



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Countering extremism, HC 428

Tuesday 27 October 2015

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Victoria Atkins, James Berry, Nusrat Ghani, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Tim Loughton, Stuart C. McDonald, Naz Shah, Mr Chuka Umunna, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 1 – 119

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Harun Rashid Khan**, Deputy Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain, **Miqdaad Versi**, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain, and **Ameena Blake**, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Can I call the Committee to order and refer all those present to the Register of Members' Interests, where the interests of members of this Committee are noted? This is the first session of the Committee on our new inquiry into the counter narrative and counter extremism. Could I welcome Mr Khan, Mr Versi and Ms Blake to give evidence on behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain? Mr Khan, can you start by telling us, the MCB is obviously very well known in the community but how many organisations are affiliated to it?

Harun Rashid Khan: Thank you, Mr Chairman, for inviting us. We have around 500 mosques, Islamic organisations and Islamic schools as affiliates with the MCB across the country.

Q2 Chair: How many members would regularly attend a meeting of the MCB committee?

Harun Rashid Khan: The way MCB is structured, at the moment we have a national council that has 70 members who meet on a quarterly basis.

Q3 Chair: Would you regard yourself as the voice of the Muslim community in Britain or the umbrella body representing the views of the Muslim community? Because I have, for example, 36 mosques in my constituency, and each would claim to be the voice of the Muslim community. How would you describe yourselves?

Harun Rashid Khan: We have always described ourselves, Mr Chairman, as the representative of our affiliates. We never claim to represent all Muslims in Britain.

Muslims in Britain, as you very much know, are quite diverse, made of many different communities and ethnicities, so we have always represented our affiliates' views. Now the perception may be somewhat different, based on a survey carried out by BBC Radio 4 earlier this year, where they surveyed 1,000 Muslims up and down the country. They were asked a question: do you feel the MCB represents your views? Some 55% of people said they felt MCB represented their views.

Q4 Chair: Good—there is nothing like having the support of Radio 4 to boost up your credibility. I am not sure what would happen if we put our names out there.

Now, you have been very critical of the Government, very critical, and you have said that the Prevent strategy has really failed—these are your words—and many young Muslims are not interested in engaging with anything to do with Prevent. Why do you think the Government's strategy has failed?

Harun Rashid Khan: Mr Chairman, it has been known for a number of years, and I think your Select Committee has covered some of these areas around the Prevent strategy, and more academic research, as well, around the strategy not working. Our perception is mostly from our soundings of community members across various mosques and centres that we visit, hearing from young people how they view the activities of Prevent and how it is delivered on the ground. For example, Prevent officers visiting institutions when the speaker is listed to come and talk at a mosque. I know one particular case in my borough where a speaker was listed and they were contacted by the local Prevent officer saying, "You shouldn't really have this speaker" and so on, without any real evidence provided. But I can give a bit more. Maybe I can hand to my colleague to answer—

Q5 Chair: I was going to ask Mr Versi: you go further than Mr Khan in talking about a failure of Prevent. You say that there is an alienation of the organisation—you speak on behalf of the organisation—that the new strategy risks alienating the very people needed to confront al-Qaida and Daesh. In other words, the community itself. That is a very serious charge from an organisation that is supposed to be the umbrella organisation for British Muslims.

Miqdaad Versi: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I think that Muslim communities across the UK seem to be saying very similar things. We have many mosques, for example, who when they do community cohesion events, such as interfaith events, have counter-terrorism police coming to them, and that is part of the Prevent strategy. We have situations with young people at schools, especially when it comes to the Prevent duty being made the statutory duty in education, we have many people within schools having very unfair and discriminatory practices against them. There are a lot of case studies that we provided to David Anderson, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, and we can share some of those right now if they are of interest. For example, a young teacher who is teaching physics and a Muslim young child asked about nuclear fission. He was asked to be referred to the counter-terrorism team. I can give you many more examples if you would like to go into that further.

Q6 Chair: We will go into it further later on in the evidence session, but you are telling us that the decision of the British Government is making matters worse?

Miqdaad Versi: I am saying that what we are being told by our affiliates—as well as other stakeholders across the country—is very similar: that is that there is a risk that it is making it worse. The people right now, across the country, are very worried in ways that I have not seen previously. When there is that view that is coming from our affiliates, from young people, from all the people within the community, it is of course worrying and something that is important to share. We all want to keep our nation safe and if something is coming from the Government that might have or has a risk of doing something that is different, it is important to raise that.

Q7 Chair: Yes. Aameena Blake, Baroness Warsi—who will be giving evidence later—talked about the dinner table test and that Islamophobia had now become acceptable. Is that your view?

Aameena Blake: I think on some levels it is becoming acceptable, from what we have seen recently in the media with the attacks on Muslim individuals, for example, on a bus last week. That was quite a nasty verbal attack on some Muslim ladies and it seems to be becoming much more inherent nowadays than perhaps it was 10, 15 years ago. I work a lot within the communities and I have done for many, many years now and I have seen Muslim ladies across the community, regardless of what background and nationality they are from, who are worried about going out. They are worried about people saying negative things to them in the street. They are worried about going into the town centre to do their shopping. This shows that there is, unfortunately, a rise in Islamophobia. We are trying to counter this by trying to educate people and create much more community cohesion between different communities at the moment, but unfortunately it is still going on.

Q8 Chair: Mr Khan, finally from me in this first set of questions, this could be the MCB's fault, couldn't it, because you fell out with the last Government? I think relations with Hazel Blears, who was the then Minister, were not perfect. You are now criticising this Government. Do you ever look to yourselves to see how you can do more to try to get Governments to trust the work of the MCB? Because what they might say is, "Actually, they are not working very hard on behalf of the community. It is not the Government failing or successive Governments, it is actually yourselves." Why do you think they have lost faith in you?

Harun Rashid Khan: Mr Chairman, if you look at our press releases, our comments in the media, yes, we are critical of some of the Government's approach but we also welcome some of the initiatives taken by Government. That is a fair position in a democratic state, as we are, understanding democracy and also the Government is elected by all of us, so it is not just the MCB. In a sense, to be independent and also to be fair to our community, we are not here to endorse everything the Government does. If we see something that is coming across as unfair, and the public are telling us that they are feeling as though some of these measures are very unfair towards them or biased towards a community, we need to convey that message.

Q9 Chair: Yes, I should have asked you this, Mr Versi: you have been quite critical of the media. You have just written in *The Guardian* about the fact that the media is to blame for this. Is that right?

Miqdaad Versi: The media plays a role. I don't think it is the sole cause of all of these issues. It is an important part of the way that the British public understand different issues and when there are certain things that happen in the media, and certain headlines that are being put, we think that those are things that are likely to be negative towards community cohesion rather than positive.

Q10 Chair: But you said it is time the media treated Muslims fairly.

Miqdaad Versi: That is a headline that was chosen by the subeditors of *The Guardian* rather than me.

Q11 Chair: What would have been your headline?

Harun Rashid Khan: Fairness not favours.

Miqdaad Versi: Fairness not favours. Yes. We released a document which says "fairness not favours" and I think that is the key element that we always talk about that, when it comes to the media, we want it to be accurate, we want it to be fair, and we want it to be something that can reflect the reality of what is going on on the ground. If that results in an increase in bigotry against Muslims that is clearly not something that we think is a good thing for our society.

Q12 Mr David Winnick: Do you think there is any comparison with the Irish community? At a time when terrorism was taking place, we know the overwhelming majority of Irish people loathed terrorism as, indeed, does the Muslim community in this country; up and down they are loathing of terrorism, and the fact that they could be victims like the rest of us is well known. But at the time there was suspicion of many Irish people, totally innocent, prejudiced because of what was happening in Northern Ireland and particularly on the mainland. Do you think there is a comparison with the Muslim community as a result of murderous psychopaths carrying out acts or trying to do so?

Chair: Mr Khan?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes. Broadly yes, very much so, I think there is a lot of correlation around communities and the perceptions. Obviously I was a lot younger at the time, mainly during the peak period of the conflict and it was very much covered in the media. In today's day and age it does very much feel like we are being watched, you know as a community. A lot of the terminology that has been used around being spied on and so on or being reported on, but I will let Miqdaad elaborate a bit more

Chair: Mr Versi?

Miqdaad Versi: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. We have spoken to many human rights groups that worked within Northern Ireland, including the British Irish Rights Watch. I spoke to the director of the British Irish Rights Watch about this issue directly—the former director who was in charge from 1995 to 2012, Jane Winter. She and two other people, who I spoke to, experts on Northern Ireland, are saying the same thing. That there are significant parallels and, at the minimum, we should learn the lessons that happened from Northern Ireland. There are many lessons that they themselves have

submitted to different committees, including the International Commission of Jurists, the ICJ report, which show that there are parallels that need to be understood.

This ICJ report, they went to 15 different countries across the world and they asked them, “What is going on with terrorism? What are the key issues that matter?” and in each one of these countries the Government was saying, “This is an exceptional situation. We need to deal with it by using exceptional measures in every single case”. The outcome from that report is that there are lessons and parallels across all of these different conflicts where, if communities are not engaged with and policies are too strong against those communities without them being appropriately engaged, it is likely to be counterproductive. That is what the report is saying and that seems to be what we hear from the ground as well.

Q13 Mr David Winnick: Do you think that the balance that needs to be struck is between the need to ensure that Britain is safe, and that includes everyone regardless of what religion or no religion or where their background comes from, from terrorism—and 7/7 is hardly forgotten—and the need not to alienate people because they happen to be Muslims? Do you think the balance is somewhat out of kilter at the moment?

Harun Rashid Khan: Just to clarify, Mr Chairman, going back to your earlier question, I didn’t cover on that. MCB has on the record been very clear about standing up against terrorism and extremism. There is no doubt that our country needs to be kept safe, and that has never been a question of ours. We are not challenging that area of work. Police have a job to do. Counter-terrorism have a job to do and so on. But in terms of your question, yes, we feel that there is an imbalance in terms of the approach, so I think it is about the impact on communities is what we need to bottom out. What kind of impact is this approach having on our communities? I say “communities” because it is not only impacting Muslim communities: the messages and the rhetoric are also impacting wider communities in the way people perceive Muslims.

Q14 Mr David Winnick: Yes. My last question is this: you have recognised that it is the duty of Government and the police and the security forces to keep this country as safe as possible from an ongoing and continuing terrorist attacks, but how far do you feel that people could be alienated by the wrong approach—people who otherwise would not feel alienated would do so if the policies continue along what you have been describing, a feeling that, “Just because we happen to be Muslims we are being victimised or a watch is being kept on us simply because we’re Muslims”?

Harun Rashid Khan: That is the impression that is portrayed a lot among the youth. You will see a lot of that on social media, mainly on Twitter, some on Facebook. You will see lots of young people commenting about some of the measures that have been taken against Muslims. There are a number of factors. Sometimes they will respond to international conflicts. Sometimes they will respond to what is going on in the UK. We very much live in a very active media environment now, where lots of people are on social media, and we know that social media has played a big factor in terms of extremism as well and people going abroad, so all of these have played in. Some elements have taken it a step further and some elements are building up their tensions internally and anger is building up in terms of the way they respond.

