

SPECIAL REPORT

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MARGARET THATCHER CENTER FOR FREEDOM

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Islamist movements in the U.K. have the same ambitions as their ideological allies elsewhere: the creation of an Islamic state governed by sharia law. However, in a Western country ambitions are inevitably more localized than in a Muslim-majority country. Therefore, Islamist groups focus on Islamization of individuals and communities; using the democratic process to gain political influence (often with support from politicians sympathetic to—or naïve about—their cause); undermining support for British countermeasures; fundraising for Islamist causes; and isolating and segregating British Muslims by propagating the notion of a Western war on Islam. Some British media outlets, human rights groups, and universities have aided the progression of Islamism in their own country by giving a platform to Islamist organizations and amplifying their messaging.

The United Kingdom has been a hub for Islamist activity for decades. It has been a base for fundraising and recruitment for terrorist causes across the world, while British citizens have swelled the ranks of Islamist groups. In the decades before approximately 900 British passport holders traveled to Syria to fight for ISIS, and British subjects have engaged in jihadist causes in Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen. Eventually, U.K. jihadists turned their attention inwards. The first clear consequence—though by no means the last—was when British citizens recruited by al-Qaeda carried out suicide bombings on London’s public transportation network on July 7, 2005.

Yet Britain was not just a crucible for violent jihadist thought and activity. It has also served as a base for political Islamism. Groups that aspired to create an Islamic state and whose attitude to violence was more guarded than that of the jihadists also set up shop in the U.K. and their roots also run deep.

The British government's response has been of mixed effectiveness. Part of it has been led by the military. Post-9/11, the U.K. took part in various military operations against Islamists operating overseas: The U.K. committed its military to U.S.-led war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, while also carrying out counterterrorism training in Somalia and Mali.

The U.K. has also developed a program, called Prevent, which is designed to stop people from joining terrorist movements in the first place. It has also tried to deport, with mixed success, foreign national terror suspects, and tried to prevent dual nationals and British citizens with recourse to another nationality from returning to the U.K. if they travel abroad to join a terrorist group.

The policy response has been reasonable, though not perfect. Yet the U.K. remains ill-prepared to deal with the societal challenges that Islamism has created. Divisions remain over who, exactly, the enemy is, particularly when it comes to the assessment of what kind of dangers are posed by political Islam. That means the response is, inevitably, piecemeal.

This *Special Report* contends that the U.K. must be guided by the principle that engagement with any form of Islamism is a mistake that undermines attempts to weaken it. The U.K. government must also seek to undermine the influence of Islamism among Muslim communities while finding creative ways to elevate those who actively seek to challenge it.

Context

Islamism is a political ideology within Sunni Islam that interprets Islam as not only a faith, but an all-encompassing sociopolitical framework for how to live. It is comprised of certain key tenets.¹

- Sovereignty lies with God, not man.
- The world is divided into *dar al-harb* (the lands of Islam) and *dar al-kufr* (the lands of unbelief).
- Muslims must restore a caliphate in which the Muslim nation (*ummah*) will live under Islamic law (shariah). The caliphate is to be headed by a caliph, who serves as religious and political head of the *ummah*.

However, a key distinction lies within Islamism between those willing to commit acts of violence² for the cause; and those focusing on proselytization, politics, prayer, and, sometimes, infiltration. It was this politicized, but less overtly violent, approach to Islamism that first laid roots in the U.K.

Several organizations established in the U.K. between the 1960s and the 1990s had links to the most significant political Islamist movements in Europe: the North African Muslim Brotherhood and South Asian Jamaat-e-Islami.³ These included the Islamic Forum of Europe (IFE), the U.K. Islamic Mission (UKIM), the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB).⁴

Rather than the creation of an Islamic state in the U.K., such groups first focused on Islamizing the individual and then the community.⁵ In order to help achieve this, Muslim Brotherhood literature argued, for example, that “western society is inherently hostile to Muslim faith and interests and that Muslims must respond by maintaining their distance and autonomy.”⁶ In short: self segregation.

However, these groups did not abandon the long-term vision of a sharia-governed caliphate just because they were not operating in a Muslim-majority country. IFE literature, for example, states that it “strives for the establishment of a global society, the Khilafah...comprised of individuals who live by the principles of...the Shari’ah.”⁷

Beyond Islamist dissident organizations, there have also been Saudi-funded mosques constructed in the U.K. that reflect Saudi Arabia’s strident Wahhabi strain of Islam. One particularly significant mosque—the East London Mosque in Whitechapel—had been partially funded by the Saudis and became a hub of activity centered around Jamaat-e-Islami and those who admired the teachings of its founder, Abul A’la Maududi.⁸

The injection of Islamism into the British Muslim mainstream was also facilitated by the sheer volume of foreign Islamist extremists operating in the U.K. in the 1990s, numbers so large that foreign intelligence services ended up dubbing the capital “Londonistan.”⁹ The British government recklessly welcomed Islamist dissidents from authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), who claimed both asylum and state benefits in the U.K., and then worked to turn Britain’s Muslim communities against the state. These clerics also raised awareness among British Muslims about the atrocities being committed against Muslim populations in Bosnia and Chechnya.

