

The Muslim Community In Ireland

Challenging Some Of Myths & Misinformation



“ Racism denies people their basic human rights, dignity and respect. ”



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**National Consultative Committee on
Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI)**

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NCCRI



Introduction

The Muslim community is an important part of the growing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in Ireland. It is a diverse community comprised of Irish-born Muslims who have been living in Ireland for many years and more recent migrants.

The history of the Muslim community in Ireland has been a long and positive one and to date, people from the Muslim community have successfully integrated into Irish society without losing their distinct ethnic or religious identity. However in recent months there has been a worrying growth of media and public discourse that has tended to stereotype the Muslim community in Ireland as 'fundamentalist' and linked with extremism.

As well as causing hurt and offence within the Muslim community in Ireland, there is a concern that if left unchallenged these stereotypes have the potential to contribute to the conditions where Islamophobia will increase in Ireland with direct and indirect consequences for Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims.

This leaflet has been produced by the NCCRI in partnership with representatives from the main Muslim representatives bodies in Ireland to highlight these concerns and to provide both information and resources to the media and a wide range of organisations interested in this issue.

This leaflet does not seek to stifle debate or to criticise media reporting that is in the public interest or which is balanced and fair. These are essential components in a democratic society where freedom of the press is valued.

The purpose of this leaflet is about encouraging reporting and discussion that is balanced and which seeks to be informed by adequate contextual information from a range of sources (including a range of sources within the Muslim community itself) and which seeks to highlight the potential damage to intercultural relations as a consequence of irresponsible, or sensationalised media coverage and related public discourse.

While much of the media reporting in Ireland in relation to the Muslim community in Ireland continues to be of a high standard, it is also evident that in recent times there has been an increase in alarmist, selective and sensationalised journalism that evident in a minority of newspapers.

Recent examples of newspaper headlines that appeared in two Sunday newspapers in Ireland include:

'Fascist fundamentalism is rife among young Irish Muslims' (13 August, 2006)

'The green jihadis' (August 20, 2006)

In some cases what are otherwise balanced, well-written and researched articles can be undermined by an alarmist headline. It is also evident that criticism of such articles, if acknowledged, tends to get buried in the letters page of a subsequent edition.

The Muslim community in Ireland

It is a popular myth that Muslims have only come to Ireland in the past ten years. In fact Muslims began arriving in Ireland in increased numbers in the early 1950s mainly as students and people in business, although there is evidence of visits by trading ships from Muslim countries to Irish ports as early as the 18th century. The number of Muslim people in Ireland has changed significantly in recent years; in 2002 the population had quadrupled to 19,147 from 3,873 in 1991. The 2006 Census results will show a further significant increase in the Muslim community in Ireland. Current estimates believe the population to be between 25,000 - 30,000.

The Muslim community in Ireland is extremely diverse in terms of nationality and ethnicity. Most of Ireland's Muslims are Sunni with less than 2000 Shia. Some Muslims in Ireland have been here for many years and are Irish citizens. Many have been born here and are 2nd and 3rd generation Irish Muslims. Some of the Muslim community in Ireland came here as Programme Refugees or as asylum seekers who became refugees from countries as diverse as Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Algeria and Somalia. Some have been granted permission to remain in Ireland on the basis of having at least one Irish-born child. In more recent years the number of Muslims in Ireland has increased with the numbers of migrant workers, either from outside the European Economic Area or as EU citizens including countries such as China, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Libya, Great Britain and France.

The Muslim community is well organised with a number of mosques, two Muslim schools established under the Department of Education and Science and many societies. The first Muslim organisation in Ireland, the Dublin Islamic Society was formed in 1959 by a group of Muslim students, which later became the Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI). Over the years the membership increased and many Muslims have become permanent residents. As a result of the increased numbers of

the community, the Islamic Foundation of Ireland recognised the need for a permanent mosque and Islamic Centre. In 1983, the Mosque in the South Circular Road was established. The first purpose built mosque was built in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo in 1986.

In September 1996 the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland at Clonskeagh, Dublin 14 was opened. The Islamic Cultural Centre offers facilities for daily prayers and religious celebrations and for education and the general welfare of the community including a Muslim National School, a library, a mortuary, a shop and a restaurant. Other Islamic centres provide similar services. Both the Centres at South Circular Road and at Clonskeagh are Sunni mosques and are active in developing initiatives to break down barriers and encourage mutual understanding between Muslims and the Irish public.

In 1998 the Ahul Bait Islamic Cultural Centre in Dublin was opened, which is representative of the Shia Muslim community in Ireland. There are also other bodies such as the Muslim Association of Ireland, Cork Muslim Society, the Galway Islamic Society, the Limerick Mosque, the Federation of Islamic Student Societies and Muslim organisations affiliated by nationality as well as individuals who are prominent in the Islamic community in Ireland. There are a number of Mosques in Ireland, some of which have many hundreds of people participating in Friday prayers and others that attract only a small number of people.

