

*Schools of Thought in  
Islamophobia Studies: Prejudice,  
Racism, and Decoloniality*

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**ABSTRACT:** Anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia are not just phenomena—they have increasingly become the focus of a new field of research: Islamophobia studies. Frequent national and international conferences and publications in this area bear witness to this. This article discusses the different prominent approaches to the concepts of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism that can be found in academic literature. It discusses the different theoretical strands within Islamophobia studies rather than the commonalities they share. In broad terms, three “schools of thought” can be identified in Islamophobia studies. The first conducts research on Islamophobia in the context of prejudice studies, the second is informed by racism studies and draws on the postcolonial tradition, and the third contributes to the second through the addition of a decolonial perspective.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, prejudice studies, postcolonial studies, decoloniality, critical race theory

INTRODUCTION

In a review in *Ethnicities*, Brian Klug (2012, 666) surveyed the already growing literature on Islamophobia and stated that Islamophobia is a concept that has come of age, as it now “functions as an organizing principle for scholarship and research.” In the Anglosphere, Islamophobia has become widely accepted as a term to name the racism focused on the figure of the “Muslim,” and its historical development and genealogy has been traced in great detail (Allen 2010); however, in other parts of the world (especially in Europe), the terminology itself is still questioned a great deal, not only by Islamophobes but also within academic spheres. Hence, numerous articles have been written to discuss the semantics and etymology of Islamophobia (Muftic 2015) and to propose alternative terminologies, as was the case in the late 1990s in Fred Halliday’s (1999) work. This article pursues a different goal. Rather than discussing what the correct terminology might be, we will explore the meaning, theories, and concepts behind what authors mean when they refer to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism in the more theory-based literature on the topic, as Klug (2012) has already done to some extent in his review article.

While the idea of Islamophobia first appeared in 1910 in the context of French colonization in Algeria (Allen 2010), the definition provided by the British think tank the Runnymede Trust was the first to introduce the concept to a wider audience in 1997. Nevertheless, we can see a diverse development of the meaning different authors ascribe to Islamophobia and/or anti-Muslim racism. While numerous scholarly books began to appear around 2005 (Klug 2012, 666), within the subsequent 10 years we can even argue that a new field of “Islamophobia studies” is in the process of emerging. It is materializing in many ways in academic institutions. Since 2010, Hatem Bazian has organized the annual International Islamophobia Studies Conference at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, and since 2013, a Transatlantic Islamophobia Studies Conference has been held in Paris.

Since 2014, Farid Hafez from the University of Salzburg has organized the biannual Islamophobia Studies Conference for three German-speaking countries: Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. He is also the editor of the *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*, which he founded back in 2010. Since 2012, Bazian has edited the *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, a biannual journal. He organizes these activities at the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at the Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley. In addition, the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University, headed by John Esposito, is a permanent research project dedicated to the study of Islamophobia. Moreover, several think tanks, such as the US-based Center for American Progress and the Turkey-based Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, have been regularly putting out research publications on Islamophobia. Armin Muftic (2016) frequently updates an international bibliography for Islamophobia studies, currently including more than 1,100 titles; 210 books, 60 edited volumes, and 346 articles in books and 502 journal articles. In 2017, these efforts culminated in the establishment of the Islamophobia Studies Consortium comprising more than 20 universities from all over the world. Alongside many other irregular conferences and publications, the emergence of these institutions and fora testifies to the emergence of Islamophobia studies.

At the same time, the rise of Islamophobia studies does not mean that authors have a common conception of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism. Consequently, this article intends to map the field of Islamophobia studies and identify different theoretical approaches in the large amount of work that has been produced by the academic community thus far. I especially concentrate on the more theory-based literature on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism and those organizations that are, today, part of what I have called institutions that conduct work in Islamophobia studies. I aim to map different theoretical approaches to Islamophobia studies and anti-Muslim racism studies.

