

UK: Boris Johnson makes anti-Muslim pitch for Tory Party leadership

Julie Hyland
9 August 2018

Boris Johnson, the former UK foreign secretary, has set out his stall for a leadership challenge to Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May based on Islamophobia.

His column in the right-wing Conservative *Daily Telegraph* newspaper was ostensibly a criticism of Denmark's outlawing of face veils last week. Under the pretext of protecting Danish “values,” those found guilty of wearing the face veil in public are subject to fines of £115, rising to £11,500 after a fourth violation.

On Friday, a 28-year-old woman became the first to be charged and fined under the new law. Just 200 women in Denmark are estimated to wear face veils, but in May, the Liberal, Conservative and Danish People's Party coalition government voted the law through. Full or partial bans on face veils are also in place in France, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands and the German state of Bavaria. The European Court of Human Rights has upheld the bans in France and Belgium, citing communal harmony!

Having stated that Denmark was “wrong to ban” the veil, Johnson moved on to the familiar dog-whistle of the extreme-right. Ridiculing those wearing it for “looking like letterboxes” and a “bank-robber,” he made clear the fraudulent character of his opening declaration criticising Denmark by writing that he felt “fully entitled” to expect women to remove face coverings when talking to him at his MP surgery, and that businesses, schools, universities and branches of government should be “able to enforce a dress code” so that people are “able to see each other's faces and read their expressions.”

Johnson has form. In 2005, following the suicide bombings in London by Islamic extremists that killed 52 people, he wrote in the Tory *Spectator* under the heading “Just don't call it war.”

“If we were Israelis, we would by now be doing a standard thing to that white semi-detached pebbledash house” in Leeds that was home to one of the suicide bombers. “We would dispatch an American-built ground-assault helicopter and blow the place to bits. Then we would send in bulldozers to scrape over the remains, and we would do the same to all the other houses in the area thought to have been the temporary or permanent addresses of the suicide bombers and their families.”

“To any non-Muslim reader of the Koran, Islamophobia ... seems a natural reaction,” he continued. “Judged purely on its scripture ... it is the most viciously sectarian of all religions,” insisting that the UK must accept that “Islam is the problem.”

Then Johnson was writing to prove his credentials in support of the US-led invasions of the Middle East. His latest *Telegraph* column had the purpose of staking out his claim to Tory leadership.

An inveterate self-promoter, it is just three weeks since Johnson quit May's cabinet in complaint at her proposed deal with the European Union (EU) on British withdrawal. Johnson jumped ship to denounce May's plans for a “common rulebook” with the EU for trade in goods as “vassalage ... colony status for the UK.”

Johnson is, as always, an opportunist and a hypocrite. His professed “dislike” for “any attempt by any—invariably male—government to encourage” the facial veil, naturally, does not apply to Saudi Arabia, which is not mentioned in his column. The only government he references is that of Ramzan Kadyrov, President of the Chechen Republic—presumably because this suits Johnson's anti-Russian campaign.

Saudi Arabia has just announced that it is freezing all new trade with Canada and is expelling its ambassador, due to Ottawa's “interference” in its affairs. Canada had

called last week for the release of human and women's rights activists critical of the Saudi regime—the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said at least 15 such individuals had been arrested since May 15.

They are only a fraction of the thousands arbitrarily detained in Saudi prisons, with hundreds held for years without charge. In April, Human Rights Watch (HRW) analysed official Saudi data on detentions showing that, of the 5,314 people officially recorded, 3,380 had been held without a conviction for six months, 2,949 for more than a year and 770 for more than three years.

The mass roundup takes place behind a smokescreen of supposed reforms by the Saudi despots, including allowing women to drive. Meanwhile, women require the consent of male guardians to travel, marry, divorce and sign contracts, while “modesty” dress—including the abaya, a long cloak and head scarf—is rigorously enforced.

The HRW analysis was released just days after Johnson officially welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to London, greeting him as a great “reformer” and announcing a UK-Saudi Arabia strategic partnership council guaranteeing Saudi investment and procurement in UK-based companies worth up to £65 billion.

Johnson dismissed criticism of the Saudi war in Yemen that has killed thousands of civilians and left 20 million people aid-dependent—the largest food security emergency in the world. A cholera outbreak has sickened more than one million people since April, and an estimated 130 children are dying daily due to malnutrition and disease.

Government figures show that the UK licensed more than £4.6 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia since it began bombing Yemen in March 2015. Johnson dismissed calls to stop the sales, stating that other countries would “happily supply arms” if the UK bowed to pressure for a ban.

Johnson has thus far rejected belated calls by May and other Tory leaders to withdraw his remarks on the face veil. Their damage-limitation attempts have only fuelled Johnson’s efforts to position himself as a “free speech” martyr in the right-wing swamp that makes up much of the Tory membership and its fringes.

A poll of 1,000 Tories by the Conservative Home website—taken before his *Telegraph* column—put

Johnson as the favourite leadership contender, on almost 30 percent, 10 points ahead of Home Secretary Sajid Javid, who happens to be the first Conservative MP from a Muslim background to hold office.

Johnson is counting on the fetid anti-migrant atmosphere being whipped up by all parties. His *Telegraph* piece referenced previous remarks, in 2006, by then Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw who also used a newspaper column to announce that he would insist that a constituent remove her veil in his presence. The Danish vote to ban the burka was backed by the Social Democrats, whose leader Mette Frederiksen describes Islam as a barrier to integration.

During his July visit to the UK, US President Donald Trump endorsed Johnson as a future British prime minister. Former Trump adviser, the fascistic strategist Steve Bannon, called on Johnson to challenge May. Bannon has reportedly been in secret talks with Johnson since his resignation from cabinet.

There is a stark contrast between the muted response to Johnson’s anti-Islam assault and the hysterical smear campaign against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters, based on bogus accusations of anti-Semitism.

Islamophobic attacks account for the overwhelming majority of hate crimes in Britain. A report by Tell MAMA, which aids victims of anti-Muslim violence, recorded that 2017 had seen a significant rise in assaults—up by 16.3 percent on the previous year—to 1,201. Hate crimes include physical attacks—mainly on women—and the firebombing of mosques. Separate figures show that anti-Muslim hate crimes in London rose by almost 40 percent in 2017 through January 2018—from 1,205 to 1,678.

Johnson’s op-ed was published the day after an attack by far-right, anti-Muslim and pro-Trump supporters on the Bookmarks bookshop in London, run by the Socialist Workers Party, which followed a brutal assault three weeks earlier by fascists on rail union leader Steve Hedley.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact