



Embassy of the State of Kuwait
in the Czech Republic



ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND EUROPE

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Content

The first panel dealt with the definition and usage of the term “Islamophobia”. Mr. Richardson introduced the concept of “open” and “closed” views of Islam and Muslims and a list of eight premises that constitute the latter views (elaborated by the Runnymede Trust in the UK), which can be termed Islamophobic. However, he pointed out that it really does not matter what term do we use for anti-Muslim attitudes but it is more important to focus on their content, manifestations and strategies of coping with these. Mrs. Wetzel made a comparison between Antisemitism and Islamophobia, saying that while there are not completely identical, there is a lot of structural similarities, for example the belief in a danger of a take-over by “alien” group, in conspiracy theories, in hyper-sexuality and in sexual deviance of Muslims/Jews and in their backwardness and anti-modernity, the collective negative attributions and the detachment between reality and real threats and imagined threats. According to her Muslims are put in the position of the significant “Other” like Jews before and because of global insecurity (climate change, economic crises) national interests and national sentiments and their defense is again in the foreground, feeding anti-Muslims sentiments and the idea of “liberation” of Europe. Mr. Al-Faraj pointed out that Muslims extremists are punished much harshly in Muslim countries than in the West and that if extremists really obey by religious law they would have to leave non-Muslim lands because in Islam the value system (ability to practice Islam) is more important than land.

The second panel consisted of three Czech speakers and focused on anti-Muslim attitudes in the Czech Republic. Mr. Ošťanský described the nature of anti-Muslim community that seems to be more active lately, given boost by the perceived take-over of hostile Islamists of some countries in the Middle East in the context of the Arab Spring and by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as outbreaks of extremist or immigrant violence in European countries. He stressed the fact that media are the major cause of anti-

Muslim sentiments as the coverage of the Middle East and Islamic topics is quite extensive in relation to the negligible relations/realities the country has in common with these topics. The mainstream media do not feel the same social responsibility with Muslims as with the Jews or Roma population and uncritical anti-Muslim coverage/statements are perceived as normal. Mrs. Kalibová said that although there are cases of verbal or other assaults on Muslims it is extremely difficult to have a good overview of such incidents because many time Muslims do not report them, the police do not classify them as Islamophobic/religiously or racially motivated and even the representatives of the Muslim community do not encourage Muslim victims to seek legal remedy or visibility for the fear of drawing too much attention to the Muslim community. Mr. Mareš provided information regarding the potential for Islamophobic violence among far-right extremists and their confusion in their attitude toward Muslims because some far-right activists might regard Muslims as allies against or as lesser enemies than Jews in the short-term. Czech far-right scene is heavily influenced by the German far-right. Also British (English Defense League), Hungarian and Scandinavian extreme right has influence on the Czech scene.

In the third panel, Mr. Choudhury presented an extensive study on Muslims in the Western Europe, concluding that mostly on the local level there are positive examples of coexistence with Muslims having even bigger trust in local institutions and politics than non-Muslims. The most important values are also identical in both groups. Local media are more sensitive and accurate in their coverage of Muslims than national one and health care is the best tool for building mutual trust. Mr. Pedziwiatr gave a detailed overview of the composition of Muslims in Poland and of the reasons of anti-Muslim sentiments additional and specific to the usual ones, e.g. Polish casualties in the War on Terror and in terrorist attacks including the one in Bali. The media in Poland, even the most respected ones, report in a sensational and inaccurate manner about Muslims. The Muslim community as in other countries is not really a community because it is very fragmented. Mrs. Marzouki the situation of US Muslims to Muslims living in Europe. She identified financial and “intellectual” sources for anti-Muslim hatred and said that Islamophobia in the US is not a random phenomenon but to large degree purposefully driven by certain think-tanks, media and personalities. In reality, she said, the issue is not one of a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims but between two groups of Americans who hold different view of how to interpret the US constitution and what kind of country the US should be – so in a way Muslims became a scapegoat for a larger struggle about the future of the US.

During Q/A sessions a lot of issues were actively debated by different participants of the conference: the several layers of Islamophobia (xenophobia; defense of liberal European values; pro-Israeli attitudes; economic issues; feelings of decline and nostalgia for simpler and happier imagined past).