In the next section, I will briefly discuss the main assumptions in the initial definition of Islamophobia that was proposed by the Runnymede Trust, which ultimately established the foundation for the debates that followed for a long time (Bleich 2011, 1582). The third section will discuss theoretical literature that has very much stuck to the definition as proposed by the Runnymede Trust, which can be categorized as prejudice studies. The section that follows discusses approaches that are more rooted in critical race theory and include important postcolonial approaches. Many of these authors—especially beyond the Anglo-Saxon world—explicitly refer to the notion of “anti-Muslim racism” and refuse to even use the term Islamophobia. The penultimate section discusses the literature that explicitly uses a decolonial perspective, before I draw some conclusions in the final section. This article is the first of its kind to theoretically map the field of Islamophobia studies. The aim of this article is not to present an innovative new approach or evaluate strengths and weaknesses of every approach, albeit the critique of every approach in these three schools already entails substantive criticism and arguments towards the other.

### NAMING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Without a doubt, Islam and Muslims today have become a global topic of debate, from Los Angeles to Tokyo, from Stockholm to South Africa. Questions of how to integrate Muslims, how to accommodate the Islamic religion, and how potentially dangerous Islam is to the achievement of peace on earth appear to be widespread. How one should think about Islam and Muslims has become a relevant political position, in addition to considering the positions Muslims have in society and the positions they ought to have. Frequent public debates have kept the figure of the Muslim in the spotlight, whether these discussions concern terrorist

attacks, bestselling books, or events—including the most recent “Muslim ban” of US President Donald Trump or the advice given by the European Court of Justice to regulate the wearing of the hijab—that are divided along religious lines of difference. As a consequence, an impression is created about what is really at stake concerning an imagined “real Islam” and “real Muslims.”

As I have already indicated, the first terminological definition of Islamophobia was offered in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust in its report: “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All.” The report was authored by the then newly established multi-ethnic and multi-religious Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia. In this report, Islamophobia was defined as holding “closed views of Islam.” These views include seeing Islam and Muslims as the following:

1. A single monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to new realities.
2. Separate and other—(a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures, (b) not affected by [other cultures], and (c) not influencing [other cultures].
3. Inferior to the West—barbaric, irrational, primitive, or sexist.
4. Violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, or engaged in “a clash of civilizations.”
5. A political ideology, used for political or military advantage.

These “closed views” may lead to the following:

6. Criticisms made by Islam of “the West” being rejected out of hand.
7. Hostility towards Islam being used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
8. Anti-Muslim hostility being accepted as natural and “normal.”

In contrast to these “closed views,” the Runnymede Trust presented “open views of Islam” as an alternative. These “open views” are characterized as follows:

1. Islam [is] seen as diverse and progressive, with internal differences, debates, and development.
2. Islam [is] seen as interdependent with other faiths and cultures—(a) having certain shared values and aims, (b) affected by (other faiths and cultures), and (c) enriching [other faiths and cultures].
3. Islam [is] seen as distinctively different, but not deficient, and as equally worthy of respect.
4. Islam [is] seen as an actual or potential partner in joint cooperative enterprises and in the solution of shared problems.
5. Islam [is] seen as a genuine religious faith, practiced sincerely by its adherents.
6. Criticisms [by Islam] of “the West” and other cultures are considered and debated.
7. Debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion.
8. Critical views of Islam are themselves subjected to critique, lest they be inaccurate and unfair.

This definition has provoked several criticisms. I will quote part of the critique from Mohammad Tamdgidi, who expressed his discomfort with the dichotomized categorization the Runnymede Trust produced. According to him, the

Runnymede Trust's "open views of Islam" unfortunately falls in the trap of regarding Islam monolithically, in turn as being characterized by one or another trait, and does not adequately express the complex heterogeneity of a historical phenomenon whose contradictory interpretations, traditions, and sociopolitical trends have been shaped and has in turn been shaped, as in the case of any world tradition, by other world-historical forces. (Tamdgidi 2012, 76)

In addition, he views the proposed "open views of Islam" list as an oversimplification and distortion of the tradition of Islam "away from its complex heterogeneity and in favor of a monolithic view that is simplistically portrayed as being all positive" (Tamdgidi 2012, 77). Tamdgidi, in my view, is right in this critique, but it still very much relies on the notion—although plural—of a real "Islam." As a result, although he criticizes the construction of Islamophobia and Islamophilia as "aspects of the West's epistemic racism and its own looking glass self-projected upon colonized subjects as if it points to their essential attributes" (Tamdgidi 2012, 78), there remains an attempt to ontologize the categories of "Islam" and "Muslims" within the concept of Islamophobia.

