

Counter-Islamophobia Kit

Key National Messages – Portugal (English)
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Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States.

CIK Project (Counter Islamophobia Kit)

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Key National Messages – Portugal

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About the CIK Project

The *Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States* (Counter Islamophobia Kit, CIK) project addresses the need for a deeper understanding and awareness of the range and operation of counter-narratives to anti-Muslim hatred across the EU, and the extent to which these counter-narratives impact and engage with those hostile narratives. It is led by Professor Ian Law and a research team based at the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK. This international project also includes research teams from the Islamic Human Rights Commission, based in London, and universities in Leeds, Athens, Liège, Budapest, Prague and Lisbon/Coimbra. This project runs from January 2017 - December 2018.

About the Paper

This paper is an output from the third workstream of the project which was centred on describe the key national messages pertaining to Islamophobia and countering-Islamophobia in each context considered in the framework of this project: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and United Kingdom. The key national messages, findings and toolkit, the Counter-Islamophobia Kit (CIK) will be disseminated to policy makers, professionals and practitioners both across the EU and to member/regional audiences using a range of mediums and activities.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the key findings of research that was conducted on the dominant Islamophobic narratives and the counter-narratives to islamophobia that exist within Portugal. The content analysis of the most representative Islamophobic discursive focused on mainstream academic literature, media outlets with online presence, the blogosphere and social commentary in cyberspace on Islam and Muslims, since the year 2000. The identification of counter-narratives to Islamophobia and their public impact was mainly based upon the assessment of various contemporary legal and policy interventions, news analyses and the testimonies and reflections given by research participants - a group that included politicians, political activists, social workers, representatives of Islamic organizations, journalists and academics.

Key message 1 | The construction of Muslims as barbarian and pre-Modern.

Dominant Islamophobic narratives convey and reinforce the idea that there is an intrinsic incompatibility between the West/Europe/Portugal and Islam. Within such dichotomy, Muslims are portrayed as: violent and irrational, and, therefore, as prone to “religious fanaticism”, fundamentalism and tyranny.

Key message 2 | Non-liberal Muslims – seen as *unassimilable* – do not have a place in Europe. Muslims are represented by the media and mainstream intellectuals as illiberal and anti–progressive (namely, sexist, homophobic) and, hence, unassimilable – not having a place in Europe. Simultaneously, discourses around the incompatibility between Islam and Europe/the West consecrate a Eurocentric geopolitics of gender equality, LGBT rights and freedom of speech.

Key message 3 | Countering negative and untruthful representations of Islam and Muslims. There is widespread ignorance of Islam, and, more broadly, a lack of an adequate education in the history of religions. Islam and Muslims are often subjected to prejudiced representations in the mass media, school textbooks and in political discourse. This is something which needs to be tackled through a sound revision of the curricula and textbooks, adequate training, knowledge dissemination about Islam and an equal footed dialogue with Muslim organisations.

Key message 4 | Contesting power relations: historical narratives, legal and political arrangements. Institutionalised practices of Islamophobia, identified in contemporary legal and political arrangements, are deeply rooted in the legacies of colonialism and Eurocentric knowledge. Any political intervention that evades this point is likely to bring about only superficial change.

Key message 5 | Beyond denial: possible horizons in the public debate on Islamophobia. Present times call for: 1) opening up a public debate on Islamophobia, and 2) implementing effective counter-measures that challenge the image of a Portuguese specificity (that is, that there exists “no problem here”) and that confront everyday experiences of institutionalized Islamophobia.

