Capitalizing on Fear:
The Politicization of Xenophobia and Islamophobia

Moderator

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Speakers

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*Head of Egyptian
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This is a report on a public session titled "Capitalising on Fear: The Politicisation of Xenophobia and Islamophobia", held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of speakers and participants present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.
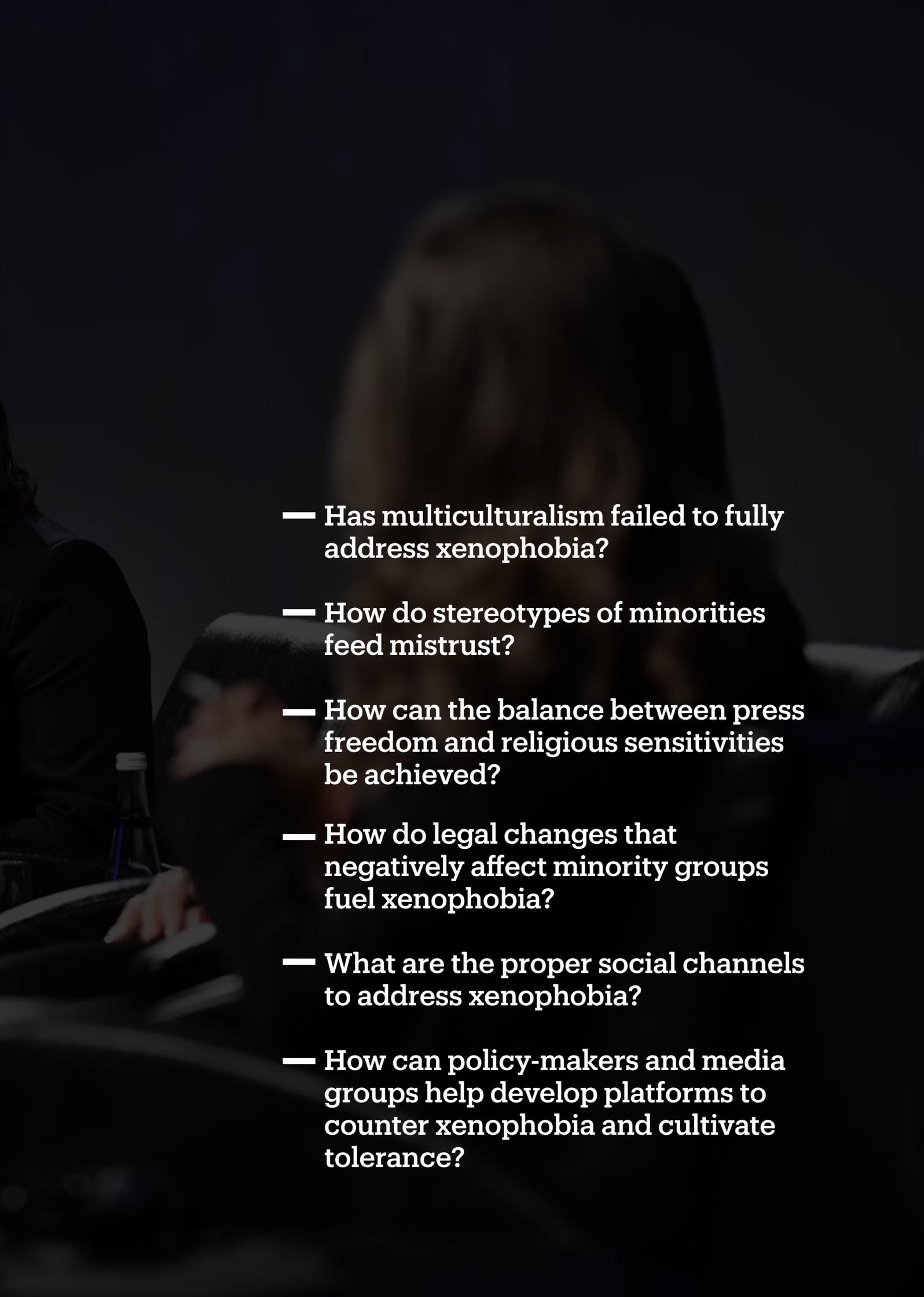
— Has multiculturalism failed to fully address xenophobia?

— How do stereotypes of minorities feed mistrust?

— How can the balance between press freedom and religious sensitivities be achieved?

— How do legal changes that negatively affect minority groups fuel xenophobia?

— What are the proper social channels to address xenophobia?

