

Free Speech Union briefing

Anti-Free Speech Hostility: The Islamist Links of the Government's Working Group on Islamophobia

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Preface

By Fiyaz Mughal

This report demonstrates that when the current Labour Government created a 'Working Group' to advise it on a possible definition of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate, its members had already pretty much made up their minds. Their backgrounds, laid bare below, suggest they will have been sure that a definition was necessary before they even started work. According to leaks last year, they may have substituted the phrase 'anti-Muslim hostility' for 'Islamophobia', but this is just as problematic, given the broad meaning of the term 'hostility'. Whatever name they end up choosing, as a Muslim who has long fought hate crime, I am convinced we must resist it for the sake of our personal freedoms.

This report also raises questions around how and who the Government engaged with to advise it – and why. The hand-picked members of the Working Group did not include a single person who dissented from the view that a definition was needed, suggesting the whole exercise was a politically motivated *fait accompli* from the outset. The Group's job was not to consider whether a definition was desirable, but to build a public case to justify a decision that Labour had already made.

I have worked on tackling anti-Muslim hate for over a decade. I founded and developed Tell MAMA, the first nationally recognised Government body that monitored and helped thousands of victims of anti-Muslim hate crime for 13 years. That experience has shown me that existing laws provide Muslims with the necessary protections around their race and religious backgrounds, just as they do other minorities. No further laws or definitions are needed, but the Government created the Working Group as a political sop aimed at regaining lost political ground with some, more conservative Muslims whose campaign group, The Muslim Vote, unseated four Labour MPs and slashed others' majorities.

The establishment of the Group has given narratives created by Islamist groups a chance to influence social policy via the back-door. Over the last decade, I have become acutely aware that Islamists were pushing the

view that Muslims should be regarded as a race, as well as a distinct religious group. This amounted to a strategy to curtail free speech. We are now at a point where the latest iteration of the 'definition' includes the view that Muslims – who are in reality of diverse origins – should be classed as a race, and protected as such.

One consequence of the proposed definition is that if any member of the public suggests that there is an over-representation of male Pakistanis in 'grooming gangs', they would be liable to face serious complaints and consequences. The definition creates the risk they could be pronounced as 'guilty' merely for stating facts. As the FSU Director Lord Young has argued, people could fall foul of the definition merely by reporting that Muslims had done something wrong, for this could be classed as 'hostility'.

This report demonstrates why we must stand against and challenge the so-called definition. If we do not, we will have allowed the erosion of a critical freedom, on which all others depend, the right to free speech. The time to resist this is now.

– Fiyaz Mughal OBE, FCMI, Founder of Tell MAMA, Faith Matters and Muslims Against Antisemitism, February 2026.

Executive Summary

The adoption of an official, government-recognised definition of Islamophobia is a demand made for many years by organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), in which leading members have also had a lengthy history of expressing extreme, Islamist views. It came closest to realisation when the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims issued a report containing such a definition in 2018. This was denounced by free speech advocates and liberal, secularist Muslims, who saw the APPG definition – that Islamophobia is “rooted in racism and a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness” – as likely to restrict public debate, as well as criticism of the Islamic faith. The APPG’s co-Chair at the time was Wes Streeting, who is now a strong contender to succeed Sir Keir Starmer as Prime Minister.

In February 2025, the-then Communities Secretary Angela Rayner appointed a new five-member Working Group to deliver a definition of “Anti-Muslim Hatred/Islamophobia”. It is thought to have done so in October, although its report has not been published and FOI requests seeking to obtain it by the Free Speech Union have been refused. Leaks confirmed by one group member suggest that instead of the terms specified in its remit, it has instead produced a definition of “anti-Muslim hostility”. The FSU considers this to be no improvement, and likely, in the words of our Director Lord Young, to make it difficult to refer to Muslims doing anything wrong, granting them protections that people of other faiths don’t enjoy. Given that we already have laws against hate crime and discrimination, any definition would either be pointless, because it would do no more than restate existing legal principles, or would threaten free expression.

When setting up the Working Group, Rayner’s Ministry said it had been chosen as “reflective of a wide range of perspectives and priorities for British Muslims”. This briefing explodes that claim. In fact, four of its five members had already expressed support for the 2018 APPG definition when the Group started work, and *none* of them was on record as opposing the concept of a definition *per se*.

There was, for example, no representative from Tell MAMA, a body whose leadership has opposed defining Islamophobia, and which has received some £6 million from the Government to combat anti-Muslim hate crime and support its victims since 2012. Tell MAMA's grant aid has now ceased – following a campaign against it led by one of the Working Group's members, Baroness Shaista Gohir, and the husband of another, Nafeez Ahmed. His wife, Working Group member Akeela Ahmed, is now the Chief Executive of a new organisation, the British Muslim Trust, which is set to receive government grants of more than £2.5 million in Tell MAMA's place, although it did not begin to operate until the autumn of 2025.

This briefing examines the connections and pronouncements of all the Working Group's members and finds that all of them have links to Islamist individuals or organisations such as the MCB and MEND, including the Group's Chair, Dominic Grieve KC. Grieve, the only member of the Group who is not a Muslim, wrote a supportive Foreword to the APPG report. In coming to favour an official definition, he appears to have changed his views to a significant extent, although, as the briefing points out, he denies this.

Until 2013, Grieve made a series of strong statements about Muslims' religious and political attitudes, claiming, for example, that Muslims were trying to change society in ways that were inimical to pluralist democracy. He argued then that what he termed "political correctness" arising from multiculturalism posed a serious threat to free speech. Subsequently, before and after the 2018 APPG report, he has become an advocate of an Islamophobia definition, although he denies this poses a threat to free expression. The briefing reveals that while undergoing this conversion he sought advice from several leading figures in the MCB and MEND.

In 2014, Gohir posted tweets supportive of Hamas, and her son, who ran her parliamentary office until last year, claimed Israel fabricated evidence of the Hamas massacre of 7th October 2023. She too supported the APPG definition and authored a report saying that to discuss the disproportionately Muslim heritage of child sex grooming gangs is Islamophobic, claiming that just as many child sexual abusers are non-Muslims.

