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MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE'S EFFORTS TO CONFRONT ISLAMOPHOBIA

Abstract

The phenomenon of Islamophobia is one of the most dangerous cultural consequences of the wave of extremism and violence that has shaken the world over the past three decades. The more extremism increases, Islamophobia increases, and the more Islamophobia increases, extremism increases at the same rate. This phenomenon has imposed its heavy consequences on Muslims in all Western and non-Western countries in which Muslims represent a minority of the social fabric. Many international and local organizations have endeavored to confront this phenomenon. The Muslim World League is considered to be one of the most active international Islamic organizations in combating and confronting this phenomenon. In this article I try to trace the cultural and religious efforts of the League in countries that suffer from increasing rates of Islamophobia, through which the League aims to mitigate the effects of this phenomenon - either by educating Muslims about further integration, or educating non-Muslims about the truth of the Islamic religion. That is how it tries to correct negative perceptual images they have about Islamic religion in the Western mentality, which are the underlying motivations behind the development and escalation of Islamophobia.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslim World League, Saudi Arabia, dialogue, religions, Islam

Introduction

The term "Islamophobia" is considered as a relatively recent term when it comes to discussions concerned with Islam's relationship with the West. The term, drawn from psychiatric disorders, was coined to denote the phenomenon of phobia or psychopathic fear from Islam,² which is not considered as a modern phenomenon that dates back to the events of September 11, and the emergence of extrem-

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2 Ayad Salah Shaker, *The Phenomenon of Islamophobia in the West*, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya, Beirut, 2019, p. 24.

ist Islamic currents. But rather as a phenomenon that has deep roots in an ancient history that is full of a long series of turbulent relations between the West and Islam, which passed through the first Christian clashes in the Levant in the first centuries of Islam, through the Islamic-Christian clashes in Western Europe, especially in the Battle of Tours (La Poitiers) in 114 AH, and the devastating Crusade campaigns in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the Ottoman-Christian clashes in Eastern Europe, and the Ottomans living in Europe for five whole centuries and up to modern colonialism, which launched a new phase of the conflict represented in the political control over the Muslim World and launching the cultural Orientalism project to discover the East and analyze its components and political, cultural, economic and religious dimensions.³

Later, we have the recent clashes caused by the emergence of extremist Islamic movements in the last three decades, which caused a major shock in the history of the latest cultural conflict between the Muslim World and the Western World in particular, the events of September 2001, the 2004 Madrid attacks, the 2005 London attacks, the 2015 Paris attacks, and dozens of hostile acts committed by Muslim youth affiliated with Islam, which have been exaggerated. As such, Abdul Karim Issa, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, believes that the feelings of fear of Islam is inherent in the Western imagination, until it came to view Islam as an enemy of Western culture and political entities.⁴ This phenomenon has grown until it caused the emergence of a wave of counter-violence against all Muslims in the West, turning a blind eye to their positions on these terrorist attacks, and this wave emerged as media discourse incited against Muslims and insulted their sacred symbols, as is the case with the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on the 30th of September 2005⁵ and the French newspaper Charlie Hebdo in 2011. It has also emerged in the growing anti-Muslims sentiments. According to data collected by specialized research centers, hatred crimes against Muslims rose sharply in the United States of America after the attacks of September 11, 2001,⁶ and according to the statistics of the American-Islamic Relations Council (CAIR) published in 2016, the rate of hatred against Muslims increased in 2016 by 57% compared to 2015, coinciding with a 44% increase in hate crimes against Muslims during the same period, as the rate of intoler-

3 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Knowledge/Power/Creation*, translated by Kamal Abu Deeb, The Arab Research Foundation, 5th Edition, Beirut, 2001, p. 56.

4 Abdul Karim Al-Issa, "The Inaugural address at the International Conference on Islam in Europe and Islamophobia in Brussels", March 2017, available at: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1602431> (accessed 12.10.2020)

5 Fahmi Huwaidi, *Insulting the Prophet of Islam Renews the Question: Who Hates Who?*, *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper*, No. 9913, January 18, 2006, p. 13.

