Narratives of Division

The Spectrum of Islamist Worldviews in the UK

WITH A FOREWORD
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JANUARY 2019

Contents

Foreword

Tony Blair

Divisive ideas about the place of Muslims in the West are threatening social cohesion in Britain today. These narratives come from activist groups that claim that Muslims cannot fully be part of our society, and they risk making British Muslims feel that their identity is incompatible with modern Britain. Countering and recognising this is an essential part of fighting extremism because—let us be clear—there is nothing incompatible between being British and being Muslim. But too many people, Muslims and non-Muslims, actively push messages that suggest otherwise.

This report demonstrates that political leaders must devote more focus and resources to challenging these corrosive narratives. It examines the messaging of prominent Muslim activist groups that UK authorities have accused of spreading divisive or extreme views and finds that they thrive on portrayals of victimhood and anti-Western conspiracy theories. Many of these groups advance a worldview that pits Muslims and non-Muslims against one another, in which the government and British society are portrayed as inherently anti-Muslim.

For example, many of the recent attacks on Prevent and Muslim organisations that receive public funding are from a perspective that is contrary to the very idea of engagement with the government. That's not to say that there aren't legitimate debates to be had on these issues, but many objections come from a starting point that sees the government, and any Muslim who engages with it, as an adversary. This atmosphere discourages moderate voices from speaking out because of the abuse and delegitimisation they receive from these radical groups. This skews discourse, making fringe views appear more dominant.

Sadly, it often seems as though policymakers have just decided to cede the argument in these debates. This failure to engage with these difficult issues creates a worrying dynamic. Many Muslims in the UK hear more from divisive groups about how there is a security state set up to oppress them than they hear from our national leaders about how communities and policymakers can work together to build a thriving, inclusive Britain.

Changing this debate requires leaders to demonstrate that Muslims and non-Muslims have lived in peaceful co-existence for much of history and can continue to do so today. There is a notion that Western and Islamic values are inherently contradictory, yet they have actually developed in tandem. The Enlightenment and the modern Western ideas that emerged from it would not have been possible without significant influence from advances in mathematics, physics, chemistry, medicine and philosophy made during the Golden Age of Islam.

Britain has a long history of Muslim activism. But while many of these activist organisations focus on promoting a uniquely British Muslim identity, others have applied Islamist ideologies to the British context in a troubling way. The latter are now seeking to shape the narrative about a Muslim population that is growing, disproportionately young, and facing significant social and economic challenges. We cannot leave it to such divisive groups to speak for them, or the growing strains on our social fabric will only worsen.

The idea that Muslims and non-Muslims cannot co-exist has to be confronted more vigorously by a united political front. Failing to challenge these messages will boost the political fortunes of the far right, which will characterise these divisive messages as representing the views of all Muslims, when they obviously do not. Political leaders on the left must work to counter these narratives and avoid legitimising, intentionally or otherwise, the fundamentally anti-Western worldview that many of the groups identified in this report espouse. The failure to promote a type of politics that seeks to unite rather than divide will only create more space for extreme voices and views.

Unless deeply divisive narratives that undermine the relationship between Muslims and broader British society are rooted out, the threat of Islamist extremism will not be defeated. Often, when people think of this challenge, they focus entirely on violent jihadi groups. Yet as this report shows, many of the central ideas that British Muslims are hearing today from some activist groups are worryingly similar to the ideology of violent extremist groups. To succeed in our struggle against extremism, we must do more to counter the core ideas that fuel it.

Tony Blair
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Executive Summary

There is a concern among policymakers and law enforcement in the United Kingdom (UK) that nonviolent activist groups are perpetuating divisive ideas. At minimum these ideas threaten social cohesion, and at worst they may be contributing, even if unintentionally, to the cause of extremists. Yet understanding how to define or tackle nonviolent extremism—or even simply differentiate it from divisive political rhetoric—remains a grey area in both security and policy discourse. Groups facing accusations of nonviolent extremism, which include far-right and Islamist activists, naturally reject these assertions, arguing the UK government is seeking to undermine their advocacy of legitimate causes and threatening free speech.

Yet previous research by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change suggests that authorities are right to be concerned about some of the ideas spread by some nonviolent activist groups. Our findings have consistently highlighted the role of ideology in fuelling extremism and emphasised the complex but undeniable link between the ideas that underpin nonviolent and violent extremism.[1]

A central point of contention in the debate about nonviolent extremism in the UK concerns accusations and counter-accusations between UK authorities and activist groups that authorities have publicly identified for holding extremist views. This report focuses on five Muslim activist groups that UK authorities have criticised for promoting problematic or extreme views, although they do not advocate violence: CAGE, Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT), the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK), and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND). This report assesses whether there is any substance to such accusations by analysing the public messages of these groups and comparing them against a baseline of extremist messaging.

The messaging of the proscribed extremist group al-Muhajiroun forms this benchmark.[2] The use of al-Muhajiroun's ideology as a point of comparison was not based on any assumptions about whether activist groups would share any narratives with the banned organisation. Rather, that ideology was taken as an objective standard against which to evaluate claims made against these groups by UK authorities. The assessments in this report of the levels of overlap between the messaging of these groups and that of al-Muhajiroun are based on analysis of hundreds of pieces of public content for each group as well as the researchers' judgements. Therefore, the conclusions presented are based in part on opinion and could be subject to interpretation.

To date, public discussion of this issue—particularly what defines extremism—has been largely anecdotal and part of an increasingly polarised debate. This report provides evidence-based analysis of these groups and their public messaging, away from the often politically charged cycle of accusations and rebuttals. While understanding the messages of others relies to some extent on interpretation, we have gone about this analysis in a systematic way. In doing so, we aim to provide new insight that can help shape policy in this important but currently undefined area. One way in which this research could contribute to this debate is in helping create consensus on a working definition of extremism that identifies the key ideas that underpin extremist narratives. The spectrum of views outlined below aims to be a starting point in working towards such a definition in the Islamist context, recognising that a similar mapping exercise would be necessary to define other forms of extremism or extremist ideologies, including the far right.

Most of the activist groups studied promote a worldview that significantly overlaps with that of a proscribed Islamist extremist organisation. That worldview portrays Muslims as victims who are in a constant struggle against Western oppression and a global anti-Muslim conspiracy. Unlike al-Muhajiroun, the activist groups studied do not call for violence. When we analyse the five activist groups' positions on the theme of justification of violence, we are referring at most to an apparent willingness to make excuses for violence committed by others in the cause of Islamism. There is no suggestion that the activist groups in the report advocate violence or illegality. They are neither violent nor encourage or incite violence by others nor act unlawfully in promoting terrorism. However, much of their messaging is worrying because it conveys a deep divide between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK, particularly between Muslims and the government, which most of these groups actively seek to delegitimise.

These groups aim to shape the dominant narrative about the UK's growing Muslim population and how Muslims perceive their relationship to broader British society, making it crucial to understand the ideas these groups advance and the ideology that underpins them. If left untackled, such narratives are likely to have an alienating effect on the communities in question and perpetuate a siege mentality, contributing to feelings of separation and negatively affecting the future of social cohesion in Britain.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Most of the groups analysed promote a divisive view of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK through their public messaging.** HT, MPACUK, IHRC and CAGE use their public content to advance a worldview in which Muslims in the UK and around the world are in an intractable state of tension and conflict with non-Muslims. MEND's recent public messaging does not share this worldview.

- **Six key themes form this divisive worldview.** These are victimisation, opposition between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, opposition between Islam and the West, a delegitimisation of the government, the centrality of Islam in politics and justification of violence. There is a range of views on these six themes, with differing degrees of severity from mainstream to extreme *(see table 1.1)*.

- **The groups studied all focus on these six themes to a certain extent in their public messaging, and with varying degrees of severity** *(see table 1.2)*. For four of the five groups (all except MEND), at least 50 per cent of their tweets and at least 80 per cent of their press releases drew on one or more of the six themes.

- **There is significant overlap in the narratives of most of the groups studied and those of al-Muhajiroun.** Each of the five groups shows some degree of overlap in its narratives with the proscribed UK extremist group al-Muhajiroun, although this varies significantly across the groups *(see table 1.3)*. This overlap indicates a connective thread that links the messaging and narratives of these activist groups, which UK authorities have at some point accused of extremism, to those of an outlawed extremist organisation. These narratives can build on one another to promote some version of a shared divisive worldview that pits Muslims and non-Muslims against one another.

- **MEND's messaging has the least overlap with the worldview promoted by al-Muhajiroun and is markedly different in tone from the content of the other groups.** MEND's messaging avoids the conspiratorial and inflammatory language used by the other groups studied. The tone of its current content also differs from some of its historical statements, which could be a result of organisational changes or a concerted effort to change the tone of its public messages.

- **CAGE's, MPACUK's and IHRC's public messaging has significant overlap with four of the six key themes in al-Muhajiroun's statements and materials.** However, the most significant divergence between these groups' views and al-Muhajiroun's is on the pivotal topics of the central role of Islam in politics and the justification of violence. These are two particularly significant factors that separate extremist groups from activist ones.

- **Of the five groups studied, only Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain is close to al-Muhajiroun in its approach to the issue of violence.** UK authorities have over the years voiced serious concerns about HT, and along with other organisations that cause concern, it is kept under continuous review by the UK Home Office.[3] The near alignment of HT's messaging with that of al-Muhajiroun highlights why successive British governments have attempted to proscribe HT. They have been unsuccessful because they could not establish to a sufficient legal standard that HT intended to incite or glorify violence.

TABLE 1.1 A Range of Positions on Six Key Narrative Themes

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
Mainstream	Raises awareness of anti-Muslim incidents	Does not label Muslims with different views as disloyal	Sees no conflict between being Muslim and British	May criticise but does not reject the political system	Sees Islam as a spiritual guide, which may influence political views	Makes no attempt to justify violence
	Sometimes uses alarmist rhetoric about anti-Muslim discrimination permeating society	Occasionally questions motives of Muslims with different views	Highlights distinct Muslim and Western identities but sees no clash	Takes a strong stance against existing policies but open to engagement	Sees Muslim identity as a reference point for activism	Provides some justification for violence
	Sees victimisation as a consequence of a security state	Regularly portrays some Muslims as being against fellow Muslims	Emphasises tensions between West and Muslim world	Sees little value in engaging with a system seen as against Muslims	Believes Islam should have a central role in politics	Openly supports violent international groups
	Sees victimisation as systemic and inevitable	Uses hostile language against Muslims seen as traitors	Portrays West as antagonistic towards Muslims	Actively seeks to delegitimise govt in eyes of Muslims	Supports Islamic governance or a unified authority over Muslim states	Believes violent jihad can be justified
Extreme	Believes in a global conspiracy against Muslims	Classifies all Muslims who do not hold same views as apostates	Perceives inherent unresolvable conflict between Islam and West	Rejects Western democratic model and advocates complete overhaul	Advocates a global Islamic caliphate	Directly encourages violence

TABLE 1.2   Positions of Five Activist Groups and al-Muhajiroun on Six Key Themes

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)	half	half	quarter	quarter	quarter	quarter
CAGE	half	half	three-quarter	three-quarter	half	quarter
Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK)	three-quarter	three-quarter	three-quarter	three-quarter	half	quarter
Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)	three-quarter	three-quarter	three-quarter	three-quarter	three-quarter	half
Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT)	full	full	full	full	full	three-quarter
Al-Muhajiroun	full	full	full	full	full	full

TABLE 1.3   Degrees of Narrative Overlap Between Five Activist Groups and al-Muhajiroun

Group	Degree of Overlap
Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)	Limited
CAGE	Significant
Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK)	Significant
Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)	Significant
Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT)	Near alignment

Policy Recommendations

Some activist groups in the UK perpetuate broadly shared narratives that promote a divisive view of how Muslims should see their place in Britain, and how they should relate to government and society. These narratives overlap significantly with some of the key ideas of Islamist extremists, albeit with varying degrees of severity. These divisive messages present a significant challenge for UK policymakers, particularly given the lack of established definitions and frameworks to understand the grey space between radical activism and extremism.

To address this, political leaders need to focus on measures that:

- actively challenge narratives that seek to divide communities along identity lines;

- increase educational resources that will enhance people's resilience to divisive messages and influences from a young age; and

- build broad-based engagement with communities that goes beyond self-appointed gatekeepers.

Most of these ideas could be broadly applied to address factors that contribute to other forms of extremism, including on the far right.

CHALLENGING DIVISIVE NARRATIVES

Policymakers should:

- **Push back against divisive narratives more robustly and directly.** Political leaders must do more to directly challenge the 'us vs. them' narratives of problematic activist groups. At present, too few people are willing to robustly take on these corrosive narratives or the groups that advance them, in part because of the backlash and abuse that can occur when public figures take a strong stance on sensitive topics. These groups often capitalise on people's real anxieties and fears, and a lack of engagement from both political and community leaders on sometimes difficult issues allows divisive messages to gain traction. This silence means that more radical voices are given the space to dominate the debate and shape how some communities perceive their place in society. Leaders from across the political spectrum must step up their efforts to take on these troubling narratives by directly addressing the warped arguments and often conspiratorial claims that drive them.

- **Develop new resources to support practitioners to create a robust working definition of extremism.** The UK government can support the effort to push back against divisive narratives by developing new resources that can assist political leaders, law enforcement, local authorities and other practitioners in understanding the complex dynamics of extremism and extremist narratives in the UK. Working with community organisations, subject-matter experts and other stakeholders, the government should develop a resource to help establish a working definition of extremism, including identifying key ideas that underpin extremist narratives for both Islamist and far-right extremism. The framework this report has developed to demonstrate the varying degrees of divisive ideas that build up towards an extreme ideology could help serve as a model for this resource. The Commission for Countering Extremism has identified some similar objectives as part of its work plan, which would provide an important contribution to the development of this resource.[4]

ENHANCING YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESILIENCE

Policymakers should:

- **Promote educational initiatives that teach young people how to engage in dialogue on difficult issues.** People need the tools to be able to critically engage with the increasingly polarising messages that permeate public discourse and dominate social media. This effort should begin at a young age, and the classroom provides an ideal setting to help young people develop these skills. The UK Department for Education should train teachers to facilitate discussions in schools on difficult issues, including religion and identity. Having safe, supportive environments in which to raise these and other issues can help young people navigate difficult questions and articulate anxieties in a constructive way. Our Institute has developed a robust toolkit for educators to lead these kinds of dialogues in the classroom based on nearly ten years of organising classroom conversations for tens of thousands of students in over 30 countries through our Generation Global programme.[5] Independent assessments of the programme have shown that promoting dialogue on difficult issues has increased open-mindedness in participants.[6]

- **Develop a curriculum to promote digital literacy and critical thinking about sources of information for all secondary-school students.** Research by the Commission on Fake News and Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools, run by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust, found that only 2 per cent of students in the UK had the critical literacy skills to determine whether information is real or fake. In addition, two-thirds of teachers believed fake news "is harming children's well-being by increasing levels of anxiety, damaging their self-esteem and skewing their world view".[7] This points to the need for a robust curriculum on digital literacy and critical thinking to empower young people to recognise and evaluate fake news and other forms of inflammatory content they encounter online. The UK government could consult major media companies and social-media firms to support the development of this curriculum.

BUILDING BROAD ENGAGEMENT

Policymakers should:

- **Ensure that community engagement is meaningful and far reaching.** The UK government and other political figures should seek to broaden their engagement with different communities, with special attention on encouraging diverse voices from within communities to speak out on a variety of issues. A 2016 report by the Women and Equalities Committee of the UK House of Commons highlighted that Muslim communities often feel they are engaged by the government only through a lens of countering extremism, and more meaningful engagement on a range of issues would help counter such perceptions.[8] Policymakers should pay special attention to looking past self-appointed gatekeepers in communities who often dominate external engagement, to ensure that a diversity of opinions and minority voices has the chance to be heard. Public figures need to ensure they understand the messaging and motivations of groups with which they engage. It is important to avoid providing platforms or legitimacy to groups or individuals who promote deeply divisive views, which can often happen inadvertently.

- **Increase funding and support, when feasible, for organisations doing positive work to combat divisive influences on communities.** The UK government can play a role in empowering a broad range of voices and positive influences in communities around the country by increasing funding for community-based organisations that undertake positive work. Such groups can be a powerful bulwark against negative influences on communities and young people, but they have suffered in recent years due to sharp contractions in government spending. By some estimates, government funding available to community initiatives has declined by nearly 60 per cent since 2003 from £6 billion ($7.9 billion) to £2.2 billion ($2.9 billion), and this fall is likely to continue as local councils—one of the biggest sources of funds for community groups and charities—face continuing budget cuts.[9] In a welcome move, Minister for Countering Extremism Baroness Williams announced in October 2018 the

government would be awarding £5.3 million ($6.8 million) to organisations whose work combats extremism through the Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT) programme. To date, the level of funds allotted for such initiatives has been very small and this increase signals a move in a positive direction, although longer-term engagement and funding are necessary to ensure sustainability of such initiatives.[10] The risks of an increasingly divided society and alienation of some communities merit a significant rethink of funding for important community work.

