

# The 'No True Muslim' Fallacy

How Muslims are intimidated and marginalised  
for supporting counter-extremism initiatives

**Liam Duffy**

CIVITAS



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## Summary

'Imagine Hamish McDonald, a Scotsman, sitting down with his Glasgow Morning Herald and seeing an article about how the "Brighton Sex Maniac Strikes Again". Hamish is shocked and declares that "No Scotsman would do such a thing". The next day he sits down to read his Glasgow Morning Herald again; and, this time, finds an article about an Aberdeen man whose brutal actions make the Brighton sex maniac seem almost gentlemanly. This fact shows that Hamish was wrong in his opinion, but is he going to admit this? Not likely. This time he says: "No true Scotsman would do such a thing".'<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the white supremacist terrorist attack on worshippers at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, Dame Louise Casey, at one point the Government's integration advisor, and Mark Rowley, formerly National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism Policing at New Scotland Yard, penned a powerful opinion editorial in *The Sunday Times* declaring: 'Our efforts to stop extremism are "undermined at every turn".'<sup>2</sup> As this paper explores, no-one's efforts to stop extremism are more undermined than those of Muslim activists, experts and practitioners.

The opposition and controversy surrounding the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, specifically the Prevent strand, and the wider counter-extremism agenda, is well chronicled. While there have certainly been mistakes and teething problems at both the policy and local delivery level of Prevent, many of the most infamous and notorious headlines have been subsequently proven to be at least heavily embellished, and in many cases complete misrepresentations of events.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Obituary: Professor Antony Flew', *The Scotsman*, 15th April 2010 <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/obituary-professor-antony-flew-1-799918>

<sup>2</sup> Casey, Louise and Rowley, Mark, 'Our efforts to stop extremism are 'undermined at every turn'', *The Times*, 17 March 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/our-efforts-to-stop-extremism-are-undermined-at-every-turn-cwwrm3d3t>

<sup>3</sup> Sutton, Rupert, 'The campaign against Prevent is based on myths and distortion – and it's helping Islamic extremists thrive', *The Telegraph*, 7 December 2016 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/07/campaign-against-prevent-based-myths-distortion-helping-islamic/>

The chorus of discontent on the most controversial aspect of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy has been led by a small number of organisations and groups who have set much of the tone of the debate, while major newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent* have repeatedly carried opinion columns by critics of Prevent, and amplified many of the 'scare stories' which have later been debunked.

Groups like CAGE, Prevent Watch, Hhugs (Helping Households Under Great Stress) and MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) are well known for their opposition to the Prevent strategy and criticism of many other elements of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism work (more commonly known in North America and other parts of the world as PVE or CVE – preventing, or countering, violent extremism).

However, these groups in many instances have not merely attacked Government policy, but have disproportionately attacked Muslims who work on these issues and Muslim-led organisations which have received government funding for work in this area. For example, MEND (formerly known as iEngage) and some of its senior figures have been extremely critical of such organisations, including the Quilliam Foundation and the anti-Muslim hatred monitoring organisation, TellMAMA.<sup>4</sup>

Although these organisations are small in terms of their staff numbers, their reach through grassroots activities in Muslim communities around the country is substantial. So, while these groups have demonstrated an ability to get news stories into the mainstream press, their stance on Prevent and counter-extremism has also filtered down into communities in some instances. At times, this has resulted in pressure not only against the higher-profile counter-extremism activists, but against those delivering the Government's Prevent strategy or other similar work on a local level.

Just like with the Scotsman Hamish McDonald, many of those opposed to counter-terrorism policy accuse those Muslims who engage as being – as Baroness Falkner once put it – 'insufficiently Muslim', on the basis that *No True Muslim* would ever contribute to such an agenda.<sup>5</sup> The slurs of 'Uncle Tom', 'House Muslim' and 'Native Informant' are commonly deployed to support these arguments.

In a time of rising Islamist extremism and the spread of Takfiri doctrine made most famous by the Islamic State group, declaring Muslims not to be true believers is potentially dangerous, and can represent a real threat to the physical safety of individuals.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 'Setting the Record Straight', *Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)*, 2015 [https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Setting-the-record-straight\\_01.pdf](https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Setting-the-record-straight_01.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 'Islamophobia', *House of Lords Hansard: Volume 794*, 20 December 2018 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2018-12-20/debates/2F954D45-1962-4256-A492-22EBF6AEF8F0/Islamophobia>

<sup>6</sup> Takfirism is the practice of excommunicating Muslims by declaring their impurity. The terrorist group Islamic State used Takfiri doctrine to justify killing campaigns against Muslims it saw as enemies. <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/salafi-salad-jihadism-takfirism-and-use-violence>

At the very least, it is a deliberate attempt to undermine the standing and credibility of certain individuals in the eyes of British Muslims, which in turn undermines counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and integration efforts. The framing of those Muslims working on these issues as somehow betraying their communities hemorrhages support for vital government programs.

Just as concerning is the abandonment and lack of support given to these often isolated activists by the mainstream left. The anti-imperialist far-left has often participated in the hounding of these individuals and groups, some of which will be detailed in this report, but in the name of opposing UK policy, many on the mainstream left have failed to defend Muslims who actively promote the values of democracy, tolerance and gender equality.

For instance, where traditionally centre-right newspapers have come to the defence of individuals such as Maajid Nawaz and Sara Khan, at times traditionally left-leaning outlets such as *The Guardian* and others have amplified the criticism and attacks,<sup>7</sup> effectively abandoning liberal and reformist Muslims and siding with religious conservatives.

This in turn has enabled their attackers to push the narrative that they are serving government and Conservative interests.

Some of the most well-known and outspoken activists on these issues, such as Ed Husain, Maajid Nawaz, Sara Khan and Fiyaz Mughal have been labelled as 'Muslim validators' by their critics, and the weaponisation of Islamophobia accusations have been used to label such activists as part of an 'Islamophobia industry', alongside far-right extremist groups and figures such as the EDL and Britain First.<sup>8</sup>

In the worst instances, UK-based experts such as Dr Usama Hasan of the Quilliam Foundation have ended up in the crosshairs of Somali terror group, al-Shabaab. It is no coincidence that the narrator of the video which al-Shabaab released targeting prominent British Muslims spoke in an unmistakable London accent.<sup>9</sup> Closer to home, counter-extremism commissioner Sara Khan has received rape and death threats.<sup>10</sup> Both demonstrate the potency of the charge of betraying a community.

On the ground, British Muslims working with authorities or receiving funding for their work on counter-extremism are often subjected to immense and

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<sup>7</sup> Wasty, Bushra & Hassan Sulekha, 'Why we're concerned about Sara Khan, the new anti-extremism chief', *The Guardian*, 25 Jan 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/25/concerned-sara-khan-anti-extremism-british-muslims>

<sup>8</sup> Ingham-Barrow, Isabel (ed.), 'More than words: Approaching a definition of Islamophobia', *MEND*, June 2018 <https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Approaching-a-definition-of-Islamophobia-More-than-words.pdf> pp.50-65

<sup>9</sup> Malik, Shiv; Gardham, Duncan and Dodd, Vikram, 'Prominent UK Muslims under police protection after al-Shabaab threats', *The Guardian*, 17th October 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/17/al-shabaab-uk-muslims-police-protection>

<sup>10</sup> Hymas, Charles, 'Extremists are bullying critics into silence, says Britain's first counter-extremism commissioner', *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/19/extremists-bullying-critics-silence-saysbritains-first-counter/>

intense pressure. The resource deficit for tiny organisations working on integration and counter-extremism programs, compared to organisations tied to Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami or Hizb ut-Tahrir is dreadfully obvious when these campaigns are underway.

Isolated individuals and groups making sincere and commendable efforts to foster cohesion and fight extremism on shoestring budgets can find themselves the targets of co-ordinated campaigns from groups with the resources to operate nationally and with large followings on social media. In the worst instances, this can attract the attention of foreign states which are seeking to sow discord in Britain (detailed later in this report).

This can be shocking, distressing and difficult to manage for these groups and individuals. Due to the social media followings of some of the groups engaged in these campaigns, their attacks can quickly gain traction online and leave their targets shocked and unable to respond. In the worst case scenario, it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which an impressionable and angry follower takes matters into their own hands against the targeted individuals.

This report will explore some of the experiences of activists, experts, community groups and practitioners working on various elements of UK counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policy (such as the Prevent strategy), as well as a selection of case studies from their counterparts in North America. The North American examples show that the backlash against these liberal Muslims is ideological, not circumstantial and in response to government policy (such as Prevent).

Our efforts to counter extremism and terrorism will be ultimately unsuccessful without the support and engagement of Muslim communities in the UK and North America. It is essential therefore, that there is greater awareness of the social (and at times physical) price which Muslims working on these agendas are being forced to pay by Islamists and their political allies and enablers.

At its heart, the campaign against Muslims participating in initiatives designed to curb extremism and radicalisation are symptomatic of a broader struggle over control of the narrative of Islam and being Muslim in Western democracies.

## Methodology

This report is a collection of cases and personal testimonies relating to individuals and groups who identify as Muslim who have either:

- a) Worked within or in partnership with the UK Government's Prevent strategy (such as a local authority Prevent co-ordinator or a locally-funded community project);
- b) Worked within or received funding through the UK Government's Counter-Extremism Strategy, such as the Building a Stronger Britain Together programme;
- c) Been publicly active in counter-extremism or counter-terrorism efforts.

Some of the individuals detailed in this report are based in North America and therefore unrelated to the UK Government Counter-Terrorism or Counter-Extremism Strategy, yet the attacks and pressure they have faced are similar to their UK counterparts. In North America, work which would fall under the Prevent strategy in the UK is commonly referred to as 'CVE', or Countering Violent Extremism.

Many of the same attack lines are used against CVE as are directed at Prevent, such as that it targets Muslims or is in some way conducting 'surveillance' in communities. These same myths can present as many obstacles for North American Muslims as those in the UK in terms of securing trust and buy-in from local communities, but this can also translate to much more personal pressure.

This report is intended to shine a light on some of the abuse, pressure and harassment faced by Muslims who decide to take a stand on extremism. In this regard, a series of possible tangible actions to mitigate or alleviate the pressure for certain professions or activists are given at the end. These actions might be considered by local government, central government, donors/funders and law enforcement.

A number of individuals spoken to or interviewed for this report were unwilling to go on record or would only speak on condition of anonymity. In several cases, some of the more severe details about the experiences have been omitted as it would risk compromising the anonymity of the individuals. Therefore, some sections include narrative based on the testimony of the individuals. Furthermore, some individuals who were initially willing to speak later withdrew citing fear about rekindling abuse and harassment they have faced in the past.

This report takes into account the experiences of Muslims of various political affiliations, from Conservatives, to Liberal Democrats and Labour supporters, to their equivalents in North America. Despite accusations that Prevent and other measures attempt to create a 'government approved Islam', there is great political and ideological diversity among the respondents, but they are united in opposition to extremism and terrorism.

## Sara Khan – Inspire and The Commission for Countering Extremism

'Britain is one of the world's most successful multiracial, multireligious and multicultural societies. But our enjoyment of Britain's diversity must not prevent us from confronting the menace of extremism, even if that is sometimes embarrassing or difficult to do.'

– Theresa May, June 2017, announcing the creation of the independent Commission for Countering Extremism

### Inspire

In the wake of the Manchester Arena suicide bombing by 22-year-old Greater Manchester resident, Salman Abedi, then prime minister Theresa May set out plans for the establishment of a new Commission for Countering Extremism. The Commission would aim to challenge extremism in a way that would mirror the kind of progress which has been made in eroding societal racism in recent decades in Britain. The plans for the Commission had originally been outlined in the Conservative Party manifesto, but the multiple terror attacks which rocked Britain in 2017 likely provided a catalyst for its creation.

