



UNIVERSITY OF
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COLLEGE OF
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YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM, BELONGING AND IDENTITY IN BIRMINGHAM

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

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Prevent & Security Workstream

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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 draws on two roundtable discussions which took place in the first half of 2017 with young Muslims from across the city of Birmingham. Discussions centred on issues concerning identity, belonging and the city of Birmingham and how these have been challenged by counter-terrorism strategies and discourses, with a particular focus on PREVENT¹. These roundtable discussions were facilitated as part of the three-year research project entitled, *Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city*. The project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities for Muslims and Muslim communities in the city and help challenge the negative narratives surrounding them in the public and political spaces.

COUNTER-EXTREMISM & PREVENT

During the discussions, the participants spoke freely about their experiences and the subsequent impact of the UK's counter-terrorism strategies on their everyday lives. They all highlighted the opinion that PREVENT was perceived to be discriminatory through the undue targeting and criminalising of individual Muslims and their communities. Most also emphasised the mistrust the policy had created between Muslims and their communities and both the state as also mainstream society. The negative effects were particularly explicit in the expressions of the participants' everyday lives, specifically on their sense of belonging, conceptions of their identity as British Muslims, and their relationships with mainstream society and, more specifically, the city itself.

¹ 'PREVENT' specifically refers to one strand of the British Government's four-stranded counter-terrorism strategy and 'preventing violent extremism' on the other hand is more overarching term used to encompass a variety of activities and endeavours that may or may not include PREVENT.

In terms of security, most felt that there had been a sense of things being 'tightened up' around them; others described this as feeling increasingly in the 'spotlight'. From discussions, most stated that this had resulted in them feeling they needed to place limits on themselves, for instance in terms of their freedom of expression and what they felt they could or could not openly say. What emerged was a picture of young Muslims practising self-censorship and self-regulation - albeit involuntarily but also quite spontaneously - in many of their everyday encounters. When asked about this, participants spoke about how they had concerns about using Arabic or 'Islamic' words or phrases in public spaces or talking about political issues in particular counter-terrorism or foreign policy. Some even stated that they felt uncomfortable using everyday items including mobile phones and backpacks. Whilst this feeling of being uncomfortable was most likely in public places such as travelling on public transport or being at airports, some also spoke about feeling similar in a much wider range of places in the immediate aftermath of terror incidents given perceptions that they might be associated with or supportive of terrorism and extremism.

A very real sense of young Muslims internalising counter-terrorism discourses was therefore clearly evident. Not only did this appear to result in self-censorship and self-regulation but so too did it negatively impact how those young Muslims saw and subsequently positioned themselves in relation to mainstream society. From the discussions, the participants spoke about how this had a detrimental impact on their sense of identity and by consequence, feelings of belonging also. Everyday experiences of being seen to be a 'suspect' - whether perceived or actual - were shown to undermine their emotional bond with the city specifically and the country generally, potentially diminishing - in their words - both their sense of 'Brummie-ness' and 'Britishness' respectively.

BELONGING & HOME

Notions of belonging are built around the sense of safety and security associated to any given place. Given that belonging is about cognitive as well as emotional attachment, so too does belonging incorporate notions of where and when people feel 'at home'. For the participants, security was clearly associated with where they felt most 'at home'. In Birmingham, this was expressed as being those areas of the city where large and high-density Muslim populations resided. For most of those involved in the discussions, this was also where many had been born and grown up as well as where they had strong individual, familial and community histories and relationships. For most, the boundaries of their belonging and where they felt safe did not stretch to incorporate the whole city but remained rather narrow and localised to 'Muslim areas'. It was in these locations where participants spoke about how their lives were bounded by strong relationships and where the greatest intensity of life experiences took place.

As regards the city centre – and 'non-Muslim areas' in general - there was clear and shared sense that these were potentially unsafe places for young Muslims. As places associated with notions of threat and fear, most of the participants spoke about how they tended to avoid certain places or areas of the city. If they could not, they spoke about being cautious when there. When asked about why certain places like the city centre were perceived in this way, participants spoke about how the city was 'dangerous' because of the threat of experiencing violence or other forms of Islamophobia. From the discussions had, while the perception was that Muslims were always liable to be Islamophobically attacked or abused, the threat was much greater in the aftermath of terror incidents and atrocities. It is worth noting that the roundtable discussions were held in the

wake of terror attacks in Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge.

Despite this negative perception of the city centre and concerns about possible threats and violence, all of the participants regarded Birmingham as a good city for Muslims to live in not least because of the strength of its ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. In some ways, this was contradictory to what had been voiced previously. Nonetheless, the participants felt that Muslims were not seen as aliens or outsiders by everyone across the city and so generally felt safer in Birmingham than in places elsewhere, especially those they referred to as being less diverse or 'more white'.

NOTIONS OF IDENTITY

When discussing identity, the conjunction of being British and being Muslim was troubled. Most participants agreed that when Britishness became associated with 'mainstream white culture' - which participants referred to as being centred around things such as pub culture, drinking and clubbing – so notions of Britishness were seen to go against the values of Islam and what it meant to be Muslim. For them, such associations weakened their identification with Britishness and British society. While participants recognised that binary oppositions of Muslims and British identities were problematic – citing narrowly conceived and mono-cultural constructions of both as being particularly misrepresentative – they also recognised how these had the potential to leave certain individuals vulnerable to alienation, marginalisation and by consequence, radicalisation.

Finding a way to reconcile these opposing binaries – whether real or constructed - was seen to be a crucial condition in creating peace, resolving tensions about identity, and strengthening notions of belonging and

'home'. In terms of reconciling Muslim and British identities, participants spoke about the need for more inclusive language and broader definitions of what Britishness might be as also who and what PREVENT and other counter-terror policies and approaches seek to engage.

LOOKING FORWARD

Alongside the need for more inclusivity and broader processes of definition, there was also an agreement about the need for more positive narratives relating to Muslims in both the media and political spaces. Participants suggested that the state needs to invest in 'IQ' in the formulation of policies around national security rather than funding top-down projects to combat radicalism as they perceived was the case with PREVENT. Security and preventative strategies were suggested as needing to be grounded in more bottom-up, transparent approaches if trust was to be built with Muslim communities.

Some participants suggested a greater need for Government to work with Muslim scholars if they wanted to make real progress in trying to find better outcomes to combat terrorism and violent extremism. While so, the challenge of ensuring authenticity and widespread authority was something that participants did not necessarily have a fail-safe response to. Instead, they responded that Government needed to identify and subsequently work with Islamic scholars who understand both Islamic traditions and the realities of British society.

In discussions about the drivers of radicalisation, a combination of structural, political and psychological issues were identified by participants as being both causal and catalytic for certain individuals when engaging in violent extremism. In this way, some participants spoke about how those who found themselves at the intersection of socio-economic inequalities - ranging from poverty to the lack of access to adequate education - had potential to feel alienated from wider society as indeed their own communities also. Combined with the detrimental impact of mental health issues as also anger at counter-terrorism policies or foreign policy, these were the primary factors participants cited in trying to explain why some individuals are drawn into being radicalised and violent extremism.

While PREVENT was seen by participants as a policy through which anger could be reinforced by those young Muslims who were already experiencing isolation and alienation, they added that one of its major failings was how it seemingly smoke-screened a whole range of crucially important socio-political and structural issues - such as poverty, unemployment and low educational attainment among others - at the expense of prioritizing extremism and thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes about all Muslims per se.