— How can policy-makers and media groups help develop platforms to counter xenophobia and cultivate tolerance?

Summary

This session discussed the current upsurge of xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe and North America. Both problematic discourses operate at various levels of intensity, from outright anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant political campaigns to depict any disadvantaged or marginalised segment of society - including women, as the 'other' through film, media or numerous educational platforms. The potency of this session was that it incisively investigated the diverse factors contributing to the escalating pervasiveness of Islamophobia and the far-right populist discourse that targets a wide spectrum of minorities. In conclusion, this session put forward concrete measures - including political activism and grass-roots activism, that would reduce anti-Muslim hysteria, anti-immigrant bullying and numerous other manifestations of Islamophobic or xenophobic narratives.

To begin, the esteemed panellists shared their personal experiences and observations in regards to both the upsurge of Islamophobic and xenophobic narratives in their respective contexts. Brendan Cox suggested that 'discourses of hate,' demonisation and, eventually, criminalisation must be addressed at various levels of sophistication, including the development of proper institutions, a robust, independent judiciary and honest journalism, all that which works together to respect and protect the rights of minorities and disadvantaged sections of society. Ilyasah Al-Shabazz observed that the institutional and structural violence that plague the African American community during her father's time has hardly changed. Nevertheless, she retains a realistic optimism about the requisite need to continue to work for the empowerment of women, men and all disadvantaged people through grass-root level activism. Farid Hafez argued that the current escalation of Islamophobia is a continuation of structural and institutional racism, which Europe has been unable to effectively reconcile with since colonial times. Thereafter, Maha Azzam elaborated on the manner that economic and cultural insecurities are creating anxiety and fear of minorities and immigrants in Europe. Then, lastly, Sayeeda Warsi observed that the revitalisation of the mistaken notion that Europe, only, has a Judeo-Christian identity is causing suspicion and exclusion of all other religious and ethnic communities living there. That exclusivist anti-pluralistic celebration of a mythical, non-existent Europe aims to emotionally deal with a loss of economic, cultural and political power.

Lastly, to conclude, the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia was deconstructed in a sophisticated way to reveal its impact on numerous levels, across all spectrums of society. Firstly, the session explored the socio-political, cultural and economic contexts that facilitated the rise of far-right sentiments in Europe. Then, the speakers elaborated on the numerous ways politicians are 'capitalising on fear' and using 'scapegoat' narratives to rationalise anti-Islam and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Secondly, the session discussed how various grass-root level activism has and can continue to effectively tackle fear and hate between communities. Thirdly, the challenges of stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims in the public sphere and the critical role media must play to represent not just Muslims, but women, African Americans, Latin Americans and Asians was discussed. The session emphasised that, as a global community, we are all in this together. Hence, common, inclusivist and embracing platforms must be put forward to confront all forms of bigotry, whether those aberrations exist in Europe, the Middle East, North America or Asia.

Moderator of the session, Senior News Presenter of TRT World, Andrea Sanke, commenced the discussion by mentioning the alarming rise of Islamophobic and xenophobic discourse.

Introduction

The 21st century is witnessing the exceptional upsurge of Islamophobic and xenophobic discourse at an alarming rate. The politics of populism and far-right movements are gaining ground in Western countries with provocative anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Discourse of hate is appearing in the ugliest forms were ethnic, religious and racial minorities are physically attacked and killed. Moreover, the black community in the United States is still fighting for their rights as equal citizens. The recent emergence of the "Black Lives Matter" movement is a clear example of the unsolved question of racism in the US.

This session was held against the backdrop of the socioeconomic conditions of minorities living in the West. It discussed the rise of xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse in Europe and North America. Both discourses operate on various levels, from outright anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant political campaigns to using discourses that depict disadvantaged or marginalised segments of society as the 'Other', through media, film and other sources. The strength of this session was that it investigated the various factors contributing to the escalating presence of Islamophobia and the rise of far-right populist discourse that targets a wide spectrum of minorities. In conclusion, this session puts forward concrete measures to reduce xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse through grassroots activism.

Historical and Institutional Foundations of Xenophobia and Islamophobia

The present-day upsurge in xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse is the result of historical and contemporary factors. Terrorist attacks, the global financial crisis and the recent refugee influx have all contributed to the rise of the discourse of hate and fear of Muslims and immigrants. However, this discourse has its historical roots in European colonialism where non-western societies, in particular Islam and Muslims, are portrayed as a homogenous group involved in violence and extremism, emphasising their 'Otherness'.

