



UNIVERSITY OF
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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CITY: AN OVERVIEW

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

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Cohesion & Integration

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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):

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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.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE CITY

In the wake of Project Champion and Operation Trojan Horse, research has shown how the city's non-Muslim communities are likely to be more suspicious and mistrusting of Muslims not least based on the premise that 'there is no smoke without fire'¹.

This is extremely problematic because wider research has shown how greater suspicion and mistrust affords greater credence to the negative and typically unfounded stereotypes that inform and shape Islamophobic attitudes about both Muslims and Islam². More concerning is the fact that my research also shows that these same negative and unfounded stereotypes are a major motivating factor for the perpetrators of Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes³.

The task of accurately illustrating the scale and prevalence of such Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes in Birmingham is however extremely difficult to ascertain. The same is true of the national picture also.

This is because of a number of factors.

¹ Chris Allen. Dark legacy of Birmingham's 'Trojan Horse' episode (2014)
<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/2014/06/dark-legacy-of-birminghams-trojan-horse-episode.aspx>

² Chris Allen. Islamophobia. Farnham: Ashgate (2010).

³ Jonathan Githens-Mazer & Robert Lambert. "Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime: UK case studies 2010" Exeter: EMRC, University of Exeter (2011).

The first of these is the lack of separate monitoring in relation to Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes by the police and statutory agencies. This includes the lack of aggregation that takes place in relation to all 'religiously motivated' hate crime incidents and hate crimes also⁴. While the Metropolitan Police have been recording Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes separately for the past two years⁵ - and indeed making the data publicly available - other police forces have failed to follow suit. I have been informed that West Midlands Police do record Islamophobic incidents and hate crime separately but this remains unverified and no evidence of any recorded data has been established⁶.

However, the Prime Minister and Home Secretary announced in October 2015 that legislation would be introduced that would require all police forces by law to separately record Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes⁷. While this is extremely positive, some concern must be expressed about why this was enacted via counter-terror legislation in preference of extending existing legislation relating to hate crime. In doing so, it is possible that it could convey an extremely negative message to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The second relates to the fact that there has been a tendency in the past for religiously motivated hate crimes to be inaccurately

⁴ Matthew Feldman & Mark Littler, Tell MAMA Reporting 2013/4 Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis and 'Cumulative Extremism' (2014)
<http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/finalreport.pdf>

⁵ BBC News (2015)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-34138127>

⁶ Verbally confirmed by a senior officer within West Midlands Police.

⁷ The Guardian (2015)
<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/13/police-must-record-anti-muslim-hate-crimes>

recorded as racially motivated⁸. This is not always because of a lack of awareness on behalf of the police but because there are times when race and religion are seen to overlap. An example of this might be when a Muslim is verbally abused by being called a 'Paki Muslim'.

The third relates to the under-reporting of all forms of hate motivated incidents and crimes⁹. Islamophobia is not exceptional in this respect. What is exceptional however is the extent of under-reporting that is estimated as regards Islamophobia. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (formerly the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia) suggests that the percentage of victims of Islamophobia choosing not to report could be as high as 70%¹⁰. According to the government funded third party reporting mechanism Tell MAMA the picture is even more concerning with the suggestion that a mere 3% of all Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes are reported to the police¹¹.

Finally, research has shown that Muslim women who follow more conservative forms of Islam have been shown to be extremely reluctant to report their

experiences of Islamophobia to the police primarily on the basis of cultural issues, e.g. not wanting to report to a male officer¹². Anecdotally, it has also been suggested that Muslims are reluctant to report to the police due to a fear of being spied on especially if they give police their personal information¹³.

Any attempt to present a true picture of the scale and prevalence of Islamophobia in Birmingham – as indeed nationally – is therefore only going to be speculative at best. This of course makes the reality of Islamophobia extremely easy to dismiss which feeds into the hands of certain detractors of Islam and Muslims as also the far-right milieu¹⁴. In this way, the debate about 'proving' Islamophobia which is typically countered by 'it does not exist' is a cyclical one that is sadly, self-perpetuating. What is without doubt however is that Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes do occur in the city and can be easily verified by news reporting, academic research, third party monitoring and anecdotal evidence.

From adopting this approach, the vast majority of Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes are what might best be termed 'low-level' for instance, verbal abuse, being spat at and having head scarves or face veils forcibly removed. 'High-level' incidents and hate crimes on the other hand might refer

⁸ Matthew Feldman & Mark Littler, Tell MAMA Reporting 2013/4 Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis and 'Cumulative Extremism' (2014) <http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/finalreport.pdf>.

⁹ University of Leicester Hate Crime Project, Findings and Conclusions (2014) <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/research/current-projects/hate-crime/documents-and-images/findings-and-conclusions-full-report>

¹⁰ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, Making Hate Crime Visible in the European Union: Acknowledging Victims' Rights, 2012 [http://report-it.org.uk/files/fra-2012_hate-crime\[1\].pdf](http://report-it.org.uk/files/fra-2012_hate-crime[1].pdf).

¹¹ M. Feldman & M. Littler, *Tell MAMA Reporting 2013/4 Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis and 'Cumulative Extremism'*, 2014 <http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/finalreport.pdf>.

