholar and activist who co-edited the book series *Decolonizing The Mind*. He analysed the silencing of Islamic voices globally within a broader civilisational context, critiquing Western ideologies for dismissing alternative worldviews. In the global north and the United States, there is still the idea of superiority that the Western Enlightenment is the pinnacle of history. He takes a broad view by describing the silencing of Islamic and other voices in broader civilisational and global contexts, not just political.

He contrasted the Western view with other civilisations – Islamic, Chinese, Latin American, African and Indigenous communities – that integrate ethics, spirituality and collective societal values as well as social justice from a theological point of view. He called for dialogues to replace clashes between Western progressivism and non-Western philosophies to envision new, inclusive paradigms. He further stated that China, despite being governed by a Marxist communist party, engages in dialogue with different civilisations and contributes to it.

Some of these civilisations in the global south connected ethics with knowledge, religion and spirituality on how to set up a society. Hira posited that a cultural clash could instead be transformed into a dialogue that embraces other philosophies related to Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism and others.

In the West, we often do not include other philosophies as viable. He stated Christianity was the foundation of Western civilisation, which justified colonisation to civilise “the heathens” and “give them civilisation”.

Furthermore, he implied that liberalism has become a narrative of social movement pretending to be progressive, but when it comes to issues of geopolitics or economic structures, they have little response and eventually end up in individual politics – sexuality, personal development, having your voice heard – rather than analysing geopolitics.

He suggested the need for engagement on how to build a new civilisation as a counterweight to the ongoing efforts to silence Islamic and other voices from the global south. From the perspective of the global north, the voices of Islam would be seen as one of the voices of the global south.

Ironically, an effect of the livestreamed genocide was to reduce Islamophobia and hijabophobia, therefore humanising Palestinians. He stated the need for the re-humanisation of the Palestinians and other marginalised people in order to decolonialise our minds.

David Miller from Zaim University, Turkey, recounted how the cancel culture removed him from his post as a political sociology professor at Bristol University. He addressed institutional silencing as part of broader systemic challenges, including Islamophobia and imperialism.

He suggested a “full spectrum resistance” as a response to the ideology of the American empire, which is for full spectrum dominance over air, sea, land, space and information. He believed that to regain free speech and other freedoms, there needs to be an end to imperialism and the imperialist system led by the United States. He highlighted the limitations of relying solely on legal strategies.

Silencing is done by domination, not at the level of rhetoric, he stated. The only way we will win against the American empire is by defeating it and not just by rallying for freedom of speech. Defeating our enemy with the proper legal strategies is important. It is legitimate by international law to support the right of the Palestinian people to resist occupation and oppression.

He stated that the Zionist colony is one of the key enemies of West Asia and indeed of global peace. The United States provides 70% of the ammunition and diplomatic cover, while Germany and the United Kingdom supply intelligence, overflights, and others for the current genocide of Palestinians.

The key question, he asked, is how do we defeat our enemies? We can never win simply on abstract principles of justice. The Western liberal society values are ideological tools depended upon by the powerful. Others, however, will be denied those rights.

He emphasised that the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are useful, but they are not going to defeat Zionism. He believed that it is the force of the axis of resistance in West Asia that is going to defeat Zionism.

There are two major roles Zionists play: 1) promoting Islamophobia and the idea that Muslims are backward extremists that must be selectively and particularly policed; 2) carrying out the genocide. Zionists have hundreds of companies and charities supporting Islamophobia and genocide by sending money to the Israel Defense Force (IDF) or directly supporting settlements in the West Bank. He spoke of the need to intervene materially.

Tasneem Chopra, who was awarded an Order of Australia medal (OAM) for her work in championing diversity in 2020, shared her personal ordeal of being targeted by a smear campaign for speaking out against the genocide in Gaza. Her advocacy for human rights was mischaracterised as antisemitic and supportive of Hamas. She discussed the emotional and professional toll of such campaigns and the broader implications for Muslim women and activists of colour.

She endured a 12-month smear campaign and institutionalised silencing, lost her job and much more for critiquing Zionism. Witnessing genocide is trauma, she said. Many are traumatised even if they are not oppressed by the system. She added that normality is a concept of the past since the witnessing of genocide by all humanity.