Key message 1 | The construction of Muslims as barbarian and pre-Modern

The media plays an important role in the construction of images, representations, ideas and narratives about human populations and their cultures. Overall, the Portuguese mass media and cyberspace discourses tend to portray Muslims as barbarian and pre-modern, and backward people. On the one hand, Muslims are constructed as presenting a propensity towards violence. On the other, opinion makers and commentators on online social media continue to reproduce the idea that there is an intrinsic relationship between Muslims and fundamentalism. Particularly following 9/11, so-called Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism have been conflated and widespread in the media and in public discourse. For instance, in May 2016, a campaign and a public petition against the construction of a new Mosque in Mouraria (Lisbon), where Muslims from South Asian and West African countries live and work, was launched in the Portuguese public sphere. Broadly speaking, news coverage, interviews (including expert opinions), articles and online commentary suggested that the Mosque would become a key place where Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, radicalisation and terrorism would be fostered. As a result, this discourse reinforced the idea that Muslims are a threat to national security. Proselytism emerged as another key theme, deployed particularly by the extreme right, within which Islam is depicted as a religion of “fanatics” who want to “invade” Europe, “reconquest” the Iberian Peninsula, convert the “infidels” and destroy the modern Western “way of life” and its “values”. Muslims are also understood as people who do not accept or abide to Western law, democratic principles and scientific thought, but who instead prefer being ruled by tyranny, theocracy and *excessive* faith. This narrative is mainly deployed in social and political discourses concerning Muslims, in which they tend to be portrayed as prone to religious fanaticism and despotic regimes, while secularism and democracy are represented as intrinsic values to Western societies. In the data analysed in our research, these elements were mobilised as *evidence* of the “irrationality” of Muslims.

Key message 2 | Non-liberal Muslims – seen as *unassimilable* – do not have a place in Europe

The press, the users of online media and some intellectuals have frequently focused their attention on a series of characteristics which are said to make Muslims an

unassimilable population and, therefore, as not having a place in Europe. One of the most prominent issues is the question of gender and sexual (in)equality within so-called Muslim cultures. On the one hand, numerous media reports have associated the figure of Muslim men to sexual repression and exploitation. Moreover, the use of a veil/hijab/burqa by Muslim women and so-called “forced marriages” tend to be presented as evidence that the culture practices of Muslims has not overcome its “backwardness”. On the other hand, news reports and opinion pieces, as well as social commentary, have consecrated a eurocentric geopolitics of the rights of women and of sexual freedom – although it is admitted these are not always respected in the West. Hence, not only have Muslims have been portrayed as bigoted and homophobic regarding the LGBT issues mobilised by news and social media outlets, as the analysis of the media on this theme has suggested that the European societies’ support for LGBT rights is deployed as proof of Western superiority, whereby notions such as “sexual liberation”, “progress” and “democracy” thrive. That is, the topics of gender and sexuality tend to be presented as a dividing line between the “civilized” (Westerners) and the “barbarian” (Muslims). Another dominant narrative deployed in the media is related to the perception that Islam, conceived as illiberal, hampers freedom of speech. This theme has occupied a central role in the media in Portugal both in the coverage of the 2005-2006 Danish cartoon affair and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack. In both cases, dominant discourse stressed not only that freedom of speech is a key tenet in Western societies, but they also stressed and reproduced a polarised conception of Islam and the West. On the one hand, Islam was related to “religious fundamentalism”, intolerance, irrationality and violence, while, on the other hand, the West was associated to secularism, tolerance, liberty and reason. Consequently, Muslims tend to be perceived as a threat to “social cohesion”, freedom of thought and freedom of speech in so-called Western liberal democracies – being seen as reluctant to “assimilation”. This is grounded on the assumption that Muslims are “foreigners” and must “integrate” into the so-called “host” society – and hence should abandon any distinctive characteristic.

Key message 3 | Countering negative and untruthful representations of Islam and Muslims

This strand was supported by a part of our interviewees that perceived Islamophobia to be an individual prejudice and a consequence of ignorance and misinformation on Muslim and Islamic history, culture and theology. In this sense, some of them suggested a couple of recommendations that may be used to challenge and demystify the social bias and stereotypes that exist with respect to Muslims and Islam. For instance, some defended the need for people to gain more knowledge of Islamic traditions and of the Quran as a way to correct negative views of Muslims. Moreover, they indicated that it is necessary to include approaches that emphasise that there are different ways of interpreting the Quran and of living as a practitioner of Islam. They also recommended that there be the creation of public mechanisms that promote an exchange between civil society and Islamic communities as a way to give more visibility to Muslim activities and everyday life. These proposals were presented as a way to counter the negative representations of Muslims as violent, intolerant, “fanatics”, irrational, “unassimilable” and a “threat” to “social cohesion”. Another recommendation that was made in order to counteract what they consider to be the paucity of knowledge on religious diversity, Islamic tradition and the lack of visibility and recognition of Muslim culture in the public sphere was a call for the creation and implementation of specific programs. Such programs are to be aimed at training media and education professionals, as well as professionals at state institutions. They also suggested that there be an implementation of different approaches to tackle and challenge the negative and predominant representations surrounding Muslims and Islam with respect to the gender issue. In this sense, they argued that it is necessary to promote more knowledge on the history and frame of Muslim women in the political and cultural domains in the Islamic tradition. In addition, some of them stressed that a greater knowledge of the work done by Muslim feminists along with a mobilisation of debates on gender roles within Islam could be fostered in order to challenge the depiction of Muslim woman as submissive and oppressed.