Q15 Tim Loughton: The MCB, I gather, are organising a special conference with grassroots Muslim community groups and leaders to facilitate a response to the problems of terrorism. Is that right? What brought this about and what is the intention? What are you going to get out of it?

Miqdaad Versi: For a long time we have been looking at these issues and trying to find out how do we best articulate the views of the community, understand what the community is thinking in a more measured way, in a way that balances the different concerns that are there in the community, and we have done so through different workshops and round tables across the country already. We have already talked to a significant number of people on this issue but we thought a very effective way of doing this would be to start a national conversation on this issue, to focus specifically on: what measures can we take to tackle some of the issues that we recognise are problems within society? Not from a perspective of the Government is saying that this is a Muslim problem but from a situation where we as communities see problems and are worried ourselves.

When a young person leaves a family that devastates that family as well as everybody else. So we as a community wanted to come up with our way of thinking and our ways to try to tackle this. Therefore, we have our national conference that will start in London but we have conferences planned across the country over the next few months, which will then culminate in some sort of report or some sort of way of putting it all together.

Q16 Tim Loughton: This is not just to deal with extremism from supposed Muslim groups; this is to deal with extremism and terrorism beyond?

Miqdaad Versi: No, it is focused on what we as Muslim communities can do. What do we think are the concerns within our community when it comes to extremism, when it comes to people leaving to go to Syria, what are those concerns? How do we best, in our communities, deal with these things in a way that is effective and has the buy in from communities.

Q17 Tim Loughton: Was this conference borne out of frustration and perhaps resentment for the Government's new strategy, or was it simply because this is a problem that you see that you need to be quite rightly absolutely a part of at every level? What exactly was the thinking behind it?

Miqdaad Versi: We had started thinking about this about six to eight months ago but it happened to come out just a month after the Counter-Extremism Strategy came out. It is partially related to the fact that we don't feel there has been much engagement with Muslim communities and we wanted to ensure that that voice is heard. It is also the case that we are representatives of our affiliates and our affiliates want something to be done on this issue and we want to represent them in the most effective way as possible.

Q18 Tim Loughton: Can I just draw one parallel, another issue that is germane to another inquiry we have had, and that is on child sexual exploitation? A few years ago there were some high profile cases that involved members of the British Pakistani Muslim communities as it happened to be. There was some good stuff that went on with some individual mosques, in terms of engaging communities about: this is a crime. This is wrong. Did the Muslim Council do similar things there and are there parallels to engaging right at the

grassroots to challenge people that, “What is happening here is wrong. It is a crime and we all have a duty to stand up to it”?

Harun Rashid Khan: Very much so. I think this is where some of these incidences, whether it is child sexual exploitation or terrorism or extremism, to keep them separated—
[Interruption.]

Chair: Mr Khan, I am going to adjourn the Committee. We are going to vote and we will return as soon as we are quorate. Order, order, the Committee is adjourned.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chair: We are waiting for Tim Loughton who is just coming up the stairs. I think we will proceed. Naz Shah.

Q19 Naz Shah: I heard you when you said earlier that you are not representative of all Muslims and you represented affiliates. However, even while representing those affiliates, what do you feel are your shortcomings as an organisation and what might your failures be?

Chair: Mr Khan?

Harun Rashid Khan: I think pretty much, as a community organisation, we are not much different from many other voluntary self-funded, independent organisations, and many of the challenges that we face are around managing our resources and lack of them. So, as an organisation, MCB operates pretty much self-funded by its affiliates who are themselves self-funded. We don’t receive any funding or big grants and so on, so we do what we can within the limitations that we have with our capacity. So the three of us here, and including the leadership of MCB, no one is paid staff so we do everything in our own time and that is our commitment to the community. That is donating our time for a cause we feel needs to be served, not only for the community but I think for wider society as well.

Q20 Naz Shah: I was thinking more along the lines of: in terms of being representatives, why do I not see more women in your senior positions? Can you name your top five women in those positions?

Harun Rashid Khan: In MCB we brought in the constitutional change last term where all of the affiliates had to elect 20% of women within the national body of MCB. Every national affiliate within MCB out of the three delegates that they could put forward one had to be a woman. Those were the requirements we could set as a body. The responsibility then obviously went down to the organisations to send their representatives. Aameena is here, as a good example. We met those criteria within the national council of MCB of having 20% women.

It comes with its own challenges, I think, if I am honest, in terms of the role that women can play because of the number of other factors, including family life and everything else, the timing of the meetings, but we have proactively worked to try to bring in more women into MCB and to portray that as best as we could. I think it is very important in our society because there are a lot of misconceptions as well. Historically, that has been another area

of concern, just like other things that we hear about that are always focused on the Muslims—it is either extremism, terrorism or not enough women or the rights of women and so on. So our public role is to allay those fears.

Q21 Chair: Tim Loughton was putting a final question to you. Do you remember his question?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes, I do.

Chair: You do. Do you want to just give us the answer, as the bell was going?

Harun Rashid Khan: I will quickly touch on it, yes. Mr Loughton, thank you. We have spoken out against child sexual exploitation. It is very clear it is an abhorrent crime and we also promoted a Friday sermon that was sent out to 500 mosques explaining to people that this is a crime. I would like to say, however, that there is no correlation between Islam and that kind of abuse. It is very clear, it is abhorrent and sometimes we see—again, coming back to the media—that somehow there is a link between Muslim men and that kind of grooming. It is incorrect because, in my view, if those men were actually listening to what was being said in the mosque, if they actually attended the mosque, then they wouldn't be doing the crimes. They would be hated in the community if it was a known fact. So I think what hurts us more, as a society, is when they are labelled as “Muslim”. They are criminals and I think we should stick with criminals who commit these horrendous acts.

Chair: Thank you. This goes back to Mr Versi's arguments in *The Guardian* newspaper about the way this is covered. We will come to you in a minute, Mr McDonald, but first Mr Jayawardena.

Q22 Mr Ranil Jayawardena: Turning to a different area, the Government has set out its commitment to developing a new hate crime action plan. Could you outline, first, what the impact hate crimes have had on the Muslim community?

Miqdaad Versi: Thank you very much for the question. We have had a significant increase in hate crime that you have probably seen in the different figures, a 70% increase in the Metropolitan Police. Different third party organisations have also talked about the increases in hate crime and, anecdotally, we have evidence after evidence—more and more people talking about hate crime. Now, when it comes to the actual strategy, what we think should happen—

Mr Ranil Jayawardena: Well, no, the question: what impact has hate crime had on the Muslim community?

Miqdaad Versi: Many people across the country are now very concerned about Islamophobia. Our affiliates are telling us, people are telling us that it is a real concern over and above of course economy, health and social questions. Islamophobia is one of the key concerns, and the impact it has is they are worried, “What's happening? Why is this happening to our society?” This was something where we had a much more cohesive society now we are having something where bigotry is growing against our society.

Q23 Mr Ranil Jayawardena: You say that it has been recognised and so what does that lead to? Are there any consequences of that fear?

Miqdaad Versi: I think there are two areas. One is that there is a worry that that fear is leading to changes in behaviour for some people. I think sister Ameena mentioned that earlier, about the fact that some people are choosing to be a bit more careful about when they go out, for example. At the same time, there is also a worry that: why is this not being dealt with and are we different to other groups where more proactive work is being dealt with to try to tackle bigotry? That second area is one that I am a bit concerned about and, hopefully, through the work that is happening with the Government's hate crime action plan and the very welcome development the Government has put forward about recording hate crimes and disaggregating them by religion, hopefully that will help in that second category.

Q24 Mr Ranil Jayawardena: Do you think that hate crimes and the fear of hate crimes is leading directly to extremism?

Miqdaad Versi: It would be difficult to make such a jump without knowing that for sure and without investigating. I think it is very important to have an evidence base to justify this. At the minimum it is creating a fear that some Muslims have that they are not being treated equally, something that is very important to them, that their family, that their friends, that someone in their community has had this and nothing has been done to deal with it. I think that is definitely causing some sort of alienation or some sort of feeling of second class citizens. I don't think it is fair to say that necessarily this directly leads to extremism because I am not sure that that link is clear.

Q25 Mr Ranil Jayawardena: One final question then, if I may, Chairman. You referenced cohesive communities a moment ago in passing. The Counter-Extremism Strategy says that "it will seek to build more cohesive communities, tackling segregation and feelings of alienation that can help provide fertile ground for extremist messages to take root". What would you like to see the new hate crime action plan achieve to help deal with that?

Miqdaad Versi: The hate crime action plan is obviously something that we hopefully will be able to feed in to. I was at the APPG on Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism last week and we were discussing some of these issues directly. I think it is worth highlighting some of the outputs from that. One of the key things I found quite fascinating was the fantastic work that is being done on anti-Semitism. It is bigotry and a crime that needs to be tackled very, very seriously and very good work is being done on that. I think one of the key things that we would be hoping for is equality and hoping that the same thing could also be done against anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia in the same way. We would hope that that equality would lead to real fantastic work that, again, can help create that trust with communities and can help allay some of the fears that many people have.

Q26 Stuart C. McDonald: Mr Versi, earlier on you gave some examples of key studies that you had referred to and you also spoke a little bit about the potential risk of the Government strategy alienating people. A couple of criticisms have been made of the strategy and I wanted to have your comments on them. First of all, some critics say that lumping together cohesion strategies with counter-terrorism validates a view that, if you are taking part in community cohesion events—you gave the example of an interfaith event—you are

somehow going along with the view that the Muslim community is at risk of being targeted. Do you share that view? Is that fair criticism?

Miqdaad Versi: Yes, that is a criticism that we have had. I think it is very worrying. Many of these issues came up in Northern Ireland according to the discussions I have had with people there, and what we have to try to distinguish between is this idea of what may be seen as social conservative practices or sometimes more than that, extremism and terrorism. I think that they are different categories. They need to be dealt with differently and not be seen through the same light. Just because someone happens to have a very conservative perspective, which I may radically disagree with, does not necessarily mean they are likely to be a terrorist. We need to distinguish between the two and tackle them separately. When we do that, we are more likely to be able to succeed because I think that is going to be more effective and less counterproductive.

Q27 Stuart C. McDonald: A second criticism that has been made—and it might relate to some of the case studies that you spoke about—is the reliance that we now place on teachers, university lecturers and so on to take part and play a fairly significant role in the strategy. Does that cause dangers as well? These are not people who are trained to be counter-extremism officers; they are teachers and lecturers.

Ameena Blake: I think very much yes. I come from an educational leadership background, and the teachers that I have spoken to feel completely at sea when it comes to dealing with these types of issues. They don't feel qualified. They don't feel they have the knowledge. They don't have the training. They don't have the background. The issue itself is such a complex thing that I think it would be very unfair to put the onus on somebody who is an educator to almost become like a police officer and to be an expert in that particular area. It is quite dangerous because teachers are feeling, I think on all levels, like they are almost backed in to a corner, where the schools and school leaders are being told, "You need to be monitoring this" but they are not being told, "Okay, how do I monitor it? What am I looking out for? What are the signs of somebody who is being radicalised?"