In January 2018, Sara Khan, the founder of Bradford-based Inspire, a women's rights NGO which aimed to tackle religious fundamentalism, was appointed to the two-year role of Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism.<sup>11</sup>

Khan's appointment was immediately labelled as 'controversial' in a series of pieces from major media outlets. For example, *The Independent's* coverage of the appointment led with the headline: 'Sara Khan: Government's appointment of new anti-extremism chief branded 'alarming' amid widespread criticism'.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, *The Guardian's* headline on the day of the appointment read: 'Choice of new UK anti-extremism chief criticised as "alarming"'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Commission for Countering Extremism on [www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/commission-for-countering-extremism): <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/commission-for-countering-extremism>

<sup>12</sup> Khan, Shehab, 'Sara Khan: Government's appointment of new anti-extremism chief branded 'alarming' amid widespread criticism', *The Independent*, 25 January 2018 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/sara-khan-extremism-appointment-government-criticism-a8177006.html>

<sup>13</sup> Grierson, Jamie, 'Choice of new UK anti-extremism chief criticised as 'alarming'', *The Guardian*, 25 January 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/24/leading-muslim-campaigner-sara-khan-head-anti-extremism-drive>



The use of the word 'alarming' in both articles refers to comments made by Conservative peer, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who implied that Khan is a 'creation of and mouthpiece for the Home Office'.<sup>14</sup> This assertion appears to be based on Sara Khan's support for the Government's Prevent and counter-extremism strategies. Coupled with assertions that Sara Khan is not trusted by, or is not representative of Muslim communities, the implication is made that a true representative of the Muslim community would not support Prevent or counter-terrorism/counter-extremism strategy.

In a Twitter exchange on these comments with activist and former Labour councillor Amina Lone, Warsi claimed that there was 'more to this appointment than meets the eye', and said that 'women must be policy makers and not just instruments of others [sic] policies'.<sup>15</sup> These comments go further than the initial assertions, alluding almost to conspiracy in the appointment.

Groups such as CAGE and MEND (Muslim Engagement & Development), were also outspoken in their response to Sara Khan's appointment. Since describing 'Jihadi John' Mohammed Emwazi as a 'beautiful young man' and blaming his radicalisation on British security services, CAGE has seen its mainstream credibility wane.

MEND, however, has been more successful in establishing itself and its voice on matters affecting Muslims. MEND was quick to criticise Sara Khan following the appointment, putting her rise to prominence as an activist down to her outspoken support of the Government's Prevent strategy.<sup>16</sup> The article which made this claim then went on to attack the Prevent strategy throughout, suggesting that the basis for the attacks on Sara Khan are borne entirely out of her support for Government counter-terrorism policy.

However, the pressure on Sara Khan came from groups and individuals perceived to be more credible, too. Although the coalition Government under David Cameron disengaged with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) on issues affecting Muslim communities, it is still portrayed by some media and politicians to be representative of a large section of British Muslims.

The MCB issued an official statement quickly following the announcement of Sara Khan's appointment to lead the Commission, expressing its 'grave concerns' and 'urging caution'.<sup>17</sup> Once again, the tone and content of the letter sought to distinguish Sara Khan from the 'Muslim communities', despite Sara Khan being a British Muslim woman herself:

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> 'New counter-extremism tsar Sara Khan faces calls to quit', *BBC News*, 25 January 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-42807560>

<sup>16</sup> 'Sara Khan: who is she and why can't she be the counter-extremism tsar', *MEND*, 1 February 2018 <https://www.mend.org.uk/news/sara-khan-cant-counter-extremism-tsar/>

<sup>17</sup> 'Commission for Countering Extremism: Muslim Council of Britain Urges Caution', *The Muslim Council of Britain*, 25 January 2018 <https://mcb.org.uk/press-releases/commission-for-countering-extremism-muslim-council-of-britain-urges-caution/>

'The Lead Commissioner should also have a track record of transparency, accountability and experience in garnering trust amongst the communities they serve.'

Harun Khan, Secretary General of the MCB, said: 'The fight against terrorism requires equal partnership between all parties, including Muslim communities. This appointment risks sending a clear and alarming message that the government has no intention of doing so.'<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, an open letter signed by over 100 Muslim organisations and activists was published in response to the appointment. The letter was signed by organisations such as CAGE, MEND and the MCB, as well as other organisations such as FOSIS (Federation of Student Islamic Societies).<sup>19</sup> Based on the ideological foundation of such organisations, it is unsurprising that they would criticise a liberal Muslim woman taking the role of counter-extremism commissioner. CAGE, for example, has previously argued for the repeal of *all* counter-terrorism legislation.<sup>20</sup>

The letter was also signed by Imam Shakeel Begg of Lewisham Islamic Centre in South-East London, a critic of Government counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy who, significantly, was labelled an 'extremist' by Justice Haddon-Cave during a libel case which Mr Begg brought against the BBC and lost.<sup>21</sup>

However, beyond these figures well known for their stance towards counter-extremism campaigners, a number of local religious and community leaders from around the UK also signed the letter, which claimed that Sara Khan has 'no grassroots credibility with the Muslim community'. Again, this claim seems to rest almost entirely on the fact that Khan's Inspire engaged with local Prevent strategy practitioners, although it did also question Sara Khan's credentials to tackle far-right extremism.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, since coming to lead the Commission, Sara Khan has been outspoken against the rising threat of far-right extremism on a number of occasions, including commissioning a number of research papers to examine the threat from far-right extremism in the UK.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in the United Kingdom', *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, December 2015, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/MB%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> 'CAGE calls for the abolition of anti-terror legislation', *CAGE*, 20th June 2017 <https://www.cage.ngo/cage-calls-for-the-abolition-of-anti-terror-legislation>

<sup>21</sup> Casciani, Dominic, 'Imam loses libel action against BBC over 'extreme' claim', *BBC News*, 28 October 2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37798201>

<sup>22</sup> 'Open letter to Home Secretary calling for removal of Sara Khan as counter-extremism tsar', *MEND*, 30 January 2018 <https://www.mend.org.uk/news/open-letter-home-secretary-calling-removal-sara-khan-counter-extremism-tsar/>

<sup>23</sup> 'Commission selects leading academics for research on extremism', *Commission for Countering Extremism*, 9 April 2019 <https://extremismcommission.blog.gov.uk/2019/04/09/commission-selects-leading-academics-for-research-on-extremism/>

One of the most inflammatory responses was an opinion piece published on the Middle East Eye news site, titled 'I am insulted at Sara Khan's appointment'.<sup>24</sup>

Sara Khan faced such a degree of criticism of her appointment that she responded in an article in *The Guardian* the same week with the headline: 'As anti-extremism chief, I hear my critics – but I'll listen to victims too.'<sup>25</sup> Given that a number of the signatories such as CAGE, MEND and others appear to have a vested interest in the failure of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy by virtue of their own worldviews, their attacks on Khan should be unsurprising.

Some organisations leading the chorus of criticism have an interest in the failure of counter-extremism policy as it would add further scrutiny to their own views and activities. Yet as London think tank Policy Exchange notes, even the more grassroots and community/locally-based organisations voicing opposition to the appointment have their own problematic links to sectarian and at times extremist organisations, many of which advocate against or marginalise the heavily persecuted Ahmadiyyah Muslim community.<sup>26</sup> Under a robust and effective counter-extremism policy it is likely that many of these signatories would see their activities heavily scrutinised because of these links.

Another incentive over the attacks from Muslim-led groups such as the signatories to the open letter is the question of who claims to represent Muslim communities. While neither Sara Khan nor her NGO Inspire have ever claimed to speak for the British Muslim population (Sara Khan has in fact suggested that there is no such thing as a homogenous British Muslim community), organisations such as the MCB aim to influence policy as a legitimate and leading arbiter between political leaders and the UK's Muslim population. However, 2016 research from Policy Exchange suggests the MCB may represent the views of as little as 2% of the British Muslim population.<sup>27</sup>

One defence of Sara Khan's appointment by former Deputy Mayor of London, Munira Mirza, scrutinised this claim to speak for Muslim communities:

'It is not clear on what basis the MCB and Warsi claim to speak for "the Muslim community". Those vague words, "considered by many" look more like a cover for their own prejudices, projected onto a population that is

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<sup>24</sup> Iqbal, Siema, 'I am insulted at Sara Khan's appointment', *Middle-East Eye*, 28 January 2018 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/i-am-insulted-sara-khans-appointment>

<sup>25</sup> Khan, Sara, 'As anti-extremism chief, I hear my critics – but I'll listen to victims too', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/26/extremism-victims-sara-khan-study>

<sup>26</sup> 'Islamist attacks on Sara Khan show importance of Extremism Commissioner', *Policy Exchange*, 28 Jan 2018 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/islamist-attacks-on-sara-khan-show-importance-of-extremism-commissioner/>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

never given a choice over who should represent them. Self-styled “Muslim community leaders” have long claimed to speak for millions when in fact they represent no-one but themselves and the dogmatic Islamist agenda that feeds extremism.<sup>28</sup>

### Criticism from the Left

Many of the attacks on Sara Khan have also come from the left, including from the left of the Labour Party, with Naz Shah, Labour MP for Bradford West leading much of the criticism for the Lead Commissioner. Shah has also previously attacked Sara Khan's Inspire NGO for receiving Prevent funding through the Home Office, and has also alleged a lack of transparency around this funding and questioned the impact of Inspire's work.<sup>29</sup>

At the time, even Labour's shadow home secretary Diane Abbott released a statement published on the Labour Party's official website, commenting that the appointment of Sara Khan would not 'build confidence across our communities'.<sup>30</sup> Again, echoing sentiments that a Muslim woman from Bradford was not only unrepresentative of 'communities', but that they had some reason to mistrust or fear Sara Khan's appointment.

### Conclusion

The experience of Sara Khan and the backlash she faced exemplifies the difficult choice faced by many Muslim activists and groups who feel strongly about extremism and terrorism issues and want to make a difference. Government Prevent funding or counter-extremism funding through the Building a Stronger Britain Together programme – both Home Office-managed – is available for community groups from around the UK, and is one of the only sources of funding available for work on these issues.

Yet Sara Khan faced backlash against her in 2018 and 2019 for funding which her NGO Inspire received years prior. This begs the question of what Muslims who want to help tackle extremism and radicalisation within their own communities are supposed to do so if not by taking Government funding.

On representation, if Sara Khan, the daughter of Pakistani immigrants who grew up in Bradford is somehow 'inauthentic' or 'unrepresentative' of Muslim communities, this begs another question: who is? With only 2% of British Muslims feeling represented by them, and their refusal to allow Ahmadi Muslims to identify as Muslim, an organisation like the Muslim

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<sup>28</sup> Mirza, Munira, 'Who Speaks for British Muslims?', *All in Britain*, 26 January 2018 <https://allinbritain.org/who-speaks-for-muslims/>

<sup>29</sup> 'Naz Shah MP launches attack on Sara Khan's Inspire', *5 Pillars*, 22 January 2016 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2016/01/22/naz-shah-mp-launches-attack-on-sara-khans-inspire/>

<sup>30</sup> 'Diane Abbott comments on the ill-advised appointment of Sara Khan', *Labour*, 25 January 2018 <https://labour.org.uk/press/diane-abbott-comments-ill-advised-appointment-sara-khan/>



Council of Britain's claim to know who speaks for British Muslims should be treated with scepticism.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the groups opposed to Sara Khan's appointment will have felt a double-edged sword in terms of risk. Firstly, if the commissioner were to expose and hold society to account over extremism, then many of those groups may have had their own views and activities exposed; secondly, it is in the interests of Islamist groups to pose as the only authentic representatives or interlocutors for British Muslims. Sara Khan, with her outspoken views on extremism and intolerance, will have jeopardised that credibility and undermined a key strategic objective. These two factors help explain why Sara Khan's appointment caused such consternation.

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<sup>31</sup> Frampton, Martyn; Goodhart, David and Mahmood MP, Khalid, 'Unsettled Belonging: A survey of Britain's Muslim Communities', *Policy Exchange*, Dec 2016 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/unsettled-belonging-a-survey-of-britains-muslim-communities/>

## Fiyaz Mughal OBE – Faith Matters

Fiyaz Mughal OBE is the founder and Director of Faith Matters, an organisation working to counter-extremism and support integration, as well as the founder and former director of TellMAMA, an organisation monitoring anti-Muslim hate crimes.<sup>32</sup>

Since founding both organisations, Mughal has been a vocal supporter of efforts to counter extremism in the UK. This has resulted in a number of years of abuse and harassment, both online and offline, which he claims has significantly impacted his life.

Mughal is often targeted and bracketed, alongside the Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Sara Khan, as a government stooge and a 'sell out' to Muslims. An insight into the type of abuse directed at Mughal can be found on social media:

*'Another House Muslim sellout. Fiyaz Mughal & @FaithMattersUK should be ashamed of themselves, getting rich off Prevent'.  
– Twitter user, 20 Sept 2015*

A number of those social media accounts attacking Mughal appear to be sock puppet accounts, in addition to the more well-known anti-Prevent and anti-CVE activists accusing Mughal of 'selling out' the Muslim Community, such as the below graphic which circulated on social media in 2018:



<sup>32</sup> Faith Matters <https://www.faith-matters.org/>

As with Khan and others in this report, the line of attack is to undermine credibility with Muslims and the individual's 'authenticity' as a Muslim.

