# Counter-Islamophobia Kit

**Key National Messages – France (English)**

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Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States.

**CIK Project (Counter Islamophobia Kit)**

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Key National Messages - France

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Counter-Islamophobia Kit

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Centre for Ethnicity & Racism Studies

## About the CIK Project

The *Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States* (Counter Islamophobia Kit, CIK) project addresses the need for a deeper understanding and awareness of the range and operation of counter-narratives to anti-Muslim hatred across the EU, and the extent to which these counter-narratives impact and engage with those hostile narratives. It is led by Professor Ian Law and a research team based at the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK. This international project also includes research teams from the Islamic Human Rights Commission, based in London, and universities in Leeds, Athens, Liège, Budapest, Prague and Lisbon/Coimbra. This project runs from January 2017 - December 2018.

## About the Paper

This paper is an output from the third workstream of the project which was centred on describe the key national messages pertaining to Islamophobia and countering-Islamophobia in each context considered in the framework of this project: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and United Kingdom. The key national messages, findings and toolkit, the Counter-Islamophobia Kit (CIK) will be disseminated to policy makers, professionals and practitioners both across the EU and to member/regional audiences using a range of mediums and activities.

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**Executive summary**

Several reports have confirmed the proliferation of anti-Muslim narratives across European countries[1]. These narratives, based on anti-Muslim prejudice rooted in colonialism and racist and far-right ideologies, lead to exclusion, discrimination and Islamophobic incidents against individuals and places of worship. Research[2] shows that 'otherisation' of Muslims by politicians and mainstream media affects the mentality of the general population and makes Muslims more prone to physical and verbal attacks and Islamophobia. In this regard, France is no exception. Despite the decline in anti-Muslim acts observed in 2016, the figures confirm an overall upward trend observed since 2011[3]. We recommend the following steps be taken by authorities to counter anti-Muslim narratives effectively:

**1. Dissociate Islam from terrorism in the political discourse.** The criminalising discourse associating Muslims with a range of threats generates social exclusion and misperceptions and was pointed at as the primary cause of Islamophobia[4]. It is necessary to engage Muslim communities in inclusive dialogue and consultative decision-making in order to build trust and social cohesion and move away from security-centred policy approach to issues related to Islam and Muslims.

**2. Encourage media to adopt a more nuanced approach to Islam-related issues to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes.** Media portray Muslims as a homogenous group whose religious and cultural traditions compromise *laïcité* and republican values. There is a need to move beyond the cliché about incompatibility of Islam and democracy and increase intercultural awareness by engaging in a fact-based public debate on Islam. Positive visibility is key to reinforcing acceptance of Muslims and eventually normalisation of their presence in all spheres of public life.

**3. Increase social involvement of Muslim women and ensure they have a stronger voice in public debates and in the development of policies affecting their life.** Muslim women, treated as objects rather than agents, are frequently misrepresented in the media and their opinion ignored. Create new opportunities for the civic and political engagement of Muslim women highlighting their diversity and increase their participation when conducting discussions on all topics, not only those related to Islam and religious practices.

**4. Ensure that public debate on integration does not cast Islamic religious practices as an obstacle, thereby throwing backing responsibility for integration on Muslims.** Their sense of belonging and loyalty are constantly questioned whenever they identify as believers. As a result these populations are increasingly perceived as illegitimate and not fully French. It is necessary to reframe the debate on *laïcité* and national identity by emphasizing shared values and framing religious and ethnic diversity as enriching the social and cultural fabric.

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[1] See FRA. EU Fundamental Rights Agency. 2016. *Fundamental Rights Report 2016*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union ; Europol. 2015. *European Union terrorism situation and trend report 2015*. [Online]. [Accessed on 23 March 2017]. Available from: https://www.europol.europa.eu/

[2] Ameli, S. R., Merali, A. and Shahghasemi, E. 2012. *France and the Hated Society*. Wembley: Islamic Human Rights Commission.