Farid Hafez, a lecturer at the University of Salzburg and an expert on Islamophobia, observed that the current escalation of Islamophobia relates to the Clash of Civilizations theory, which was constructed after the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR) and peaked with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, he remarked that these facts should never make us forget the historical roots of Islamophobia, which was institutionalised by Western powers through the maintenance of a racial global order and the construction of a white Christian Europe after the Reconquista of Spain in 1492. He also added that this historically formed Islamophobic discourse immersed within the European society became apparent in the last few decades when the second and third generation of the working class immigrant's sons and daughters climbed up the social ladder, occupying governmental jobs. Similarly, Ilyasah Shabazz, the daughter of Malcolm X, also pointed out the historical racism institutionalised in the US through black slavery and reminded that her father insisted on the language of "human rights" instead of "civil rights" in order to challenge this institutionalised racism. Hence, xenophobia and Islamophobia has to be also understood as a form of structural violence institutionalised by white supremacists.

However, Sayeeda Warsi, former Minister of State, Member of House of Lords, did not agree with the explanation of Islamophobia with long historical perspective. She argued that white people or Europeans do not have historical animosity towards blacks, Muslims or non-Europeans. She gave the example of the crisis between UK and Northern Ireland, both being white and European, and pointed out that the contemporary rise of xenophobia and Islamophobia has to be understood within the context of the current political crisis. However, she agreed on the point that the revitalisation of Judeo-Christian identity as the only European identity is causing suspicion and exclusion of other religious and ethnic communities living in Europe.

Europe, which once witnessed the holocaust of Jews, did not happen unexpectedly. Anti-Semitic discourse was institutionally legitimised and led to public hatred against Jewish minorities in Europe over a period of time, finally causing mass execution. Similarly, the United States has a long history of slavery and institutionalised racism, leading to the social marginalisation of African-American communities. Hence, it is time for Western countries to address the structural problems contributing to the hatred of Muslims, immigrants, blacks and other minorities.

The head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council, Maha Azzam pointed out that the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East has also led to the misrepresentation of Muslim societies.

Different Factors Shaping the Current Discourse of Hate and Fear

The current rise in the discourse of hate and fear are shaped by various factors. Most importantly, political rhetoric by far-right populist leaders, unprofessional and biased media reports and global financial crisis has contributed to the current rise of xenophobia and Islamophobia. Terrorist attacks and the recent refugee influx are the topics on which far-right politicians mobilise people against Muslims and immigrants. Worsened economic situation and loss of jobs in many Western countries also contribute to the fear of immigrants.

Far-Right Populism

There has been a sharp increase in far-right populism in Europe over a decade. Politicians are gaining support with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric and many far-right parties have emerged successful over the last few years, even gaining seats in parliaments and forming parts of the governments of many European countries. Similarly, the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric of Donald Trump during the American presidential election has helped mobilise conservative votes. Populist politicians have become successful in convincing their rhetorical agendas to do the masses even at the expense of polarising the society.

According to Sayeeda Warsi, giving the example of her resignation from parliament during the Gaza conflict of 2014, the politicians are not keeping up their promises and credibility. However, Brendan Cox observed that politicians are successful only to an extent since their aim is to capitalise on fear and turn communities against each other. He believes that this tendency has not affected the larger section of society as far-right politicians could only capitalise on already aggravated mindsets. Farid Hafez remarked that we often focus on the political rhetoric of far-right politicians and forget how the centrist and liberal parties in Europe are now co-opting the policy claims of the far right, in order to avoid losing their electoral base. He gave the example of Angela Merkel's policy to ban face covering while people celebrate her as the champion of the free world. On a separate note, Maha Azzam pointed that the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East has also led to the misrepresentation of Muslim societies as undemocratic and resistant to change.

How to address far-right populism has been a complicated question. The current day far-right parties are mobilising people by promoting cultural nativism and national identity. This has led the minority communities to mobilise around their religious and cultural identity. The consolidation of communities based on their identities to different camps has often aggravated the tensions. Discussion also briefly touched upon whether the assertion of identity in the public space by minorities to counter the far-right populism added fuel to the existing polarisation. According to Ilyasah Shabazz, since Muslims or Blacks are targeted for their identity, they have the right to ask for equal treatment in every sphere of life through the assertion of their identity. She also remarked that the question of identity assertion and politics is never brought to the limelight to understand how white Christian Americans enslaved Blacks for centuries. Similarly, Farid Hafez also mentioned the absence of a concept in the non-Anglo-Saxon world to locate the white privilege and power discourse shaped by them. Brendan Cox observed that people can have multilayered and multifaceted personal identities that include national, religious or ethnic identities. Healthy societies live with multiple identities and promote pluralism. However, according to Sayeeda Warsi, the monolithic representation of Muslim identities by politicians and the media is harming both Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The extremists from within Muslim communities are trying to exploit this homogenous notion of Muslim identity for their political agendas. Similarly, far-right groups perpetuate monolithic identity to portray all Muslims responsible when terrorist attacks occur.

