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From the Problem of Representing Muslim Identity to Islamophobia: An Examination in the Context of Radical Salafism

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Islamophobia and the representation of Muslim identity in the context of Radical Salafism. Islamophobia is not merely a form of prejudice arising from religious or cultural differences; it is also shaped by perceptions of Muslim identity through actors, discourses, and representations. The study analyzes the impact of Radical Salafism's ideological discourse and the violent practices of organizations such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram on perceptions of Muslim identity. It argues that the radical reinterpretation of concepts such as jihad, caliphate, and takfir, and their generalization through media and political discourses as representative of Islam and Muslims, strengthen Islamophobic perceptions. Although Radical Salafism does not represent the pluralistic nature of Islamic thought, it has become a

visible representation of Muslim identity. The portrayal of radical groups as representative of all Muslims in Western media and political discourse facilitates the association of Muslim identity with security-centered stereotypes. The underrepresentation of Muslims in media, politics, and the public sphere, together with the limited visibility of counter-narratives, deepens this crisis of representation. The study demonstrates that Radical Salafism significantly influences perceptions of Muslim identity and contributes to the spread of Islamophobic discourse despite not representing Islamic thought.

Keywords: Kalam, Islamic Doctrinal Schools, Islamophobia, Muslim Identity, Problem of Representation, Radical Salafism, Media Representations, Political Discourse, Security Policies

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia has emerged as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that can no longer be adequately explained solely through individual prejudice or isolated instances of discrimination. Particularly in the post-Cold War era -and even more noticeably after the September 11 attacks- global security discourses, media representations, political rhetoric, and institutional practices have collectively contributed to the systematic reproduction of negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Accordingly, Islamophobia should be understood not as the product of specific historical events or individual actors, but as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of diverse social, political, and cultural forces.

One of the key factors contributing to the emergence and spread of Islamophobia is the way Muslim identity is represented in the public sphere. Public perceptions of social groups are shaped not only through direct personal encounters but also through media content, political discourse, cultural representations, and security policies. In this context, global perceptions of Muslims are often constructed around a limited set of actors and narratives that fail to reflect the historical depth and intellectual diversity of Islamic thought. In particular, the imbalance between the high visibility of radical organizations and the limited public representation of the broader Muslim community constitutes one of the central dimensions of contemporary debates on Islamophobia.

In the modern world, radicalism cannot be viewed merely as a security issue. Emerging within a complex web of interactions among religion, politics, identity, and media discourse, radical movements not only generate violence but also contribute to the formation and continual reproduction of particular social perceptions. In this regard, the rhetoric and actions of certain radical organizations identifying themselves with Salafism have had a significant impact on the global perception of Islam. Yet these effects extend well beyond the activities of such groups themselves. Through media representations, political narratives, and security policies, they are continually reinforced within a broader framework of meaning. As a result, Radical Salafism, despite representing only a narrow interpretation that does not reflect the pluralistic character of Islamic thought, has increasingly come to function as one of the most visible reference points for Muslim identity in the global public imagination.

While the literature on Islamophobia has largely focused on media representations, discriminatory practices, security policies, and Orientalist discourses, scholarship on radicalism has primarily examined theological interpretations, political violence, identity crises, and ideological transformation. Within studies of Radical Salafi thought, particular attention has been given to the ways in which concepts such as *jihad*, *takfīr*, and *hākimiyyah* are detached from their historical and theological contexts and transformed into ideological constructs through literalist and selective interpretations. By contrast, studies on Islamophobia have primarily emphasized the prejudices generated by media discourse and security-oriented policies. However, the reciprocal relationship between these two bodies of scholarship -particularly regarding the problem of representation- has received relatively limited attention. In this context, Salafism: Challenged by Radicalization? Violence, Politics, and the Advent of Post-Salafism [1] provides an important analysis of the processes of transformation and radicalization within Salafi thought. Likewise, influential contributions to the study of Islamophobia, focusing on media discourse, security policies, and the prejudices and discriminatory practices rooted in the legacy of Orientalism, include *The Rise of Global Islamophobia in the War on Terror* [2]; *Governing the Fear of Islam: Thinking Islamophobia Through the Politics of Secular Affect in Historical Debate* [3]; *ReOrient* [3]; *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies* [4]; *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* [5]; and *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* [6], edited by John L. Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin. Despite their significant contributions, these two strands of scholarship have generally developed in isolation from one another. Consequently, the interplay among the ideological, communicative, political, and institutional factors that reinforce Islamophobia -as well as the role of representation in this process- has received only limited scholarly attention.

Against this background, the central problem addressed in this study is that Muslim identity is frequently represented in the media, political discourse, and the public sphere through the lens of radical actors and security-oriented narratives, while alternative forms of representation that reflect the pluralistic character of Islamic thought remain largely absent from public visibility. This imbalance encourages a reductionist and homogenized understanding of Muslim identity, thereby facilitating the continual reproduction of Islamophobic narratives. Moreover, the combined impact of the limited representation of Muslims in the media and political sphere, together with the lack of visible alternative narratives, has received insufficient scholarly attention.

