Derleme

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AN EFFECTIVE STRUGGLE AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA: A SERIES OF SUGGESTIONS

Fuat USTAKARA[*]

Abstract

Islam, as a term, means submission to Allah and refers to concepts of "peace and well-being". However, the unrealistic anti-Islam policy that has been adopted since the September 11 attacks especially, led to claims about Islam's connection with terrorism. This discriminatory trend of hate speech is called Islamophobia. Besides, the Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis is a fact to mention when it comes to Islamophobia's developmental process. In a struggle against Islamophobia, the Islamic world should utilize public relations strategies under the guidance of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. In this regard, this study offers suggestions regarding what practices should be employed in terms of strategic public relations in the prevention of Islamophobia. This study emphasizes the need to take the two-way asymmetric model of public relations into account for practices, so that perceptions and attitudes of Islamophobic people can be affected.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis, Strategic Public Relations, Organization of Islamic Cooperation

İSLAMOFOBİYLE ETKİN MÜCADELEDE STRATEJİK HALKLA İLİŞKİLERİN ÖNEMİ: BİR ÖNERİLER DİZGESİ

Özet

İslam, Allah'a teslimiyet anlamına gelmekte ve "barış, esenlik" anlamlarına karşılık gelmektedir. Ancak özellikle 11 Eylül sonrası İslam'a karşı yürütülen gerçek dışı politikalarla birlikte İslam dini terör ile bağlantılı gösterilmeye başlanmıştır. Bu ayrımcılık gözeten nefret söylemlerine dayalı yönelime İslamofobi adı verilmektedir. İslamofobinin gelişiminde Medeniyetler Çatışması Tezinin rolünün altını çizmek gerekir. İslamofobiyle mücadelede, İslam dünyası İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatının öncülüğünde halkla ilişkilerden yararlanmalıdır. Bu çalışma, İslamofobiyi önlemeye yönelik stratejik halkla ilişkiler kapsamında neler yapılabileceği konusunda öneriler getirmektedir. İslamofobi yönelimli insanların algı ve tutumlarında değişiklik yapmak için iki yönlü asimetrik halkla ilişkiler modeli doğrultusunda çalışmaların yapılması gerektiği vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslamofobi, Medeniyetler Çatışması Tezi, Stratejik Halkla İlişkiler, İslam İşbirliği Teşkilatı

[*] Doç. Dr., Gaziantep Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi
ORCID No: 0000-0001-2345-6789

INTRODUCTION

As a growing challenge, which we have been intensively exposed to through word-of-mouth especially since the early 2000s, Islamophobia has turned into a threatening problem for the whole globe. In fact, as suggested by Esposito and Kalın (2018: 18), the history of Islamophobia in not deep-rooted. To the contrary, its emergence dates back to the period between the late 20th century and the early 21st century. The rise in interest of academic circles toward this field is based upon the observed growing pattern of Islamophobia.

Islamophobia has emerged as a result of globally determined political factors. Discriminative and heavily biased behaviors held against Muslim immigrants, and citizens in the US and Europe, are the most outstanding factors seen in Islamophobia's recent visibility. However, it can also be concluded that Islamophobia has developed as a reaction against the Muslim identity in general.

Manifesting itself as a deep political fantasy, Islamophobia has recently leaped forward with a fresh new environment of fear. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the fall of the communist authority, the "Red Fear" left in its place a new type of fear. This new type of fear is the deeply established "Green Fear". The September 11 attacks on the well-known Twin Towers in New York City in the United States, which happened in 2001, played a leading role in the aggravation of Islamophobia. However, the institutional structure behind the growing trend of Islamophobia depends on the "Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis", as suggested by Samuel Huntington (2006). Therefore, today we face a "manipulative orientation that falsifies the truth" as an approach that Muslims should globally struggle against.

The struggle against Islamophobia requires comprehensive public relations practices on behalf of the countries where Islam is lived as a religion. In this respect, strategic public relations practices with long-term effects can gain accomplishments. Within this context, we will list some suggestions regarding how to practice these measures of strategic public relations.