Recruiters tied these foreign conflicts and examples of Muslim suffering into a theological and political framework that said that British Muslims were required to fight jihad in defense of their co-religionists. The U.K.’s Commission for Countering Extremism recently concluded “that the radicalizing effects of these clerics continues to be felt within Muslim communities today.”¹⁰

One particularly prominent figure was Abu Qatada, one of al-Qaeda's favored theologians. A Palestinian, Qatada arrived in the U.K. on a forged passport in 1993, claiming asylum. He sermonized to a variety of extremists from his base of the Four Feathers social club in London's Baker Street, delivering a series of incendiary fatwas and publishing newspapers about the brutal civil war under way in Algeria.¹¹

Another was Abu Hamza, an Egyptian who arrived in the U.K. on a student visa. Hamza lost both of his hands while constructing a bomb at an Afghan training camp in the 1990s.¹² He was handed control of the Finsbury Park Mosque in north London, which he turned into a base from which to fundraise for terrorist causes, forge passports, disseminate propaganda, and send worshippers to overseas terrorist training camps.¹³

There was also Omar Bakri, a Syrian refugee based in Tottenham, north London. A successful recruiter, Bakri served as leader, first of Hizb ut-Tahrir (a revolutionary group which openly agitated for the overthrow of governments across the MENA region and for the restoration of the caliphate),¹⁴ and then of al-Muhajiroun, an organization now designated as a terrorist group by the British government.¹⁵

While these were perhaps the three highest-profile and influential figures, there was a range of other recruiters and clerics operating in the U.K. This included a Jamaican convert to Islam, Abdullah el-Faisal, who delivered a range of bloodthirsty lectures from the Brixton Mosque in south London before the mosque's leadership kicked him out;¹⁶ Khalid al-Fawwaz, a Saudi who ran Osama bin Laden's London office and served as a link from the U.K. to bin Laden;¹⁷ and Hani al-Sibai, an Egyptian asylum seeker linked to the Egyptian Islamic Jihad who continues to use London as a base to recruit for terrorist causes.¹⁸

Other prominent agitators included Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian theologian highly regarded in certain jihadist circles and closely tied to Abu Qatada;¹⁹ and Egyptian refugee Yassir al-Siri, a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad who had been sentenced to death in his home country.

However, not all recruiters came from overseas. A Londoner, Babar Ahmad, leveraged his experience fighting in Bosnia in the 1990s to become one of the most prolific recruiters for terrorist causes in the U.K. Part of this took place online: Ahmad was considered the "godfather" of Internet jihad, a pioneer in using the Internet to spread the Islamist message and provide updates on the conflicts then occurring in Chechnya and Afghanistan.²⁰

Between them, these men were connected to hundreds, if not thousands, of terrorists and helped to ensure that Islamist causes overseas were put front and center in the mind of British Muslims. Subsequently, in the 1990s,

hundreds of British Muslims ended up fighting overseas in Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, Yemen, or Afghanistan.²¹ More followed in the post-9/11 world after the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.²²

Inevitably, what began as a focus on Islamist causes overseas slowly began to morph into plotting terror attacks in Britain. As early as 2003, British terrorists who had gone to train with al-Qaeda in Pakistan became persuaded of the religious duty to now strike at home.²³ A wave of plots tied to al-Qaeda followed. Some attacks were narrowly averted, including attempts to use fertilizer bombs in London.²⁴ Yet on July 7, 2005, the first successful al-Qaeda-inspired attack on British soil took place. Four suicide bombers on the London transportation network—three of whom were homegrown—murdered 52 people.

It took until May 2013 before the next loss of life on British soil, when two converts to Islam stabbed Drummer Lee Rigby to death in London in broad daylight. However, there were numerous close calls in between. Some were averted by authorities—such as a potentially cataclysmic plot to detonate liquid bombs on transatlantic flights, and another to commit a suicide attack near a shopping mall in Manchester.²⁵ Others were not detected by intelligence services, with only human error or pure chance preventing further loss of innocent life in plots involving car bombs and suicide bombs, such as the failed attempts by four aspirant bombers to detonate suicide vests on the London underground on July 21, 2005.²⁶

The threat endures today. Approximately 900 individuals left the U.K. for Syria or Iraq between around 2011 and 2019.²⁷ As of March 2017, there were 23,000 Islamist terror threats on the U.K. intelligence radar. Within this 23,000, approximately 3,000 were being actively monitored or investigated in some 500 separate operations.²⁸ The U.K. was hit with four major Islamist terror attacks in 2017, thrice in London and once in Manchester. These attacks left 265 injured and 34 dead. Then, in November 2019, a convicted Islamist extremist who had recently been released from prison (where he was jailed for other crimes) stabbed two people to death and injured another three in a terrorist attack he carried out in London.