Accordingly, the primary research question guiding this study is formulated as follows: How do Radical Salafism and media-political representations shape perceptions of Muslim identity, and how does this process contribute to the reproduction of Islamophobic discourse?

Building on this question, the study aims to analyze the relationship between Radical Salafism and the representation of Muslim identity, as well as the role of this relationship in the formation and reproduction of Islamophobic discourse. To this end, Radical Salafism is examined as an ideological and theological factor; media representations as a communicative factor; political rhetoric as a political factor; and security policies together with institutional practices as structural factors.

In addition, the study explores how the problem of representation, the limited visibility of Muslims in the media and political sphere, the lack of alternative narratives, and the inadequacy of counter-discourses contribute to the continued reproduction of Islamophobic perceptions.

This research adopts a comparative analytical approach. Within this framework, Radical Salafi discourse, media representations, political rhetoric, and institutional practices are examined together in order to analyze the processes through which Muslim identity is represented. The study considers the rhetoric and activities of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram; representations of Islam in Western media; political narratives such as the "clash of civilizations" and "moderate Islam"; and the impact of security policies on perceptions of Muslim identity. It also discusses how the underrepresentation of Muslims in the media and political sphere, together with the limited development of effective counter-discourses, contributes to the persistence of Islamophobic narratives.

Ultimately, this study seeks to examine Islamophobia through the interconnected relationships among Radical Salafism, media representations, political rhetoric, security policies, and the problem of representation. In doing so, it aims to offer a holistic analytical framework that places the representation of Muslim identity at its center while integrating the multiple dimensions through which Islamophobia is produced and sustained.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE REPRESENTATION PROBLEM OF MUSLIM IDENTITY ON ISLAMOPHOBIA

The global representation of Muslim identity has increasingly become a site of contestation, largely due to the dominance of narratives centered on security, violence, and radicalism. This problem of representation leads to the reduction of Islam and Muslims to a narrow set of actors and events, overlooking the pluralistic character of Islamic thought and Muslim societies. As a result, it creates fertile ground for the reinforcement and reproduction of Islamophobic perceptions. In particular, Radical Salafi discourse and the acts of violence associated with it have become among the most influential factors shaping global perceptions of Muslim identity. For this reason, the following section first examines the historical development of Radical Salafism, its core ideological narratives, and its impact on global perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

2.1. RADICAL SALAFISM, THE DISCOURSE OF VIOLENCE, AND GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS

Radical Salafism stands out as a significant ideological and theological factor in the cycle through which Islamophobia is produced and sustained. It refers to interpretations of Salafi thought that have been detached from the historical and contextual foundations of classical Salafism and reconfigured in the modern era in ways that associate them with political violence. In particular, the rhetoric and activities of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram have played a decisive role in making Radical Salafi interpretations highly visible on a global scale.

Within the discourse of these organizations, key Islamic concepts such as jihad, caliphate (*khilāfah*), and *takfīr* are stripped of their historical and theological contexts and reinterpreted through selective and ideological readings. Consequently, these concepts are transformed from their broader theological meanings into instrumental narratives used to legitimize political violence. In addition, so-called lone wolf attacks have further amplified the global dissemination of this ideological framework by enabling acts of violence to be carried out independently while remaining connected to its broader narrative.

One of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is ISIS. Its propaganda consistently portrays even Muslims who do not share its ideological orientation as legitimate targets while attempting to justify violence through selective religious references. The impact of such radical practices extends beyond the violence itself. Through global media coverage and security discourse, these acts are continually reproduced and incorporated into broader interpretive frameworks that shape public perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

In this process, Radical Salafi discourse exerts its influence not only through violent action but also through representation. Such acts are frequently transformed into symbols that are implicitly associated with Islam as a whole, encouraging generalized perceptions of Muslims and Islamic belief. As a result, radical discourse functions both as one of the principal starting points in the production of Islamophobia and as a continuing source of symbolic reference through which Islamophobic narratives are reinforced.

At the same time, the phenomenon of radicalism is by no means confined to Radical Salafism. Comparable patterns of exclusion and violence can be observed across a variety of religious and ideological traditions. Radical Evangelical discourse, for example, has framed certain communities as existential threats through narratives centered on Armageddon and holy war. Certain forms of Jewish religious extremism have employed historical and theological references to legitimize hostility toward Palestinians. Within the context of Hindu nationalism, discriminatory practices and violence directed toward Muslim communities have also been widely documented. Likewise, radical Buddhist movements in Myanmar have been implicated in severe abuses against Muslims. Even within ostensibly secular frameworks, strands of New Atheist discourse have at times portrayed religion itself as inherently linked to violence.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that radicalism is not exclusive to any single religious tradition. Rather, similar mechanisms of exclusion are reproduced across diverse ideological contexts through the construction of distinctions between "us" and "them." From this perspective, Islamophobic narratives generated through reference to Radical Salafism -or justified by invoking the actions of Radical Salafi groups- constitute a self-reinforcing cycle. They not only encourage generalized perceptions of Muslim identity but also create conditions in which Islamophobic discourse and radical narratives mutually reinforce one another.