[3] Anti-Muslim incidents increased by 30% in 2011, by 28% in 2012, by 11.3% in 2013, decreased by 41% in 2014 and a phenomenal increase of 223% was registered in 2015. CNCDH. Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme. 2016. *Le rapport sur la lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie.* [Online]. [Accessed on 23 March 2017]. Available from: http://www.cncdh.fr/

[4] CCIF. Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France. 2014. *Rapport Annuel*. [Online]. [Accessed on 15 March 2017]. Available from: http://www.islamophobie.net/

**5. Acknowledge discrimination against Muslims and develop policies reflecting a commitment to equality that will enable Muslim populations to realise their full potential.** It is essential to continue the reform of the anti-discrimination framework so as to close gaps in the level of protection afforded to Muslim populations, especially in access to employment. This effort should be accompanied by continued awareness-raising work and training of concerned professionals, as well as of local and regional authorities.

**Key message 1: Dissociate Islam from terrorism in the political discourse.**

The security-based approach to Islam introduced post-9/11 continues to dominate the government's relations with Muslims in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that hit France in 2015. The domestic and foreign terrorist threat France currently faces led the French authorities to strengthen immigration controls and reinforce domestic security legislation. Although national leaders warned against conflating mainstream Islam with terrorism, administrative measures and provisions introduced to counter this threat specifically target the country's Muslim populations.

Using their extended powers under the state of emergency – in force between November 2015 and October 2017 when the new counter-terrorism legislation came to replace it – the law enforcement officials raided thousands of Muslim homes, put hundreds of suspects under house arrest and ordered closing of a dozen of mosques[5]. Though the Minister of the Interior claimed 32 terrorist plots were disrupted in the same period, in most cases these actions did not lead to terrorism charges. The new law on domestic security[6] shifted the prerogatives away from the judiciary into the hands of the administrative authorities – prefects, thereby making these contested emergency powers permanent and free from adequate judicial oversight.

For numerous human rights groups broad surveillance and exceptional policing powers represent serious violations of individual rights and the rule of law, without averting and curbing the terrorist threat. The recent use of these measures against demonstrators and activists unrelated to terrorism raises even more doubts about their purpose. These policies also negatively affect public opinion on Muslims since they act as a vehicle for narratives of hatred. Terrorism is increasingly used to justify anti-Muslim prejudice.

Discursive association of Islam and terrorism fuels the idea that Muslims challenge domestic security and represent a potential terrorism threat. The logic, which considers that French Muslims are answerable for the acts of other Muslims, including those abroad, makes the whole Muslim population guilty by association. Compelling Muslims to publicly condemn terrorism and distance themselves from extremist ideology after each new terrorist attack even reinforces this thinking.

In the current context when the populations who feel targeted by the counter-terrorist measures need to be reassured it is advisable to deploy strong and inclusive political narratives and avoid inflammatory language which pits communities against each other. Political discourses should therefore clearly distinguish between Islam and Islamism and avoid linking domestic Islam-related issues with international politics. The fact that Muslims are not a monolith but an ethnically and religiously diverse population should be reflected not only in the political rhetoric but also on the policy level.

Moreover, setting up an advisory body composed of experts and representatives of the civil society to monitor the good application of the counter-terrorist legislation should be encouraged. Radicalisation and terrorist recruitment cannot be addressed through repressive measures alone – they have to be deployed in parallel with prevention. The government should therefore move away from the securitisation of Islam and focus on policies that have a long-term impact on Muslim populations, especially the youth, and facilitate their access to education, training and job market. Priority should be given to those initiatives and educational tools that promote public

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[5] Vie Publique. 2017. De l'état d'urgence à la loi renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme. [Online]. [Accessed on 15 March 2018]. Available from: http://www.vie-publique.fr/
[6] The law on the reinforcement of national security and of the fight against terrorism (N. 2017-1510) was enacted on 30 October 2017.

knowledge of Islam and challenge its framing as a religion of violence. Community dialogue spaces and programmes should be set up to engage Muslim youth outside of a strictly security framework and build their resilience against violent extremism.

**Key message 2: Encourage media to adopt a more nuanced approach to Islam-related issues to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes.**

Negative representations associating Islam almost exclusively with terrorism, religious proselytism and community withdrawal have dominated the mainstream media for the last 25 years[7]. The public and media image of French Muslims was shaped both by significant national events and global conflicts and crises such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks. From that point onwards Islam-related issues were increasingly treated as cultural incompatibilities.

It is not uncommon for news stories to assert that Islamic traditions oppose women's rights, freedom of expression and democracy. To avoid negatively influencing the public opinion, media professionals should be encouraged to deal with sensitive topics responsibly and to provide a more balanced coverage of Islam-related issues. Holding media that spread anti-Muslim narratives accountable can help maintain the ethical standards of news reporting. Given the capacity of the media to influence perceptions and narratives, their role in reinforcing the cohesion of the social fabric should be upheld.

"Split loyalties" of French Muslims came to the forefront of media and political narrative with the emergence of Daesh and a new threat of terrorism. Muslims are once again represented as a seemingly dangerous out-group and treated with suspicion. Biased reporting promoting the idea that Muslims are disloyal citizens who try to subvert the national unity and the secular republican ideal reinforces the sense of insecurity. Such fears seem to flourish in the context of distrust in political elites and democratic structures and involve excessive coverage of mundane facts and false smears. We have recently witnessed an outbreak of fake scandals involving burkini-clad women, rumours of cafés occupied by Muslims and forbidden to women and anecdotal evidence about migrants sexually harassing women in Paris neighbourhood of La Chapelle-Pajol[8]. Publishing and relaying sensational and misleading information that vilify Muslims encourage anti-Muslim sentiment and marginalisation of Muslim communities.

Similarly, policy-makers should refrain from opposing "moderate" Muslims – integrated and respectful of French values and "fundamentalists" since it contributes to their essentialisation and reinforces the divide between Muslims and the majority population. It is of equal importance to cut through the rhetoric that casts Muslims as a challenge to the "French way of life and culture" and build the political narrative around shared values thereby creating connections between communities. Alternative narratives about "national identity" recognising the contribution immigration made to the social and economic development of the country are likely to produce a positive impact on social cohesion. Significant change in this aspect could be achieved also through improving intercultural awareness and interfaith dialogue.

Perpetuating negative stereotypes of Muslims by politicians across the political spectrum consolidates the theoretical and ideological basis for justification of Islamophobia. To break the dominant narrative on Islam as a cultural threat it is necessary to provide a platform for experts who are capable of dismantling the intellectual and political discourse that deflects anxiety-provoking news on terrorism or economic crisis for political purposes.

Since mainstream media notoriously lack interest in minority issues, active backing should be given to those initiatives and platforms that promote the media representation of people from

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[7] Boniface, P. 2015. Le grand repli – 3 questions à Nicolas Bancel et Pascal Blanchard. *Mediapart*, 23 September. [Online]. [Accessed on 15 March 2017]. Available from: https://blogs.mediapart.fr/pascalboniface/blog/
[8] See De Cock, L. & Meyran, R. eds. 2017. *Paniques identitaires. Identité(s) et idéologie(s) au prisme des sciences sociales.* Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Le Croquant.

diverse backgrounds by seeking input from experts from minorities, including Muslims. Muslims, however, should not be solicited only as experts on Islamic issues, their know-how in other domains should be highlighted.

**Key message 3: Increase social involvement of Muslim women and ensure they have a stronger voice in public debates and in the development of policies affecting their life.**

The public discourse on Muslim women is heavily influenced by imbalanced reporting that produces distorted images. Framing Muslim women as a homogenised group participates in the construction of a hegemonic discourse pointing to their systematic oppression. It is necessary to address biased representation of Muslim women by calling upon the media to strive for neutrality and accuracy in their reporting and avoid misleading simplifications and generalisations. Other effective measures include working with journalists to raise their awareness of prejudice and its impact on Muslim women.