Introduction

We see far right and Islamist extremists seeking to divide communities with a false narrative that being Muslim is incompatible with British values and our way of life, despite all the evidence to the contrary.[11]

This excerpt from the UK government's "Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper", published in March 2018, succinctly distils the central argument that divisive groups use to promote tensions between communities in the UK. As the paper notes, the notion that Muslims do not belong in Britain has become a central focal point around which both far-right and Islamist actors have mobilised, albeit with different justifications. With Britain's disproportionately young and rapidly growing Muslim population caught in the middle of this increasingly toxic debate, it is essential for policymakers and community leaders to understand the forces behind this argument.

Voices on the farther reaches of the right claim Muslims reject British society and its values because their culture and religion are fundamentally inconsistent with values of UK society. Meanwhile, groups that can be broadly referred to as Islamist argue that it is British society and institutions that have comprehensively rejected and demonised Muslims and Islam. Both sides point to anecdotal examples to support their theories and distort facts in line with their intolerant worldviews.

This phenomenon of reciprocal extremism, in which the ideas of Islamist and far-right actors play off and reinforce one another, has become increasingly prominent in research findings on extremism, as highlighted in works such as Julia Ebner's 2017 book *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism*.[12] Ebner observes how extreme groups on both ends of the spectrum increasingly focus on the overarching narrative of the West vs. Islam.

Successive UK governments appear to have increasingly recognised the need to combat such narratives as central to a range of challenges from promoting integration across communities to combating extremism and radicalisation. From former UK Prime Minister David Cameron's high-profile speech on extremism in Birmingham in 2015 to the updated CONTEST strategy and the integration green paper (both released in early 2018), there has been a growing emphasis on using public policy and government leadership to confront ideas that promote a stark mentality of us vs. them.[13] While integration and extremism are rightly considered distinct areas of policy, divisive ideas that seek to pit different communities against each other represent a key factor in both domains.

Yet the concept of divisive ideas, specifically those centred on the role of Muslims in the West, defies simple classifications. There are increasing flirtations with these ideas in mainstream politics, while their most severe manifestations are advanced by recognised extremist groups. This raises the question of where policymakers should draw the line between narratives that are divisive and those that are extreme. And what is the best way to respond to groups whose messaging consistently falls somewhere just below that line?

UK policymakers must seek to understand the actors and ideas that fall into this grey area. There are a significant number of groups in the UK that do not directly advocate violence and may not even explicitly reject core values of British society but that nevertheless perpetuate troubling narratives about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain. These groups, which include both right-wing actors and those that could loosely be defined as Islamist, exist in a murky space between legitimate political activism and clear-cut extremism. In large part, there is no basic vocabulary to discuss these actors and their ideas, let alone a cogent policy framework for addressing their malign influence.

Some preliminary work has emerged to explore this extremist-adjacent space on the right. In its 2018 "State of Hate" report, the anti-extremism organisation Hope Not Hate profiled how the growing spectrum of right-wing, anti-Muslim activism in the UK spans from tech-savvy alt-right media figures who perpetuate misleading narratives about Islam in the West to dangerous extremist groups that implicitly or explicitly promote violence.[14] While not equating conspiracy theorists and agitators with far-right terrorist groups such as National Action, Hope Not Hate highlights how the messages of the alt-right overlap with those of extremist groups and create fertile ground for their development.

This report examines the other side of this increasingly polarised debate by focusing on several prominent Muslim activist groups that UK authorities have accused of perpetuating divisive or extreme ideas. This analysis is important because these groups seek in varying ways to influence the broader narrative about how Muslims should approach their relationship with British society and institutions. We have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of these groups' public messaging through social media, press releases and other public statements to understand their core narratives. In doing so, we explored one key element of the increasingly divisive debate on the place of Muslims in the UK.

It is essential to note that anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred are very real concerns in the UK today. Organisations such as Tell MAMA, which monitors anti-Muslim incidents, and official sources including Scotland Yard have confirmed that anti-Muslim incidents and hate crimes have risen in recent years.[15] This report in no way seeks to refute that unfortunate reality, and the authors acknowledge that some of the grievances expressed by the groups studied stem in part from this context. In coding the public messaging of the groups, we did not attribute a divisive or extreme character to statements that merely sought to raise awareness of anti-Muslim behaviour.

Nevertheless, we identified a troubling pattern of messaging among the groups, which portrayed anti-Muslim attitudes as part of a systematic, society-wide effort to oppress and disenfranchise Muslims in the UK. This outlook was emphasised through a concerted effort to delegitimise the government and any government policies related to Muslims, including public condemnation of any Muslims who chose to constructively engage with the government. The cumulative effect of this alarmist, often conspiratorial rhetoric is the cause for concern, not the acknowledgement that anti-Muslim sentiments are a pressing issue.

The approach to this report builds on our Institute's existing research on the complex relationship between nonviolent and violent ideologies, which has consistently emphasised the links between the underlying ideas that fuel a wide range of extremist actors. Our previous findings have highlighted, for example, that nonviolent Islamist organisations use strikingly similar terminology in their written materials to Salafi-jihadi groups.[16]

SELECTION AND ANALYSIS OF GROUPS

This report analyses assertions by UK authorities that have pointed to certain prominent Muslim activist groups holding or promoting extreme views of an Islamist nature. We studied a broad range of public remarks, statements to the media and debates in the UK parliament to identify groups that are currently active in the UK and that authorities have accused of holding or fostering extreme views in the context of Islamist extremism.

We narrowed down this list with a number of filters. This included eliminating any group that did not appear to have at least a modest public following (at least 10,000 followers on any one social-media platform) and any group that was not currently active in regularly sharing content on at least one social-media platform, as this was a key medium through which we analysed their public messaging. We also eliminated charities that focus primarily on fundraising, umbrella organisations that represent a variety of member groups and proscribed organisations. (For a detailed methodology, see the appendix.)

This process led us to identify five groups for further study:

- CAGE;
- Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT);
- the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC);
- the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK); and
- Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND).

These groups have diverse histories, modes of operation, sizes and levels of influence, but each has solicited significant concern from one or more UK authorities for promoting or holding extremist views.

To examine these accusations, we compared the messaging of these five groups with that of a proscribed UK Islamist group, al-Muhajiroun. This method enabled us to establish a benchmark, defined by the most extreme end of Islamist activism in recent UK history, against which to measure the messaging of currently active groups, which have caused concern among UK authorities for spreading problematic views.

Al-Muhajiroun, which rose to prominence in the 1990s and dominated the UK Islamist scene until its proscription in 2006 (and, to some extent, after that through offshoots and prominent individuals), provides a relevant point of comparison for several reasons.[17] It is arguably the most high-profile Islamist extremist organisation to have emerged in the UK and therefore would have been responding to similar cultural and political factors to the UK-based groups that form the focus of this research. Al-Muhajiroun spent years operating in the open and facing sustained criticism for its views from UK authorities. Al-Muhajiroun characterised itself as a legitimate activist organisation representing the interests of British Muslims. There is no implication that any of the studied groups would follow al-Muhajiroun's trajectory; rather, al-Muhajiroun provides a benchmark against which to assess these groups' messaging.

FROM ACTIVISM TO EXTREMISM

To assess the extent to which the messaging of the five groups studied can be characterised as extreme, we undertook a systematic comparison of their public messaging. The aim was to gauge whether and how they engaged with prominent themes in al-Muhajiroun's messaging and whether there were any overlaps between the key narratives of the activist groups and those of the proscribed organisation. Our methodology included:

- preliminary research to assess whether the groups had engaged with these themes historically;
- analysing and coding a three-month sample of the groups' Twitter activity from January to March 2018; and
- analysing and coding a sample of the groups' press releases from the same three-month period.

This three-pronged approach was designed with the limitations of each individual method in mind: the background research provided a useful overview of the groups' past activities but may not have reflected more recent developments in their positions; the Twitter activity provided a large, recent sample with a bulk of data to analyse but was limited in length of content because tweets are restricted to 280 characters; and the press releases had more substantive content from the groups but were fewer in number. A longer period of analysis was beyond the scope of this study but could be useful in future analyses.

Comparing the groups' content with the six key themes in al-Muhajiroun's messaging enabled us to measure each group's content and classify its views from mainstream to extreme. It should be noted that the conclusions drawn from this analysis reflect the judgements of the researchers and could be open to interpretation.

Al-Muhajiroun

The resilience of the al-Muhajiroun network in the UK and its role in the emergence of a UK-based jihadi hub means that understanding the group's ideology and worldview is an important part of understanding the worldviews and public narratives of Islamist groups in the UK more broadly. Analysing al-Muhajiroun's messaging enabled us to identify the major themes and narratives that constitute the backbone of UK-based Islamist extremism, providing a valuable benchmark against which to assess claims UK authorities have made against other groups for holding divisive or extreme views.

BACKGROUND

Al-Muhajiroun, which means "The Emigrants" in Arabic, was founded in the UK in 1996 by Syrian national Omar Bakri Muhammad. Bakri joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a teenager in Syria and cited Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna and leading Brotherhood thinker Sayyid Qutb as his early ideological inspirations.[18] Bakri went on to found Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT) but parted ways with the organisation due to differences of opinion with the movement's international leadership.

Through Bakri's emphasis on building a strong public and media profile, al-Muhajiroun gained rapid prominence as the most visible Islamist group in the UK. Over its 20-plus years in operation in various forms, Bakri and other al-Muhajiroun figures created significant controversies through inflammatory statements, such as praising the hijackers who carried out the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks in the United States.[19]

In 2004, Bakri announced he had disbanded al-Muhajiroun, which had been under intense scrutiny from the security services for some time.[20] In 2005, the UK Home Office revoked Bakri's indefinite leave to remain and banned him from the UK after he flew out of the country for a trip to Lebanon.[21] Bakri claimed he had about 4,500 core supporters throughout the UK, though the actual size and extent of al-Muhajiroun's membership at any given time in its life is unknown.[22]

Anjem Choudary, a British citizen and one of Bakri's acolytes since his HT days, relaunched al-Muhajiroun under the name al-Ghurabaa ("The Strangers") in September 2005. That group was proscribed in July 2006. Al-Muhajiroun relaunched itself under several different names after 2006, most notably Islam4UK, although the UK government banned and shut down all such offshoots.[23]

Al-Muhajiroun and its branches are now proscribed in the UK. Bakri and Choudary were both imprisoned—the former in Lebanon, the latter in UK.[24] Bakri was arrested due to "links to terrorism", and Choudary was charged with supporting ISIS.[25] Choudary was released in October 2018.

Twenty-three out of 51 terrorist plots either carried out or foiled by UK authorities in the last 20 years have been linked to the al-Muhajiroun network.[26] According to Hope Not Hate's 2013 report on al-Muhajiroun, the group has been "the single biggest gateway to Islamist terrorism in the UK".[27] British counter-terrorism authorities have reported that at least 100 individuals involved in terrorist attacks or fighting with ISIS in Iraq and Syria were influenced by individuals who were part of the original al-Muhajiroun leadership.[28]

PUBLIC MESSAGING AND WORLDVIEW

Because it is proscribed in the UK, al-Muhajiroun does not have an active platform from which to promote its public messaging today. Nevertheless, while it was in operation, Bakri and Choudary were active in writing statements, giving interviews and speeches at events and protests,

and appearing on TV shows. These materials are still publicly available.

We analysed more than 50 of these interviews, speeches, lectures and writings to understand al-Muhajiroun's ideology and worldview. The core network of al-Muhajiroun extends beyond these two individuals, but Bakri and Choudary are the group's two most important leaders who were responsible for its organisational and ideological development. On the basis of this analysis, we identified the key themes that dominated al-Muhajiroun's public messaging and ideology to form the basis of a comparison with the public messaging of the five Muslim activist groups that authorities have accused of advancing problematic views.

Six major themes emerged from analysis of al-Muhajiroun's public messaging:

- victimisation;
- 'good' Muslim vs. 'bad' Muslim;
- Islam vs. the West;
- delegitimising the government;
- the centrality of Islam in politics; and
- justification of violence.

These themes, which are detailed below alongside supporting example statements from al-Muhajiroun's leadership, encompass the ideological blueprint of the most prominent Islamist extremist group in the UK. The quotes included for each theme do not represent an exhaustive list of relevant statements, but rather a selection to illustrate how these key ideas and themes featured in al-Muhajiroun's public messaging and worldview. Al-Muhajiroun's stance on these themes forms the most extreme position on the mainstream–extreme spectrum and act as the benchmark for our assessment of the other groups' public messaging and outlook.

Victimisation of Muslims

Portraying Muslims as victims of non-Muslim governments and the West was a pillar of al-Muhajiroun's discourse. The group not only emphasised depictions of Muslims as victims of persecution in the UK and around the world but also pointed to every court decree and

government decision against Muslims as proof that they were being persecuted for their faith. The idea that there was a global conspiracy against Muslims, and that anti-Muslim feelings were inevitable and institutionalised, was central in its messaging.

In 2010, when al-Muhajiroun's offshoot Islam4UK was proscribed, Choudary said, "This is the Britain we live in today. It is an apartheid system. The Muslims are treated second class citizens. We need to wake up to reality."[29] Commenting on the January 2015 terrorist attack on French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, Bakri also touched on this idea when he said, "If you are a practising Muslim today in Europe, then you are under attack. We know that very well. I mean, there are so many draconian laws which have been introduced in Belgium, in France, in Holland, in Britain . . . that the Muslim community are being treated as second class citizens. Their passports have been taken away. They are being made citizen less [sic]."[30]

Al-Muhajiroun dismissed all British counter-extremism policies as draconian rules that specifically target Muslims, with Choudary stating,

The British government has further increased its draconian laws which is evident in the PREVENT strategy and CONTEST document. Banning groups, labelling fundamental concepts of Islam as extreme, spying, causing fitna [unrest] within the Muslim community to a point where many Muslim youth in Britain and the West feel they can't voice their views, opinions and frustrations over foreign policy and occupation.[31]

Bakri in 2001 spoke against efforts to ban extremist speakers on campuses, stating, "The Islamic movement uses pseudo-names to enter universities and talk about Islam, because the rules do not allow talking about Islam."[32]

In his statements, Bakri portrayed Western democracy as dishonest and aimed at subjugating Muslims. He argued that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslims had to provide unqualified support for the United States or risked being labelled terrorists, stating, "That is what proved to me, as Muslims, that democracy is the civilised face of dictatorship."[33] Commenting on the UK government's decision to

ban him from returning to the UK in 2005, Bakri said, "If they ask me to return back, I will say that no, I will never ever return back to UK, unless they declare apologies for the Muslims and stop the new law of terrorism, stop, you know, terrorising Muslims in Britain."[34]

Al-Muhajiroun's messaging also presented victimhood as an intrinsic part of Muslim identity, and Muslim suffering as something that evokes little sympathy from the West. When asked about the 2014 execution by ISIS of the American journalist James Foley, Choudary said, "The Muslim blood can run like water because it is not real blood. Only the blood of the Russians and Americans and those people who are now conspiring against the Muslims is real blood."[35]

'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

Al-Muhajiroun showed no reservation in calling any Muslim who disagreed with its views an apostate and was vocal in its criticism of other British Muslim organisations that opposed it. Bakri in 2004 issued a fatwa against the Muslim Council of Britain after it urged Muslims to share concerns about suspected terrorists with the authorities. He said the council had gone against the Quran by urging Muslims to cooperate with the security forces against Muslims.[36] Bakri separately said, "I believe all people referred to as 'moderate' Muslims have at one time or another struck deals with the British government."[37] When confronted with criticism from the Muslim community, Bakri said,

I'm not surprised if the Muslim Council of Britain disagree with my stand, because their sect cedes sovereignty to the Queen. Those you call 'moderate' Muslims I call 'deviant', because they tell you one thing and believe something different. The one who says something he doesn't believe is a hypocrite—like he believes that Christians are misguided or that Jews are cursed and he says that in every prayer, and yet he says to you, 'You are the best.' I don't say that.[38]

On several television programmes in which other Muslims debated Choudary and challenged his opinions, he accused them of apostasy and called them *kuffar* (disbelievers, singular *kafir*). During

one British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) programme in which Muslim activists disagreed with Choudary, he said, "Majid Nawaz [a UK radio personality and commentator on British Muslim issues] is a very well-known sell-out and he is not a Muslim. He is a *kafir*. I think you need Muslims to talk about Islam. You cannot ally with the American and British establishment." Asked whether Nawaz should face consequences for his supposed betrayal of Islam, Choudary answered, "He will be in the hellfire."[39]

Al-Muhajiroun was also vocal against any Muslim sect that does not belong to Sunni Islam and used the derogatory term *rafida* (rejecters) to describe Shia Muslims.[40] Bakri even questioned the creed and belief of HT when he parted ways with the group, accusing it of committing to a different creed.[41]

Islam vs. the West

Al-Muhajiroun espoused an unapologetically polarising worldview, seeing the world in terms of Muslims and non-Muslims: *Dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr* (the abode of the disbelievers). Bakri, in his pamphlet "Jihad: The Method for Khilafa", categorised Britain as part of the *Dar al-Kufr*, which he described as "Non-Muslim countries where the kuffar [disbelievers] have authority".[42]

Bakri described al-Muhajiroun as the "head of the spear against the Western enemy".[43] In the group's worldview, the West was presented as a monolithic entity in constant conflict with Muslims. For al-Muhajiroun, Muslims living in the West were not part of the West but exclusively members of the ummah, or global Muslim community.

In al-Muhajiroun's binary worldview, nothing a Muslim did against non-Muslims could be condemned, regardless of whether it was right or wrong. When Choudary was asked about his reasons for not condemning the 7 July 2005 (7/7) bombings in London, he said,

At the end of the day, when we say innocent people

we mean Muslims. As far as non-Muslims are concerned, they have not accepted Islam. That is a crime against us . . . If you are a non-Muslim then you are guilty in not believing in God . . . The allegiance is always for the Muslims, so I will never condemn a Muslim for what he does. Indeed, I must stand with him whether he is an oppressor or oppressed.[44]

When he was later accused of engaging in propaganda for ISIS, Choudary said, "I think that there will always be two camps in the world. From the time that Allah created men, there has also been those people who follow the *Shaytan* [Satan] and those people who follow Allah. And they will lie about each other maybe or they will use propaganda against each other. There is a war taking place, so undoubtedly, demonising the enemy, trying to undermine them; this is all part of it."[45]

Delegitimising the Government

Al-Muhajiroun did not see the British system of governance as legitimate, and its views of the British state and society were filled with stereotypes and conspiracies. According to Bakri, "The British government is an enemy of Islam and Muslims and it is leading the fight against Islam and Muslims and responsible for the rise of the Zionist entity."[46]

The organisation rejected the legitimacy of the British political system in its entirety. Choudary refused to appeal against judicial decisions against him and his group on the grounds that the British legal system has no legitimacy and is based on man-made laws and courts to which a Muslim cannot conform.[47]

One month after the 7/7 attacks, asked whether he thought he had a duty to report people who might carry out attacks on British soil, Choudary said, "We are not going to have any kind of allegiance to the government or to the police."[48] Indeed, al-Muhajiroun saw being Muslim as an inherent rejection of the UK's democratic system of government. Choudary said, "We submit to no one. We reject all the idols of democracy, freedom, liberalism and we only accept the commands of God."[49]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

Al-Muhajiroun repeatedly argued that the UK needed to replace its governance with sharia law. Bakri declared that his life dream is "to see [an] Islamic flag on 10 Downing Street".[50] Islam4UK listed "establishing Islamic emirates throughout the UK" as one of its stated goals.[51] During an interview that was removed from YouTube in September 2018 for violating the platform's terms of service, Choudary said,

One of our campaigns was to invite Britain to adopt the sharia as an alternative. And part and parcel of that was to give them an example of how the Britain would look under the sharia. For example, under the sharia there is no monarchy system, so Buckingham Palace certainly would not be the home for the monarch who is in existence today, rather we can have an alternative.[52]

According to al-Muhajiroun's interpretation of a sharia state, adultery and apostasy would be punished with death.[53] Bakri in 1997 took British reporter Jon Ronson around London to show him how he would implement sharia rules in the UK. He argued that the British people should prepare themselves for a sharia state in which alcoholic drinks, clubs, pubs, songs and pictures with sexually suggestive content would be banned. He even said, somewhat jokingly, "Under the sharia state, the Spice Girls will be arrested."[54]

Establishing a global Islamic state was at the core of al-Muhajiroun's ideology. This is not surprising as al-Muhajiroun evolved out of HT, which holds the ideal of the caliphate as its central principle. However, unlike HT, which advocates establishing the caliphate in Muslim lands first, al-Muhajiroun saw the entire world as legitimate ground for this aim. In the statement in which Bakri disbanded al-Muhajiroun, he wrote, "We have decided that it is time to rid ourselves of titles, bodies and infrastructure to merge together as one global sect against the crusaders and occupiers of Muslim lands."[55]

Al-Muhajiroun believed that the caliphate would not be a member of the United Nations (UN) because the UN is a man-made institution. The caliphate would also close all embassies because it would not recognise international laws.[56] Similarly, if an Islamic state were established, the rest of the world would be considered *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war, part of the abode of disbelievers when they are in conflict with Islam), where Muslims have the right to kill, rape and plunder in any state that does not have a treaty with the caliphate, because "the foreign policy of the Islamic State is aimed at conquering the world". Bakri wrote,

Once the Islamic State is established anyone in Dar Al Harb will have no sanctity for his life or wealth hence a Muslim in such circumstances can then go into Dar Al Harb and take the wealth from the people unless there is a treaty with that state. If there is no treaty individual Muslims can even go to Dar Al Harb and take women to keep as slaves.[57]

Choudary was quick to recognise the legitimacy of the self-declared caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A few days after Baghdadi declared himself caliph in 2014, Choudary and his associates met to discuss the announcement. Among those present in the meeting was Siddhartha Dhar (known as Abu Rumaysa), who later became an ISIS executioner. After the meeting, Choudary decided to pledge allegiance to the ISIS caliphate.[58] Choudary has said,

Ultimately, the Khalifa *is the highest authority for Muslims worldwide. Implementing sharia internally and carrying it as a foreign policy outside its borders.* Khilafah *system involves sovereignty belonging to God and authority being in the hands of the Muslims. . . . As you know we have 50 states. They need to be united under one leader. His decisions will be binding upon people. If there is any dispute he will make sure it is resolved. And obviously he will have an apparatus. There will be governors in different areas. But the main thing is that sovereignty belongs to God and the whole of sharia needs to be implemented. And even if one law is not Islamic, then people can rise up against the* Khalifa *and remove him [the caliph].*[59]

Justification of Violence

According to al-Muhajiroun's ideology, all Muslims are required to take up arms to spread the message of Islam and defend its lands. However, based on Bakri's definitions and categorisations of the *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*, Muslims who live in non-Muslim countries that do not oppress

them or prevent them from practising their faith are living in a "Covenant of Security".[60] According to this covenant, Muslims should not carry out acts of violence in exchange for having full freedoms of faith, worship and *dawah* (inviting others to the faith).

When Bakri disbanded al-Muhajiroun in 2004, he said the group was divided into two different wings: *dawah* and jihad. The latter advocated military operations in the West, but Bakri claimed he rejected this because of the covenant of security between Muslims and non-Muslims.[61]

Al-Muhajiroun's statements on violence were therefore contradictory. Despite its argument about a covenant of security, the group condoned many terrorist attacks that took place in the West. For example, al-Muhajiroun hailed the 9/11 attackers as the "Magnificent 19" and put up posters around Britain displaying pictures of the hijackers. Abu Omar, a spokesperson for the group, said the actions of the hijackers were "quite splendid" and "completely justified".[62] Choudary said,

The British government should know that Sheikh Anwar Al-Awlaki, may Allah bless him, and Sheikh Osama bin Laden, may Allah give him paradise, and many other people like al-Qaeda nowadays and a list of other people like al-Shabaab in Somalia believe that there is absolutely no covenant of security in the West. So not only soldiers but even civilians who voted for the government for them are legitimate targets. That is an opinion out there. That is an opinion based on [the] Quran and teachings of the Prophet, so I can't reject that there is another opinion.[63]

Bakri and Choudary used clever language to support al-Qaeda while protecting themselves from legal action. They rejected having any ties to al-Qaeda and its leaders or recruiting for them, but also said they would take pride in being associated with them. Asked whether he had been invited to the International Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, founded by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, Bakri said, "Of course not . . . I wish I had a connection, as there is no shame in being linked to Sheikh Osama bin Laden."[64]

On another occasion, Bakri said, "I never recruited people to go abroad and fight against anyone. However, people used to come to us if they wanted to join jihads abroad but soon discovered that we were merely jihad sympathisers. Anyway, legally speaking, all our activities were permissible during that period. We did not breach any laws as we were helping suffering people abroad."[65]

Al-Muhajiroun attempted to justify the use of violence as a means to fight the victimisation of Muslims. When questioned about their alleged support for terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda, members of al-Muhajiroun spoke of the plight of Muslim nations and mentioned how terrorist attacks would stop once the oppression of Muslims had ceased. For example, Bakri said, "Our main concern is to please Allah, and to die in the cause of Allah and go to *jannah* [heaven]. If the U.S. continues with her policy against Islam and the Muslim world, Muslims will be more inclined to strike blows against America."[66]

When Choudary was asked about the murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in 2013 by a man who was involved with and inspired by al-Muhajiroun, he said, "British foreign policy and the humiliation of the Muslim ummah at the hands of the British government . . . He may have had enough of seeing the plight of the Muslim ummah, the occupation of her lands and the massacres and daily killings of his brothers and sisters."[67] Choudary also claimed that Cameron and the "British regime" should be held responsible for the attack. He added, "I don't think it is allowed for Muslims to feel sorry for any non-Muslim who dies. As an adult non-Muslim, whether he in the army or not, if he dies, he died on disbelief and he will go for hellfire. I don't feel sorry for any non-Muslim."[68]

NARRATIVES OF DIVISION

Our analysis of more than 50 interviews, statements and speeches by the leading figures of al-Muhajiroun allowed us to identify six major themes that dominated the worldview of one of the most prominent and notorious Islamist extremist organisations in the UK. Each of these themes manifests itself through a divisive narrative *(see table 2.1)*.

Based on the assertion that al-Muhajiroun's narratives constitute an extreme point of view, given that it is a proscribed organisation in the UK, we used these findings as a benchmark against which to assess the public messaging of the five UK Muslim activist groups, which authorities have called out for promoting extremist or problematic views. These assessments are based in part on the judgements of the researchers, drawing on extensive analysis of the groups' public messaging, and are therefore open to interpretation. The next chapter details the overlaps between these groups' public messaging and the narrative of al-Muhajiroun.

TABLE 2.1   The Six Key Themes and Narratives in al-Muhajiroun's Worldview

Theme	Al-Muhajiroun's Narrative
Victimisation	Believes there is a coordinated global conspiracy against Muslims
'Good' Muslim vs. 'bad' Muslim	Classifies all Muslims who do not share the group's views as apostates
Islam vs. the West	Perceives an inherent, unresolvable conflict between Islam and the West
Delegitimising the government	Rejects the Western democratic model and advocates complete overhaul of system
The centrality of Islam in politics	Advocates a global Islamic caliphate
Justification of violence	Directly encourages use of violence

Narrative Overlaps of Activist Groups

After identifying the six key themes of al-Muhajiroun's worldview, we sought to understand whether the messaging of the five activist groups engaged with similar themes and, if so, how their narratives on those themes compared with those of al-Muhajiroun. We analysed hundreds of pieces of public content for each group and categorised them by theme, based on the key ideas or words on which they centred *(see table 3.1)*.

Of the five activist groups, some had little to no messaging on some of the themes, but each had a significant amount of content relating to at least two themes *(see figure 3.2)*. For four of the five groups (all except MEND), at least 50 per cent of their tweets and at least 80 per cent of their press releases drew on one or more of the six themes.

In studying how the groups engaged with the different themes, we identified a range of narratives for each theme, ranging from views that are accepted in the mainstream to those that could be classed as extreme *(see table 3.3)*. This does not imply that there is an inevitable progression from divisive to extreme ideas, or that any of the groups on the lower end of the spectrum would eventually support the more extreme narratives. Rather, it demonstrates how divisive ideas relate to more extreme narratives and how a more extreme worldview can draw on a foundation of divisive ideas. It also highlights how some groups can mobilise legitimate issues, such as anti-Muslim hatred, and twist them to present a worrying 'us vs. them' worldview.

TABLE 3.1   Themes in Activist Groups' Public Content

Key Themes	Sub-themes, Ideas and Related Words
Victimisation	Anti-Muslim, communities, dehumanisation, discrimination, hate, hate crime, hatred, Islamophobia, minority, onslaught, other, persecution, prejudice, racism, stigmatisation, suspect, target and vilification.
'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Betray, credibility, grass-roots, house Muslim, independent, Islam, loyalty, moderate, mouthpiece, Prevent-funded, puppet, Sara Khan, sectarian, support, takfir, traitor, uncle Tom and Yes-woman.
Islam vs. the West	Alien, assimilation, British, British values, citizen, colonisation, compatability, conflict, identity, imperialism, integration, multiculturalism, Muslims, non-Muslims, oppressor, war on terror and West.
Delegitimising the government	Apartheid, arbitrary, boycott, civil liberties, control, counter-extremism, dissent, draconian, engagement, legitimacy, Napoleon, Ofsted, Orwellian, police state, Prevent, Stasi, surveillance and thought police.
The centrality of Islam in politics	Alternative, Brotherhood, caliphate, capitalism, guidance, Islamic state, Islamism, *Khilafah*, Muslim, secularism, sharia, societal needs, system, ummah, unify, vote and world order.
Justification of violence	Apologists, armies, blowback, British foreign policy, crimes, defend, glorification, grievances, lands, military intervention, Muslim, radicalisation, retaliation, sow terror and terrorism.

FIG. 3.2   Prevalence of Six Key Themes in Tweets and Press Releases of Five Activist Groups

NUMBER OF PIECES OF CONTENT

CAGE   Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain

Islamic Human Rights Commission   Muslim Public Affairs Committee

Muslim Engagement and Development
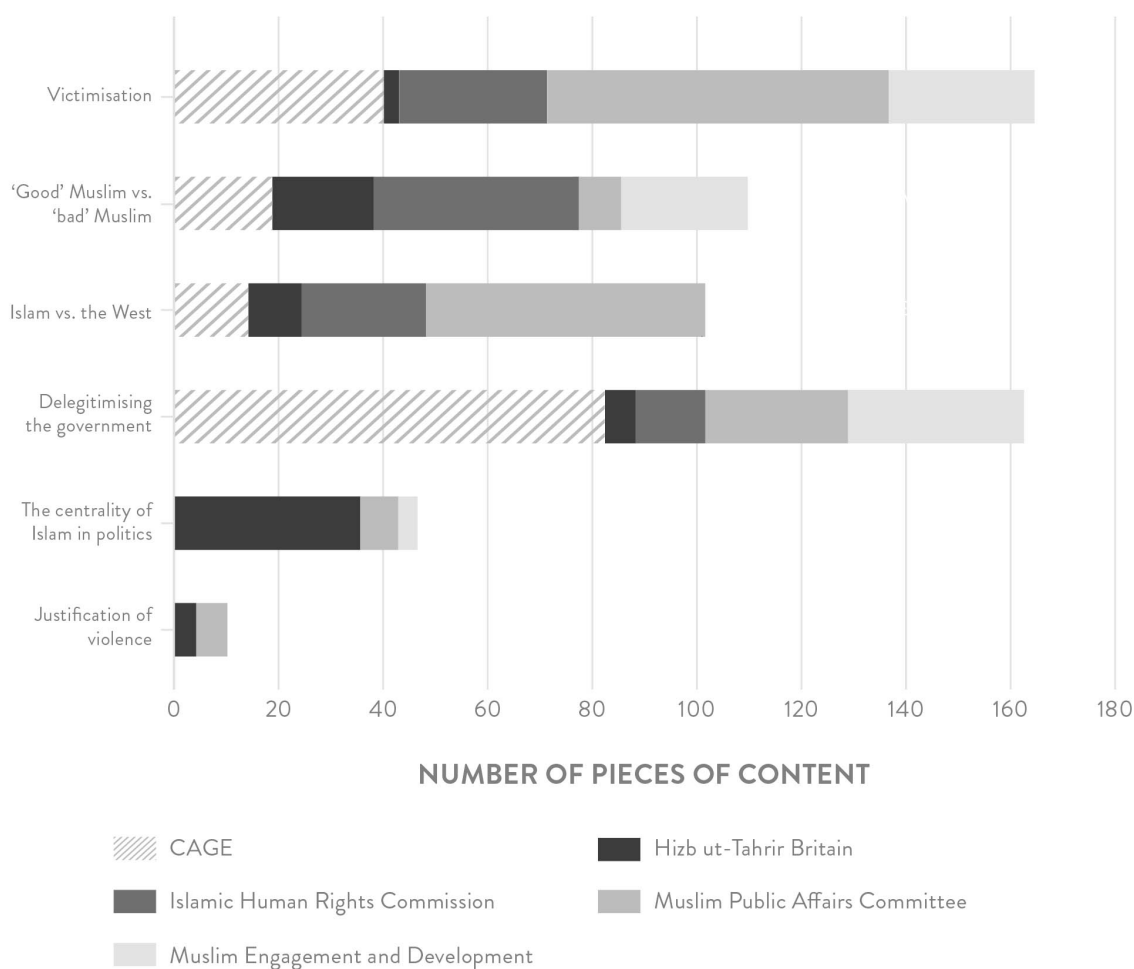
TABLE 3.3 A Range of Positions on Six Key Narrative Themes

		Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
Mainstream ↑	○	Raises awareness of anti-Muslim incidents	Does not label Muslims with different views as disloyal	Sees no conflict between being Muslim and British	May criticise but does not reject the political system	Sees Islam as a spiritual guide, which may influence political views	Makes no attempt to justify violence
	◔	Sometimes uses alarmist rhetoric about anti-Muslim discrimination permeating society	Occasionally questions motives of Muslims with different views	Highlights distinct Muslim and Western identities but sees no clash	Takes a strong stance against existing policies but open to engagement	Sees Muslim identity as a reference point for activism	Provides some justification for violence
	◑	Sees victimisation as a consequence of a security state	Regularly portrays some Muslims as being against fellow Muslims	Emphasises tensions between West and Muslim world	Sees little value in engaging with a system seen as against Muslims	Believes Islam should have a central role in politics	Openly supports violent international groups
	◕	Sees victimisation as systemic and inevitable	Uses hostile language against Muslims seen as traitors	Portrays West as antagonistic towards Muslims	Actively seeks to delegitimise govt in eyes of Muslims	Supports Islamic governance or a unified authority over Muslim states	Believes violent jihad can be justified
Extreme ↓	●	Believes in a global conspiracy against Muslims	Classifies all Muslims who do not hold same views as apostates	Perceives inherent unresolvable conflict between Islam and West	Rejects Western democratic model and advocates complete overhaul	Advocates a global Islamic caliphate	Directly encourages violence

Applying this framework to the five groups, we classified the degree of severity of each group's messaging from mainstream to extreme, to discern how these narratives compare with those of al-Muhajiroun. There was considerable variation across the five groups in terms of how much narrative overlap they shared with al-Muhajiroun's worldview *(see table 3.4)*. MEND had by far the least overlap with the proscribed group, while Hizb ut-Tahrir was broadly similar in its worldview to al-Muhajiroun on every issue except justification of violence, where there was some narrative distance.

These findings are significant because the five groups seek to shape how Muslim communities understand their relationship with broader British society. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about how much traction these groups or their narratives have among their target audiences, namely British Muslim communities. Yet there are indications that they collectively have enough prominence and following to be of concern.

CAGE, for example, has more than 250,000 Facebook followers. This is a substantial following in the context of UK political organisations, for example the Scottish National Party (287,000 followers) or the Green Party (302,000 followers). In addition, most of these groups are very active outside the realm of social media in organising events and demonstrations, and participating in conferences and discussion panels. IHRC's annual Al-Quds Day march to oppose Zionism, for instance, draws thousands of people every year. Representatives from some of these groups appear in mainstream media outlets with some regularity.

The degree of overlap in the narratives of the five groups with al-Muhajiroun is troubling, particularly on issues such as delegitimising the government, where the extent of overlap across the board was the highest. This indicates that a range of more radical Muslim activist groups are perpetuating a broadly similar message that the British government is not a legitimate representative of Muslim communities and is in many ways intrinsically opposed to their interests. The examples in the following chapters highlight how this idea is conveyed.

TABLE 3.4 Positions of Five Activist Groups and al-Muhajiroun on Six Key Themes

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)	◑	◑	◔	◔	◔	◔
CAGE	◑	◑	◕	◕	◕	◔
Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK)	◕	◕	◕	◕	◑	◔
Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)	◕	◕	◕	◕	◕	◑
Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT)	●	●	●	●	●	◕
Al-Muhajiroun	●	●	●	●	●	●

CAGE

Founded in 2003, CAGE is an advocacy organisation originally set up to raise awareness about detainees in the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. The group gained fame after Moazzam Begg, a British detainee who was released without charge, joined the organisation in 2005. CAGE focuses primarily on campaigning against "state policies developed as part of the War on Terror".[69] According to CAGE's website, the organisation has 14 staff members, including five directors.

REACH AND INFLUENCE

CAGE is based in London and hosts frequent events, organising or participating in 25 events from 1 September 2017 to 31 March 2018. CAGE also takes part in international events; in April 2018, the group was invited to participate in a conference at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on the effect of surveillance programmes on Muslim communities.

CAGE's social-media following is the highest of the groups in this study, at around 26,000 followers on Twitter and 257,000 on Facebook. The organisation has a notably high number of YouTube views, with nearly half a million video views and around 2,500 subscribers.

PUBLIC MESSAGING

Analysis of CAGE's social-media output via Twitter and its press releases over a three-month period showed that four out of the six themes in al-Muhajiroun's messaging also feature prominently in CAGE's public messaging and worldview. Seventy-one per cent of the group's tweets and 100 per cent of its press releases contained one or more of the themes *(see figure 3.5)*. The theme of delegitimising the government was the most prominent, with almost half of the press releases pushing this topic. The tropes of victimisation, Islam vs. the West and 'good' Muslim vs. 'bad' Muslim were also key themes in the group's messaging.

CAGE's messaging over the three-month period did not have a strong indication of supporting the centrality of Islam in politics or of justifying violence, although background research shows that the group has advocated some positions relevant to these two themes in the past.

Victimisation

CAGE has shared content in tweets contending that the West does not see Muslims as human but humiliates and kills them and considers them "barbaric" *(see figure 3.6)*.[70]

In reference to an investigation by Birmingham City Council and the Department for Education into Operation Trojan Horse, an alleged Islamist plot to infiltrate UK schools, CAGE stated that the "[government and media] agenda was to institutionalise Islamophobia", implying the existence of a concerted effort by the establishment to formalise anti-Muslim hatred *(see figure 3.7)*.[71]

Separately, CAGE has also claimed there is an "Islamophobia industry" that benefits from targeting Muslims.[72]

FIG. 3.6 Tweet by CAGE on the Hypocrisy of Western Liberals
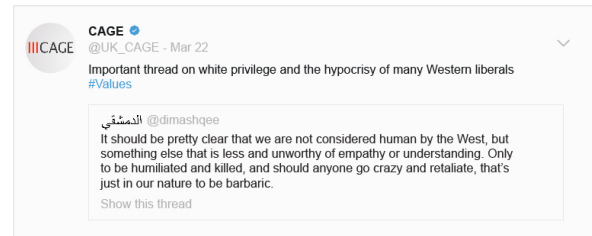
FIG. 3.7 Tweet by CAGE on the Trojan Horse Affair
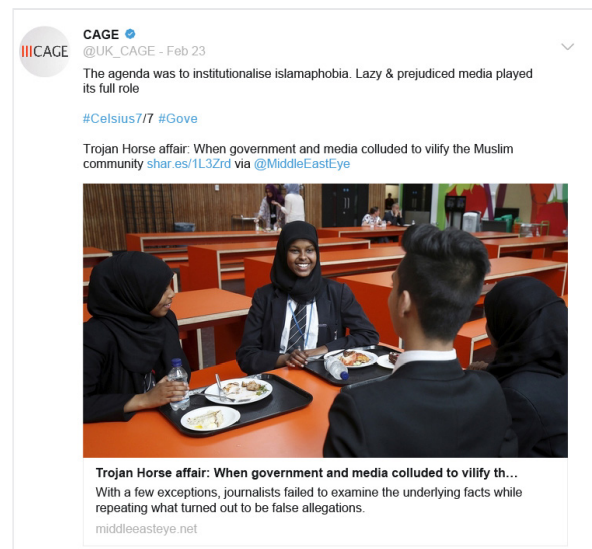
'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

CAGE condemns Muslim organisations that work with the UK government. In a tweet posted in March 2018, CAGE claimed Muslim community organisations Inspire and Faith Associates had

FIG 3.5 Prevalence of the Six Key Themes in CAGE's Tweets and Press Releases

PERCENTAGE OF CONTENT CONTAINING KEY THEMES
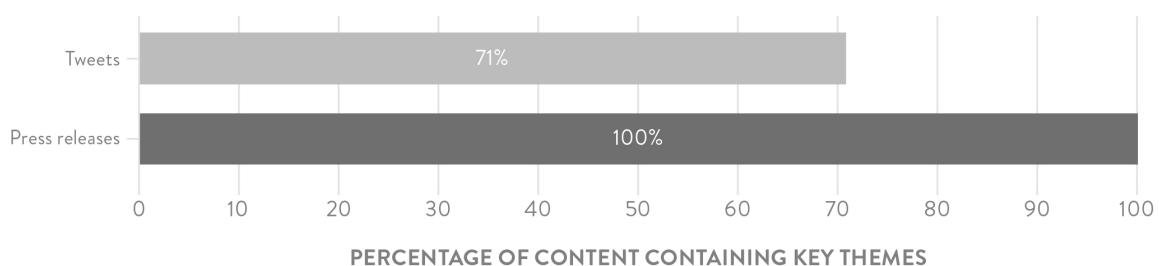
"benefited in kind from the state" and were therefore "front organisations" for the Home Office *(see figure 3.8)*.[73]

Tweet by CAGE on the Charity Hand in Hand
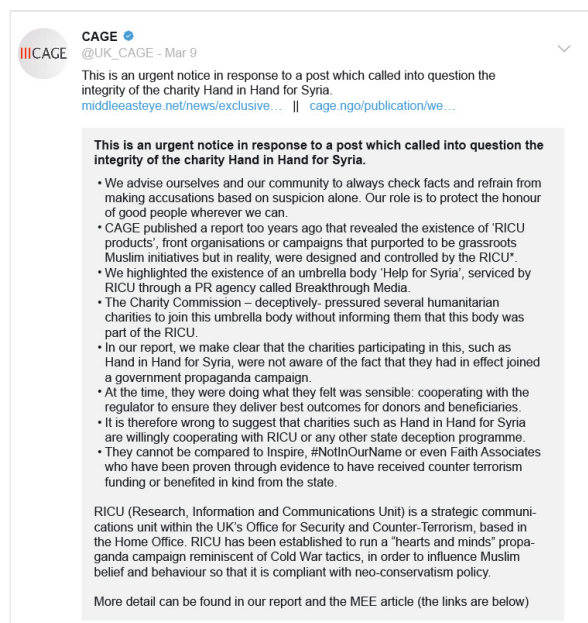
CAGE released two press releases to protest the existence of the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) and the appointment of Sara Khan as its lead commissioner, referring to her as a "sock puppet" of the government.[74] (The commission was funded by the government but operates as an independent body.) According to CAGE, "Muslims who support the CCE will be effectively supporting self-criminalisation of their own community and unequal treatment. We strongly urge Muslims and all fair-minded people to not support this insidious Commission which is totally against British traditions."[75]

In January 2017, CAGE published a "leaked" list of Muslim organisations that had allegedly received £1.2 million ($1.6 million) in funding for the Prevent programme, one of the four strands of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy. The list presented any association with Prevent as something insidious or to be hidden. CAGE Research Director Asim Qureshi added that "this document also conclusively demonstrates the relationship and oversight the Home Office has over ostensibly

community led projects . . . directing and attempting manufacture consent for PREVENT among Muslim communities."[76]

Islam vs. the West

CAGE presents the relationship between Muslims and the West as an antagonistic one, in which the West, particularly Western governments and security apparatus, see Muslims through a securitised lens *(see figure 3.9)*.[77]

Tweet by CAGE on the War on Islam
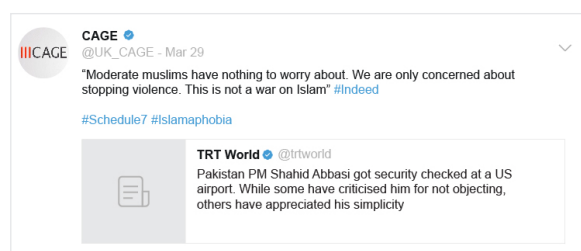
CAGE's messaging often alludes to colonial legacies and injustices to present an anti-Western viewpoint. In one press release, CAGE said,

When powerful nations of the world profess to "fight terrorism" and yet in the same vein continue to actively engage in or support an onslaught against civilians, then you have to question what their real intentions are—peace or dominance and endless war.[78]

This view is consistent with CAGE's past statements. In 2017, CAGE claimed that "Islamophobia is at the heart of the 'War on Terror' because the UK and US security establishment continues to thrive and profit from it".[79]

Delegitimising the Government

In several tweets, CAGE compares the British state's counter-extremism policies with those of the former East German security service, the Stasi, and of the Soviet Union *(see figures 3.10–3.12)*.[80] In one tweet, the group draws on comparisons between the UK state and "echoes of Nazi Germany, and the Stasi" *(see figure 3.10)*.[81]

Tweet by CAGE on UK Counter-Extremism Policy

> **CAGE** ✔
> @UK_CAGE · Mar 4
> Shocking indictment of the state of affairs in the UK. A minority community under full spectrum onslaught by the State.
> @terrorwatchdog
>
> > **Mary Williams** @marymaryw
> > Strong criticism from Gareth Peirce on the way we are treating Muslim children in this country as a sub-race, with echoes of Nazi Germany, and the Stasi. Condemnation from her on the many scare stories and the flaws of Prevent legislation. #DoughtyStWomen #IWD2018

Tweet by CAGE on Prevent and the Soviet Union

> **CAGE** ✔
> @UK_CAGE · Mar 26
> The Prevent Policy is a sophisticated attempt at social engineering that even the old USSR would have envied. The minds must be controlled in line with the traditional wishes of the Old Establishment.
> #WhoSpeaksForBritishMuslims

Tweet by CAGE on the Stasi

> **CAGE** ✔
> @UK_CAGE · Mar 26
> Anyone who disobeys the diktat must be smeared and subjected to "pre crime" policies reminiscient of the Stasi state in East Germany.
> #WhoSpeaksForBritishMuslims

Tweet by CAGE on Totalitarianism

> **CAGE** ✔
> @UK_CAGE · Jan 28
> The govt needs to get the definition of extremism passed through Parliament first.
>
> Lack of definition gives too much arbitrary power to State employees & history tells us that this can lead to totalitarianism
>
> > **Sabbie** @VictorianSab
> > Replying to @UK_CAGE @HJS_Org @ukhomeoffice
> > Sorry, but I don't get your comment 'there shouldn't be a counter-extremism commission'. If there is a problem in society there should be something done about it. You only need to spend a few mins on Twitter to see there are all sorts of extremists running around.

Tweet by CAGE on the Delegation of Power

> **CAGE** ✔
> @UK_CAGE · Feb 7
> .@WillBaldet This is what happens when the State delegates arbitrary power to half million plus minor public servants; Chaos & the empowerment of a Little Napoleon Class. #Prevent #EndPrevent
> @terrorwatchdog
> @simonbhooper
>
> > **CAGE** ✔ @UK_CAGE
> > Suffragettes compared to Nazis in Prevent-linked 'extremism' lesson plan
> > shar.es/1NQpcC via @MiddleEastEye
> > #Prevent #EndPrevent

CAGE sees any cooperation by Muslims with the UK government on counter-extremism as deeply problematic. In one press release, CAGE called for "a complete policy of disengagement with the Commission for Countering Extremism" after accusing the government of "sponsoring extremism" and "silencing dissent" (although the commission is an independent body set up by the government).[82] CAGE frequently describes the government as giving "arbitrary power" to state employees and suggests that this can lead to totalitarianism *(see figures 3.13 and 3.14)*.[83] Other references to the state being a "surveillance state" or "police state" are very common and serve to delegitimise a democratically elected government.[84]

CAGE's strong criticism of the British state and its institutions has been consistent. In 2017, CAGE made the following claim about the UK education-standards department, Ofsted:

PREVENT is being imported into the judicial system and it entrenches Ofsted's role as an increasingly intrusive "regulator" that acts as an ideological henchman for the state.[85]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

This theme was not prevalent in the three-month sample of tweets and press releases, although it did appear in historical research of CAGE. The group has made statements that signal a certain degree of support for Islam having a role in governance. In a 2015 Home Affairs Committee inquiry, in response to questioning by Member of Parliament (MP) Nusrat Ghani for clarification on a statement by fellow CAGE Director Moazzam Begg on the "Islamic duty to struggle for an Islamic State", Director Adnan Siddiqui stated that CAGE supported a caliphate, but with a different model from that of ISIS.[86]

Justification of Violence

This theme was not significant in the sample of CAGE's public content. The group does not advocate violence and has publicly rejected using violence. However, CAGE tends to deny agency to perpetrators of terrorist attacks by arguing that the foreign policy of Western countries is one of the primary causes of radicalisation, while downplaying the role of ideology.

In an article posted on its website in 2017 after the Westminster terrorist attack, despite not endorsing the attack, CAGE claimed,

There is a risk that violence will continue as long as states line up to condemn violence and 'terrorism', while legitimizing state violence both actual and structural (in the form of counter-extremism programmes that criminalise belief and political dissent), towards Muslims.[87]

In 2014, referring to a suicide attack carried out by a British citizen, CAGE said that it was a "price worth paying" to release prisoners held by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.[88]

OVERLAPS WITH AL-MUHAJIROUN

Based on analysis of CAGE's social-media messaging, press releases and historical statements, we ranked the degrees of overlap between the group's public messaging and that of al-Muhajiroun *(see table 3.15)*. These narrative overlaps show the proximity of the ideas shared by these two groups, albeit with differing levels of severity.

TABLE 3.15   Narrative Overlaps Between CAGE and al-Muhajiroun

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
CAGE	◑	◑	◕	◕	◕	◔
Al-Muhajiroun	●	●	●	●	●	●

Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain

Founded in 1986 as a branch of the global pan-Islamist organisation, Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT) was one of the most active Muslim organisations in the UK in the early 1990s. The group's exact membership numbers are unknown, although one of its protests in 2005 is believed to have attracted 8,000 participants.[89] Omar Bakri Mohammed, its first leader, left the group and founded the terrorist organisation al-Muhajiroun.

According to HT, there is "no space within the rabidly secular political framework in Britain or as a matter of fact any European state for Muslims who believe in the values and laws of Islam".[90] In this regard, the group advocates the re-creation of an Islamic caliphate—although it rejects violence as a means to achieve this and ISIS's claims to have done so. Groups operating under the HT name are banned in a number of countries, including Germany, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, China and Russia.

REACH AND INFLUENCE

HT organised 11 events in the UK between September 2017 and March 2018. The organisation also hosts online panel discussions via Facebook, such as its March 2018 discussion "Emergence of the Khilafah State: The alternative to the crumbling world order".[91] HT members are active in handing out flyers outside mosques, although the group's exact numbers are unknown.

HT has received a high level of media coverage in the UK, particularly on several occasions when various governments attempted to ban the group. However, Home Office reviews to date have concluded there is insufficient evidence to outlaw the group.[92]

HT's social-media following is of moderate size, with around 14,500 followers on Twitter and 26,000 on Facebook. Its YouTube channel has nearly 2,000 subscribers, and its videos have been viewed around 186,000 times.

PUBLIC MESSAGING

The six themes in al-Muhajiroun's messaging were prevalent in around 88 per cent of HT's tweets and 100 per cent of its press releases between January and March 2018 *(see figure 3.16)*. HT's messaging on these themes also came the closest to emulating al-Muhajiroun's worldview on these issues. The centrality of Islam in politics was the most prominent theme, accounting for more than one-third of tweets and half of press releases, with a focus on re-establishing the caliphate. This worldview is consistent with HT's previous statements. The group's approach to the issue of violence has also bordered

on justification of violent acts in some current and past statements.

Victimisation

HT focuses heavily on cases of Muslims facing poor treatment and sometimes violence in the West and around the world. Some of the incidents to which the group refers are real injustices. However, HT portrays this treatment as an inevitable consequence of Muslims living in states that are not governed by Islam.

In one retweet, HT refers to the case of a Muslim woman jailed in Russia and states the only solution is "to work with Hizb ut Tahrir to establish the rightly guided Khilafah (Caliphate)" *(see figure 3.17)*.[93]

FIG. 3.17   Tweet by HT on the Russian Caliphate

In a February 2018 press release, HT accused Ofsted head Amanda Spielman of "bullying" Muslim children for raising concerns about young girls being made to cover their hair and argued that both Spielman and Sara Khan were guilty of "defaming

FIG. 3.16   Prevalence of the Six Key Themes in HT's Tweets and Press Releases

PERCENTAGE OF CONTENT CONTAINING KEY THEMES
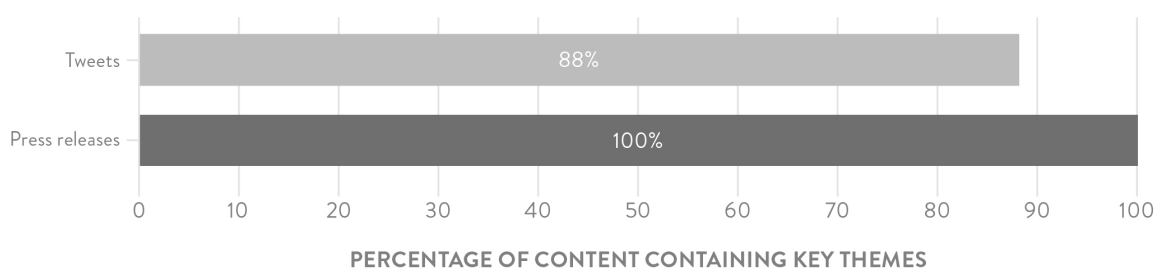
Islam and Muslims".[94] This idea was also portrayed in a tweet about the forcible secularisation of Muslim girls *(see figure 3.18)*.[95]

Tweet by HT on Forcible Secularisation
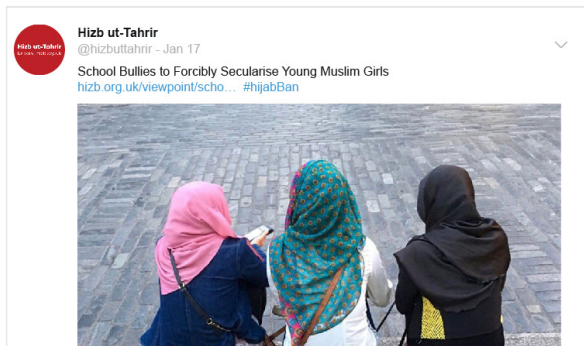
Outside the three-month sample, HT has suggested that Muslims are the victims of a global conspiracy against Islam. In 2017, HT wrote,

What Muslims sense in the UK is part of a global agenda. The propaganda against Islam in the UK is part of the propaganda against Islam in the Muslim world.[96]

'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

HT frequently condemns Muslim governments that it deems not Islamic enough. In one tweet, HT shared a link to a video accusing Saudi Arabia of enforcing a "pro-secular, liberal and anti-Islamic" agenda under the guise of reform *(see figure 3.19)*.[97]

Tweet by HT on Secular Reforms in Saudi Arabia
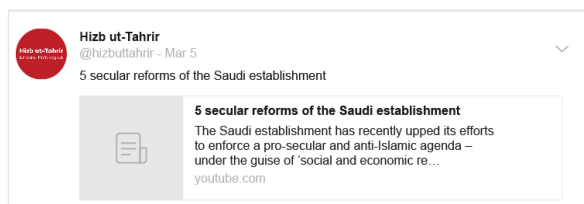
HT also considers Muslim countries that associate with Western forces or have benefited from colonialism illegitimate. In one tweet, the group accused Pakistan of serving the country's "crusader masters" for not supporting a caliphate and Saudi Arabia of "treachery" for its historic ties and defence relations with Britain *(see figures 3.20 and 3.21)*.[98]

Tweet by HT on Pakistan and "Crusader Masters"
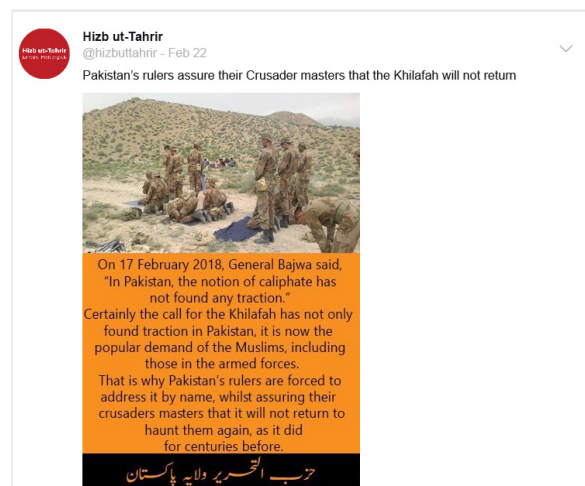
Tweet by HT on Saudi Arabia and British Colonial Forces

Applying the same logic to domestic politics, HT condemns Muslim politicians or Muslims who collaborate with the UK government or adopt Western values. In 2013, HT said,

'Muslim MPs'—such as Sadiq Khan, Rushanara Ali, Sajid Javid, Shabana Mahmood and Anas Sarwar—as well as other politicians who make a play for the support of the Muslim community—voted FOR 'Gay Marriage'. Some of these politicians visit the Muslim community and give Islamic greetings, or parade their Muslim names and heritage. Yet when they are in the company of their fellow politicians and the media they compete with each other to prove who is the most Westernised![99]

Islam vs. the West

HT completely rejects Western values, including capitalism and secularism *(see figures 3.22 and 3.23)*, and presents these values as the root causes of society's ills.[100] In one tweet the group states that "secularism is the cause of child abuse".[101] This criticism of Western values is used as the starting point to later demand the re-establishment of a caliphate.

FIG. 3.22 Tweet by HT on Capitalism
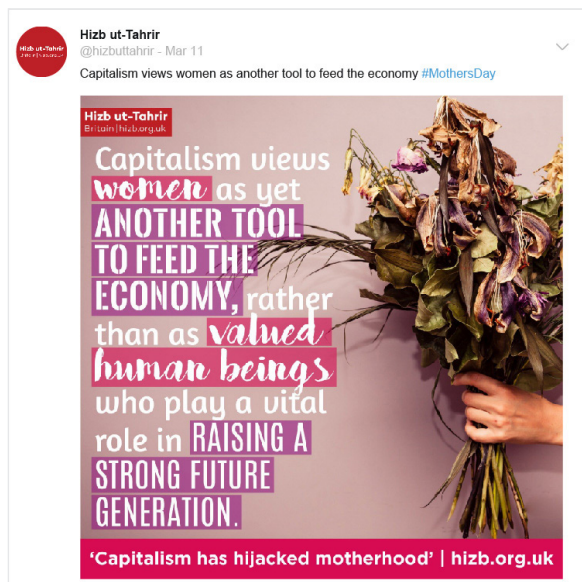
FIG. 3.23 Tweet by HT on Secularism
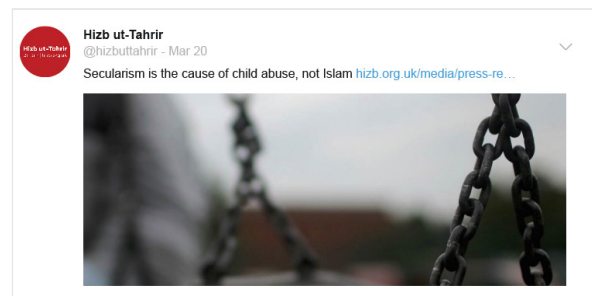
HT sees Western presence or engagement in the Muslim world and other countries through the lens of colonialism and racism *(see figure 3.24)*.[102]

HT's stance on the incompatibility of Western and Islamic values has remained unchanged over the years. In 2016, HT described liberalism as "alien" to Islam.[103] In 1995, it said,

From all that we have discussed previously, it is extremely clear that the Western culture (Hadharah), values and Western viewpoint about life, Western democracy and the general freedoms, all completely contradict with Islam and its rules. They are Kufr [infidel] thoughts, Kufr culture, systems of Kufr and laws of Kufr.[104]

FIG. 3.24 Tweet by HT on the Balfour Declaration
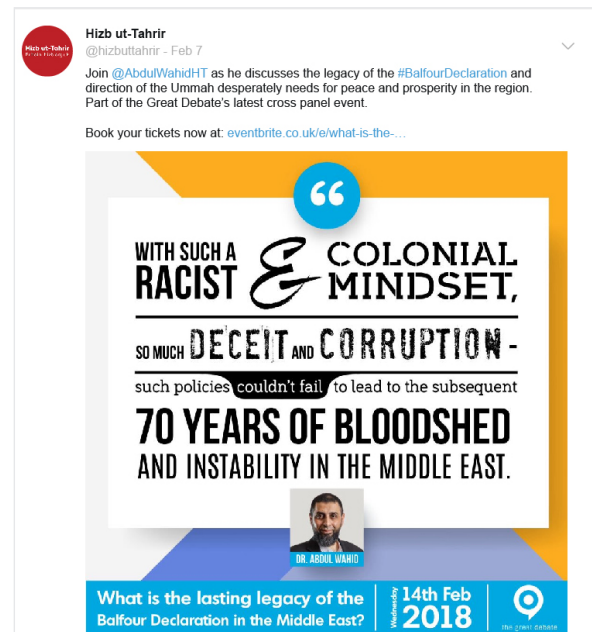
Delegitimising the Government

HT presents all government counter-extremism initiatives as attempts to impose secularism on Muslim communities and spread "hysteria" about Islam. In one press release entitled "'Prevent' is a lie and so is 'Safe and Secure'", HT stated,

[Prevent] is falsely marketed as a means to prevent violence, but in practice has been nothing more than a means to spread hysteria and irrational fear of Islam and Muslims, while attempting to intimidate the Muslim community into replacing Islam with a secularised liberal moderate version of Islam.[105]

In one tweet, HT shared a link to an article on its website in which it called for Prevent to be abolished for being a "'police-state' style spying tool directed at the Muslim community" *(see figure 3.25)*.[106] In another tweet, HT contended that "hate speech is part and parcel of a secular system" *(see figure 3.26)*.[107] The tweet links to an article that states that the UK "government and media spare no effort in spreading negativity and promoting hatred of Islam and Muslims".[108]

FIG. 3.25   Tweet by HT on Prevent
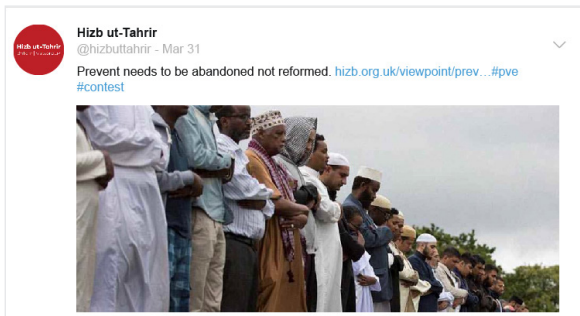
FIG. 3.26   Tweet by HT on Hate Speech

HT rejects the legitimacy of the British government because it is not based on an Islamic system of governance, feeding into the group's narrative of Islam needing a greater role in politics, which is dominant in HT's messaging. In 2015, HT urged Muslims not to vote in UK general elections, arguing,

The aim of encouraging Muslims to participate in the secular politics of Westminster is to see Muslims endorse and adopt this non-Islamic secular political system, its values and policies. The consequence of this is, as we have seen, that the more Muslims engage in this secular process, the more they secularise their views until they openly support un-Islamic positions.[109]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

This is the most prevalent theme in HT's messaging, as re-establishing the caliphate is the group's main doctrine *(see figure 3.27)*.[110]

FIG. 3.27   Tweet by HT on the Caliphate
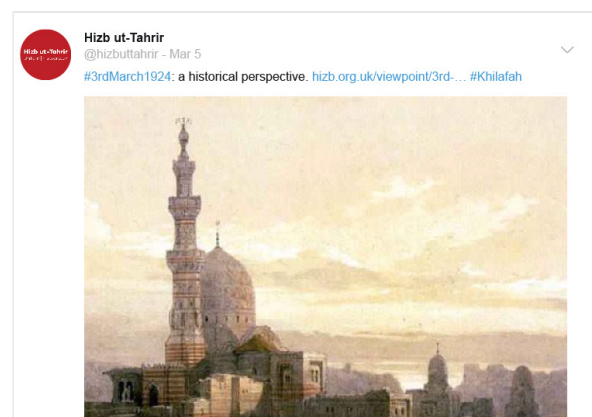
HT presents the caliphate as the solution to a corrupt secular and capitalist system. In one press release discussing why the caliphate should have nuclear weapons, HT describes it as the only "nation" that would call for nuclear disarmament, as opposed to the "irresponsible" capitalist and secular nations.[111] HT constantly highlights the superiority of Islam over secular and capitalist values *(see figures 3.28 and 3.29).*[112]

FIG. 3.28   Tweet by HT on Islam and Motherhood

FIG. 3.29   Tweet by HT on Women in Islam

In 2008, HT said,

The Khilafah state is a model that would bring real justice to the region, replacing the tyrants and dictators in the Muslim world, liberating the occupied land, throwing off the shackles of colonialism, ending oppression and establishing a system over the Muslim world that will allow Jews, Christians and Muslims to live together.[113]

Justification of Violence

In the tweets examined, HT makes several calls for "Muslim armies to rise" and liberate Muslims from oppression *(see figures 3.30 and 3.31).*[114]

FIG. 3.30   Tweet by HT on Muslim Armies

Tweet by HT on Pakistan and Muslim Armies

These views are consistent with HT's past views, as shown by this statement from 2010: "The *Muslim Ummah* knows that there is no solution except to move armies to end the blockade and liberate Palestine; and that these armies must remove the rulers who confine them to barracks and thus prevent them from fulfilling this duty."[115]

HT has also sought to justify acts of terrorism or violence against Western individuals or targets on a basis of such actions being a consequence of Western policies. In comments shared on one of HT's websites in 2015, a senior HT member commented on the knife attack on MP Stephen Timms by the student Roshnora Choudry, stating,

The reality is that it is a response that comes out of the policy of the British government. That's the sad fact, that anyone, whether Muslim or not Muslim, whether British citizen or from another land, the reality is that when the policy creates this enmity, when the people see that the policy you've adopted is false, when they see it as an imposition, when they see it as an act of oppression, it creates this anger and it creates this resentment. And whatever action that comes from this is a natural response to that aggression.[116]

In a press release on an election debate between the three main UK political parties in 2010, HT wrote, "All three parties share the false narrative that terror emanates from Afghanistan and Pakistan—ignoring the role of western foreign policy in fuelling bitterness and anger in the Muslim world."[117]

OVERLAPS WITH AL-MUHAJIROUN

HT is the group with the highest degree of narrative overlap with al-Muhajiroun *(see table 3.32)*. Of the five groups studied, only HT was close to al-Muhajiroun in its approach to the issue of violence. The near alignment of HT's messaging with that of al-Muhajiroun highlights why there has been much discussion of whether HT in the UK should be proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000 and the 2006 act, which included a measure on the "glorification of terrorism". However, Home Office reviews to date have concluded there is insufficient evidence to ban the group.[118]

Narrative Overlaps Between HT and al-Muhajiroun

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
HT	●	●	●	●	●	◕
Al-Muhajiroun	●	●	●	●	●	●

Islamic Human Rights Commission

The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) was founded in 1997. The organisation's views are broadly consistent with those of the Iranian regime and have a strong pro-Shia stance. IHRC states that its activism focuses largely on speaking out against the oppression of Muslims, including Shia minorities in Muslim-majority countries, supporting the Palestinian cause and countering Islamophobia in the West.

REACH AND INFLUENCE

IHRC organises the annual Al-Quds Day march in London in opposition to Zionism. The 2016 event reportedly had 4,000 participants. Participants often fly Hizbullah flags at the protest, a practice that London Mayor Sadiq Khan unsuccessfully called on the UK home secretary to ban in 2017 and 2018. IHRC holds weekly events and is active in campaigning, organising 21 events between September 2017 and March 2018.

IHRC's social-media following is smaller than those of most of the other activist organisations: 5,200 followers on Twitter, 13,600 on Facebook, around 700 subscribers to its YouTube channel and about 220,000 YouTube video views.

PUBLIC MESSAGING

Four of the six themes in al-Muhajiroun's public messaging were prevalent in IHRC's messaging. Of the group's social-media output analysed, more than 70 per cent of tweets and 90 per cent of press releases fitted four of the themes in al-Muhajiroun's messaging *(see figure 3.33)*. The themes of victimisation and 'good' Muslim vs. 'bad' Muslim were the most prevalent.

Victimisation

Following the June 2017 Finsbury Park terrorist attack, IHRC accused the "Zionist lobby" of radicalising the attacker, Darren Osborne, stating in a press release that "the trail of responsibility for the murderous attack on Muslim worshippers in north London's Finsbury Park last June can be traced back to the door of the Zionist lobby in London". Osborne stated that he had originally wanted to attack an IHRC event.[119]

IHRC's messaging employs an alarmist rhetoric that focuses on Muslim victimhood, often using legitimate examples of anti-Muslim sentiment to sow fear or promote hysteria. For example, the group states the media has contributed to "turning our political discourse into one big call to arms against Islam and Muslims" and that "everyday is Punish a Muslim Day" *(see figures 3.34 and 3.35)*.[120]

FIG. 3.34   Tweet by IHRC on Anti-Muslim Stories

FIG. 3.33   Prevalence of the Six Key Themes in IHRC's Tweets and Press Releases

PERCENTAGE OF CONTENT CONTAINING KEY THEMES
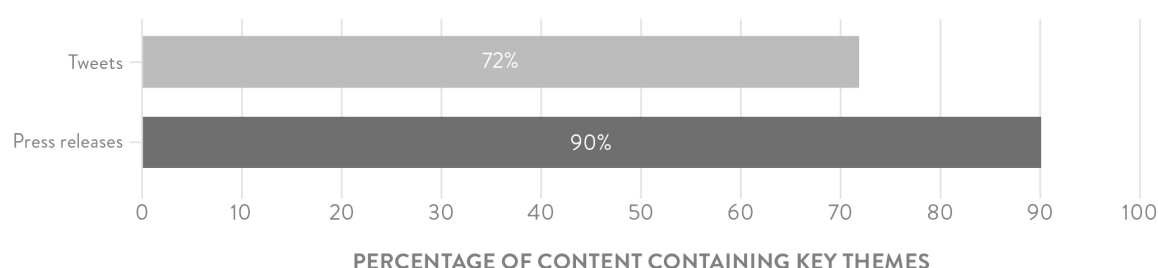
FIG. 3.35   Tweet by IHRC on Punish
a Muslim Day
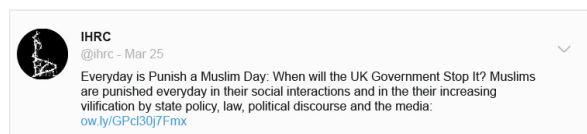
These views are in line with past statements.
In 2013, IHRC wrote,

*Britain is still a racist country and the level of fear
amongst ethnic minorities of being attacked or harassed
are reflective of the harsh realities they face in their
everyday lives. Muslims are the victims of hate crimes
that are fuelled by the demonisation that we hear from
politicians and the media. Islamophobia drips down
from the politicians and media, and Muslims bear the
consequences on the streets and in the workplaces
of the UK.*[121]

'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

Although IHRC identifies itself as a human-rights
organisation for all people regardless of religion or sect,
during the studied period it predominantly highlighted
issues relating to prominent Shia figures, particularly
those linked to the Iranian regime. From January
to March 2018, over half of IHRC's press releases
focused on criticism of the Nigerian government (led
by President Muhammadu Buhari, a Sunni Muslim)
and its detention of Shia cleric Ibraheem Zakzaky
(see figure 3.36).[122] According to the BBC, Zakzaky is
a strong adherent of the Iranian revolutionary ideology
and his Islamic Movement group, which seeks to
establish an Islamic state in Nigeria, espouses "clear
hatred of parts of the West".[123]

FIG. 3.36   Tweet by IHRC on Ibraheem Zakzaky
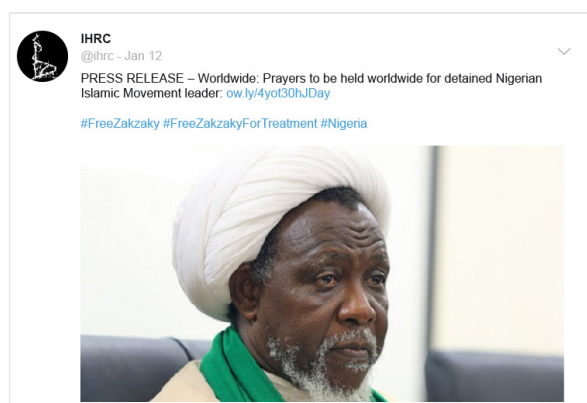
In the UK, IHRC has singled out Sadiq Khan for
opposing its annual Al-Quds Day march, accusing him
of "betraying Londoners" for his comments connecting
the march with extremism and anti-Semitism.[124] In a
2017 letter, the group accused Khan of doing "very
little" to "protect the rights and freedoms" of his
constituents, "including those who are Muslims", in
opposing the rally.[125]

IHRC in October 2018 nominated both Khan and
Home Secretary Sajid Javid for its "UK Islamophobe of
the Year" award.[126] In May, IHRC condemned Muslims
who work with the UK government as "anti-Islam" or
not Muslim enough:

*We are seeing who the government talks to when it
wants to consult the so-called 'Muslim community': people
who include secularists, those who are anti-Islam; the likes
of Ex-British Muslims, etc.*[127]

Islam vs. the West

IHRC's messaging has a strong anti-Western
stance and presents the relationship between the
West and the Muslim world as intrinsically hostile,
especially in depicting the West as forcibly making
Muslims integrate and give up their cultural and
religious autonomy. IHRC uses references to
colonialism and imperialism to convey the notion
that the West continually seeks to subjugate
Muslims *(see figure 3.37)*.[128]

FIG. 3.37   Tweet by IHRC on Colonialism

In an article by an external contributor that was
posted on IHRC's website, modernity is described
as a "civilizational project of death" formed by the
European colonial expansion *(see figure 3.38)*.[129]

FIG. 3.38   Tweet by IHRC on Modernity

Reflecting on the integration of Muslims in 21st-century Britain, IHRC in 2005 argued,

Basic Islamic principles and values of both a personal and political nature are being demonised and stigmatised to such an extent that the very definition of the word 'Islam' is at stake. Such an ostensible loathing for 'the Other' must not be seen as assimilation but extermination in the same way it was seen in Nazi Europe, Rwanda and the Balkans.[130]

Delegitimising the Government

In an article, one of IHRC's co-founders referred to Spielman's support of a London primary school's ban of young girls wearing the hijab as a "crusade", a "declaration of war" and a "pre-emptive justification of the onslaught to come".[131]

One press release argued that the UK government's integration plans, which relied on promoting British values, were already "doomed" because they "are part of a wider securitisation discourse which posits the conservatism of Muslims as a reason for poor integration and by extension a potential threat to national security".[132] Arguments on security vs. civil liberties are common in political discourse, but IHRC's rhetoric falls in the realm of conspiracy theories, often referring to the government as a "police state" based on "surveillance" and "Orwellian" laws. Speaking in 2015 about the UK Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill, which later became law, IHRC wrote,

The Bill will introduce a raft of new measures to deal with terrorism and extremism in the UK. It is IHRC's view that the current proposal is . . . far and away the most Orwellian to date; it will erode civil liberties and turn the UK into a police state.[133]

In 2015, IHRC released a report entitled "The New Normal for Muslims in the UK", which it claimed provided "shocking insight into the UK as an ever developing 'Stasi state' rife with hatred for the 'suspect' Muslim community".[134]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

IHRC aligns itself with the Iranian regime and the ideology of its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the tweets and press releases studied did not actively advocate a similar system in the UK, the group's support of the politics and central figures of a country that has adopted Islamic governance over secularism is a key indicator of IHRC's view on the role of Islam in politics.

In its advertisement for the 2018 Al-Quds Day march in London, IHRC even quoted Khomeini, the ideologue behind Iran's theocracy, in its promotional materials: "'The Quds Day is a universal day. It is not an exclusive day for Quds itself. It is a day for the oppressed to rise and stand up against the arrogant.' – Imam Khomeini"[135]

In past statements, IHRC has spoken in favour of establishing Islamic states in Muslim countries or forming a caliphate:

The establishment of Islamic law or shariah – which has many different guises – in the Arab world is a wholly legitimate. Although Western governments and many of their citizens may disagree with some elements of Islamic law, respect for democracy dictates that those who yearn for Islamic law in their countries should be entitled to campaign for it. The same applies to the goal of uniting all Muslim nations under one Caliphate.[136]

Justification of Violence

This theme was not prevalent in the three-month sample of tweets and press releases. Some protesters at the Al-Quds Day march fly the flags of international militant groups that use violence, such as Hizbullah—a practice that the IHRC leadership has condoned in its guidance for the event.[137] Although Hizbullah is only partly proscribed in the UK, and IHRC's guidance suggests that protesters carry the flag of the organisation's so-called political wing, which is not proscribed in the UK, experts argue there is little distinction between Hizbullah's political and militant activities.[138] IHRC's website contains links to excerpts from speeches by Hizbullah leader

Hassan Nasrallah and photos of Hizbullah military parades to mark the occasion of Al-Quds Day.[139] Like many of the other activist groups, IHRC also presents Western military action as a significant root cause of terrorism. It claimed in 2015,

The main consequence of western military intervention in the Middle East in recent years has been to aggravate the threat of terrorism and reprisals against what is considered by many inhabitants in the region as hostile foreign aggression.[140]

OVERLAPS WITH AL-MUHAJIROUN

Based on the combination of tweets, press releases and historical statements, there is a significant degree of overlap between IHRC's public messaging and that of al-Muhajiroun on the six key themes *(see table 3.39)*.

TABLE 3.39   Narrative Overlaps Between IHRC and al-Muhajiroun

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
IHRC						
Al-Muhajiroun						

Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK

Founded in 2001, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK) was initially conceived as an online portal but later grew into a grass-roots organisation. MPACUK's stated goal is to combat anti-Muslim narratives and counter the "Zionist lobby". Its Operation Muslim Vote campaign aims to mobilise Muslim voters on what it sees as core community issues, mainly foreign policy, Islamophobia, Prevent, Palestine and the Muslim Rohingya people in Myanmar.

The UK National Union of Students has voted to keep MPACUK—and Hizb ut-Tahrir—off campuses as part of its No Platform policy.[141]

REACH AND INFLUENCE

MPACUK claims to have replaced three "unethical" Conservative MPs from their seats in the 2017 UK general election with "ethical" Labour ones through its campaigns, alongside removing "pro-Iraq, pro-Israel" Labour MPs from their seats in 2005 and 2010.[142] However, there is no evidence that MPACUK has made a significant impact on any individual constituency during the past few general elections.

MPACUK appears to have only one or two members and operates largely online. Despite its very small size, the group effectively uses social media to maintain its profile. MPACUK has the second-highest combined social-media following of the groups studied: around 11,600 followers on Twitter, 112,000 on Facebook, 364,000 video views on YouTube and some 1,000 YouTube subscribers.

PUBLIC MESSAGING

More than half of MPACUK's tweets and 86 per cent of its press releases invoked one or more of the six key themes (see figure 3.40). MPACUK and HT are the only two groups whose messaging alluded to all six themes. The tropes of victimisation and Islam vs. the West were the two most prominent, accounting for more than one-third of all tweets. The tone employed in these tweets stood out as particularly inflammatory and hostile, especially when referring to the government or Muslims who work with it.

Victimisation

MPACUK uses examples of individual acts of injustice towards, or persecution of, Muslims to push a worldview in which Muslims are constantly victims of and oppressed by a biased, hypocritical system. MPACUK regularly asserts that there are entirely separate standards for Muslims and non-Muslims in British society. In one tweet, the group insinuated that a Jewish religious school was not facing consequences for censoring textbooks (see figure 3.41), implying that Ofsted would not accept such actions from a Muslim school.[143] In fact, Ofsted issued a "scathing report" against the Jewish school in question.[144]

FIG. 3.41   Tweet by MPACUK on a Jewish School

MPACUK again highlighted perceived hypocrisy in British attitudes towards Muslims compared with Jews when it criticised the government's response to letters calling for a Punish a Muslim Day and implied similar threats to Jews would be taken more seriously (see figure 3.42).[145]

FIG. 3.40   Prevalence of the Six Key Themes in MPACUK's Tweets and Press Releases

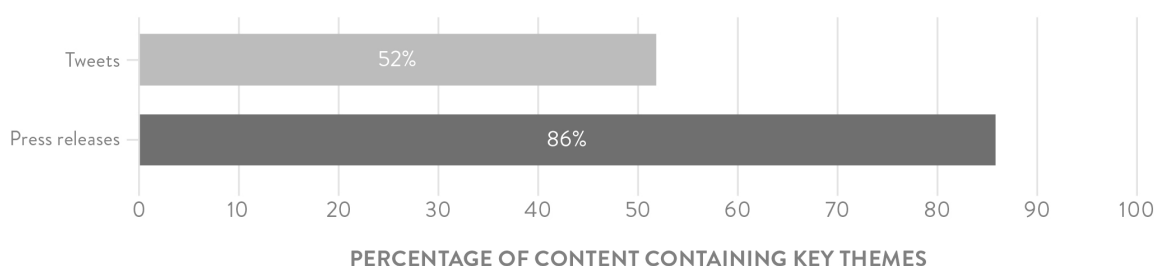PERCENTAGE OF CONTENT CONTAINING KEY THEMES

FIG. 3.42   Tweet by MPACUK on "Punish a Jew"
Day

In another tweet, MPACUK claimed that
according to broader society, there was "no such
thing as an Islamophobic hate crime", suggesting
that such crimes are not taken seriously by others,
in reference to an anti-Muslim attack in Leicester.[146]
The perpetrator was in fact convicted of an
anti-Muslim hate crime *(see figure 3.43)*.[147]

MPACUK frequently uses the oppression of
Muslims around the world to put forward the view
that anti-Muslim hatred is part of a coordinated force,
of which all Muslims should be aware. The group's
messaging often conveys an alarmist siege mentality.
For example, in an article for UK Muslim news website
5PillarsUK, MPACUK highlighted how the 1995
Bosnian genocide should act as a warning to Muslims
in the West today, stating, "Although such horrors
seem a world away from the relative security enjoyed
by most Muslims in countries like Britain we need
to ask whether their story is a warning that Muslim
minorities cannot afford to ignore."[148]

FIG. 3.43   Tweet by MPACUK on Islamophobic
Hate Crime

MPACUK's rhetoric on the victimisation of
Muslims often centres on conspiracies or the view
that anti-Muslim sentiments are not random but
institutionalised. In a 2017 statement, MPACUK said,

*Islamophobia is on the rise. From draconian legislation
to attacks on our streets, Muslims are the most oppressed
people around the world. But these attacks on Islam are
not a product of random, individual acts of hate. They
are the product of an organised, well-funded industry—
the Islamophobia industry—that works tirelessly to
dehumanise Muslims.*[149]

'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

MPACUK uses derogatory language to describe
Muslim groups or individuals who cooperate with the
UK government, including racially charged phrases
such as "house Muslim" *(see figure 3.44)*.[150]

MPACUK is vocal in its criticism of Muslims
whom it considers collaborators with the government,
including Sara Khan *(see figure 3.45)* and Fiyaz Mughal,
head of Tell MAMA, a leading national project that
works to fight anti-Muslim abuse.[151]

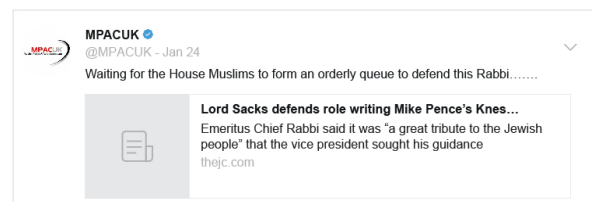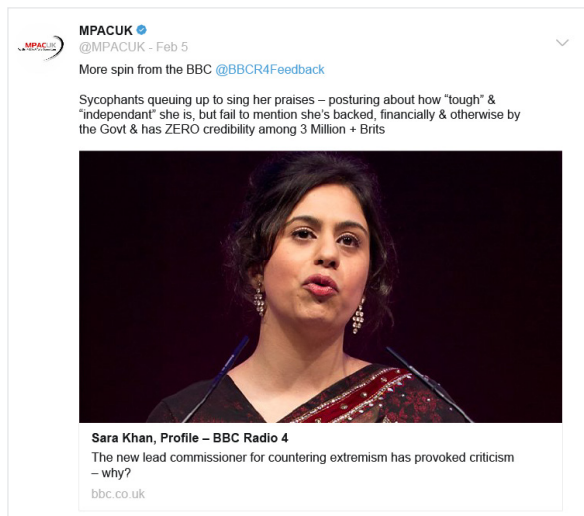**FIG. 3.44**   Tweet by MPACUK on
"House Muslims"

FIG. 3.45   Tweet by MPACUK on Sara Khan

In statements outside the three-month sample, MPACUK has defended using racially charged phrases such as "house Muslim" and "Uncle Tom" that evoke slavery to describe Muslims whom it sees as sell-outs to the white establishment or government:

> *House Muslim and Uncle Tom are not racist labels, they are political ones. Only an Uncle Tom would say otherwise.*[152]

Islam vs. the West

MPACUK presents Israel and the West as constantly in opposition to Muslims, portraying Zionism as a root cause of the problems that Muslims face, often relying on conspiracies to support this view. In one tweet, MPACUK shared a link to an article discussing how the food-and-drink company Nestlé is oppressing Muslims in developing countries and accused Zionism of being "behind this evil" *(see figure 3.46)*.[153]

FIG. 3.46   Tweet by MPACUK on Zionism

MPACUK takes a broadly anti-American view and accused the United States of being a state sponsor of terrorism *(see figures 3.47 and 3.48)*.[154]

FIG. 3.47   Tweet by MPACUK on Sponsors of Terrorism
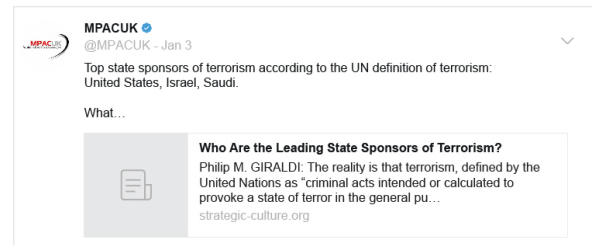
FIG. 3.48   Tweet by MPACUK on Terrorism and the CIA

MPACUK's messaging beyond the three-month period also follows this trend of presenting Muslims and the West as in a state of constant tension. In 2014, the group tweeted about how Muslims have no faith in Western governments anymore *(see figure 3.49)*.[155]

FIG. 3.49   Tweet by MPACUK on Western Manipulation

Delegitimising the Government

MPACUK is continually hostile towards the British government and institutions in its messaging, implying that the state has an agenda against Muslims. In one tweet, the group argued that the state and army want to control Muslim "bodies and minds", while in another it suggested that the British Army is allowed to "kill Muslims for Queen and country" *(see figures 3.50 and 3.51).*[156]

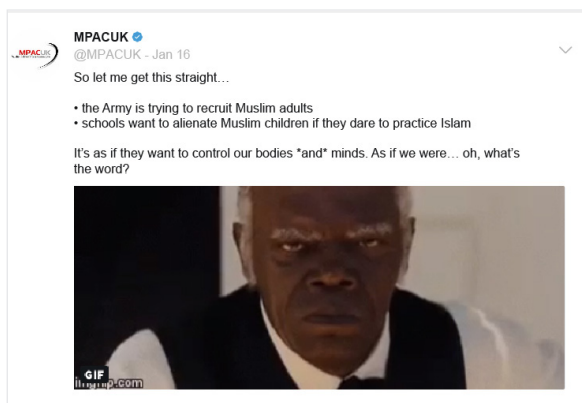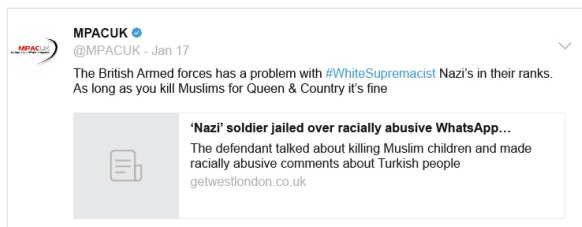FIG. 3.50   Tweet by MPACUK on the British Army

FIG. 3.51   Tweet by MPACUK on the UK Armed Forces

MPACUK has also stated that the UK government, through its security measures, takes away more civil liberties than terrorists like al-Qaeda do *(see figure 3.52).*[157]

FIG. 3.52   Tweet by MPACUK on the Government and Civil Liberties

These statements are consistent with MPACUK's past messaging, which has presented the UK government and security apparatus as part of a sinister police state. In 2015, the group argued that "the [Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill] puts in place the architecture of a Police State, giving government ministers sweeping powers to restrict the rights and freedoms of citizens without due process and the right to a fair trial".[158]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

MPACUK encourages its followers to exercise their democratic rights and engage with the existing political system, although this is often through the lens of what the group believes Muslims should care about as a bloc *(see figure 3.53).*[159]

FIG. 3.53   Tweet by MPACUK on Muslims and Jeremy Corbyn

Beyond seeing Muslim identity as playing a central role in political engagement, MPACUK to some extent idealises Islam having a role in politics. In one tweet, MPACUK highlighted how Islam gave rights to women 1,400 years ago, while in Britain women are still struggling to achieve equal pay *(see figure 3.54)*.[160]

FIG. 3.54   Tweet by MPACUK on Women in Islam
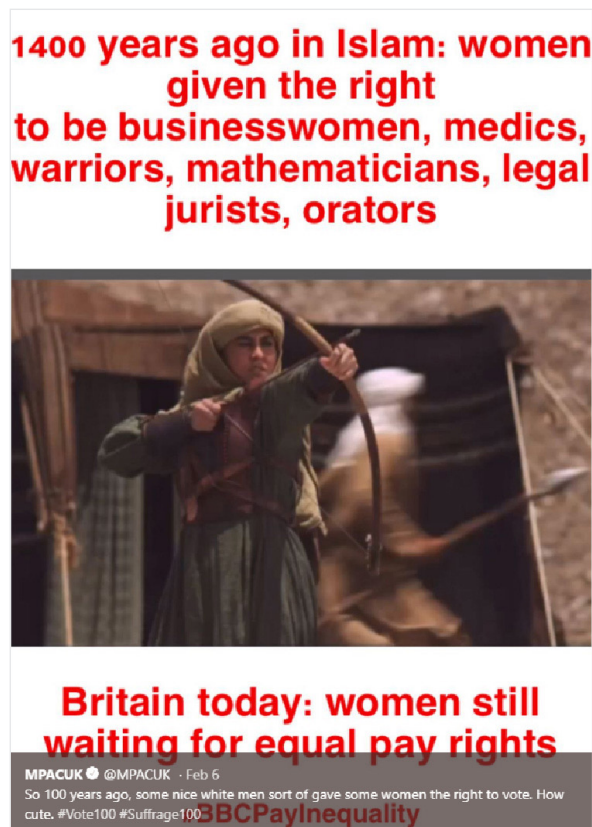
MPACUK organises the Operation Muslim Vote campaign, which includes an interactive map showing information on the political stances of incumbent MPs so that Muslims can "elect ethical MPs and unseat unethical MPs", based mainly on their stances on foreign policy and issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Islamophobia.[161] In the 2005 Channel 4 documentary *Operation Muslim Vote*, an MPACUK spokesperson was seen referring to Muslims who supported Labour as "traitors" and chastising a Muslim Labour councillor for being "more Labour than Muslim", implying that a Muslim citizen's religious identity should be central to his or her voting patterns.[162]

Justification of Violence

MPACUK consistently stresses the role of foreign policy in radicalisation and, in the case of the attacker in the September 2017 Parsons Green train bombing, violent action *(see figures 3.55 and 3.56)*.[163]

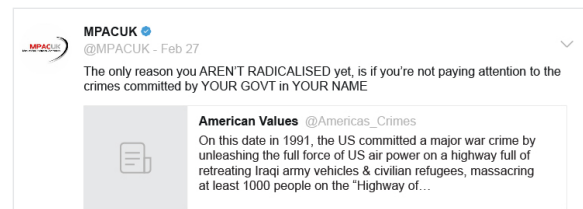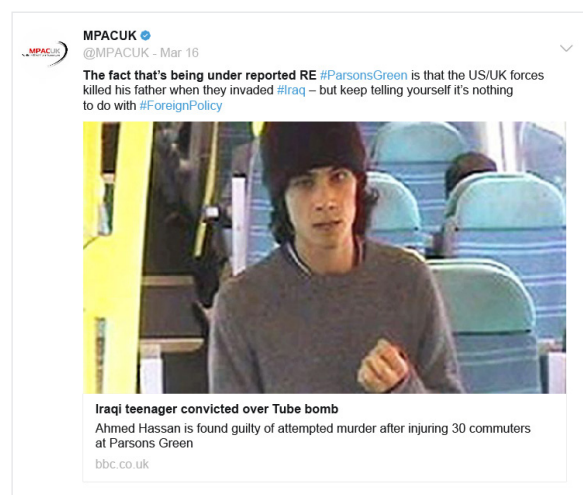FIG. 3.55   Tweet by MPACUK on Radicalisation

FIG. 3.56   Tweet by MPACUK on the Parsons Green Attacker

These recent messages are consistent with MPACUK's past statements. After the murder of Lee Rigby by Islamist extremists in 2013, MPACUK took to social media to say that until the British government "stops its violence in the #Muslim world, their murders will create more murderers".[164] A spokesperson for the group also spoke on Sky News about the attack and emphasised that "this is directly linked to foreign policy".[165]

OVERLAPS WITH AL-MUHAJIROUN

Analysis of social media and historical statements found a significant degree of overlap between the public messaging of MPACUK and that of al-Muhajiroun *(see table 3.57)*.

TABLE 3.57   Narrative Overlaps Between MPACUK and al-Muhajiroun

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
MPACUK	◕	◕	◕	◕	◑	◔
Al-Muhajiroun	●	●	●	●	●	●

Muslim Engagement and Development

Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) describes itself as an advocacy organisation focused on encouraging Muslims to be more active in British media and politics. MEND was founded in 2010 under the name of iEngage, which later evolved into MEND. iEngage and MEND have courted controversy due to statements by their former leadership, including some that were considered anti-Semitic, but the group has since undergone organisational changes.[166] MEND seeks to build relationships with MPs and local government in its advocacy efforts.

REACH AND INFLUENCE

MEND claims to have been the main driver behind the recognition in October 2015 of anti-Muslim hate as a separate category of hate crime.[167] MEND has published reports on Islamophobia and other matters related to the Muslim community and actively engages policymakers at the national and local levels. It launched a report on the definition of Islamophobia in 2018, which was submitted to the UK Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims.[168]

MEND has around 58,000 followers on Facebook and 15,000 on Twitter. MEND's videos on its YouTube channel, which has around 750 subscribers, have been viewed more than 200,000 times. The organisation currently lists 19 employees on its website.

PUBLIC MESSAGING

MEND's public messaging via social media and press releases differed in tone from that of the other four groups. Some of the topics MEND brought up regularly were similar to those emphasised by the others, such as anti-Muslim discrimination and government counter-extremism policies. However, MEND's worldview and narrative focus on these topics could largely be classified as closer to the mainstream, rather than having significant overlap with the worldview of an extremist organisation like al-Muhajiroun *(see figure 3.58)*. Analysis showed that MEND promoted engagement with authorities to tackle these issues, in contrast to the other groups, which mainly sought to delegitimise or reject UK authorities and present incidents of anti-Muslim hatred as part of a global conspiracy.

Victimisation

A substantial amount of MEND's social-media content is dedicated to raising awareness about anti-Muslim discrimination. However, the language MEND uses does not actively promote an alarmist or conspiratorial view of Muslim victimhood. MEND's tweets and press releases over the period studied generally promoted engagement with authorities to work on issues such as anti-Muslim hatred *(see figure 3.59)*.[169]

FIG. 3.59   Tweet by MEND on Councillors and Police Officers

MEND Community
@mendcommunity · Mar 27

At the meeting were local councillors and police officers

Around 200 members of the local community attended and were able to ask the authorities about hate crime in the area and voice their concerns

This is what MEND is all about

The BBC and ITV covered our event #Dispatches

MEND suggested in several tweets that "right-wing extremism isn't taken seriously in this country" and regularly blames the media for promoting Islamophobia *(see figures 3.60 and 3.61)*.[170]

FIG. 3.60   Tweet by MEND on Darren Osborne

MEND Community
@mendcommunity · Jan 24

Osborne's partner said that he had become a "ticking time bomb" and he told people in a pub he was going to "kill all the Muslims"

Why wasn't he reported?