2.2. FROM SALAF TO RADICAL SALAFISM

The term *salaf* literally means "those who came before" or "predecessors" and, within Islamic thought, refers to the earliest generations of Muslims. The generations of the *Sahābah* (the Prophet's Companions), the *Tābi'ūn* (their successors), and the *Atbā' al-Tābi'īn* (the successors of the successors) -whom the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) described as "the best of generations" [7]- constitute the primary referents of this concept. Within this framework, the notion of *al-salaf al-sālih* (the pious predecessors) came to occupy a central place in Islamic intellectual history, representing an approach that regards the religious beliefs, practices, and interpretations of the early Muslim community as the normative model to be followed [8].

Historically, the emphasis on the Salaf emerged as a reformist movement grounded in the aspiration to return directly to the Qur'an and the Sunnah while taking the religious understanding of the early Muslim community as the normative model. This approach emphasized a literal interpretation of the scriptural sources and was accompanied by a critical stance toward *bid'ah* (religious innovation) and sectarian pluralism [9]. Over time, however, the authority attributed to the Salaf was increasingly absolutized, paving the way for its detachment from its historical context and its transformation into a normative source of religious authority. In this process, certain groups reduced the Salafi understanding to a rigid epistemological framework and elevated it as the sole legitimate criterion for interpreting Islam. Consequently, the intellectual legacy associated with the Salaf became increasingly susceptible to ideological reinterpretation under changing historical and political circumstances. Within this context, Radical (Jihadi) Salafism gradually evolved into an interpretive orientation that legitimizes violence, particularly in response to the socio-political crises of the twentieth century.

This intellectual transformation was further shaped by the critical framework developed by Sayyid Qutb around the concepts of *ḥākimiyyah* (divine sovereignty) and *jāhiliyyah* (the state of ignorance). In subsequent radical interpretations, however, these concepts were detached from their original context, reinterpreted, and ultimately employed to provide a theoretical foundation for ideological movements that sought to legitimize violence. This development underscores the extent to which such interpretations represent a departure from the mainstream tradition of Islamic thought [10].

From the mid-twentieth century onward, the emergence of new nation-states across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia brought about profound transformations in both religious and political structures. In this context, the consolidation of authoritarian, centralized states closely aligned with the West created a socio-political environment that proved conducive to the development of Radical (Jihadi) Salafism. Beginning in the 1960s, particularly within the Egyptian intellectual context, these trends increasingly came to be regarded as diverging from mainstream Islamic thought. At the same time, a series of major geopolitical events -including the establishment of Israel in 1948, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Gulf War, and the military interventions that followed the September 11 attacks- contributed to the emergence of radical narratives structured around the distinction between the "near enemy" and the "far enemy." During this period, influenced by figures such as Abdullah Azzam, the concept of jihad was reinterpreted as an individual religious obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*), while the Palestinian issue assumed a central place within the discourse of global resistance. Following the Gulf War in the 1990s, Saudi Arabia's expanding strategic partnership with the West further deepened the divide between the traditional religious establishment (*'ulamā'*) and Radical Salafi circles [11].

Throughout its historical development, Salafi thought has been characterized not as a single, fixed tradition but as one that has evolved in response to changing historical and social contexts. In its earlier phases, it was primarily distinguished by its commitment to the scriptural sources and its emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy (*'aqidah*) [12]. In the modern period, however, reformist and anti-colonial discourses became increasingly influential. By the final quarter of the twentieth century, certain strands of Salafi thought had become increasingly politicized, eventually evolving into Radical (Jihadi) Salafi movements [13].

The emergence of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram as a consequence of this transformation has inflicted profound damage on Muslim societies while simultaneously contributing to the association of Islam with violence in the global public imagination [14]. These developments were further generalized through Western media representations and political discourse, reinforcing Islamophobic perceptions [15]. As a result, a self-reinforcing cycle emerged in which radical narratives and Islamophobic representations continuously legitimized and strengthened one another [16].

2.3. NATURE AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Salafism emerged as a religious approach grounded in a direct return to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, taking the beliefs and practices of the earliest Muslim community as its primary point of reference. By treating the religious understanding of the first generations of Muslims as a normative model, this approach sought to construct a conception of Islam purified from *bid'ah* (religious innovation), superstition, and later cultural accretions.

However, when Salafi methodology became detached from its historical context and transformed into an absolute and exclusive epistemological framework, it contributed to narrowing the diversity of interpretation within Islamic thought. In this process, the scope of *ijtihād* (independent legal reasoning) was progressively restricted, while religious texts came to be interpreted predominantly through a literalist hermeneutic [17]. This, in turn, created the conditions for alternative schools of thought and theological interpretations to be classified through exclusionary categories such as *bid'ah* (innovation) and *kufr* (unbelief).

Modern Radical Salafi discourse has moved beyond this historical framework and evolved into an interpretive paradigm centered on *takfīr*. Within this framework, certain Salafi groups have selectively drawn upon the writings of classical authorities such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah to legitimize their own ideological positions [14]. However, this mode of appropriation departs significantly from the original methodological and historical contexts in which these scholars developed their ideas. In this process, the concept of *takfīr* has shifted from its classical function as a theological judgment concerning matters of faith to an instrument of political and social exclusion. Consequently, Salafism has evolved beyond a purely religious mode of interpretation into an ideological framework that actively constructs collective identities and facilitates political mobilization [18].

