



UNIVERSITY OF
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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL
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CHALLENGING THE VIEW THAT BIRMINGHAM AND ITS MUSLIMS ARE A PROBLEM – ESRC FESTIVAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE 2017

BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIMS: in the city, of the city

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Identity & Belonging

Dr Chris Allen

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Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city

This project is more than academic research. Bold and unique, this three year programme will consider the story of the city's Muslim communities – their past, present and future – to better understand their contribution to the success of the city. Recent events across the city and country have significantly impacted cohesion. Often misrepresented or misunderstood, Muslim communities deserve a safe space where they have the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with leaders, institutions and policymakers about the issues that matter to them and impact their everyday lives. As a leading Russell Group institution, the University of Birmingham occupies a singular niche to facilitate this. Building on our links across the political sphere, state apparatus and the city, we aim to bring together diverse groups for a range of engaging, relevant and pertinent activities.

Birmingham – as a city and as a university – has a strong commitment to fairness, tolerance and co-operation. This project aspires to generate new ideas to support and encourage others to understand Birmingham's Muslim communities as both 'in' and 'of' the city.

DISCLAIMER

This paper contains the views of individuals that were engaged and duly interpreted by members of the project's research team. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies with the author(s):

Dr Chris Allen

c.allen.2@bham.ac.uk

This short comment piece was written in relation to the ESRC Festival of Social Science event, *A Conversation about Birmingham's Muslims: in the City, of the City* held on Thursday 9th November 2017. A version was also published in the *Huffington Post*.

COMMENT

It's been almost half a year since Khalid Masood drove his car into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge – injuring around 50 people and killing four – before going on to crash it into the perimeter fence of the Houses of Parliament where he stabbed to death a police officer before being shot and killed¹.

As soon as Masood's identity was made public, the media homed in on how he was from Birmingham. Following a raid on his flat on the outskirts of Birmingham city centre, camera crews and journalists from around the world descended on his Hagley Road home. At the same time, I - like many of my peers - were called on to give interviews, most of the time being asked to provide answers to questions that we did not yet know.

My media remit included speaking to journalists from Belgium, France, Switzerland and the United States as also from here in Britain. Almost all of the interviews focused on why Birmingham was the 'capital of jihadism', the 'new Londonistan', and as one a Belgian journalist put it, the new Molenbeek² (the Brussels suburb where police raided a number of houses in March 2016 in connection to the Paris terror attacks four months earlier).

¹ See, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39373766>

² See, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/15/molenbeek-the-brussels-borough-in-the-spotlight-after-paris-attacks>

Among the British news media a similar line of questioning was also evident. Take for instance the Financial Times and its description of Birmingham as a 'hotbed' of Islamist activity³ or the Independent when it referred to the city as a 'breeding ground for British-born terror'⁴. It was the Daily Mail however that surpassed all others. Under the headline, 'So how DID Birmingham become the jihadi capital of Britain?'⁵ the piece focused on where Masood lived and where he hired the car from that he subsequently used to commit his atrocities. As the Mail put it, both were "in Birmingham. Birmingham. Birmingham. Birmingham. It's always Birmingham". For the Mail, the cause for Masood's actions was without doubt Birmingham.

The Mail sought to substantiate its claim by drawing on a report⁶ by the right-wing Henry Jackson Society, a think-tank the Charity Commission recently considered taking regulatory action against in response to allegations it received money to wage a propaganda campaign⁷. In doing so, it noted that within a few miles of Masood's flat, 26 of the country's 269 'jihadis' had been 'produced' out of Sparkbrook. Despite noting that Masood's flat was in Edgbaston, the Mail was never going to let a 'few miles' spoil a good story. As such it went on to deride Sparkbrook as if Masood lived there,

³ See, <https://www.ft.com/content/c20027e8-0ff3-11e7-a88c-50ba212dce4d>

⁴ See, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-attacker-khalid-masood-birmingham-uk-terrorists-breeding-ground-a7646536.html>

⁵ See, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4344300/How-DID-Birmingham-jihadi-capital-Britain.html>

⁶ See, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Islamist-Terrorism-preview-1.pdf>

⁷ See, <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/charity-commission-looking-henry-jackson-society/governance/article/1424329>

describing it as a 'segregated' ghetto 'where few British-origin households remain'. It added that Sparkbrook was shaped by the failures of multiculturalism, of 'mass, uncontrolled immigration' and that 'a significant section' of its residents did not speak English. In addition that Sparkbrook was also home to 22 mosques the underlying message was loud and clear.

But as noted previously, it wasn't just Sparkbrook that was to blame; the real problem was Birmingham. Pulling together a number of disparate and unconnected issues and incidents, the Mail cited the now defunct Project Champion and Operation Trojan Horse more recently as evidence of why Birmingham was 'becoming synonymous with extremism'.

For those that are unaware, Project Champion⁸ began in 2008 when 200+ ANPR and CCTV cameras were installed around two areas of the city with high density Muslim populations. Noting how local residents in both of the affected areas had been misled about the purpose of the cameras, an independent review by Thames Valley Police resulted in the cameras being dismantled a few years later. Despite this, the Mail claimed that the cameras were 'justified'.