Akeela Ahmed has for years worked closely with the head of the MCB's media monitoring unit trying to stop 'Islamophobic' journalism, and last year she set up a new body that aims to engage with government, the British Muslim Network. Working with her was its then and current co-Chair, Qari Asim, who was sacked by the last Tory government for

attempting to restrict free speech. He has also cultivated relationships with Pakistani imams who support the death penalty for blasphemy and venerate the killer of the liberal former Punjab governor Salman Taseer.

Asha Affi, a Somali community worker, stood in 2010 as a council candidate for the Respect Party, the alliance of Islamists and leftists led by George Galloway, Britain's best-known apologist for the Iranian and former Syrian regimes. At the time she stood for a ward in the borough where Galloway had been an MP for the previous five years, Respect's policies included support for the destruction of the state of Israel, and Galloway was a hosting twice-weekly shows on the Iranian regime channel Press TV.

Javed Khan, the last Group member, runs Equi, a think tank whose trustees include Afzal Khan MP, formerly a senior MCB official. Equi published a report last year arguing that 'misinformation' about Muslims should be combatted by the state.

In September 2025, together with Humza Yousaf, Scotland's former first minister, Khan was one of two keynote speakers at the launch of the UK branch of an international organisation based in Turkey, the Muslim Impact Forum (MIF), which has close ties to Turkey's Islamist government. At the time Khan spoke, the MIF's website had for months been featuring an interview with Asim Qureshi, the Policy Director of CAGE, the terrorist prisoners' support group.

Qureshi once described Mohammed Emwazi, the ISIS executioner better known as "jihadi John", as a "beautiful young man". In his MIF interview, filmed at an event in Istanbul, Qureshi said he hoped to use his contacts with the MIF's leadership to build support for destroying the "evil" state of Israel once and for all, since it "should not be allowed to exist".

The evidence in this briefing suggests that far from reflecting a range of perspectives, the Group's pre-existing bias towards a restrictive definition means it did not meet the standards of objectivity required by the Code of Conduct for Board Members of Public Bodies. There is thus a serious risk that if adopted, the definition will be exploited to silence dissent and shield extremists from criticism.

Introduction

On 28 February 2025, Angela Rayner, the then-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, announced the appointment of a ‘Working Group’ to deliver an official definition of “Anti-Muslim Hatred/ Islamophobia”. According to her media announcement, the group would advise the government on “how to best understand, quantify and define prejudice, discrimination, and hate crime targeted against Muslims”.¹

Its terms of reference² stated that “any proposed definition must be compatible with the unchanging right of British citizens to exercise freedom of speech and expression – which includes the right to criticise, express dislike of, or insult religions and/or the beliefs and practices of adherents”. The Government insisted that this right would be protected by the fact that any definition would be non-statutory.

Nevertheless, Rayner’s announcement was greeted with concern by free speech advocates, led by the Free Speech Union. We argued that even if it lacked statutory force, any definition would come to be used as a yardstick by both private and public bodies, and so lead to self-censorship and the restriction of free and lawful discourse. We also pointed out that discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims are already sanctioned by the civil and criminal law. Any definition would either do no more than restate existing legal principles, and would therefore be pointless, or it would threaten freedom of expression.

In a letter to Rayner dated 25th June 2025, the FSU’s Director Lord Young drew attention to the lack of transparency surrounding the Working Group’s advice and deliberations, which have throughout been secret. This has remained the case despite a protracted legal correspondence between lawyers instructed by the FSU and the Treasury Solicitor, and unsuccessful attempts to obtain further details via the Freedom of Information Act.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-working-group-on-anti-muslim-hatredislamophobia-definition>

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e12094d8e313b503358c7c/Anti-Muslim_Hatred_Islamophobia_Definition_Working_Group_Terms_of_Reference_March_2025.pdf

The Group issued its final advice in October 2025. It has yet to be officially published, although a version of its definition was leaked to the BBC in December,³ and described within hours as accurate by a Working Group member, Baroness Gohir. The leak revealed that although the Group had been asked to define ‘Islamophobia’ and ‘anti-Muslim hatred’, it had decided instead to focus on something else — ‘anti-Muslim hostility’. The FSU considers this apparently watered-down term to be little or no better than its predecessors. It would effectively ban criticism of Islam, alone of the major religions, and stifle discussion of issues such as the disproportionately Muslim heritage of child sexual ‘grooming gangs’, the misogyny found in many Muslim countries, the impact of Britain’s growing Muslim population on our society and Islamist terrorism, subjects which may well trigger expression of views hostile to some, if not all, Muslims. As Young put it, “the danger of any definition, however carefully drawn, is that it will make people think twice before referring to Muslims doing anything wrong, prioritising them above people of other faiths”.⁴ Similar observations were made by Policy Exchange in January.⁵

In Young’s initial letter to Rayner and the subsequent correspondence, the FSU advanced a further reason why the Working Group was likely to produce a definition inimical to free speech. This was evidence that its members had a pre-existing bias towards a restrictive definition, and therefore did not meet the standards of objectivity required by the Code of Conduct for Board Members of Public Bodies.⁶

Underpinning that claim was the fact that four of the five Working Group members had expressed support for the definition of Islamophobia produced in November 2018 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims. They included the Working Group’s Chair, the former Conservative Attorney-General Dominic Grieve KC, who wrote a Foreword to the APPG report, saying he “greatly welcomed” it.⁷ At the time, the APPG’s co-Chair was the current Health Secretary Wes Streeting. Its definition states that Islamophobia is “rooted in racism and a type of racism that targets

3 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjrjzp42v4zo>

4 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/12/15/labour-watered-down-islamophobia-definition-still-bad/>

5 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/a-false-compromise/>

6 Cabinet Office, *Code of Conduct for Board Members of Public Bodies* (2019) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d037ebc40f0b609a555f141/Code-of-Conduct-for-Board-Members-of-Public-Bodies-2019-WEB.PDF>

7 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febdbd1a90cfffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”, and has been widely criticised on the grounds that it harms free speech and protects the Islamic faith from criticism. Among the examples it gave of ‘Islamophobia’ was any mention of the presence of Muslims in the ‘grooming gangs’, references to historical episodes in which Islam had been imposed by force on conquered populations and questioning the claims of Muslim majority countries, such as Iran, that other countries, such as Israel, were engaging in ‘genocide’ against Muslims.