The 'sellout' and 'house Muslims' slurs prompted TellMAMA to release a statement on their website criticising the terminology.<sup>33</sup> The statement was predictably mocked by their detractors, with tweets such as: 'this is hilarious. House Muslims complain about being called House Muslims'.<sup>34</sup> Mughal says:

'In particular, Islamist extremists in alliance with far left, have repeatedly used the online space to smear, threaten and make false statements about me, including that I am "Islamophobic". They have completely demeaned the term by using it against people like me who have spent decades challenging it, often at great personal risk and cost.'<sup>35</sup>

The abuse directed at Mughal is not just limited to social media and the online space:

'Because of the actions of these thugs, I have had to take serious and robust security measures with soft and hard security measures in place when I simply carry out my daily functions. The organisations I founded were set up to protect Muslims from hate, yet the Islamists who seek to control mindsets and manipulate the abuse suffered by Muslims for their own ends have directed their own campaign of hate against me as a result. This shows what a serious threat these people and groups pose not only to public discourse on serious issues, but to peaceful and law-abiding Muslims who they try to intimidate into silence.'

Like Sara Khan, Mughal's refusal to push a more divisive agenda has landed him in the crosshairs of groups which aim to position themselves as representative of British Muslims. There is a pattern of abuse and attacks levelled against any Muslims who reject the conventional narratives on British Muslims, from Maajid Nawaz, Sara Khan, Fiyaz Mughal, Haras Rafiq and others, regardless of their politics or other factors, attempts will be made by Islamist groups, 'representative' bodies and the far-left to sabotage the work and reputation of Muslims in the public sphere commenting on extremism, radicalisation and terrorism.

<sup>33</sup> 'House Muslims' is just as bad as 'House N.....', *Tell MAMA*, 23 September 2015  
<https://tellmamauk.org/house-muslims-is-just-as-bad-as-house-n/>

<sup>34</sup> Screengrabbed Twitter post, September 23rd 2015

<sup>35</sup> Private Correspondence with Fiyaz Mughal OBE

## Qanta Ahmed

Dr Qanta Ahmed is a British-American physician, author and journalist residing in New York.<sup>36</sup> Dr Ahmed is a frequent broadcast media contributor in both the United States and Britain and is widely published on Islamism, Islamist terrorism and contemporary antisemitism including in *The Guardian*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Independent* and *The Spectator*. She has been fiercely criticised for her outspoken criticism of Islamism and the support Islamists receive from the political left.

She has written extensively on a number of sensitive subjects, including her first book *In the Land of Invisible Women*, on her experience of living and working in Saudi Arabia. She has also completed a treatise on the Psychological Manipulation of Islam in the Service of Terror following which Dr Ahmed travelled to the Swat Valley in Pakistan to meet former child soldiers of the Taliban during their deradicalization. As a result of her work in this area, Dr Ahmed has given testimony in the US Congress, including at the 5th Investigative Hearings on Radical Islam in the United States at the request of Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, Congressman Peter King.<sup>37</sup>

Dr Ahmed has also been critical of a number of Muslim representative organisations and the use of the term 'Islamophobia'. After publishing a column in *The Spectator* defending Boris Johnson's right to satirical comments on the burka while disagreeing with Johnson's tolerance for the niqab in British society, Dr Ahmed was criticised for 'misrepresenting Muslim behaviour and belief' in a report by the Centre for Media Monitoring (a Muslim Council of Britain project).<sup>38</sup>

Dr Ahmed summarised this response from a range of organisations in her *Spectator* column:

'Have you ever wondered why there are so few moderate Muslim voices in the press? It's not because they don't exist. There are over a billion of us in the world. In many cases, it's because of the way we are treated by hardliners. Once again, they have trained their crosshairs on me, this time charging me with "misrepresenting Muslim behaviour and belief" and "negating the belief of some Muslims". If a Muslim speaks up against political Islam – questioning the legitimacy of these self-appointed spokesmen – this is what we can expect'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.qantaahmed.com/bio/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg76517/html/CHRG-112hhrg76517.htm>

<sup>38</sup> <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CfMM-Quarterly-Report-Oct-Dec-2018.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2019/07/what-does-the-muslim-council-of-britain-have-against-muslims-like-me/>



Instead of pushing back against her argument – that covering the face as a Muslim woman is not normative Islam and that Johnson's comments were not hateful – the MCB elected simply to argue that Ahmed was being 'Islamophobic'. As Dr Ahmed writes:

'But rather than argue its case, groups like the Muslim Council of Britain seek to shut down debate altogether. By painting arguments like mine as bigoted and beyond-the-pale, they aim to wrest control of the conversation in favour of another view: that Muslims are perennially demonised and objectified by the very same societies, and media outlets, which allow us to freely express our views.'<sup>40</sup>

### Lonely Work

In private correspondence conducted for this report, Dr Ahmed explained that being a Muslim outspoken on Islamism is 'lonely work'.

The isolation of this work is not only a symptom of being denounced by Islamists through their co-ordinated attacks on liberal Muslims, but also because there is a failure of moderate, pluralist, liberal Muslim individuals or organisations to work together. Instead, Dr Ahmed suggests that liberal Muslim organisations sometimes work in competition, at least in the US, for invitations to events, meetings, for political contacts and in some instances funding (Dr Ahmed is not funded by any individual or organization).

Dr Ahmed has also received a great deal of backlash for her criticism of US Democrat Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib (the first Muslim women elected to the US Congress) who she has criticised for pushing the same 'victimhood narratives' as Islamists while simultaneously demonising the state of Israel and promoting its boycott.<sup>41</sup>

In one tweet in response, the face of the online news show 'The Young Turks', Cenk Uygur, tweeted the following suggestion, undermining the idea that Dr Ahmed holds her own opinions as private citizen and Muslim woman:

'Fox News Guest Claims Muslim Reps. Tlaib and Omar Suffer From "Grotesque Holocaust Envy" <https://mediaite.com/news/fox-news-guest-claims-muslim-reps-tlaib-and-omar-suffer-from-grotesque-holocaust-envy/>... via @mediaite

I will reply to Dr. Qanta Ahmed on tonight's show. I hope she at least gets paid well.'<sup>42</sup>

An unfortunate suggestion, given that Dr Ahmed is still a full-time practising academic physician whose media appearances are 'extra-curricular'. Ahmed explains in private correspondence that her public commentary

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> <https://twitter.com/MissDiagnosis/status/1164010381762805760?s=20>

<sup>42</sup> <https://twitter.com/cenkuygur/status/1163902324894420993?s=20>



In terms of physical risk, I am much more cautious about where I go and who I speak to. It hasn't curtailed me in any way, but I am definitely more cautious.

These groups (like the MCB) denigrating me doesn't surprise me at all. What's been most disheartening is that there are so few voices waging the same battle on Islamist extremism.

In this I have to take my hat off to the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological offshoots, because they're so good at standing together and working as a group even from different organisations.

When I criticise Islamist figures in the public sphere, you find out that you're fighting a large number of Muslims who think that you're singling them out – even though I'm a Muslim woman – and then you're fighting the left who thinks that these people are victims of racism and they're only being vilified on a racial basis, not for their ideas or beliefs, and then you're fighting the encroachment of Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood ideas into the left on top of that.

In comparison, when I visit the Muslim world and meet people who have fought against Islamism<sup>48</sup> they are so supportive of everything I have to say on this issue, because they have seen the consequences of Islamist power.

In recent years, there are fewer and fewer publications where these ideas are accepted. Now that I'm identified as someone who is critical of Muslims – because people can't differentiate between Muslims and Islamists – there is an embargo on these ideas.

Because of the freedoms in the West, the Muslim Brotherhood risks becoming more powerful in the West than it ever was in the Arab World. I have Egyptian colleagues who cannot believe how unwilling the United States is to take them on, because people don't even know how to begin to address them.

The Islamists have been very successful in portraying themselves as persecuted religious minorities, instead of the totalitarian extremists that they are, and we in the West have swallowed that lock, stock and barrel. This makes it incredibly difficult to be outspoken against them, even though we've known for decades that that is how they operate.

In America, there is so few of us speaking out publicly against Islamism and the claims of Muslim representative bodies to speak

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<sup>48</sup> Dr Ahmed refers here to the Pakistani North Western Frontier Corps- the Rangers who defeated the Taliban to reclaim the Swat Valley; the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan who defeated ISIS; the Gaza Division of the IDF confronting Hamas including Muslim soldiers serving the IDF

for all Muslims, you could literally fit us all into one room. But there is no collegiality. Unless we find a way to collaborate, this is a losing war.

It's not even the far left, it's all or at least most of the left, that has been so successfully duped that they feel they have to protect Islamists.

My first experience of this was in 2012 when I was called to the Capitol to testify on domestic radicalisation in a series of hearings.

When I testified I was immediately discredited by one of the Democrat committee members on the basis that I had no access to classified material, that I wasn't American at that time and had no reason to testify, that I had no work on the ground with extremists.

I was amazed at the questions the Democrats were asking, conflating my criticism of Islamists with Muslims, one Congresswoman said that I should be careful of my words, because words like mine led to the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. It did not matter of course, that I am Muslim myself.

The Democrats were looking at Islamism firmly through a civil rights lens. People on that side are so conscious of the civil rights legacy that they want to see Islamists as victims. It's never about the ideas, they believe criticism is only motivated by racism.

It's so appalling that no one speaks out or challenges these ideas, so I do keep going but there could come a point where I say 'I've had enough', but I don't think I'm quite there yet.

I have one or two but it would be so good if one had some more friends who are doing this kind of work to pick up the phone and talk to.

People are unable to conceive that there are Muslims who look like me, dress like me, live like me who are completely engaged with Islam. Because the Islamist portrayal of Islam has so successfully sold that women have cover up, you have to identify as oppressed, you have to appear that you're under siege even as you enjoy freedoms in a democracy. They've got no concept that Muslims don't have to look like this, they think that all Muslims have to look and be politically engaged like (activist) Linda Sarsour.'



## Community projects under fire

When it comes to engaging with Muslim groups and individual campaigners, the Prevent and counter-extremism strategies seem unable to satisfy the detractors.

Without engaging Muslim organisations, funding Muslim-led campaigns or employing Muslim practitioners, Prevent and other counter-extremism initiatives are criticised for a lack of knowledge or leadership from credible Muslim voices.

Yet when Muslim groups and individuals are engaged in partnership, Prevent is criticised for 'targeting' the Muslim community. For example, academic Heath-Kelly has suggested that such engagement implies that those groups are a 'risk'.<sup>49</sup>

Government must better communicate why Muslim groups and Muslim-led projects are engaged with, rather than simply trying to show how the strategies are 'balanced'. The principle terror threat to the United Kingdom is posed by Islamist terrorists – a fact which is reflected in both Prevent referral statistics and in the number of plots (both successful and disrupted).<sup>50</sup>

While many have tried to downplay the role of ideology or the religious motivation of Jihadist terrorists, the fact remains that these groups draw heavily on Islamic scripture and theology and continue to target Muslim communities in the West with their recruitment efforts. In this context, alternative narratives from mainstream faith leaders with credible knowledge of faith, or strong Muslim role models in the community, can contribute to a stronger civil society capacity to root out extremism and prevent individuals from being radicalised.

Muslim community organisations and faith leaders will remain an essential component to the delivery of a successful terrorism prevention or counter-extremism strategy.

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<sup>49</sup> Ali, N. (2015) Mapping the Muslim community; the politics of counterradicalisation in Britain. In Heath-Kelly, C., C. Beaker-Beall and L. Jarvis (eds.) *Counter Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge)

<sup>50</sup> 'Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2017 to March 2018', *Home Office*, 13 December 2018 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/763254/individuals-referred-supported-prevent-programme-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3118.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/763254/individuals-referred-supported-prevent-programme-apr2017-mar2018-hosb3118.pdf) and Bentham, Martin, 'MI5 boss warns of 'startling' IS terror threat to Britain', *Evening Standard*, 1 May 2019 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/mi5-boss-warns-of-startling-is-terror-threat-to-britain-a4131271.html>

## UK Local Delivery

Some of the activists detailed in previous sections have come under the most pointed and sustained criticism for their work in support of Government counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy, yet in many instances, their profile, credibility and stature has meant that other activists, commentators and influencers have been able to defend on behalf of the subject under attack.

For example, as detailed above, charity founder and former Labour councillor Amina Lone responded to Baroness Warsi's criticism of Sara Khan on social media. *The Telegraph*, *The Jewish Chronicle* and the Policy Exchange think tank also all wrote their own responses in defence of the criticism faced by Sara Khan's appointment to lead the Commission for Countering Extremism.