6 *The New York Times*, 17 September 2016, p. 20.

erance against Muslims increased by 65% between 2014 and 2016. The report published by CAIR found that hate crimes against Muslims increased by 74.58% in total.⁷ While terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo and Saint Denis in 2015 contributed to the increase in this phenomenon in France and Europe in general, these events became a turning point in the rates of increased hatred towards Muslims in the countries of the European Union. This hatred, in turn, is the most powerful catalyst that fueled the phenomenon of extremism for some Muslim youth in those countries. The Independent newspaper reported that hate crimes against Muslims increased fivefold in the wake of the 2017 London Bridge terrorist attack, and London police data revealed a 40% increase in racist incidents compared to the rest of the year.⁸

Consequently, as the Secretary General of the Muslim World League notes, a direct correlation arose between the two phenomenon of terrorism and Islamophobia.⁹ The more terrorist attacks under the name of Islam increased, the more Islamophobia incidents takes place. And the greater the phenomenon of Islamophobia becomes; the more terrorist attacks are committed as a reaction to the radicalization of the manifestations of Islamophobia. This steady duality between the two phenomenon evokes a Greek mythology that tells of two deities fighting side by side; Phobos, who embodies fear, and Demos, who embodies terror; They are twins descending from the God of War, Iris. The God Phobos represents fear, which is the phenomenon of Islamophobia in this context, and the God Demos represents the modern phenomenon of terrorism. Although the two phenomena are incompatible with the fact that there is an essential similarity between them, they are like the two pincers who move opposite to each other while playing the same role in the cutting process.

MWL's vision of the phenomenon of Islamophobia

The Muslim World League considers the phenomenon of Islamophobia as one of its agendas and priorities, and although it mentions the phenomenon of Islamophobia in writing in its founding charter and the goals of its establishment, this phenomenon is included in the short text of the charter, where the text of the charter refers to “calling on nations in general to compete in the field of work for the good and prosperity of humanity and to achieve social justice among its mem-

7 *The Islamophobia in Europe, the Outreach and the Practice*, Democratic Arabic Center for Strategic, Political & Economic Studies, Berlin, 2019, p. 122.

8 *The Independent*, June 7, 2017, p. 7.

9 *Maad Magazine*, 11 December 2018, p. 31.

bers and the creation of a better human society”¹⁰, as two of its founding goals refer to “caring for civilized communication and spreading the culture of dialogue between cultures and religions¹¹ and “caring for Muslim minorities and their issues, and communicating with them to solve the problems they face within the limits of the constitutions and regulations of the countries in which they are located.”¹² On the basis of these founding texts, the Muslim World League is moving in its efforts to confront the phenomenon of Islamophobia, which its Secretary-General believes as a term, entered the field of political, media and cultural deliberation in effect in 1998, after the bloody bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.¹³ That is, with the beginning of the wave of extremist terrorism that Al Qaeda launched in 1996.

International conferences and forums

The League adopted the strategy of increasing its media presence in Western countries through conferences and seminars to raise awareness of the dangers of Islamophobia on Western societies and on international peace and coexistence. Therefore, since 2016, it intensified its presence there through a huge series of international conferences that dealt with the phenomena of terrorism and Islamophobia based on the League’s vision of the organic interconnection of the two phenomena. Note that the League had been active before 2016, but it did not focus on activities in Western countries concerned with the phenomenon of Islamophobia that deals with it in the context of their fight against extremism and terrorism at the level of Islamic countries, except in some cases, such as the World Conference on Dialogue organized by the League in Madrid in June 2008, which dealt with the discussion of establishing a strategy for dialogue and acculturation between Islam and Western societies to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between the two parties.¹⁴ The League also held the International Conference on “Islam and Combating Terrorism”, in Mecca Al- in February 2015, and discussed the reciprocal relationship between terrorism and Islamophobia. It discussed media abuses that attack Islamic sanctities in some Western countries under the pretext of freedom of expression, which is one

10 Abdallah Ben Abdel Mohsen At-Turki, *The Muslim World League, Facts and Figures*, MWL Publication, 2002, Mecca, pp. 32-33.