It can be assumed that the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (consisting of Muslims and Non-Muslims) proposed this definition due to general disquiet among Muslims, who often lack agency in public spheres and attempted to create a positive self-image through this definition, something which has been observed in African American movements (Hall 1994, 15–25), for example by asserting that God was a black man (Cone 1969). Similar to other conceptions of racism this first definition of Islamophobia created a category for Islam and Muslims that is stabilized and continuously reaffirmed by uttering the word "Islam" (Terkessidis 2004, 53–66). It ultimately constructs the category "Islam" itself by looking at it from the perspective of an Islamophobe.

Nevertheless, there are some points that the Runnymede Trust affirmed and that have largely been shared across the literature in Islamophobia studies until today. Specifically, a common view is that Islamophobia works through homogenization, views Islam as inferior and an enemy, and leads to discrimination. These characterizations have been collectively asserted by most authors in the vast literature on Islamophobia.

### *PREJUDICE STUDIES*

The impact of the Runnymede Trust's definition can be seen in the project called The Bridge Initiative, which was led by John Esposito at the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. It defines Islamophobia as follows:

Islamophobia is prejudice towards or discrimination against Muslims due to their religion, or perceived religious, national, or ethnic identity associated with Islam. Like anti-Semitism, racism, and homophobia, Islamophobia describes mentalities and actions that demean an entire class of people. Jews, African-Americans, and other populations throughout history have faced prejudice and discrimination. Islamophobia is simply another reincarnation of this unfortunate trend of bigotry. (The Bridge Initiative 2016b)

According to this definition, Islamophobia is, once again, first and foremost about Muslims. It shares the traits of generalization, simplification, and negative attribution that lead to discrimination, as demonstrated by the Runnymede Trust.

At the same time, it clarifies what it does not mean by Islamophobia: “Rational criticism of Islam or Muslims based on factual evidence is not intrinsically Islamophobia, just as criticism of the tenets or followers of other religions or ethnic groups does not necessarily indicate bigotry or prejudice” (The Bridge Initiative 2016b). In this statement, the Bridge Initiative counters criticism of the notion of Islamophilia, which was challenged for being an implicit part of the Runnymede Trust’s definition of Islamophobia. However, it does ultimately still operate within the notion of the existence of a “good Muslim.” One article from the Bridge Initiative, which dealt with the election campaign of the current president, Donald Trump, states that Trump was “wrong about Muslims” (The Bridge Initiative 2016a). But the question still remains: was he really wrong or might something else explain his prejudiced views?

In part, the approach of the former head of the Berlin Center for Antisemitism Studies, Wolfgang Benz, can also be seen to belong to this school of thought. He is certainly one of the first authors within the German-speaking literature to have engaged with the concept of Islamophobia (under the names of *Islamfeindschaft* and *Islamfeindlichkeit*) and enriched the study of Islamophobia with his expertise in the long-established field of anti-Semitism studies (Benz 2009, 2011). At the same time, Benz defines Islamophobia in his writing as a form of “resentment.” Resentments are defined by Benz (2011, 161) as “dangerous.” He argues, “They start as prejudice and have the tendency to culminate in hatred of stigmatized individuals, groups, and ethnic, religious, or national communities, hatred that is released by violence” (Benz 2011, 161). Benz (2009, 9–20) explicitly frames Islamophobia within the context of prejudice studies and attributes it to social psychology (Benz 2011, 165). For him, the majority–minority relationship is a fundamental component of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Benz 2011, 183). The conceptualization of minorities and majorities implies the existence of real subjects. Here both Esposito and Benz follow what I would call the school of prejudice studies, in which Islamophobia is regarded as an expression of mentalities and actions, a form of prejudice. This is an approach from social psychology and attempts to explain prejudice as the result of social-psychological behavior patterns (Jaschke 2013).

