Insight

The Struggles Against Antisemitism and Islamophobia: An Empowering Connection or Mutual Neutralization?

Elad Ben David and Ofir Dayan | No. 2148 | June 2, 2026

In recent years, a growing trend has emerged in the West toward advancing legislation and public policy that define and address antisemitism and Islamophobia simultaneously and, at times, even jointly. While these initiatives are presented as a means to protect minorities, promote equality, and strengthen relations and dialogue between Jews and Muslims, addressing these two phenomena within a single legal framework might carry unintended consequences—specifically, blurring the lines between combating racism and normalizing anti-Israel discourse and disguised antisemitism.

This article focuses on the post-October 7 era, examining how this connection between antisemitism and Islamophobia corresponds with shifts in public and institutional discourse, particularly among Muslim communities and civil society organizations in the West, with an emphasis on the United States. Through an analysis of discourse and policy, the article demonstrates that, despite the similarities between antisemitism and Islamophobia, the politicization of the concept of Islamophobia—especially its use in the context of anti-Israel discourse that has intensified since October 7—creates tension with the struggle against antisemitism, may overshadow it, and could even blur its boundaries.

In recent decades, the number of antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents in the West has risen significantly. Each form of hatred has distinct characteristics and modes of expression, yet both are fundamentally rooted in xenophobia — antisemitism as a widespread and dangerous phenomenon that has persisted for centuries, and Islamophobia as a form of hatred that intensified significantly following major waves of migration to Europe in the shadow of the Syrian Civil War and in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States.

The response to the rise of these hatreds was not long in coming: Jewish and Muslim communal organizations promoted, formulated, and advanced definitions of antisemitism and Islamophobia, respectively. These efforts gave rise to a range of global and local initiatives. Some, such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, have been adopted by numerous countries and organizations. At the time of writing, several definitions for both antisemitism and Islamophobia are being promoted simultaneously in the West, with the aim of having them adopted and utilized as accepted and binding codes of conduct — in policy, legislation, and enforcement. However, some of these definitions contradict one another. This fact has heightened the importance of local initiatives to combat these manifestations of hatred, some of which even link the two types of bigotry together.

While much has been written about antisemitism and the struggle against it, including at this research institute, the same cannot be said of Islamophobia. The process of defining this form of hatred began later, and even drew inspiration from legislation concerning antisemitism. Therefore, it is worth discussing the background of Islamophobia-related legislation as a foundation for comparing and contrasting it with antisemitism, and for addressing both phenomena. In this context, it should be acknowledged that certain governments, including those of Sweden and the United Kingdom, are attempting to redefine hatred directed against Muslims because they believe the term "Islamophobia" implies merely a fear of Muslims and does not directly address discrimination against them — a perspective also backed by research that emphasizes the historical context of the term's usage.

The Phenomenon of Islamophobia: Historical Background

From the late 1960s until the September 11 attacks, Islamophobia in the United States was of relatively low intensity — a reality that enabled Muslim immigrants to integrate into American society reasonably well. In Europe, too, the phenomenon was not particularly prominent; however, the very coining of the term in a 1997 report by the Runnymede Trust think tank signaled a growing trend. The report examined prejudices toward Muslims in the United Kingdom and defined Islamophobia as a composite of negative attitudes and feelings toward Muslims and their religion, manifested, among other things, in discrimination, social exclusion, harassment, hate crimes, and negative representation in the media. The report determined that Muslims in the UK were experiencing significant hostility. Subsequent research validating the phenomenon argued that Muslim groups frequently experienced discriminatory treatment, and recommended new legislation aimed at protecting this minority against the trends of discrimination targeting them.

In France, where tensions surrounding religion and the state have persisted since the French Revolution, relatively fertile ground emerged for tensions involving the Muslim community. This manifested, for example, in issues of immigration, national identity, the controversies surrounding the wearing of the hijab, and the increased visibility of nationalist and anti-immigration politicians, such as Jean-Marie Le

Pen. These differences between European countries and the United States may stem, at least in part, from the distinct histories of the two continents. While Europe carried a historical baggage of conflict with the Muslim world, America lacked a similar history — a factor that contributed to a more favorable starting point for American Muslims and their integration into society.

