

# **A Definition of Anti-Muslim Hostility**

## **1. Introduction**

The United Kingdom is built on values of freedom, fairness, tolerance, and respect. It is a country where people of all backgrounds living under and within our laws should feel safe. We are proud of and celebrate the contributions made by our diverse communities, which form an integral part of our national life, strengthening the country's social, cultural and economic fabric, and enriching our heritage.

Yet, in recent years, our Muslim communities have faced growing hostility, discrimination, and hate. Home Office statistics show that hate crimes targeting Muslims are now at record levels: 4,478 crimes were recorded in the run up to March 2025 – up a fifth on 2024 – and representing almost half of all religious hate crimes. This is not an isolated year – they have been far too high for too long. We also know there is significant underreporting.

This is not just about numbers: such hostility has a significant impact on the lives of people who live in this country. We have witnessed mosques, schools and Muslim-owned property and businesses attacked and vandalised. Women who wear a headscarf have been harassed. Muslims also face widespread online abuse, where even positive or supportive sentiment about Muslims is often met with an avalanche of abuse.

Anti-Muslim hostility not only affects Muslims but also other people who are perceived to be Muslim – including Sikhs, Hindus or those who have left Islam. This can mean that people are targeted simply because they look Muslim. Assumptions are made about people from diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds and they are treated as a collective group and negatively stereotyped, irrespective of their actual opinions, beliefs or actions as individuals – a process sometimes described as racialisation.

## **2. Why we must tackle anti-Muslim hostility**

The impact on British Muslim communities is profound. Many Muslims now fear using public services, including transport and healthcare, and are wary of reporting crimes against them. Some feel forced to isolate themselves for their own safety. This drives communities further apart and entrenches the very problems that need to be overcome to build social cohesion.

The government is taking sustained action to keep Muslims safe. We have boosted security for places of worship and funding for organisations focused on reporting and tackling anti-Muslim hate. Our Protective Security for Mosques scheme enables Muslim places of worship and schools to upgrade their CCTV, alarm systems and fencing.

Alongside this, the government funds the British Muslim Trust to operate a national helpline for victims of anti-Muslim hate to report incidents safely, online or in person. The

service, launched as part of the government's Combatting Hate Against Muslims Fund, encourages cultural understanding and reporting by affected communities.

Yet, against the alarming backdrop of increasing hate crime, we all need to do more to get to the root of the prejudice and hostility that many Muslims face, while crucially ensuring everyone's rights to freedom of expression are protected.

### **3. The case for a definition**

If you are unable to define an issue, you are far less able to tackle it. As with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, which the UK government adopted in 2016, a clear definition of anti-Muslim hostility is an important step towards combatting the unacceptable hostility that Muslims face. Previous attempts to define anti-Muslim hatred have fallen short, leaving the concept ambiguous and highly contested.

A definition – focused on protecting individuals rather than religion or belief – can provide clarity and consistency in understanding anti-Muslim hostility. A definition must not and will not prohibit free speech nor stop issues being raised in the public interest. Rather, it should, through setting out clearer parameters, allow the development of a framework for understanding when legitimate debate crosses into unacceptable hatred, prejudice and discrimination of individuals.

For communities, a clear definition can help to provide a shared language to describe the distinct forms of hostility many Muslims face. It can increase understanding in wider society of what anti-Muslim hostility is, its impact on fellow citizens and give victims the confidence that what they are experiencing will be recognised and taken seriously.

Practically, a definition can also serve as a tool for government and organisations to better understand, measure, prevent and address anti-Muslim hostility – whether empowering people to report incidents, informing staff training and guidance, enhancing education, or facilitating more effective and consistent policy responses and support.

Creating a new definition of anti-Muslim hostility is not about granting special privileges, giving preferential treatment to particular communities, or protecting the religion of Islam. It is about protecting people from unacceptable hostile behaviour that seeks to intimidate and divide. It is about upholding the principle that everybody should expect and enjoy equal dignity, justice, security and opportunity.

While existing law provides important protections to everyone in the UK, legislation alone is not enough: law can address offences, but a definition can be the foundations of the wider cultural, educational and preventative work needed to stop hatred from taking root.

### **4. Development of the government's new definition**

For those reasons, the government established an independent expert Working Group to provide advice to government on appropriate and sensitive language to describe, understand and define unacceptable treatment, prejudice, discrimination and hate targeting Muslims or anyone who is perceived to be Muslim. The Working Group undertook a significant evidence gathering exercise, including a Call for Evidence which informed their private advice, and forms the basis of the definition that the government is now adopting.