If that training isn't given then things that are not a concern—for example, a child wanting to have a space to pray in, which is completely nothing to do with terrorism or extremism, as opposed to a child who is maybe speaking about things that are very disturbing and do need to be dealt with—can be seen as a problem. In this way, the teachers are feeling like they are almost targeting the wrong people. They don't know who to target and who not to target, who to support and who not to support.

Q28 Mr Chuka Umunna: I want to follow up on a couple of exchanges before I ask my question. One was the question that Naz Shah asked about the representation of women in the organisation. You didn't have the opportunity to answer: to name the five most senior women in the organisation. I think Mr Khan was asked that. Who are the five most senior women?

Harun Rashid Khan: Within the leadership we have Ameena Blake, we have Mrs Unaiza Malik, Sahar Al-Faifi, so that is within the top leadership of MCB and then—

Mr Chuka Umunna: That is three out of how many?

Harun Rashid Khan: Three out of seven. Then if you go to the whole fuller body, I wouldn't be able to name every single person but there are a few others, like Shaheda Dewan who is quite well known as well.

Chair: You can write to us with a list of names.

Harun Rashid Khan: It is on our website as well, so it is there.

Q29 Mr Chuka Umunna: Great. Mr Versi, I think you were pulling your punches a bit when you were being asked questions about the media. Perhaps I could ask you a more pointed question about the extent to which the stereotypes of the community are presented. Do you think the way in which a platform is given to self-appointed community leaders who purport to speak for the Muslim community and hold out-of-the-mainstream radical views is unhelpful or helpful when we are trying to deal with the possible radicalisation of our younger people? When they hear those views that are put forward as mainstream views and given a platform on programmes, like "Newsnight"—I am thinking of Anjem Choudary, *for example—do you think that helps or hinders the work that you are trying to do in preventing the radicalisation of our young people?*

Miqdaad Versi: We have to be very careful about the perception of what we do. If major broadcasting institutions or print media ever give the impression that one individual somehow represents a broader spectrum of the community, when that individual is very much outside the mainstream, that is a serious concern and always has been. We have been quite vocal on this issue. We have written to some of the broadcasters on issues related to this and there have been conferences recently to try to counter these issues, to deal with—

Q30 Mr Chuka Umunna: Is it fair to say that it hinders the work you are trying to do when people like Anjem Choudary are given a platform and allowed to present themselves as speaking for the community when, in truth, they have no mandate to claim they do so?

Miqdaad Versi: Yes, I do think that.

Chair: Aameena Blake, I think you indicated you wanted to speak.

Aameena Blake: Yes. I live in a community largely made up of non-Muslims and the feedback that I get from my friends, my neighbours in a non-Muslim community—we tend to focus on the radicalisation of the Muslim community but also the media rhetoric is terrifying for non-Muslim communities as well. Whereas originally they would have just seen Muslims as, "Okay, you're a different faith, maybe you're from a different background" now they don't know who is wearing a scarf in the street and who has got a beard in the street, they think, "Oh, well, maybe this person is going to attack me. Maybe they're a terrorist". So there is this mistrust that has built up over the last few years that is affecting the whole of British society. People don't know who to trust anymore.

A lot of excellent work is going on at grassroots. For example, we had the Visit My Mosque Day a few months ago, which was covered very well by the media. It was very well received and then straight after that when we get some very negative rhetoric. It almost destroys the work that we are trying to build up.

Q31 Mr Chuka Umunna: Do you find—and this is a question to all three of you—that when you are dealing with news gathering organisations, you are dealing with producers and journalists who are of the community and actually understand it or do you find you are dealing with generalists who don't have a deep knowledge of the community?

Chair: Mr Versi?

Miqdaad Versi: I think that there is a mixture. Many are journalists and they are not necessarily very specialist, but you do see more and more religion correspondents who try to understand more about what is going on in the media. At the media conference, for example, that I went to a couple of months ago, you recognised the religious illiteracy of many of the people who are involved, many of the journalists, who do not know necessarily the issues related to Islam. They are talking about it as experts and of course it would be helpful for that to change.

Chair: Thank you. Mr Khan?

Harun Rashid Khan: I agree with that view. It is not common. It is quite mixed in terms of the approach and basically what Miqdaad said is very true.

Chair: Ms Blake?

Ameena Blake: Yes, I agree as well. I think the messages given out as well need to be positive messages to reinforce the community cohesion, and this is where we maybe need to educate individuals within the media.

Chair: Thank you. Mr Umunna?

Q32 Mr Chuka Umunna: I will ask the question I was going to ask, which was: I know one of the criticisms that the MCB has had of the Government is which organisations they converse with to get a sense of where the community is. Some are seen to be representative of the community. Others aren't. For example, Quilliam, there is a lot of discussion as to whether they really represent the views of the community. You said in that regard that you feel that some key Muslim groups have been shunned or haven't been engaged with properly. Which are the key groups that you feel are shunned? Which groups are these that you don't feel—

Chair: Obviously apart from the Muslim Council of Britain.

Mr Chuka Umunna: Apart from your good selves.

Chair: Mr Khan, not a whole list but just quickly.

Harun Rashid Khan: I don't think we need to name people. I think it is probably in the public domain as well. Quilliam is a think tank, so I would not necessarily say they are a representative organisation, and that is what they qualify themselves as. From our perspective, there are organisations and mosques up and down the country who have not been engaged with. What we have been saying consistently is that, if the Government is going to be bringing out new laws and legislation, they should be talking to all the communities. So, just like any other public service that carries out a consultation exercise

where everybody has a chance to contribute, similar to Select Committees, everyone should have their say.

Q33 Mr David Winnick: Recognising that it is certainly inane, to say the least, for people to condemn Muslims in Britain because of ISIS or other terrorist murderous groups, do you accept that there is a danger that because of the situation in the Middle East, Israel in particular, there is a growth of anti-Semitism among a number of Muslims? Presumably you agree that it is equally inane to think that disagreeing, as I happen to, with Israel's policies is any excuse whatever for any form of anti-Jewish hatred.

Harun Rashid Khan: Mr Chairman, during the height of the Gaza conflict in summer 2014, there was a fear especially expressed by the Jewish community and the Board of Deputies around some growth in anti-Semitism. That led to us meeting with them and us coming out with a joint statement asking for calm within both communities. Protesting against these kind of actions by Israel, and vice versa, is something you can do but within peaceful means. There is no specific evidence to say that, specifically from the Muslim community, there has been a rise in anti-Semitism.

Q34 James Berry: The Muslim Council of Great Britain—you are not a pressure group, you are a leadership organisation, aren't you?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes, we are an umbrella organisation.

James Berry: Yes, and you provide leadership in the community.

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes.

Q35 James Berry: You show leadership, for instance, by issuing statements condemning acts of terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes.

James Berry: I always point people to that when they say the Muslim community isn't doing enough to condemn those acts; it is always on your website there straight away.

Harun Rashid Khan: Thank you.

James Berry: In that leadership role you do have a responsibility, don't you, to act with others, including Government, to create a counter-extremism narrative? So far that narrative has not been entirely successful from all the stakeholders. I accept you have criticism of what the Government is doing but what have you done that has not been successful and what do you think you could do to create a better counter-extremism narrative?

Chair: Aameena Blake.

Aameena Blake: We have done many different things at grassroots to try to engage communities within the process—not only the statements and the press releases that we have released but also the dialogue that we have within different communities is a very, very important method of trying to move forward. Sometimes communities don't engage as well, maybe because of the fact that they are voluntary organisations; they are busy

doing their own running around the centres and so on. So this is one of the challenges that we face, which is much improved now.

Harun Rashid Khan: Mr Loughton mentioned this conference, which we are organising in November to understand counter-terrorism and extremism and to come out with a follow on would be a narrative. Well, when you say “counter narrative” I think some of that has already been covered by many imams and scholars up and down the country, which is widely available on social media. Basically the majority of mosques and communities up and down the country have condemned ISIS and do not believe in this Islamic State, as they call it. It is very, very clear from our perspective and maybe that message isn’t going out wide enough and clear enough, as you said. If you help us promote it, it will be much more effective as well. We need more of that.

Q36 James Berry: You mentioned about the police being a bit heavy handed in dealing with so-called extremist speakers. Do you assist the police and the Home Office in identifying extremist speakers and identifying radical material online?

Harun Rashid Khan: Radical material online: we are not really resourced as such. If we were to be aware of anybody, even as an organisation or as an individual, breaking any law, we would have to report it as a crime. I think that is a duty on us, irrespective of which category it fits.

Q37 James Berry: Just to return to my question, do you assist the police and the Home Office in identifying extremist speakers first?

Harun Rashid Khan: When you say “the Home Office” could you just clarify? Obviously the Home Office isn’t the place where we report crime, so it would be the police.

Q38 Chair: Okay, do you assist the police in identifying extremist speakers?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes.

Q39 James Berry: Do you assist the police when you find and see radical material online? To be fair, an imam in one of our local mosques showed me. Do you, as he does, assist the police in identifying that material?

Harun Rashid Khan: Yes.

Q40 Chair: Thank you. Aameena Blake, you supported the idea of the Islamic scholar Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri that British Muslims should take part in a peace march to show that they don’t “quietly condone terrorism”, which was the suggestion that people said the Prime Minister was making. Why should people have to go on a march in order to show that they don’t quietly condone terrorism?

Aameena Blake: I think that it is very much part of British society that when we speak out, we do so in a peaceful manner. I have been Muslim for 23 years but, even before I was Muslim, my parents used to take me on various marches and so on. It is very important for not just the Muslim community but for the non-Muslim communities as well to have a voice in these areas. A peaceful march not only empowers people to be able to do this but also gives a message out to the wider community that this is how we all feel together as

the British community, so not just a Muslim thing a British voice saying, “This is not an okay thing”.

Q41 Chair: Mr Khan, finally, do you regret the fact that over the last 30 years the MCB has not been able to develop the kind of structure and the wherewithal to be like an organisation like the Board of British Jewish Deputies, where Government goes to it and it goes to Government? There is proper dialogue. What has gone wrong with you establishing that credibility because 30 years ago, certainly when I went into Parliament, there was no access to power? You now have Members of Parliament of the Muslim faith. You have people in the Cabinet of the Muslim faith. There is access to power for the Muslim community. You represent 500 organisations here. What can you do to be more credible as an organisation?

Harun Rashid Khan: First, the Jewish community I think, if I am correct, have been in the UK for around 200, 250 years and Muslims have pretty much been here maybe 50, 60 years, so we are in our infancy in a sense. I am a second generation. I think Miqdaad is as well and Aameena was born here.

Q42 Chair: But in terms of numbers, you are five times bigger than the Jewish community, aren't you?

Harun Rashid Khan: We are bigger but also much more diverse as well as a society, so—

Q43 Chair: I give that as an example. Do you ever sit there in your committee meetings and think, “Why are they not quaking in their boots because the Muslim Council for Britain has said something has gone wrong” or “something is to be supported”? Do you not think about where that credibility is lacking?

Harun Rashid Khan: That depends on the perception. You made a very good point that strengthens our view of how Government views us. If you remember at the child grooming conference where you said, “When MCB speaks the Government listens”. We took that seriously and that is the impression that we have—that even though it may seem to the outside world that the Government is not listening, we feel they are. We just need to cross that bridge. There are positive things happening. It will just take some time to build up the relationship and that is where we need to be really.