However, a series of events and upheavals in the twentieth century contributed to the strengthening of Islamophobic trends in America, primarily against the backdrop of developments in the Middle East. Among these were the Arab-Israeli wars and the oil embargo, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the 1983 bombing of the Marines in Beirut. These global events served as catalysts in shaping a more negative image of Islam and Muslims in the United States, which was reflected, among other things, in workplace discrimination and harassment in educational institutions as early as the 1980s. Nevertheless, despite these isolated incidents, the Muslim community in the United States lived with a reasonable sense of security and tranquility for many decades. The turning point came in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, which marked the beginning of a new era in relations between Islam and the West and the crystallization of the public sentiment that "everything had changed."

In Europe, the intensification of Islamophobia following September 11 merged with deeper and more longstanding tensions, as noted above. In many countries, Muslims came to be perceived not only as a security threat, but also as a cultural and demographic threat to the character of Europe itself. This perception strengthened right-wing populist parties, intensified debates surrounding religious symbols, and further complicated the integration of Muslim minorities into the public sphere — further reinforcing the discourse surrounding Islam as foreign to European identity.

In the United States, where trends of social integration among Muslims had been prominent, the aftermath of September 11 dealt a significant blow: a community whose overwhelming majority was law-abiding and loyal to state institutions was suddenly perceived as a potential suspect and a security threat. The attacks had profound consequences for the American Muslim community, which found itself on the front lines of the "War on Terror" and was impacted by security policies and government legislation, along with the strengthening of Islamophobic trends. Among the expressions of this were the enactment of the PATRIOT Act in 2001, the expansion of surveillance on mosques and Islamic charities, the freezing of activities or even the closure of Muslim institutions, as well as the public controversy surrounding the proposed mosque near Ground Zero in 2010. In retrospect, some of these measures were viewed as justified, as in the case of the "Holy Land Foundation" case.

Either way, these processes created fertile ground for intensifying tensions surrounding Islam in American society. The trend continued during the Obama administration, despite its attempts to adopt a more targeted enforcement policy, and intensified even further during President Trump's first term. These dynamics grew even stronger after October 7, during the presidency of Joe Biden and through President Trump's second term. Although October 7 is generally identified with the resurgence of antisemitism, it also led to a rise in Islamophobia; in the initial months following the attack, incidents of Islamophobia in the United States reportedly increased by 180%. Similar trends were observed in Europe, including assaults, threats, and vandalism targeting mosques. In London, reports indicated an increase of approximately 140% in Islamophobic incidents, while Muslim institutions described receiving threatening letters and experiencing a growing sense of insecurity.

Alignment and Cooperation Between the Struggles Against Antisemitism and Islamophobia

The rise in Islamophobia following the September 11 attacks led to joint initiatives between Jewish and Muslim communities in the United States, as liberal Jewish voices called for solidarity with Muslims and for the condemnation of Islamophobia. Prominent Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC), called for cooperation with the Muslim community in a shared struggle against both antisemitism and Islamophobia. In addition, interfaith dialogue and engagement took place, including statements by leading imams in the United States. For example, Shamsi Ali engaged in an interfaith partnership with Rabbi Marc Schneier, both prominent leaders in New York, calling for a joint struggle against antisemitism and Holocaust denial, alongside efforts to combat Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslims. These activities also extended to imams who voiced harsh criticisms of Israel. For instance, Sheikh Yasir Qadhi, an influential preacher from Texas, called for cooperation between Orthodox Jews and Muslims in combating antisemitism and Islamophobia in the United States, particularly in relation to restrictions on Muslim and Jewish ritual slaughter and issues concerning kosher and halal practices.