In a new and welcome development in September 2006 the Irish Council of Imams was established. The Council's aims include:

- 1 Forming an authorised specialized Muslim official body to express the Islamic verdicts regarding issues occurring in the Irish Arena
- 2 Encouraging the Muslim positive integration into Irish society
- 3 Embarking on social and educational programmes for Imams
- 4 Positive contribution toward solving social and family problems
- 5 Co-operation in relevant issues with concerned offices and organisations
- 6 Collaboration with people of other faiths via dialogue on commonalities
- 7 Endeavouring to reach Muslim consensus on Muslim occasions in Ireland
- 8 Spreading the spirit of the Islamic tolerance¹.

¹ Irish Council of Imams, (September 15, 2006) Press Release

Islamophobia

Racism is a specific form of discrimination and exclusion faced by cultural and ethnic minorities. It is based on the false belief that some “races” are inherently superior to others because of their cultural and ethnic background, different skin colour, and nationality. Racism denies people their basic human rights, dignity and respect.

Islamophobia is a specific form of racism towards Muslims. It manifests itself in general negative attitudes, violence, harassment, discrimination and stereotyping of Muslims. The Runnymede Trust² has identified eight components that define and contribute to Islamophobia:

- 1 Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change
- 2 Islam is seen as separate and ‘other’. It does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them
- 3 Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist
- 4 Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a ‘clash of civilisations’
- 5 Islam is seen as a political ideology and is used for political or military advantage
- 6 Criticisms made of the West by Islam are rejected out of hand
- 7 Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society
- 8 Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural or normal.

² The Runnymede Trust is a widely respected non-governmental expert body that has the stated aim of challenging racial discrimination, influencing legislation and promoting multi-ethnicity in the UK

Islamophobia in Ireland

The experience of living in Ireland has been generally positive for Muslims. However, there continues to be sporadic incidents related to racism/Islamophobia that continues to be experienced by the Islamic community in Ireland.

Typical incidents of Islamophobia reported to the NCCRI relate to verbal abuse and other forms of harassment and disrespect rather than physical assaults or criminal damage.

This can change at times of heightened global tensions. In particular, the NCCRI Racist Incident Reporting Procedure reported in 2001 that almost one fifth (20%) of all incidents recorded between May and October 2001, were directly related to September 11th. These incidents reported of physical assaults and verbal abuse against the Islamic community and also those perceived to be of middle-eastern or Asian origin, including visitors to Ireland, migrant workers and refugees and asylum seekers.

The NCCRI noted at the time that many of these incidents appeared to be isolated and uncoordinated and did not persist beyond 2-3 weeks beyond the attack. However they did give rise to concern, especially as some of the incidents involved serious assaults, abuse and destruction of property. Subsequent NCCRI reports have demonstrated isolated incidents of Islamophobia directed towards members of the Muslim community.

In the aftermath of the bombings in London on 7 July 2004, in which there was at least two Irish casualties, Muslim organisations issued advice to the Muslim community in Ireland to be more wary in the coming days. It is to be welcomed that there were very few reported incidents related to Islamophobia in Ireland during this period compared with many other EU countries.



Linking the Muslim Community in Ireland with Extremism

Some of the recent newspaper reports in Ireland have sought to link Muslim people and Muslim youth in particular to fundamentalism/extremism and terrorism despite the fact that:

- Representatives of the main Muslim organisations in Ireland have consistently condemned and disassociated themselves on many occasions with the 9/11 attacks on the United States and subsequent incidents in Spain and Britain.
- The Gardaí in Ireland have consistently rejected the contention that extremism is 'rife' among the Muslim community in Ireland.
- Press releases and press conferences have been organised by most of the Muslim organisations in Ireland to refute some of the recent media coverage linking the Muslim community in Ireland with extremism.

While allowing for the possibility that there is always going to be individuals who hold extreme views and some may act on such views, the consistent view of leading Muslim bodies in Ireland is that; if anyone suspects criminality related to extremism, it should be reported to the Gardaí for investigation.

These media reports are contrary to government and Garda information. An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, during Leader Questions in the Dail, rejected reports that there are active Islamic terrorist cells operating in Ireland. He acknowledged that there were only a very small number of people who come and go from the state, are closely watched and monitored.

The Muslim community in Ireland have consistently contended that the views of individuals purporting to speak for the whole community should be investigated thoroughly by the media, and that if such views are reported they should be reported in context and in a professional way that does not stereotype the Muslim community as a whole.

Further Information and Contacts

- **Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland**, 19 Roebuck Rd, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14.
Tel: 01-208 0000, Email: info@islamireland.ie Web: www.islamireland.ie
- **Islamic Foundation of Ireland**, 163 South Circular Road, Dublin 8.
Tel: 01-453 3242, Email: ifi@indigo.ie www Web: islaminieland.com
- **Ahul Bait Islamic Cultural Centre**, Bawn House, Milltown Road, Dublin 6.
Tel: 01-260 4497, Email: abohasan@eircom.net
- **Irish Council of Imams in Ireland**, contact through the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland or the Islamic Foundation of Ireland.

Also in this series

Challenging the Myths and Misinformation about:

- Refugees and Asylum Seeker
- Irish Travellers

Available at www.nccri.ie

For exhibitions and understanding of art and culture associated with the Muslim community see also the:

- **Chester Beatty Library**, Dublin Castle, Dublin 2. Tel: 01-407 0750, www.cbl.ie

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