However, many local and community level activists do not enjoy the same level of public profile or support network able to defend against such attacks. Yet, attacks against Muslim-led initiatives and activists at a grassroots level do occur.

The attacks may be less high profile and less targeted than those against the likes of Sara Khan – which made national headlines – but they can be just as corrosive and echo much of the same messaging used against the more high-profile activists. These attacks can have an impact on personal relationships and standing within the community. In the worst instances, these attacks can impact funding for community organisations with very few resources to begin with, as well as deter others from becoming involved or supporting the mission.

For example, the 5Pillars website, which describes itself as a 'Muslim community media platform' has sought to 'expose' Muslim groups and activists which either collaborate with or receive funding from Prevent through the Home Office.

In a January 2017 article headlined 'EXPOSED: The Muslim organisations that get Prevent funding', 5Pillars sought to undermine a number of Muslim-led national counternarrative initiatives which received Prevent funding by labelling them as 'part of a British government covert propaganda strategy'.<sup>51</sup> The initiatives are therefore not only framed as top down, rather than as community organisations which have approached the Home Office for funding, but as part of a 'propaganda' campaign, therefore likening government efforts to counter radicalisation to the activities of an authoritarian regime.

This was not without precedent, *The Guardian* ran an article the previous year with the headline 'Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired

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<sup>51</sup> 'Exposed: The Muslim organisations that get Prevent funding', *5 Pillars*, 3 January 2017 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2017/01/03/exposed-the-muslim-organisations-that-get-prevent-funding/>

by the cold war'.<sup>52</sup> RICU refers to the Home Office's Research, Information and Communications Unit, which Charles Farr, then head of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) described to MPs at a Home Affairs Select Committee as having two functions:

'advising the rest of government but actually, not just government, officialdom, from a brigade commander in Helmand province through to a chief constable in Yorkshire, about how they may wish to characterise the threat we face and describe the response that we are making and, secondly, rather different, they are responsible for challenging the propaganda which comes to us from al-Qaeda and associated groups'<sup>53</sup>

In the context of pushing back against al-Qaeda and later Islamic State propaganda which pushes a divisive message for Muslims in the West, a message which is often amplified or parroted by non-violent Islamist groups, the need for alternative narratives which encourage a sense of belonging in the UK and unity against extremism and terrorism should be welcomed.

However, with niche outlets like 5Pillars and mainstream newspapers like *The Guardian* framing RICU's activities as simply propaganda, these projects are desperately undermined and seen instead as tools of state control and manipulation – rather than attempts to prevent citizens from ruining their own lives or causing harm to others by becoming involved in terrorism.

CAGE went further, describing RICU's activities in supporting grassroots activities as the British state's efforts at 'covertly engineering the thoughts of its citizens'.<sup>54</sup>

One of the most effective mischaracterisations of Prevent or counter-extremism work has been to suggest that Muslim groups which access funding (such as through Prevent) are allowing their beneficiaries, users or target audience to be subject to a covert propaganda campaign, a Home Office psy-ops campaign or worse, to be under some kind of surveillance. This is also a narrative which has struck a chord in North America and undermined Countering Violent Extremism work across the Atlantic (which will be discussed later in this report).

Some recent examples of the use of this narrative to undermine laudable initiatives involving British Muslims are detailed below.

<sup>52</sup> Cobain, Ian; Ross, Alice; Evans, Rob; Mahmood, Mona, 'Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the cold war', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>

<sup>53</sup> 'Project CONTEST: The Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy – Home Affairs', *Parliament*, 26 February 2009 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmhaff/212/09022602.htm>

<sup>54</sup> [http://www.cageuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CAGE\\_WACI.pdf](http://www.cageuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CAGE_WACI.pdf)

## Bradford Literature Festival Boycott

### ***Literature festival makes national headlines when guests boycott due to funding received through Home Office Counter-Extremism efforts***

In June 2019, a number of advertised guests withdrew from the annual Bradford Literature Festival – a Muslim-led event – over the fact that the festival had received a small amount of funding through the Home Office Building A Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme, part of the Counter-Extremism Strategy.<sup>55</sup>

The BLF applied for a limited amount of BSBT funding to run some pre-festival projects for Muslim women attendees. Despite the limited nature of the project in relation to the wider BLF event, the author boycotts received mainstream press attention and may have damaged the credibility of BLF.

Several of the authors charged that they did not want to be seen to legitimise or give credibility to 'monitoring' which occurs under the Counter-Extremism Strategy. There were also frequent conflation with the Prevent Strategy, although Prevent and the Counter-Extremism strategies are entirely separate.

*The Guardian* newspaper published the case by one of the boycotters which outlined this mischaracterisation:

'...it is highly problematic to suggest that the people the projects engage are at risk of becoming extremists due solely to their identity. It is rooted in the counter-radicalisation thesis that suggests that since *any* Muslim could become violent, all Muslims require monitoring. It reduces Muslims to subjects requiring de-radicalisation.'<sup>56</sup>

Aside from the erroneous conflation with the work of the Prevent Strategy, the suggestion here, again, is that beneficiaries of such projects are deemed to be 'at risk', or worse, that they are being monitored or are the subjects of propaganda campaigns. This is not the case.

Community projects aimed at countering radicalisation and/or extremism do not necessarily see their main users or beneficiaries as 'at risk' of radicalisation. Although for certain projects, this may be the case – such as direct intervention programmes with individuals. Projects such as those run through BSBT may wish to see other outcomes of the beneficiaries such as (but not limited to):

- Beneficiaries to become strong advocates against extremism in their local communities

<sup>55</sup> 'Bradford Literature Festival boycott over anti-extremism cash', *BBC News*, 20 June 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-48707061>

<sup>56</sup> Manzoor-Khan, Suhaimah and Mir, Saima, 'Does Bradford festival's counter-extremism funding warrant a boycott?', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/24/bradford-literary-festival-counter-extremism-funding-boycott>



- Empowering members of the community (especially women and young people) can encourage integration and bypass extremists and community gatekeepers who intend to keep alternative voices and reformers marginalised

What's more, considering the theological basis of modern extremist ideologies such as that of al-Qaeda, Islamic State, or non-violent Islamist groups, it is imperative that credible advocates against such theological narratives are cultivated and supported in towns and cities across the United Kingdom.

Outcomes such as these need to be better communicated by authorities, at present, people like those boycotting BLF are being allowed to set the narrative.

The furore over the festival was covered in *The Guardian*, the Middle East Eye, BBC News and in a number of regional and specialised outlets. Festival organisers made the following comments to *The Guardian* and fortunately the event proceeded:

'BLF's work in Bradford spans all communities particularly those which are the most disadvantaged. The BSBT programme is a broad initiative, working with communities across the board. For us, in the context of this festival, the focus of the BSBT work has been on promoting the value of education and the importance of literacy, which is central to the ethos of this festival.'<sup>57</sup>

However, a small counter-festival was also arranged nearby by some of the boycotters and some of the fiercest critics of counter-extremism work and Prevent.

The backlash against BLF started on the political left, with writers and authors who would identify as left-wing pulling out of the festival over the modest BSBT funding for pre-festival activities, although it was later joined and supported by groups such as CAGE.<sup>58</sup>

That a laudable project such as the Bradford Literature Festival can receive such a high-profile backlash for holding an integration project with a modest grant from BSBT speaks to a concerning state of affairs over counter-extremism efforts in the UK. There are critics who are unlikely to be convinced, and engaging with them will reap few benefits from a government point of view, but the benefits of encouraging integration and the empowerment of minority women needs to be better communicated by policymakers and experts.

<sup>57</sup> Wolfe-Robinson, Maya, 'Six pull out of Bradford festival over counter-extremism funding', *The Guardian*, 20 June 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/20/six-pull-out-bradford-literature-festival-counter-extremism-funding>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-amnesty-shouldnt-support-men-like-moazzam-begg-1895848.html>

## Nursery, Stoke-on-Trent

### ***Small community nursery pressured to return a grant awarded through the Home Office BSBT programme (counter-extremism)***

The Home Office's Counter-Extremism Strategy and resulting Building A Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme are distinct from the Prevent strategy, which is one strand of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy, CONTEST. The BSBT programme is a central government funding stream open to registered charities and described as:

'The Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme supports civil society and community organisations who work to create more resilient communities, stand up to extremism in all its forms and offer vulnerable individuals a positive alternative, regardless of race, faith, sexuality, age and gender.'<sup>59</sup>

BSBT is an open and transparent funding stream, and a list of the 233 groups which have received funding or in-kind support through BSBT are published on the Gov.uk website.<sup>60</sup>

One such organisation which had been awarded funding for a project through the BSBT programme was a Muslim-led nursery in Stoke-on-Trent.

The project which was due to be run through BSBT sought to work with young people possibly sympathetic to, or involved in far-right milieus, to 'improve their understanding of Islam and Muslims', according to a post on the nursery's Facebook page.<sup>61</sup>

The organisation worked with young people 'aligned' to far-right groups, including arranging tours of the associated Mosque and holding 'challenging conversations'.<sup>62</sup> The post claims that such initiatives were part of the organisation's work, and that the BSBT funding would only support the continuation of work already being delivered.

However, as a number of reports and rumour began to circulate that the nursery had received Prevent funding, rather than BSBT funding, it took to social media to attempt to reassure those with concerns. Curiously, the statement made on Facebook also stresses that recent renovations at the nursery were possible with funding through the Community Investment Fund through Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Clearly, as with the experiences of some individual practitioners detailed later in this report, accusations have been made that Prevent funding is

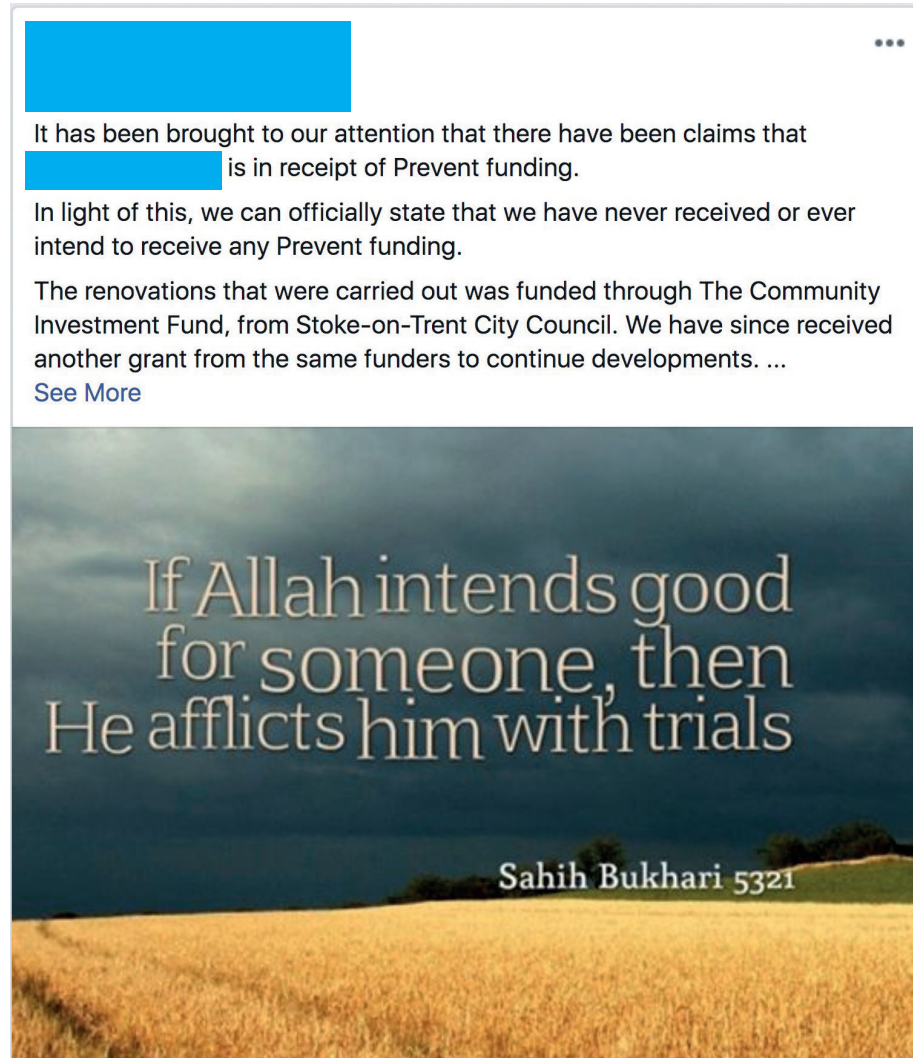
<sup>59</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/building-a-stronger-britain-together>

<sup>60</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/809584/BSBT-list-of-groups-jun-19-v2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809584/BSBT-list-of-groups-jun-19-v2.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Facebook post from 13th June 2019

<sup>62</sup> 11th June Facebook post

responsible for material improvements and purchases (one practitioner's family cars were explained by funding from Prevent and the security services). This is a pernicious mischaracterisation of Prevent funding which adds to suspicion and resentment and can be weaponised against community organisations and those employed through Prevent.