The media also seem to prefer giving the floor to the so-called experts who speak on behalf of Muslim women rather than letting them speak for themselves. Muslim women frequently denounce the absence of their voices in the media and the confiscation of their narratives by external observers and critics. It seems essential to address the lack of appropriate representation of Muslim women in the media and the public sphere by initiating corrective measures that would help them gain in visibility. It should therefore be ensured that the presence of Muslim women in news production and their participation in public debates, especially on issues relevant to them, is increased.

Public opinion usually perceives *hijab* as a symbol of sexism, bigotry and backwardness and the fact that reasons for wearing a headscarf are multiple is being conveniently overlooked. Instead, women wearing a headscarf are portrayed as lacking agency. They are framed as victims of sexism and male oppression coerced into covering and if they claim they wear the headscarf of their own free will it is put down to their desire to Islamise the society from the bottom up. Such stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women are also stigmatising for Muslim men who are in return accused of hindering their emancipation.

Coercive measures and laws that limit their access to labour market, to leisure facilities, housing, and health care that are presented as an integration solution only seem to aggravate the economic and social isolation of Muslim women. Therefore, measures should be taken to enhance their social participation and their empowerment to become active agents in shaping their lives. Projects and schemes striving to increase the integration of Muslim women into the workforce and develop their economic potential should also be encouraged. Accepting Muslim women as professionals who contribute economically to the society and judging them according to their performance and not their affiliation to a religious community can enhance their self-fulfilment and self-esteem and correct misperceptions according to which they are domestic and family-oriented. Local initiatives offering community-specific solutions towards social inclusion of Muslim women should be supported.

While Muslim women, especially if they wear a headscarf, bear the brunt of Islamophobia[9], protection of women's rights is often used as a justification of anti-Muslim narratives which frame Muslim women as oppressed by the so-called Islamic traditions. It should be reminded that patriarchy is structural to our society and is not specific to Islam. Policy-makers need to emphasise that all women should be able to enjoy their rights including those wearing the *hijab*. In order to break down negative stereotyping of Muslim women, measures should be adopted to facilitate their interaction with larger public. Actions by local governmental and non-governmental actors

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[9] ENAR. 2009. *Forgotten Women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women*. [Online]. [Accessed on 20 March 2018]. Available from: http://www.enar-eu.org/ ; CCIF. Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France. 2016. *Rapport Annuel*. [Online]. [Accessed on 20 March 2018]. Available from: http://www.islamophobie.net/

can be particularly useful in increasing dialogue and bridging the gap between Muslim women and communities on the local level. Focus groups and other forms of community dialogue can provide a means of identifying and mediating the challenges that these women sustain. It is also important to embed the struggle against Islamophobia into the fight against sexism and discrimination against women.

**Key message 4: Ensure that public debate on integration does not cast Muslim religious practices as an obstacle, thereby throwing backing responsibility for integration on Muslims.**

Though the recently published FRA survey[10] indicates that the majority of European Muslims (76% of respondents) have strong attachments to their country of residence, they are often suspected of conflicting loyalties. Framing Islam as an "immigrant" religion that took root in France reinforces the perception of French Muslims as foreign elements.

As the pressure on Muslims to show no signs of foreign culture or religion and to proclaim their adherence to the republican values clearly and loudly has intensified after the recent terrorist attacks, misinterpretations of the legal framework in which *laïcité* is implemented continue to cause tensions. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders to ensure that the principle of *laïcité*, which represents the freedom of conscience and guarantees the free exercise of worship is respected and does not exclude Muslims. They should vocally oppose erroneous interpretations of *laïcité* and its use as an instrument of repression against Muslim populations. Effective initiatives such as dissemination of information for employers and formal training of civil servants on the legal framework of application of the principle of religious neutrality should be supported. It should be emphasised that narratives constantly opposing Islam and *laïcité* are damaging for social cohesion. Casting religiosity as a barrier to integration deepens rifts within the society instead of inducing a feeling of belonging.