By May 2019, the APPG definition had been endorsed by, among others, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. It was then that a coalition of writers, anti-Islamist Muslims, think tanks and campaign groups issued an open letter to the then-Home Secretary, Sajid Javid. This stated that the definition had “negative consequences for freedom of expression, and academic or journalistic freedom”, and if adopted by Government, would “inhibit free speech about matters of fundamental importance”. It would, the letter went on, be “used to effectively shield Islamic beliefs and even extremists from criticism”, so that “formalising this definition will result in it being employed effectively as something of a backdoor blasphemy law”.⁸

Liberal black and minority ethnic critics were especially scathing. According to Pragna Patel, the founder and former director of Southall Black Sisters and the current co-director of the feminist campaign group Project Resistance, the APPG definition served a “profoundly anti-democratic agenda that seeks... to promote a clampdown on free speech and dissent”. In her view, “the very concept of Islamophobia would only serve to shore up religious authoritarianism and the social control of freedom of expression”.⁹ If widely adopted, the definition would silence “feminists, secularists, homosexuals, religious minorities, ex-Muslims and others who oppose religious impositions”.

This briefing builds on the concerns about the Working Group’s bias set out in Young’s letter to Rayner, and further examines the risk that, like its APPG predecessor, the definition now under discussion risks silencing dissent and shielding extremists from criticism.

The reason is simple: evidence that the Working Group’s members not

⁸ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2019/05/islamophobia-definition-unfit-for-purpose-say-campaigners>

⁹ <https://journals.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/feministdissent/article/view/1268>

only supported the 2018 definition, but have been closely associated with Islamists, whose agendas have long seen an official definition of Islamophobia endorsed by the Government as a high priority.

Islamism – the belief that faith should guide politics and policy and that societies must primarily be governed by Shari’ah law – is not a monolithic ideology, but its positions on permitted speech are invariably more restrictive than those grounded in traditional Western norms. Arguably its most liberal interpretation is that contained in Article 21 of the Organisation of Islamic States’ 2021 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. Although this ostensibly upholds the right to free speech, it qualifies this by stating: “Freedom of expression should not be used for denigration of religions and prophets or to violate the sanctities of religious symbols or to undermine the moral and ethical values of society.”¹⁰

Other interpretations are more extreme. In Pakistan, for example, blasphemy offences can attract the death penalty, and as of 2023, there were some 40 prisoners on death row for this ‘crime’ in the Punjab province alone.¹¹ The country, from which a high proportion of British Muslim families originated, has also seen dozens of extrajudicial killings for the same offence, some of whom have been murdered by lynch mobs while awaiting trial.¹² Another victim was the Punjab governor Salman Taseer, assassinated by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri in 2011 for challenging the death sentence awarded to a Christian woman. When Qadri was hanged in 2016, Islamists venerated him as a martyr.¹³ As we shall see, one of the Working Group members recently formed a new national organisation for British Muslims together with an imam who has visited and praised Qadri’s supporters in Pakistan, and arranged speaking engagements for them in Britain.

This briefing will consider especially the links between the Working Group and two national Muslim organisations. The first is the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), with which the then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown banned all official engagement in 2009. The immediate cause was its then-Deputy Secretary-General Daud Abdullah signing a declaration in support of Hamas, saying the “Islamic nation” was obliged to “carry on with the jihad and resistance against the occupier until the liberation of all Palestine”.

¹⁰ https://www.oic-oci.org/upload/pages/conventions/en/CDHRI_2021_ENG.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023%20Pakistan%20Blasphemy%20Issue%20Update.pdf>

¹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/29/man-shot-dead-for-blasphemy-in-pakistan-courtroom>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35684452>

Brown had asked the Royal Navy to help stop weapons being smuggled into Gaza, and the declaration stated that Muslims should regard such activity as “a sinful aggression” that should be “fought” — so legitimising attacks on British ships.¹⁴

Successive coalition and Tory governments maintained the official boycott of the MCB, as does the current administration led by Sir Keir Starmer. Its radicalism persists. Mohammed Kozbar, the MCB’s deputy chief until 2025, was pictured with the late Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Gaza in 2015, where he also visited the grave of the terror group’s founder Shaikh Ahmed Yassin and praised him as the “master of the martyrs of resistance”.¹⁵ He has said it is a “smear” to claim that this means he supports violence against Israel, pointing out that Hamas was only proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000 “in its entirety” in 2021, although its military wing was proscribed 20 years earlier. As chairman of the Finsbury Park mosque, in 2022 Kozbar invited the Egyptian preacher Omar Abdul Kafi to speak, despite the fact he had previously given sermons posted on YouTube urging Muslims to kill Jews.¹⁶ In 2024, the Metropolitan Police removed Kozbar from its Muslim Communities Forum after he shared a post by a leader of the proscribed organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir and shared a video that claimed “Israeli intelligence companies” were “taking control of key functions in our intelligence and police services”.¹⁷

The MCB’s current Secretary-General, Wajid Akhter, argued in 2022 that Muslim parents should teach their children to identify “primarily” as Muslims, and as Britons only second.¹⁸ He also played a central role in The Muslim Vote (TMV), a coalition of some 25 organisations, some of them openly Islamist, which mobilised voters in constituencies with large Muslim populations against Labour’s support for Israel during the 2024 general election. This led to Labour losing four seats to radical Muslim independents, and its candidates drastically reduced the majorities of key Labour figures

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/mar/23/muslim-council-britain-gaza#:~:text=He%20said%20of%20his%20views,for%20attacks%20on%20British%20troops>.

¹⁵ <https://www.thejc.com/news/terrorist-exalted-as-holy-warrior-by-new-deputy-leader-of-british-muslims-c75s4h5g>

¹⁶ <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/london-mosque-hosts-hate-preacher-who-called-9-11-and-charlie-hebdo-attacks-comedy/>

¹⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/02/24/met-cuts-ties-adviser-previously-praised-hamas-founder/>

¹⁸ <https://muslimmatters.org/2022/02/03/did-the-prophet-wear-glasses-raising-children-resilient-muslims/>

such as Wes Streeting.¹⁹ Absent TMV's success, it is arguable there would have been no Working Group on Islamophobia, for TMV has promised it is here to stay, and that its victories in 2024 were "just the beginning" – a far from welcome prospect for the Labour leadership.