Furthermore, according to Neil Basu, the U.K.'s top counterterrorism police officer, between March 2017 and September 2019, British law enforcement foiled 15 Islamist terror plots.²⁹

Today, the Islamist threat to the U.K. is largely homegrown: Almost three-quarters of Islam-related offenses that have occurred in the U.K. were committed by U.K. nationals and individuals holding dual nationality.³⁰ What started as a foreign ideology—brought in primarily via the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia—today has a distinctly British face.

Beyond the Brotherhood: Modern Islamist or Islamist-Sympathetic Movements and Clerics in the U.K.

Political Islam was introduced to the U.K. via the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami-linked groups in the 1960s. Yet other Islamist activist groups have sprung up in recent years that are not as closely tied to traditional Islamist South Asian or North African politics. These include Cage,³¹ Helping Households Under Great Stress (HHUGS), and Muslim Engagement & Development (MEND).³²

Cage describes itself as “an independent advocacy organization working to empower communities impacted by the ‘War on Terror.’”³³ Since its 2003 founding, Cage has lobbied for the release of a variety of Muslim terrorists and terror suspects.³⁴ At the time of this writing, Cage was campaigning on behalf of Ammar al-Baluchi,³⁵ who is currently facing trial via military commission at Guantanamo Bay for his logistical role in 9/11. Cage also faced strident criticism after its director of research, Asim Qureshi, described ISIS executioner Mohammed Emwazi as an “extremely gentle...beautiful young man” before Emwazi joined the terror group.³⁶ Qureshi has previously given a speech outside the U.S. embassy in London where he called on Muslims to support jihad against “the oppression of the West.”³⁷ Cage’s outreach director is Moazzam Begg. (For more information on Begg, see below under “Key Battlegrounds for the Mainstreaming of Islamism.”)

An organization closely aligned with Cage is HHUGS (which formerly described itself as Cage’s “sister organization,” although Cage has downplayed this claim).³⁸ HHUGS claims to “provide financial, emotional, and practical support and advice to Muslim households impacted by counter-terrorism, national security and extremism-related laws, policies and procedures, in the UK and abroad.”³⁹ The group’s primary focus is, therefore, on assisting the families of terrorists and terror suspects. Shakeel Begg and Haitham al-Haddad are both patrons;⁴⁰ Murtaza Khan has spoken at HHUGS events.⁴¹ (More information on these three men below under “Key Battlegrounds.”)

Cage is also connected to MEND, a nongovernmental organization that states that it “helps to empower and encourage British Muslims within local communities to be more actively involved in British media and politics.”⁴² Cage and MEND share a funder,⁴³ and an ex-MEND employee now works for Cage. MEND has also promoted CAGE’s publications and defended them online.⁴⁴

MEND presents itself as a mainstream group and has worked closely with parliamentarians and the police on issues such as “Islamophobia.”⁴⁵

Yet, the journalist John Ware has noted multiple examples of MEND's "partnerships with clerics and organizations who have expressed views that are antisemitic, homophobic, anti-Western, sectarian and occasionally in support of terrorism."⁴⁶ MEND's volunteers, representatives, and organizers have also made a variety of inflammatory statements online, including tweeting pictures of Israelis supposedly drinking human blood.⁴⁷

Beyond these groups, there are also several influential individuals within the British Islamist scene.

Shakeel Begg (no known relation to Moazzam Begg), for example, is an imam at the Lewisham Islamic Centre in Southeast London. This is the mosque attended by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, the converts who stabbed Lee Rigby to death.⁴⁸

Following an attempt by Begg to sue the BBC for defamation, a 2016 High Court ruling in the U.K. found that Begg was "an extremist Islamic speaker who espouses extremist Islamic positions" and "promoted and encouraged religious violence by telling Muslims that violence in support of Islam would constitute a man's greatest deed." For example, Begg had previously been reported to have told an audience to "take some money and go to Palestine...fight the Zionists in Palestine if you want to do this"; and gave a speech outside Belmarsh prison (which houses a large number of convicted terrorists and terror suspects) in which the High Court concluded that he voiced, "sympathy and solidarity with the Belmarsh Muslim prisoners' for their plight, but also approval of their crimes."⁴⁹

Despite this, as one think tank study observed, Begg is considered a mainstream figure in certain circles. Tom Wilson, the study's author, noted that Begg "has established himself firmly within a network of local interfaith and community groups and has also developed strong links with a number of public bodies. These activities have brought him into close contact with schools, local authority groups, police groups, the chaplaincy of a local hospital and the chaplaincy of a London university."⁵⁰ For example, in 2018, Begg was invited to speak at a "Lewisham Labour Against Racism" rally alongside a Labour Member of Parliament.⁵¹

Another popular cleric who has openly called for the restoration of an Islamic caliphate is Haitham al-Haddad.⁵² He has described homosexuality as a "scourge,"⁵³ praised female genital mutilation, and claims to have received requests from adulterous women "begging [him] to help them to find a way to a Muslim country to be stoned to death."⁵⁴

Clerics like Haddad are supported and their message amplified by websites like "5 Pillars," which also serves as a base for attacks on those Muslims who do not share this highly intolerant interpretation of Islam. "5 Pillars"

has also criticized and openly undermined interfaith initiatives concerning Jews and Muslims, or sects within Islam that it dislikes.⁵⁵ The site is edited by Roshan Salih, an employee of the Iranian-funded channel, Press TV,⁵⁶ and a conspiracy theorist on Israel and Jews.⁵⁷ Its deputy editor, Dilly Hus-sain, has called for a “unified military effort by the Islamic world to remove the Zionist occupation” of Palestine.⁵⁸

State Responses

One of the most important responses by the British government to the domestic threat—from violent Islamism initially and then non-violent Islamism more recently—is its counter-radicalization program called Prevent.

Prevent is one of four strands within the government’s counterterrorism strategy (CONTEST), alongside Pursue, Protect, and Prepare. It aims to “stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism,” in part by giving local communities the tools to challenge extremism.⁵⁹

Near the start of the century, Prevent was a skin-and-bones initiative tied to addressing the radicalization of individuals interested in carrying out acts of violence within the U.K.⁶⁰ It aimed to do so by engaging both in a war of ideas while also addressing various grievances (such as “disadvantage” and “structural problems”).⁶¹

The strategy was fleshed out in the years to come, and a concept formed that the government, police, and local Muslim communities would cooperate to challenge Islamist violence and the narratives that surrounded it via local, grassroots campaigns. The intent was ultimately to dissuade those on the verge of violence.⁶²

An assumption within Prevent was that as a distorted form of Islam was imperiling the U.K., the government must push the “right” form of Islam as a counterweight.⁶³ This policy rested on the notion that the extremists’ interpretation of theology was entirely implausible and that the solution to radical Islam was merely an alternative form of Islam, rather than a focus on universal values.

Control was handed to local town and city councils to spend money on counter-extremism initiatives, yet little guidance was given on how to spend it. The results were inevitably disappointing. Some money was spent on a variety of confused initiatives with little connection to counter-extremism.⁶⁴ Some was spent on organizations that had a veneer of respectability, yet in reality openly promoted Islamist thought.⁶⁵ Little found its way to actually serving the purpose of stopping Muslims from turning to terrorism.⁶⁶

Perhaps such issues could have eventually been addressed if the government of the day was working to empower genuine moderates. Yet the government regularly—and closely—engaged with Islamists at home and abroad, empowering and even funding them.

Sometimes, these decisions were made out of naivety about the ideology that animated such groups. However, there were also those openly keen to empower Salafist or Muslim Brotherhood groups. One such man was Robert Lambert, head of the Metropolitan Police’s Muslim Contact Unit, who openly contended that “Islamists can be powerful allies in the fight against al-Qaida influence.”⁶⁷

While some of these Islamist groups may have supported attacks against Israel or coalition forces in Iraq, they were more wary of calling for acts of violence on the streets of the U.K. Rather than recognizing such groups as a potential pathway to violent jihadism, Lambert regarded them as a safety valve that would draw young radicals away from specifically targeting the homeland. Therefore, as a rule of thumb, in Lambert’s mind, as long as groups did not explicitly call for terrorist attacks against British interests, they were potential allies—regardless of their views and actions regarding a caliphate, sharia law, or even on terrorist attacks, elsewhere in the world.

Therefore, Lambert successfully advocated working closely with a British group tied to the Muslim Brotherhood to lever Abu Hamza al-Masri, the jihadist cleric who controlled Finsbury Park Mosque, out of power at the mosque.⁶⁸ One of the subsequently empowered men was closely tied to Hamas and had praised suicide attacks in Israel, but was more equivocal about their utility in the U.K.⁶⁹

Government attitudes toward this approach began to shift after the Labour government lost power in 2010. Lambert’s reputation was hit by revelations over deeply unethical behavior he had undertaken while he was an undercover police officer.⁷⁰ Furthermore, case studies he cited as successes for engagement with Islamists were shown to be flawed.⁷¹

When a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats came to power in May 2010, a new Prevent strategy was drafted, which identified the entire ideology of Islamist extremism—not just the violent manifestation epitomized by al-Qaeda—as what needs to be combated. It put ideology front and center as being the main driver of Muslim extremism, which was defined as “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.”⁷²

The strategy also downplayed the role that Islamist grievances play in terror attacks, stating that as “terrorism is associated with rejection of a

cohesive, integrated, multi-faith society and of parliamentary democracy,” the government would focus on ideology in both its violent and non-violent forms. It went on to declare that “we will not work with extremist organizations that oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society. If organizations do not accept these fundamental values, we will not work with them and we will not fund them.”⁷³ Islamist advisers relied upon by the previous government were now out in the cold.