The Co-founder of More in Common, Brendan Cox, recounted the effects that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had in allowing the rise of far-right parties in the West.

Media

Many media outlets in the Western hemisphere have contributed to the rise of xenophobic and Islamophobic discourses by fuelling prejudices and stereotypes. Far right and populist politicians are often capitalising on fake news produced in the media. Digital media has also become an essential platform for the far right to propagate fear and hate. Many people have a negative image about Islam and Muslims, not through personal contacts but through the image they perceive from the media. Brendan Cox noted that after the 9/11 terrorist attack most violent incidents were carried out by the far-right in the West, however, terrorist attacks by Muslims are selectively magnified by the media to create fear towards the Muslim community and reinforce Islamophobic discourse. Within this context, Farid Hafez reminded that media practitioners have to be self-critical and reflective about the kind of news they produce and what kind of categories they use to represent different identities. For example, he pointed out how the media in Germany projects "hyper-sexual" Muslim men to create a misogynic image of immigrants. Following such misrepresentations, the governments introduce sex education for refugees and reinforce the stereotypes against Muslims. Hence, he suggested that media practitioners have to be self-critical and reflective about what sort of discourse they promote. Similarly, Sayeeda Warsi suggested that the media has to cover good and positive news rather than focusing on negative news and magnifying it. According to Maha Azzam, the media has to disconnect the referencing of terrorist attacks done by Muslims to Islam and avoid scapegoating the entire community. All the speakers congratulated TRT World for organising such a panel and hoped that the topic discussed would be successful in challenging the stereotypical narratives published by many media sources in the West.

The Economic and Cultural Insecurities

The economic crisis and resultant restructuring of the employment sector could create discord and anxiety in society. Such situations often provide a favourable climate for the emergence of populist parties by creating the fear of the 'Other' taking away jobs. The BREXIT referendum in 2016 is a clear example of how economic insecurity could lead people to revive nationalist sentiments. The global financial crisis, impacts of neo-liberal austerity measures and the recent wave of refugee influx due to the civil war in Syria has contributed to the increase in economic and cultural insecurity for many people in the West. Maha Azzam and Brendan Cox shared similar opinions that these insecurities, often manipulated by the media and politicians, are creating anxiety and fear towards minorities and immigrants in Europe. An increase in the unemployment rate in many European countries has also created a climate of fear of immigrants and this situation is used as leverage by populist parties for anti-immigrant rhetoric. Similarly, the increased visibility of Muslim religious and cultural symbols in the European public sphere has also led to anxiety.

Lecturer at the University of Salzburg, Farid Hafez, argued that the current escalation of Islamophobia is a continuation of structural and institutional racism.

Ilyasah Shabazz, daughter of Malcom X, explained the history of the civil rights movements in the US and the role of Malcolm X in it.

Conclusion: "Can We live Together"?

In an era of globalisation of economic relations, mass migration and cultural interactions, the French philosopher and social theorist Alain Touraine asked the provocative question "Can we live together?" Touraine observed that the paradox of our times is the increase in social and economic mobility, leading to sectarian tension between different identities. The same question would be pertinent while thinking about how to grapple with the issues of xenophobia and Islamophobia. Brendan Cox observed that the 'discourses of hate,' demonisation and, eventually, criminalisation must be addressed at various levels of sophistication, including the development of proper institutions, a robust, independent judiciary and honest journalism, all working synergistically to respect and protect the rights of minorities and disadvantaged sections of society. Ilyasah Shabazz pointed that there must be reforms in the educational system and the curriculum must include the experiences of marginalised sections of society. What Touraine offered in his book to address the question of living together was the education of individuals in becoming active agents of social change. Similarly, all the panellists insisted on the importance of grass root level activism to reduce the discourse of hate and fear. They also highlighted the importance of bringing culturally, racially, religiously and ethnically different communities together to ensure trust and respect between them.

The session, 'The Politicisation of Xenophobia and Islamophobia', discussed the increased rise of racist sentiments that is now rampant in Western countries.