In any event, several Working Group members have ties to the MCB, which not only supported the APPG definition when it was issued in 2018, but also issued its own report three years later, which, somewhat bizarrely, claimed the definition did not restrict but enhanced freedom of speech: "Naming a prejudice is not an act of censorship... [but] allows us to express ourselves in a more informed and considerate manner."²⁰

The second organisation is MEND, Muslim Engagement and Development. For a time, it seemed to be inheriting the role from the MCB of national interlocutor between the Government and Muslim communities, and senior politicians of all parties would attend its events. But it too was ostracised after one of its directors claimed that when a young fanatic named Khalid Masood killed five people and injured 50 by driving a car into them outside Parliament in 2017, this was "not terrorism". Later that year, the Henry Jackson Society published evidence²¹ that MEND had regularly hosted extremists and Islamist speakers, and promoted conspiracy theories that claimed Islamophobia was being "intentionally driven" by government policies and "Zionists". In 2023, two days after the October 7th Hamas massacre, MEND's chief executive Azhar Qayyum signed a declaration affirming support for Palestinian armed struggle, saying Israel had to be "dismantled",²² while last year a MEND report said the notion that grooming gangs were predominantly Muslim was a "myth" created by an "Islamophobic narrative".²³

19 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-muslim-council-of-britains-new-leadership/>

20 <https://mcb.org.uk/defining-islamophobia-comprehensive-report-amplifies-what-it-is-what-it-isnt-and-why-it-matters/>

21 <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/mend-islamists-masquerading-as-civil-libertarians/>

22 <https://5pillarsuk.com/2023/10/09/british-muslim-organisations-scholars-activists-defend-palestinian-right-to-resistance/>

23 <https://www.mend.org.uk/debunking-the-racist-muslim-grooming-gangs-narrative/>

The members of the Islamophobia Working Group

The Working Group was chosen and appointed by Rayner and her then-Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Faith, Communities and Resettlement, Lord Khan of Burnley. According to the terms of reference they set down, it would be “reflective of a wide range of perspectives and priorities for British Muslims”.²⁴

However, scrutiny of its members’ past records and associations, both past and present, suggests this is not the case. None of them shared the perspective of black and minority ethnic feminist organisations such as Project Resistance. Instead, they have expressed support or forged links with individuals who have made no secret of their own Islamist beliefs, especially with regard to free speech. This briefing will present evidence in relation to each of the five Group members in turn, concluding with its Chair, Dominic Grieve – whose own role and political trajectory across this field have attracted little attention until now.

Asha Affi

A Somali community worker, Asha Affi was described in Rayner’s media announcement of the Working Group’s membership as an “independent consultant”, giving no detail. However, her record in calling for censorship to combat Islamophobia goes back to 2016, when she presented evidence on behalf of the Council of Somali Organisations to a Commons Select Committee on Home Affairs inquiry into hate crime. In this she and her colleagues said that “the media contribute hugely to increasing Islamophobia in society” and that this made Muslims “vulnerable to revenge”. In their view, journalists should “desist from highlighting [the] ethnicity of perpetrators” – a recommendation that, if adopted, would stifle discussion of Islamist terrorism and grooming gangs.

²⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e12094d8e313b503358c7c/Anti-Muslim_Hatred_Islamophobia_Definition_Working_Group_Terms_of_Reference_March_2025.pdf

As for social media, Affi claimed that some apparently lawful posts constituted “hate crimes” in themselves.²⁵ The committee, which was then chaired by the current Foreign Secretary, Yvette Cooper, appeared to agree, for its report, issued at the start of a general election campaign in May 2017, claimed that social media platforms were indeed “being used to spread hate, abuse and extremism”, much of it Islamophobic. It recommended that the next government should “review the entire legislative framework governing online hate speech”, in order to eliminate “harassment and persecution”.²⁶

This was not Affi’s first appearance in the public square. In May 2010, she stood as a candidate for the far-left, Islamist-aligned Respect Party in the local elections in the East India and Lansbury Ward of the London borough of Tower Hamlets. For the previous five years, Respect’s highest-profile figure had been an MP for the borough where Affi stood — its sometime leader George Galloway.

Galloway’s positions at this time are a matter of record. Having once saluted the “indefatigable” Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein,²⁷ he won his seat in 2005 against a Labour incumbent thanks to support from the Muslim Association of Britain,²⁸ an organisation set up by members of the international Muslim Brotherhood that was later described in Parliament by the former Cabinet minister Michael Gove as having an “Islamist orientation and views”.²⁹ By 2010 he was hosting two separate talk shows each week on Press TV, the channel funded and run by Iran’s Islamist regime, which led to him being reprimanded by Ofcom for breaching its Broadcasting Code.³⁰ In 2008, Galloway said on Channel 5 that Iran did not execute homosexuals simply because they were gay, but only if they were rapists, suggesting that claims to the contrary were “anti-Iranian propaganda”. (In fact, under Iran’s penal code, consensual sex between men can attract the death penalty.³¹) He also lavished praise on Syria’s dictator Bashar al-Assad³² and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah,

25 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/70127/pdf/>

26 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/609/609.pdf>

27 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/george-galloway-the-political-rebel-with-a-cause-7604006.html>

28 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4519575.stm

29 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-68564577>

30 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/aug/03/george-galloway-ofcom-press-tv>

31 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/mar/31/theissueistorture>

32 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4451848.stm

saying he wished to “glorify” its leader Hassan Nasrallah because he was “right to fight Zionist terror”.³³ In 2009, the year before Affi ran for office, Galloway was awarded a Palestinian passport by the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh when he visited him in Gaza.³⁴

All these incidents had received extensive publicity by the time Affi stood for Respect. (She was not elected, polling 603 votes.) Last year, asked about her candidacy by *UnHerd*, she claimed she was not aware of and did not support all Respect’s policies.³⁵

Affi did not respond to a request for comment.