This ideological transformation became particularly influential in shaping the intellectual foundations of violent transnational organizations that emerged during the final decades of the twentieth century [19]. From this perspective, Radical Salafism should be understood not merely as a theological interpretation but also as an ideological formation that has developed through its interaction with the political crises of the modern world.

2.4. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF JIHAD

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, the concept of *jihad* has been understood in diverse historical contexts and across multiple layers of meaning. Broadly speaking, it denotes striving or exerting effort in the path of God and encompasses a wide range of individual and collective responsibilities. Accordingly, *jihad* has traditionally been understood as a multidimensional concept that includes personal moral and spiritual struggle, social responsibility, scholarly endeavor, and, where legitimate, armed defense under specific ethical and legal conditions [20].

By contrast, modern Radical Salafi movements have narrowed the concept of *jihad*, reducing it largely to a one-dimensional understanding centered on violence. In this reinterpretation, its historical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions are marginalized, while the concept is reframed primarily in terms of armed confrontation and ideological struggle. Within this framework, some contemporary radical groups have invoked the concept of *tāghūt* [21] to delegitimize existing political authorities, thereby constructing a theoretical basis for the justification of violence [22].

As a consequence of this transformation, *jihad* has shifted from a concept associated with legitimate defense and the pursuit of justice to one employed as a tool for ideological mobilization and the legitimization of political violence [17]. In this way, a religious concept has been detached from its original context and reconstructed as an instrument serving political and ideological objectives [10]. This process has been particularly influential in attracting young and socially vulnerable individuals seeking identity, belonging, and a sense of purpose, directing them toward radical organizations [23].

At the same time, recent decades have witnessed a global reframing of the concept of *jihad* through the lens of extremist violence. In particular, media representations and political discourse have increasingly reduced the term to a narrow semantic field closely associated with Islam itself. This development has not only produced a significant narrowing of the concept's meaning but has also generated considerable epistemological ambiguity regarding its theological and historical significance [24].

In this context, both Radical Salafi groups and Western media and political actors have instrumentalized the concept of *jihad*, albeit for different purposes. While the former employ it as a means of ideological mobilization, the latter frequently invoke it within discourses of security and threat. This reciprocal instrumentalization not only constricts the conceptual scope of *jihad* but also reinforces a broader discursive cycle that perpetuates global tensions. The modern transformation of *jihad*, therefore, should be understood not merely as a theological debate but as a complex problem of representation situated at the intersection of media, politics, and security discourse.

At this point, the central issue extends beyond the violent acts committed by radical organizations to the ways in which those acts are represented on a global scale and the images through which Muslim identity becomes publicly visible. As Radical Salafi narratives circulate through media and political discourse, they directly shape prevailing representations of

Muslim identity, thereby contributing to the reinforcement and reproduction of Islamophobic perceptions.

2.5. ITS IMPACT ON GLOBAL PERCEPTIONS

Having evolved into a global security concern, Radical Salafi discourse has contributed significantly to the intensification of negative perceptions of Islam. The violence and propaganda associated with organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram have created conditions that have facilitated the expansion of Islamophobic attitudes and practices [25].

Radical groups identifying themselves with Salafism have reinforced political narratives in the West that associate Islam with violence. This development has not only strengthened Islamophobia on a global scale but has also fueled prejudice, discrimination, and hostility directed toward ordinary Muslims who bear no connection to extremist violence. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, the introduction of stricter security legislation, intensified border controls, and various military interventions further amplified the visibility of radical narratives, accelerating the spread of the perception of an "Islamic threat" within Western public discourse [26]. While these developments increased the international visibility of radicalism, they simultaneously deepened the marginalization of innocent Muslims by reinforcing prejudice, discrimination, and social hostility [27].

2.5.1 Al-Qaeda and the Post-9/11 Perception of Islam and Muslims

Among radical extremist organizations, al-Qaeda and ISIS have been the most influential in shaping both national and international security policies. Drawing upon a Radical Salafi interpretation of Islam, these organizations have claimed that the authentic teachings of Islam within Muslim societies have been corrupted and that the Muslim world is under sustained attack by external powers. The attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States marked a profound turning point in international security discourse and in global perceptions of Islam. As al-Qaeda was identified as the principal perpetrator, Radical Salafi ideology gained unprecedented visibility in the global public sphere, making it easier for certain political and media actors to promote a direct association between Islam and terrorism [28].

In the aftermath of the attacks, segments of the Western media increasingly linked the events to concepts such as *jihad*, *mujāhid*, and "Islamic terrorism," thereby contributing to the tendency to conflate the actions of radical organizations with Muslims as a whole. At the same time, al-Qaeda, through its declaration of the West as a collective enemy, transformed the concept of *jihad* into an ideological instrument designed to legitimize fear and violence. Consequently, classical Islamic concepts were detached from their historical and theological contexts and redefined to serve ideological purposes. Historically, al-Qaeda's understanding of *jihad* originated as a form of resistance specific to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan [29]. Under the influence of figures such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, however, this interpretation evolved into a transnational ideology. With the emergence of ISIS, it further developed into an attempt at state-building before eventually giving rise to decentralized forms of individual terrorist violence [28].