The first indication of there being controversy surrounding the funding for the nursery appears on the 11th June 2019, as the post (screenshotted above) denies accusations of receiving Prevent funding.

The statement 'We believe that the mu'min [believers] is put through tests and this is one of those tests', in combination with the image, provides an insight into the type of pressure the community group was being subjected to.

In the comments on the post, the nursery invites followers to attend a community meeting the following day to express concerns. A reply to the comment is screengrabbed and posted below:

Walkam Salaam

I would like to ask a few questions.

Does the funding include tackling Islamic extremism? If it does then although on the surface it seems good, you are subconsciously implying that Islam has a extremist problem and that muslims are not doing enough to root out the problem. And in essence agreeing to the Islamophobes narrative.

Secondly would you not have to go by the government definition of extremism (which in itself is very vague & broad). For example if young child said that Israeli land belongs to Palestians and that Israel is illegal occupier force what would you organisation reponse be? As the government classes that as extremist behaviour.

Also could you give more details of projects where you have engaged with far right as not seen on your social media posts. And what was the outcome of those projects.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 16w



This comment is interesting in particular for its assertion that tackling Islamic extremism is 'subconsciously implying that Islam has a extremist problem'.

The pattern of denying that Islamist extremism is an issue is not an uncommon myth for detractors of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism practitioners to peddle in order to undermine these efforts.

Again, the assertion that the Government classes believing that 'Israeli land belongs to Palestinians' as extremist behaviour is completely misleading. There is no such guidance to suggest or enforce this 'threshold'.

Following the meeting, the nursery again took to Facebook on the 13th June to announce their withdrawal from the BSBT programme:

'Official Statement (13/06/2019):

Firstly, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who took the time out of to attend the meeting tonight. We would also like to thank members of the community who provided feedback. The nursery has always endeavoured to serve the local community and its sentiments. Considering this, we have decided collectively to withdraw from the BSBT program with immediate effect.

Our intentions are always to contribute to the excellent standards of education with the most upmost integrity. We have worked with young people at risk of joining far-right extremist and Islamophobic groups to improve their understanding of Islam and Muslims. Despite withdrawing from the BSBT initiative we will continue this work as we have done previously.

Once more, we would like to thank everyone for their support and raising their concerns. We will always make time to listen, consult and respond.

Finally, we will continue to serve our local children and families with sincerity and integrity.<sup>63</sup>

The original version of this report featured the name of the nursery described above. This was removed after Civitas was made aware at the point of publication of the severity of ongoing risks to both the physical safety and the livelihoods of the individuals involved.

For community organisations working on cross-cultural and interfaith initiatives the BSBT programme can be an important source of funding, yet the pressure on and suspicion of the nursery, a local community organisation, was such that the group felt it necessary to turn down a significant revenue source.

Like with Bradford Literary Festival, the conflation between counter-extremism and Prevent is clearly a factor. However, general suspicion and rejection of any need to tackle extremism is also an issue for community groups and individuals. Both central and local government have a role to play in more clearly communicating the need for community groups, particularly Muslim groups, to engage in this work, yet those isolating and harassing community groups must also be held to account.

## **Love Your Neighbour Holocaust Memorial Event**

### ***Interfaith event cancelled due to intimidation***

In early 2019, a Holocaust Memorial event designed to raise awareness of the efforts of Albanian Muslims to save Jews during the Second World War was due to be held at the Shia Markaz El Tathgheef El-Eslami, or Centre for Islamic Enlightening (IEC) in the North London Borough of Barnet.<sup>64</sup>

However, after a considerable backlash the IEC took the decision to cancel the event held in partnership with Yad Vashem UK Foundation (Yad Vashem is Israel's official Holocaust memorial organisation).<sup>65</sup>

Although the event was not billed as counter-extremism or Prevent related, nor was it officially supported by either, the aims of encouraging community cohesion and interfaith understanding fit with both Prevent and the Counter-Extremism Strategy's resilience-building aims. However, according to local press reports, the event was supported by the local authority-led Barnet Multi-Faith Forum.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 13th June 2019 Facebook post

<sup>64</sup> The Centre for Islamic Enlightening; Markaz El Tathgheef El Eslami <https://iec.org.uk/>

<sup>65</sup> Yad Vashem UK <http://yadvashem.org.uk/>

<sup>66</sup> Walawalkar, Aaron, 'Holocaust memorial exhibition forced from Golders Green to Redbridge', *Ham&High*, 16 January 2019 <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/cancelled-golders-green-holocaust-memorial-event-finds-new-redbridge-home-1-5854619>



The principal backlash began after the 5Pillars website ran a story about the IEC's plans to hold the 'Israeli Holocaust event'.<sup>67</sup> Much of the follow-up dissent and criticism to this story was led by the website's editor and journalist for Press TV, Roshan Salih, who told his 5000+ followers that:

'Yad Vashem isn't just a museum that remembers the holocaust, it's an Israeli institution that actively promotes Israel and Zionism. So therefore this mosque in Golders Green should have nothing to do with it. No to any kind of normalisation with Israel or Israeli institutions.'<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, Iranian state-affiliated Press TV, was quick to follow up on Twitter and criticise both the event and the Mosque for hosting:

'OUTRAGEOUS: Golders Green mosque set to hold an 'interfaith' event with #Zionists in London. What about Palestine? #FreePalestine #London'<sup>69</sup>

Salih had also previously singled out Muslim organisations for engaging in interfaith work which was described in an article for 5 Pillars as 'cosying up to Zionists'.<sup>70</sup>

The intensity of the backlash increased as Mehr News Agency, a pro-regime media outlet in Tehran, also picked up on the story and according to the Jewish Chronicle, labelled the Mosque as a 'Shirazi cult'.<sup>71</sup> The Shirazis are minority group often in dispute with the Khomeini regime, leading to speculation that the Mosque now feared for its community in Iran as well as its worshippers in North London.<sup>72</sup>

Shortly following the condemnation from 5Pillars, Press TV and Mehr, the online furore translated to the real world, as a source involved in the organisation of the event suggested that in addition to the online abuse on both Facebook and Twitter, individuals connected to the Mosque began to receive threatening anonymous phone calls in order to intimidate them. According to a source involved in the organisation of the event, this left the Mosque leadership fearing for their own personal safety.

The Mosque had received unwanted attention a number of times previously, before the Mosque had been established in the Hippodrome at Golders Green it was the subject of the heated criticism from elements in the local Jewish community. The backlash to the Mosque's opening was

<sup>67</sup> 'Mosque in Golders Green to host Israeli Holocaust event', *5 Pillars*, 30 December 2018 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2018/12/30/mosque-in-golders-green-to-host-israeli-holocaust-event/>

<sup>68</sup> Twitter Post <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1078958317509267458?s=20>

<sup>69</sup> Twitter Post <https://twitter.com/Presstvuk/status/1078998038901899266?s=20>

<sup>70</sup> 'Why are Muslim organisations getting cosy with Zionists', *5 Pillars*, 20 November 2018 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2018/11/20/why-muslim-organisations-are-getting-cosy-with-zionists/>

<sup>71</sup> Doherty, Rosa, 'Golders Green Mosque cancelled Shoah exhibition over Iran fears', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 10 January 2019 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/golders-green-mosque-cancelled-shoah-exhibition-over-iran-fears-1.478387>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

described in a letter penned by faith leaders as a 'hostile and, at times, racist response to the new Islamic centre's opening'.<sup>73</sup>

On this occasion, the pressure reached such an extent (from extreme elements in the Jewish community as well) that the Mosque cancelled the event short notice and released a statement on social media suggesting that it was not aware of Yad Vashem's 'international links'.<sup>74</sup>

In a blog post, David Toubé, Director of Policy at Quilliam, wrote on the event's cancellation:

'A Shi'a group which sought to celebrate and commemorate the heroism of Muslims who protected Jews during the Holocaust was bullied and threatened by the Islamic Republic of Iran and its cheerleaders out of doing so.'<sup>75</sup>

A replacement venue was found at short notice in Eton Road Mosque in the London Borough of Redbridge in East London. The mosque managed to evade a good deal of intimidation and abuse as the venue was not released publicly until very shortly before the event.

Nonetheless, the 5Pillars website still condemned the mosque in question when its role was revealed publicly and attempted to apply pressure to the Mosque's leader, Bashir Chaudhry.<sup>76</sup>

After the event photos were published online by some of those who condemned it. Some of the comments online referred to the event attendees as 'coconuts', and called Eton Road Mosque 'Uncle Tom's Mosque', damaging labels which imply inauthenticity (these will be explored further in later sections).<sup>77</sup>

Another commenter exposed sectarian biases by questioning if the establishment was a real Mosque, saying it looked more like a 'Qadiani or Shia temple'.<sup>78</sup> 'Qadiani' is a derogatory term used to describe the persecuted Ahmadi minority. A number of comments also expressed disdain for counter-extremism commissioner Sara Khan, one sarcastically commenting that it would be the only time Khan would be seen in a Mosque – again questioning Khan's Muslim 'credentials'.

Eton Road Mosque's leadership certainly felt the pressure, but a source close to the event suggested that the support of local politicians and

<sup>73</sup> Sherwood, Harriet, 'Faith leaders condemn 'racist' objections to Golders Green Mosque', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/06/hippodrome-golders-green-faith-leaders-condemn-racist-objections-mosque>

<sup>74</sup> Doherty, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 10 January 2019

<sup>75</sup> Toubé, David, 'The Depressing Saga of the Holocaust Exhibition in Golders Green', *Quilliam*, 4 January 2019 <http://journal.quilliaminternational.com/2019/01/04/the-depressing-saga-of-the-holocaust-exhibition-in-golders-green/>

<sup>76</sup> 'Eton Road mosque in Ilford might reconsider hosting Israeli Holocaust exhibition', *5 Pillars*, 18 January 2019 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2019/01/18/eton-road-mosque-in-ilford-might-reconsider-hosting-holocaust-exhibition/>

<sup>77</sup> 5Pillars Facebook post 22nd January 2019

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

leaders, including Mike Gapes MP and the leadership of Redbridge Council was a significant factor in the event going ahead, serving to reassure the individuals involved.

The backlash against the IEC in Golders Green leading to the cancellation and subsequent move of a laudable interfaith and intercultural event demonstrates the risk individuals and groups who stray from a tightly controlled narrative will face from certain quarters.

### **Scottish Association of Minority Ethnic Educators (SAMEE)**

#### ***Small educational charity accused of conducting surveillance over £5,000 grant from Police Scotland***

In Scotland where the Prevent strategy traditionally has had a lighter footprint, some community groups have nonetheless come under fire for engaging with Prevent, or even broader projects which aim to tackle extremism and radicalisation alongside multiple other harms/issues.

For example, the Scottish Association of Minority Ethnic Educators (SAMEE), came under fire from Scotland Against Criminalising Communities (SARC), a group which campaigns against Prevent and broader counter-terrorism legislation.<sup>79</sup> In 2017 SARC examined SAMEE's accounts for the year ending 2015 and criticised the group in an open letter on their website for receiving £5,000 in funding from Police Scotland.<sup>80</sup>

The SARC letter claims that 'Working with police will inevitably expose SAMEE to the pernicious Prevent strategy'. SARC charges that SAMEE, instead of providing opportunities for ethnic minorities, 'has created opportunities for Police Scotland to influence minority ethnic educators and parents.'<sup>81</sup> Once again, the charge is one of betrayal.

For a small organisation like SAMEE, incidents of this sort can be extremely challenging to manage in terms of reputation and accessing future beneficiaries and donors. If beneficiaries are being told they are actually being subjected to covert propaganda campaigns or intelligence gathering this can clearly be immensely damaging and completely unexpected for the organisation running the project.

It is also completely disproportionate that a small grant of £5,000 could be used in the way that SARC and other detractors suggest. That a small community group could conduct intelligence gathering or surveillance on behalf of authorities, let alone for such modest amounts of funding, should be a charge which is exposed for how flimsy it is.