Operation Trojan Horse⁹ began in 2014 with a report in the Sunday Telegraph alleging a 'plot' to take-over a number of state schools in Birmingham by 'Islamist-inspired extremists'. While the letter was understood to be a hoax, subsequent investigations by Birmingham City Council,

⁸ See, <http://www.publicspirit.org.uk/project-champion-and-the-stigmatisation-of-muslim-space/>

⁹ See, <https://discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/operation-trojan-horse-how-a-hoax-problematised-muslims-and-islam/>

Ofsted, West Midlands Police and the Department of Education all failed to uncover any evidence of any 'take-over'. In truth, all the investigations were able to identify were some governance issues in a handful of schools that were placed under scrutiny.

Despite authoritatively citing both as 'evidence' of the problem of Muslims in Birmingham, the truth of the matter is that the Mail's claims were at best extremely weak, at worst downright inaccurate. The only redeeming factor was that the Mail thankfully chose not to cite the utterly farcical claims made by the so-called 'expert' Steven Emerson on Fox News in 2015 when he claimed that Birmingham was 'totally Muslim where non-Muslims simply don't go in'¹⁰.

With half a year having elapsed since the Westminster attacks, the claims that were made at the time about Birmingham seem even more lurid.

As regards Masood, the Telegraph suggested that he had in fact lived in Birmingham for little more than a year before the attacks¹¹. It is worth stressing that despite him having lived for longer in various locations in Kent, Luton and Saudi Arabia none of these came under as much scrutiny as Birmingham did. Likewise, we also now know that Masood had a history of violent knife crime resulting in him having served two prison sentences. It is claimed that during one of these stints, Masood – who was born Adrian Elms and had a series of different identities over his 52 years – converted to Islam.

¹⁰ See, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/11/fox-news-steven-emerson-birmingham-muslims>

¹¹ See, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/24/khalid-masood-everything-know-london-attacker/>

Despite the Mail's allegations of Masood having 'contacts' in Birmingham, Neil Basu – Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and Senior National Coordinator for UK Counter-Terrorism Policing – said Masood acted alone¹². Noting that the exact motivation for the attacks may never be known, Banu added that while Masood had an interest in Islamist-inspired extremism, there was no evidence of links with Islamic State or al-Qaeda be that in Birmingham, Britain or indeed elsewhere. Consequently, all twelve of those who were arrested in Birmingham in the immediate aftermath of the attacks have since been released without charge.

As regards Masood's engagement and interaction with Muslims in Birmingham more widely, there is no evidence he had any firm or established links with any specific community, group or mosque. Despite the Mail's inference otherwise, this included any Muslims in Sparkbrook. Without doubt, no evidence exists to suggest that any Muslim – or indeed anyone else – in Birmingham was in any way complicit in the atrocities he went on to commit.

Contrary to how Muslims in the city were portrayed at the time, a number of the city's Muslims gathered in the city centre shortly after under the banner of 'Not in Our Name'¹³. Weeks later, Birmingham's Muslims were opening the doors of the Central Mosque to all; hosting a 'Best of British Tea Party'¹⁴ in defiance of the

English Defence League's shameless and opportunistic attempt to stoke tensions in the city when it relocated its planned rally to Birmingham from elsewhere in the Midlands. While not all Muslims should be held accountable for the actions of a small handful – or indeed be expected to 'apologise' on their behalf – what is evident is that Birmingham's Muslims are somewhat different to how they are presented in the media and elsewhere.

Having said that, it is true that there are a small number of Muslims in Birmingham that – like Masood – are attracted to extremist messages and ideologies. But so too are there non-Muslims in the city who are equally attracted to extremist ideologies albeit those which aren't Islamist-inspired: the recent arrest of a number of Birmingham citizens alleged to have links with the now banned neo-Nazi movement, National Action being a case in point. We cannot overlook the fact that extremism is far from the preserve of Muslim communities only.

For too long now, the ordinary and everyday lives of Muslims in the city have been routinely and repeatedly perceived by those looking in as something far more extraordinary, insidious and dangerous: misconstrued as 'evidence' of another as yet undiscovered conspiracy, of being 'proof' that Muslims are an 'enemy within', or indeed any other Islamophobic construct that some are far too eager to conjure in the public's imagination. Given the occurrence of such, it is likely that the city's Muslims will again be feeling anxious and fraught.

While some will insist there's no smoke without fire given the coverage and perception of Birmingham, my experience is

¹² See, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/27/westminster-attacker-khalid-masood-not-directed-by-isis-met-police>

¹³ See, <http://www.itv.com/news/central/story/2017-03-25/muslims-in-birmingham-hold-unity-rally/>

¹⁴ See, [http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/edl-rally-muslims-birmingham-central-mosque-english-defence-league-a7674131.html)

[news/edl-rally-muslims-birmingham-central-mosque-english-defence-league-a7674131.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/edl-rally-muslims-birmingham-central-mosque-english-defence-league-a7674131.html)

that most in the city are open and honest about the problems and challenges we face together. However, those same problems and challenges bear little resemblance to the picture painted in the wake of events in Westminster earlier this year. It is highly unlikely that this will be the last time the city will be misrepresented and misunderstood, and so its imperative we remain united in the face everything that is thrown our way.