11 Ibidem, p. 35.

12 Ibidem.

13 Abdul Karim Al-Issa, Islamophobia is a Term Used to Intimidate People from Islam, *Al Youm Al Sabea Newspaper*, 2 December 2019, p. 19.

14 See: “Madrid Declaration”, issued by the World Conference on Dialogue organized by the Muslim World League in Madrid, Spain, 16-18 July 2008.

of the reasons for the increase in hostilities and terrorism against Western countries, where extremist groups exploit these issues to incite youth who are deceived into revenge, which in turn increases tension and thus the phenomenon of Islamophobia. The conference came up with an integrated strategy to prevent terrorism and extremism and correct the image of Islam in Western societies.¹⁵

It should also be noted here that the League used to organize intensive discussion sessions with universities in Muslim countries such as Al-Azhar University and Assiut University in Egypt, most notably the symposium held at the headquarters of the Islamic Universities Association in Cairo on March 4, 2015, where this event had a significant impact because it coincided with the terrorist incident against the Jordanian pilot, Muath al-Kasasbeh, and when the killing of 21 Egyptians took place in Libya by extremist groups.¹⁶

After Dr. Al-Issa assumed his position, the tendency to intensify presence in Western countries became clear, as mentioned above. Therefore, the League held a long series of seminars, conferences and workshops in many Western countries to raise awareness of the dangers of Islamophobia, including an international symposium entitled "The Role of Followers of Religions in Promoting Peace" in Geneva in November 2017, which extensively discussed the phenomenon of Islamophobia and its relationship with the phenomena of extremism and terrorism. The final statement of the symposium contained what was stated: "The extremists are weak in argument, have no ability to confront facts, only work in a region of emptiness and they only employ religious emotions which are abstract from religious and intellectual awareness, and that their last bet and their only hope after the disappearance of many of their ideas when strongly confronted is to provoke religious sentiments in the wake of Islamophobia campaigns against Islam as a religion. This hostility is not against extremists who fought Islamic moderation only. This fatal mistake served extremism and terrorism a lot.¹⁷ The symposium brought together a significant number of European experts from the European Union institutions to discuss an integrated strategy to address the phenomenon of Islamophobia. After this conference, the League moved to direct coordination with the European Union on this issue. Therefore, it organized a conference titled "Islam in Europe and Islamophobia" at the headquarters of the European Union in March 2017 in which the

15 The Final Statement of the International Islamic Conference "Islam and Combating Terrorism", organized by the Muslim World League, *Dirasat Magazine*, 16 Nov 2016, p. 240, Riyadh.

16 Mostafa Atef, "The Efforts of the Association of Islamic Universities in Confronting Terrorism", in: *The Conference on the Role of Universities in Confronting Terrorism*, Naif Arab University for Security Sciences, 11-12 April 2017, Riyadh, p. 13.

17 The Muslim World League Organizes a Symposium on the Role of Followers of Religions in Promoting Peace in Geneva, *Saudi Press Agency*, 11-11-2017. Available at: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1686617> (accessed 22-10-2020).

Secretary-General of the League's inaugural speech stated: "Terrorism has a bet on the abstract religious sentiment that was provoked by the hatred of Islamophobia, so it offered hatred more than anything else," stressing that Islamophobia is the strongest message of extremism that threatens to mobilize Muslim sentiment against the Other. He indicated that when the logic of consciousness is absent in reading the events, we will live a painful civilizational clash in difficult circumstances, stressing again that Islamophobia is a discourse of exclusion that causes misprediction. The history of religious extremism in all religions had painful events that are present at times and absent at others and see-saw from time to time.¹⁸