The interaction between al-Qaeda's declaration of *jihad* against the West and the United States' response under the banner of the "War on Terror" intensified radicalization not only in the military and legal spheres but also within the ideological discourse of Radical Salafi movements. This dynamic contributed to the deterioration of global perceptions of Islam and accelerated the spread of Islamophobia. Although the elimination of symbolic leaders such as Osama bin Laden significantly weakened al-Qaeda's centralized organizational structure, it also created opportunities for ISIS to expand its influence. Moreover, as al-Qaeda became the primary target of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, its regional affiliates assumed greater operational significance, while new ideological and organizational divisions emerged within the broader movement [30].

2.5.2 ISIS: The Discourse of the Caliphate and Jihad

ISIS emerged from al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch but subsequently evolved into a more rigid and exclusionary organization. While al-Qaeda generally adopted a more contextual approach to interpreting scriptural sources, ISIS embraced a strict literalist methodology. ISIS also regarded participation in *jihad* as an individual obligation incumbent upon all Muslims, whereas al-Qaeda considered it sufficient for a limited vanguard to undertake armed struggle. Their strategic objectives likewise differed. ISIS sought to establish an "Islamic State" centered in Iraq and Syria, while al-Qaeda pursued a transnational vision of *jihad* directed primarily against the West without prioritizing immediate state formation. Accordingly, ISIS adopted the logic of "state first, then *jihad*," whereas al-Qaeda effectively followed the reverse sequence: "*jihad* first, then the state." They also diverged in identifying their principal adversaries. ISIS prioritized the "near enemy," while al-Qaeda traditionally focused on the "far enemy," although the extensive involvement of the United States in the region increasingly blurred this distinction. Moreover, ISIS openly targeted a wide range of groups that it regarded as religiously illegitimate, whereas al-Qaeda generally sought to avoid actions likely to deepen internal divisions within the Muslim community [10].

Following the capture of Mosul in 2014, ISIS proclaimed a self-declared caliphate, triggering intense theological and socio-political debates throughout the Muslim world. Through this declaration, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi placed ISIS at the

center of international attention by presenting himself as the legitimate leader of all Muslims and portraying the organization as the guardian of Islam and the defender of *jihad*. Within his rhetoric, the pronoun "we" was used to construct ISIS as the authentic representative of true Muslims, while "they" referred not only to external enemies but also to Muslims who refused to pledge allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the organization. In this way, ISIS established a powerful ideological framework that mobilized its followers against both internal and external enemies. By portraying itself as the sole legitimate representative of Islam and *jihad*, the organization implicitly delegitimized all other Muslim groups. This provides a clear example of how terrorist organizations instrumentalize religious references to consolidate collective identity and generate ideological legitimacy through a rigid "us versus them" dichotomy [31]. Likewise, ISIS transformed the historical institution of the caliphate into a propaganda tool by selectively appropriating elements of the Islamic historical tradition while disregarding foundational Islamic principles such as consultation (*shūrā*), justice, and mercy in favor of unconditional obedience and absolute allegiance. Consequently, the caliphate was reduced from a religious institution to an instrument of totalitarian control and ideological expansion [32].

Through its violent Radical Salafi discourse, ISIS labeled governments, communities, and individuals who opposed its ideology as *murtadd* (apostates) or *ḫāghūt*, thereby constructing a religious framework through which violence could be legitimized [33]. In this context, ISIS classified Türkiye as *Dār al-harb* ("the Abode of War"), citing its NATO membership and strategic alliance with the United States as justification [34].

The organization's instrumentalization of religious concepts to legitimize violence is also evident in its propaganda publications. Statements published in its magazine *Dabiq*, such as "The blood of the apostate is more lawful than the blood of the unbeliever" and "Kill them wherever you find them," illustrate how religious texts and concepts were selectively interpreted to justify violence. The organization targeted not only Western societies but also Muslims who rejected its ideology. Its attacks in Suruç, Ankara, and Gaziantep, which claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians, exemplify this strategy. Moreover, execution videos deliberately combined religious symbols and the repeated invocation of "Allāhu Akbar" to confer religious legitimacy upon acts of violence. The title of its Turkish-language magazine, *Konstantiniyye*, likewise carried the symbolic implication that Istanbul represented a future ideological target. By systematically detaching religious symbols from their historical and theological contexts and disseminating highly professional propaganda through social media, ISIS succeeded in increasing the global visibility of its narratives while influencing segments of Muslim youth in Western societies [35].

2.5.3 "Lone Wolf" Attacks and Individual Radicalization

The propaganda strategies employed by Radical Salafi organizations have encouraged not only organized militancy but also processes of individual radicalization. In this regard, terrorist attacks carried out by so-called "lone wolf" actors demonstrate the extent to which radical ideologies can influence individuals outside formal organizational structures [36].

Many of these individuals become exposed to extremist content through social media platforms and online forums, where experiences such as identity crises, social exclusion, discrimination, and the search for belonging may increase their susceptibility to radical narratives. Because such attacks are often carried out without direct organizational affiliation, they are widely regarded as particularly difficult to detect and prevent [37]. Nevertheless, sections of the Western media have frequently generalized these incidents to Muslims as a whole, thereby deepening social polarization. Political actors have likewise invoked such attacks to justify the expansion of security-oriented legislation directed at Muslim communities. Consequently, acts committed by isolated individuals can be transformed into forms of collective stigmatization on a global scale, further increasing the visibility and circulation of radical narratives [38].

An examination of lone wolf attacks committed both by anti-Muslim extremists and by individuals claiming to act in the name of Islam demonstrates that such acts cannot be reduced to a single ideological source. Despite their differing motivations, these incidents collectively illustrate how ideological propaganda can accelerate individual radicalization while resulting in the deaths of large numbers of civilians.

3. COMMUNICATIVE, POLITICAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS THAT DEEPEN THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION

The production of Islamophobia cannot be understood solely through the lens of radical discourse. It is also closely connected to the historically rooted cycle of Orientalist knowledge production that has shaped modern Western thought. Within this framework, the representation of Muslim identity should be understood as a multilayered process that is continually reproduced through media discourse, political rhetoric, and institutional security practices. Accordingly, this section examines how Islamophobia is constructed not only through its substantive content but also through the mechanisms of representation and meaning-making that shape public perceptions.

3.1. THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL LANGUAGE: THE COMMUNICATIVE AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF REPRESENTATION

Representations of Islam in Western media and political discourse largely reflect the continuation of representational patterns historically rooted in the Orientalist intellectual tradition and the legacy of colonial knowledge production [39]. Within this framework, the persistent portrayal of Muslim identity through narratives of security, threat, and violence is linked not only to contemporary political developments but also to a much deeper historical and epistemological background. This legacy became particularly visible and intensified in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, when Islam and Muslim identity increasingly came to be framed through the language of security, threat, and violence. During this period, the concept of *jihad* likewise became increasingly associated with radical organizations and was frequently incorporated into broader discourses on terrorism [40].

The tendency within media discourse to associate Islam as a whole with violence through the actions of Radical Salafi organizations has contributed to the formation of generalized and reductionist perceptions. This may be regarded as one of the principal communicative mechanisms through which Islamophobia is produced and reproduced. In particular, the language employed in news reporting, together with practices of selective visibility and media framing, facilitates the direct association of particular acts of violence with Islam.

In this context, a noticeable double standard emerges in media representations. While the religious identity of Muslim perpetrators is frequently emphasized in reports of violent incidents, the religious or ideological identities of individuals or groups responsible for comparable acts are often downplayed or omitted altogether. This selective mode of representation contributes to the continual reproduction and social normalization of Islamophobic perceptions. Moreover, the media sustains these perceptions not only through news coverage but also through popular cultural products such as films, television series, and documentaries [41]. The recurrent portrayal of Muslim characters as figures associated with violence or as the "other" reinforces enduring mental images through repeated visual and narrative patterns. As a result, this representational regime normalizes negative perceptions of Islam not primarily through explicit statements but through the cumulative effect of implicit symbolic codes.

Within this framework, the tendency of Western media to detach the concept of *jihad* from its historical, theological, and spiritual contexts and to present it instead through the discourse of "holy terrorism" creates a perceptual framework that, in important respects, converges with Radical Salafi narratives [42]. Consequently, media discourse not only increases the visibility of radical violence but also constructs a generalized interpretive framework that extends these acts to Islam as a whole. In doing so, it continuously reinforces the communicative dimension of the cycle through which Islamophobia is produced and reproduced.

One of the principal dimensions of this cycle is political discourse. Statements by political leaders, the conceptual frameworks employed in international relations, and security-oriented political narratives all play a decisive role in shaping global perceptions of Islam and Muslim identity. Political discourse functions not merely as a means of describing events but also as a mechanism for constructing social reality and categorizing collective identities.

In this regard, U.S. President George W. Bush's reference to a "crusade" in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks resonated widely throughout the Muslim world, reviving language that carried powerful historical associations with religious conflict. Such rhetoric shifted the discourse of counterterrorism toward a framework of religious and civilizational opposition, thereby reinforcing a representational structure in which Islam increasingly came to be positioned as the cultural and ideological counterpart of the West.

Similarly, the "Clash of Civilizations" [43] paradigm developed by Samuel P. Huntington transformed cultural and religious differences into a conflict-centered explanatory framework within global political discourse. In doing so, it portrayed the Islamic world as a homogeneous and potentially conflict-prone counterpart to Western civilization. This paradigm exerted a lasting influence on the field of international relations and significantly shaped the conceptual foundations of political discourse concerning Islam and the Muslim world.