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Report on the conference: “Islamophobia in the Czech Republic and Europe”

- Organized by the Institute of International Relations Prague and Insaan: Czech- Arab Center for Cultural Dialogue.
- Partners: Embassy of the State of Kuwait in the Czech Republic and Anna Lindh Foundation- Euromed.
- Participants:

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Juliane Wetzel, Researcher, Center for Research on Anti-Semitism, Germany

Sami Al-Faraj, Director, Kuwait Centre for Strategic Studies, Kuwait

Bronislav Ostřanský, Research Fellow, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

Klára Kalibová, Analyst, In IUSTITIA, Czech Republic

Miroslav Mareš, Researcher, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

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May 2013.

On the 23rd May 2013, the international conference on Islamophobia in the Czech Republic and Europe was held in the Mirror Hall of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague. Existing negative stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims in general are being strengthened nowadays. Almost all of the countries of Europe are experiencing a rise in the number of people who are anti-Muslim oriented. They are often described as Islamophobes. Nevertheless, the term itself presents quite fertile ground for many disputes on the definition of Islamophobia and some alternative names.

The conference was held in three panels, the first of which discussed the variety of possible alternative terms for Islamophobia, the actual importance of the context and the name, and the degree of similarity with some of trends in history such as Antisemitism. The second panel touched on anti-Muslim sentiments in both the Czech Republic and Europe as a whole as well as some specific cases on territory of the Czech Republic. The conference was concluded with a third panel which focused on the ways Muslims perceive their lives in Europe and how people treat them, as well as experiences of Muslims living in the USA.

The first panel of the conference was opened by Mr. **Robin Richardson**, who actively participates in writing and editing many publications on this topic. As he said in the very beginning, his idea is to suggest the appropriate definition of Islamophobia, but his greater concern is the phenomenon itself – its causes and counter-narratives we need on this matter.

Mr. Richardson presented two cartoons from 1990 ad 2006 to illustrate the matters he would speak about. First image was created by Michael Cummings and showed Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev sending a joint message from NATO and the Warsaw Pact declaring the need to defend against Islam. Muslims are presented as evil, destructive, and willing to kill. The other image is drawn by Andrzej Krauze and it shows four non-Muslim men pointing accusingly at a stereotypical Muslim woman. It presented the idea that this woman is the cause of all our problems. After presenting these two images, Mr. Richardson asked whether this is just Western imagination or if there was a real threat coming from Islam.

Continuing on, Mr. Richardson presented the undisputable fact that the word Islamophobia receives a lot of criticism and pointed out some alternative names such as anti-Muslim racism, intolerance against Muslims etc. But no matter the word chosen, key words to correlate with are

fear, worries and anxiety. He suggests the patterns in Western Europe which imply inequality and correspondingly claims that Islamophobia is funded – it costs a lot of money to print many books against Islam. Moreover, many Western countries' governments actually do like Islamophobia, since they always have a matter with which to frighten the people.

This part of the panel was concluded by the notion that there must be an open view on Islam, as opposed to the closed one claiming that “all Muslim are same”. In addition, it was concluded that we need counter-narratives – we do need to tell different stories because after all we are all same.

The next panelist was Ms. **Juliane Wetzel**, a historian who tried to present possible similarities as well as dissimilarities between antisemitism and Islamophobia. She tried to present the basis for possible comparability and the differences imposed. Antisemitism she denoted as an expression of national perseverance and the accusations directed towards Jews for not integrating in the society. On the other hand, she doesn't see Islamophobia as an instrument for perseverance. She states that Jews were seen as significant “others” whereas Muslims today occupy a very important place in societies.

At the same time, Ms. Wetzel suggests the common feature – both cases are irrelevant in basis. They are rather a hallucination of fears. In case of Jews it was all about political and economic fear, whereas in the case of Muslims the fear is more posited in demographic superiority – they have been perceived as occupiers of Europe.

Stereotyping is the key focus when thinking about Muslims. One of the similarities is that both antisemitism and Islamophobia have the notion of backwardness and anti-modern aspects emphasized.

Both profiles include features such as sexual deviations and hyper-sexuality according to Ms. Wetzel.

Moreover, the claim that “Muslims are Jews of today” is present and rooted in the fact that both are based on perceptions of Western societies as opposed to the relations to real experiences. Nevertheless, one cannot forget Holocaust and the genocide which was possible due

to the dictatorship in existence in that time, whereas nowadays, as Ms Wetzel claims, in Western European societies there is no evidence of dictators in power.

Panel proceeded with the questions related to Kuwait: is this country in a position to complain about Islamophobia in Europe and fight for the others when it cannot provide for a better treatment inside the country itself. The main issue was touched by the last speaker in this part of the conference: Mr. Sami al-Faraj. Coming from Kuwait, he tried to present a series of events from the past that could be related to Islamophobia.