Chair: Thank you very much. Mr Khan, Mr Versi and Ms Blake, thank you very much for coming in. We will be in touch with you during the course of this inquiry. It is going to go on for six months, so we might well be in touch with you about the meetings we are having in Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and Manchester.

Harun Rashid Khan: Thank you.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Habibur Rahman**, Chairman, East London Mosque Trust, **Sufia Alam**, Women's Projects Officer, East London Mosque Trust, and **Salman Farsi**, Media Officer, East London Mosque Trust, gave evidence.

Q44 Chair: Thank you very much. I am sorry about the delay. We will try to ask our questions very quickly because we are making up time. There may be another vote at 5 o'clock, which colleagues will have to go to.

This is the largest mosque, Mr Rahman, in the whole of Europe. You have between 8,000 and 10,000 worshippers every Friday, 2 million people pass through your doors every single year, so if anyone wants to look at a community organisation within the Muslim community then it is the East London Mosque. Why is it that you are so critical of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy?

Habibur Rahman: Thank you, Mr Chairman; we appreciate this opportunity to contribute to these proceedings and this engagement. I am not sure we are that critical of the strategy. We are observant of the views and concerns that are raised within the community, so we are hearing the concerns from the community about how it is alienating and isolating the community and the fact that a strategy of this importance can be devised and brought about without that level of consultation, which—

Q45 Chair: Let us be clear: you are not critical of the strategy, you support the Government strategy. Some of the statements from Mr Farsi are quite critical of the way in which the strategy is proceeding, so you differ from the MCB who are very critical of the way in which—

Habibur Rahman: No, that is not what I was saying. As you say, we are a very large institution and a lot of people pass through our doors and they do make comments about this strategy and how it is affecting and impacting the Muslim community. So, in that respect, we are critical of the impact it is having on the community, as I have said, in terms of isolation and alienation and so on, and the fact that there has not been that level of engagement with the community. We are a bit surprised that the Government has not engaged an institution like ours, which could have made a very valuable contribution. So we are in line with—

Q46 Chair: So you are ready to be asked. Your concern is nobody has come to partner you, to ask you to try to find the solutions to these problems. You are there, you have been waiting and you have been willing but nobody has come. Is that the problem?

Habibur Rahman: Not only have we just been waiting and willing; we have been approaching, ourselves, the Government and we can say that there has been good interaction in the past. However, over the last two terms, perhaps, we have not had any engagement from the Government, despite our initiative, approach and invitation. Unfortunately, that has not been forthcoming.

Q47 Chair: In terms of the Prevent programme there is a £40 million budget. Do you think that has been adequately properly spent or would you have your views as to how it could be spent better?

Habibur Rahman: That would be a question we would like to ask and have answers to. This is a very significant amount of money from the public funds; the taxpayers are paying this amount, and we are not seeing any tangible outcomes from that. So we do believe that there can be better utilisation of such funds and better outcomes in terms of tackling

extremism and radicalisation. I can share with you that an institution likes ours has been working, even before the days of CONTEST and Prevent, in tackling extremism. It continues to do so but there is an awful lot of suspicion from the community of the approach, therefore not that engagement from the community and therefore not satisfaction in terms of how the money is being spent.

Q48 Chair: Mr Farsi, we are going to hear shortly from Baroness Warsi who, in some of her comments, and to quote directly from a Twitter comment, said that the Government was demonising British Muslims in some of the things that they were doing. Do you agree? That is a very strong statement. Do you agree with that?

Salman Farsi: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I do agree with that to an extent. Those are the sentiments from members of our congregation. Those are even sentiments that I personally would agree with. Sometimes I feel like, as a Muslim, I am being demonised in this country even though I have been born and brought up here.

Q49 Chair: By Government policy?

Salman Farsi: By Government policy, yes. It is scrutinising our communities and it is kind of driven by a sense of an irrational fear of Muslims. The lack of engagement, as we heard in the previous session, and as our chairman has said, is driving that.

Q50 Chair: Mr Farsi, you were involved in the BBC documentary “Welcome to the Mosque” where you opened the doors of the East London Mosque to the BBC to let them see what was going on in there. In particular I want to ask you one specific question that is of interest to some of us on the Committee, who took evidence from the three girls who went from Bethnal Green. You were involved in that, were you not? You were trying to track them down, you were trying to help the family. You specifically know about that case, is that right?

Salman Farsi: Yes, I was involved with the case. The families approached the mosque for help where they felt let down by the police and so on, so they turned to our institution. Communities often do turn to their local mosque for support.

Q51 Chair: What were they saying specifically about the fact that they had felt let down by the mainstream organisations, like the police and others?

Salman Farsi: In this country we hold the police and other agencies in very high esteem and when we turn to them for support we would expect a certain degree of support and help. I think in this particular case it was not so forthcoming. Something that struck me was one of the officers who was dealing with the case told the family not to listen to the legal counsel that they were receiving. So that was very surprising to me. In my interactions with the families they were very vulnerable and they needed a lot of support from all of us.

Q52 Chair: Mr Farsi, you are relatively young—to me anyway—so you are better connected to the Muslim youth who would go to the mosque and who would worship there and take part in activities. Have you done much work with those who either are trying to go and fight abroad or those who have come back, to try to work out why they go in the first

place? I say this because obviously we did not get to examine the girls who went, although we spoke to their parents. I met the two young men who tried to go from Brent and were then brought back from Istanbul to try to understand why they went. I know it is a big subject but what is the reason why these young people decide to leave the comfort of their homes? As the Prime Minister says, people who were born in this country who had everything that Britain has had to offer then decide to get on a plane, go to Istanbul and then go to Syria. Do you know why they do this?

Salman Farsi: I think it boils down to individual circumstances. We cannot put a finger on it and say it is because of this reason or because of this particular ideology. It boils down to a number of different reasons, socio-economic factors, upbringing. It might be they have experienced some forms of abuse. It might be Islamophobia and so on. All of these things are playing a part in this.

I have not had the chance to speak to the particular individuals that you have spoken to—

Q53 Chair: No, but have you come across anyone who has come back, who you can talk to?

Salman Farsi: Not as of yet.

Chair: In a Mosque of 10,000 people.

Salman Farsi: No. I have not come across anyone.

Chair: Thank you. Nusrat Ghani.

Q54 Nusrat Ghani: Mr Farsi, you mentioned that the families of the three girls came to you for some advice and support. Did they come for advice and support before the girls left the country?

Salman Farsi: No, they did not. They approached us after the girls were reported missing. At that point we assisted the police in launching their appeal on the Friday to our worshippers.

Q55 Nusrat Ghani: Did the girls regularly practise at the mosque?

Salman Farsi: We would not be able to tell you that. According to family members, they used to come to the mosque but we have no record of them ever coming.

Q56 Nusrat Ghani: Do the families practise at the mosque regularly?

Salman Farsi: I am not sure.

Q57 Nusrat Ghani: So even though you feel that as an institution you were the only organisation there to help them, you had very limited contact with the families to understand the situation.

Salman Farsi: No. I have had sufficient contact with the families but I think the family members would frequent their own kind of local mosques slightly more than ours. But they have been to our mosque, yes.

Q58 Nusrat Ghani: Do you have concerns there might be other people that occasionally or regularly attend your mosque that may have become radicalised or may have been groomed on the internet to travel overseas?

Salman Farsi: We do have those concerns and that is why my colleague, Sufia, she will be happy to tell you about some of the programmes that we have been doing with members of our congregation.

Q59 Nusrat Ghani: Do you have a ballpark figure; the amount of young people or women or adult men you might think that are at risk?

Salman Farsi: No, I don't.

Q60 Nusrat Ghani: You mentioned, Mr Rahman, you are ready and willing to support the Government in the work that they are trying to do. What gaps do you think there are in the Government strategy at the moment and how do you think you can fill those gaps?

Habibur Rahman: I think the issue is about trust and engagement of the community and not to make the community feel that somehow they are alien or they are not part and parcel of the society and they are not welcome. These are some of the messages or the feelings that the community feels.

So certainly in terms of working with the community, what the Government can do— and we have been very successfully working in our local community, as I said earlier. We have been tackling and countering extremists even before the days of CONTEST. The likes of Ed Husain, for example, he was an extremist. We had to physically throw him and his colleague, Mr Omar Bakri Muhammad, out of the mosque and we have not tolerated that kind of narrative in our mosque.

We have also been working very closely with the police even before then and trying to work in co-operation for the betterment of the community. In fact my colleague, Salman, and our director, Dilowar Khan, have just been commended by the police for the good work they have been doing with the police and also in tackling very difficult circumstances. You are aware of the Sharia patrol and the Christian patrol that happen to be in our area. They took the initiative to work with the police on that and they have been commended for that.

So I think to gain the trust of the community, to engage in the communities, and institutions like ours, and to look at ways of how we can, together, defeat this narrative, the extremist narrative, would be what I would suggest.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Rahman.

Nusrat Ghani: Can I ask one more question?

Chair: Yes, of course.

Q61 Nusrat Ghani: Having spoken to a number of other imams and mosques there was some concern that they feel that their mosques have been taken over by foreigners, by imams from Saudi Arabia, for example, and practising Wahabism, which was not the faith that was the majority faith here in the 1960s and 1970; it would have been Sunni or Shia

Islam. Do you feel that your mosques are susceptible or that the traditional Islamic faith of this country has been hijacked by Wahabism?

Habibur Rahman: We are very proud of the fact that we practise a balanced Islamic practice and the teaching that is portrayed from our mosque from the sermons and teaching that is given is a very balanced understanding of Islam. That is the reason why we cannot name you a few people from the 10,000 people who come every week that we think are susceptible. We believe that approach that we are doing, and the work that we are doing through the sermons—our Friday sermon is delivered in four languages, including the British sign language—that the message that is being given out covers these issues on a regular basis. We believe that part of the reason why young people are getting radicalised and are going into extremism is because of a lack of understanding of Islam. There are many evidences and reports that support that, including the MI5 report that shows that those who do not practise and do not understand are more vulnerable.

Chair: Thank you. Chuka Umunna has a supplementary and then we have Naz Shah.

Q62 Mr Chuka Umunna: Two questions. The question that was asked about the imams has been raised with me by local notable figures also within the British Muslim community generally. What percentage of your imams are from abroad as opposed to from the UK?

Habibur Rahman: In our institution?

Mr Chuka Umunna: Yes.

Habibur Rahman: We have several imams. Most of the imams that we have have been in this country for over 20 years.

Q63 Chair: Do you have a percentage? Mr Umunna wants to know what is the percentage of foreign imams to ones who are—

Mr Chuka Umunna: Let me phrase it another way. Are the majority of the imams from abroad in your mosque?

Habibur Rahman: So if I was to say I am from abroad, because I came to this country when I was 12. I have lived my entire life here.

Mr Chuka Umunna: Sure.

Habibur Rahman: So similarly our imams. All of our imams are from here but they were born abroad.