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<sup>79</sup> Scottish Association of Minority Ethnic Educators <https://www.samee.org.uk/>

<sup>80</sup> Haley, Richard, 'Open Letter to SAMEE – What have the Police bought from you?', SACC <http://www.sacc.org.uk/articles/2017/open-letter-samee-what-have-police-bought-you>

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

The SAMEE project looked at a range of issues which educators could address, radicalisation among them. Engaging with the police should be a completely legitimate endeavour for any community organisation which should not be shamed or used against them. This perpetuates a 'them and us' mentality and is an obstacle to integration of minority communities.

## Conclusion

Small, local community organisations with only a handful of staff at best are coming under attack from organised campaigns of abuse and smear. On a local level these are directed by local Islamist groups, on a national level by left-wing figures and NGOs. In the most severe case, these groups can even come under attack from foreign regimes – as was the case with the Golders Green Mosque coming under attack from the propaganda arms of the Iranian state.

Ironically, organisations with small budgets and limited resources are being characterised as surveillance arms of the British state or funded by 'Zionists' by organisations with far bigger budgets and, at times, links to overseas regimes.<sup>82</sup>

These consequences must be considered by funders, donors and partners such as the local authorities and police. Risk assessments must be conducted and action plans put into place for when (not if) community groups find themselves under such intense pressure. For community groups with small budgets, little to no security and no experience in dealing with such intense backlash, such pressure can be extremely distressing and intimidating.

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<sup>82</sup> Norfolk, Andrew, 'Qatar accused of using British bank to promote Islamist causes', *The Times*, 5 August 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-accused-of-using-british-bank-to-promote-islamist-causes-htsmq8d8p>

## Practitioners under pressure

This section will detail a number of anonymised accounts and testimonies from practitioners working in different parts of the UK on some aspect of the counter-extremism and counter-terrorism strategies. This may include local authorities, central government and police.

In all cases, these accounts have been substantially sanitised in order to protect the identity of those who discussed their experiences on the condition of anonymity. That retaining anonymity was such a concern for the respondents alludes to the severity of the intimidation and attacks they have previously been on the receiving end of.

Some specific details of abuse and harassment, including the organisations believed to be behind the attacks, would have risked compromising this anonymity. Nonetheless, they offer an insight into the kind of daily pressure practitioners may face, and in some cases the threats to their physical safety.

In one instance, a female practitioner interviewed for this report subsequently requested that her testimony be omitted citing the backlash she might receive.

### Comparative Experience of Two Practitioners in Same UK Region

#### ***Extremists force police officer to move home and install CCTV***

In certain cases, Muslims working in Prevent and counter-terrorism more generally have been subjected to extremely distressing experiences.

In one case, Practitioner A was forced to install police alarms in his home and in his family business due to threats and exposure made online for his work in Prevent. The officer in question also took the decision to move home as a result of the pressure and harassment he faced which was being pushed and shared online by individuals known to be associated with Islamist groups operating in the local area.

For a period of six months, Practitioner A described how he felt daily discomfort at being out in public, worrying that he and/or family members would be targeted in the street. The harassment had a negative impact on his sleep, his relationship with his new wife and with his own family, some of whom even became suspicious of his work in Prevent.

Not only this, but the personal insecurity faced by Practitioner A had a negative impact on the delivery of Prevent in the local area, and on



community engagement efforts. According to Practitioner A, community groups became more hesitant to engage with Prevent as a result of the officer's experience, pointing to the safety fears surrounding him as evidence that they could not be protected from similar abuse.

Furthermore, at a mosque the practitioner previously engaged with, individuals deliberately spread rumours that he was there to 'spy' on the community, rather than to build relationships. This resulted in an atmosphere of extreme distrust.

Practitioner A was so uncomfortable going into the details of the pressure he faced that only a brief overview is offered here, and a number of more serious incidents are omitted. He feared that more details published would expose his identity, leaving him vulnerable to further attacks and damaging his ability to perform his job.

Practitioner B, in a similar part of the country had not faced such pressure but only because he had taken deliberate steps to mitigate against it. For example, he had intentionally asked to work in Prevent in a different locale than his own neighbourhood, and even close family members were not aware of the area of policy in which he worked.

Despite this, Practitioner B still took security measures at home such as closed-circuit television (CCTV). This officer believes that he would have faced more intense pressure and criticism had he not successfully managed to work in a different local area, and had not managed to keep knowledge of his role as discreet as possible.

### **Practitioner C**

One female Muslim practitioner has experienced a great deal of opposition in her local engagement efforts.

In one incident, the practitioner was delivering a training session, an elected councillor, himself a Muslim, used the names of Sara Khan and Maajid Nawaz as terms of abuse directed at the practitioner in order to undermine her credibility with the audience. The councillor in question proved extremely disruptive, meaning that the practitioner's efforts to talk about her professional role and the risk of radicalisation in the borough were effectively derailed. Although her male counterpart faced scepticism in the same session, he did not suffer the same level of personal attacks and criticism, and was not labelled as another Sara Khan or Maajid Nawaz – the undertone of 'betrayal' being the clear attack line in this case.

### **Practitioner D**

One male practitioner spoken to for this report has been an outspoken voice on extremism and integration issues for several years in both local communities and participating in national conversations. This fact has led to a campaign of abuse and harassment from both left-wing and Islamist groups aware of his work and his associations.

Much of the pressure began several years ago when writing publicly on extremism:

'People began trying to pressure members of my family and my wider social circle. It got to the point where I was uncomfortable going to family weddings and some people would shun and ignore me because of my views and work.'

A number of the more severe instances of attacks on this practitioner were omitted from this report in order to preserve the anonymity of the individual.

Practitioner D also details how his manager at work began to get frequent letters complaining about his conduct and performance from people who had been present at meetings with the Practitioner. Many of the individuals behind the campaign of letters the practitioner believed were local far-left activists now employed in the public sector, and likely emboldened by the activity of local Islamists peddling myth and hearsay to receptive audiences.

The practitioner also disclosed that the abuse and pressure on social relationships adversely affected his marriage. Although not the main factor behind the breakdown of his relationship, in private correspondence Practitioner D details that the abuse placed great strain on the marriage and stress on both individuals, causing long-term problems.

In this case, the opposition was so severe that the police became involved, although further details cannot be disclosed in order to protect the identity of the practitioner.

### **Practitioner E**

This practitioner's relationship with his local community began to suffer and be affected even before he began working in the broader counter-extremism field. After taking an interest in elements of UK Government counter-terrorism practice and policy while studying counter-terrorism at university, the individual (while still a student) attended a local event held in opposition to the Prevent strategy:

'I went in with an open mind and was quite sympathetic to a lot of their arguments. Towards the end of the meeting I stood up and challenged one or two of the things they had asserted, and suggested that there is an issue of extremism which needs to be addressed. I asked for their suggestions on how to address the issue if not through Prevent and immediately came under attack from almost everyone else present as a Government spy who had been planted inside the meeting.'

The individual in this case left the meeting and decided to conduct extensive research into Prevent and into its detractors and critics and grew more and more sceptical of the rumours and hearsay which were pervasive in his community about Prevent. Upon graduation, the individual pursued a career in the field and got a job as a practitioner working on both Prevent and counter-extremism.

The practitioner tells me that working in this field has resulted in him having to 'restructure his entire social circle' and that his family's standing in the local area was detrimentally impacted as rumour and hearsay spread among the local community. He was accused, among other things, of being a 'sell-out' an 'MI5 agent' (this was used to explain purchases such as new cars by the family), and a 'coconut'.

In this case, the result the practitioner has been considerably ostracised from his local community, gravely impacting personal relationships and family:

'I could no longer go to the Mosque I had attended since I was a kid, and only my closest friends and family have chosen to stick by me and not believe all the rumours and hearsay.'

## Ideological not circumstantial: how North American activists suffer the same backlash

Below, the experiences of a number of activists and groups in both the United States and Canada are detailed based on open source information (such as on social media) and correspondence with the individuals involved. Similar narratives as those used against UK activists are deployed, demonstrating that the pressure on liberal Muslims working to counter extremism is not circumstantial (such as based on opposition to the Prevent strategy) but ideological and coordinated.

### The case of Minnesota

In the state of Minnesota, a large Somali-American population has seen its fair share of recruits to terror groups al-Shabaab in Somalia and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>83</sup> The phenomenon of people becoming involved in terrorism in Minneapolis-St. Paul (otherwise known as the Twin Cities) is to such an extent that in 2015, the US Attorney for Minnesota went as far as publicly declaring that there was a 'terror recruiting problem in Minnesota'.<sup>84</sup> A number of American citizens from the Twin Cities area were also thought to be connected to the 2013 Westgate Mall terror attack in Nairobi which claimed 71 lives.<sup>85</sup>

In this context, it is clear that extremist recruitment is an issue which must be taken seriously in Minnesota, yet efforts to curb the devastating radicalisation of Minneapolis youth have been scuppered by attacks on the most prominent counter-extremism activists and by organisations discouraging community members from cooperating with law enforcement.

One prominent community activist, Abdirizak Bihi, Director of the Somali Education and Social Advocacy Center in Minneapolis-St. Paul, has claimed in comments to the Conservative news site the Daily Caller that the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) attacks him as 'anti-Muslim', and has tried to campaign for authorities not to work with him on the basis that he does not represent the community fully.<sup>86</sup> A similar line

<sup>83</sup> 'Al-Shabaab's American Recruits', *Anti-Defamation League*, February 2015 <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/al-shabaabs-american-recruits.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> 'FBI: 'We have a terror recruiting problem in Minnesota'', *CNN*, 20 April 2015 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/justice/2015/04/20/bts-minnesota-terror-arrests-isis.cnn>

<sup>85</sup> Lewis, Paul, 'US citizens may be among Nairobi mall attackers, Kenyan president says', *The Guardian*, 24 September 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/24/us-citizens-nairobi-mall-attack-kenya>

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, Charles C., 'Somali-American leader: 'I tried to warn America' about homegrown radicalization', *Daily Caller*, 23 September 2013 <https://dailycaller.com/2013/09/23/somali-american-leader-i-tried-to-warn-america-about-homegrown-radicalization/>

of attack was deployed against Omar Jamal, a fellow Somali-American activist who is outspoken on the issue of radicalisation and extremism in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

It is clear that such attacks can have an isolating effect and discourage other community and faith-based activists and organisations from working with those who are labelled 'anti-Muslim' or unrepresentative of the community. The need for initiatives which counter extremist radicalisation could not be clearer in Minneapolis, yet those who recognise this problem and seek to address it are routinely bullied and isolated. The account of one of the most prominent and respected community activists is below.

### **Average Mohamed**

Average Mohamed is a non-profit organisation based in Minneapolis which uses cartoon animations based on democratic principles to provide a counter-narrative to extremist propaganda. The initiative is the creation of Executive Director, Mohamed Ahmed, a Somali-American and practicing Muslim who aims to promote liberty and democracy, as well as 'advocate powerfully against violent extremism'.<sup>87</sup>

Average Mohamed's creator, Mohamed Ahmed, has faced criticism and attacks for his work to combat radicalisation. Ahmed writes in an article posted on LinkedIn:

'There is a cost to speaking up. We are bound to pay its cost because we will not accept hate or extremism as discourse from anyone.'<sup>88</sup>

In personal correspondence, Mohamed Ahmed elaborates on the 'cost to speaking up', detailing how he has been targeted on social media by some individuals within the Minneapolis community from which Ahmed hails himself.

The nature of the attacks is once again one of betrayal:

'[They say] that we are pimping our community on this issue of extremism by advocating anti-extremism we are portraying our community or kids as radicals.'

Ahmed explained how the attacks marry up with far-left ideology which leads some to believe that:

'our government is a racist western imperialist who is using extremism to rob our communities of their democratic rights and freedoms.'<sup>89</sup>

As a result, counter-extremism counter-narrative initiatives such as Average Mohamed are labelled as part of the 'surveillance state' against

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<sup>87</sup> Average Mohamed <https://averagemohamed.com/about-average-mohamed-mohamed-ahmed/>

<sup>88</sup> Mohamed Ahmed LinkedIn Post <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/opposition-counter-ideology-anti-hate-mohamed-ahmed/>

<sup>89</sup> Private correspondence with Mohamed Ahmed



minority communities. This is a clear and deliberate attempt to prevent these initiatives from reaching and building trust with the very members of the communities they need to engage with.