Reverend Stephen Sizer, Founder and Director of Peacemaker Trust in the United Kingdom, outlined five strategies used to silence criticism of Israel: ingratiating, intimidation, isolation, incrimination and assassination. He stressed the importance of distinguishing between legitimate political critique and racism.

He said the strategy the Zionists use is a clear and established path to achieve their ends. These include: 1) funding offers to a particular school or college, along with all-expense-paid “familiarisation” tours to imbibe the Israeli script, while warning not to have anything to do with Palestinians; 2) intimidation of organisations for writing articles to the point of self-censorship, but if that does not work, then; 3) isolation – intimidating others to isolate you, including the institutions you work for, as has happened to him and other speakers mentioned above, David Miller and Tasneem Chopra; 4) incrimination with the help of the police and judicial authorities, using guilt by association, accusations of antisemitism and of Holocaust denial, and; 5) assassination—giving the example of those assassinated in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iran. He also stated that Zionists often do these actions through others, particularly universities and news organisations.

To counter this, he argued that we need to understand their weak links to push back on their strategies and effectively bring Zionism to an end. Their weak links are: 1) their definition of antisemitism is not antisemitism, though it is weaponised; 2) the two-state apartheid solution that Israel and the United States may try to impose, which is not two states of equal rights but an apartheid regime.

As if to indicate this, President Donald Trump has called for the expulsion of all Palestinians in Gaza to other countries and has not referenced a two-state solution.

Richard Haley of Edinburgh and Glasgow highlighted the pressures activists face from both external opposition and internal networks, including political parties and community groups. He urged for a collective support to protect those on the front lines from being isolated and targeted.

He suggested having a coalition of groups to work together and speak out regarding silencing, apartheid, crushing of resistance, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

He advised us to be consistent in our actions and believed that if we do not fight, we would lose the battle. He maintained that the only way to exert agency against imperialism is with the axis of resistance to demand an arms embargo, as well as insisting on recognition from governments that it is a genocide. He also encouraged pro-Palestinian lawyers to press charges against sending arms to Israel; support our legal colleagues; write to Zionist organisations everywhere and; to picket them and tell them to divest.

Myriam Francois, a journalist, discussed the double-edged nature of social media, which, while exposing the horrors of conflicts like Gaza, also desensitises audiences and is a tool for data collection and consumer profiling, stating that we are perceived as consumers within the social media space. She argued that social media was not formed for political organisation—if you express political views on social media, you are subject to silencing through shadow banning and closing of accounts. She believed that on social media we are talking with ourselves, not advancing our causes.

She also emphasised the importance of translating online solidarity into tangible actions, such as community organising, advocacy and investments in media to counter prevailing narratives.

Malia Bouattia from the United Kingdom highlighted the importance of developing networks – especially in spaces like protests, where there is a huge diversity of people from all walks of life – and supporting those who have lost their jobs and had their reputation compromised, given the impact of the Zionist lobby.

As freedoms are being attacked, she suggested the need for support from other groups offering safety for those taking a political role. There is a need to challenge this digital battle of Islamophobia online.

She stated that the geopolitical function of Islamophobia and scapegoating the Muslim community is to justify the dehumanisation process, in the service of mass murder and exploitation.

Laurens de Rooij explored the complexities of societal change, emphasising that meaningful transformation requires confronting deep-seated fears and collective memories shaped by colonial legacies. He advocated for embracing discomfort to challenge entrenched stereotypes. He also stated that journalists can move the discourse into a more positive light, away from the perpetual repetition of the same stories and narratives over time. There is a great need for media organisations to change how they operate, such as how we discuss Muslims and Islam.

Sadek Hamid shared his experience of facing coordinated Islamophobic attacks after engaging in academic work on Islamic activism.

He called for a reassessment of strategies by Muslim organisations to more effectively combat Islamophobia. He challenged that if there are so many books and articles on Islamophobia, then why is there so little change? He believed that we are just talking to ourselves. Moreover, he stated that in the United Kingdom, perhaps one-third of the population have institutionalised or family Islamophobia, one-third are decent folks and one-third are on the fence. He asked why it seems that the onus is always on Muslims to defend the general accusations, insisting that there has to be a paradigm shift.

Global Islamophobia is a powerful set of forces we are up against. He reminded us that even Muslims are not immune from Islamophobia. There is an internalisation of Islamophobia even amongst Muslims because some risk ostracism and excommunication.