The year 2017 witnessed an intensive campaign of seminars and workshops in Western countries to study the phenomenon of Islamophobia, for example the workshop "Good neighborhood and coexistence" that was held in the French city of Mulhouse in November 2017. In the same month, MWL held the International Forum of the Muslim World League in Geneva in November 2017, through which the League sought to pressure the institutions of the European Union to criminalize Islamophobia in any form, as it is currently considered the first resistant to the efforts of combating extremism, and is a strong obstacle to the positive integration of the Muslim minorities where it has become subject to stakeholders in some political rivalries, away from exploring the facts and assessing its political, cultural and economic risks.¹⁹ The conference raised a global slogan entitled "The peace of some societies is the peace of all societies", based on the fact that the world has become interconnected in a way in which the corruption of a part extends to those around it and far from it, warning that the negligence in implementing the values of justice, freedom, tolerance and peace between different religions and cultures will create a potential nucleus for an extremist idea or a terrorist crime, and that the oppressed failure to win will have dire consequences.

In its recommendations, the forum called for intensifying Islamic meetings with scholars of other religions to study the outstanding issues and problems, forming common concepts, and liberating them from the influences of historical conflict among followers of religions, with the aim of spreading a culture of peace and understanding, rejecting the promotion of a culture of violence, hatred and exclusion, and not poisoning the media space in a way that fuels religious, sectarian and intellectual conflicts.²⁰

In May 2017, the League held the sixth meeting of the Union of Sharia Councils

18 Ibidem.

19 *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, 17 November 2017, p. 21.

20 Ibidem, p. 20.

in the United Kingdom. The meeting hosted a significant number of Muslim scholars representing 16 Sharia councils in various British cities to discuss issues of integration and protect Muslim youth from the ideology of extremist movements, and issue religious decrees that directly contribute to reducing polarization in the British society, among Islamic centers, parties and associations representing the extreme right.²¹

The media and scientific activities of MWL

In addition to conferences, seminars and workshops related to the phenomenon of Islamophobia, the MWL intended to enhance its scientific and Islamic activities through its media apparatus located at the League's headquarters in Mecca Al-, and through the Islamic Fiqh Academy, which addressed many of its religious decrees issues related to Muslim minorities in Western countries and the issue of integration into the western societies. The issue of integration is considered the most important cure for Islamophobia. Through the League's Kalima Magazine, published in Arabic and French, which is the most important magazine in the field of fighting Islamophobia, and the Magazine of the Islamic World Newspaper, Maad Magazine, the MWL addressed²² the phenomenon of Islamophobia in more than sixty articles and publications dealing with the including ways to confront it and steps Muslim communities must take to confront hostile media campaigns against them.²³

The League issued many books in response to Western cultural products that incite against Muslims in Western countries and portray them as conquerors of Western societies, such as Alan Finkelkroot's Unfortunate Identity book and Eric Zemmour's French Suicide book. The League held discussion sessions about these books to refute the intimidation of the threat of Islam on Western culture.²⁴ The League has also been active in to highlight the issue of cartoons insulting Islamic sanctities in Western countries, and it has worked extensively with European institutions and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to criminalize insulting of religions in any form.²⁵ The League has issued a collection of books to respond to the media slander against Messenger Muhammad through a series of books written by

21 *The Saudi Press Agency*, 17 May 2017, p. 18.

22 It was established in 1966, under the name of "Muslim World Newspaper", the name was changed to "Maad Magazine" in 2018.

23 See, for example: *Maad Magazine*, the issues of the following days: 12-10-2015; 23-10-2016; 30-09-2018; 19-04-2019, and 20-09-2020.

24 Ayad Salah Shaker, *The Phenomenon of Islamophobia in the West* . . . p. 176.

25 See: *The Journal of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation*, Issue of September 2020.

the former Secretary General of the League, Abdallah Ben Abdel Mohsen At-Turki.²⁶

In terms of positive initiatives, the League joined all positive initiatives to consecrate diversity in societies, as it took a decision to value all these initiatives, including in the Canadian law to combat the phenomenon of hostility towards Islam, which the League worked a lot to highlight in media and politics.²⁷