¹² See, EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, Making Hate Crime Visible in the European Union: Acknowledging Victims' Rights, 2012 [http://report-it.org.uk/files/fra-2012_hate-crime\[1\].pdf](http://report-it.org.uk/files/fra-2012_hate-crime[1].pdf); and M. Feldman & M. Littler, Tell MAMA Reporting 2013/4 Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis and 'Cumulative Extremism', 2014 <http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/finalreport.pdf> among others.

¹³ C. Allen & J.G. Nielsen, *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU following 9/11, 2002*.

¹⁴ Chris Allen. *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate (2010).

to harassment, physical assault and violence¹⁵.

Noting this, research confirms that the likelihood of 'low-level' incidents and hate crimes is a further reason why victims choose not to report them to the police. Nonetheless, both academic and third sector research has shown that irrespective of whether low-level or high-level, all are as likely to have the same detrimental impact on not only the victims but so too their families, friends and communities¹⁶.

While so, there have been a number of 'high level' Islamophobic incidents in Birmingham in recent years. The most shocking was the brutal murder of 82 year-old Mohammed Saleem on his way home from his local mosque in Small Heath in April 2013. Shortly after, the Ukrainian national Pavlo Lapshyn was found guilty of his murder. Lapshyn was also found guilty of attempting to detonate nail bomb at three mosques in nearby Tipton, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

Other high level Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes in the city include:

- a young Muslim man being attacked and left with life-threatening injuries outside a mosque in Small Heath¹⁷;
- a Muslim woman being doused in alcohol while travelling on a train in the city¹⁸; and,

¹⁵ C. Allen & J.G. Nielsen, Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU following 9/11, 2002.

¹⁶ Chris Allen, Arshad Isakjee, & Özlem Ögtem Young. "Maybe we are hated" The experience and impact of anti-Muslim hate on British Muslim women. University of Birmingham (2013) <http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/maybewearehated.pdf>.

¹⁷ Birmingham Mail (2012) <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/two-arrested-after-man-attacked-186253>

- a Muslim woman being abused and threatened by a fellow passenger on a bus who intimated he would set her on fire¹⁹.

In Birmingham, Islamophobic incidents are also routinely directed towards the material and physical structures associated with Muslims and Islam as per the three nail bomb attacks on nearby mosques previously.

Other examples include:

- eight Muslim-owned shops, restaurants and boutiques being attacked in the Small Heath and Sparkbrook areas of the city²⁰;
- the mosque in nearby Cradley Heath being destroyed by arson²¹; and,
- the proposed Langley Islamic Culture Centre being gutted following an arson attack²².

Another factor in trying to better understand the scale and prevalence is to acknowledge how in the wake of terror-related incidents irrespective of whether they occur in the UK or elsewhere in the world, there tends to be a 'spike' – a sharp increase – in the number of Islamophobic

¹⁸ Birmingham Mail (2015)

<http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midland-s-news/helpless-muslim-woman-showered-alcohol-10238092>

¹⁹ BBC News (2015)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-34966040>

²⁰ Independent (2015)

<http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/muslim-owned-shops-in-birmingham-attacked-with-guns-and-hammers--xym9dNkyox>.

²¹ Jonathan Githens-Mazer & Robert Lambert.

"Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime: UK case studies 2010" Exeter: EMRC, University of Exeter (2011).

²² Jonathan Githens-Mazer & Robert Lambert.

"Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime: UK case studies 2010" Exeter: EMRC, University of Exeter (2011).

incidents and hate crimes. An example of this can be seen in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in January 2015 and the spate of Islamophobic graffiti that appeared in various locations across the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus days later²³.

Another factor in relation to the scale and prevalence of Islamophobia is what might best be termed the far-right milieu. In the wake of terror-related incidents as also Project Champion and Operation Trojan Horse, a number of different groups that exist within the far-right milieu tried to not only exploit the ensuing suspicion and mistrust shown towards Muslims but so too establish anti-Muslim and anti-Islam campaigns especially those seeking to oppose the building of new mosques in and around the city.

Most recently, PEGIDA attempted to protest against Muslims and Islam in the city. Previously, the English Defence League did similar. Around the outskirts of the city, those such as the British National Party and Britain First have also been active. A particular site for confrontation and opposition has been in nearby Dudley where various groups from within the far-right milieu have been actively campaigning and protesting for more than a decade and a half²⁴.

Despite the fact that a full picture of the scale and prevalence of Islamophobia is difficult to establish for Birmingham and its surrounds, it is vital that the realities and

potential impacts of Islamophobia are neither dismissed nor overlooked in glib or meaningless ways. As research has shown, the failure to tackle Islamophobia has the very real potential to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims. Similarly, it has the potential to weaken governmental measures that seek to reduce and prevent extremism while also creating a major barrier to improving cohesion and integration among communities.

Essentially, the failure to tackle Islamophobia will detrimentally impact the ability and indeed willingness of Muslims and their communities to actively participate in public life in Birmingham and indeed Britain more widely.

²³ Huffington Post (2015)

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/01/20/islamophobic-graffiti-birmingham-uni_n_6505534.html

²⁴ Chris Allen. Between Critical and Uncritical Understandings: A Case Study Analyzing the Claims of Islamophobia Made in the Context of the Proposed 'Super-Mosque' in Dudley, England. *Societies*, 3(2), (2013) pp.186-203.