

## M3 Background information “Islamophobia”

- In many European countries, Muslims frequently experience discrimination, hostility and ostracism due to their religion, their names or appearance. Today, Islamophobia constitutes a serious challenge to European democracies. Hostility towards Islam, and therefore towards Muslims, has historical roots originating in medieval Christians’ **rejection of Islam** and the disparagement of the Muslim faith frequently expressed in the colonial era.
- Islamophobic attacks and incidents are generally treated as **criminal offences**. They range from online hate speech directed against Muslims or, more specifically, Muslim refugees, to the sending of threatening letters to Muslims, verbal or physical attacks on women wearing hijab or men considered to be of ‘Muslim appearance’, and graffiti, desecration of Islamic sites and facilities, and other **attacks**.
- Two key events which catalysed an **increase in everyday hostility towards Muslims**, which in some instances has resulted in attacks on mosques, were the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and the large movements of refugees from majority Islamic societies fleeing civil wars towards Europe in the mid-2010s.
- Many people equate Muslims in general with members of **radical Islamist groupings**, although the latter represent a very small minority of Muslims in Europe. A number of European countries have begun to combat the radicalisation of young Muslims by Islamist extremists, using internet channels such as Facebook and Twitter or closing down mosques which propagate extremist Islamist views.
- **Discrimination and ostracism** towards Muslims occurs at various different levels of societal and daily life. Some Muslims, for instance, struggle to find work or housing.
- Today, one principal arena of Islamophobia is the **internet**, where many websites propagate aggressive invective against people whose actual or assumed religion or whose names or appearance mark them out as ‘other’ – a negatively connotated alterity which those espousing Islamophobic views believe entitles them to deny these ‘others’ a place in Europe.

What can you do?

- It is important for teachers to **speak out against generalising prejudices and disparaging attitudes** towards specific religious or cultural groups. There is great diversity in the ways in which Muslims follow their religion and express their cultural heritage. Talk to your pupils about the right to freedom of religion and about the universality of human rights. Don’t let Islamophobic prejudice become the ‘elephant in the room’ – bring it out into the open and get your classes talking about it. State your point of view clearly. Don’t condemn individual pupils, but rather oppose the views they express which you consider problematic.
- Islamophobia can also become an **identity**, as in scenarios where warnings of the West becoming ‘overrun’ by Islam surface and circulate. You and your pupils should be aware that Islam has always been one of the religions influencing European culture, alongside Christianity and other faiths.
- It happens all too often that history books, including those from Europe, neglect Islam or depict it in a one-sided manner as negative, backward and immutable. Why don’t you work with your pupils to **find out about the history of Islam** and its influence in education, art, science, business or politics in Europe? Make sure you take account of nuances and of processes of change in religions and cultures.

\* In line with colloquial usage in contemporary British English, ‘Islamophobia’ is used here to stand both for the hostile and prejudice-driven rejection of Islam as a concept and of societies dominated by Islamic cultures, and for acts of hostility and ostracism directed towards individual Muslims or those assumed to be Muslims. The term ‘anti-Muslim racism’ is also widespread in academic and media discourse.

\*\* The European Islamophobia Report, now in its third edition, provides an overview of trends in numbers of Islamophobic offences across Europe and includes reports on 33 specific countries. Its editors stress the finding of the European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) that 31% of European Muslims surveyed had faced or were facing discrimination, but only 12% had reported an Islamophobic act to the authorities in the five years prior to the survey. In other words, it appears as if the statistics on Islamophobic hate crimes are just the tip of the iceberg. The Report is unable to provide a uniform and comparable presentation of statistics on Islamophobic attacks due to the highly divergent sources and methods of collection underlying them; this means they are not necessarily accurate reflections of the degree of Islamophobia in the countries to which they refer. It is a safe assumption that the more thoroughly statistics are collected, the higher the resulting figures will be. Most European countries deal with Islamophobic hate crimes under general anti-discrimination legislation.

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