Additional examples manifested at institutional levels, such as the Biden administration's 2023 National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism. This strategy was built upon four core pillars: increasing awareness of antisemitism and Jewish-American history, strengthening the security of Jewish communities, combating the normalization of antisemitism, and promoting cooperation and solidarity among diverse communities, while also calling on social media platforms to adopt zero-tolerance policies toward antisemitism. The Biden administration's strategy garnered broad support from Jewish organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which praised its addressing of threats originating from both the political right and left. At the same time, it drew criticism for its collaboration with various civil society organizations, including CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) — a step that drew backlash because of the anti-Israel stances associated with the organization and its executive director, Nihad Awad.

Counterarguments to the Definition of Antisemitism

While certain figures viewed President Biden's policy as a positive development, the tension between the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism and the definition advanced by the Nexus Document, led by voices on the political left, generated intense political controversy. The disagreements centered on a range of issues: whether the definition is used to suppress legitimate criticism of Israel, whether antisemitism can be obscured through anti-Zionist rhetoric, whether antisemitism should be understood as a unique phenomenon or as part of a broader system of hatred, and the role of Israel within the definition itself. In light of this, the critical importance of the Biden policy lay in its attempt to strike a balance between these differing perspectives.

In tandem with this criticism, and as part of the same vibrant public debate, concerted efforts have been made in recent years to undermine the widely accepted IHRA definition of antisemitism, which has been adopted by hundreds of countries and organizations worldwide. The primary criticism of this definition stems from its accompanying examples, which illustrate which expressions may be considered antisemitic. Under the IHRA definition, for example, holding Jews collectively responsible for the actions of the State of Israel and drawing comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany are identified as examples of antisemitic expression. Critics of the IHRA definition argue that these and other examples classify an overly broad range of discourse as antisemitic. In their view, such categorization may lead to

— and in some cases has already led to — a chilling effect on legitimate critical discussion of the State of Israel and its policies.

Refusal to Address Antisemitism as a Form of Hatred with Unique Characteristics

One of the central challenges facing those engaged in combating antisemitism is the refusal of some opinion leaders and policymakers to treat it as a unique form of hatred carrying characteristics distinct from other forms of bigotry. As discussed above, this trend raises concerns about the conceptual blurring of anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Importantly, this tendency is evident not only on the fringes of society, but also within its political institutions.

A prominent example was the resolution passed by the U.S. Congress in 2019 following antisemitic remarks by Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, who accused American Jews of dual loyalty (to both Israel and the United States). Rather than addressing antisemitism directly and specifically, Democratic members of Congress passed a resolution expressing opposition to "bigotry, discrimination, oppression, racism, and insinuations of dual loyalty," defining these phenomena collectively as "threats to American democracy."

The closing of ranks behind Omar was not an isolated incident. It hints at a larger problem: the perception of antisemitism as just another non-unique form of hatred directed at minorities. In this view, the Jewish minority is seen as merely one minority group among many, alongside a broader need for political correctness and social justice that creates balance among all forms of hatred. This persists despite the fact that Jews are consistently the minority targeted by the vast majority of religiously motivated hate crimes across many U.S. states. In 2024, for instance, 69% of the religio-motivated hate crimes were committed against Jews — a minority that accounts for only around 2% of the population in the country.

Against this backdrop, the weakness of the congressional resolution becomes evident. This generalized resolution, effectively a declaration against "everything bad," fails to address antisemitism as a form of hatred with unique characteristics, thereby stripping it of its substance. As a result, what could have become an opportunity to confront a significant and growing social problem turned into a generalized condemnation lacking any concrete action.

Congresswoman Omar provided another example of the inherent tension between antisemitism and Islamophobia. In 2021, she compared the actions of Israel and the United States to those of Hamas and the Taliban. In the eyes of her critics, her remarks were perceived as a problematic blurring of the lines between democratic states and terrorist organizations, whereas her supporters, led by members of "The Squad" (a political grouping of progressive members of Congress), framed the criticism against her as tainted by Islamophobia. This case illustrated how the tension between antisemitism and Islamophobia creates an inherent misalignment: a statement perceived by some as antisemitic can trigger criticism that others perceive as Islamophobic — a claim rejected by those accusing the congresswoman of antisemitism. This misalignment complicates efforts to reach a consensus regarding the basic definitions of both forms of hatred and, by extension, makes it more difficult to advance joint legislation addressing both phenomena within a single framework.