Akeela Ahmed

For many years, Akeela Ahmed has been at the forefront of dialogue between Muslims and successive British governments. She is widely seen as a moderate voice, but she is no free speech liberal, and has long suggested that discourse must be regulated by the state to protect Muslims from harm. In 2018, as Young noted in his letter to Rayner, Ahmed told the APPG on British Muslims that the Islamophobia definition it was then considering must have “legal power”, so that it could be “implemented by the Government and the police”.³⁶



What might this mean? She gave a hint the following year. Speaking as the senior adviser to a Government cross-departmental working group (not to be confused with the Islamophobia group established last year) on anti-Muslim hate, she gave evidence to yet another inquiry into Islamophobia, which was being conducted by the Home Affairs select committee. Islamophobia “cannot simply be reduced to or restricted to hate crime”, she said. It was vital to have a formal definition that tackled the “wider and broader form of discrimination that is far more wider reaching in a British Muslim’s life”.

33 https://web.archive.org/web/20100305175223/http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=9334

34 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7939480.stm

35 <https://unherd.com/2025/05/how-islamism-infiltrated-downing-street/>

36 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cfd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

Lamenting the “biased portrayals of British Muslims in the media, broadcast, print and online”, she said the definition would have to deal with commentators such as the *Sun*’s Trevor Kavanagh, who were “currently able to talk about a ‘Muslim problem’ using racialised and Islamophobic language without it being widely recognised as Islamophobic, or simply being seen as free speech”.

However, she was not only concerned with famous columnists. Also in her sights were “microaggressions during school runs”, and “low-level hatred and negative attitudes that would not [currently] be classed as crimes”.³⁷ Taking such comments together with her insistence that the definition of Islamophobia must be legally enforceable, she seemed to be advocating measures more restrictive than the investigation and recording of some criticisms of Muslims by the police as ‘Non-Hate Crime Incidents’.

In any event, Ahmed’s connections with those who have voiced Islamist views are extensive. She and her husband Nafeez have long been friends of Mudassar Ahmed (no relation), whom Nafeez has described online as “my mate”.³⁸ In fairness, it must be said he did so in the context of supporting victims of an Islamist terrorist attack in 2017. It is, however, a matter of record that Muddassar is a former leader of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC), which tried to mobilise Muslim voters to oust Labour MPs it accused of supporting Israel and the Iraq war. Before the 2005 general election, Muddassar Ahmed had to apologise for an MPAC leaflet that falsely claimed that Lorna Fitzsimons, the Labour MP for Rochdale, had done nothing for Palestinians because she was Jewish.³⁹ (She is not.) Despite the apology, she lost her seat.

In 2006, a report by a Parliamentary inquiry into antisemitism⁴⁰ said MPAC had circulated articles from neo-Nazi and Holocaust denial websites, and claimed that Zionism was an “octopus that penetrates every western nation and pushes it to start World War Three upon Muslims”. The report cited evidence supplied by the Community Security Trust that showed MPAC had claimed that the ancient Jewish Talmud, written many centuries ago, was a “Zionist holy text”.

37 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/98950/html/>

38 <https://www.filmsforaction.org/articles/letter-to-extremists/>

39 <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/race-row-apology-1065474>

40 <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=1274>

This did not stop Starmer from inviting Muddassar to a ‘round table’ meeting with Muslim leaders at Downing St last year. Earlier, shortly before the 2024 election, the future PM attended an *iftar* dinner hosted by Mudassar at the Reform Club to mark the end of the Ramadan fast – together with the now Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Justice Secretary David Lammy and Akeela and Nafeez Ahmed. Muddassar went on to give both Mahmood and Lammy donations of £10,000.

Last year, Mudassar told *UnHerd*⁴¹ he now regrets his career with MPAC. Nevertheless, he still has Islamist friends. In April 2025 he travelled to Turkey to present a “spirit of humanity” award to its Islamist government’s deputy foreign minister Burhanettin Duran. President Recep Erdogan’s wife Emine was named “best global female leader” at the same event. Muddassar Ahmed described his attendance and meetings he held with Turkish ministers as “inspiring” and an “honour”,⁴² although they came shortly after more than 100 opposition politicians were arrested and detained, including the candidate who had been set to run against Erdogan in a presidential election.⁴³ (Akeela Ahmed refused to respond to a request for comment from the FSU, but told *UnHerd* that she knew nothing of Muddassar’s work with MPAC, nor his friendships with Islamists, and had a long record of interfaith dialogue.⁴⁴ Her husband Nafeez told the FSU that Muddassar’s choices and actions had “nothing to do with me”, that he considered MPAC was “stupid and unhelpful”, and was a “massive critic of Erdogan’s regime”.)

Nafeez worked in his youth for the Islamic Human Rights Commission,⁴⁵ which is closely aligned with Iran’s Islamist regime. In 2009 he wrote a paper that described Zionism as a “Jewish heresy” and Israel as a “Settler-Colonial Apartheid regime based on a heretical (anti-Judaic) form of Political Zionism”.⁴⁶ (He later publicly regretted this, and his work with the IHRC.⁴⁷) He has defended the Islamist campaign group CAGE,⁴⁸ which

41 <https://unherd.com/2025/05/how-islamism-infiltrated-downing-street/>

42 https://www.linkedin.com/posts/muddassar-ahmed-44217112_just-returned-from-an-inspiring-and-productive-activity-7318586779933048832-YABj/

43 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yren8mrxp8o>

44 <https://unherd.com/2025/05/how-islamism-infiltrated-downing-street/>

45 http://druckversion.studien-von-zeitfragen.net/Curriculum_Vitae_Nafeez.pdf

46 <https://web.archive.org/web/20160813051319/http://iprd.org.uk/wp-content/plugins/downloads-manager/upload/The%20Origins%20of%20the%20Israel-Palestine%20Conflict%20Settler-Colonialism.%20Apartheid%20and%20Political%20Zionism.pdf>

47 <https://www.nafeezahmed.net/thecuttingedge/2022/5/10/recognising-complexity-in-the-israel-palestine-conflict>

48 <https://x.com/NafeezAhmed/status/627846578154422276>

supports prisoners jailed for terrorist crimes, and personally demanded restrictions on free speech. In 2012, he drafted a document submitted to Lord Justice Leveson's inquiry into the press on behalf of Muddassar's lobbying firm Unitas Communications. It demanded the establishment of a statutory media regulator to enforce mandatory training for journalists on how to cover Muslims and Islam, which should have the power to impose "proper penalties" on those who published Islamophobic content. According to Nafeez's submission, "freedom of speech cannot in any way be used to justify the promulgation of false, inaccurate and racist narratives on British Muslims". These, he said, were "undermining social cohesion".