Q64 Mr Chuka Umunna: Okay. Because I think this also links to the issue about young people as well and I just want to ask a question following up from what—

Nusrat Ghani: If I could just—

Chair: Sorry, order, Ms Ghani. Can we just have a—

Mr Chuka Umunna: Just on that, you said in some senses, when you were talking about the young people, it was a question of understanding of the religion. What about the

understanding of the young people, particularly the second and third generation? Do you feel that there is a gap in understanding and a gap generally between the elders and second and third generations, like my generation?

Chair: Mr Farsi.

Salman Farsi: I think there is a communication barrier between the generations. We have been working to definitely address that. Certainly some of the sermons and the messaging that goes out from all our imams we make sure that it addresses the issues that they are dealing with. So in that sense, yes. We are also trying to recruit a new imam who is born and brought up here who can take on some of those challenges that young people have.

Chair: Thank you. Ms Ghani has one very quick supplementary.

Q65 Nusrat Ghani: Maybe just to help Mr Umunna, the question should be: how many of the imams were trained in this country, how many of the imams were trained overseas and, specifically, how many of your imams were trained in Saudi Arabia?

Chair: If you do not have those figures would you write to us with them?

Habibur Rahman: We can certainly—

Chair: Unless you can give us a figure now.

Habibur Rahman: We can write to you—

Chair: That will be very helpful and thank you for that clarification. Naz Shah.

Q66 Naz Shah: The Government has committed to developing a new hate crime plan. What impact have hate crimes had in your community or certainly your congregation, the people who attend your mosque, which you are aware of?

Salman Farsi: As an institution we receive anywhere between 40 to 50 pieces of hate mail every year and it will spark off from incidents that have involved Muslims around the world. So after Charlie Hebdo we saw a spike in hate crime that we received. After the Woolwich attack we saw a spike in hate crime. I think hate crime is certainly linked to incidents that happen around the world and even here. We do see reports from members of our congregation who suffer abuses on public transport, for example. We had one case study last year where a woman had her face veil ripped off, her hijab ripped off. Yes.

Q67 Naz Shah: What would you want the new hate crime action plan to achieve?

Salman Farsi: I think, as was stated in the previous session, the new hate crime action plan needs to be fair and equal in terms of the way it deals and works with the Muslim community. I think there certainly needs to be input from Muslim communities on the plan.

Q68 Chair: Mr Farsi, you are quoted as saying that MI5 is paying Muslim informants for controversial short-term spying at mosques. You were quoted as saying in *The*

Guardian, I think on 19 September, that they are paying up to £2,000 to individual people. You were very critical of that. Do you have evidence of this?

Salman Farsi: With respect to that report, this is the information I was told at the time by the journalist—

Q69 Chair: So it is the journalist who told you rather than you telling the journalist?

Salman Farsi: Yes.

Q70 Chair: I see. So you are telling us now that you do not have information that MI5 is paying money to people to spy on mosques?

Salman Farsi: No. I do not have that information but if it is the case then I would—

Chair: Of course if it is the case, but it is not the case, as far as you know. You do not know whether, among the 10,000 congregation, people have been paid by MI5 to pass on information to them.

Salman Farsi: I would not be able to comment on that, but if there were it should not have to be the case that this is the only kind of approach certain agencies take to gather intelligence.

Q71 Chair: So would you be prepared, if you found out that there were groups in the mosque who were up to no good, to go and inform the police about it—

Salman Farsi: Absolutely.

Chair: —without a question?

Salman Farsi: Absolutely, and I have done that in the past.

Q72 Chair: How many times have you done it in the last year?

Salman Farsi: In the last year?

Chair: Yes.

Salman Farsi: I have done that a couple of times where I have had doubts about an individual—things that they have said or actions that they have done.

Chair: Thank you. David Winnick and then Stuart McDonald.

Q73 Mr David Winnick: I take it from the answer that you have just given, Mr Farsi, and the other two of your colleagues may wish to comment, that you recognise that we have a danger of acute terrorism. There is no doubt about that, presumably. There is a balance to be struck, is there not, between the security services and the police protecting all of us, Muslims no less than the rest of the population, and the civil liberties of those in the community, Muslims or otherwise? Do you accept that there has to be some sort of balance?

Salman Farsi: Indeed, and I think right now we do not have that balance and that is why we have such an outcry from our community, from academic institutions and so on. As

representatives of the Muslim community we can say that our national security and our safety, we take it very seriously.

Q74 Mr David Winnick: But if the police and the security services, who you accept have a role to play, are not getting it right that is unfortunate because of the feeling of alienation in the Muslim community, which you have been mentioning. How do they get it right? One recognises, presumably, that they have to have some sort of way that they can get information to prevent murder.

Salman Farsi: So that is where the engagement needs to come at a local community level. We have an excellent relationship with our local police and that is the kind of relationship that is needed across the board all over the country. If that relationship is not there then that is where the fear in the community stems from and a lot of things do get missed.

Q75 Mr David Winnick: Can I ask you this question? Is there a possibility that younger people feel—wrongly, of course—that they are being preached at, if you like to use the term, by the likes of you, Mr Rahman, and people perhaps older than themselves? Imams who, perhaps, are not in touch. But when they look at social media and some of the poisonous propaganda put out by those we know about, is there a danger there of youngsters being alienated along the lines that I have just described?

Habibur Rahman: I think we are not trying to give sermon to them and preach to them as such—

Mr David Winnick: I accept that entirely of course.

Habibur Rahman: Yes. There is a danger that they are getting a lot of influence through the social media but what we are suggesting is that there is a need for that engagement between institutions like ours with the community. The community must also have the trust and confidence that the Government also wants to work together with the community because we all share the concerns that you have. All of us want to be safe and we want our children to be safe in the society. So, therefore, there is a breakage of confidence in that process. We need to be able to get to those young people. I agree with you that there is obviously a disconnect also.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Winnick. Stuart McDonald, we need to make a little bit of progress.

Q76 Stuart C. McDonald: Sure. Ms Alam, I think you almost had the opportunity to tell us a little bit about some of the work that you do to try to dissuade young men and women from going to Syria. Could you tell us a little bit about that now?

Sufia Alam: Well, the last conference we did in the summer in partnership with a local safeguarding team in Tower Hamlets was on child sexual exploitation, radicalisation and gang violence. Those are some of the kind of community issues that have come through and are a big issue for parents. In these conferences we manage to get through to a large audience of frontline workers, parents, schools and institutions where we were able to kind of air our views around radicalisation and how people can get help.

So what we were talking about, social media influences, how parents could engage with their children a little bit more and all of these three streams had a commonality in terms of disengagement from parents. There is that intergeneration gap that we recognise is happening and we are trying to bring that closer through engagement. Some of the programmes that we have certainly at the Maryam Centre are for women, because one of the things we recognised over the last two decades working in the community is that women have been isolated in this community. It is only now through community action groups and projects that we have empowered women to a stage where they can understand and make informed choices.

Some of the areas that we have tackled: domestic violence, abuse and neglect. We looked at troubled teens, gang violence, how we could get the trust between the police, the local authority and parents back. How women can approach the police and we also—

Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful. Stuart McDonald.

Q77 Stuart C. McDonald: Just very briefly, do you feel that these projects are having an effect and how easy is it to measure progress?

Sufia Alam: Definitely. As a result of the gang violence conference we have had parents coming up to us and said, “Can we have a forum because we find the mosque a safe ground to come in without being judged?” So we started a forum so that we could balance their interaction between the police, local authority, the youth offending team, without people being stereotyped at home. So the presence of a police officer going into a home in the middle of the night is quite a taboo thing in the community. So balancing and looking at the barriers, we would like to be the go-between—sorry, I forgot the question.

Q78 Stuart C. McDonald: Is it easy to make a success? What you are giving now is some anecdotes but do you feel these programmes are successful? How easy is it to measure?

Sufia Alam: Yes, absolutely. We get the feedback as well. So after every programme we have evaluation and we get feedback from the local authority so we work very closely with them. I am kind of inundated by invites as well for us to engage in a lot of their kind of PR—

Q79 Chair: Would you send the Committee, rather than repeating all these very useful programmes, a list of all the programmes that you have done and that will form part of the evidence?

Sufia Alam: Of course. I would love to, yes.

Chair: Thank you. Naz Shah has a supplementary and then we will close the session.

Q80 Naz Shah: Thank you, Chair. I am not sure if you are aware of the petition to keep our madrassas independent and free from Government interference on GoPetition. Lots of madrassas and mosques have signed up to it. I was just wondering if you were aware of it and if you are whether you have signed up to it?

Chair: Mr Rahman, are you aware of this petition?

Habibur Rahman: Sorry, I am not, no.

Chair: Mr Farsi?

Salman Farsi: No.

Q81 Chair: Mr Farsi, in the past the mosque has been criticised for inviting radical preachers and you have said in the past as well that since 2010 the selection of these radical preachers have been very carefully tightened up. You are regarded as being a moderate mosque, whatever that means in the current parlance—as opposed to an extreme mosque I suppose. How do you know what people are going to say before they arrive? Do you check them out because you might invite someone who you think is moderate and they end up inflaming everybody when they come and make their speeches?

Salman Farsi: As a mosque and Islamic centre we have one of the tightest booking procedures seen for any institution. So before any third party hirer rents our venue we go through a process where we do a background check on the speaker—things that they have said in the past, check through YouTube for their videos. Then the management of the mosque makes a decision whether we allow this person to come and use our venue as a platform.

Q82 Chair: Do you switch off the microphone if they turn out to be pretty bad people?

Salman Farsi: If we think that someone is speaking out of line we will shut the event down.

Q83 Chair: Mr Rahman, we have had two very large organisations, the MCB and now the East London Mosque, the biggest mosque in Europe, as our first two witnesses. We have Baroness Warsi coming shortly to give evidence. It is very odd that both these organisations, which must represent thousands of people in the United Kingdom, feel that they are not engaging with the Government. What is the solution to this problem, do you think?

Habibur Rahman: Well, there needs to be a willingness from both sides and certainly I have already outlined that we are very willing. I think the need needs to be felt by the Government that we have a very difficult situation and problem before us and we need solutions for that. The approach that we have taken so far has not resulted in that positive outcome and we need to find better solutions. As I have said earlier, if we did have that dialogue with the community I think our worshippers, the thousands of worshippers that you have mentioned, would be reassured that there is this engagement and if this continues then we can come out with solutions that would be of help for the whole community.

Q84 Chair: Obviously we are hearing from Baroness Warsi shortly. Do you think that in Government, in the Opposition and in public life there are enough people speaking up for the Muslim community?

Habibur Rahman: I think there can be more. The sentiments that we are getting from the Muslim community at the moment is that they are feeling very isolated and they are feeling as if they are the “other” in the society, and there can be more people who can give that reassurance. Can I just say that the focus on the ideology does not help because a lot of people are probably feeling that Islam as a whole is being targeted as opposed to the very criminals that we all want to address? So, yes, certainly there can be more people who can stand up for the Muslims in a voice that is not being heard.

Q85 Chair: So you agree, like Mr Farsi, with a number of the comments that have been made by Baroness Warsi and her analysis of the problems of the Government strategy?

Habibur Rahman: I would echo those as well, yes.