At the same time, it must be said that not all social-psychological approaches necessarily have to exclude dimensions of power and domination, although they primarily focus on individual patterns of thought and individual patterns of action. As a result, not all work in prejudice studies fundamentally neglects structures of power and domination. Various approaches in prejudice studies, such as social dominance theory (Heitmeyer 2002) and critical social psychology, do in fact incorporate questions of power. Consequently, the designers of the long-term study on right-wing attitudes in German society (Decker et al. 2016, 11–21) argue that ideologies of inequality are not only directed against individuals. In contrast, they emphasize that such individual aggressions also go hand in hand with the aim of enforcing authoritarian and anti-democratic societal structures (Decker et al. 2016, 11). Both authors point out that the focus on individual attitudes in their research can never be thought of separately from society as a whole: “As people with authoritarian or ethnocentric attitudes vehemently turn against an open society, they themselves are the product of this society” (Decker et al. 2016, 12). Similarly, other social-psychological approaches that deal with Islamophobia also incorporate power structures into their analyses (Ünal 2016).

In addition to the critique of the absence of power relations in many approaches to Islamophobia studies that are based on prejudice studies, there is another central aspect that should be mentioned here that I have already gestured towards several times. According to a critique that stems from racism studies in general and anti-Semitism studies in particular, questions pertaining to Islam and Muslims should be separated from one another, as has been done in anti-Semitism studies. The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1976, 8) presented this



theorem clearly in his essay “Anti-Semite and Jew”: “If the Jew did *not exist*, the *anti-Semite would invent him*.” Many authors have built on this analogy between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Hafez 2010b; Levey and Modood 2009). Following this reasoning, Edward Said made an early statement in this area in his book *Orientalism*:

Additionally, the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, regressions, investments, and projections. (Said 1979, 16).

This means that we are not necessarily talking about real forms of “Islam” but rather about images of Islam, which serve the conception of the “self” and the “other.” The “Muslim Other” is used in Islamophobic discourses for the projection of the self’s deficits, which are negatively framed.

A frequently recurring statement in the public discourse on Islam, which is a vivid example of the power of the imagination, is that “not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims.” This statement tells us less about reality than it does about representation—that is, the perception—of terror in associated media coverage (Friedrich and Schultes 2013). This is because the very concept of Muslim people, as well as that of Jewish people in anti-Semitism, is an abstract one used to conceal mental processes. As Sartre said, “Far from experience producing his idea of the Jew, it was the latter [idea about the Jew, author/s] which explained his experience” (Said 1979, 8).

Nevertheless, as already noted before, the prejudice studies approach to Islamophobia studies has especially contributed in studies on how Islamophobia works through homogenization, making “Islam” inferior and discriminating Muslims. But criticism of the neglect of power structures and the use of ontological categories for “Islam” and “Muslims” are taken into consideration in what I consider to be the most prominent strand in academic Islamophobia studies literature today: racism studies informed by the central assumptions of postcolonial theory, such as othering and power relations. Klug observed as early as 2012 that a shift in the literature was occurring in the direction of viewing Islamophobia through the lens of racialization (Klug 2012, 677). I will outline this approach in the next section.

### POSTCOLONIALITY AND RACISM STUDIES

Postcolonial studies do not have a unified theory or methodology. Nevertheless, its essential ideas derive from the works of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978), Gayatri Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 1988), and Homi Bhabha (*Nation and Narration*, 1990). From this literature, basic concepts such as Othering (Said), subalternity (Spivak), and representation, hybridity, and the provincialization of Europe (Bhabha) are taken. The notion of “postcolonialism” does not—in a narrow sense—refer to a merely historical understanding of colonialism. As the decolonial thinker Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues, the notion of coloniality refers to something different than colonialism:

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as

a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243)

This is what postcolonial studies discusses. Racism studies has adopted the essential assumptions of postcolonial thinkers, such as the construction of race, and the role dominance and power relations play, among other things.