This study aims to analyze the methods to be employed to implement public relations, within a global scope and an efficient struggle against Islamophobia and its political, social, and cultural aspects. To be more specific; Islamophobia is a phenomenon that must be considered as a comprehensive problem and dealt with on a global scale. Accordingly, this paper puts forward suggestions regarding the implementation of strategic public relations practices to prevent Islamophobia. The guidance and content provided by this paper are expected to bring contributions to the academic literature with an inter-disciplinary approach,

while leading the way in terms of the strategic public relations practices employed to struggle against Islamophobia in an efficient way. Based on the literature review, the study is divided into two chapters. The first chapter covers brief information about Islam and Islamic civilizations, based on the meaning of Islam as a general term, besides clarifying Islamophobia with certain aspects. The second chapter, on the other hand, puts forward model strategic public relations practices that can be employed to prevent Islamophobia. In general, this study considers a significant issue by bringing communication-oriented solutions within the scope of the struggle against Islamophobia, which is a growing global trend.

1. ISLAM AS A RELIGION AND THE GROWING ISLAMOPHOBIA

In order to comprehend the meaning of Islamophobia, it could be helpful to discuss the general meaning of Islam as a religion. This section only discusses the outlines of Islam as a religion and concept. There are two significant civilizations that dominate the world. One is the Western Civilization[1], and the other is the Islamic Civilization. In its lexical meaning, the term Islam comes from the Arabic word "seleme" and refers to "the firm submission to Allah" (Meydan Larousse, 1971: 432). Further review shows that researchers associate "Islam" as a name given to the last divine religion with the following three meanings it covers, which are also the most fundamental characteristics of Islam as a religion (Büyük Larousse, 1986: 5797):

1. "Islam", as a term, means *submission*. Therefore, someone who adopts this religion must submit to Allah and His orders, in addition to accepting His existence, oneness, the books, and the prophet.

2. Islam comes from the same root as the word *selam*, which refers to *salvation* and *well-being*. Accordingly, someone who adopts this religion becomes free from all misbeliefs, such as denialism and polytheism and misdeeds, thus finds well-being and happiness.

3. Islam, as a term, has common roots and meanings with the word *müsaleme,* which means *mutual harmony, compromise,* and *amity.*

The aforementioned multiple meanings of Islam's roots which are explored above as a term, refer to submission to Allah, finding salvation, and living in peace, provide insights to comprehend the characteristics of Islam as a religion. However, misunderstandings about Islam have led to prejudices against the religion and thus we have been facing the

[1] The Western Civilization manifests itself as a sophisticated order of belief and morality (Özakpınar, 1999: 91). Christianity and the Ancient Greek civilization have significant impacts in emergence of the Western Civilization. The structure of the Islamic Civilization, on the other hand, is not that complicated.

phenomenon of *Islamophobia*, which means "fear of Islam", especially within the last few years. As cited by Akıner and Mencet (2016: 173), a lot of people in the West, who are identified as scholars (academicians, authors, thinkers, journalists etc.), approaches Islam with stereotypes without having a proper historical perspective. It is seen that, Islamophobia, as a social and political problem, is especially associated with the US and Europe (Uzun, 2012: 20). Muslim immigrants, who have settled in the US and Europe and become citizens of the countries they settled in within time, have been exposed to significant levels of harassment in these two significant geographies which they live in. As identified by Kalın (2018: 38), the hostility against multi-culturalism has implicitly turned into hostility against Islam and Muslims.

Today, it is observed that, besides the fears raising from the historical process, recent terrorist incidents[2] have consolidated and unearthed the biases against Muslims seen in the Western societies (Er and Ataman, 2008: 748). According to statistics, a social, cultural, and economic discrimination and intolerance, which is called Islamophobia, has emerged against Muslims in European countries in the aftermath of the Cold War (Aktaş, 2014: 31). It is a well-known fact that the phenomenon of Islamophobia has been on the rise since the September 11 incidents (Karslı, 2013: 75). September 11 has caused an increase in Islamophobia in the West and instigated the situation by leading to the growth of anti-Americanism in Islamic world (Esposito and Kalın, 2018: 19). Islamophobia is considered a modern and secular anti-Islam discourse and an approach that has emerged after the integration of Muslim immigrants in host societies, intensifying after the September 11 incidents (Cesari, 2018: 59). In addition, the impact of Islamophobia does not remain limited to Muslim immigrants. For instance; the Islamophobic cartoons published in Jylland-Posten daily, which is circulated in Denmark, and the French humor magazine Charlie Hebdo, as well as the mass shooting that happened in a mosque in New Zealand in 2019 and massacred 49 people, can be seen as an explicit indication of the fact that Islam, as a religion, is directly targeted.

Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis plays a significant role in the genesis of this fear instigated against the Islamic Civilization and Muslim societies. According to Huntington (2006: 23), the essential source of struggle of the new world order will not be ideologic or economic. The huge separations expected among human communities

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[2] Although they do not have any relation with Islam, terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, are often intentionally identified as Islamic organizations by either the American or European authorities.

and the foremost source of struggle will be cultural. Nation states will further their roles as the strongest actors in global developments, and possible political struggles on the global scale will emerge amongst groups and nations within different civilizations. According to this point of view, the clash of civilizations will shape global politics. So indeed, Islamophobia has emerged as a new fear in the aftermath of the "Red Fear", which was created by Western societies.

2. ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE PREVENTION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

As mentioned in the instances given above, the transition of these biased attitudes against the Islamic Civilization and Muslims all around the world to actual behaviors has been observed several times. It is obviously seen that strategic public relations practices are needed to prevent these biased attitudes, which arise from the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Bernays (1928: 961-964) states that public opinion can be successfully steered to prevent racial discrimination[3] and invokes the idea that the same strategies can be employed within the scope of the struggle against Islamophobia. Achievements of strategic public relations efforts have been globally proven, several times.

To mention briefly about the meaning of "strategy" as a term, it refers to "a plan designed to achieve a purpose or a target" (Görpe, 2001: 94). Acting according to a plan, to be developed for the sake of the struggle against Islamophobia, requires a proactive approach[4] toward the problem. Centuries earlier, Sun Zi (2019: 2) summarized the necessary proactive approach as follows: Proper evaluation of the situation means taking action through current opportunities. In this way, problems can be solved before growing further, with the help of strategic public relations practices. As emphasized by Ural (2006: 16), the idea that public relations should be planned, managed, and utilized explicitly shows that public relations includes strategic communication practices. According to a strategy-focused definition; public relations means "a body of planned practices that is affected by feedback and implemented in order to provide information for internal and external target groups, which are identified in

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[3] Bernays was of the opinion that people can be directed to good purposes, just as they can be directed to bad purposes (Grunig and Grunig, 1992: 288).

[4] Proactivity is recommended in public relations as a strategic approach. In proactive approaches, public relations units take roles in a continuous and planned course of work to prevent potential problems and utilize opportunities. From this point of view, strategy and planning can be considered as determinant factors in public relations (Çekirge Paksoy, 1999: 32).

line with the employed strategy to achieve a specific target (such as adopting an understanding or promoting an institution or product), and to leave positive marks among them" (Görpe, 2001: 79-80). Accordingly, it is also cited that the concept of "strategic relations/communications" should also be included in definitions of public relations in order to design these definitions properly as statements that bear the essence of public relations (Kalender, 2008: 27).

Strategic public relations practices are needed to eradicate the negative impacts of Islamophobia on a global scale. In terms of the prevention of Islamophobia, political authorities in the countries which are also members of the Islamic civilization should initiate joint efforts and cooperation. Public relations practices are considered significant within the scope of the strategic aspects of the struggle against Islamophobia. In terms of the prevention of Islamophobia's negative impacts, efficient implementation of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way asymmetric public relations model[5] would create significant reactions. Looking at the general characteristics of this model, we understand that it aims to ensure a change in attitudes and behaviors of publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 22). Public relations means a series of acts, changes, or processes that lead to a result (Wilcox et al., 2007: 8). The practices based on this two-way asymmetric model in the prevention of Islamophobia have the necessary characteristics to ensure the change mentioned above.

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The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which has been founded in order to ensure solidarity within the Islamic world and to defend rights and interests of Muslims all around the world, is a high-level organization that carries out operations on a global scale. Based on this definition, in line with the idea argued in this study, joint initiatives can be organized to prevent Islamophobia under the guidance of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and comprehensive efforts can be pursued with the participation of the political authorities in the Islamic world, various non-governmental organizations, and universities within the process. In this way, a barrier can be built before the growth of Islamophobia to ensure substantial prevention.

As mentioned above, certain strategic public relations practices should be realized under the guidance of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The study puts forward suggestions regarding this purpose, together with various instances in this regard. As the initial step, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation should establish a public relations unit for all these joint acts, and adopt an attitude that will keep this issue on the agenda.