Last year, shortly before joining the Islamophobia Working Group, Akeela Ahmed urged the Government to end its boycott⁴⁹ of the MCB. By then, she had been working closely for years with Miqdaad Versi, the Director of the MCB's Centre for Media Monitoring. The pair advised the Independent Press Standards Organisation when it drew up restrictive "guidance" for reporting on Islam – a development that the former Equality and Human Rights Commission Chair Sir Trevor Phillips has said is "suppressing thorough and honest journalism" and represents a "surrender to regressive trends".⁵⁰

Meanwhile, although she said she would always be happy to collaborate with the MCB, Ahmed revealed she was setting up a new organisation to engage with officialdom, the British Muslim Network (BMN). In this her co-chair was high-profile imam, Qari Asim, who was sacked in 2022 as a government adviser on Islamophobia by the then-Communities Secretary Michael Gove, on the grounds he was jeopardising freedom of speech. Asim, a Sunni, had supported protests outside cinemas that succeeded in cancelling screenings of the film *Our Lady of Heaven*, which presents a Shia perspective of Islam. The letter dismissing him called this "a campaign to limit free expression" which meant "it is no longer appropriate for you to continue your work with government in roles designed to promote community harmony". (In his defence, Asim insisted he did believe in free speech, and had merely been trying to protect "cohesion in British society" – a term very similar to that used by Nafeez Ahmed in his Leveson inquiry submission.⁵¹)

49 <https://x.com/BBCr4today/status/1894297161292288410>

50 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Eroding-the-free-press.pdf>

51 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leeds-61771695>

Asim has advocated inter-faith dialogue, and was one of several Muslim leaders who met King Charles last February after signing “reconciliation accords” with the Chief Rabbi and other prominent Jews.⁵² However, he has also cultivated contacts with multiple Pakistani religious leaders who supported Taseer’s killer Mumtaz Qadri as a “martyr” for Islam. The Islamism investigator who posts on X as Habibi has compiled a list of 11 such figures whom Asim has visited in Pakistan or invited to speak at mosques in Britain, variously praising them as “incredible”, “remarkable” and “insightful”. (Asked about this last year by *UnHerd*, Asim said he is opposed to blasphemy laws, does not share the Pakistani imams’ view of Qadri, and regards Taseer’s murder as a “repugnant crime”.) In 2022, a Facebook screenshot shows that Asim met Pakistan’s former religious affairs minister Noor ul-Huq Qadri, describing him as “an incredibly knowledgeable, humble, and approachable scholar”. That may be so, but when in government Qadri called for harsh measures against Pakistan’s persecuted Ahmadi Muslim minority, saying “whoever shows sympathy or compassion towards them is neither loyal to Islam nor the state of Pakistan”.⁵³ (Akeela Ahmed told *UnHerd* she did not know of Asim’s links with Qadri’s supporters, and does not share their views.)

However, the BMN, from which she has now stepped down, is not the only new venture set up by Ahmed. She is also the Chief Executive of the British Muslim Trust (BMT), which even as the Working Group was still deliberating last July, received a Government grant that is set to be worth more than £2.5 million from a new Combatting Hatred Against Muslims fund disbursed by Rayner’s department to deal with Islamophobia.

Behind this contract lies an extraordinary, and until now unreported, twist that has considerable relevance to any assessment of the Islamophobia Working Group. The BMT replaced an earlier grantee, Tell MAMA, which had received government cash totalling £6 million since 2012 to monitor anti-Muslim hate crime and to support its victims. This was founded and led by Fiyaz Mughal, a former Liberal Democrat councillor who is vehemently opposed to both Islamist extremism and an official definition of Islamophobia. He has also earned the loathing of more radical elements by founding another organisation, Muslims Against Antisemitism, and stating repeatedly that Jews and Muslims should work together against all form of racism.⁵⁴

52 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ephraim-mirvis-charles-muslim-jewish-buckingham-palace-b2696272.html>

53 https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_pakistani-ahmadi-leaders-fear-backlash-after-new-minority-commission-formation/6189460.html

54 <https://muslimsagainstantisemitism.org/staff/>

If Rayner and Lord Khan had been serious about trying to ensure that the Working Group reflected a “wide range of perspectives”, Mughal would have been an obvious choice for membership. After all, Tell MAMA has assisted thousands of hate crime victims over many years, and published authoritative reports on the nature and origins of this type of offence. But no one from Tell MAMA was appointed. Meanwhile, starting in the summer of 2024, Tell MAMA had been facing a campaign of vilification, featuring critical articles on the left-wing website *Byline Times*⁵⁵ by none other than Akeela’s husband Nafeez Ahmed and allegations made in the House of Lords by a Muslim woman who *did* join Rayner’s Working Group, Baroness Shaista Gohir.

Gohir claimed Tell MAMA suffered from a “lack of transparency” and criticised its “governance”. Lawyers instructed by Tell MAMA rebutted the allegations. But Gohir was protected by parliamentary privilege, and last April, by which time she was serving on the Working Group, she demanded an inquiry into Tell MAMA, saying the public needed to know how much it had spent on salaries and consultancy fees. The Faith Minister Lord Khan stated that the Government had “no concerns” about Tell MAMA’s finances or governance. But Gohir doubled down, claiming, without adducing evidence, that Tory politicians had used Tell MAMA as “a vehicle to monitor extremism” instead of fighting hate crime.⁵⁶

Tell MAMA denied these allegations, but its funding had already been “paused”. In the face of the campaign against it, it decided not to re-apply, and in its place, Government funding worth £2.65 million for the period to the end of March 2028 went to Akeela Ahmed’s BMT. Though registered as a limited company in 2018, this had never traded, and had no experience of handling anti-Muslim hate crime. Gohir had insisted that “Muslim communities do not have trust and confidence in Tell MAMA”.⁵⁷ Whether they will feel more confident in the BMT remains to be seen. In any event, the end of Tell MAMA’s grant has been widely applauded by Islamists.⁵⁸

55 <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/07/18/tell-MAMA-why-is-government-funded-group-under-reporting-muslim-hate-crimes-by-more-than-90/>

56 https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/apr/09/anti-islamophobia-group-tell-mama-should-face-inquiry-says-muslim-peer?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

57 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-05-20/debates/F90BB0E1-FA54-4B6C-A635-039B0E1BCD8B/HateCrimesAgainstMuslimWomen>

58 <https://www.meforum.org/fwi/fwi-news/u-k-islamists-celebrate-cuts-to-hate-crime-monitor>

The official tender documents, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and shared with the FSU, show the Government was looking for “applications from existing third party reporting centres who want to expand their services” – yet when the BMT applied in May 2025, it had no services at all: its helpline did not open until 30th October. The documents also reveal that officials met Ahmed and her lead trustee Shabir Randeree, chair of the King’s Trust International, on 10th June 2025, along with two other applicants. The funding decision was taken the following month.

Every organisation that applied was awarded a score under 16 different headings, with a maximum possible total of 300. The headings asked applicants to describe items such as “your current working relationship with government and other public sector organisations” and “how will the skills and experience of the organisation and its staff lead to the success of the project”. Remarkably enough, despite its inexperience, the BMT scored 290 out of 300.

The BMT has received support from another organisation with Islamist links, the Aziz Foundation, a charity established by the billionaire landlord Asif Aziz. This has campaigned against the Prevent counter-terrorism programme on the grounds it “actively harms Muslims”,⁵⁹ and funds the MCB’s Centre for Media Monitoring.⁶⁰ Last year, a Policy Exchange analysis found the Centre’s work was “repeatedly inaccurate, unfair or biased to an extent that would be unacceptable in any professional news outlet”, while its own literature stated its purpose was to “take control of the narrative” about Islam.⁶¹

59 <https://unherd.com/newsroom/islamophobia-watchdog-role-given-to-prevent-critic-2/>

60 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/charity-bankrolling-london-ramadan-lights-funded-extremism-linked-group-fs4f2xg6>

61 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Bad-Faith-Actor-A-study-of-the-Centre-for-Media-Monitoring-CfMM-1.pdf>

Shaista Gohir

Long before she attacked Tell MAMA, Baroness Gohir had been Chief Executive of the Muslim Women’s Network, a position she still holds. Like Ahmed, in recent years she has taken pains to portray herself as a moderate. Her organisation has supported victims of domestic violence and misogyny, which has brought her into conflict with Muslim conservatives. However, she supported the 2018 APPG definition⁶² and some of her Tweets about Israel and Palestine posted in the last decade suggest she used to be more radical. They have all now been taken down, but the FSU has preserved screenshots. In one, dated 20th July 2014, she declared: “The only reply to a murderer is resistance #FreePalestine.” The same month she was asked whether she accepted that Hamas had invited reprisals by firing rockets against civilian targets in Israel. She responded: “So when Hamas are not chucking their rockets over which [they] don’t do much anyway is Palestinian life great? Israel oppresses them.”



She also claimed the US was “ruled by another country, Israel”, and accused “our politicians” of “pandering” to it, adding: “I am siding [with] Hamas”, suggesting that those who did not “sympathise” should “go over and live just one day of Palestinian life”. In 2014, nine years before allegations of genocide against Israel became widespread during the war that began on 7th October 2023, she was already levelling this charge, saying: “Let’s not compare Hamas empty rhetoric to what Israel are actually doing – slowly finishing off a people. Genocide?”

Recently, she has been less forthright. But Ibtisam Belola, one of Gohir’s Muslim Women’s Network trustees posted on X while the October 7th attack was still taking place that those who said Israel had a right to self-defence were “wilfully ignoring the Palestinian struggle and their legitimacy to defend themselves against occupation”, while the attacks were justified “resistance”.

Gohir has insisted neither she nor her son, Faris, who until last year was running her parliamentary office, is antisemitic. However, he posted claims that Israel “faked” the October 7th massacre by spraying fake blood on

62 <https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/mediaStatementDetail.php?id=209>

the floor of homes whose inhabitants had, in reality, been butchered, accompanying this claim with a photo of a murder scene and a laughing face emoji.

Gohir has suggested that to raise concern about the Muslim heritage of child sex grooming gangs is Islamophobic, lending weight to Young's fear that the pending definition may make it impossible to report on Muslims "doing anything wrong". In 2013, she wrote a report saying "right-wing populist groups have used this issue to fuel racism and Islamophobia, ignoring evidence that sexual exploitation occurs in every community and that the majority of offenders are White". She had discovered that those who preyed on Asian victims mainly shared their heritage, but reassured her readers that this did not mean that "sexual exploitation is more of a problem in Asian and/or Muslim communities". She also suggested that the issue was being exploited by the extreme-right BNP, and attacked *The Times* over articles that said that grooming gangs were of disproportionately Muslim heritage. According to Gohir, they were based on "spurious statistics" and rested on "shaky foundations".⁶³

The FSU approached Gohir for comment on all of the above. In her reply, she did not address any of the points we raised, complaining that instead of engaging with its substance, the FSU was asking about "selectively quoted historical social media posts, the views of people connected to me, and conjecture about motives". She added: "The focus on personal histories rather than the actual text strongly suggests difficulty in challenging the definition on its merits. Attempts to discredit the work by attacking individuals are not only inappropriate but undermine meaningful debate about how anti-Muslim hatred should be understood and addressed."

63 https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf

Javed Khan

Khan is a former head of Barnardo's who runs the Muslim think tank Equi, whose trustees include the Labour MP Afzal Khan. Afzal has supported interfaith work with Jews,⁶⁴ but has also served as Assistant General-Secretary of the MCB, and as its northwest England representative. In 2019 Afzal Khan was forced to apologise for sharing a Facebook post that referred to the "Israel-British-Swiss-Rothschilds crime syndicate" and "mass murdering Rothschilds Israeli mafia criminal liars". He claimed he had not noticed its antisemitic wording when he reposted it.⁶⁵



Last July, months before the Working Group submitted its definition and advice, Equi published a report by a political scientist, Dr Sinan Siyech. His recommendations were dirigiste and far-reaching. In his view, anti-Muslim hatred was such a grave threat to "social cohesion" – that phrase again – that the Government should run a "national public campaign" to include "training, workshops and resources to help people critically evaluate online content and reduce the spread of harmful misinformation".⁶⁶ Islamophobia, it seemed, was to be brought within the ambit of what has been termed the publicly-funded censorship-industrial complex.⁶⁷ As for Khan, giving evidence to a Commons committee in April 2025, when the Working Group was already at work, he blamed Islamophobia on "media and social media", which spread "fake news about Muslims". He said an official definition was "essential", because it would "help law enforcement track and combat Islamophobic hate much more effectively than currently happens"⁶⁸