One of the central concerns of current work in racism studies can be observed in the deconstruction of basic assumptions that stabilize and reproduce the most basic racialized constructions, which form the bases for racist thought. As a result, for most authors today, engaging in the discipline of Islamophobia studies does not mean engaging with Islam and Muslims, but rather with the dominant culture (Attia et al. 2015) in those societies where anti-Muslim racism is located. Consequently, it is not just about Islam. It is also less about the nature of Islamophobia, as this only gives us information about the make-up of Islamophobic, dominant societies themselves. According to this argumentation, the 9/11 attacks, as well as other terrorist attacks carried out by so-called “Islamists,” were never the origin of Islamophobia. Many of the works, inspired by the Foucauldian theory of the power/knowledge complex, analyze Islamophobia as a form of discourse (Hafez 2010b, 2017; Kallis 2013; Prasad 2013; Pucher 2012; Ramm 2009; Saeed 2007; Schiffer and Wagner 2011; Shumsky 2004; Ureta and Profanter 2011). According to this theorization, the aim of Islamophobia studies is to criticize power structures that aim to govern the subjects they have constructed.

Iman Attia, who wrote about anti-Muslim racism as early as the late 1990s, took the issue up again in her 2007 publication after the topic became more obviously virulent in society. According to her, studying anti-Muslim racism entails the deconstruction of social processes of construction carried out by power structures. For her, it is about a “hegemonic-critical revision of dominant images and discourses . . . which serve the stabilization of power” (Attia 2007, 5–7). According to her, anti-Muslim racism is a form of cultural racism, in which “religion is . . . culturalized and transformed into the essential components of the cultural conceptions of self and other” (Attia 2007, 9).

There are a number of other works that share this wider conception of racism in which a racialization of actual or attributed religious belonging takes place. While many authors in the academic sphere follow this line of argumentation, it should be mentioned here that a conceptualization of Islamophobia that is informed by racism studies appeared at quite an early stage in the Anglosphere, as we can see in Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown’s (2004, 29) introduction work to their book on *Racism*, as well as those by Nasar Meer, Tariq Modood, and many others (Kyriakides et al. 2009; Meer and Modood 2009, 2010, 2012). At the same time, we should not underestimate the diversity of racism studies as a field, and it is not sufficient to state that Islamophobia is a form of racism, as we encounter several competing notions of racism. Thus a “racism without races” (Balibar et al. 1990, 28) gives us a different conceptualization of anti-Muslim racism, in which the identity aspect of religion is placed to the fore compared to other notions of racism and the emphasis on religion in the construction of difference is only a semantic one. Brown, for example, argues that an analytical distinction is made between the racialization of an ethnic group, on one hand, and a religious group, on the other. The second form of racialization does not primarily focus on biological and somatic differences, according to Brown (2000, 74). This distinction between racialization and racism is rejected by other authors. Mark Terkessidis (2004, 98), for example, interprets racialization in a broader way as a process “in which, on the one hand, a group of people is defined as a natural group through certain characteristics and, at the same time, the nature of this group is constructed in



relation to one's own group." This broader understanding of racism makes it easier to include anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia within such a concept of racism.

Hafez has proposed the following definition in his *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*:

When talking about Islamophobia, we mean anti-Muslim racism. As Anti-Semitism Studies has shown, the etymological components of a word do not necessarily point to its complete meaning, nor how it is used. Such is also the case with Islamophobia Studies. Islamophobia has become a well known term used in academia as much as in the public sphere. Criticism of Muslims or of the Islamic religion is not necessarily Islamophobic. Islamophobia is about a dominant group of people aiming at seizing, stabilizing and widening their power by means of defining a scapegoat—real or invented—and excluding this scapegoat from the resources/rights/definition of a constructed “we.” Islamophobia operates by constructing a static “Muslim” identity, which is attributed in negative terms and generalized for all Muslims. At the same time, Islamophobic images are fluid and vary in different contexts, because Islamophobia tells us more about the Islamophobe than it tells us about the Muslims/Islam.<sup>1</sup>

