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Islamophobia: Europe's new political disease

The rise of the counter-jihad movement threatens communal harmony as much as so-called 'militant Islam', says author.

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A new wave of anti-Muslim intolerance and antagonism is sweeping Europe. The far right political gains seen in some parts of the continent are alarming. Anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and extreme right parties seem to be cashing in on economic hardship and austerity measures. In a blinkered world of "us" and "them" they have found in Europe's Muslim citizens the "others".

In this fevered atmosphere of rising nationalism Islam, the religion of its most-impooverished people, is taking over the continent. Never mind the agonies such sentiments caused when acted upon by the Norway killer, Anders Breivik last year. "Racism is the lowest form of stupidity; Islamophobia is the height of common sense!" [said one group](#) in 2008.

To any person with a modicum of common sense such attitudes are absurd and bordering on a mythical view of reality. We must check their rise. In a powerful indictment, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, posted a blog about how European Muslims are [stigmatised by populist rhetoric](#) (October 2010).

"European countries appear to face another crisis beyond budget deficits - the disintegration of human value. One symptom is the increasing expression of intolerance towards Muslims.

Opinion polls in several European countries reflect fear, suspicion and negative opinions of Muslims and Islamic culture," he wrote.

He was not alone in giving Europeans this warning; many people across British politics and media have shared similar sentiments for some time. Amnesty International has shared this concern. In its April 2012 report "[Choice and prejudice: discrimination against Muslims in Europe](#)", Amnesty exposes the impact of discrimination on Muslims. Marco Perolini, Amnesty's expert on discrimination, says: "Muslim women are being denied jobs and girls prevented from attending regular classes just because they wear traditional forms of dress, such as the headscarf. Men can be dismissed for wearing beards associated with Islam... Rather than countering these prejudices, political parties and public officials are all too often pandering to them in their quest for votes."

Amnesty International has accused France, Belgium and the Netherlands of failing to implement proper laws banning discrimination in employment.

It is disheartening that a continent that had learnt many lessons in such a hard way, after the devastation of the two World Wars, and which prides itself in equality and human rights, is allowing itself to be influenced by the forces of intolerance and hate. It is now open season to malign Muslims because of their religious and cultural practices. Yet Muslim immigrants arriving after the war joined in the effort to rebuild the economies of war-torn Europe in the 1950s. In almost every field of life, Muslims have been an integral part of the European tapestry. Muslims are today at home in Europe, have been contributors to its past and are stakeholders in its future.

Yet the language and rhetoric used by the Far Right and the level of political expediency in mainstream European politics is mind boggling. The hate mongers are apparently succeeding in swapping a racist agenda for an Islamophobic one. The lacklustre response from European leaders has paved the way for anti-Muslim bigotry to move closer to the mainstream.

It took a [cold-blooded massacre](#) of 77 Norwegian youths by a far-right "Christian" extremist, Anders Behring Breivik last summer, to shake the conscience of Europe's political class. It was a horrendous wake-up call to home-grown far-right violence and ideology, inspired by the rhetoric

of vote-chasing politicians, pseudo academics, media analysts and hate groups like the English Defence League (EDL) in Britain. Breivik, in his recent trial, has made vitriolic attack on European leaders for their "impotence" to stand up against Muslim "conquest" of Europe. In this, he is propounding the "Eurabia" fantasy that is central to the so-called "[counter jihadist](#)" movement propelled by ideologues in the USA.

Elsewhere, in France, the shockwave of the far-right National Front polling nearly one fifth of French voters in the first round of the presidential elections is still reverberating. Both the socialist candidate and the incumbent president are now [wooing the supporters of Marine le Pen](#).

In Britain the recent news that the EDL has joined hands with the British Freedom Party (BFP) is going to have political implications. The BFP was formed in 2010 by disaffected members of the BNP and whatever its stated objectives, its main target is the Muslim community. It wants to ban the *niqab*, stop the building of new mosques and Islamic schools and outlaw Sharia (as if it runs Britain!) including Islamic finance. The news that EDL head Tommy Robinson is to be [appointed](#) Deputy Leader of the British Freedom Party has alarmed anti-racist groups like [HOPE Not Hate](#), and others.

The alliance of EDL and BFP would be more dangerous than the BNP: the current EDL head "Tommy Robinson" (real name: Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, a tanning salon manager from Luton) has a better media presence than the Holocaust-denying Nick Griffin. In focusing on Islam and the threat of "Islamist extremists" they can have a bigger appeal than the simple racist agenda of the BNP. With political trust at an all-time low, this far right alliance may take advantage of voter apathy in national and local politics to advance their cause.

Be that as it may, we must stand firm and not let our country and continent slip into the intolerant past. We must join hands to slay the dragon of Islamophobia and help build Europe again with everyone's help, Muslim and non-Muslim, alike. It is time we listen to the voices of sanity, not hate.