Without downplaying the complexity of these issues, it is necessary to address the demands for equal treatment formulated by Muslim communities and grant them the same rights as to other religious groups. Their specific claims, affirmation of their religious identity in the public sphere or alerting about discriminatory practices should in no case serve to legitimise their stigmatisation or lead to accusations of being undeserving citizens. There is an urgent need to engage in a dispassionate public debate about the French citizenship model, secularisation and the French identity while ensuring it will not get sidetracked by electioneering or sectarian interests and arguments about the clash of civilisations and rampant Islamisation of France.

The governments both on the left and right have put in place policies to address integration, but failed to deliver fully on their promises to curb the marginalisation and discrimination of the youth of immigrant background. Living mostly in unemployment and poverty-stricken suburbs these segments of the French population have since the 1980s been represented as causing crime and insecurity in the country. Associating immigration, delinquency and insecurity in the political discourses fuels the idea that suburban youth, mostly of North African or African origin, is unassimilated and represents a potential threat to public order and national security. Political discourse on suburbs needs to be reframed and dissociated from negative stereotypes it is linked to. Discursive attacks on suburban youth which further stigmatise and marginalise them should be condemned.

It is also essential to look beyond the stereotypical ideas according to which Muslims are prone to communalism (*communautarisme*) – a tendency to put forward values associated to assigned cultural, religious and ethnic identities – and are unable or unwilling to assimilate into French culture. Questioning sense of belonging and loyalty of French Muslims based on the behaviour of a handful of individuals has damaging consequences for the whole community that is then forced to provide justifications and disprove the negative. The policy-makers should therefore avoid linking Islamic traditions and practices and assimilation problems in their discourse. Inclusive

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[10] FRA. EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2017. *EU-MIDIS II. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Muslims – Selected findings*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

policies based on inputs from Muslim communities, events facilitating interactions between Muslims and the majority population and raising awareness campaigns conveying the idea that Muslims play an active part in the society should be supported both on the local and national level.

**Key message 5: Acknowledge discrimination against Muslims and develop policies reflecting a commitment to equality that will enable Muslim populations to realise their full potential.**

Stereotypical portrayal of Muslims in media and political discourses reinforces prejudice and leads to stigmatisation and discriminatory behaviour. A number of reports confirm that Muslim populations face high level of discrimination in all spheres of public life[11] and their visibility plays an important role in their exposure to discrimination[12].

Trends and evolutions of anti-Muslim hatred in France are currently assessed based on the statistical data on crime collected by the Ministry of the Interior. The official data and the data compiled by independent NGOs such as the CCIF usually differ because of methodologies used[13]. To obtain reliable data allowing for tailored responses to discrimination against Muslims and Islamophobia, it is essential to improve both monitoring and reporting[14] of Islamophobic incidents. This entails establishing efficient monitoring mechanism and developing capacity of the law enforcement officials to accurately record such incidents. Raising awareness campaigns and outreach activities may be useful tools for encouraging victims to report them. Authorities should also clearly voice their condemnation of Islamophobia and step up efforts to ensure equal access to justice for victims of those acts. Although lacking conceptual clarity, the term "Islamophobia" is widely used by practitioners from the civil society and anti-discrimination agencies and Muslim populations themselves. Consenting to its use is a way of recognizing the scope and seriousness of this problem.

Experience of discrimination and harassment affects Muslims' social inclusion and trust in the country's legal system and police[15]. Policy-makers should encourage the creation of safe and accepting environments for Muslim populations and sustain the community-led initiatives that help Muslims build trust in the institutions and reduce the sense of alienation. The government should also ensure that experts from academia or civil society are systematically consulted on issues related to hate crimes, police violence and discrimination. Educational materials and training programmes on racial and religious prejudice should be developed as a means of preventing discrimination.

Several research studies[16] have confirmed that Muslim job applicants, both male and female, are subject to discrimination in access to employment. Bias and negative stereotypes seem to also have an impact on career choices of practicing Muslims who avoid applying for jobs in companies whose corporate culture does not seem to accept Muslim lifestyle. It is therefore necessary to promote good practices in implementing principles of equality in access to employment. Measures aimed at enhancing economic, social and political integration of those sections of Muslim populations facing the greatest difficulty could bridge the gap between communities.