While Hafez's definition emphasizes power structures, others have also explicitly pointed to the crucial relevance of considering racism as a “social relationship.” Benjamin Opratko and Fanny Müller-Uri thus criticize Deepa Kumar's conceptualization of Islamophobia as a “power tool” as “reminiscent of earlier Marxist conceptions of racism as a tool, used by the ruling elites to divide the subaltern classes” (2016, 120). They utilize critical race theory and attempt to go beyond functionalist and instrumentalist conceptions of racism. For them, the “culturalization as well as economization of the social come together in the figure of ‘the Muslim’” (Opratko and Müller-Uri 2016, 127). Anti-Muslim racism here is understood as “a central dimension of the hegemonic structure of Western societies” (Müller-Uri 2014, 127). What Müller-Uri presents here is a larger and structural conception of racism. The focus is not on a person to be a racist, but the awareness of our racist practices, which are inscribed in our socialization and knowledge. Based on this conceptualization, other authors argue that there is a “structural, implicit, or unconscious process of racial othering, which can accompany all our actions, and an obviously focused, explicit, and conscious doing of race” (Kreutzer 2015, 21). The concept of “dominant society” addresses precisely this structural dimension of anti-Muslim racism. In this context, anti-Muslim racism is understood as a “dominated social relationship” (Müller-Uri 2014, 62), an ideological discourse, or symbolic or epistemic violence (following Spivak) in an asymmetrical power relationship that devalues the “other” and valorizes the self (Müller-Uri 2014, 68).

Drawing on Frantz Fanon and Theodor W. Adorno, Müller-Uri (2014, 91) argues, by taking into consideration the apparent post-racial turn in Europe, that anti-Muslim racism is about “an essentialist conception of culture, which appears as the functional equivalent of the biological racial concept,” which in this case does not refer to culture, but rather to religion. Central to this is the naturalization of a cultural or religious difference, which constitutes the ideological core of all racisms (Müller-Uri 2014, 96). Müller-Uri (2014, 97) reminds us that Jews were already regarded to be a “mental race” in anti-Semitic thought, which meant that they were “culturally not assimilable.” And so too today the figure of the Muslim is imagined as an object, who is deindividualized within a collective and constructed in a way that follows similar patterns to that of an essentialized Muslim culture. Referring to Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Jacques Derrida, Iman Attia (2009, 23) highlights, with regard to Europe, that “exploitation . . . no longer works exclusively or primarily through direct violence” but “goes hand in hand

with cultural hegemony.” According to Attia (2009, 23), “the focus on culture . . . thus places culture as the third element alongside structure and subject.” This further serves to regulate this “danger.” As Attia (2009, 89) points out elsewhere, “anti-Muslim discourses are presented as a form of self-defence, which is analogous to national-socialist and right-wing presentations of anti-Semitic discourses, which have previously been framed as a form of self-defence.”

While this strand of Islamophobia studies draws primarily on the area of racism studies that is informed by critical race theory and tends to abandon the notion of Islamophobia itself, there is another strand that includes the postcolonial approach but takes it a step further. This approach does not consider the project of deconstructing epistemic Eurocentric violence and narratives of anti-Muslim racism in hegemonic Islamophobic discourses to be the most central issue within its analysis. It not only argues, as Achille Mbembe (2014, 23) does in his “Critique of Black Reason,” that Islamophobia merely allowed an already existing structure of colonial thinking to expand widely. This postcolonial tradition already has a global perspective and frames Islamophobia within the history of the “modern world system” as “a history of the expansion of European states and peoples into the rest of the world” (Wallerstein 2007, 11), but, at the same time, criticizes the Eurocentrism they see as inherent to this approach (Grosfoguel 2011, 2). This approach is called a “decolonial” practice, which I will outline in the next section by drawing mainly on the research of Ramon Grosfoguel who, like Hatem Bazian, works on Islamophobia from a decolonial perspective and has theorized it in highly explicit ways.