His view on this particular matter is that Muslims are seen as means to conquer the world. As opposed to previous two panelists, Mr. al-Faraj touched more in depth historical background necessary to fully understand this religion. He pointed out the common misconception of Jihad, stating that Jihad is in its essence about using one's energies to change and influence people's opinions but not about using the force.

In addition, Mr. al-Faraj also focused on the duty of Muslims to their value system. According to him, it simply means that Muslim like anyone else should be able to exercise their religion no matter what. It is in essence a case of human rights. He devotes his focus to the fact that many Muslims cannot exercise their basic human rights even in their own countries and that they might have a reason for going somewhere else.

To sum it up Mr. al-Faraj said that Muslims have given the rest of the world a unifying force. The entire world is being unified against the idea of Islam.

The end of the first panel was followed by the session of questions for the panelists. A very interesting remark was given by the Deputy Ambassador of Egypt in the Czech Republic who quoted a writer of one of the books he got to read stating that we all need to find best in ourselves and that this is a key factor to successfully deal with Islamophobia.

Interesting remarks were given also by Ms. Wetzel and another panelist Nadia Marzouki. According to them, one of the key points to significantly reduce Islamophobia might be a pedagogical approach. The suggested period to begin is at a really early age while youngsters are still in elementary. The point is that, with elderly people having ideas already incepted in their minds, it gets quite difficult to actually change their attitudes. Islamophobia is based on

ignorance of true principles and it is more matter of emotions rather than of cognitive aspects therefore the best way to fight Islamophobia is through early education. Panelists agreed it is a long way to go and it will take much more time and resources to significantly improve the attitudes. Nevertheless, education is a first but significant step to begin with.

Bronislav Ostřanský opened the second panel on “Islamophobia in the Czech Republic” with an introduction to Muslims in the Czech Republic, followed by a broad overview of the problem. He suggested that most Muslims in the Czech Republic are urban, well-educated, and looking for work or education, echoing the comments of Sami al-Faraj from the first panel. Although few are indigenous, most having come from Arab nations friendly to communism during the Cold War, they view the Czech Republic as a welcoming nation. Continuing in academic style, Ostřanský documented the manner in which this welcomed group, once referred to as the Czech Republic’s “invisible minority”, has become an object of hatred, the image of a cultural enemy, and even a political scapegoat. With a nod to the question by Nadia Marzouki in the first panel, he explained that the transfer of Islamophobic criticism to the anonymous auspices of social media turned what might have been a rational discussion of a genuine albeit esoteric political concern into an emotionally-charged attack on those without a voice. It is therefore unsurprising that rational discourse by academics, this conference inclusive, is falling increasingly on deaf ears. Furthermore, the list of Islamophobes’ fears has expanded to include radicalization through mosques, the destruction of Liberal values, the advent of sexual perversity, and a pandemic of irrational violence. Still citing heavily, Ostřanský showed that such societal zeitgeist was not contained to the masses, extending to such regional and national political issues as the proposed construction of a new mosque in Hradec Kralové and comments of the President. But perhaps the most harrowing trend introduced by Ostřanský is the suggestion that mainstream political parties are weighing in on the same side as Islamophobes, whether or not for the same reasons. The idea that an anti-mosque group has received government funding, and that the Christian Democratic Party has lent the movement public support in Hradec Kralové lends the future of Islamophobia in the Czech Republic an altogether more ominous tone.

The second speaker, Klára Kalibová, approached Czech Islamophobia from a more tangible point of view, describing statistics about Islamophobic crimes reported both to the government and to her organization, the IUSTITIA. Ironically, though the data itself paints a

rather optimistic picture of Islamophobia in the Czech Republic, the methodology used makes the low rates the problem in and of itself. There is ample evidence of hate crimes committed in the Czech Republic, though the vast majority (at least more than 95%) were not related to Islamophobia. However, as Kalibová described, the voluntary nature of the study hides the very real possibility that victims of hate crimes based on Islamophobia are too afraid to report abuses despite the potential support provided by the Victim's Rights Act. As well as fear of discovery, she also listed as impediments lack of awareness of support mechanisms and the perpetual desire of Muslims not to be seen as a "problem" community, thereby justifying Islamophobic rhetoric. Her final note was to enumerate the different kinds of hate crimes seen, which included verbal and physical attacks, cyber bullying, and harassment. Exemplifying the last two, she described a website used by Islamophobes in the Czech Republic as a database of Muslim sympathizers, their addresses, phone numbers, and other contact information to be used by its members for harassment. Shockingly, though this site is known to the Czech police, since it is hosted on a US server, jurisdictional issues prevent its suppression. This sheltering of Islamophobes by jurisdiction and victim fear of reporting supports Kalibová's claim that necessary civil barriers to Islamophobia in the Czech Republic are conspicuously absent.