Chair: Ms Alam, Mr Rahman, Mr Farsi, thank you very much for coming. The Committee may decide to come and visit your mosque and talk to some of the young people there. We are going to different parts of the country as part of our big conversation with the Muslim community and if we do that we will be in touch with you.

Habibur Rahman: We would welcome that very much.

Chair: Thank you. If you could send us the information that we requested, I would be very grateful.

Habibur Rahman: We will do.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Baroness Warsi gave evidence.

Q86 Chair: Baroness Warsi, thank you very much. I am sorry we are running a little bit late but you understand the format of all these things. It may well be that you got a vote in the Upper House, which means that the Committee will have to wait for you; it is the other way round for other witnesses.

Thank you for coming. You have used some pretty damning criticism of the Government’s counter-terrorism strategy. Just to quote some of the things you have said. You have said, “The British Muslims fear the Government is fighting a cold war against their faith”. You have said some of their programmes have been counterproductive. You have talked about the Muslim community feeling demonised. These are very serious and what I would regard as damning criticisms of the counter-terrorism strategy. Do you stand by those statements?

Baroness Warsi: I do. First of all, Chairman, can I apologise for leaving my phone on? It may bleep, because I want to make sure that I know when the Minister is on her feet.

Chair: Of course.

Baroness Warsi: Thank you, and thank you very much for inviting me to the Committee. This is a really important inquiry that you are holding. I do stand by what I have said. It is important for me not just to state my own opinion on these issues, and views on these issues, but also to reflect what I have the advantage and privilege of listening to within communities that I am deeply connected to. Much of what you have quoted and other comments that I have made are a reflection of the views that are held within British Muslim communities, and it is therefore important for Government to be aware of those.

Q87 Chair: Do you think, while you were in Government, playing a very distinguished role at the very highest levels of the governing party, that they were not aware of this?

Baroness Warsi: I do not think it is any secret that there were differences of opinion within Government, not just because it was a coalition Government, and of course we had two parties at the table, but also within the two political parties at the table there were differences of views as to how we should tackle this issue. We are all united on the view—this Committee, the Government, the Opposition—in our very clear sense that there is a problem. There is a problem that we need to tackle, and we all want a safer, more stable, more secure Britain. Where we differ is that there are different routes to getting there.

Q88 Chair: Yes. But so far, if I can stop you there, you feel the Government has gone on the wrong route? The intent is there, and you have worked with David Cameron and the Home Secretary and others. You know that they have a willingness to try to deal with this problem; no Prime Minister or Home Secretary would not want to try and solve this problem. The willingness is there but they seem to have gone down the wrong road. Is that right? Is that what you are saying?

Baroness Warsi: What I am saying is that there are three strands to this, and each of them we need to test ourselves against. First of all, we need to say, what is the evidence to support our analysis of the problem? That is where we have to start, and there has been a difference of opinion as to what the problem is. There is a view in certain sections that it is all about ideology. There are different views that say this is about grievance, or social or economic factors.

I am a lawyer. I go back to evidence. I say, “Let us look at the data. Let us see what the polling says. Let us see what academics are saying.” Indeed, even our own intelligence services have made comments in the past that there is no—

Q89 Chair: But you talked about going back to basics on this, right down to the roots. Do you think that is where we have gone wrong? We have spent millions, billions of pounds on counter-terrorism, and what you are telling us is something that we ought to have learned at our mother’s knee, which is ask the community, go back to the grass roots. Is that what you are saying?

Baroness Warsi: What I am saying is, 10 years on, do we feel that this strategy is working and are we all safer? I do not believe that we can all genuinely say that the strategy has worked and that we all do feel safer, which is why I am saying that we have to understand that there is not a single driver of radicalisation, and there is not a linear journey from somebody having unsavoury views to them wanting to eventually blow themselves up.

Q90 Chair: Tell us what you think the drivers are?

Baroness Warsi: Again, it is important that politicians do not give their opinions on this. There is much research out there that shows that there are many different drivers of radicalisation. Some of them are about upbringing, socioeconomic backgrounds, grievance, ideology. Where the challenge has been over the last 10 years is that we have obsessively focused on certain drivers of radicalisation but not on other aspects of radicalisation.

Q91 Chair: Do you think it has been too critical of the Muslim community? The suggestion that they are quietly condoning terrorism, which is what they said about the last speech of the Prime Minister.

Baroness Warsi: The Prime Minister has probably stepped away from that speech, and that was probably a good move, but I would go back to saying that we have over-focused on the ideological aspect and the religious based aspect of the driver of radicalisation, and not focused enough on the other aspects of radicalisation. If you go back to the early Prevent Review, when, for example, one of the things it brought to the fore was that Islamophobia was a driver of radicalisation.

We are slowly now starting to see some progress, thankfully, but it was interesting to see politicians intervene regularly on the ideology debate, but hardly ever on say the other aspects and drivers of radicalisation. For me, where I have concern is that if we are to focus on the bits that either we find easy or we find easier to sit with our own viewpoint, then we are not looking at the genuine evidence base for the drivers of radicalisation.

Q92 Chair: Which is what you are saying we need?

Baroness Warsi: We are not analysing the problem.

Chair: Which is what you are saying we need, which we do not have at the moment?

Baroness Warsi: Which is what we need to do. So, go back to the evidence base. And one of the—

Q93 Chair: Who can provide this evidence?

Baroness Warsi: Some of it used to be provided by Government. One of the mistakes that the coalition Government made, and of course I was part of that, was getting rid of the citizenship survey. This was something that used to happen under the last Labour Government. It was an opportunity to be able to look at what people were thinking about issues at a certain point in time. It was done across communities.

It is very important, for example, if you ask a question of the community at large and say, “How do you view the police?” If 80% of the community come back and say, “We view them as being a positive force in society”, and that is a view that is held by all communities—so 80% of Muslims or 82% of Hindus, or 78% of Christians, or different groups—you get a comparative sense. Whereas, if you just look at one particular community, you can draw very distorted results from what may come back. So that was a mistake that was made.

Q94 Chair: Now, you resigned from the Government—not over their counter-terrorism strategy, over foreign policy issues—but at the time you resigned you were regarded as, in effect, the most powerful Muslim politician in the whole of Europe. At the table, the very top table, sitting in the Cabinet, having chaired the governing party, where you could wield huge influence over Government policy. I have spoken to Ministers who have served with you, and they have all told me that you made a huge difference on critical matters to do with the community.

Coming away from power, which is where it all ends, and we can be in opposition for the rest of our lives—I am not talking about the Labour Party here, but I am just saying generally—what matters is where you were sitting, where you could do something about it, where people had to see you every Tuesday and you would bang on about the need to do this. Then there you go, you resign, you leave the Muslim community and the wider community without an advocate for change. Do you think that you let the community down by resigning, and you ought to have stayed and fought your corner on these issues, because there are no other voices saying this?

Baroness Warsi: Chairman, this is a question that I have been asked consistently over the last year since my resignation, and it was certainly a question that I grappled with. Do you stay to fight another day, because there are so many issues that still require fighting or do you stand by your principles and your values?

I was in a very difficult position. Had I been a Minister for Transport at the time the Gaza conflict was happening, it may have been easier, but I was the Minister for Human Rights, I was the Minister for the UN, I was the Minister for the ICC. I was sat at the Foreign Office. I was taking every question on this issue at the House of Lords. I was standing up and being given Government lines that I did not agree with, therefore was saying things at the Dispatch Box that in my view were not true, nor were a reflection of what I felt. I was creating effectively a dishonest record on Hansard of what I felt at that time.

I therefore had a choice: do I carry on saying and doing things that I do not believe? I have always had two very simple rules, which may not always go down too well, which is, say what you believe and do what you say. At that time, I felt that I was neither saying what I believe nor doing what I was saying.

Q95 Chair: Even though it was a foreign policy issue. Do you think foreign policy does drive radicalisation? When young people see what is happening in Syria, they decide to go and fight there?

Baroness Warsi: There are two separate issues here. There is the issue of my resignation and whether I felt, as the Minister who had responsibilities for those areas, I could continue making and standing by the decisions the Government was making, which I could not.

But the second aspect of it comes down to who we are, in terms of our values and our principles, and there is much evidence, academic evidence, to support the fact that hypocrisy is consistently cited as something that is used to describe the way in which Government, not just this particular Government, but governments and the establishment deal with their communities.

As I said in my resignation letter, if we believe in British values of international justice and the rule of law, and human rights and accountability, then we have to be seen to be living by those values. There is definitely an overlap between foreign policy and domestic affairs, which in many ways was the reason why I felt that the role that I did was quite unique and important. I was in a domestic department as well as in the Foreign Office, and there is an interplay between how we deal with things domestically and how that reflects on us internationally, and the decisions we make internationally, and how we are therefore viewed by our domestic communities.

Chair: So, no regrets?

Baroness Warsi: No regrets.

Q96 Mr David Winnick: Did you find, Baroness Warsi, a lack of sympathy? I do not suggest for one moment that you will mention particular personalities. Of course not. But did you find generally, in Government ministerial circles, a lack of sympathy for what you have just been saying in reply to the Chair?

Baroness Warsi: In many ways, I was advantaged and disadvantaged by the fact that I come from the Muslim faith. I was advantaged because I got to those parts that many of my colleagues would never get to, and got to hear conversations and be part of discussions that my colleagues would not be part of.

But at the same time, because I came from the Muslim faith, maybe much of what I said was seen through that prism—"Well, she would say that, wouldn't she?" Therefore, it was a reality. Like I said, you have to take the good with the bad. The advantage of having that background meant I came to the table, I felt, much more informed, but the disadvantage was that your opinions are viewed through a certain prism, which probably does not make them as powerful as if I had not come from the Muslim background.

Q97 Mr David Winnick: You said, very frankly, in reply to questions, again from the Chair, that you were saying as a Minister things that you did not believe in. Honourably, you decided you could not go along with that, and resigned—that is not unknown in Governments of all colours. Would I be right in saying, basically, you felt that the Muslim community was being let down generally as a result of Government policy towards Israel, or rather the way in which the Government was defending Israeli actions when we should not be doing anything of the kind?

Baroness Warsi: Absolutely not. I do not believe that the Muslim community, or indeed any faith community, was being let down by the Government's policy on the Gaza conflict. I think the Government was letting itself down on its Government policy on Gaza and, indeed, was letting down what I see as a great British tradition of human rights. I believe in international justice, international accountability, the rule of law. Those are our British values, our principles, and I felt that what we were espousing as our principles were not the principles that we were following in our policy.

Q98 Mr David Winnick: Yes. A view which many of us have put forward on numerous occasions in the Commons—in all fairness to Government—the previous Government, which I supported. How far do you feel, Baroness Warsi, there is alienation

among the Muslim community, leaving aside the Foreign Office aspect? You accept, presumably, that Muslims in this country have a freedom like others, no different, no less, than in most parts of the world? Do you accept that, presumably, that this freedom exists?