The government then passed Prevent-related legislation in 2015, which made it a legal requirement for certain authorities—prisons, hospitals, and education providers, for example—to have “due regard to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.” That meant understanding the risk of radical ideology, communicating that to all staff, and understanding what kind of support potentially radicalized individuals may need.⁷⁴ This was known as the “Prevent Duty” and has become a key source of Islamist and academic dissent for years.⁷⁵

Despite—and, on occasion, perhaps because of—some of Prevent’s successes,⁷⁶ it has received sustained and vocal criticism from Islamists and left-wing activists. MEND, Cage, and groups they are connected to have been especially active in working to undermine Prevent, with Cage accusing Prevent of “contribut[ing] to the radicalization process rather than counter[ing] it.”⁷⁷ These groups have become central to the ecosystem that has emerged in opposition to Prevent, where various student, far-left, and Islamist groups have converged in an attempt to undermine the government’s efforts to address extremism on campus.

One of the groups in this ecosystem is Prevent Watch, which describes its mission as to “support people impacted by the Prevent Duty.”⁷⁸ Prevent Watch has clear links to both Cage and MEND. Prevent Watch has given joint presentations with MEND; Cage has spoken at Prevent Watch events, used Prevent Watch material at its own events, and facilitated contact between individuals affected by the Prevent program and Prevent Watch.⁷⁹

This anti-Prevent ecosystem has consistently spread false information about the program. Possibly the best-known example is when a 10-year-old child was visited by local police after writing in an English lesson that he lived in “terrorist housing” rather than “terraced housing” (a case widely reported across the media). This case was portrayed on the Cage website as a “growing trend within the global framework of Islamophobia”⁸⁰ and is listed as “The ‘terrorist house’ Case” on the Prevent Watch website.⁸¹ Miqdaad Versi of the Muslim Council of Britain stated that “[t]his is a natural consequence of the extension of the ‘Prevent Duty’ to schools.”⁸²

In fact, a potential terrorist threat was not the reason for the police visit. The child had also written in his class that “I hate it when my uncle hits me.”⁸³ His teachers’ understandable concern about this statement meant that local police and social services were notified to ensure that the child was not being abused. Yet the myth about this case and an allegedly over-zealous use of Prevent endures. In his book *Radicals Chasing Utopia*, Jamie Bartlett states that during his interviews while researching Prevent, the “terrorist house” case was offered “several times as incontrovertible proof that Muslims are being unfairly targeted.”⁸⁴

Such incidents are not always simply a case of crossed wires. The idea that the government maliciously or enthusiastically targets Muslim children bolsters a key narrative of Islamists and one they push frequently: that there is a Western conspiracy against Islam.⁸⁵

In January 2019, the “Preventing Prevent” lobby was successful in forcing the government to agree to an independent review of the program. Like the 2010 review, this, too, was initially being overseen by the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Alex Carlile. However, some of those agitating most vociferously for the review—such as the Conservative peer Baroness Sayeeda Warsi—immediately dubbed it a “whitewash,” as Lord Carlile was not her preferred choice as reviewer.⁸⁶ Some of these same long-standing critics began a legal challenge against Lord Carlile’s appointment, leading to his being stood down by the government in December 2019.⁸⁷ This challenge lends credence to the idea that dislike of Prevent has always been less about its content and more about its very existence; and that only scrapping Prevent entirely or transforming it so radically that it is essentially unrecognizable is an acceptable result.

Key Battlegrounds for the Mainstreaming of Islamism

The ideology of Islamism is no longer confined to the fringes of British society. Instead, Islamist groups are active in Muslim communities, in the political sphere, within civil society groups and charities, on social and traditional media, and in the universities. This has enabled their views to become increasingly mainstream.

1. Politics. One group that has had some success in leveraging political influence is MEND. Despite MEND’s controversial past, it has been hosted in the House of Lords, and British parliamentarians, government officials, and police forces have actively engaged with it.⁸⁸ In November 2017, then-leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, attended the event at Parliament to launch MEND’s “Islamophobia Awareness Month.”⁸⁹ There are those in

Westminster—most notably Baroness Warsi—who have actively sought to enhance government engagement with MEND even more.⁹⁰

Part of the reason that MEND has been mainstreamed is that certain institutions desire to partner with groups actively working on issues of concern to Muslims, such as “Islamophobia.” MEND has had success in presenting itself as a respectable and legitimate partner on such issues.

Another relevant group is the Islamic Forum of Europe. At a local level, the IFE, an organization heavily influenced by Abul A’la Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami, has demonstrated the influence of Islamist groups in Muslim-majority areas of the U.K.