Finally, Miroslav Mareš concluded the second panel by placing Islamophobia into the Czech Republic's wider social and historical setting. He described the first traces of the movement in the anti-Turkish violence of the 1980s, with the propagandist songs of the time, such as "Turkish Night", still relevant today. Throughout the 1990s, the scope of xenophobia spread to include other Muslim nationalities, widening to anti-Arab and anti-Pakistani movements. Although stone throwing and anti-Islamic graffiti by "Crusaders", extreme right nationalists, were common at the time, Islamophobia paled in comparison to anti-Jewish and anti-Roma movements at the time. Reflecting Kalibová's statistics, it is clear that those movements still remain dominant individually in the Czech Republic to this day. Nonetheless, Islamophobia has crossed traditional xenophobic and racial lines in the Czech Republic, which, according to Mareš, is gaining support by nationalists, neo-Nazis, atheists, libertarians, conservatives, the extreme right, and the "Patriotic Left". This was clearly evidenced by the protest outside this conference which included an atheistic component. For neo-Nazis, this is perhaps not surprising after Juliane Wetzel's speech in the first panel on the similarities between Islamophobia and antisemitism; other groups have similarly found Islamophobic grievances

similar to their own political worries. As a result, each of the above movements has generated new concerns about the Islamic presence in the Czech Republic based on their organizational predispositions, and have produced propaganda to match. Mareš specifically pointed out as examples of Islamophobic propaganda stickers by the National/Free Resistance and the so-called “White Media”. For the moment, non-violent Islamophobia is dominant, but there is a trend towards xenophobic and racial group unity and deterioration of ideological differences between these social groups in light of emotional propaganda. While the allegiances of other social movements, and indeed other victims of xenophobia, are hardly set in stone, Mareš concludes that every new group that accedes to this propaganda adds a bit more fuel to an already explosive mix of Islamophobia in the Czech Republic just waiting for a spark.

Overall, the second panel highlighted two distinct ideas. Firstly, Islamophobia is being adopted into wider social movements. Other xenophobic or racial groups have adopted Islamophobia as elements of their own agendas, making it their own, but the movement goes beyond xenophobia. Islamophobia can be caused by the radicalizing nature of social media, irrational fears, emotional propaganda, the need for a scapegoat not protected by civil barriers, or even, as Ošťanský later suggested in a question, an outgrowth of opposition to EU immigration laws. Secondly, the panel highlighted how little we really know about the scale and effects of Islamophobia. The low reporting rates, vacillation of the Roma between support and opposition to Muslims, the uncertain loyalties of some neo-Nazi groups, and the creation of a radical anti-halal movement in response to corporate business decisions all require more academic study.

Third panel of discussions was opened by Mr. Tufyal Choudhury, author of many publications and participant in researches largely related to the areas of racial and religious discrimination, integration, human rights and counter-terrorism.

He presented the project developed by himself and his associates with the aim to deliver the comparative analysis of the northern and western cities of Europe and their attitude towards Muslim people living there. It is more of localized research formed in order to present the ordinary experiences of people in everyday life. It was conducted as a series of face – to – face interviews in eleven different cities. People were asked variety of questions related to integration and interestingly most of Muslims claimed they all share same values in the neighborhood, no

matter the religion. On the other hand, non Muslims claimed the difference of religion as being a factor that does divide the neighborhood itself.

Another conclusion drawn from the project conducted was the paradox of trust in police. While the trust in police is big as they claim, the reports to the police are quite low. Political orientation is another aspect covered by this project. As Mr. Choudhury presented, if Muslims have a chance to vote they would vote for the mainstream parties. Health care and education are also important aspects covered and it is suggested that language is very important in these aspects so that people can get themselves understood even though they do not reside in the country of their origin.

According to the same project, local media is more sensitive and more positively oriented towards Muslims, due to its scope and the fact these papers are sold to the locals mainly.