The government is deeply grateful to the Working Group for their insights and work throughout this process.

## **5. The definition**

This is a working definition and, as with all working definitions, it may need to evolve over time as understanding of the issues develops.

The definition uses the terminology “Anti-Muslim hostility”, which reflects the wider prejudice and discrimination Muslims face, and squarely focuses on Muslims as individuals rather than Islam as a religion. “Hostility” focuses on actions and conduct rather than simply the holding of beliefs. As the definition and notes make clear, the right to express hostility to others is part of our right to freedom of expression under law. But hostility with the intention of encouraging hatred against others because they are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim is conduct government is committed to challenging.

The definition covers the different aspects of hostility Muslims face: criminal acts, discrimination on the basis of being Muslim or perceived to be Muslim, and also the way in which Muslims can be treated as a collective group defined by fixed and negative characteristics with the intention to encourage hatred against them.

For many, anti-Muslim hostility can be articulated as a form of racism. However, Muslims come from diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, and UK law treats race and religion as distinct protected characteristics. In practice, hostility against Muslims often relies on assumptions about dress, appearance, names, or other perceived markers that the perpetrator associates with being Muslim. These assumptions treat individuals as if they belong to a collective group with fixed negative traits — a process sometimes described as racialisation. Importantly, this definition makes clear that prejudicial stereotyping or racialisation constitute anti-Muslim hostility when combined with an intention to encourage hatred against Muslims.

## 6. Definition of anti-Muslim hostility

The UK Government's non-statutory definition of anti-Muslim hostility is the following:

*Anti-Muslim hostility is intentionally engaging in, assisting or encouraging criminal acts – including acts of violence, vandalism, harassment, or intimidation, whether physical, verbal, written or electronically communicated – that are directed at Muslims because of their religion or at those who are perceived to be Muslim, including where that perception is based on assumptions about ethnicity, race or appearance.*

*It is also the prejudicial stereotyping of Muslims, or people perceived to be Muslim including because of their ethnic or racial backgrounds or their appearance, and treating them as a collective group defined by fixed and negative characteristics, with the intention of encouraging hatred against them, irrespective of their actual opinions, beliefs or actions as individuals.*

*It is engaging in unlawful discrimination where the relevant conduct – including the creation or use of practices and biases within institutions – is intended to disadvantage Muslims in public and economic life.*

The purpose of the definition is to protect Muslims from hostility. **It must be read alongside the accompanying text set out below**, which makes clear that open debate in the public interest is important and must be fully safeguarded. Context must also always be taken into account when interpreting and applying the definition.

Everyone should feel able to contribute to the exchange of ideas that supports a free and thriving society, participate in academic and political discussion and feel able to raise concerns. This accompanying text is intended to make clear that these principles are essential and must be upheld.

It is important to bear in mind the fundamental right of every person in the United Kingdom to exercise freedom of speech and expression within the law. Examples of expression that are protected include:

- Criticisms of a religion or belief, including Islam, or of its practices, or critical analyses of its historical development.
- Ridiculing or insulting a religion or belief, including Islam, or portraying it in a manner that some of its adherents might find disrespectful or scandalous.
- Criticism of the belief systems or practices of individual adherents of a religion or belief, including Islam.

- *Raising concerns in the public interest.*
- *Contributing to debates in the public interest, including academic and political debate.*

## 7. Related definitions and clarifications

**Discrimination:** Under the Equality Act 2010, discrimination may be direct or indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when someone is treated less favourably by another person or people because of an actual, perceived, or associated protected characteristic.

Indirect discrimination occurs when a policy which applies in the same way for everybody has an effect which particularly disadvantages people with a protected characteristic, unless the person applying the policy can show it is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.

**Ethnicity, race and appearance:** The definition refers to the way that people are perceived to be Muslim based on assumptions about their ethnicity, race, or appearance. The Working Group identified that people are often perceived to be Muslim based on these differences that may have little to do with religious belief. The definition should not be interpreted as excluding other reasons why people may be perceived to be Muslim.

**Freedom of expression:** Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects the right to hold opinions and express them freely without interference from public authorities, including the right to express views publicly. This right may be restricted only where it is lawful, necessary and proportionate to do so in order to:

- protect national security
- protect territorial integrity
- protect public safety
- prevent disorder or crime
- protect health or morals
- protect the reputation or rights of others
- prevent the disclosure of information received in confidence
- maintain the authority or impartiality of the judiciary

## 8. Notes on use

The government is adopting this definition of anti-Muslim hostility and will refer to it when developing and revising relevant policy. We encourage relevant organisations, employers and sectors to do the same – with the definition designed for organisations to use in ways that they consider to be useful and lawful.