For example, after far-left George Galloway was elected as Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005, he was secretly recorded saying: “I am indebted more than I can say, more than it would be wise—for them—for me to say, to the Islamic Forum of Europe. I believe they played the decisive role [in my election].”⁹¹

This is not an isolated example. According to the British government, “[i]n November 2009 the IFE led a petition seeking a directly elected mayor in the London borough of Tower Hamlets.”⁹² A 2010 documentary for Channel 4’s *Dispatches* then demonstrated the extremely close ties between IFE and Luftur Rahman, then Labour’s mayoral candidate for Tower Hamlets. These revelations led the Labour National Executive Committee to remove Rahman as their candidate. Instead, he ran as an independent—and won—before the exposure of a legion of corrupt, nepotistic, and fraudulent practices led to his formally being removed from office in 2015 and being barred from running for office again until 2021.⁹³

Jim Fitzpatrick—the Member of Parliament for Poplar and Limehouse, a constituency within the IFE’s Tower Hamlets base—has stated that the IFE is “acting almost as an entryist organization, placing people within political parties, recruiting members to those political parties, trying to get those individuals selected and elected so they can exercise political influence and power.”⁹⁴

2. The Courts. Certain individuals and groups have also utilized the U.K.’s libel laws to sue or threaten to sue outlets that write on particular topics. Former Guantanamo Bay detainee Moazzam Begg (now outreach director at Cage), for example, threatened to sue *The Sunday Times* in February 2010 for its article tying him to the Taliban (He had taken his family to Afghanistan to live under Taliban rule in the summer of 2001.);⁹⁵ he then sued the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in 2011, leading the think tank to “sincerely apologise...for damage done to his reputation” and pay him damages.⁹⁶

Prevent Watch has also been active on this front. Journalist Andrew Gilligan reported in the *Sunday Telegraph* in January 2016 that a widely covered case featuring a Muslim mother—who accused the U.K. of being a “police state” because child protection officers spoke briefly with her teenage son after he used the term “ecoterrorist” during a conversation in class about environmental activism—was linked to Prevent Watch.

The mother in question, Ifhat Smith, was indeed affiliated with Prevent Watch and was also the London office manager for Ennahdha,⁹⁷ the Tunisian political party heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood.⁹⁸

Smith took the school to court over her son being questioned by the child protection officers. The case was dismissed and she was told to pay £1,000 for wasting the court’s time.⁹⁹ Prevent Watch complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) about the *Sunday Telegraph* article in April 2016. IPSO dismissed that complaint.¹⁰⁰

Yet Smith also tried to sue the *Sunday Telegraph* for the way in which the story was reported. In October 2016, despite IPSO’s ruling, the newspaper decided to pay her compensation, apologizing for giving the impression that her concerns over her son’s case were not “brought in good faith.”¹⁰¹

This is not an isolated case involving Prevent Watch. In November 2015, the BBC reported that a school in Waltham Forest, East London, had “mistakenly revealed” the first names of seven children there who were assessed to be a radicalization risk after a July 2015 freedom of information (FOI) request. The BBC’s report, however, was incorrect. When the FOI request was released, the names of the children were redacted; but according to the Waltham Forest Council, the document was then “manipulated by a third party to reveal the blocked-out names.”¹⁰² Who this third party was is not publicly known.

The BBC interviewed Haras Ahmed, who put in the FOI requests, about the story.¹⁰³ Yet Ahmed, too, had been associated with Prevent Watch prior to going to the media.¹⁰⁴ This information formed part of a *Sunday Telegraph* article by Andrew Gilligan.

In response, Ahmed sued and in August 2017 the *Sunday Telegraph* agreed to pay £20,000 and issue a statement which, in part, read that his interview on the BBC was not part of a “campaign to undermine the government’s anti-terrorism policy” and was done in “good faith.”¹⁰⁵

Libel cases involving those aligned with Islamist causes are not always successful. For example, in January 2009, Azad Ali—formerly director of engagement at MEND and now community relations director at Cage, but

at the time a civil servant at the Treasury¹⁰⁶—tried to sue two British newspapers on the basis that their quoting one of his articles from an IFE-hosted website had the effect of portraying him as “a hardline Islamic extremist who supports the killing of British and American soldiers in Iraq.” However, the judge said that Ali’s claim suffered from “an absence of reality” and that Ali was, indeed, “taking the position that the killing of American and British troops in Iraq would be justified.”¹⁰⁷

Yet there is a clear temptation for media outlets to pursue the same path as the *Sunday Telegraph*. Fighting libel cases takes time, effort, and significant amounts of money. It can be quicker and easier to pay damages and issue an apology. This is a major danger: If the media are unwilling to report on the past extremist statements or actions of Islamists, the media are enabling Islamists to present themselves in a more credible and mainstream fashion.

This feeds a sense of grievance that the press prints false stories, seeking to demonize Muslims. It also leads to less press freedom, as media outlets stop reporting on non-violent Islamists for fear of the legal repercussions.

3. The Media. The media is also culpable for mainstreaming and promoting Islamists and Islamist groups. For example, Moazzam Begg was invited onto BBC News in December 2014 to discuss the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s (SSCI) highly critical study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program of terror suspects.¹⁰⁸ Begg was invited on the basis of his former detention at Guantanamo Bay and his claims that he was tortured by the U.S.