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[11] FRA 2017, Op.cit.

[12] Simon, P. & Safi, M. 2013. Les discriminations ethniques et raciales dans l'enquête Trajectoires et Origines: représentations, expériences subjectives et situations vécues. *Economie et Statistique*, (464-466), pp. 245-275.

[13] While the government figures are based on the complaints filed by the victims, the CCIF records also acts of personal and institutional discrimination.

[14] According to the CCIF (2014, Op.cit.) only about 20% of acts of Islamophobia are reported.

[15] FRA 2017, Op.cit.

[16] Adida, C., Laitin, D. and Valfort, M.-A. 2010. Identifying barriers to Muslim integration in France. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. **107**(52), pp.22384-22390 ; Valfort, M.-A. 2015. *Discriminations religieuses à l'embauche: une réalité*. Paris: Institut Montaigne.

More needs to be done to build stronger connections between communities. This can be achieved by expanding positive narratives and developing strategies that will effectively promote the idea that Muslim communities contribute socially and culturally to the French society. It is also necessary to facilitate programmes and capacity-building initiatives that lead to empowerment and community growth.

About the research

Key national messages were produced as part of the *Countering Islamophobia Through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States* project led by University of Leeds and carried out in 8 countries (UK, Belgium, Portugal, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Greece, France and Germany). The aim of the project was to identify prevailing narratives and counter-narratives of Muslim hatred, analyse the ways in which the narratives and counter-narratives were constructed and deployed. Data gathered was used to identify trends in Muslim hatred and formulate recommendations on how to reduce such forms of discourse. The research reports – one on hate narratives, the other on counter-narratives produced for each participating country – draw upon data collected in each country and provide the basis for a country-specific toolkit of best practice in the use of counter-narratives to Muslim hatred.

The Workstream 1 report *Dominant Islamophobic Narratives – France* attempts to categorise prevailing narratives of Muslim hatred within the French context and to identify their key elements and interlocking contextual environments employing the *Domination Hate Model of Intercultural Relations*[17]. The report builds a detailed picture of the development of anti-Muslim hatred through history, highlighting the most significant events from the colonial period until the recent past. In order to give a more comprehensive overview of the evolution of the term Islamophobia, a review of academic research and grey literature dealing with the phenomenon, giving particular attention to civil society reports and working papers, was included. The report further retraces the ways Muslims and Islam are framed in the political and media discourses and assesses impact and influence of these hate narratives on public opinion. Acts of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims in everyday life and barriers they face in access to education, employment and public and private services were also explored. On the basis of findings of the report and following Sayyid's performative approach to Islamophobia[18], we attempted to rank the dominant anti-Muslim narratives in order of frequency and impact on the Muslim communities.

The Workstream 2 report *Dominant Counter-narratives to Muslim Hatred* provides analysis of the responses to anti-Muslim narratives in the context of France and constitutes the second part of the research outputs on hate narratives. The report analyses the counter-narratives to Muslim hatred and provides an insight into their formation against the backdrop of mobilisation of Muslim communities and their allies in key moments in history. Data presented in this report was collected via semi-directive interviews of policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, journalists, activists and representatives of civil society and grassroots organisations active in the field of fighting anti-Muslim prejudice and Islamophobia. In addition, a review of academic literature, online and paper media outlets, social networks, blogs and websites was completed. Analysing data from a wide range of sources allowed us to identify the most prevalent counter-narratives and assess their form, deployment and modus operandi in different discursive environments. Best practices in challenging Muslim hatred were organised in clusters according to the type of hate narratives they tackled. The findings serve to highlight the impact of identified counter-narratives on public opinion and specific audiences including media professionals and local policy-makers.

All research outputs are available online and can be accessed through the Publications section of the project's website (https://cik.leeds.ac.uk).

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[17] See http://www.ihrc.org.uk/activities/projects/11319-the-hate-crime-project-muslim-experiences
[18] Sayyid, S. 2014. A measure of Islamophobia. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. **2**(1), pp.10-25.