



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

COLLEGE OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

## OPERATION TROJAN HORSE: AN OVERVIEW

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

Paper no.4

Cohesion & Integration Workstream

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2017



## *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):

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper comprises material which formed part of a submission of written evidence to the Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life in April 2016.

## OPERATION TROJAN HORSE & BIRMINGHAM'S EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

In 2014, a letter published in the Sunday Telegraph described what became known as 'Operation Trojan Horse': an alleged plot by 'Islamist hardliners' to 'takeover' around 25 state schools in Birmingham<sup>1</sup>.

Attracting national attention in both the political and media spaces, West Midlands Police questioned the validity of the allegations because it believed the letter to be a hoax<sup>2</sup>.

Nonetheless, the allegations prompted what became the largest educational investigation in British history. This investigation was four pronged, with the Department for Education, OFSTED, Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police all undertaking separate approaches. It must be stressed that none of the investigations found any evidence whatsoever of a 'plot' to 'takeover' any schools in Birmingham or elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Allen, Operation Trojan Horse: examining the 'Islamic takeover' of Birmingham schools, The Conversation (2014)

<https://theconversation.com/operation-trojan-horse-examining-the-islamic-takeover-of-birmingham-schools-25764>

<sup>2</sup> Chris Allen. Operation Trojan Horse: how a hoax problematized Muslims and Islam, Discover Society (2014)

<http://discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/operation-trojan-horse-how-a-hoax-problematized-muslims-and-islam/>

Over the past decade my research has shown Muslims are increasingly perceived to be problematic: a threatening, ever-more homogenised and undifferentiated 'Other'<sup>3</sup>. There is little doubt that the allegations made via Operation Trojan Horse will feed into this process of problematizing and Othering.

This can be illustrated by the way in which the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair made unfounded claims about the situation in Birmingham. While making a speech on the international stage, Blair claimed that there was a direct link between the kidnapping of 200 girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram and the 'extremism' that he alleged was evident in Birmingham's schools<sup>4</sup>. Completely unsubstantiated, it is again necessary to stress that there was no tangible evidence of extremism uncovered in any of the schools investigated in Birmingham.

However, the OFSTED investigation did uncover a handful of incidents in a small number of schools that were problematic as regards school governance. Soon after, five of the city's schools were placed in special measures<sup>5</sup>.

Over the past decade, my research has also shown how it is commonly perceived that Muslims and Islam are largely incompatible with the British – or 'our' – values, norms and way of life. There is little doubt that the allegations made via Operation Trojan Horse will also feed into and further reinforce this perception also.

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Allen. Islamophobia. Farnham: Ashgate (2010).

<sup>4</sup> The Telegraph, 2014

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/education-news/10900955/Trojan-Horse-plot-driven-by-same-warped-Islamic-extremism-as-Boko-Haram-says-Tony-Blair.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, 2014

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/09/trojan-horse-row-birmingham-schools-special-measures-ofsted>

This is because the allegations inferred – without substantiation – that Birmingham Muslims who were participating in what were entirely normal, respectable and responsible activities – e.g. becoming active within their children's schools, taking on the role of school governor and so on – were in fact being far from normal, respectable and responsible. Instead, the allegations conveyed the message that Muslims were engaged in something that was far more underhanded, insidious and even dangerous.

Consequently, those Muslims who might want to actively participate in their children's education in the future – or indeed actively participate in other aspects of public life – might now find it much more difficult to do so. If they do, then they might find themselves under greater scrutiny and monitoring.

Given that young Muslims account for more than 80% of the school age population in certain wards across the city, the barriers to participation that Muslim parents might encounter therefore present a significant challenge.

Another legacy of the Operation Trojan Horse allegations will be to make conversations and discussions about ensuring Muslim pupils feel confident and able to engage in the educational system while having their cultural and religious needs met will have been made far more difficult. This will not only affect Muslims. All conversations and discussions about how to ensure that all pupils in the city have a wide range of educational, social and cultural interactions and experiences will have been made more difficult. Such conversations and discussions are of course essential if all pupils – irrespective of their religious, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic background – are to feel confident

about their role within a cohesive and multicultural society as opposed to being problematized and marginalised and therefore restricted from actively participating in public life.

