

## The discreet charm of Islamophobia (in the Greek Media)

By Elvira Krithari

A few years ago at the University of Athens, while a guest speaker was lecturing about an innovative way of digital interaction between citizens and the municipal authorities, somebody asked him how the local government would respond to individual electronic notices about the care of stray animals. The guest replied: "We do not have strays in our municipality. Immigrants eat those."

The "news" of [immigrants supposedly] eating pets is not new and can occasionally be found, with slight variations, in media outlets worldwide. They are often accompanied by photographs of dead dogs in an unknown context and serve as a telling depiction of what supposedly awaits the western reader from a vague yet looming cultural deterioration.

Karpos, a Greece-based team that gathers competencies and ideas in the field of Media and Education, found recently, among others, a news story of similar content in its monthly report which examines the presence of hate speech that targets religious groups in the Greek media. The finding of their report -part of the "[GetTheTrollsOut](#)" project led by the [Media Diversity Institute](#)- was an article found on a [sports website](#) under the headline: "They ate a dog: Muslims have the right to, based on their law."

The headline seems promising. It makes the reader assume that someone has actually eaten a dog and that by the end of the story all the details will be known. In fact, no one that at least the writer knew about, had done so. But the chosen wording implying that there has been a specific case of dog meat consumption is not accidental. The reader (deceptively) learns early from the headline that Muslims (in general) have a religious permission to consume dog meat and this is enough to cultivate the disgust of the reader unfamiliar with the subject.

The recently published Greek article is a fragmentary reproduction of an older one, [appeared for the first time in 2018](#) at an English-speaking Egyptian news website where both the content and context were very different. It could pass as just another case among the massive copy-paste practices of Greek digital media, however both the phrasing on the headline and the fragmentary (and therefore distorted) content, as well as the choice of republishing a two-year-old "news story", indicates the constant existence of a certain kind of phobia. It is also indicating the existence of an audience willing to consume something far worse than eating its own pets: the disparaging and erroneous narratives about the "other" and in this case the Muslim other.

### Obvious and hidden islamophobia

"There is a distinction between what we call mainstream media that usually maintain more of an impartial position, and the typical far-right media. In the latter, Islamophobia is particularly evident," says Alexandros Sakellariou, PhD in Sociology of Religion, lecturer at the Hellenic Open University and researcher at Panteion University, as well as one of the two authors, along with Professor Ali Huseyinoglu, of a [report on Islamophobia](#) in Greece (2019), published in June by SETA.

Given that some sort of Islamophobic content can be found in almost every news outlet, except from probably those of a progressive agenda, in order to assess the role of media in the spread of islamophobic ideas in society, one should first examine their impact.

The established, mainstream Greek media do not often host religiously offensive content, but this is not always the case. When they occasionally publish something that has Islamophobic elements it is likely to reach a wider audience and be more impactful as the reader would expect it to be valid. In contrast, the far-right, intolerant and conspiracy-friendly press, though less popular, does not hesitate to publish content that may even incite violence. "We will not see headlines of this type in *Kathimerini*, (e.n. a traditionally conservative Greek mainstream newspaper of high circulation) although in the past there have been such cases in newspapers that were not considered extreme. For example, the now-shut down (Greek daily) *Freedom of the Press* once put on page one a story about the construction of a mosque in Athens with the image of a gunman, possibly an al-Qaeda member, or with a scene from gunfire in the Middle East, pictures that clearly conveyed the message that the Muslims wandering among us were nothing but jihadists. I have not noticed anything similar lately, which I believe is connected with the reduction of terrorist attacks and the elimination of the Islamic State (ISIS), since what is happening at the international level is also affecting us," Sakellariou notes.

Although, far-right media play a significant role in the spread of Islamophobic propaganda, societal ramifications are greater when it comes to media with greater reach. "I think that a lot of damage has been done by the mainstream media and by articles that do not make big headlines. Or from what is shown on TV, which mostly is images of violence. So long as different opinions are not equally showcased, the message will always be 'this is how Muslims are, there's nothing we can do'. During the Islamic State's most active period this message was very strong in the evening news. I met people in the Greek countryside, who had extreme views on Muslims without supporting the extreme right. Their views were shaped exclusively by these Media outlets, without ever having met a Muslim. This stereotypical approach had a profound effect on society, even when the journalist didn't openly take a negative stance on Islam. When the news show violence, without anything being explained or put into context, the message conveyed by the image is very strong," he says. According to the researcher, the situation was different in the years prior to the crisis. Until 2010 there were many reports, articles and TV shows, trying to approach the notion of the "other". "Today, a different (more balanced) approach on Islam or Muslims tends to disappear from the media."

