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THE IMPACT OF ISLAMOPHOBIA ON MUSLIMS LIVING IN FRANCE

Abstract

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the growing number of terrorist attacks in the world, the organizers of which were often Muslims, caused a negative attitude towards this religion. Stereotypes that Muslims are dangerous and aggressive spread in the West, which naturally led to an increase in Islamophobic attitudes. I would like to mention that nowadays, unfortunately, a similar attitude towards Muslims can be observed in many countries. In this case, I will analyze the example of one particular European country, France. What is important is how much Islamophobia affects French Muslims in this country. Accordingly, I will focus on the existing and possible laws in the country regarding the Muslims living there and their daily life. I will discuss French secularism, which is related to the laws adopted in the country. The discussion will focus on the following questions: whether the rights of Muslims are restricted, whether followers of this religion are victims of discrimination, whether acts of hatred against Muslims are frequent, and how widespread Islamophobia is in this European country.

Keywords: Islamophobia, cultural racism, secularism, French Muslims, discrimination.

Islam is the youngest monotheistic religion. This is a belief that people have argued about for years. Whether Islam is the basis of aggression, whether this religion justifies murder, whether Muslims are dangerous – society has debated these issues for decades. Unfortunately, as a result of acts of terrorism, Islam has become a violent and brutal religion for certain sections of society. For not a few people, it is nowadays associated with danger (Esposito 2002, 140). When Osama bin Laden began to talk about religious motivations for terrorist attacks, the Western media started to analyze the true nature of Islam. After 9/11, terrorists were referred to by one general term – “Muslims”. Of course, when information was spread that a terrorist was equated with a Muslim, society believed that all Muslims are extremists, which naturally increased Islamophobia, which refers to prejudices, negative attitudes, and hostility towards Islam and Muslims (Abdulla 2007, 1).

Interestingly, Islamophobia, according to some researchers, is cultural racism. This form of racism causes hatred and enmity based on religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and ethnic origin. Hostility toward Muslims is manifested by cultural and religious factors (Green 2015, 27). Anti-Muslim racism is characterized by the re-articulation and politicization of a huge archive of metaphors, stereotypes, and images constituted by the long history of Orientalism (Müller-Uri and Opratko 2016, 121). For years, Muslims were, and unfortunately still are, seen as undeveloped barbarians, and Islam as a violent religion whose followers were uncivilized and inferior to Western culture and civilization. Today, Islamophobia is dismissed as a problem and defended as a practice. In this sense, Islamophobia is not as “disgusting” as racism. Basically, it is seen as a rational response to the threats to Western universal values (Sayyid 2011, 3).

It should be mentioned that in 2020, during the pandemic, information was spread that Muslims could not understand the current situation in the world and, in general, did not follow hygiene rules. There were rumors that they were spreading the virus on purpose. During this period, posts with offensive content were published, for example, “Most Muslims are dirty”, “Muslims do not follow the rules of hygiene”, and “Let them infect each other” (Rose 2021, 19). Celebrating the potential deaths of Muslims, one 4chan user posted in March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, that they hope that “all the mudslimes get sick and die”, while a second user responded that given the proximity of the Muslim festival of Ramadan, Muslim people “will purposefully weaken themselves then gather with their elderly and die”,

which they say “will be beautiful” (Rose 2021, 19). I would like to add that the fake news circulating on the internet included photos and videos of people in mosques taken a week before the lockdown was announced in Britain (Birmingham City University 2020). There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges, including social problems. During this period, unfortunately, harassment of Muslims and physical and psychological violence against them increased.

As I mentioned before, I will focus on one particular European country, France, because I think the case of this country is particularly interesting. France is where approximately 5 million Muslims live (Iqbal 2015). The current situation in this country is interesting because, in France, there are laws that many, not only Muslims, consider as anti-Islam laws. These laws are related to French secularism – laicism, which is often perceived as a tool used by the state to legitimize Islamophobia in the country. (S.P. 2020). Bans in the country apply to religious symbols, including Islamic headscarves. In 2010, wearing the niqab and burqa was banned in France. Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president at the time, said the law was intended to protect France’s secular values, as well as women from being forced to cover their faces in public. It is known that there are cases when girls, often minors, are forced by their families to wear hijabs due to tradition. Of course, action like this is not permissible, however this does not mean that Muslim women should be restricted in their freedom and the right to choose whether they want to wear a headscarf in public places. Women should have the right to decide how they want to dress (Esposito 2002, 234).

Currently, the French Senate is trying to ban the wearing of the hijab in public places by girls under the age of 18. Along with this, the ban will affect the wearing of hijab by women, mothers of students, and the wearing of religious symbols by public officials on school trips. It is natural that this law caused a reaction from Muslims, and not just Muslims, and #HandsOffMyHijab went viral on social media (“Law against Islam” 2021). This initiative of the French Senate is part of the “anti-separatism” bill (Lang 2021). In October 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron said that Islam is a religion that is experiencing a crisis all over the world today, and in France, it was necessary to free Islam from foreign influence (Yeung 2021).

In my opinion, the French election was an interesting event, and I would like to review it. In April 2022, presidential elections were held in France. The majority of Muslims living in France voted for the far-left candidate, Jean-Luc Melenchon, in the first round. As for the second round. In this case, several imams, including the head of the Grand Mosque in Paris, urged worshipers to vote for Emmanuel Macron to prevent Marine Le Pen from becoming president (Khan-Ruf 2022). Interestingly, voting for Macron was quite difficult for many French Muslims, although the negative attitude towards Muslims would have increased with the victory of far-right leader Marine Le Pen. In general, Le Pen was distinguished by anti-Muslim rhetoric. For example, she wanted to ban the wearing of the hijab in public, but not other religious symbols, such as the Jewish kippah (Jabkhiro and Ausloos 2022). It should be noted that according to Le Pen, the headscarf cannot be considered a sign of a person’s religious beliefs. According to her, it was only an “Islamist form” (Khan-Ruf 2022). The fact that Marine Le Pen received 41.45% in the French presidential election (France24 2022) emphasizes the opinion that today Islamophobia exists in France, which greatly affects the daily life of Muslims living in the country.

It is unfortunate that in the West, including France, it is not uncommon for citizens to express hatred and hostility towards Muslims, which often leads to acts of hatred. These crimes include acts such as theft, vandalism, intimidation, violence, sexual assault, or murder. Such crimes have become a significant problem for Europe since 9/11. According to the EU Minorities and Discrimination Survey, one in ten Muslims in EU countries is a victim of a hate crime. It should be noted that violence is also directed against people who “look” like Muslims. In this case, the focus is on Sikhs, who are perceived as Muslims and, unfortunately, become victims of hate crimes. By all means, it is clear what the consequences of a lack of information and ignorance can be.

Anti-Muslim incidents increased significantly in France from 2010 to 2013. In 2010, 188 incidents were recorded. This number increased to 298 in 2011, 469 in 2012, and 691 in 2013. The increase was likely due to the intense political campaign surrounding the headscarf, which, of course, exacerbated the perception of Islam as a foreign and misogynistic religion (Green 2015, 284-285). I would like to add that many crimes were committed against Muslim women. For example, in 2013, two men attacked a pregnant Muslim woman in Paris and tried forcibly removing her hijab (Abdelkader 2017, 45). As a result of the punches inflicted on the abdomen, four days after the incident, the woman had a miscarriage (Erlanger 2013).

It must be mentioned that in 2015, after the attack on Charlie Hebdo magazine, the number of hate crimes against Muslims increased. While 133 crimes were reported in 2014, there were more than 400 such incidents in 2015. According to France's National Human Rights Commission, this was a 223 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims. Crimes were of various types: throwing shells at mosques, opening fire in the Kabab restaurant, leaving a pig's head near the mosque with the inscription "Next time it will be your head", etc. (Abdelkader 2017).

It is interesting how fast the reaction can be to such terrorist attacks. The first anti-Muslim attack was reported in 2015, within hours of the Charlie Hebdo attack. That evening, four shots were fired at a mosque near the city of Albi in southwestern France. Also, a mosque in the city of Aix-les-Bains was burned on the same day. In the coastal city of Bayona, people full of aggression towards Muslims wrote such phrases as "assassins", "dirty Arabs", etc., on the walls of a mosque (France24 2015).

In addition to hate crimes, French Muslims face other problems in their daily lives, such as unemployment. It is very difficult for French Muslims to find long-term, full-time jobs. A 2010 Stanford study found that Muslims are oppressed in the employment sector. Research has shown that in France, Christians receive twice as many employment opportunities as equally qualified Muslim candidates. A new study conducted in 2015 found that employers are less likely to hire Muslim applicants than Christian or Jewish applicants (Abdelkader 2017, 46).

There is no doubt that Islamophobia in the world affects the lives of Muslims. As a result of widespread stereotypes, peaceful, innocent Muslims have to live in an environment where people look at them with suspicion. Society does not allow Muslims living in the West to express themselves. The impact of Islamophobia is manifested in many aspects. Discrimination against Muslims is increasing in jobs, schools, and city streets. The widespread opinion that Islam is associated with aggression, terrorism, and violence leads to the emergence of anti-Muslim sentiment in the people, which subsequently manifests itself in acts committed based on hatred. As I mentioned, unfortunately, similar facts are common in France. Not a few people believe that Islamophobia is felt in the mentioned state, which poses serious challenges to French Muslims. The country's laws, which are linked to French secularism, restrict Muslims, especially Muslim women, as they do not have the right to decide whether or not to wear religious symbols, in this case, Islamic headscarves, in public places. Along with this, there are difficulties related to employment in the country. Muslims, unfortunately become victims of discrimination in the employment sector, making it difficult for them to find suitable jobs. Naturally, the environment where you feel excluded has a great impact on a person's mental health, and in this regard, the mentioned problem is also quite noteworthy.

To sum up, Islamophobia is a serious challenge in France, with many innocent French Muslims suffering as a result. The existing laws in the country, together with widespread stereotypes, make the life of the followers of Islam more difficult in this country.

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