Baroness Warsi: I have said consistently, and I absolutely believe it to my core, that there are very few places in the world that are better to be a Muslim than Britain. I say that because having experienced other parts of the world and, as a Muslim woman, seen some of the challenges that can present themselves in different parts of the world, having come from a very mixed theological background, and knowing there are certain parts of the world where certain bits of my theological background would not be acceptable, I have no doubt that Britain is a wonderful place for Muslims to live. But I also have no doubt that things could be better, and I also am acutely aware that we need to retain that position in the world.

Q99 Mr David Winnick: I am sorry to interrupt. There is no doubt there is alienation, that many Muslims certainly have no desire whatsoever to embrace terrorism, far from it, but nevertheless feel alienated in the way that perhaps other communities do not. How can that be overcome, when one recognises the difficulties, of course, of the authorities doing their utmost to protect us all from terror?

Baroness Warsi: Every generation has the issues of its time. I have regularly cited that when I was growing up what radicalised me was the colour of my skin. It was irrelevant what my religion was, and we regularly defined ourselves as black British people, even if we were not black. Race was a unifying factor for those of us who were growing up at that stage. That is because, if you looked around you, from South Africa to America to even the riots here, the defining challenge of the time was race.

The defining stories of the day and the defining identity challenges of the day are religious right now. Religion is the new race. It is therefore not at all unusual that young British Muslims would feel like they were right in the middle of this heated debate. Out of that comes great leadership, but out of that also comes alienation, just like we saw during the time of the race riots; just like we saw during the black civil rights movement; just like we saw in South Africa. Some people feel it is all doom and walk away and feel quite alienated and closed in, others step up at that point.

The challenge for Government is, how do we ensure that more people remain part of the whole and part of that stepping up, rather than doing things that alienate people and push them to the sides? They are part of the solution.

Q100 James Berry: Would you agree that in the past not enough has been done to tackle forced marriage and female genital mutilation?

Baroness Warsi: It depends who you are saying not enough has been done by.

James Berry: By the Muslim community, by other Asian communities, and by the Government.

Baroness Warsi: We have all failed. I know when I was first speaking about the criminalisation of forced marriage, even the Conservative Party felt that it was a step too far. Therefore, yes, we should have done this earlier. In fact, I remember being rebuked for asking for forced marriages to be criminalised. So I felt that there was almost a kind of

perverse, inverse racism, by saying that if a brown girl goes off and disappears during the summer and does not come back, well, she has probably gone to visit her relatives whereas, if a white girl had done exactly the same, the same school would go around with social workers and find out where she was.

I absolutely believe that everybody in this country, irrespective of their racial or religious background, deserves the same protections and, therefore, practices that did not lead to protection of those communities needed to be rooted out.

Chair: Let us go back to counter-terrorism.

Q101 James Berry: Yes. I just want to finish that. So you would accept that there had been a passive tolerance of that within the community, which people like yourself and very brave campaigners from the community stepped up and spoke out about, and that is why it is tackled now? But there had been a passive tolerance around these things, which is what the Prime Minister is addressing in his conference speech.

Baroness Warsi: There had been a passive tolerance of it at local authority level, at government level. The Government of the day had passively tolerated it. I think that sections of the community had passively tolerated it. I do not think it was a case of everybody else wanted to deal with it and the community were passively tolerating it. I think there just was not the political will to be able to tackle some of these issues, and I am delighted issues like FGM, forced marriages and the protection issues of young people have been dealt with.

Q102 James Berry: So how do we square the issue that the focus on FGM and forced marriage, which is very welcome, a lot of that is on the Muslim community? How can we ensure that that focus appropriately remains there, without it being a vehicle for radicalisation with, let us say, an idea that there is an excessive focus and you are only targeting Muslims? I accept that there are other Asian communities as well, but how do we do that? How do we have the appropriate focus without it leading to complaints that there is an excessive focus and that is causing extremism and radicalisation?

Baroness Warsi: The most high profile campaigning on the issue of forced marriage has come from the Sikh community. Girls within the Sikh community are just as likely to be victims of forced marriages as Muslim communities. We need to be careful that what we do not do when we focus on the issue of forced marriages is focus on a religion, but focus on the problem, wherever that problem may come from.

Again, with FGM, it is a problem that is prevalent within certain North African communities. You never see a South Asian example of FGM, whatever their religious background, because it just does not happen. It happens in certain African cultures, which include Christians. So again, as long as we focus on the issue rather than the religious identity of the issue, we will solve the issue. When we start focusing on religious communities, that is when we start to get it wrong.

Q103 Stuart C. McDonald: Baroness Warsi, we have heard evidence and read evidence as well about the importance of a counter-narrative to tackling extremism. Do you

share the view that that is an important element of our counter-extremism strategy? If so, how would the Government and civil society go about drawing up a resilient counter-narrative?

Baroness Warsi: Yes. Counter-narrative is an essential part of counter-extremism. How do you convince people their view is wrong unless you put forward an alternative viewpoint? To implement a genuine counter-narrative strategy, the first strand of it has to be genuine engagement.

One of the things that I felt quite frustrated about in Government, and continue to remain frustrated about, is the number of people we refuse to speak to. If there was a way of changing somebody's views by not speaking to them, I am quite happy to listen to that argument. I just do not think it has ever worked.

We only ever change people's views when we speak to them. We have had examples where there are certain events that successive Governments have failed to attend because there are people there who have unsavoury views. These events have been large events, sometimes attended by thousands, tens of thousands, of members of the British Muslim community.

I just find it very unusual how a counter-narrative strategy can work if, when we have the opportunity to espouse that counter-narrative, we decide not to go. I absolutely believe that there is a counter-narrative that has to be put out there, and the first strand of it is to engage, to make sure those people who we want to hear this narrative get to hear it, rather than never speaking to them.

Q104 Stuart C. McDonald: That all seems very sensible. We heard earlier also that there are narratives out there already, but one problem is sometimes the barrier between generations. How do we develop a narrative that appeals to the younger generation in particular?

Baroness Warsi: As a mum of teenage kids, there is always a generational issue as to whether your kids want to hear anything that ever comes out of your mouth, or whether they hear what you are saying. So there are different ways in which we deal with the counter-narrative issue.

There is a genuine engagement process that has to take place with the theologians and the religious leaders within the community. Just like the extremists will base some of their arguments in religion, the counter-narrative has to have some of its base within religion.

There are community workers and youth workers who will base this on their own experiences. Just like there is an issue in relation to grievance, there has to be a counter-narrative that is based in positive role-modelling and where people have seen real success.

Each category of people that we are dealing with has to be dealt with differently. Social networking, having a counter-narrative on social networking; I know there has been some good work, positive work, about organisations putting up videos and materials on the internet that young people can access.

But I would say a counter-narrative is only as good as the authenticity of its source. In any area if the source of a counter-narrative is Government, it is hardly going to be listened to. If the source of a counter-narrative is either an organisation or an individual that is neither

connected to nor respected by nor listened to by the communities we are wanting to influence, then the counter-narrative, however great it may be, is not going to be listened to. So the vehicle and the source of the counter-narrative is as important as the message.

Q105 Stuart C. McDonald: One final question, if I may. You and various other witnesses have spoken about the risk of further alienation if this strategy is not done correctly. Is there a danger that there is this sort of messy overlap between community cohesion strategies and a counter-extremism strategy? We had an example earlier about people turning up to an interfaith event and there was a counter-terrorism officer. How do we separate these things out?

Baroness Warsi: The CONTEST strategy had a “P” missing. You will all be familiar with the CONTEST strategy, “Pursue, prepare, prevent”. I am sorry, you will have to add the fourth “P” for me. But the fifth “P” in all of that, the one that was missing, was “Promote”. So we did all the hard-edged stuff and then “Prevent”, which was supposed to be the soft-edged stuff, I think should have been not seen as the soft element of the CONTEST strategy, but “Promote” should have been seen as the soft edge of the CONTEST strategy.

That is the community cohesion element: how do we promote the values and the principles that we feel Britain is today? I think what we did, the mistake that we made, was that “Prevent” eventually became bits of “Promote” and bits of “Prevent”, and therefore people felt that the community cohesion issue, which deals with all communities, should have been over here, but the “Prevent” aspect of it should have been kept separate, and should have been kept with the hard edge of the CONTEST strategy.

Q106 Mr Chuka Umunna: Baroness Warsi, earlier this month you tweeted in respect of the resignation of Professor Goodwin of Nottingham Uni from the working group on anti-Muslim hatred. You said that his leaving that group was as a result not just of the failure of the Government’s policy, but you described it as, and I quote, “A destructive policy of disengagement and alienation”. What did you mean by that? Did you mean you believe the Government has a policy of disengagement and alienation?

Baroness Warsi: The cross-government working group on anti-Muslim hatred was set up after a lot of debate within Government. It should have been set up a lot earlier. In fact, it should have been set up by the last Labour Government. There was no doubt that the challenge of Islamophobia was on the rise. I was quite surprised when we went into Government in 2010 that there was absolutely no format, no remit, no structure, to deal with the issue of anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia.

I was also quite surprised that no mainstream politician had stood up and spoken about the issue. You will recall that in 2011 I made the first intervention on this when I said Islamophobia had passed the dinner table test. I was hoping that immediately after that we could have set up the cross-government working group. We were not reinventing the wheel. We have this structure already in Government. We have a cross-government working group on anti-Semitism, and we have a whole series of engagements that come off the back of that.

This group was eventually set up, but the challenge that this group has consistently had is that, despite numerous requests, Ministers have not engaged with the group. The group has not been at the table when big decisions have been made, despite the fact that there is a

large body of evidence that shows that Islamophobia is a driver of radicalisation, they were not called.

Q107 Mr Chuka Umunna: Can I just stop you there? Just in relation to the evidence point, and you made this point earlier, one of Professor Goodwin's complaints was that the work of that group was not supported by any research or other resource. Was that your experience, that there is no research in Government being carried out into the issues that that group was looking at? That seems to be his principal charge, and you mentioned it earlier. Do you agree with that?

Baroness Warsi: The whole point of bringing Dr Matthew Goodwin and Dr Chris Allen into the Department for Communities and Local Government, and indeed, to sit on the cross-government working group, was because both had experience of research in this area. I was desperate to bring some academic underpinning and resilience to our policy making, and the support for their academic work, and for further academic research, was sadly not there.

Q108 Mr Chuka Umunna: In respect of the overall policy of Government on engaging with the community, obviously there are a number of Departments involved: the DCLG, the Home Office, No. 10, Education. Which Department do you see as being the principle driver of Government's policy in this area?

Baroness Warsi: In the area of extremism?

Mr Chuka Umunna: Overall, in terms of the Government's policy towards engaging with the Muslim community, which Department do you see as being in the driving seat? You said that there were different views, clearly, when you were in Government.

Baroness Warsi: I am not sure Departments were in the driving seat. I think individual Ministers had very strong views, and those views did not always agree with colleagues. We now have an extremism analysis unit. Apparently it is their job to decide who can and cannot be engaged with. I suppose, again, the lawyer in me instinctively felt that if we were not going to engage with people, we should tell them we are not engaging with them. We should also tell them the reasons why we are not engaging with them. We should give them a right to reply. The rules of natural justice require that.