Another example of the inability of states to treat antisemitism as a unique issue was evident in the Australian government's approach to antisemitism within its borders. Only in mid-2024, following

numerous antisemitic attacks that included vandalism and damage to Jewish property and public buildings, did the Australian government decide to appoint a special envoy to combat antisemitism. The appointment of this envoy was made contingent upon the concurrent appointment of a special envoy to combat Islamophobia, despite the fact that the move was prompted by antisemitic, rather than Islamophobic, attacks.

The Australian government continued to link the two forms of hatred later on, when the envoy, Jillian Segal, submitted a comprehensive plan to combat antisemitism. According to an essay she published as part of a Tel Aviv University report, the government that had appointed her to prepare a report on antisemitism in the country refused to accept its recommendations until a parallel report on combating Islamophobia was also prepared, despite the fact that antisemitic attacks continued to occur in the country throughout that period. Only after the terrorist attack at Bondi Beach in Sydney in December 2025, in which fifteen Jews were murdered, did the government hasten to accept the report's recommendations.

It is understandable why states seek to link different forms of hatred and address them in a similar manner, but the Australian case demonstrates that there are instances in which the linking of the two phenomena and the struggles against them severely harms the ability to fight antisemitism — a phenomenon that stands on its own and is not necessarily dependent on struggles against other forms of hatred.

In this context, a study by Brandeis University is particularly helpful in understanding the similarities and differences between antisemitism and other forms of hatred. The researchers surveyed students from diverse backgrounds regarding their perception of their environment and found that at least one-third of Jewish, Black, Asian, and Muslim students had experienced expressions of hatred at their educational institutions. Jewish and Muslim students experience their campuses as hostile to the groups to which they belong at very similar rates (37% and 34%, respectively). By contrast, while hostility toward minorities generally characterized students on the political right, antisemitism was not associated with any particular political or ethnic group, although it was somewhat more prevalent among Black and Muslim students. From this, it may be concluded that, while the experiences of Jews and Muslims are similar and should perhaps be addressed in similar ways, the roots of the hatred and those who spread it are not necessarily similar (at least within this age group). Therefore, the root causes of each type of hatred must be addressed through a distinct approach.

Advantages of Linking the Struggles Against Different Forms of Hatred

Despite all of the above, and in line with the similarities between the two forms of hatred that emerged from the Brandeis University study, there are also advantages to linking different forms of hatred together. First, connecting the two forms of hatred increases the likelihood that decision-makers and the public will devote attention to them and demand that their governments address these challenges. Framing the issue as a broader war against hatred, rather than exclusively a war against antisemitism, has the potential to attract wider audiences. These demographics may not necessarily be troubled by rising antisemitism in their countries, but they are certainly concerned with the surge in expressions of hatred and the erosion of social cohesion. This approach also makes sense because, in many cases, it is the same perpetrators — racists and white nationalists — who disseminate both antisemitism and Islamophobia using identical methods.

Of course, this approach does not guarantee that the two forms of hatred will be treated equally. For example, the British government's policy paper from April 2026 adopted the framing of combating hatred and strengthening social cohesion. While separate chapters in this policy paper are dedicated to both forms of hatred, the recommendations regarding antisemitism amount to little more than continued monitoring and referrals to previous committees. Conversely, the United Kingdom commits to allocating significant financial resources and assets to the fight against Islamophobia.