Influential organisations such as the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) have taken a firm stance against work which comes under the Countering Violent Extremism umbrella, and have repeatedly accused government CVE programmes of 'singling out Muslims'.<sup>90</sup>

Ahmed claims that some of this stance and pressure on federal CVE has impacted his own programmes, as he alleges that individuals involved with the local CAIR chapter have accused him of being embedded within US Government CVE structures. CAIR later withdrew the claim but Ahmed is still trolled and harassed on social media using similar attack lines by other individuals. In Ahmed's own words: 'Our current government does not want us and CAIR are raising hell on us'.

Average Mohamed is a small grassroots community initiative running on a shoe-string budget, not unlike many others in major cities such as Minneapolis. However, unlike community projects which are designed to improve literacy or fight gang violence, Average Mohamed has faced sustained campaigns online aimed at discrediting its work and undermining its legitimacy with key audiences, beneficiaries and stakeholders.

'We are out here risking our necks and peace of mind. In order to help secure our societies from extremism. To find only others aggressively discounting us, insulting us and trying to boycott us from far-right wing and far left is disheartening. Whereas the extremists just want us dead. Our work's only aim is to secure our democracy.' – *Mohamed Ahmed, creator of Average Mohamed*

That a cartoon initiative can be the subject of such abuse demonstrates the ideological commitment to undermining any and all CVE efforts by some in these quarters. What's more, such abuse can have a detrimental impact on funding and can deter donors – this can therefore jeopardise livelihoods and contribute to a very real sense of insecurity on the part of practitioners.

### **From Revolution Muslim to CVE: Jesse Morton**

Jesse Morton is a New York based former-Jihadist turned counter-extremism activist whom, using the kunya Yunus Abdullah Muhammed, was sentenced to 11.5 years' imprisonment in the United States in 2011 for urging followers to kill the creators of South Park for their alleged blasphemy. After agreeing to become an FBI informant and renouncing his

<sup>90</sup> 'Government's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Approach Continues to Single Out Muslims', *Council on American Islamic Relations*, 4 August 2017 [https://www.cair.com/cair\\_islam\\_oped\\_government\\_s\\_countering\\_violent\\_extremism\\_cve\\_approach\\_continues\\_to\\_single\\_out\\_muslims](https://www.cair.com/cair_islam_oped_government_s_countering_violent_extremism_cve_approach_continues_to_single_out_muslims)

views, Morton was released in 2015 and has since become an advocate against the extremist ideology he once sought to spread through his Revolution Muslim website.<sup>91</sup>

Since abandoning the Jihadist ideology and being 'outed' in an article in *The Washington Post*, Morton has received credible enough death threats for him to have to move residence. The severity of these threats compared with previous activists covered in this report is likely related to Morton's own past as an extremist and subsequent cooperation with law enforcement.

However, Morton has also come under attack from left-wing commentators and publications for his cooperation with law enforcement. In a similar vein to UK-based critics that labelled Sara Khan as a 'creation of the Home Office', Morton says he has frequently been attacked as an 'FBI mouthpiece'.<sup>92</sup>

The left-wing website AlterNet published an attack on Jesse Morton, in which the authenticity of his story of involvement with Jihadism was questioned and he was compared unfavourably to British former-extremist, Maajid Nawaz – whose Quilliam Foundation was attacked for receiving government funding.<sup>93</sup> Other left-wing websites such as The Intercept published what Morton calls 'hit-pieces' on his story and his work.

Jesse Morton has acted as an informant for the FBI, but this has also been used to undermine his advocacy and countering-extremism work through his startup NGO, Parallel Networks.

The mythology and conspiracies eventually filtered down into his local community. After being released from prison and settling into life in Northern Virginia and Washington D.C. after going public with his story, Morton began attending local mosques and says that he was initially greeted with an overwhelmingly warm reception:

'Most of the Muslims in my local community were incredibly supportive of my story. I cannot tell you when I first went public, how many times I would get stopped when I walked into the Mosque to have people hug me and to shake my hand and to tell me 'congratulations brother, thank you so much for changing your views, you're going to be a good voice and a beneficial voice''.<sup>94</sup>

However, following the backlash against CVE efforts (as Morton was an outspoken supporter of CVE) and against FBI tactics against potential

<sup>91</sup> 'Profile: Jesse Curtis Morton', Counter-Extremism Project <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/jesse-curtis-morton>

<sup>92</sup> Private correspondence with Jesse Morton

<sup>93</sup> Lazare, Sarah, 'Are Major Media Outlets Exaggerating the Story of a 'Reformed Terrorist' to Advance the FBI's Disturbing Agenda', *AlterNet*, 6 September 2016 <https://www.alternet.org/2016/09/are-major-media-outlets-exaggerating-story-reformed-terrorist-advance-fbis/>

<sup>94</sup> Private correspondence with Jesse Morton

terrorists from leading civil rights organisations and Muslim groups, the leadership of local Mosques began to turn on Morton:

'They would start to tell the community that actually I was there to spy, so gradually you would get the cold shoulder. The narrative and the discourse of what is seen as the American Muslim community is not set by the community, but by a small collective of leaders affiliated with the same organisations – so they push this agenda against CVE, and in turn against me and anyone who supports it'.

Morton believes that much of the discourse on CVE initiatives which come out of the Department for Homeland Security (DHS) and on FBI counterterrorism investigations is polluted by conspiracy and not grounded in reality. The result has been a large scale refusal of Muslim organisations to engage with the limited CVE efforts which exist. What's more, this has made it difficult for Muslim groups which are embedded in communities to buck this trend.

### **Mubin Shaikh and the 'Toronto 18'**

Mubin Shaikh is a Canadian former undercover agent who was able to infiltrate and serve as a key witness in the 'Toronto 18' terror plot, an ambitious and coordinated plot which involved combat training for terrorist operations and the intentions to bomb multiple targets across Southern Ontario, as well as to publicly behead the Prime Minister of Canada.<sup>95</sup> Shaikh went undercover in the cell on behalf of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and several details of the case remain restricted due to national security implications.

At one point in his younger life Shaikh had developed an extremist worldview following encounters with the Taliban during a period of travel in Pakistan. However, Shaikh claims that the 9/11 terror attacks had caused a pivot away from extremism which led to a period of study and introspection in Syria. Upon his return to Canada Shaikh operated as a 'walk-in' for the CSIS, his expert knowledge of religion and extremist ideology would prove critical in infiltrating and ultimately helping to disrupt a grave terror threat.

Since details of Shaikh's involvement became public knowledge through the trial of the Toronto 18 plotters, Shaikh is now considered a subject matter expert on radicalisation and extremism. He regularly advises governments and law enforcement agencies on extremism around the world.

Following his public outing, Shaikh came under fire from individuals within the extremist milieus within Canada, to an extent this was to be expected due to the sense of betrayal and his hand in the successful prosecution of a number of would-be terrorists.

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<sup>95</sup> Teotonio, Isabel, 'Toronto 18', *The Star* <http://www3.thestar.com/static/toronto18/index.html>

However, Muslim organisations which are commonly viewed as mainstream such as the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) have a long history of opposition to national security measures taken by the Canadian Government and its security apparatus such as CSIS.<sup>96</sup> For example, a 2018 article from the NCCM accuses the government and security services of disproportionately targeting Muslims. Although, as Phil Gurski, former CSIS intelligence officer points out in a blog response, almost every terror attack in Canada since 9/11 has been carried out by Islamist extremists operating within Muslim communities.<sup>97</sup>

Because of his work in counter-terrorism and outspoken support for Countering Violent Extremism programmes, NCCM and Shaikh do not enjoy a relationship – despite Shaikh being one of the most prominent Muslim voices on extremism in Canada. Conversely, although Shaikh works extensively with agencies in the United States, he currently does not work with Canadian government or law enforcement.

'Based on deliberate misrepresentation of the discourse on radicalisation, extremism and CVE programs, Islamist groups routinely target Muslim organisations that at great risk to their person and profession carry out vital and necessary work to tackle extremism' – Mubin Shaikh

Even in the UK, some of the platforms which have attacked other British activists and experts included in this collection also attacked Shaikh. For example, 5Pillars ran a story with the headline: 'Gun-wielding former spy pledges to "go to war" with British Muslim activists' after Shaikh and Sara Khan had an exchange on their personal Facebook accounts in which Shaikh declared that he was 'ready to go to war' with CAGE.<sup>98</sup> Canadian citizen, Shaikh, is also pictured in separate posts on his personal Facebook at a shooting range – legal in Canada.

The attacks on Mubin Shaikh are certainly interesting and as Mubin points out: 'they reveal a template that this problem is widespread and ideological, not circumstantial'.<sup>99</sup> Even practitioners like Shaikh and Morton have been subject to attacks even though their routes into CVE differed considerably and in both instances, involved actual counter-terrorism efforts.

Similarly, former FBI Special Agent and Lebanese-American Ali Soufan has been the subject of such attacks. Ali Soufan's FBI career tracking al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden before and after the 9/11 attacks means

<sup>96</sup> Gardee, Ihsaan, 'Government Must Rebuild Trust with Canadian Muslims on National Security', *National Council of Canadian Muslims*, 11 June 2018 <https://www.nccm.ca/government-must-rebuild-trust-with-canadian-muslims-on-national-security/>

<sup>97</sup> LinkedIn Post by Phil Gurski <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/csis-does-target-muslims-accountability-phil-gurski>

<sup>98</sup> 'Gun-wielding former spy pledges to "go to war" with British Muslim activists', *5 Pillars*, 7 December 2016 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2016/12/07/gun-wielding-former-spy-pledges-to-go-to-war-with-british-muslim-activists/>

<sup>99</sup> Private Correspondence with Mubin Shaikh

that Soufan is something of a 'living legend' in counter-terrorism circles, particularly since the Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Looming Tower* and the Hulu/Amazon television series of the same name – both of which focus heavily on Soufan's career leading up to 9/11.<sup>100</sup>

Soufan was the subject of a campaign by the NGO Cage to pressure governments into issuing an arrest warrant based on the alleged torture of one of their clients, Ali Al-Marri, who was detained as part of the War on Terror following 9/11.<sup>101</sup> The online campaign from CAGE developed a great deal of interest and engagement on social media, and was amplified by media platforms such as Middle-East Eye, Middle-East Monitor and Islam21C.

Many of the groups who have attacked the likes of Mubin Shaikh, Mohamed Ahmed, Ali Soufan and Jesse Morton couch their criticisms behind an opposition to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) – yet all 4 were involved in direct counter-terrorism efforts in very different ways. In different ways, all 4 have suffered personal attacks which started because of their varied involvement in preventing genuine terrorist attacks and prosecuting terrorists, not just in work to counter violent extremism.

**Fiyaz Mughal, Founder of Faith Matters on Native Informant slurs:**

“Using Uncle Tom and Native Informant slurs are actually saying that those of us who collaborate with government are working for some colonial regime which provides no rights and recompense to, in this case, Muslims communities. What they are saying is that Government and state structures are essentially an enemy, thereby perpetuating a ‘Them and Us’ narrative.

This language is part of the problem in creating an extremism environment detaching those who believe their narrative from local communities, statutory structures and most of all, any tangible connection with our country.

Believing that Muslims have no rights in this country is demonstrably untrue, perverse and blind to the reality of the rights and freedoms that all can enjoy in Britain. Even former Islamic State fighters are returning to this country acknowledging the civil and human rights compared to the Islamist utopia they went to join.”

<sup>100</sup> Wright, Lawrence, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda's Road to 9/11* (Penguin: 2007)

<sup>101</sup> Twitter Post [https://twitter.com/UK\\_CAGE/status/989118207113027585](https://twitter.com/UK_CAGE/status/989118207113027585)



## Muslim native informants

'Islamists loathe no bogeymen more than liberal Muslim activists.' – European Eye on Radicalization editorial board.<sup>102</sup>

Accusations of inauthenticity are a common retort of the critics and attackers of Muslims working in counter-extremism and counter-terrorism, or even those who are simply outspoken on matters of Islamist extremism and reformist/liberal Muslims.

The labels of Native Informants, Uncle Toms, House Muslims and Coconuts should be taken very seriously. Such corrosive language can be extremely detrimental to integration efforts, by labelling Muslims who engage with authorities or who do not agree politically as essentially betraying their real community. Such language is seen by some as a progressive spin on the language of Neo-Nazis – for example, similar terminology was deployed against Prince Harry, who was labelled a 'race traitor' by Neo-Nazis for his marriage to Meghan Markle.<sup>103</sup>

The Native Informant labels are corrosive to social cohesion and integration in a number of ways. They delegitimise the idea of Muslims working with the state and authorities in more than just countering extremism efforts. This inhibits the integration of ethnic minority communities and leaves more vulnerable members of the community unaware of their rights or unable to access their rights and legal protections from authorities.