It's almost as if right-wing extremism isn't taken seriously in this country

#DarrenOsborne

Finsbury Park attacker 'brainwashed' by right-wing…
New, chilling details have emerged regarding the Finsbury Park attack of 19 June 2017, as the trial of Darren Osborne at Woolwich crown court unveils the
mend.org.uk

FIG. 3.58   Prevalence of the Six Key Themes in MEND's Tweets and Press Releases

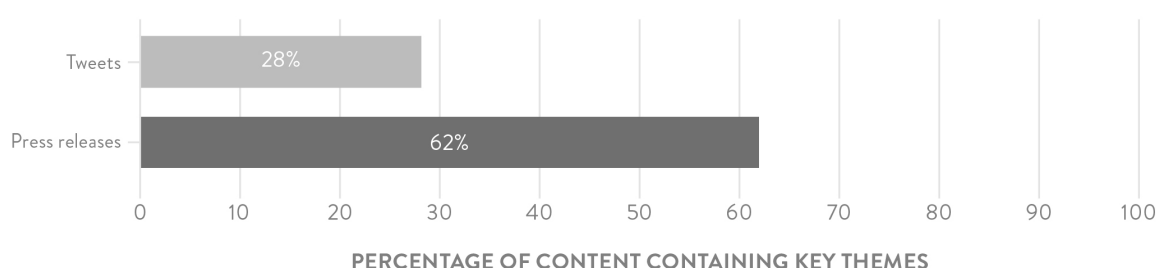|	
Tweets	28%
Press releases	62%

PERCENTAGE OF CONTENT CONTAINING KEY THEMES

Tweet by MEND on the Media and Islamophobia

In 2014, MEND stressed that Muslims in the UK feel increasingly vulnerable, stating, "Events over the last year have been harrowing in the extreme. British Muslims have experienced a sense of vulnerability that in some ways eclipsed the fears experienced in the days and years following 9/11 and 7/7."[171]

'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

MEND has strongly criticised the appointment of Sara Khan as the lead commissioner for countering extremism, arguing that she is not independent from the UK government and has no credibility with the Muslim community. In particular, MEND has accused Khan of not being transparent about receiving funding from the UK Home Office, presumably for her work at Inspire, the counter-extremism organisation that Khan co-founded *(see figure 3.62)*.[172]

Tweet by MEND on Sara Khan

Meanwhile, MEND presents itself and groups such as CAGE as more "legitimate" organisations, often highlighting their "grassroots support" *(see figures 3.63 and 3.64)*.[173]

Tweet by MEND on CAGE

Tweet by MEND on Its Grass-Roots Support

MEND has spoken out publicly against Tell MAMA, including in 2014, when its founder stated,

We don't want the government to fob us off with some phony thing called Tell MAMA, which has got a pro-Zionist pretty much heading it, or in a very senior capacity, and is making all sorts of comments we might not agree with when it comes to homosexuality, to be recording Islamophobia.[174]

Islam vs. the West

This theme was not prevalent in the messages studied. Outside the sample of tweets and press releases, MEND has spoken out against this narrative that pits Islam and the West against each other, criticising in particular al-Muhajiroun for "[engaging] in this sort of deluded juxtaposition of a faith identity and national identity as though the two were antithetical and uncomfortable bedfellows".[175]

MEND promotes the view that British society is founded on "tolerance", although it argues against a hierarchy of values and states that minority communities "should not be forced to provide evidence quantifying how 'British' they are and how 'valuable' they are to the country".[176]

Delegitimising the Government

MEND does not question the fundamental legitimacy of the British government and state institutions, but rather seeks active engagement with them. MEND is very critical of UK counter-

extremism policy, however. At times its language on these issues implies the government is unfairly targeting Muslims or that there is a "climate of anti-Muslim paranoia" *(see figures 3.65 and 3.66)*.[177]

Tweet by MEND on Prevent

Tweet by MEND on Prevent Referrals
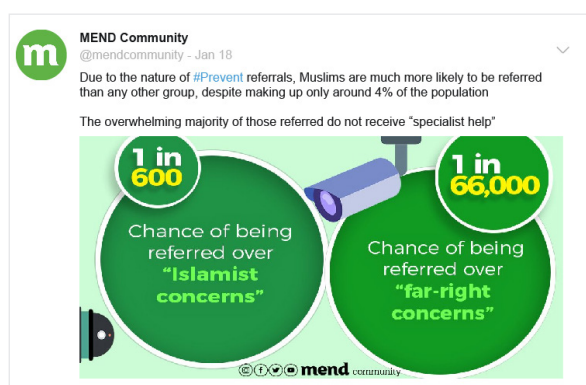
In 2015, MEND published a Muslim manifesto with policy pledges, including one focused on curbing the "encroachment of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties".[178]

The Centrality of Islam in Politics

MEND does not position Islam as playing a central role in politics. In the studied sample of tweets, MEND emphasised the importance of the Muslim vote in influencing elections, stating that its goal is to increase Muslim and minority voting rates *(see figures 3.67 and 3.68)*.[179]

Tweet by MEND on Election Manifestos

Tweet by MEND on Muslim Influence on Elections

MEND publishes "Muslim Manifestos", in which it reviews the key issues that affect Muslim communities and the percentage of Muslims in the population of each UK parliamentary constituency.[180]

Justification of Violence

This theme was not prevalent in the sample of published content. In past statements, MEND has supported the argument that foreign policy plays a primary role in radicalisation:

Our invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter widely accepted to be illegal given the absence of UN resolution, have contributed to the radicalization of Muslims.[181]

In 2010, MEND criticised the decision to ban Islam4UK, an offshoot of al-Muhajiroun, suggesting that the "abuse of freedom of speech" did not constitute sufficient grounds to ban it.[182] These two statements were made when MEND was under different leadership, which could be a factor in the difference between its past and present messaging, and is taken into account in the assessment below.

OVERLAPS WITH AL-MUHAJIROUN

MEND had by far the least narrative overlap with al-Muhajiroun, and its messaging aligns more closely with the mainstream end of the spectrum than that of the other groups *(see table 3.69)*. MEND's messaging avoided the conspiratorial and inflammatory language used by the other groups. The tone of MEND's current public messaging is markedly different from some of its historical statements, which could be the result of organisational changes or a concerted effort to change the tone of its public content.

TABLE 3.69   Narrative Overlaps Between MEND and al-Muhajiroun

	Victimisation	'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim	Islam vs. the West	Delegitimising the Government	The Centrality of Islam in Politics	Justification of Violence
MEND	◐	◐	◕	◕	◕	◔
Al-Muhajiroun	●	●	●	●	●	●

Conclusion

Analysis of five groups accused by UK authorities of holding divisive or extreme views yielded a troubling portrait of a particular type of radical activism taking place in Britain. Four of the five groups were relatively open and unapologetic in sharing a worldview that portrays Muslims, both in the UK and around the world, largely as victims who are in a constant struggle against Western oppression. One group, MEND, was less engaged in advancing these kinds of narratives in its recent public content, but it has a history of making some divisive statements.[183]

All the groups shared some degree of narrative overlap with the proscribed extremist organisation al-Muhajiroun, although this varied significantly across the groups and the themes on which they converged. Only one group, Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain, came close to sharing al-Muhajiroun's stance on violence. The distinction between views that are deeply divisive and ones that are clearly extremist is important, yet it is also necessary to recognise how divisive views can provide the ideological basis on which extreme ideas are built. There is no inevitable conveyor belt from divisive activism to nonviolent and then violent extremism, but there is undoubtedly a relationship between these concepts. This highlights the need to proactively challenge ideas that sow mistrust and tension between communities.

The messaging of most of these groups is worrying because it conveys a deep and almost insurmountable divide between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK, while also dividing Muslims into 'good' and 'bad' camps. It paints the government as an opponent of Muslim communities rather than a democratic institution that all citizens, including Muslims, should engage with and challenge when necessary. The combined impact of such narratives seems likely to have an alienating effect on the communities in question, contributing to feelings of separation and division from other parts of society. One need only look at political and social upheaval in the West today to see the consequences of societies becoming increasingly divided along identity lines.

This report has not sought to determine the exact level of influence these groups or their narratives have over Muslim communities, as that is beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, there are signs that these groups have enough traction to be of concern. Together they have more than half a million followers on Facebook and Twitter, which is an impressive figure for activist groups of this kind. Several of the groups are active in organising events across the UK, some of which draw significant crowds. In addition, these groups are visible on prominent online media platforms that target British Muslim audiences, such as 5Pillars and Islam21c (which have more than half a million Facebook followers combined). These two sites have featured more than 500 articles highlighting the views and activities of these five groups over the past five years, almost exclusively in a positive fashion.

Furthermore, some of the key narratives of these groups—such as pointing to Western foreign policy as the primary cause of, or even justification for, radicalisation and referring to government policies on extremism as being indicative of a security state— are increasingly prominent in the broader political discourse. While those concepts are not exclusive to these groups, their growing prevalence demonstrates that these groups and their ideological allies are having an impact on the public debate.

Confronting and challenging divisive ideas can seem a nebulous task for political leaders. Perhaps this is why they often appear to avoid doing so. Former UK Prime Minister David Cameron shared a grand vision of tackling the ideological roots of extremism—

both Islamist and far right—in a 2015 address in Birmingham. Yet that vision and the initiatives that were to accompany it, including a renewed focus on engaging with affected communities, seem to have fallen largely by the wayside amid a myriad of other political challenges. Given the turbulence of these political times and the signs that extreme views of many kinds are on the rise, leaders must focus now on addressing these worrying trends before they develop into a greater threat to social cohesion in Britain.

Appendices

Methodology

This report examines the narratives of Muslim activist groups that UK authorities have accused of holding divisive or extreme views. To identify the groups to include in the study, we identified UK-based activist groups with a Muslim identity that:

- have faced one or more accusations of holding or advancing divisive or extreme views from UK authorities including government officials, parliamentary bodies, MPs or law-enforcement figures;
- are not proscribed;
- maintain at least a modest public following, as measured by more than 10,000 followers on at least one social-media platform;
- are not umbrella organisations encompassing multiple member groups, for example the Muslim Council of Britain;
- are not fundraising-focused charities;
- are not single-issue advocacy groups; and
- are currently active in public engagement, as measured by the consistent use of a social-media account between January and March 2018.

Applying these criteria, we identified the following groups (with examples of UK authorities that have accused them of holding problematic views):

- CAGE: accused by Theresa May, when she was UK home secretary, of attempting to "excuse the barbarism shown by those operating in the name of [ISIS]";[184]
- Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain (HT): faced possible proscription for holding extreme views that—some argued—served as "glorification" of terrorism;[185]
- Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC): identified during a debate in parliament as condoning the presence of Hizbullah flags at its Al-Quds Day event in 2017;[186]
- Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND): accused of employing "extremist rhetoric" in a major address on extremism by Mark Rowley, who was at the time the UK's national lead for counter-terrorism policing;[187] and
- Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK (MPACUK): accused during a debate in parliament of holding anti-Semitic views.[188]

To develop a standard against which to assess the messaging of the five groups, we carried out a comprehensive study of the public messaging of the proscribed Islamist extremist organisation al-Muhajiroun. Al-Muhajiroun serves as a useful point of comparison because it is the most prominent Islamist extremist organisation to have emerged in the UK and spent many years under scrutiny for its views while portraying itself as a legitimate advocate for British Muslim communities. We did not set out to demonstrate similarities between the messaging of these groups and that of al-Muhajiroun, but rather to use the group's themes and narratives as an objective benchmark against which to make an assessment.

The conclusions reached in this report regarding the levels of overlap that the messaging of these groups has with that of al-Muhajiroun are based on analysis of hundreds of pieces of public messaging for each group as well as the researchers' judgements. Therefore, these conclusions are based in part on opinion and could be subject to interpretation.

In studying over 50 interviews, public statements, speeches and lectures by al-Muhajiroun's two most prominent leaders, Omar Bakri Muhammad and Anjem Choudary, we identified six key themes that underpin the group's worldview *(see table 4.1)*.

Using al-Muhajiroun's narratives on each of the six key themes as a benchmark of extreme views, we developed a catalogue of the five non-proscribed activist groups' public messaging to identify how, if at all, those groups approach these six concepts.

TABLE 4.1 The Six Key Themes and Narratives in al-Muhajiroun's Worldview

Theme	Al-Muhajiroun's Narrative
Victimisation	Believes there is a coordinated global conspiracy against Muslims
'Good' Muslim vs. 'bad' Muslim	Classifies all Muslims who do not share the group's views as apostates
Islam vs. the West	Perceives an inherent, unresolvable conflict between Islam and the West
Delegitimising the government	Rejects the Western democratic model and advocates complete overhaul of system
The centrality of Islam in politics	Advocates a global Islamic caliphate
Justification of violence	Directly encourages use of violence

We adopted a three-part methodology to analyse the public messaging of the five groups, including:

- preliminary research to assess whether the groups had engaged with these themes historically;
- analysing and coding a random sample of the groups' Twitter activity between January and March 2018; and
- analysing and coding a sample of the groups' press releases from the same three-month period.

We analysed all press releases issued by each group and all tweets published by each group's primary Twitter account between January and March 2018. This amounted to a total of 1,200 pieces of public messaging for the five groups. We supplemented this time-limited sample with selected statements by the groups or their leaders in the past to provide some historical context and background to the analysis.

This three-pronged approach was designed with the limitations of each individual method in mind:

- The background research provided a useful overview of the groups' past activities but may not have reflected more recent developments in their positions.
- The Twitter activity gave us a large, recent sample with a bulk of data to analyse, but was limited in length of content because of the maximum number of characters in tweets.

- The press releases had more substantive content that came directly from the groups but was smaller in volume.

We coded these messages to identify what overlaps, if any, the groups had with the six key theme in al-Muhajiroun's public messaging. This comparison enabled us to assess where each group's positions on the six identified themes fell on a spectrum from mainstream to extreme views.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

One of the primary limitations of this research is that it has not analysed all the UK-based Muslim activist organisations that have faced allegations of holding divisive or extreme views. Our preliminary list of groups that could fall into this category consisted of 36 highly varied organisations. These included groups that had faced accusations in the media or from research organisations, in addition to those identified by UK authorities. We chose to limit our study to those groups that had been the subject of concern for authorities including government officials, law-enforcement figures and members of parliament as we felt these allegations held more weight than those made by unofficial sources.

We chose not to look at any charities focused primarily on fundraising activities because these organisations generally do not have a significant body of public statements on a range of policy issues. We considered only groups that had at least a modest

social-media following and were consistent in sharing messages online from January to March 2018 as we believed it was more relevant to study groups that are relatively active in public engagement.

We did not assess umbrella organisations, some of which encompass hundreds of affiliate members across the country. We found it methodologically questionable to use particular statements to characterise such organisations as a whole given the breadth and diversity of their respective member organisations.

Our analysis of the messaging of the five identified activist groups draws only on publicly available content. It was beyond the scope of this research, for example, to attend events organised by these groups to determine whether their messaging differs significantly in a less controlled setting. Nonetheless, we believe that the public messaging we have analysed provides a sufficient basis to draw broad conclusions about the core narratives these groups advance.

We have attempted to take into consideration that the messaging of these groups may have evolved over time, for instance in response to prior criticisms received in the media and elsewhere. The bulk of the content we analysed is from a recent time period (early 2018) as we wanted to focus on how these groups are currently engaging on key issues. However, we also included historical examples of public messaging to provide broader context on how the groups have positioned themselves over time.

This research does not seek to gauge with any specificity the levels of influence of the five activist groups studied or the broadly shared narratives that emerged from our analysis of their messaging. It is challenging to measure this reach accurately due to factors such as the informal membership and support networks they maintain. We believe there is some evidence to indicate that these groups and their messages are prominent enough to be of concern to policymakers. A detailed analysis of how much traction these groups' narratives have among their target audiences would be an important topic for further research.

Finally, although the assessments presented in this report of the levels of overlap between the messaging of these groups and that of al-Muhajiroun are based on analysis of hundreds of pieces of public messaging for each group, they also reflect the researchers' judgements. Therefore, any conclusions presented are based in part on opinion and could be subject to interpretation.

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The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change aims to help make globalisation work for the many, not the few. We do this by helping countries, their people and their governments address some of the most difficult challenges in the world today.

We work to promote co-existence and counter extremism by tackling the ideology behind extremist violence, not just the violence itself. We work with governments and leaders of fragile, developing and emerging states to enhance their effectiveness. We work to support increased stability and understanding in the Middle East. And we work to revitalise the centre ground of politics and equip today's leaders to combat the rise of false populism.

Notes

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There is a concern among policymakers and law enforcement in the UK that nonviolent activist groups are perpetuating divisive ideas. At a minimum these ideas threaten social cohesion; at worst they may be contributing to the cause of extremists. Groups facing accusations of nonviolent extremism naturally reject these assertions, arguing that the UK government is seeking to undermine their advocacy of legitimate causes and threatening free speech.

This report focuses on five Muslim activist groups that UK authorities have criticised for promoting problematic or extreme views, although they do not advocate violence: CAGE, Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK, and Muslim Engagement and Development.

The report assesses whether there is any substance to such accusations by analysing the public messages of these groups and comparing them against a baseline of extremist messaging. It finds that most of the groups analysed promote a divisive view of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK.