Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: The University of Leeds

Unit of Assessment: 21 Sociology

Title of case study: Countering Islamophobia

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2003–2019

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	**Role(s) (e.g. job title):**	**Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:**
S. Sayyid	Professor of Social Theory and Decolonial Thought	2003–present

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013–2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No

1. Summary of the impact

Polling data, crime surveys and measures of social inequality consistently indicate that people perceived as being Muslims encounter hostility, which limits their citizenship. Muslims make up just 5% of the British population, yet more than half of religious hate crime is directed towards them. Confusion about the nature of Islamophobia has undermined efforts to address its effects. Research led by **Professor S. Sayyid** at Leeds helped to redefine Islamophobia as a form of racism that targets Muslimness and transformed its public understanding so that civil society organisations, local government and politicians could take new action to challenge it.

2. Underpinning research

Islamophobia is difficult to tackle because it cuts across policy boundaries and cultural understandings of 'race', religion and racism. The term was introduced to British public discourse in 1997, with reference to religious persecution, but without reference to racism. It covers aggressive behaviours from the mundane to murder, and from the street to the state. It invokes questions of national security and social cohesion, free speech and hate speech, issues of gender, ethnic identity and culture. Research at Leeds revealed the complex nature of Islamophobia and reframed it, proposing strategies to address it.

Sayyid's appointment to the University of Leeds in 2003 was secured through investment in a University Research Fellowship on 'Race', Ethnicity and Postcolonialism. He was assigned to the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, becoming its Director in 2007. **Sayyid** reconnected the racial with the colonial by casting 'ethnic minorities' in the UK as a postcolonial people. **[1]**

Sayyid explored the co-emergence of Muslim identity and Islamophobia through collaborative work (with Vakil, KCL) **[2]** and in a major monograph on the global politics and representation of Islam and Muslimness. **[3]** During a period of secondment, he also established an International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. This cumulative scholarship challenged and changed the academic discourse on Islamophobia by conceptualising it as more than a sociology of ethnicities and faith communities. In particular, it challenged the belief-based definition of Islamophobia in British public policy, by revealing the racialisation underpinning it and by highlighted the significance of definitions in its regulation. **[4]**

The research was further developed and applied in two EU-funded projects.

- The first (co-ordinated by Centro De Estudos Sociais, Portugal), concerned 'the semantics of tolerance and (anti-) racism in Europe' (2010-2013). It analysed the language and meanings of tolerance in relation to citizenship, and how these are shaped by public institutions, policies, and mass media. **Sayyid** led the UK study. The resulting collaborative book presented a new framing of policy debates on the question of racism, with a focus on the UK. This revealed in more detail the often-negative representation of Muslims in workplaces, education and the media and proposed a new agenda for 'racism reduction' to address this problem. **[5]**

- The second project (for which **Sayyid** was Lead Consultant [Co-I]) was concerned with 'Countering Islamophobia' (2017-2018), based on an assessment of eight country contexts. This involved categorising counter-narratives, developing good practice and disseminating these for use by policy makers, professionals and practitioners, including in the media. This project produced a 'Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit' showcasing counter-narratives to Islamophobia. **[6]**

The dominant narratives were found to position Muslims as, for example, a threat to security, a demographic or cultural threat to European identity, as homophobic or oppressive to women. A worsening environment of Islamophobia was identified in media content, political discourse and everyday experiences. A series of counter-narratives were then identified, through consultation with policymakers, lawyers, activists and media professionals. Making Islamophobia more visible, and reaching a new consensus on its definition, were identified as pre-conditions to telling a different story about 'Muslimness' and creating new space for Muslim voices.

To summarise, the key research findings suggested that:

(a) Islamophobia should be understood as a specific type of racism, directed at Muslimness, thus shifting the focus of public understanding from one of belief-based religious persecution of Muslims to one of global and institutionalised racialization.

(b) Islamophobia has become increasingly normalised in the UK, and increasingly prominent in political and media discourse. It needed to be publicly redefined as racism in order to challenge it using the tools of racism reduction – both politically and in everyday life.

(c) Counter narratives to Islamophobia can help in this work of racism reduction if they are used to make more space for Muslim voices and autonomy in policy and practice.

3. References to the research

1. Ali, N., & Sayyid, S. (2006). *A postcolonial people: South Asians in Britain*. Hurst & Co.
2. Sayyid, S., & Vakil, A. (Eds.) (2011). *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*. London: Hurst – Sayyid's contribution appears as 'Out of the devil's dictionary' (pp. 5-18)
3. Sayyid, S. (2014). *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and world order*. Oxford University Press.
4. Sayyid, S. (2014) A measure of Islamophobia. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 2(1): 10-25. https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.2.1.0010
5. Sian, K., Law, I., & Sayyid, S. (2013). *Racism, governance, and public policy: beyond human rights*. Routledge
6. Law, I., Easat-Daas, A., Merali, A., Sayyid, S. (Eds.) (2019) *Countering Islamophobia in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan (notably chapter 11 by Law, Sayyid and Essat-Daas on the Counter-Islamophobia Kit, pp. 323-360)

Examples of relevant research awards

- *'Race', Ethnicity and Postcolonialism*, University Research Fellowship (public competitive award), 2003-2008. University of Leeds (Sayyid)
- *Everything you always wanted to know about Muslims but were afraid to ask,* Attorney General's Department Building Community Resilience Grants Program (Australia), 2012-14, AUD100,000 (Sayyid PI)
- *The semantics of tolerance and (anti-) racism in Europe: public bodies and civil society on a comparative perspective*, EU SSH-CT-2010-244633, 2010-2013, GBP208,362. (Sayyid Co-I with Centro De Estudos Sociais et al.)
- *Countering Islamophobia through the development of best practice in the use of counter-narratives in EU Member States*, EU JUST/2015/RRAC/AG/BEST/8, 2017-2018, GBP189,106. (Law PI, Sayyid Lead Consultant [Co-I])

4. Details of the impact

Research at Leeds played a significant role in the public re-definition of Islamophobia as a form of racism targeting Muslimness, rather than as hostility to a form of religious belief. It:

- stimulated public debate and challenged established norms, nationally and internationally

- gained public recognition that Islamophobia is best understood as a type of racism
- changed how public authorities and Muslim community stakeholders tackle Islamophobia.

Promoting public understanding and tolerance

Islamophobia and public interest in Muslim identity grew rapidly from the late 1990s. As the research showed, popular representations of Muslimness became more racialized and relations between British Muslims and wider society became more strained after the events of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London. The declaration of a revolutionary Caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014 regenerated this public concern, stimulating mass media engagement with **Sayyid's** scholarship in Britain and abroad. For example, his work on global Islam and the Caliphate was the focus for a BBC Radio 4 *Analysis* programme and extended coverage on Australian national radio that year, on Radio 4's *Beyond Belief* in 2015, and Iranian television in 2016. In this way, the research was utilised by broadcasters to inform public understandings of Muslimness. **[A]**

At the same time, the research stimulated counter-narratives of tolerance and new platforms for community cohesion. For example, in Australia, a national 'Award for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding' (established through research collaboration with the Australia Day Council) was awarded in 2013 to the Muslim Women's Association of South Australia for their cross-cultural training and education, and to a filmmaker who debunked 'myths and speculation about asylum seekers and Muslims'. In 2014, it recognised the 'Welcome to Australia' movement and the Queensland Eidfest Association, for 'welcoming the wider community' to its celebrations **[B]**. Similarly, the Countering Islamophobia toolkit developed from EU-funded research was launched in the European Parliament with the backing of the Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup of MEPs, and promoted on the European Network of National Equality Bodies website and by the Council of Europe on the European Action Day Against Islamophobia **[C]**.

Recognizing Islamophobia as racism

In 2017-18, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims arrived at a new working definition of Islamophobia, following public consultation. This affirmed that, '*Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness*'. This wording matched that proposed by **Sayyid** and Vakil, but for the addition of five words ('is rooted in racism and'). Its report also highlighted **Sayyid's** evidence that '*the purpose of a definition is not just to inform the application of the criminal code, it is also required in order to bring about a transformation in social etiquette.*' **[D]**.

This public reframing of Islamophobia was achieved through a change of position by Muslim community actors, led by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, is the UK's largest Muslim umbrella organisation, with a membership of more than 500 mosques, schools, charitable associations and professional networks). They approached **Sayyid** and Vakil to advise on their submission to the APPG and this engagement with the research transformed their approach with regard to how Islamophobia should be defined and how it should be countered. As MCB's Secretary General affirmed, this '*was immensely important in shaping opinion on understanding 'Islamophobia' as a form of racism…that led to the publication of a 'working definition' of the term*'. A further 61 Muslim organisations then joined forces to position this approach as a collective claim. In a joint public letter to the Prime Minister in 2018, they declared that, '*For our communities, it was vital that the definition encapsulated the racialised reality of Islamophobia and its many manifestations over and above mere anti-Muslim hatred'*. Such examples evidence the research contribution to social change through take-up by civil society groups. **[E]**

The APPG's adoption of the definition, and the then Government's opposition to it, generated much public controversy. Prominent political commentators and columnists writing for *The Times, The Spectator*, *Policy Exchange* and the *Jewish Chronicle* attacked the definition, citing **Sayyid** as its primary author. Others were supportive, such as in *The Guardian,* which also identified **Sayyid** and Vakil as '*two of the most influential contributions to the parliamentary group's work*'. Such examples evidence the extent to which concepts originating from the research challenged established norms and thought. **[F]**

The scope of impact was evident from the long list of public and political actors adopting the new working definition. These included the Scottish and Welsh Governments, the Mayor of London, and national police chiefs. It was endorsed by seven national political parties (Labour, Liberal

Democrat, SNP, Scottish Conservatives, Plaid Cymru, Scottish Greens, Greens), 22 local authority Councils, and 57 individual MPs or Lords. At least 55 non-governmental organisations, notably Muslim groups, signed endorsements to the definition originating from the research. **[G]**

Changing the way stakeholders tackle Islamophobia

A key research finding was that definitions matter because of the work they do in regulating responses to discrimination. Repositioning Islamophobia as a form of racism, that targets Muslimness, also calls for the use of racism reduction strategies to address it (as shown in the research on countering Islamophobia). For example, in a shift of guidance, the Equality and Human Rights Commission now recognizes rules against hair covering as an illustration of indirect discrimination against a 'racial group' rather than solely as a matter of 'religious' belief.

Among local authorities there was evidence of change in approach. For example, In Islington, redefining Islamophobia as racism allowed them *'to use the word as a more effective tool to challenge bigotry, hatred and discrimination in our community',* while in Lambeth it was *'sending a clear message that we recognise the rise in Islamophobia and are committed to taking serious action to tackle it.'* In Hackney, it made it '*easier for us to tackle Islamophobia in all of its forms*'. In relation to anti-Muslim hate crime in Tower Hamlets, one Councillor observed that '*The adoption of the new definition of Islamophobia, identified as a form of racism will give clarity to decision makers and give them certainty as to how to investigate such incidents*'. These examples illustrate how the concepts were drawn down to change at the local level. **[H]**

These benefits were clear to Muslim community organisations too. For example, the Chair of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) argued that '*Defining Islamophobia is an important step in tackling hate-crime*', and to '*empower authorities and communities to deal with incidents of hatred and protect British Muslims*'. The Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) argued that the definition '*brings us closer to setting a consistent and coherent way to tackling Islamophobia, and helps differentiate and identify Islamophobic hate crime*'. **[I]**

Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) concluded that their engagement with **Sayyid**'s public scholarship was *'fundamental in our own endeavours to devise meaningful strategies'*, and specifically that, '*Professor **Sayyid***'s *conceptions of Islamophobia directly influence the understandings with which we aim to equip communities, and which are subsequently independently used by these communities to protect and advance their own rights, freedoms, and opportunities*'. MEND employed this understanding to produce new policy guidelines, which in turn have been adopted by '*councils, political parties, and institutions across the country*'. **[J]**

MCB adopted both the definitional approach and the strategic priority to promote counter-narratives of Muslimness. For example, building on their engagement with the research, they launched a series of training events for community organisers to embed these in policies and practices. In summary, from the perspective of the UK's largest Muslim umbrella organisation, the redefinition of islamophobia arising from research at Leeds was '*among the most significant policy developments in recent years…The clarity of the definition makes it easier to identify Islamophobia and opens up existing channels of redress*'. **[E]**

As the evidence shows, re-framing and re-defining Islamophobia makes a difference. Research at Leeds was instrumental in stimulating wide public debate, redefining Islamophobia as a specific form of racism and providing tools and examples to counter it in community advocacy work, media monitoring and training. This allowed civil society and local government to respond to the rise of Islamophobia using the established tools of racism reduction and enabling ordinary people to call out Islamophobia with greater confidence.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

A. Links to media engagement, including BBC Radio 4 *Analysis* programme (UK, 2014) https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04lpyhv; extended interview on ABC national radio (Australia, 2014) https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/encounter/5801600; featured guest on Radio 4's *Beyond Belief* (2015) https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04xnd07; televised

speech on Press TV (Iran, 2016) https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2015/11/09/436905/Salman-Sayyid-critical-thinking.

B. Press releases of the Australian national 'Award for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding' in December 2013 https://www.unisa.edu.au/Media-Centre/Releases/Awards-recognise-film-and-talk-as-paths-to-understanding/ and December 2014 https://www.unisa.edu.au/Media-Centre/Releases/Rewarding-a-spirit-of-welcome-/ (arising from Sayyid's research in 2012 https://www.unisa.edu.au/Media-Centre/Releases/210812/).

C. The 'Counter-Islamophobia Kit' (CIK) hosted on the website of Equinet (the European Network of Equality Bodies) https://equineteurope.org/2018/counter-islamophobia-kit/ and promoted as a resource by the Council of Europe on European Action Day Against Islamophobia 2020 https://rm.coe.int/european-action-day-against-islmaophobia/16809f9fbf

D. All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2017) *Islamophobia Defined*: *The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia* (quotations from pages 33 and 56) https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf

E. Corroboration letter from General Secretary, Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) (11 January 2020, first quotation) and Joint open letter to the Prime Minister from Muslim organisations (second quotation), with MCB press release https://mcb.org.uk/press-releases/british-muslim-organisations-rally-for-proposed-definition-of-islamophobia/

F. Confirmation of research contribution to the APPG in the *Guardian,* 1 December 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/01/muslims-demand-full-legal-protection-from-islamophobia

G. List of actors publicly endorsing the definition (governmental, political and non-governmental) https://www.islamophobia-definition.com/#endorsements

H. Public press statements by members of Islington Council https://www.islingtongazette.co.uk/news/islington-adopts-appg-on-british-muslims-islamophobia-definition-1-5920830, Lambeth Council http://www.lambeth-labour.org.uk/2019/07/17/lambeth-to-adopt-appg-on-british-muslims-definition-of-islamophobia/, Hackney Council https://news.hackney.gov.uk/hackney-is-no-place-for-islamophobia---islamophobia-awareness-month-2020/, and Tower Hamlets Council https://www.purumiah.com/tackling-rising-islamophobia-in-tower-hamlets-why-the-council-should-adopt-the-all-party-parliamentary-group-definition-on-islamophobia/

I. Press releases from the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)

J. Corroboration letter from Head of Policy, Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) (13 January 2020)