Asa Winstanley, author of *Weaponising Anti-Semitism* and writer for The Electronic Intifada, emphasised the importance of building independent media organisations to counter biased narratives perpetuated by legacy media. He highlighted the structural nature of Islamophobia and the need for alternative media sources to report truths often overlooked by mainstream outlets.

He suggested building alternate sources of power, instruction and information. Legacy news is still incredibly influential and played a major role in stopping Jeremy Corbyn, who is not antisemitic, from becoming a prime minister. Intelligence agencies were behind much censorship and pushed the Western intelligence agencies' Islamophobic bent, which he said comes from the United States. He recounted how the Zionist lobby has infiltrated many areas of government and that Islamophobia is a useful tool of the United States to divide and rule the population, influenced by the Israel lobby.

Professor Ramón Grosfoguel from the University of California, Berkeley, presented a critical analysis of Islamophobia as a form of structural racism. Drawing from his extensive research on colonialism and racism, Grosfoguel argued that Islamophobia is deeply embedded within the historical and structural frameworks of Western societies.

We tend to think the marker of racism is colour but have lost sight of the markers of racism as also being a superiority-inferiority relationship and a religious identity. The savage, the terrorist, the dangerous people—this is the way the structure operates, to mark groups of people as superior or inferior humans. The problem is not just about stereotypes or prejudices and the need to educate people about Islam but also structural, he stated. The implication of this feeling of superiority is the system's use of violence and dispossession for the sub-humans, as we see in the case of how the Israeli government approaches the Palestine question.

He criticised the pattern of celebrating regime changes that lead to chaos and exploitation, stressing the role of historical amnesia – such as with regard to the US\$10m bounty on the head of the current Syrian president – in enabling public complicity with imperialist agendas. He called for increased political consciousness to resist media propaganda that fuels imperialism.

He stated that we also need popular movements that champion resistance, fighting oppression and challenging the complicity of the media in fake news.

He insisted we need to break away from the liberal notion that racism is about colour. Rather, he maintained that racism is the hierarchy of dehumanising some people and humanising others. If they can rebrand al-Qaeda (in Syria) in a matter of hours, why can there not be, in the media, some kind of positive image (instantly) of Muslims in the West, he asked.

He stated that it is less a problem of individual prejudice and more structural. Unless you manage to keep Muslims down in the West, you will disempower the Zionist paradigm. This is because the association that Zionists want to create in everyone's minds is that we are dealing with this monster here, while you are combatting it there, and we are, therefore, in solidarity. He stated that the Zionist paradigm needs to see Muslims as inferior, animals or monsters so the Zionist or Westerner can look superior.

He believed we are living in moments that are very dangerous in which Muslims can easily be scapegoated, as they are in Gaza and have been with the recent wars in the Middle East. They start scapegoating, sometimes in genocidal ways. He asked: who do we think are going to be the main victims of that with all the structural build-up of Islamophobia? He shared that maybe in the next few years, he would not be surprised if there were a genocide against Muslims, because the subjective and structural conditions are already in place.

He warned that we need to take this very seriously and bring our minds together in terms of what Islamophobia is in the context of racism and the future.

Massoud Shadjareh, Director of the IHRC, closed the programme by stating that hate always precedes genocide. We need institutions to come together. He suggested that not just Muslims will be the victims and that we need to come together and stop the trajectory of violence. He believed we are currently weak: weak in the media and also not sufficiently united. If we fail, he said, the whole society pays a price for the ongoing Otherisation.

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The 2024 IHRC Islamophobia conference highlighted the multifaceted challenges Muslims face in asserting their rights and presence in public spheres. Through personal testimonies and critical analyses, speakers underscored the pervasive nature of Islamophobia and the most urgent need for collective strategies to combat it. The conference served as a platform for fostering dialogue, solidarity and actionable plans to reclaim civil rights and challenge systemic oppression.

There was mention to divest from Israel's war machine, which is perhaps the most glaring act of Islamophobia and atrocity. Little mention was made, though, of international organisations that might assist to protect Palestine by leveraging international military force and intervention as is justified by the United Nations' Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. These include the ICJ, the ICC, the newly formed Hague Group of nations (Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal and South Africa) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), among others. The aim should be to take collective action to prevent genocide and provide humanitarian aid, thereby ameliorating the most egregious outcome of colonisation and Islamophobia.

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