Set out below are a number of issues relating to Muslims and education provision that might require further consideration.

In many of the city's schools, uniform policies and the provision of cooked lunches have been adapted to accommodate the religious and cultural requirements of Muslims. Given the success of these and that they were historically seen to be examples of good practice<sup>6</sup>, so it is likely that there will be requests to accommodate those same religious and cultural requirements in other areas of educational provision. Some areas where such might occur include in relation to matters of sexual modesty – in particular, the segregation of pupils for physical education and swimming after puberty – and for single-sex secondary schools<sup>7</sup>. Similar may also arise in relation to meeting the statutory requirements relating to the provision of Religious Education and Collective Worship in Muslim majority schools.

Such calls for greater accommodation are posited in a number of reports and policy documents published by a number of British Muslim organisations including the Association of Muslim Social Scientists<sup>8</sup>, the Muslim Welfare House Trust<sup>9</sup>, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Hewer (2001) Schools for Muslims, Oxford Review of Education, 27:4, 515-527.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Hewer (2001) Schools for Muslims, Oxford Review of Education, 27:4, 515-527.

<sup>8</sup>

[http://www.fairuk.org/docs/muslims\\_on\\_education\\_policy\\_paper.pdf](http://www.fairuk.org/docs/muslims_on_education_policy_paper.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://mwht.org.uk/downloads/Understanding-the-Educational-Needs-of-Muslim-Pupils.pdf>

Muslim Council of Britain<sup>10</sup> among others. For them, the need for greater accommodation is far from unexpected.

A number of issues where there might be further calls for accommodation were highlighted by the Operation Trojan Horse investigations. One of these relates to the wearing of the hijab in schools which attracted significant political and media coverage. As the Home Secretary, Theresa May put it at the time of Operation Trojan Horse in a letter to the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove: "We do, however, need to recognise that many moderate Muslims, as well as people of other religions, believe that covering one's hair is a religious requirement and some parents will therefore want their children to do so"<sup>11</sup>. The covering of girl's heads should therefore be understood as something that is not only likely to be preferred but increasingly expected within the school setting. Having noted that, it is necessary to ensure that no pupil is forced to dress in a particular way.

The issue of sex education is also likely to be an issue where greater accommodation might be called for. While different interpretations exist, it is likely that attitudes towards sex outside of marriage, consent to sex within marriage and the issue of homosexuality would be understood and shaped through the lens of religion and theology. Given that for some the issue of sex outside of marriage and homosexuality would be seen to be sinful, there is potential for the provision of sex education to be increasingly seen as promoting social and cultural norms that go

against certain religious teachings and scriptural interpretations.

Finally, there is the issue of the accommodation of prayer into education provision including the broadcast of the midday call to prayer, the observance of Friday prayers and the organisation of lunchtime prayers within the school environment. Historical research showed that when a handful of Muslim majority schools in Birmingham made provision of a dedicated room for pupils to use during the school day for prayers this was identified as an example of good practice<sup>12</sup>. If once seen to be good practice, why might it not be good practice in the contemporary setting? If it continues to be seen to be good practice, then to what extent might the accommodation of the call to prayer or the observation of Friday prayers also be good practice therefore?

In the wake of Operation Trojan Horse, any moves towards greater accommodation of religious or cultural needs is likely to be extremely contested and placed under intense scrutiny; not least because such moves towards greater accommodation could be interpreted as evidence of a 'takeover'. As such, necessary conversations and discussions that are likely to be required in relation to education provision in Birmingham have the very real potential to further problematize Muslim pupils, parents and communities as also present further barriers to active participation in public life.

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<sup>10</sup>

<http://www.religionlaw.co.uk/MCBschoolsreport07.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> The Guardian (2014)

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/04/theresa-may-letter-michael-gove-in-full>

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Hewer (2001) Schools for Muslims, Oxford Review of Education, 27:4, 515-527.