The BBC did not mention that the same SSCI study for which Begg was invited to back up the conclusions described him as:

- A “U.K. extremist”;
- Once running a bookshop that was “a known jihadist gathering place”;
- Associated with “al-Qa’ida operatives”;
- Someone who, prior to his transfer to Guantanamo Bay, was “arrested at an al-Qa’ida safe house in Islamabad, Pakistan”; and
- Someone who gave Pakistani authorities information “on U.K.-based extremists in the context of terrorist training camps.”¹⁰⁹

Nor did the BBC mention that three separate U.S. Department of Defense

investigations into Begg's allegations of mistreatment have "found no evidence to substantiate his claims." A U.S. Department of Justice review also concluded that Begg's claims could not be supported.¹¹⁰

While it is far more likely that the BBC was unaware of this information than actively seeking to suppress it, it is not the first time that the BBC has provided a platform for terror suspects without, apparently, having done sufficient research on their backgrounds.

Upon his release from Guantanamo Bay in October 2015, the BBC conducted a more than 90-minute interview with the Saudi-born U.K. resident Shaker Aamer. The interview largely consisted of Aamer professing his innocence and making unproven allegations of torture.¹¹¹

It was the conclusion of the U.S. government, which detained Aamer between February 2002 and October 2015, that he was a trained fighter who recruited Muslims for extremist causes and has wide-ranging connections to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda-related "charities," and known terrorists.¹¹² In this case, the BBC interviewer's knowledge of Aamer's case was obviously limited and the questioning of his backstory insufficient.

Then, in March 2016, the BBC gave a nearly one-hour platform to Babar Ahmad, a British citizen who established the first major online English-language resource in support of jihad: Azzam Publications. Ahmad was extradited from the U.K. to the U.S. in 2012 to face trial on terrorism charges. Once extradited, Ahmad pleaded guilty in the U.S. to "conspiring to provide and providing material support to terrorists."¹¹³

Ahmad operated as a key radicalizer for Islamist causes in the U.K. in the 1990s. Among those he influenced was Saajid Badat, a British citizen jailed for his role in an al-Qaeda "shoe bomb" plot. Badat told a U.S. court that when Ahmad discussed jihad, "there was concerted effort to make us understand that when we talk about jihad it meant armed jihad."¹¹⁴ In his BBC interview, Ahmad stated that his terrorist convictions were related to "naive" activity in which he acted in "good faith."¹¹⁵ Again, the BBC's questioning of Ahmad's comments was inadequate; he was not even asked about Saajid Badat.

Giving Moazzam Begg, Aamer, and Badat these kinds of platforms to make the accusations they do heightens the prospect that trust in the state is weakened, and spreads the false idea that the U.S. and U.K. governments have a policy of mistreating Muslims or that there is a Western war on Islam.

4. Education. Several high-profile terrorists have studied at British universities. These include Omar Sheikh, who attended the London School of Economics and organized the kidnapping of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl by Pakistan-based terrorists. Pearl was then beheaded by 9/11

mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in 2002. Another prominent terrorist who attended a British University was Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who, at al-Qaeda's behest, tried to bring down a plane full of passengers on Christmas Day 2009 with explosives concealed in his underwear. Abdulmutallab had attended University College London. According to one study, more than a quarter of those who committed "Islamism-related offences" in the U.K. had attended a higher education institution (most commonly in Britain itself).¹¹⁶

While terrorists having attended university does not necessarily mean they were exposed to Islamist ideology there, concrete examples have been shown of how, for decades, British colleges and universities have been fertile ground from which Islamist groups recruit and proselytize.¹¹⁷

A study published in 2010 found that, in the previous five years, speakers on British campuses included supporters of Hamas; members of Hizb ut-Tahrir; and those who had previously spoken in support of armed jihad, the Taliban, and the destruction of Israel.¹¹⁸ Another study found that more than 200 events promoted to university students in the 2017–2018 academic year featured speakers "with a history of extreme or intolerant views" or who were "representatives of extremist-linked organizations."¹¹⁹

Haitham al-Haddad is invited to speak on British campuses,¹²⁰ and Uthman Lateef¹²¹ and Murtaza Khan are regular presences.¹²² Lateef regularly rails against non-Muslims and gay people,¹²³ and has campaigned for the release of Aafia Siddiqui, an al-Qaeda terrorist who is serving an 86-year sentence in the U.S. for attempting to murder U.S. officials in Afghanistan and assaulting those who tried to stop her.¹²⁴ Lateef has also discouraged Muslims from assisting British intelligence services, linking such an act to apostasy.¹²⁵ Khan, meanwhile, has described non-Muslims as "filthy,"¹²⁶ and links perceived problems facing Muslims today to the lack of a caliphate.¹²⁷

Such problems are not confined to obscure and less-prestigious colleges and universities: Moazzam Begg has had an active presence for well over a decade on some of the most esteemed campuses in the U.K.¹²⁸