Another influential debate within political discourse has centered on the concept of "Moderate Islam" [44]. While this concept has often been presented as part of strategies to counter radicalism, it has also functioned as a discursive instrument that narrows the internal diversity of Islam by constructing a normative model of religious legitimacy. Within this framework, Muslim communities have frequently been categorized into the binary distinction of "moderate" and "radical," with political legitimacy being implicitly or explicitly assigned according to this classification.

Within this discursive framework, Muslim identity is often reconstructed through the distinction between the "good Muslim" and the "bad Muslim." Rather than reflecting the religious and social diversity of Muslim communities, this binary produces a hierarchical understanding that differentiates between Muslims according to their conformity with particular political norms. Such a representational logic not only constrains the global representation of Muslim identity but also reinforces the discursive legitimacy of Islamophobic narratives.

Taken together, media discourse and political rhetoric play a central role in the emergence and dissemination of

Islamophobia. In interaction with radical narratives, they facilitate the global reproduction, legitimization, and circulation of negative perceptions of Islam and Muslim identity.

3.2. SECURITY POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES: THE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

In many Western countries, Islamophobia has evolved -particularly in the post-9/11 period- beyond a form of cultural or media-driven prejudice into a legal, political, and institutional phenomenon. In both the United States and Europe, measures such as security policies targeting Muslim immigrants, surveillance and profiling practices, mosque monitoring, restrictions on the wearing of the headscarf, and intensified border controls have gradually become embedded within an institutionalized security paradigm. Human rights violations associated with facilities such as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, together with prolonged security screenings and interrogations of Muslim travelers at airports, have likewise become emblematic of this broader process [45]. Although many of these measures were introduced in the name of national security, they have frequently contributed to the construction of Muslim communities as a category of "potential threat." Consequently, Islamophobia has extended beyond the realm of individual prejudice to become a systematic phenomenon reproduced through state policies and institutional practices [23].

These security-oriented policies have deepened discrimination against Muslim communities, undermining individuals' sense of social belonging and adversely affecting processes of social integration. The persistent portrayal of Muslims as the "other" within the public sphere has also contributed to the rise of right-wing populist movements and the normalization of exclusionary attitudes. Discriminatory practices, physical attacks, and restrictions on the exercise of religious freedoms have, in some cases, intensified identity crises and feelings of alienation among Muslims while simultaneously creating conditions in which the propaganda of extremist groups may become more appealing to socially vulnerable individuals [41].

Although Radical Salafi discourse and the West's security-oriented policies appear to stand in opposition to one another, their interaction often generates a dynamic of mutual legitimization. Within this framework, the discourse of "Islamic terrorism" has served as a central justification for the expansion of stringent security legislation, enhanced intelligence measures, and military interventions. Conversely, Radical Salafi organizations have portrayed these policies as evidence of a broader "war against the *ummah*," thereby constructing an ideological rationale for their own acts of violence [46]. This reciprocal production of narratives has also contributed to the proliferation of digital content targeting young Muslims, creating conditions in which radical propaganda can spread more effectively [47].

The interaction between these two dynamics produces a self-reinforcing cycle: security measures introduced in response to terrorism may, under certain circumstances, contribute to processes of radicalization, while acts of radical violence, in turn, are invoked to justify increasingly restrictive security policies [48]. Consequently, the relationship between security and violence is better understood not as a linear causal sequence but as a cyclical process of mutual reproduction. The implications of this dynamic extend beyond the realms of politics and security, profoundly shaping public perceptions as well as the construction of individual and collective identities.

The violent acts committed by radical groups, together with the security-oriented responses adopted by Western governments, are frequently generalized through media coverage and political discourse, leading isolated incidents to be projected onto Muslim identity as a whole. This approach establishes a reductionist equivalence between individual actions and collective identity, producing a perceptual framework in which Muslims are increasingly viewed as a category of potential threat [49]. As Edward Said argued, such generalizations may be understood as a contemporary manifestation of Orientalist thought, reflecting the persistence of historical Western narratives of cultural and civilizational superiority over the East [50].

The consequences of this process extend well beyond the realm of ideas and are reflected in the everyday experiences of Muslim communities. Discriminatory practices, social exclusion, physical attacks, and restrictions on the exercise of religious freedoms contribute to an environment in which many Muslims experience their identities as being under constant scrutiny or threat [41]. Under such conditions, identity crises and weakened senses of social belonging may become more pronounced for some individuals, potentially increasing their susceptibility to the appeal of marginal or extremist movements [51].

Taken together, prejudice, racism, and exclusionary discourse create conditions that can mutually reinforce both radical tendencies and Islamophobic attitudes. Within this framework, the continual construction of the "other" as an inherent threat contributes to the normalization and legitimization of violence [16]. The reciprocal relationship between media and political discourse on the one hand, and radical violence on the other, underscores the need to reconsider security-centered approaches and to develop more balanced, inclusive, and critically informed perspectives.

3.3. THE REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITY AND THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF REPRESENTATION

One of the central dimensions of contemporary debates on Islamophobia concerns the structural challenges surrounding the public representation of Muslim identity. The tendency for Muslims to become visible in the media, political discourse, and even academic discussions primarily through narratives of security, crisis, and conflict has contributed to the formation of narrow and reductionist perceptions of Islam. As a consequence, the historical, cultural, and intellectual diversity of Muslim societies often remains insufficiently represented, allowing one-dimensional forms of representation to gain greater prominence.

