

Conference report

“Why Muslims? Current Scientific Observations and Challenges on Anti-Muslim Attitudes and Racism”

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Anti-Muslim stereotypes, prejudices, and racist ideologies are enormously widespread phenomena across Europe and other continents. They are expressed in hostile attitudes, distancing behavioral intentions, discrimination, e. g. on the job market, hate speech and, last but not least, in acts of violence against people with actual or ascribed Muslim faith. The empirical evidence as well as reports by institutions constantly report on hate against Muslims and Islam. Partly this has led to an increase in research – basic and applied – on this hate. However, there is still a lack of systematic conceptual work, theoretical debates, and empirical research regarding the phenomena. Additionally, relatively less known is about the impact on those affected, e. g. in the form of (physical and psychological) health consequences and can also be viewed as challenges in connection with social cohesion. Equating anti-Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes or ignoring the multidimensionality of the phenomenon regarding content dimensions can be observed all too often. This lack of differentiation makes a holistic and intensive examination of the phenomenon hard or even impossible.

Hence, a conference entitled "Why Muslims? Current Scientific Observations and Challenges on Anti-Muslim Attitudes and Racism" was organized by Dr. Isabell Diekmann, Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick, Prof. Dr. Riem Spielhaus, and Zeynep Demir, MSc. It took place on the 23rd and 24th November 2023 at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) in Bielefeld. We aimed to bring together current research results in relation to conceptual and empirical work to better understand (dis)continuities, manifestations, effects, and preventive measures in connection with anti-Muslim attitudes and anti-Muslim racism. To accomplish this, renowned experts from diverse disciplines were invited to contribute their insights, facilitating a comprehensive examination from various scholarly perspectives.

We discussed conceptual approaches on different levels. Addresses of hostility, for instance, are rarely distinguished although there is empirical evidence of Islam and Muslims being perceived differently by non-Muslims as showed by Dr. Isabell Diekmann. Researchers would be well advised to readjust their conceptual frameworks and measurements to develop more fine-grained definitions and instruments to investigate hostility towards a religion compared to hostility towards people of (attributed) Muslim faith. At the same time, Olga Janzen drew attention to empirical evidence highlighting content-related dimensions, such as the attribution of oppression or segregation. These dimensions provided valuable insights into the multifaceted layers of anti-Muslim racism.

The conference further illuminated uncertainties surrounding various terms and concepts, including racism, hostility, and phobia. This discussion prompted considerations about whether the ongoing scientific debates regarding these terms and concepts might, in part, contribute to a dethematization of these phenomena in other contexts. Prof. Dr. Riem Spielhaus and Jan Düsterhöft, for instance, observed this phenomenon when researching representations of Islam

and Muslims in textbooks and raised the question of the potential impact of ongoing terminological debates on the deprioritization of these issues in educational curricula.

Furthermore, the conference emphasized the importance of context specific measurements. For example, Prof. Dr. Linda Juang introduced an instrument designed to investigate parental responses to instances of racist discrimination experienced by their school-aged children. Prof. Dr. Zerrin Salikutluk, in addition, presented findings on the strata of anti-Muslim racism, employing a quantitative intersectional approach. This intersectional framework unveiled the nuanced impact of the motherhood penalty, illustrating its universal application to all women but disproportionately affecting Muslim women.

The conference also provided space for research on perspectives of those affected by anti-Muslim racism. For instance, Zeynep Demir demonstrated that encounters with anti-Muslim racism are correlated with higher stress levels. Dr. Araththy Logeswaran, in a complementary vein, presented qualitative findings elucidating distinct coping strategies, characterized as "protective coping." Recognizing that perceived passivity may constitute a coping mechanism employed by those affected to safeguard themselves or others enhances comprehension of agency in instances of discriminatory experiences.

To go one step further and bridge science and practice, we initiated a discussion group moderated by Deniz Greschner. Contributions by Güzin Ceyhan, Olga Janzen and Prof. Dr. Gert Pickel revealed that considerations and distinctions from science are important but are sometimes difficult to apply in practice.

The conference included a hybrid public lecture held by Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Heiner Bielefeldt and Prof. Dr. Riem Spielhaus, commented by Zeynep Demir and moderated by Dr. Isabell Diekmann. Prof. Dr. Riem Spielhaus highlighted the pervasive nature of anti-Muslim racism in Germany, encompassing various manifestations such as prejudice within the non-Muslim majority, violent attacks targeting (perceived) Muslims and mosques, among others. From a human rights perspective, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Heiner Bielefeldt advocated for a nuanced distinction between restrictions on freedom of religion and exposure to racist othering. He urged consistent application of anti-discrimination laws, fostering public solidarity with targeted minorities, and subjecting concepts of "normalcy," "neutrality," and "state secularity" to rigorous critical scrutiny. Building upon these insights, Zeynep Demir, in her commentary, invoked the memory of one of Germany's most egregious racist attacks, the Solingen arson attack, which transpired three decades ago.

The conference concluded with remarks from Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick, who elucidated the various research levels addressing anti-Muslim attitudes and racism, including macro-level and intergroup dynamics. He underscored the dynamic nature of these conflicts over time and their profound impact on both our society and research methodologies. The collective understanding that emerged from the conference emphasized the significance of insights gleaned from all levels of research and diverse academic disciplines in comprehending the phenomenon of anti-Muslim racism. For future research, we face the challenge to research and combat anti-Muslim racism in all its facets – a task made even more complex by the concurrent prevalence of multiple conflicts and crises. In bringing together different disciplines, different concepts, different addressees, different levels of research, different methodologies, perspectives from

theory and practice as well as perspectives from those affected and not affected by anti-Muslim racism, this conference lays a valuable foundation for future collaborations.