Islamophobia and the New Britishness

How Brexit Revealed the Conservative Establishment's Intolerance

By Zaheer Kazmi, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, August 2, 2016

Xenophobia has long been an overt feature of right-wing nationalism in the United Kingdom; in recent years, Islamophobia, too, has come to play a central part in nationalist rhetoric. The debate that surrounded Brexit revealed that these twin hatreds have also become prominent props in mainstream political discourse. That does not bode well for the relationship between the United Kingdom’s government and its Muslim population.

Perhaps the most arresting signs of this shift came during the week before the referendum. On June 16, Jo Cox, a Labour MP, was shot and stabbed to death on a street in her Yorkshire constituency. Cox had been a prominent voice in Parliament calling for the government to welcome Syrian refugees into Britain, and had worked with a Muslim hate-crime monitoring group, Tell MAMA, to combat Islamophobia in the country. Her assailant, Thomas Mair, had had long-standing associations with neo-Nazi and white-supremacist groups. (Some bystanders reported that, as he attacked Cox, Mair shouted "Britain First"—the name of a far-right anti-Muslim group that has since denied having any connection with him.) The killing sparked an outpouring of grief, along with criticism of the way in which prominent Leavers, including Nigel Farage, then the head of the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), had fuelled anti-immigrant sentiments in the course of their efforts. Just a day before the assassination, for example, Farage launched a pro-Leave poster campaign that depicted a stream of refugees and migrants—people fleeing conflict and poverty—as a dehumanized swarm bearing down on the United Kingdom, under a headline reading "BREAKING POINT." The campaign caused widespread outrage for its similarities to Nazi-era anti-Semitic propaganda.

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In the weeks since the referendum, Britain’s minority communities have suffered from a surge in abuse stoked by the Leave campaign's divisive rhetoric. Between June 23 and June 26, for example, the British National Police Chiefs’ Council received 57 percent more reports of hate crimes than it did during the corresponding period in May, prompting David Cameron, then British prime minister, to condemn intolerance in a speech to Parliament on June 27. Alongside Poles, Jews and other minorities, British Muslims have borne the brunt of this kind of abuse. But it is EU migrants to the United Kingdom, most of whom are not Muslim, who stand to be the most affected by Brexit. So what explains the prominence of the anti-Muslim currents around the Brexit vote?

The answer lies in the mainstreaming of Islamophobia in British political discourse. The main contentions of the referendum involved apparently esoteric matters, such as the EU's
encroachments on the United Kingdom's sovereignty and the democratic deficits of EU institutions. Anti-Muslim sentiment, on the other hand, has increasingly been tied to everyday issues in British politics, particularly to terrorism and the question of social cohesion in a multicultural society. Under the banner of anti-immigration, British voters’ concerns about job creation, housing policy, and taxation have coalesced around an inchoate vision of Britishness that purports to back forms of tolerance and the rule of law but is also crudely patriotic. This has left many British Muslims feeling unfairly targeted.

By the time of the EU referendum, this worldview had already shaped Cameron’s domestic policies. As far back as February 2011, he blamed “the doctrine of state multiculturalism” and the lack of a more assertive national identity for the supposed failure of Muslims to embrace British values. Last year, his government passed the U.K. Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which, in related statutory guidance to the country’s public bodies, effectively equated extremism with opposing a hazily defined set of “fundamental British values.”

In fact, the architect of this mainstreamed nationalism was Michael Gove, the former Conservative justice secretary who led the official Leave campaign together with Boris Johnson and who made a failed bid to become prime minister soon after the vote. Ten years before the referendum, Gove published a book called Celsius 7/7, an alarmist and polemical critique of Islamism in which he drew parallels between that movement and Nazism and warned of the perils of Western appeasement. And in 2014, as the United Kingdom’s education secretary, he played a leading role in the so-called Trojan horse inquiry, which addressed allegations that school governors and teachers had conspired to “Islamize” a number of state schools in Birmingham. Gove controversially appointed Peter Clarke, the former head of counterterrorism in London’s Metropolitan Police, to lead the Department for Education’s investigation, which found some evidence of the promotion of intolerant forms of Islam but neither addressed nor found any evidence of radicalization or violent extremism. (In the midst of the affair, Gove called for the promotion of “British values” in the country’s schools.)

Cameron, for his part, endorsed Zac Goldsmith, a euroskeptic Conservative who ran in this year's London mayoral election and attempted to taint his opponent Sadiq Khan by pointing to his alleged associations with Islamist extremism. And as home secretary, Theresa May, who succeeded Cameron as prime minister and leader of the Conservatives in July, joined in a chorus of Tory disapproval implying that Khan’s alleged connections to extremists made him unfit to be mayor. (Some senior Conservatives, including former party co-chair Sayeeda Warsi, criticized Goldsmith for his use of this dog whistle; after Khan's victory, British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon publicly apologized to a British imam whom he had accused of supporting both Khan and the Islamic State, or ISIS.)

In this context, it should be no surprise that the question of Turkey's potential EU membership loomed so large in the Brexit debate. For centuries, the Turk has symbolized Europe’s foreign "other"—and leading figures on both sides of the Brexit debate played on the British public’s fear that Turkey would join the union and send millions of Muslim migrants into their country. Farage and Johnson, for example, argued that such a scenario could materialize soon after a potential Remain vote. The pressure led Cameron, whose government had supported Ankara's accession to the EU, to reverse course: in May, he claimed that Turkey would likely not join the
bloc "until the year 3000," a volte face that a senior Turkish official later told the BBC had left his country "flabbergasted." In a curious turn, pro-Leave campaigners had turned on its head a criticism regularly leveled at the United Kingdom by its EU allies: now, it was not London that had a pernicious influence on Europe thanks to the alleged free rein it gives to jihadists, but Europe that threatened Britain, thanks to its potential opening to Turkey. (Despite Turkey’s anathematization as a Muslim bogeyman, there is some truth to the claims that it has contributed to the problem of Islamist terrorism: Ankara has policed its porous border with Syria weakly and has maintained ambiguous relations with the jihadist groups fighting there.)

In short, the Conservative establishment's attempts to revive Britishness went hand in hand with the normalization of xenophobia in British political discourse. By the time of the referendum, the "Muslim question" had become the elephant in the room—or in the voting booth. This is not to say that most Leave voters sought to push Muslims out of the United Kingdom or to stop them from entering it. It is rather to acknowledge that, in recent years, British politicians have tied fears of foreign infiltration of the body politic and of Islam more generally to their country’s most contentious political issues: security and social cohesion. In the coming months, the precarious relationship between the United Kingdom's government and its Muslim population may worsen, particularly if May’s government moves rightward.

As the United States has found, neither low Muslim immigration rates nor distance from the Muslim world can guarantee freedom from domestic terrorism. Only just and equitable partnerships with Muslims, at home and abroad, can do that.