**The definition is non-statutory and must not be confused with legislation.** It does not override, and must not be used in any way that is inconsistent with, any part of the law or statutory functions, guidance, or codes of practice etc.

**Specifically, the definition is not intended to be an authoritative or exhaustive statement or summary of criminal law** or a guide to particular criminal offences. **The definition does not change what is or is not a crime**, nor does it equate anti-Muslim hostility with crime. Some actions set out in the definition would constitute criminal acts as well as being examples of anti-Muslim hostility, but the definition also sets out non-criminal conduct or behaviour which would constitute anti-Muslim hostility.

**The definition is also not intended to be an exhaustive statement or summary of equalities legislation or of how that legislation applies.** It refers to unlawful discrimination, which is the subject matter of the Equality Act 2010. The definition only covers a subset of such unlawful discrimination – that is, unlawful discrimination *deliberately* targeted at Muslims. **The definition does not change what is or is not unlawful under the Equality Act 2010.** Similarly, some actions set out in the definition would be unlawful under the Equality Act 2010 as well as being examples of anti-Muslim hostility, but the definition also includes some actions which would not fall within the scope of, or breach, the Equality Act. For instance, the second paragraph of the definition covers prejudicial stereotyping where the intention is to encourage hatred, no matter whether this behaviour would be capable of being a criminal offence or would be unlawful under the Equality Act 2010. Therefore, the second paragraph is intended to encompass behaviour that is not necessarily unlawful, but which is reprehensible in this context, because it extends beyond the bounds of protected free speech.

**The definition does not alter the legal position under the Equality Act 2010 and other legislation that race and religion are distinct.** It does not reclassify Muslims as a racial group in law and does not modify the scope or content of existing statutory protections. While cases of anti-Muslim hostility may be the product of racism or may be combined with racism, the distinction between hostility related to race and hostility related religion is often important under the law. For example, race and religion are separate protected characteristics under equalities legislation. With cases of hostility, it can sometimes be difficult to discern whether the hostility is related to race, to religion or to both. References to race (and ethnicity) in the definition of anti-Muslim hostility are not intended to conflate the two, or to suggest that there is no distinction between race and religion. It is an essential element of the definition that there is hostility directed against people or communities because of their religious identity or perceived religious identity.

**Use of the definition must always take into account the context.** Context matters because of the various ways and settings that anti-Muslim hostility can manifest, from subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination to overtly criminal acts. Alternatively, the context may demonstrate that the behaviour should not be regarded as anti-Muslim hostility, for example, because it is a legitimate expression of free speech. In addition,

there is no right to always be protected from offence and indeed people may express views that others find uncomfortable or disagreeable. However, offensive views – including those spread electronically – are sometimes used for intimidation or harassment of others. Those behaviours are not acceptable, and everyone has the right to their own opinions and beliefs without being subjected to such hostility.

**The definition and accompanying text must be read together.** The accompanying text is intended to inform the interpretation of the definition. The accompanying text recognises that it is essential in a free, democratic and tolerant society that everyone is able to robustly exchange views and exercise protected free speech, even when these may cause offence. At the same time, it is essential to the proper functioning of a democratic society that all communities are able to participate fully in it. Tolerance and respect for the equal dignity of all human beings constitute the foundations of a respectful and inclusive democratic, pluralistic society.

**This is a working definition.** The definition, its implementation, and measuring its success will be subject to ongoing monitoring and regular review. Adjustments may be made as the context of the issue evolves, in response to feedback and emerging evidence to ensure clarity, effectiveness, and useful application of the definition.

## **9. Next steps**

Defining a problem is a crucial first step towards addressing it, but we recognise that there is much more we need to do to combat religious hatred and ensure that every individual and community in the UK feels safe, respected and included.

That includes making sure that Muslim communities feel safe and protected at their place of worship or community centre, in the workplace, on public transport or accessing public services.

The government encourages the adoption of the definition across the public, private and third sectors, and them to consider how this definition applies in their contexts.

Reporting helplines and services should also consider how the definition can inform their processes, ensuring that incidents of anti-Muslim hostility are accurately identified, recorded, and addressed.

As part of our next steps, we will work with sectors to consider practical guidance and the best approaches to provide sector-specific guidance and support effective implementation.

While the definition is non-statutory, it should serve as a valuable guidance tool, enabling the government and other relevant bodies to better understand and respond to anti-Muslim hostility, supporting further action on tackling religiously motivated hate.