If partnerships with police in particular are delegitimised in this way and partnerships made less common, then the risk is that policing will increasingly be viewed by communities purely in enforcement terms. It will also allow groups with their own agendas to step in and claim to be true representatives of Muslim communities. As noted expert on Islamism Lorenzo Vidino explains in his book, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood seek to position their front organisations as the genuine voice of Muslim communities in the West for authorities to deal with.<sup>104</sup>

Western states have previously made serious errors of judgment in choosing their partners in Muslim communities, allowing Islamists to regain that trust through new organisations and front groups will be damaging for

<sup>102</sup> European Eye on Radicalization (EER) Editorial Board, 'Mend and Islamophobic Muslims – An Islamist Fable', *European Eye on Radicalization*, 2 July 2018 <https://eeradicalization.com/mend-and-islamophobic-muslims-an-islamist-fable/>

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6465661/British-Neo-Nazi-group-calls-Prince-Harrys-assassination-marrying-mixed-race-Meghan.html>

<sup>104</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo; *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2010)

both authorities and for the communities they claim to represent yet only use as props to push their agenda.

Perhaps the most potentially damaging element of the native informant slur is the dangerous flirtation with excommunication. After Islamic State has popularised Takfiri doctrine, excommunication has taken on even more weight for Jihadists. Being declared a non-Muslim carries the death sentence for those who ascribe to Jihadist doctrines – which may be a number as high as 23,000 people in the UK alone.<sup>105</sup> This is not to mention the targeting by overseas groups such as the al-Shabaab hitlist against British Muslims.

In a short period of time, high-profile former Hizb ut-Tahrir member Maajid Nawaz was awarded the 'Islamophobe of the Year' award by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), an organisation with connections to the Khomeini regime in Tehran according to a Henry Jackson Society report;<sup>106</sup> followed quickly by Nawaz's naming as an 'anti-Muslim extremist' by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organisation based in Alabama which claims to fight hate and bigotry.<sup>107</sup> Nawaz feared that his inclusion increased his vulnerability to attack by extremists, stating that 'they've put a target on my head', citing the murders of Theo Van Gogh and Bangladeshi bloggers as evidence of the dangers of such lists.<sup>108</sup> Nawaz was eventually awarded \$3.4million compensation for his inclusion as an anti-Muslim extremist.<sup>109</sup>

Speaking to European Eye on Radicalization (EER) on the slurs levelled against liberal Muslims by organisations such as MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development), the then Quilliam Foundation CEO, Haras Rafiq, highlighted the dangers of such attacks:

'There has been a concerted effort, for a number of years, to defame Muslims who are politically and socially liberal as anti-Muslim bigots. When the SPLC characterised Maajid Nawaz and Quilliam in this manner, they were forced to apologise, withdraw their report, and pay substantial damages to us.

<sup>105</sup> O'Neill, Sean; Hamilton, Fiona; Karim, Fariha and Swerling, Gabriella, 'Huge scale of terror threat revealed: UK home to 23,000 jihadists', *The Times*, 27 May 2017 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/huge-scale-of-terror-threat-revealed-uk-home-to-23-000-jihadists-3zvn58mhq>

<sup>106</sup> Fox, Emma, 'Islamic Human Rights Commission: Advocating for the Ayatollahs', *Henry Jackson Society*, 2019 <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HJS-IHRC-Report-WEB.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) <https://www.splcenter.org/about>

<sup>108</sup> Smith, Lee, 'A New Blacklist From the Southern Poverty Law Center Marks the Demise of a Once-Vital Organization', *Tablet* <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/216494/southern-poverty-law-center-blacklist>

<sup>109</sup> Graham, David A., 'The Unlabelling of an 'Anti-Muslim Extremist'', *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2018 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/maajid-nawaz-v-splc/562646/>

MEND must know that by doing so, they paint a target on our backs. Liberal Muslims have been murdered by jihadists, all over the world.

Attacking Muslims who are liberal is the primary purpose of MEND. They do so because we stand up against the hate preachers, who teach a polarised vision of Islam, with whom they have consistently allied themselves and whom they have promoted'.<sup>110</sup>

While the agenda is clear in the case of an organisation such as the IHRC, the case of the Southern Poverty Law Center is illustrative of the political left's failure to stand with reformist and liberal Muslims rather than their Islamist harassers.

'The tactics used to silence anyone who dares to question, critique or reject political Islam are similar regardless of which strand of policy or society you work in. The fact that we dare to reject a monoculture and mono-religious Islamist ideology means we are subject to tactics including harassment, stalking on social media and highlighting your views to undermine or "expose" you to audiences, online bullying, personal threats, abuse of loved ones, pressure applied to older men within your circles including husbands, fathers and brothers.

'This can also include stalking in real life and online, building "dossiers" to send to employers, families and communities in order to put relationships and careers on the line.

'It is often based in aggressive, patriarchal, modesty and honour codes which reject intellectual freedom, individual rights and equal rights for women, people of minority sects and those who are LGBT.'

– Amina Lone, former Labour Councillor and Director, Social Action and Research Foundation

## Conclusion

From the streets up to organisations which claim to be nationally representative and 'fighting hatred', Muslims who choose to play a positive role in fostering greater integration, countering-extremism and supporting counter-terrorism efforts are often forced to pay a high social price, and at times will find their physical security at risk.

The Lead Counter-Extremism Commissioner, Sara Khan, has herself spoken out about the attacks and abuse, including rape and death threats,

<sup>110</sup> 'Mend and Islamophobic Muslims' <https://eeradicalization.com/mend-and-islamophobic-muslims-an-islamist-fable/>

which she has faced in the course of her work.<sup>111</sup> It is worth asking what role the hyperbolic response to her appointment played, which characterised her as an enemy of authentic Muslims and was amplified by mainstream politicians in the Labour Party. In her role, Khan has a layer of public protection from such attacks which is not enjoyed by local community workers and practitioners. The consequences of such hysterical rhetoric against counter-extremism work should be made clear to the public.

In the UK, the likes of 5Pillars have often led the chorus of attacks on Muslim activists who do not ascribe to their worldview. While bigger organisations which are thought to be more mainstream such as the Muslim Council of Britain have criticised the more prominent counter-extremism activists, such as in the case of Sara Khan. The likes of 5Pillars, CAGE, MEND and their followers may be ideologically opposed to any and all counter-extremism efforts, yet for large, more mainstream organisations, those who undermine or threaten their claim to speak for 'the Muslim community' can find themselves targeted or isolated.

Sara Khan herself has rejected the idea that a single Muslim community exists, and groups and individuals should therefore not claim to speak on its behalf.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, British-American Muslim commentator Qanta Ahmed has criticised the work of organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain, stating that they would be better labelled as efforts to 'control the narrative of Islam'.<sup>113</sup>

Across the Atlantic, officials of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which seeks to be the main representative body for American Muslims, have criticised and attacked Muslims serving in the US Armed Forces, Muslims who work with the Anti-Defamation League and Muslims who oppose the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement against Israel.<sup>114</sup>

The stance of these major organisations filters down to the local level, such as the practitioner attacked as 'another Sara Khan', or the sudden shunning experienced by former Jihadi, Jesse Morton – both detailed in earlier sections in this report.

All of the individuals spoken to for this report believe that the criticism and attacks they face pose a major deterrent to others getting involved in the field or on these issues. This is problematic for a number of reasons for

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<sup>111</sup> Farrell, Jason, 'Those who stand up to extremism 'vilified' in UK, says commissioner Sara Khan', *Sky News*, 11 July 2018 <https://news.sky.com/story/those-who-stand-up-to-extremism-vilified-in-uk-says-commissioner-sara-khan-11433276>

<sup>112</sup> Urwin, Rosamund, 'Counter-extremism czar Sara Khan: 'There's no such thing as the "Muslim community"', *The Times*, 15 July 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/counter-extremism-czar-sara-khan-theres-no-such-thing-as-the-muslim-community-tm9vp2bzn>

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed, Qanta, 'What does the Muslim Council of Britain have against Muslims like me?', *The Spectator*, 13 July 2019 <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2019/07/what-does-the-muslim-council-of-britain-have-against-muslims-like-me/>

<sup>114</sup> Archived Facebook posts from San Francisco-based CAIR official <http://archive.is/qlsG3>

policymakers, firstly as it may result in an under-representation of Muslim practitioners and policy experts in CVE and Prevent. However, as is the case with Sara Khan and Fiyaz Mughal OBE, the criticism increases with public profile. If the only 'representatives' of Muslim communities seen regularly in the media are divisive figures opposed to countering extremism, this only serves to fan the flames of far-right narratives which posit that the problem lies with Muslim communities as a whole, rather than with extremists.

Perhaps most disappointing for many of the practitioners and activists spoken to, the lack of support from the liberal-left, whom they felt had succumbed to the Uncle Tom labels, left them feeling abandoned by fellow liberals who chose to sympathise with religious conservatives. Much of the modern left is inclined to see race and ethnicity through the prism of power dynamics and invisible structures. This results in Muslims who engage fully with authorities and not peddling grievance narratives to be seen as somehow 'inauthentic' by some on the political left.

Britain's Muslim population will play an integral role in the future of the country, yet some Islamist groups are making considerable efforts to control the narrative of Muslim populations across the West, and in many instances, to prevent full integration and participation of Muslim communities.

The attacks levelled at Muslims who recognise the threat of both Islamism and far-right extremism and who choose to participate in state counter-extremism or counter-terrorism efforts are symptomatic of a broader fight against Islamist extremism in the West. Between those fighting for opportunity for Muslim communities in the West, and between those who need Muslim communities to be marginalised to preserve their power.

The pressure, attacks and abuse come from a range of sources: this includes the far-right, who believe that all Muslims are part of the problem; the far-left, which has allied with Islamists; local Islamist activists; representative Muslim bodies and front organisations for Islamist groups. The pressure from these sources also filters down to family and friends, who in some instances begin to treat their loved ones and connections with suspicion or contempt as a result of the allegations made against them.

To quote Qanta Ahmed, today being a Muslim interested in countering extremism is lonely work. The pressure on these individuals and groups is indicative a much broader battle, for control over the narrative of Islam and what being a Muslim means in the West. Islamist groups must not be allowed to package their politics as normative Islam or excommunicate any Muslims who deviate from their ideology and narrative.

## Recommendations

- Where possible, community groups should seek the support of local leaders: councillors, leaders of the council and MPs. A number of respondents have outlined how such support would have been valuable to them during a particularly difficult period. Where possible, local authority staff such as Prevent coordinators or counter-extremism coordinators should facilitate this relationship.
- A 'Distress Call' mechanism for groups or individuals coming under attack online could be facilitated by government (local and central), or arranged informally among likeminded groups. This would allow groups and individuals who are willing to publicly defend allies to coordinate against smears and reputational attacks.
- Distress calls could be coupled with social media and media training to help groups and individuals to fend off attacks in the press and online. Such efforts have begun through the BSBT network and M&C Saatchi but they could be strengthened.
- Policymakers and authorities must seek greater awareness of the diversity within the UK's Muslim population. This will prevent the entrenchment of notions of there existing one Muslim voice on certain issues. Where authorities seek Muslim engagement, self-appointed representatives are eager to step into the void to push their politics. Engagement with groups is not necessarily a bad thing, but the trap of believing there exists an 'authentic Muslim' should be avoided.
- Police and local authorities should make it clear to employees that their physical safety is of paramount importance. Greater efforts should be made to increase understanding among the leadership of such bodies of the rabid opposition to Prevent and counter-extremism, and the demonisation of some of those working in those areas. Staff should not be made to feel unnecessary risks and where there is cause for concern, extra security should be sought. The same measures should be taken for groups in the community who are partnering on these issues.
- The private sector must be engaged more on Prevent and counter-extremism. A strong case for its positive work must be made to business. The police are already making such efforts but it is early. Private sector could be an invaluable ally to small community groups on limited budgets facing pressure from organisations with much greater resources. Groups are coming under attack for accepting modest funding grants, the expertise and financial backing of private sector partners could lend some much needed balance.
- Coalitions of like-minded groups and individuals must be encouraged and fostered at every opportunity. Networks such as the national BSBT network run by the Home Office and Local Prevent Advisory Groups



can offer opportunities for cooperation and collaboration so groups do not feel isolated.

- Government should seek to better communicate the purpose of certain Prevent and counter-extremism projects. Namely, that end users and beneficiaries of projects are not necessarily deemed to be 'at risk' of extremism. An alternative message could be that end users can be 'champions against extremism in their communities', for example.

## Author

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