### *DECOLONIALITY*

The Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project, which was founded by Bazian at the Center for Race and Gender at UC Berkeley, offers the following working definition of Islamophobia:

Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve “civilizational rehab” of the target communities (Muslim or otherwise). Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended. (Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project 2016)

This approach differs in its global perspective. It reflects Grosfoguel’s (2016, 10) definition of racism as “a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the lines of the human that have been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the ‘capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system’.” Grosfoguel uses this description to express that the culturalist and structuralist reduction of characterizations of the world system is misleading. Instead, he deploys the concept of the

coloniality of power as an . . . intersectionality . . . of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (“heterarchies”) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures. (Grosfoguel 2011, 10)

His approach is based on a more interlinked and non-hierarchical understanding of the economic structure versus the cultural system. He conceptualizes both “global ideological/symbolic and colonial/racist culture as constitutive, together with accumulation processes and the inter-state system, of the core–periphery relationships at a world-scale” (Grosfoguel 2011, 16).

So, what is the difference between postcolonial and decolonial studies? Decolonial scholars do not deny the important contributions made by postcolonial studies, and they also explicitly build on the critique carried out by postcolonial studies in Western knowledge production. However, scholars in decolonial studies, such as Anibal Quijano (2007), María Lugones (2007), and Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo 2000), see themselves as making an intervention in postcolonial studies.

Grosfoguel’s (2011, 3) project within decoloniality is—as it is for others—the decolonization of postcolonial thought that is intellectually focused on Eurocentric thinkers who are embedded in the poststructuralist/postmodern Western canon, such as Foucault, Derrida, and Gramsci (Grosfoguel 2011, 2). He argues for a critique of modernity from the Global South that is critical of both Eurocentrism and Third World fundamentalism and instead pursues: (1) a decolonial epistemic perspective that employs a broader canon of thought, (2) a critical dialogue between diverse epistemic/ethical/political projects that moves towards a pluriversal (instead of universal) world, and (3) an adaptation to the epistemic perspective of thinkers from the Global South (Grosfoguel 2011, 3). He proposes numerous ways of countering Eurocentric epistemology (Grosfoguel 2011, 25). The fight against Islamophobia, which he conceptualizes as a form of racism, becomes part of a larger global struggle against racialized inequalities and exploitation. It is essentially an epistemological struggle of the subaltern, which Grosfoguel considers to have agency in contesting the current world system.

Grosfoguel identifies different forms of Islamophobia at work. One form stems from a global historical perspective, beginning in 1492 with the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the European peninsula and the origins of the transatlantic slave trade. The other is a form of cultural racism that began with the end of Nazi Germany, anti-colonial struggles, and the civil rights movements in the West. Other forms are Orientalism, in relation to the tropes that are used, and epistemological racism, “the most invisible form of racism” (Grosfoguel 2012, 19), which delegitimizes Muslim subaltern voices and positions Western hegemonic actors as the objective parties. Grosfoguel (2011, 2) makes a distinction “between those who read subalternity as a postmodern critique (which represents a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism) and those who read subalternity as a decolonial critique.” This is exactly the point where the Muslim subject re-enters the debate from the peripheral backdoor of Western world domination.

Decolonial scholars, such as Salman Sayyid, explicitly refer to decolonial thought in relation to Islamophobia studies. For Sayyid, the “Muslim question,” as it is construed in Europe, points to a series of interrogations and speculations that reveal a difficulty in Western dominance over Islam/Muslims. These, in turn, would open up an arena of cultural, governmental, and epistemological intervention (Sayyid 2014, 3). According to Sayyid (2014, 4–5), the figure of the “Muselmann” represents the Muslim who has to be controlled, but who at the same time is also a living dead figure, who has no agency. He believes that the problem for Muslims does not have as much to do with the essentialist concepts that are used to describe them (which, in current literature, is in fact the main focus of the approach informed by postcolonial studies and critical race theory). Instead, he argues that the challenge of being Muslim today is that there is no epistemological or political space for the identity (Sayyid 2014, 8). Accordingly, the inclusion of Islam in Western epistemology as a concept would destabilize the colonial order. Sayyid wants to introduce a post-positivist, post-orientalist, and decolonial perspective to create exactly this space. For him, decolonization is the method needed to create a potential