This discrepancy may stem from the fact that Islamophobia is viewed as a "newer" form of hatred in the West compared to antisemitism, meaning structured mechanisms to combat it have yet to be established. In any event, the British document fails to consider that existing mechanisms against antisemitism, insofar as such mechanisms exist, are not functioning properly. This comes against the backdrop of the centrality and intensification of antisemitism, including attacks carried out against Jews in recent months. The distinct differences in this approach toward the two forms of hatred risk turning antisemitism into an accepted, unavoidable reality, while Islamophobia is perceived as a social ill that must be confronted with greater determination. This issue further highlights the critical need to emphasize the uniqueness of antisemitism, even when it is examined alongside other forms of hatred.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In the current post-October 7 reality, creating a linkage between the two phenomena — antisemitism and Islamophobia — as well as between antisemitism and other forms of hatred and extremism, offers distinct advantages. At the same time, it risks producing "social justice" equations that blur their unique characteristics, enabling interested actors to exploit them as a tool to neutralize the struggles against each form of hatred.

Anchoring the fight against antisemitism within a broad, universal framework of combating hatred that is not focused solely on Jews carries greater potential for impact. This is particularly true given that many Western nations have been working diligently in recent years on strategies to combat extremism, a dangerous phenomenon that can lead to both antisemitism and Islamophobia alike. On the other hand, the highly volatile political tension between Muslim and Jewish communities following October 7, the polarization of public discourse, and the normalization of anti-Zionist rhetoric make cooperation and joint legislation on the two phenomena more difficult. This is because they create interpretive gaps and erode trust.

This situation presents a complex challenge for society and policymakers: while it is an alliance with positive potential, the politicization of Islamophobia complicates its practical implementation and may even strengthen anti-Israel discourse. This is further compounded by the background of some of those who promote the definition of Islamophobia and the fight against it. Over the years, some of these actors have been motivated by anti-Israel stances and used the discourse surrounding Islamophobia as a rhetorical tool to deflect criticism. In academic and public spheres, for example, the struggle against Islamophobia is occasionally linked to support for organizations such as the BDS movement, whereby criticism of anti-Israel positions is framed as an attempt at silencing with an Islamophobic dimension.

In light of the above, global policymakers and states must adopt a balanced policy that combines collaboration with conceptual distinction. Inter-communal coalitions to combat hate crimes should be encouraged, and civil defense mechanisms should be strengthened. This should build upon existing initiatives that already bring together clergy, social activists, and community leaders around the

struggle against hatred. Western countries should assist in expanding and empowering these collaborations in order to develop ways of coping with and reducing tensions among their populations, including through interfaith and intercommunal dialogue frameworks. Such coalitions could jointly approach policymakers and demand that they address this critical issue, which is more likely to receive greater attention once decision-makers recognize that it affects many different groups.

Alongside these collaborations, a clearer distinction between antisemitism and Islamophobia should be maintained, and their incorporation into a single legislative framework, which may blur boundaries and harm the effectiveness of the response, should be avoided. Within this context, more precise criteria should be developed to distinguish between legitimate political criticism and incitement, while minimizing the political exploitation of these terms. This includes avoiding the use of the terms "antisemitism" and "Islamophobia" in response to every criticism directed at Israel or Muslims, respectively.

Efforts should be made toward adopting clear definitions of antisemitism and Islamophobia that would be accepted by major international bodies and become binding for as many countries and organizations as possible. For example, adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition as binding within the European Union would help address rising antisemitism across European countries, enabling all of them to operate according to the same standards and enforcement guidelines.

At the same time, dedicated tools should be developed for each phenomenon according to specific characteristics, while integrating educational, civic, and security-related measures. This is necessary in order to prevent the problem, mitigate it, and improve the capacity to cope with it. Pedagogical measures, including education about Holocaust remembrance and tolerance toward immigrants, may help prevent some expressions of hatred. Civic measures, such as interfaith encounters and cross-community initiatives, may support necessary de-radicalization efforts. Security measures, including patrols and protection for houses of worship, may assist in responding to manifestations of hatred when they occur. This approach, which combines collaborative action with a well-founded distinction, may strengthen the resilience of democratic societies and improve the ability of authorities in Western countries to deal effectively with complex forms of hatred.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurz, Rinat Harash, Eldad Shavit and Keri Rosenbluh