Key message 4 | Contesting power relations: historical narratives, legal and political arrangements

Some of the interlocutors in this study understand Islamophobia as a relation of domination. Accordingly, research participants raised a couple of interrogations and

denunciations of what they considered to be institutionalised practices and policies of Islamophobia. Firstly, they questioned the historical narratives that have shaped the dominant imaginaries of the Portuguese nation and state formation. More specifically, they have challenged and problematized the so-called *Reconquista* of Portugal as being the pivotal event that created Portuguese nationhood and identity, something that has been disseminated by textbooks, in class-teaching and the social imagination. In this regard, they highlighted the way in which this narrative has helped to project Muslims as essentially *violent, invaders, foreigners* and *enemies* of Christianity and hence reinforcing the binary notions of “civilisation” (Portuguese/European/Christian) and “barbarism” (Islam/Arab/African). The interviewees also connected this narrative with the topic of colonialism and its legacies on the structuration of post-colonial Portuguese society and institutions. Some participants considered that colonialism played a vital role in the process of hierarchization of racialized populations in the intersection of ‘race’, religion, and class. Following this analysis, it is argued that there is an intrinsic relationship between Islamophobia and colonialism. Finally, some participants argued that countering Islamophobia implies countering discourses, practices and policies that support and structure contemporary wars – e.g. the so-called “war on terror”. Secondly, another set of counter-measures that may be employed to counter Islamophobia, as emphasized by the interviewees, involves challenging the legal arrangements that have been established between the Portuguese state and religious institutions. In this context, the Concordat (revised and ratified in 2014) is seen not only as an instrument that increases the privileges granted to the Catholic Church, but also as a legal apparatus that reproduces the unequal power relations between the Portuguese State and different religious institutions and organisations. Accordingly, these legal arrangements reveal the contradictions and the limits of secularism and the law of religious freedom. In this sense, the interlocutors highlighted institutionalised forms of Islamophobia that are silenced and downplayed, as for instance, at the workplace and in educational settings, and in the limited implementation of legal measures. In addition, the interlocutors also argued that institutional Islamophobia finds a strong expression in so-called counter-terrorism policies and measures. Here, it was stressed that the discourse on the “radicalization” of Muslims is another way of legitimising the racialization and surveillance of Muslim communities.

Key message 5 | Beyond denial: possible horizons in the public debate on Islamophobia.

The analysis of the dominant media discourse and social commentary, mainstream academic narratives, and legal and policy interventions has foregrounded the absence of a sound debate on Islamophobia in Portugal – a situation that we can see exists in the other European contexts examined in the CIK project. A comparison with other European states, common in many conversations about racism and discrimination, often leads to a celebratory discourse in the Portuguese context, for example, “no problem here”, “we are not so drastic in our policies as the French or the Germans”, or to a confidence on “numbers” and “moderateness” – the small number of Muslims in the country and their moderate “political profile” do not call for “alarm”. These approaches have precluded a sustained interrogation of the experiences of Islamophobia and the effectiveness of the implementation of anti-discrimination measures. One possible horizon rests on a much needed shift in approach from a constant focus on Muslims and Islam as objects of scrutiny – an examination that, as most of the research participants have highlighted, falls into the discussion of stereotypes, misrepresentations and a lack of knowledge – towards a public debate on Islamophobia. Another possible horizon would require an interrogation of the intersections between racism and Islamophobia and the legacies of colonialism in contemporary Portugal, something which would build a safe public sphere for the debate with Muslims beyond that of denial and accusations of “radicalisation”.