The problem of representation extends beyond the question of how Muslims are perceived; it also concerns which actors are made visible and which narratives are allowed to circulate in the public sphere. The rhetoric and actions of highly visible radical organizations are frequently presented as though they were representative of Muslim identity as a whole, whereas pluralistic, critical, and peaceful voices rarely receive comparable levels of public attention. Consequently, public perceptions of Muslim identity increasingly diverge from the actual diversity of Muslim communities.

Within this context, political concepts such as "Moderate Islam," although often introduced as instruments for countering radicalism, may also function as representational frameworks that classify Muslim communities according to externally defined normative standards while narrowing the recognition of religious diversity. As a result, Muslim identity is increasingly interpreted through categories imposed from outside rather than understood on the basis of its own internal historical, theological, and social dynamics.

Another important factor contributing to the persistence of Islamophobic perceptions is the limited visibility of alternative forms of representation and counter-narratives. The relative absence of academic scholarship, cultural initiatives, and media content that highlight the historical experience, intellectual richness, and social diversity of Islam has created conditions in which prejudicial narratives are able to achieve broader public influence. This problem is further intensified in contemporary digital communication environments, where reductionist and polarizing narratives spread rapidly and often reach audiences more effectively than nuanced and evidence-based representations.

For this reason, addressing Islamophobia requires more than simply criticizing radical discourse; it also necessitates promoting more balanced, pluralistic, and inclusive representations of Muslim identity. In this regard, one of the most important strategies is the development of well-informed and multidimensional counter-narratives. Such counter-narratives should not be conceived merely as reactive responses to prejudice but as constructive frameworks that illuminate the historical, theological, and social diversity of Islam [52]. Educational policies, academic research, media production, and digital platforms all have an essential role to play in this process [53].

Enhancing the visibility and participation of Muslims within the media, academia, politics, and civil society, while strengthening alternative channels of knowledge production and supporting pluralistic forms of representation, can contribute both to reducing Islamophobic prejudice and to limiting the influence of radical narratives [54]. From this perspective, overcoming the current crisis of representation constitutes an important step toward disrupting the self-reinforcing cycle through which Islamophobia is produced and sustained.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Islamophobia should be understood not merely as a form of prejudice arising from religious or cultural differences but as a multidimensional phenomenon closely linked to the ways in which Muslim identity is represented. The findings demonstrate that global perceptions of Muslims are shaped less by direct personal experience than by media representations, political discourse, security policies, and institutional practices. From this perspective, Islamophobia emerges not only from individual attitudes but also from particular modes of representation and processes of meaning-making.

The study identifies Radical Salafi discourse as one of the significant factors contributing to the problem of representing Muslim identity. The rhetoric and actions of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram have facilitated the ideological reinterpretation of Islamic concepts such as *jihad*, *caliphate*, and *takfir* by detaching them from their historical and theological contexts. At the same time, the findings clearly indicate that these organizations neither represent the pluralistic nature of Islamic thought nor the diversity of Muslim societies. Nevertheless, their high level of global visibility has created a significant representational challenge, profoundly influencing public perceptions of Muslim identity.

One of the study's principal findings is that, despite not representing Islamic thought as a whole, Radical Salafism has become one of the most visible reference points for Muslim identity in media and political discourse. As a result, the pluralistic and multidimensional character of Muslim communities is frequently overshadowed by representations centered on security, violence, and radicalism. Consequently, the rhetoric and actions of particular actors and isolated incidents are often generalized to Muslims collectively, producing a reductionist and homogenized understanding of Muslim identity.

The study further demonstrates that the relationship between Radical Salafi discourse and Islamophobic narratives

cannot be adequately explained through a simple model of one-way causality. On the one hand, radical organizations portray themselves as the authentic representatives of Islam and the Muslim community; on the other hand, Islamophobic discourse exploits the visibility of these groups to generate sweeping generalizations about Islam as a whole. Although these two forms of discourse appear to oppose one another, they in fact sustain a mutually reinforcing cycle. This cycle continually reproduces both radicalization and Islamophobia, while its most damaging consequences are borne by the broader Muslim population.

The findings also highlight the decisive role of media discourse, political rhetoric, and security policies in shaping representational processes. Selective visibility, framing practices, and security-oriented approaches frequently position Muslim identity within the category of a potential threat. This dynamic not only reinforces social prejudice but also contributes to the legitimization of discriminatory practices and exclusionary policies.

In conclusion, combating Islamophobia requires more than confronting radical ideologies alone; it also demands the promotion of more balanced, pluralistic, and inclusive representations of Muslim identity. Increasing the visibility of Muslims in the media, politics, and the public sphere, supporting alternative and pluralistic forms of representation, and interpreting Islamic concepts within their historical and contextual frameworks can all contribute to reducing Islamophobic perceptions. Developing critical and inclusive approaches to the representation of Muslim identity is therefore essential for breaking the self-reinforcing cycle through which both radicalism and Islamophobia continue to be reproduced.

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