The Islamic World Magazine is considered to be one of the most important sources of data and information that continues to publish any events related to the phenomenon of Islamophobia and publishes monthly reports on the increase and decline of this phenomenon.²⁸ The League also works to finance many magazines in Islamic countries that serve the end of defending moderation in Islam and correcting the wrong concepts about it, and thus mitigating the phenomenon of hostility towards Islam in Western societies.²⁹

In the field of electronic media, the League has been active on the Internet through Radio Islam and the website (SoundVision.com), through which the League is trying to create an alternative discourse in Western societies based on accepting pluralism and not being afraid of Islam and Muslims, and how to benefit from the presence of Muslim minorities in the West in the service of security and stability in these societies.

Since January 2018, the League has also begun to establish a huge database that discusses all problems raised by some biased media outlets against Islam, by dealing with what they present case by case while ensuring that it is discussed in a scientific and discreet manner and by using the opinions of Western philosophers and the views of Muslim scholars.³⁰

Conclusion

The founding charter of the MWL stipulates its mission in defending the image of Islam in all countries of the world and serving Muslims in Islamic countries and Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries. Therefore, it was necessary for the League to include the issue of Islamophobia in bylaw charter and as part of its pledg-

26 Muhammad Al-Asaad, "The Muslim World League Confronts the Defense of the Prophet Muhammad", *Sawt al-Ummah Magazine*, 23 Sep 2003.

27 Othman Abu Zaid, A Statement of Praise for the Canadian Draft Law in Combating Islamophobia, *Journal of the Muslim World League*, 23 May 2017.

28 See: *Maad Magazine*, 12 October 2017, p. 31.

29 The General Secretariat of the Muslim World League, the Association's Charter and Regulations, MWL Publication, 25 April 1963.

30 "The Muslim World League Establishes a Specialized Database to Combat 'Islamophobia'", *Al-Dustour Newspaper*, 15 September 2018, p. 27.

es to societies in which it is active. The League's activity on the issue of Islamophobia was not prominent before 2017, and it mostly relied on traditional harmonies through scientific and religious responses to the distorting campaigns against Islam in Western countries. However, after Abdul Karim Al-Issa assumed his position as the new Secretary-General of MWL in 2017, the League's activity witnessed a radical transformation, as the League commenced working directly in Western countries and in coordination with the European Union institutions to confront this phenomenon. The League's activity, despite its intensity in recent times, remained far from the institutional influence on the foundations of the anti-Islam and Muslim media in the West, for accumulated political and cultural reasons. In order for the League to remedy this, it needs to contribute to the establishment of a Western media platform or to contribute to paving the way to providing a balanced media content that contributes to reducing the severity of the phenomenon of Islamophobia, and proposing intellectual and cultural alternatives that work to encourage dialogue and acculturation between the West and Islam.

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Ханан Халид ал-Худаири

НАПОРИ СВЕТСКЕ МУСЛИМАНСКЕ ЛИГЕ У БОРБИ ПРОТИВ ИСЛАМОФОБИЈЕ

Сажетак

Феномен исламофобије представља једну од најопаснијих последица таласа насиља и екстремизма који су уздрмали свет у последње три деценије. Што има више екстремизма, има више исламофобије. И обрнуто, што има више исламофобије, има више екстремизма. Овај феномен има велике последице на муслимане у западним и не-западним земљама у којима су они мањина. Велики број међународних и локалних организација покушавају да се боре са овим феноменом. Светска муслиманска лига се сматра за једну од најактивнијих исламских организација које се боре са исламофобијом. У овом раду покушавам да пратим културне и верске напоре Лиге у земљама у којима постоји висок ниво исламофобије, кроз које Лига покушава да се бори са овим феноменом - кроз образовање муслимане о њиховој интеграцији, или кроз образовање не-муслимана о правој истини о исламу. На тај начин, Лига покушава да поправи негативну слику о исламу која постоји у западњачком менталитету, које су основна мотивација за развој и ескалацију феномена исламофобије.

Кључне речи: исламофобија, Светска муслиманска лига, Саудијска Арабија, дијалог, религије, ислам