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[5] In this model of communication, sources try to steer and persuade target groups (Görpe, 2001: 5-6).

Transforming the issue into an agenda by keeping it continuously discussed on a global scale[6] has a strategic importance in the realization of ideas suggesting that Islamophobia should be prevented. These public relations practices will play a determining role in perception management efforts to prevent these stereotyped[7] and biased attitudes and behaviors against Islam and Muslims.

Initiatives to organize international symposiums and congresses under titles of "Islam and Peace", "Contributions of the Islamic Civilization to Humanity", and "Islamophobia and Its Reasons", as strategic public relations practices, would be quite beneficial in bringing the unrest around the Islamic geography against Islamophobia, into question. These practices should be closely monitored by the mass media in the whole Islamic geography, and all around the world. Within this regard, the international news sources, such as Associated Press, Reuters, CNN International, and Al Jazeera, should be continuously informed.

Symposium and congress events are significant as they are scientific occasions. Besides this, reference to political authorities to prevent Islamophobia constitutes another aspect of strategic public relations practices. Leaders of all political authorities in the Islamic world should come together under the roof of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and declare their ideas and opinions in public events that are open to the media.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation should call political leaders to voice before the United Nations, that Islamophobia is a detrimental approach and to activate public diplomacy within this regard. In this way, Islamophobia can be considered as a problem on a political scale.

The anticipated international congresses and symposiums should dwell on the negative reflections of the "Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis" and create the perception within the world public opinion that this hypothesis is a baseless thought. This issue should be narrated as a message by the leaders during the gatherings under the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation should organize various intellectual

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[6] At this point, we can use the Agenda-Setting Theory. It is essential that the media make Islamophobia into a significant issue by bringing it into question. As stated by McQuail and Windahl (2005: 133), among certain topics, those that attract more attention by mass media gets better internalized and gain higher importance within time.

[7] The Turkish Language Institution (TDK, 2019) defines the word "stereotype", which is a borrowed word from French, as "commonplace (opinion)". Stereotypes are explained as generalizations and oftentimes having negative connotations. This suggestion is clarified with an analysis on the novel "Kore'de Kutup Yıldızı" "the North Star in Korea" (Yıldırım Becerikli, 2005: 15-16).

events and art competitions using "Prevention of Islamophobia" as a team and announce the activities within this scope to the international media.

Being the most significant indicator of globalization, networking technology should be utilized as a part of strategic public relations. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation should create an official website that covers certain content related to "the Struggle against Islamophobia". This official website should announce the relevant activities to the media and the global public opinion.

All these public relations practices would be effective in terms of creating the perception that the terrorist attacks, such as September 11, do not stem from Islamic doctrines. In this way, an efficient capacity to cope with Islamophobia can be ensured.

CONCLUSION

Being ignited after September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, Islamophobia has transformed into a globally threatening problem for Muslim societies. This global problem is defined as an issue that should definitely be overcome. In other words, it is obviously seen that there should be a global struggle against Islamophobia.

Strategic public relations practices for the efficient struggle against islamophobia are of vital importance in terms of preventing Islamophobic attitudes and behaviors. In other words, strategic public relations practices are inevitably necessary in the struggle against Islamophobia. Revelation of the fact that Islam and Muslims are not what they are alleged to be by the opposing segments is possible through the two-way asymmetric model. Considering persuasion as the ultimate aim, this can be a useful model in terms of prevention of negative perceptions and attitudes against Islam and Muslims and the transformation of them into actual behaviors. The strategic communication activities that aim to influence these attitudes and behaviors can be realized through various scientific, cultural, and political activities. This approach would keep the reality of Islamophobia and its negative impacts on the agenda. As a significant theory in terms of mass media, the Agenda-Setting Model would be a useful mechanism that may keep Islamophobia on the agenda as discussed by the international media.

Strategic public relations practices should definitely be put into practice in order to weaken the phenomenon of Islamophobia, which was instigated by the Clash of Civilizations Hypothesis and aggravated by September 11 attacks (2001), although it dates back to earlier periods in history. Given the successful practices of Bernay, it is understood that the two-way

asymmetric public relations model is the most efficient method to employ, in order to alter negative perceptions and attitudes against Islam.

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