global demos. For Sayyid, it is not democracy in its present form, along with the attendant socio-economic neoliberal order, which is capable of creating such a global demos free from racism. Drawing on Mignolo, he refers to decoloniality as a project of “epistemic disobedience” (Sayyid 2014, 12). For Sayyid, decoloniality is not an attempt to eliminate all power structures, nor is it an attempt to establish a utopia. Rather, he sees decoloniality as an attempt to overcome the maxim of colonialism/modernity, namely the violent hierarchy of the West and the non-West. For Sayyid (2014, 13), the decolonial project is a struggle for the potential decentralization of the West. He is concerned with the attempt to give the Muslim subject a name in the world and not to leave them speechless and at the mercy of postcolonial relations, orientalist patterns of thought, and positivist epistemology. For Sayyid, Islamophobia is considered here as an attempt to prevent the Muslim subject from being given a place in the world as a Muslim. As a result, the Muslim subject re-enters the concept of Islamophobia through the backdoor of a critique of the current world system. To name this space, the decolonial theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres (n.d., 24) proposed a way to achieve decolonial epistemic disobedience in his 10 theses, which frame the decolonial project in such a way that an individual subject will emerge as: a “questioner, thinker, theorist, writer, and communicator”; a creator involved in an aesthetic, erotic, and spiritual decolonial turn (26); an agent of social change (28); and, lastly, an actor in a collective (28). In this sense, Sayyid becomes a Muslim agent who regards Islamophobia as a hindrance to this project of achieving Muslim agency in the global world system.

### CONCLUSION

This article provided an overview of theoretical debates in the field of Islamophobia studies since the first systematic definition was provided in 1997. I argue that we can speak broadly of three different schools of thought in Islamophobia studies. The first school conducts research in Islamophobia studies as primarily a form of prejudice studies. Representatives of this school, which I have discussed in this article, are John Esposito (Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University) and Wolfgang Benz (Center for Anti-Semitism Studies). Beyond this work, there is a large amount of literature that shares the basic assumptions of this approach (see also: Bunzl 2007; L. Brown et al. 2013; Lean 2012). The second school, which views Islamophobia through the lens of racialization, places Islamophobia primarily in an asymmetrical power relationship and makes theoretical links to critical race studies and postcolonial studies. This approach is perhaps the most widespread current approach within academic literature, finding especially large—although not exclusive—acceptance among the sections of that academic community that prefer to employ the notion of anti-Muslim racism rather than Islamophobia. We can particularly mention the works of Nasar Meer and Brian Klug in the Anglosphere and the works of Iman Attia and Fanny Müller-Uri in the German literature, which are all based on critical race theory. Most of this literature relies on a broader understanding of racism and conceptualizes racialization primarily as a form of essentialization, where it separates cultural racism from phenotypical characteristics. At the same time, there is also reason to believe that for some racist actors—especially within the right-wing camp—religion is nothing but an expression of the cultural abilities of a certain race (Priester 2003, 268–98). Thus, the general debate in racism studies of whether culture is a mere substitute for race or rather a euphemism for a biological category is approached in different ways. Since the decolonial approach also shares many of the insights of postcolonial studies, the scholars, who pursue the first, could also be named here, especially Hatem Bazian in his Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at UC Berkeley. However, it makes sense to see the decolonial school as

a third school, first, due to its larger epistemological and second, due to its political project. Theoretically, it is a critique of Eurocentrism in postcolonial theory that brings the “Muslim subject” back as a subaltern voice who can determine their own future. This approach goes beyond a narrow understanding of science and is a political project that calls upon agency to break what Grosfoguel (2016, 10) has called the “capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system.”

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#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Farid Hafez, Working definition of Islamophobia. Accessed December 11, 2018. <http://www.jahrbuch-islamophobie.de/islamophobie>.

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