It seems as if this long-standing Islamist presence on campuses has had some impact on Muslim student opinion: One poll found that just under a third of Muslim students believed killing in the name of Islam to be justified.¹²⁹ Such findings help explain why David Cameron, as Prime Minister, stated in 2015 that universities were "fail[ing] to see the creeping extremism on their campuses.... [W]hen an Islamist extremist goes there to promote their [sic] poisonous ideology, too often university leaders look the other way through a mixture of misguided liberalism and cultural sensitivity."¹³⁰

It is not just universities that act as launching pads for Islamist ideology. The “Trojan Horse” scandal in Birmingham also demonstrated how Islamists are taking over local schools and subjecting young children to extremist speakers and an anti-Western, segregationist worldview designed to raise distrust of non-Muslims.

The origin of this discovery was an anonymous November 2013 letter to the Birmingham City Council warning of a strategy to take over several public schools in Birmingham and run them based on hardline Islamic teachings.

In April 2014, the U.K. Department for Education undertook a review to assess the veracity of these claims. This review concluded that Muslim hardliners had undertaken a “coordinated, deliberate, and sustained” plan to take over several schools in Birmingham in order “to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamic ethos.” The consequence was that young Muslims were “being encouraged to accept unquestioningly a particular hardline strand of Sunni Islam.”¹³¹

The imposition of this worldview was only possible because the individuals implicated carefully planned out a strategy to empower themselves and diminish the influence of non-Muslims and those who did not agree with their ethos. The government’s report stated that the “Trojan Horse” plotters advanced their plans “by gaining influence on the governing bodies, installing sympathetic headteachers or senior members of staff, appointing like-minded people to key positions, and seeking to remove headteachers they do not feel to be sufficiently compliant” and by making spurious accusations of racism and “Islamophobia” against non-Muslims until they were essentially forced into resigning their positions.¹³²

The Department for Education subsequently banned Tahir Alam—the man at the center of the Trojan Horse plot—from having any further involvement with schools in the U.K.¹³³

Despite this, there has been a concerted push by activist groups to present the Trojan Horse scandal as a hoax. These have prominently included MEND, which organized an event to focus on “how a hoax letter, a media scrum, a forceful education secretary and political motivations in education regulation, lead to the stigmatisation of a community, discrimination against outstanding teachers/school leaders and exam failure for a generation of children.”¹³⁴ Planned speakers included Tahir Alam, alongside the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers and a variety of British academics.¹³⁵ The planned venue cancelled the event after press reports.¹³⁶

Conclusion

The objectives of Islamists in the U.K. are near-term and practical:

- Islamization of the individual;
- Political influence;
- Mainstreaming of key issues, including the idea of a Western war on Islam;
- Guiding the media narrative on key issues;
- Delegitimization and slandering of opponents; and
- Undercutting of support for government counter-extremism policies in Muslim communities.

And long-term and philosophical:

- Islamization of the community and
- Creation of an Islamic state in the U.K.

The harm to the U.K. is obvious:

- **Democracy is undermined.** Islamists aim to persuade others that democracy is an illegitimate form of governance. Simultaneously, Islamists cynically use democratic freedoms to assist in the election of Islamists and those who support Islamist causes.
- **Social cohesion is fractured.** The mainstreaming of Islamist views drowns out the opinions of the non-Islamist majority.
- **U.K. government policy is constrained.** British policymakers (consciously or subconsciously) believe that the Islamist narrative of a state-led war on Islam has been accepted in British Muslim communities, and tailor policies accordingly, resulting in policies that are not necessarily in the national interest.

- **U.K. allies are imperiled.** The U.K. has served as a base for Islamist fundraising for terrorism.
- **Lies become accepted as the truth.** Islamists have taken advantage of U.K. libel laws to suffocate discussion of certain topics, and use the free press to spread their propaganda.

As many Islamists in the U.K. are currently not using violence to push their political objectives, the U.K. must win a war of ideas.

The Prevent program lies at the heart of this conflict. Islamist groups' actions are not guided by a desire to improve Prevent, but to shatter it. This is not a surprise, because Prevent unmistakably says that all forms of Islamist ideology present a threat to the U.K.: that “[t]errorist groups can take up and exploit ideas which have been developed and sometimes popularized by extremist organizations which operate legally in this country,” and that “preventing terrorism will mean challenging extremist (and non-violent) ideas that are also part of a terrorist ideology.”¹³⁷

This should not be a controversial assertion. The fact that it is controversial highlights the extent to which the U.K. is struggling to grapple with the depth of Islamism’s ideological threat.

So if the U.K. is to weaken the influence of Islamism among Muslim communities, it cannot try to indulge or co-opt Islamism. The U.K. must adopt a consistently robust and unflinching approach to Islamist influence in all its forms, working alongside those on the ground seeking to do the same. Engaging with Islamists—rather than defeating them—was the U.K.’s major mistake in the past. It should not be a mistake that the U.K. continues to make.

Endnotes

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