To conclude with, Mr. Choudhury claims that the integration of new communities needs three generations. In the second one resides the conflict itself and all the disputes and disagreements should not be seen as negative but rather positive since they are the sign of integration taking the place for real. Given his points, Mr. Choudhury concluded that people's perceptions must be changed through media such as films, music and so on rather than just data presented through the papers and magazines.

Continuing on the third panel's theme of comparing Islamophobia between countries, Konrad Pedziwiatr discussed the situation in Poland. He showed that, though Tatars have lived in Poland continuously since the fourteenth century CE, they were dispersed during and after the World Wars, and the Muslim community in Poland was relatively small in the postwar years. Muslim students then arrived throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and professionals and refugees followed them in the 1990s. Due to their long history in Poland, the Tatars are recognized as one of only four "ethnic minorities" of Poland, guaranteed particular rights. According to Pedziwiatr, the government funding that accompanies this classification has empowered what is now a vibrant Tatar press, and ensured that their Muslim Religious Union has been on good terms with the government. Representing this association, their mufti, Tomasz Miskiewicz, is the official mufti of Poland. Nonetheless, due to the dispersion of Tatars during the first half of the twentieth century, and the influx of Muslim immigrants during the second half, Tatars now make up less

than 20% of Muslims in Poland. Indeed, as Pedziwiatr highlighted, their mufti competes with the mufti of the Muslim League for spiritual leadership of Poland's Muslims. This fracture in Poland's Muslim community is particularly damning in light of their apparent need to justify their religion to Poland's 96% Roman Catholic majority, whose views of Islam, Pedziwiatr contended, are based solely on media accounts of tragedies. Muslims killing Polish soldiers, journalists, and engineers in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ever-present spectre of Islamist terrorism, the Danish cartoons and reaction thereto, and even Joanna Rajkowska's artistic proposal to turn an industrial chimney in Poznan into a minaret have created a negative impression of Muslims in the minds of ordinary Poles. Furthermore, unfounded, Islamophobic exaggerations by Polish media are not prevented, apologized for, or even addressed, reinforcing these stereotypes. To combat these stereotypes, ordinary Polish Muslims are reduced to perpetually apologizing for their religion's radicals, and Islamic community centers are forced to expend resources to put on "cultural days". Therefore, the use of the considerable Islamic media resources in Poland to address an internal rift neuters their collective drive to show a more positive face of Islam. In perhaps the most disheartening note of the conference, Pedziwiatr concluded that some people find the infamy of being a Muslim in Poland so undesirable that they refuse to "come out" as a Muslim at all.

Finally, Nadia Marzouki ended the conference with a comparative case study outside of Europe, namely that of Islamophobia in the US. Denouncing stereotypes of the effects of 9/11, Marzouki explained that Islamophobia exploded in the US in 2008, after Barack Obama's election, and not in 2001. Tracing the rise of Islamophobia as temporally parallel to the rise of the Tea Party movement and the economic crisis, she controversially claimed that Islamophobia was actually part of a wider societal debate about constitutional interpretation. The Republican (Hamiltonian, right-winged) vision of America's future was associated with the exclusion of Muslims, while the Democrats (Jeffersonian, left-winged) were polarized in the opposite direction. Over the course of ten years, Islamophobes in the US funnelled \$42.6 million to Islamophobic academia to produce reports blaming Muslims for a variety of political issues. In turn, in what Marzouki described as an amplifier effect, the religious right, the media, political players, and grassroots organizations, polarized along the lines of the Republican vision of America's future, took these "experts'" views and incorporated them into their own agendas. Marzouki then traced Islamophobic arguments in two recent political conflicts. In the case of the

“Ground Zero Mosque”, she stated that Islamophobes denounced Muslims’ legal rights, an argument based on defined logical rules, by claiming that Muslims were being insensitive by placing a mosque at that particular location, an emotional argument. Since their degree of discomfort with the “insensitivity” could not be logically quantified, as is the case with any emotional argument, no logical argument could dislodge it. Similarly, in the case of the anti-Sharia movement of 2012, Newt Gingrich exploited the fear of Sharia law undermining American law to effectively neutralize logical arguments there has never been an intention to do so. Amendments eliminating the applicability of “foreign laws” have thus passed in four states, getting angered Muslim and Jewish communities up in arms. Marzouki concluded her speech by explaining that emotional, Islamophobic arguments are preventing rational discourse about genuine political questions and forcing Muslim communities to expend resources to combat unfounded stereotypes. If they are constantly put on the defensive, she asks, how could they be expected to have resources left for constructive purposes?