In the media narratives, Islam seems to be associated mainly with beheadings, a suppressed way of living, brutality and generally violence. The latter is considered to be an inherent characteristic of Islam. The positive image of the peaceful Islam supporters is rare in the media. "This is very important", Sakellariou concludes. "Not only what you show but also what you choose not to show".

### **Experts on stereotyping**

Islam-related articles in the mainstream media usually come from journalists, public figures, and politicians driven only by an ideological need to criticize it, without having a scientific background relevant to this religion. In other words, they are not scholars or real experts of Islam but rather phobic observers. Thus, prejudice is left to prevail. One would say that, after all, they only write op-eds not dissertations.

"We have to make a descriptive distinction of Islamophobia," Sakellariou says. "On one hand, we have what could be a direct Islamophobic view: that Muslims are inferior, are dangerous, and will cut off your head etc. But there also an indirect one, which I believe also

affects immigrants and has implications on both the reporting of Islamophobic cases, and the attacks against Muslims. What does not get clear often is that the motive for the attacks on immigrants is religious-driven. I believe that if all immigrants were Christians or Buddhists, there would not be the same (hostile) reaction by society. I think that the debate on migration hides islamophobia."

Of course, there are journalists who attempt to openly make this hidden connection described by the researcher. A [recent article](#) on a popular online outlet, in which each of the stereotypes of Muslims appears substantiated, states, among other things, that the mobility of Muslims, expressed by the recent migration flows, constitutes the cornerstone of Islam, since the believers follow the example of Muhammad and his early followers (...). The article writer says that Qur'an clearly speaks of this obligation of "moving for the purposes of Allah".

This anti-immigrant standpoint born out of Islamophobia is by no means new. It is one of the many expressions of the "great replacement", a conspiracy theory, according to which Muslims, instigated by a secret center of power, intend to conquer Europe by first "invading" it (migration flows are often used as evidence) -and then through childbearing and the imposition of Muslim lifestyles- in order to alter the cultural characteristics of the native population. The theory was formulated by the French Renault Camus in his book of the same name in 2011 and has since gained fans both online and offline, the most typical example being the terrorist Brenton Harrison Tarrant who killed 51 people and injured many others in a New Zealand's Mosque, in 2019.

Parts of the Qur'an are often used in this debate to contend with its critics, as in the aforementioned case. The various theories about Islam, its supposedly inherent violence and its destructive force against Western civilization, are afloat in abundance in the discourse of many conservatives and their audience.

However, "despite their negative views on Islam, when asked what they know about it, the answer is usually 'nothing', they often don't really know anything about it. The truth of the matter is that in every religious text one can find descriptions of violence - I would never claim that the Qur'an is the most peaceful text, but it was written at a specific time and may have different interpretations," says Sakellariou. "The same goes for the Bible".

### **Fighting Islamophobia**

Islamophobia in Greece seems to be closely associated with the Greek-Turkish relations. After the events of last February and March in Evros, there were hostile references to Islam in almost every Greek news outlet. As some of them violate and pose a threat to human rights, some organizations and [observatories](#) insist on monitoring them closely and referring cases with a criminal dimension to the competent authorities. The recent report on Islamophobia of Huseyinoglu and Sakellariou underlines the need for further monitoring and reporting of such incidents, which are rife with arbitrary, stereotypical depictions.

In every religious system interpretations are differentiated through centuries. They are changed and decomposed into conflicting parts, often influenced by the evolution of societies. As societies evolve, the religious discourse seems to wane. Even the habits emanating from religion dismiss their original meanings and remain only as mere expressions of an intergenerational intimacy.

If this argument is correct, then Islam, Christianity, Judaism are no longer treated or interpreted in the same way by their followers as they did in previous eras. In short, just because the Bible mentions horrible punishments for those who do not follow the strict divine laws this does not mean that faithful Christians adopt/accept such violence. The same is true of Muslims.

On the contrary, the "religion" of intolerance has a much more coherent basis and forces its adherents to adopt extreme standpoints. Often, it is not only the rational or equine fear of the "other" that initiates intolerance. But also the narcissistic obsession with the "western ego", the blind apotheosis of the self. Yet, this really is a deeply anti-social position that threatens the future of Western societies far more than any external influences, exactly because it erodes them from the inside.