Q109 Mr Chuka Umunna: If what you are saying is that the anti-Muslim hatred working group was not engaged with properly, what do you make of the Prime Minister's new community engagement forum that, on the face of it—and please tell me whether you agree or disagree with me on this—seems to be charged to do exactly the same work as the anti-Muslim hatred working group?

Baroness Warsi: I think it is charged to do different work. I welcome the community engagement forum. It is a genuine step forward and I hope that in some ways it means the arguments on the policy of disengagement have now started to be won and Government accepts that it has to engage and Government accepts that it has to set up a community engagement forum to engage. These are signals to say there is a change of direction.

Chair: Indeed.

Q110 Mr Chuka Umunna: Can I just one tiny final question?

Chair: Yes, provided it is very short.

Mr Chuka Umunna: You made quite a serious accusation or allegation earlier. Am I right in what I heard—that you were rebuked for suggesting that forced marriage should be criminalised? You were rebuked for making that suggestion?

Baroness Warsi: This is not breaking news in case somebody gets excited and wants to put it out to breaking news. This was in the public domain back in 2007/2008 when we were in Opposition and you were in Government at the time. The Labour Party wanted to introduce civil orders. I felt we needed to go further. I felt Labour should criminalise it. Labour chose not to and my party chose not to go that far, but we subsequently decided to change that.

Chair: Indeed. Thank you. In fact, Mr Umunna was not in Government then so we cannot hold that against him. Naz Shah and Nusrat Ghani then we will close.

Q111 Naz Shah: Talking about the individuals and the organisations consulted, which events, organisations and individuals were you asked not to engage with and do you know why?

Baroness Warsi: Where do I start? I had a problem with non-engagement because I am deeply connected to the communities that I come from and on weekends you go to funerals and births and deaths and weddings and you cannot always control the guest list. You are invariably going to probably bump into people who the Government would find you did not want to engage with. There was no secret that I also kept an open line to most individuals and organisations because we saw the positive impact of that immediately after the tragic killing of Drummer Lee Rigby. We saw organisations from across the plethora, many who had not been engaged with formally for many, many years, step up and we saw a fantastic, coherent, consistent response from the community.

It is one of the things that the Government need to think about. If they want to pursue this policy of non-engagement then that list of whom they choose not to engage with needs to be in the public domain.

Chair: With the reasons why?

Baroness Warsi: With the reasons why, because some of the evidence about why we choose not to engage with groups is concerning. Like I said the instinctive lawyer in me worries about the basis upon which we choose not to engage, if what we are saying is most organisations do change over time. We all know from our own political careers where we have said things and thought, “I wish I had never said that and now my views have changed”. My own party has had a huge journey in relation to the issue of homosexuality, for example, and thankfully we have gone down that route and are now in a good place. I just feel if there is a process of rehabilitation, if you want to call it that, then maybe Government needs to lay out what that process is.

Q112 Naz Shah: What is the criteria you use to assess the Muslim groups that we or the Government should be engaged with or not?

Baroness Warsi: There is not a single criterion and that is part of the problem. If there was an independent series of tests that we could assess individuals and organisations against there are many individuals and organisations who are not Muslim who would form part of that list. This is the challenge. It goes back to if we have a list of people that we fail to engage with or refuse to engage with then we need to publish it and the reasons why.

Naz Shah: Could you provide us with that list?

Baroness Warsi: I do not have that list. That is maybe something you can write to Government.

Chair: We will write to the Government but if you have a list of people you think we should talk to please do not hesitate to let us have it. Nusrat Ghani.

Q113 Nusrat Ghani: Thank you, Baroness Warsi. Earlier from East London Mosque we heard about language and tone. You have often talked about language and tone that Government has used but you have previously welcomed the language and tone of the Home Secretary addressing these issues. How can the Government get it right going forward to make sure that the community on the whole feels welcome when we are talking about these issues?

Baroness Warsi: We are all politicians and we have to at times make the decision about whether we are trying to resolve an issue or whether we are trying to get a headline. As long as we put what we are about to say through that filter and say, “Is this about getting a great headline in some of the red tops tomorrow morning or is about what will impact long term on community relations?”, we probably would get our language right.

If you look at how people view Muslims, there is some really interesting research that has been done that shows that the language that is used by politicians over time influences the way in which communities are seen. If every time a politician stands up and talks about say the Muslim community and talks about them through the narrative of extremism and terrorism, then most people out there will think that is what defines the Muslim community. Therefore we have to be very careful. If we are there to solve the issue, which is what I hope we are there to do, then the language we use has to be part of the policy thinking.

Nusrat Ghani: It is tricky because we are dealing with people from different communities and different age groups. When there was discussion about the Trojan Horse situation in Birmingham, there were parents who were trying to expose what was happening in the schools and felt they were not being supported. They wanted much more Government support than was available but then the same message would not have sat well with younger people who were made to feel alienated because of their faith. It is quite tricky to get right.

Baroness Warsi: Government is balancing those different interests but going back to evidence, it is not about keeping one lot happy or another lot happy, it is about going back to what the evidence says about the issue there. One of the things that I thought was missing after the so called Trojan Horse incident in Birmingham was that I was the only Minister to go out to Birmingham weeks after the event. We should have been there. The

whole of Birmingham and the whole of the Birmingham Muslim community was not on trial. It was a few individuals who we had concerns about in a few schools yet the lack of engagement at that moment left a larger community alienated and we did not need to do that.

Yes, it was a pretty hostile meeting but it was a meeting that we should have been brave enough to do. I do not necessarily think it should have been me that should have done it.

Q114 Nusrat Ghani: A quick question on data. You mentioned data. Looking at ideologies is one, looking at data is another. It is quite hard to capture data when we even have the East London Mosque, which has a massive congregation, saying they do not necessarily have the knowledge of young people being radicalised or leaving. We have taken evidence from other people to the Select Committee that over 750 people may have travelled overseas, perhaps half have come back. These people do not necessarily communicate to their neighbours, to their families and their communities what they are about to do or what they have done when they have returned. How do we capture the data?

Baroness Warsi: There is some very good research out there, polling that has been done, academics that have done this research as to the drivers of radicalisation, perceptions about Muslim communities. This information is out there. Academics are desperate to get this information into Government if Government is prepared to listen to them. The challenge we have in this area of policy making is that we have an opinion, we have a view and we are pursuing policy on the basis of that view rather than being prepared to say, "Hold on a minute, let us go back a step and just see what is the evidence and data on this?"

When the comments were made that parents were quietly condoning ISIS, what was the basis of that?

Chair: This is the Prime Minister's statement?

Baroness Warsi: This was a view that was repeated many times about this quietly condoning element. What is the basis for this? Parents whose children are being pursued by ISIS are not sat there quietly condoning the fact that their children are going to be taken off and become suicide bombers. I know the two families of the two boys who travelled to Syria from Dewsbury. I sat with the families for hours after their boys had gone before we heard that one of them had blown himself up. I have sat with them subsequently. I know what they have done subsequently, how they have re-engaged with the community. At no point has anybody from Government engaged with these two families.

If the Government is genuinely serious about wanting to know what it is that happens let us start with talking to the families.

Q115 Chair: You are saying that this is not happening. The communities are not being engaged with at that grass roots level and that must happen if we are going to get a strategy?

Baroness Warsi: Yes. I absolutely believe that the British Muslim communities are part of the solution and unless they are engaged, this will be a challenge that Government cannot

do on its own—whatever statements it continues to make and whatever policies it keeps trying to make.

Chair: Nusrat Ghani has a final question.

Q116 Nusrat Ghani: When you sat with the families, and I know this is a very sensitive topic, were they at any point aware that their young boys had been radicalised?

Baroness Warsi: No.

Nusrat Ghani: Nobody noticed any difference in their attitude and their conversation? They had not noticed at all?

Baroness Warsi: I had conversations with Talha's family and one of the biggest challenges for the family was the complete shock that he had gone, where they could not see it coming. A lot of conversations took place about how he had just bought some new clothes, he had left them at home, he had not taken his new clothes with him, the things he had been planning, the things he had been saying where there was no indication that he was planning not to be there anymore. These are the conversations that I think will help to inform some of our policy making. That is why these are conversations that need to take place.

Q117 Chair: We are coming to the end. That is certainly what the Committee discovered when we interviewed the parents of the Bethnal Green girls: that they had no idea what was going to happen.

Since you made your famous statement about Islamophobia passing the dinner table test, do you think things are better or worse as far as that is concerned?

Baroness Warsi: When I first did that speech I received a pretty awful knifing off the back of it from so many different quarters for even suggesting that Islamophobia existed. Since then the data from organisations like TELL MAMA, but also data from police authorities who are now collecting data on this, shows that it does exist and it is a rising problem.

Chair: It is getting worse?

Baroness Warsi: Going back to the evidence, it shows that Islamophobic and anti-Muslim hate crime is on the rise and therefore, sadly, what I said in 2011 has only just got worse.

Q118 Chair: You talked about the challenge to the community and we have heard from the East London Mosque, with its 10,000 people every week and the Muslim Council of Britain—organisations that you are very familiar with because you have been to many, many of their functions. But somehow the community itself has not risen to the challenge. I posed the question to the East London Mosque and the MCB about the Jewish Board of Deputies: how organised, how credible they are in the eyes of the Government. Why have these organisations failed to reach that test? Whose fault is it?

Baroness Warsi: You are absolutely right to say that many of these organisations have not risen to the challenge. It probably will not make me many friends within those

communities and those organisations for me to say this but when my colleagues used to talk about certain organisations and say, “These are dangerous organisations and we must not engage with them” I used to say, “They are not dangerous but they are probably useless”.

The challenge that we had with these organisations was that they were not campaigning organisations. They could not organise themselves to respond coherently to issues. They could not provide the quality of evidence and data that was required to engage. There was a lot of inter-community fighting and tension as to who was the preferred group at any one time. Things are slowly starting to change.

There was an overreliance also on Government funding. I always draw a distinction between those organisations that are Government funded and the advice that they give and those organisations that are not Government funded and the advice that they give. I think the community is starting to rise to that challenge. There is a lot to do. There is no doubt that there is a lot to do within these communities.

Q119 Chair: Indeed. You have risen faster and higher than any other Muslim woman in the history of British politics. Imagine the Prime Minister was watching this session, which of course he does on a regular basis, and he rings you—with the greatest respect to the other women who are yet to rise—tomorrow and says to you, “I want you back to lead this strategy”. What are the three things that you would do to end what you described as the cold war that now exists between the community and the Government? The three practical things that you would do?

Baroness Warsi: What the Government should be doing is, I suppose the three “E”s. First, evidence: what is the evidence for what you are doing, root your policy making in evidence; secondly, engagement; and thirdly, effectiveness. Is what you are doing working? If it is not, it has not been effective, and it is time to be brave enough to change course.

Chair: If they do not do it what are the consequences?

Baroness Warsi: We are prolonging the problem. This problem will be resolved. We have been here before. We have been before with other communities and we will work our way through it. It will just be a longer and more painful process. From a very personal perspective, for the sake of my children and their children, I want to be the generation that gets on with dealing with this issue so that in many ways my kids and their kids do not feel the urge to have to give up their day jobs and turn to politics.

Chair: Baroness Warsi, thank you very much for coming.

Baroness Warsi: Thank you.