Challenging Islamophobia: Attitudes to Islamic Immigration

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

A number of recent surveys across Europe show, despite Muslim integration, a rising suspicion of Muslims and a pushback against Islamic immigration. So how can governments and other organisations help push a positive agenda?

Commentary

A RECENT survey in the United Kingdom by the group *Hope not Hate* shows in its headline figures a growing tolerance to immigration but a growing fear of Islam. Overall 42% of those polled said that recent attacks had increased their suspicion about Islam and Muslims. Meanwhile only 10% of those polled said that they felt "similar" to Muslims, suggesting a widespread perception that Muslims are seen as culturally different.

This accords with the findings of another recent survey across Europe by Bertelsmann Stiftung which suggests that despite integrating much better than often thought, Muslims still face problems being accepted by the wider society. This was seen in another pan-European survey earlier in the year by Chatham House which suggested that many opposed Islamic immigration rather than immigration per se.

Serving Extremist Ends

These findings will no doubt be welcomed by extremist and terror groups who, it has been argued, wish to see a divide in Europe between the Muslim and non-Muslim population. While perhaps not a strategic aim of all groups, it will certainly provide fertile ground for recruitment if Muslims perceive themselves as unwelcomed or rejected by Western nations.

A particular case in point, shown by a number of studies over the years, is that people with Islamic sounding names find it harder to get jobs; when the same CV is presented to employers with an English or Arabic sounding name, the candidate with the former is several times more likely to get called in for an interview. Structural anti-Islamic bias clearly operates, even in people who may not regard themselves as racist or Islamophobic.

If Muslims find their best efforts at acceptance being pushed back then frustration will be a likely, and natural, outcome. Muslims generally neither understand nor appreciate the militant Salafi-inspired doctrines that seek to justify violence and divide communities, but they can become an ideology for frustrated youths.

Fostering Integration and Understanding

The clear message is that Islam, or any religious affiliation, is no bar to integration; though some Muslims, as members of other immigrant groups, do not seek to integrate into society. Rather, the issue can lie within the framework of the receiving society. Importantly, this is not to accuse Western societies per se of being racist or Islamophobic. The distinction between a personal and structural form of discrimination is useful. Prejudice against the unknown and acceptance of the known is a common feature of human psychology.

But it points to the need for proactive efforts by governments, civil society actors, and religious (and inter-religious) organisations to raise awareness and understanding. For many Western societies Islam remains largely an unknown Other. Cultural and linguistic differences as well as the development of immigrant "ghettos" have meant that in many cases an awareness or knowledge of Muslims has not happened.

Indeed, a number of studies have shown that in Western countries people often vastly overestimate the numbers of Muslims present in society; this can lead to fears of an "invasion" or loss of cultural identity – the figures have certainly been abused and manipulated by those with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agendas.

To overcome such misperceptions, will and determination, not to mention expertise, is needed amongst organisations that can help develop positive attitudes to integration and understanding. However, this is easier said than done. Many politicians have jumped on populist bandwagons that contribute to Islamophobia for their own ends rather than trying to work for the public good. Further, much of the media is openly hostile to immigrants and Islam.

Amongst religious and other groups there are also many conflicting agendas demanding priority, whilst there may well be a need for education within such groups on the issue as well. While immigrant groups also need to push forward with integration and can play a wider role in promoting their place in host societies.

What's the Message?

A critical issue would be exactly what message needs to be sent and how, which may

well vary from country to country. This will involve education and awareness-raising done in ways that will not alienate the target audience nor patronise them.

In today's social media age many members of the important demographic will need to be reached with catchy, short, and well produced multimedia productions. As such both the message and the dissemination of that message will be hard. In concise terms the question may be how to create a message that goes viral.

The basic message can be readily conveyed by a few key points. First, neither Islam nor reading the Qur'an are routes into violence and terrorism – we know this from the pathways of current and former terrorists, foreign fighters, etc. Second, Muslims are and must be integrating: they are learning host languages, going to university, playing sports such as football, and trying to get jobs (the degree of this varies from country to country).

Third, the host society is often suspicious of these people because of their background, so be careful you are not turning people away because of foreign sounding names – everybody needs to play their part. Fourth, stigmatising Muslims and disadvantaging them socially, culturally, and politically is what feeds the recruitment of terror groups, so again reaching out your hand is the most powerful tool against those who want to divide us.

A fact-based analysis makes it clear that Muslims are generally trying to integrate and that Islam is not itself a factor causing division or violence, notwithstanding some violent and divisive ideologies from some parts of the militant-Salafi inspired community. The structures of European societies do, though, need to be more open to accepting new communities and change. Meanwhile Muslim and other immigrants can be more proactive in integrating and playing a role in host societies. However, the challenge remains how to spread and promote a more positive understanding of Islam and the contribution Muslims can make to society.

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