

Securitisation, Inequality, and Identity: The Challenges Facing Muslim Communities in Contemporary Europe

Tahir Abbas

Introduction

The experiences of Muslim communities across Europe, particularly in contexts like the UK, Scotland, and the wider EU, are shaped by historical legacies, contemporary political dynamics, and deeply embedded societal structures. Understanding the challenges faced requires examining the intersection of securitisation, structural inequality, identity politics, and the enduring impact of concepts like Orientalism and post-colonialism. The very notion of “Europe” itself is constantly being renegotiated through lenses of ethnicity, migration, culture, and politics, often positioning Muslim populations in precarious and marginalised roles.

The Politics of Securitisation and the Reproduction of Islamophobia

A dominant theme impacting Muslim communities is securitisation – the framing of Muslims primarily through the lens of security threats. This manifests in state policies and public discourse focusing disproportionately on radicalisation and extremism. Counter-terrorism measures, while ostensibly targeting violent ideologies, often become highly racialised, focusing almost exclusively on Muslims while treating far-right extremism as a secondary concern or afterthought. This approach frequently ignores the crucial context of structural disadvantage, exclusion, racism, and discrimination that can contribute to alienation.

This securitised gaze feeds into and reproduces Islamophobia. It draws on historical Orientalist tropes – viewing the “Muslim world” (a complex construct in itself) through stereotypes, often invoking the “dangerous brown man” and the “vulnerable/oppressed brown woman.” Assimilation pressures further compound this, demanding conformity to often ill-defined ‘European’ norms while simultaneously scrutinising Muslim practices and identities. Policies like the UK’s Prevent strategy or France’s interpretation of Laïcité, despite different frameworks, struggle to genuinely address integration, reflecting a difficulty in accepting that Muslim populations are not temporary migrants but established parts of European societies.

Structural Inequalities and Logics of Racism

Beneath the layer of securitisation lie deep structural inequalities rooted in racism and the post-colonial landscape. Muslim minorities often face significant disadvantages in key areas such as employment, education, health, and housing.

These disparities are not merely cultural misunderstandings but manifestations of systemic racialisation. Data, such as the ‘Being Muslim in the EU’ report indicating Muslims face the highest risk of poverty among minority groups in places like Belgium (where they were also found to be the ‘least liked’ group, below Roma and Jewish communities), highlights the material reality of this exclusion.

Widening economic inequalities across society create fertile ground for political polarisation, often “vacuuming out” the political centre. In this environment, Islam and Muslims frequently become the “permanent bogeyman,” scapegoated in media narratives, political rhetoric, and popular culture, particularly within the heated debates surrounding immigration – a dominant issue across Europe. This normalisation of Islamophobia makes constructive dialogue incredibly difficult; even raising the issue of racism can be dismissed as unnecessarily provocative.

Intersectional Experiences and the Weaponisation of Identity

Diasporic Muslims find themselves caught between competing discourses.⁴ Muslim women, in particular, face intersectional exclusion, subjected simultaneously to the Orientalist “male gaze” and racial/religious discrimination.⁵ They experience both hyper-visibility (when their identity markers are scrutinised) and hyper-invisibility (when their individual experiences and contributions are ignored).⁶

Furthermore, concepts like multiculturalism have been weaponised, often portrayed as a failed project or a threat, further marginalising minority communities. The rise and mainstreaming of far-right, radical right, and extreme right political movements across Europe actively exploits these tensions, often promoting narratives like the “Eurabia” thesis or the “Great Replacement” theory – ideas echoing classic Malthusian fears about population change, despite the reality of around 35 million Muslims contributing to European society post-WWII (a population that is relatively young, with estimates suggesting half under 25 and a third under 15 at points).⁸

Framing Islamophobia and Moving Forward

There is a critical need to frame Islamophobia increasingly as a form of racism, acknowledging its structural impact on life chances and social inclusion, rather than viewing it solely as cultural prejudice or theological disagreement.⁹ Shifting the language from “fear” to “hate” might better capture the active discrimination experienced. Recognizing the significant contributions Muslims make *despite* these barriers is also crucial.

Current Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) approaches are often highly loaded, deeply unequal in application, mostly ineffectual in addressing root causes, and potentially damaging to community relations. The post-October 7th context has reportedly seen increases in both Islamophobia and Antisemitism, manifesting in online hate, physical assaults, vandalism against institutions, and pressures leading to the defunding or need for extra security for community organisations.

Effective strategies require moving beyond top-down, security-focused approaches. Ground-up mobilisation and strategic directions developed *by* Muslim communities are necessary to challenge structural disadvantages, combat racialisation, and assert their place within European societies. Ignoring these deep-seated issues means forgetting the past, denying present talent, and ultimately jeopardising a shared future.