On 25th September 2025, flanked by the former Scottish first minister Humza Yousaf, Khan opened the UK branch of the Muslim Impact Forum (MIF). In his speech, he said there was a need for many more Muslims

64 <https://www.afzalkhan.org.uk/news/2024/11/14/my-work-on-british-muslims-and-islamophobia-a-comprehensive-look/>

65 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-49130905>

66 <https://equi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/EQUI-%E2%80%93-June-2025-Short-Report.pdf>

67 <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/Biden-WH-Censorship-Report-final.pdf>

68 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15762/pdf/>

“at the top of government, in every government in this country, across the four nations, and in other governments that can influence, sit at the top table and make a difference on behalf of the Muslims”. After all, he said, there were already four million Muslims in the UK, and their numbers were “growing fast”.

First launched at a gala event in Istanbul in April, the MIF brings together senior figures from global politics and business, and is indelibly linked to the authoritarian, Islamist government led by President Erdogan. Photos of his wife Emine appear on its website, giving a speech at an MIF event.⁶⁹ Another MIF luminary and speaker is Shabir Randeree, Akeela Ahmed’s BMT trustee. Its next big occasion is another three-day event in Istanbul set for April 2026 at which Yousaf is again billed to speak. Its partners include Muddassar Ahmed’s firm Unitas Communications, and TRT, Turkey’s pro-government propaganda network.

The MIF backed the flotilla led by Greta Thunberg that tried to break Israel’s blockade of Gaza last October, claiming on social media that its interception by Israel was “an illegal attack on unarmed humanitarians”.

70

However, there is also stronger meat on the MIF website, in the shape of an interview filmed at the MIF’s launch in April with Asim Qureshi, the research director at the terrorist support group CAGE. In 2015, Qureshi provoked outrage by describing Mohammed ‘Jihadi John’ Emwazi, the ISIS executioner who decapitated prisoners on video, as a “beautiful young man”.⁷¹

In his MIF interview, Qureshi says Muslims have to band together in order “to actually end a settler colonial apartheid state”, adding that he hoped the “conversations” he planned to have with the MIF’s leaders and funders would “refocus their efforts towards that goal, *inshallah*”.

He added: “I think as an *ummah*, we have to ask ourselves the difficult question, which is, what is our relationship to a state that shouldn’t be

69 <https://muslimimpactforum.com/events/mif-2026/>

70 <https://www.facebook.com/muslimimpactforum/photos/the-dismantling-of-the-global-sumud-flotilla-is-a-sign-of-how-far-humanitarian-n/122129040542945953/>

71 <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-31650427>

allowed to exist. So, if we agree that settler colonisation is a profound evil in the world, and we agree that apartheid is a profound evil in the world, and that Israel actually is both of those things at the same time, then we have to ask ourselves the difficult question of why is this thing allowed to exist?”⁷²

Khan did not respond to a request for comment.

Dominic Grieve

It has already been noted above that Grieve wrote a Foreword to the 2018 APPG report, *Islamophobia Defined*. In this he stated that Islamophobia was “playing a major role and in undermining integration and community cohesion”. Much of it was “subtle and goes unreported”, but that was why he “greatly welcomed” the report, for he had “no doubt” that “action” by the state was needed. A second Foreword, by Wes Streeting and the then-Tory MP Anna Soubry, added: “We hope our working definition will be adopted by Government, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and principally, British Muslim communities who have been central to this enterprise and whose valuable contributions have significantly shaped our thinking on this subject.”⁷³



It has not been widely noticed that with this, Grieve appeared to be taking a position sharply at odds with his views a few years earlier. Indeed, some of the public statements he made in the period up to 2013 could well have been classed as ‘anti-Muslim hostility’.

For example, in a major Tory Party speech he gave in March 2009, Grieve said he feared that “the growth of ethnic and cultural diversity and the identity politics that flows from it” posed “a serious challenge” to civil society. Under the then-Labour government, there had been “more than a decade of courting self-appointed heads of minority groups and pandering to special interest lobbies”, and enforced “political correctness”. He cited a recent case: the banning of hot cross buns in a school lest they offend Muslim students, although “no Muslim had complained”. More seriously,

⁷² <https://muslimimpactforum.com/dr-asim-queeshi-confronting-complicity-in-oppression/>
⁷³ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cfd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ccee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

Grieve said, “the reluctance to challenge negative cultural imports into our country by some immigrants, including discriminatory practices against women and corrupt political and electoral practices, is one of the most troubling consequences of a culture that wishes to avoid offence and accusations of racism”. That sounds like the kind of statement that would fall foul of the proposed definition of anti-Muslim hostility.

Grieve claimed Britain was suffering from an “identity breakdown”, which had led even young Muslims to believe they were “living in a society without any values”. He left his audience in no doubt that all this threatened freedom of speech. It was vital, Grieve said, “to debate all non-violent views in our society, however disagreeable we may personally find them... Freedom under law requires freedom of thought and expression.” But this was now in jeopardy, for “we are being told the opposite – that the price of diversity must be restrictions on freedom, and this trend has been promoted in the name of multiculturalism”.⁷⁴

Grieve expressed opinions of a similar, bracing ilk on further occasions. One was an interview published in 2010 by Tariq Modood, a sociology professor at Bristol University. Grieve told him that although he often met Muslims who were “perfectly pleasant”, they also had views that were “incompatible with our national and historical tradition”. Only a “tiny minority” might wish to detonate suicide bombs on the London Underground, but “there are actually quite a large number of them who, whilst they might be quite grateful for the fact that they are living in a pluralist society rather than being persecuted somewhere else, actually want to live in a society that is very different”. According to Grieve, many Muslims wanted to “change society to the image [they] believe is fundamentally important for the salvation of humanity,” and this made “living in a pluralist democracy like the United Kingdom very difficult”.⁷⁵

Three years later Grieve claimed that political “corruption” was rife in Britain’s Pakistani heritage community, because its members came “from backgrounds where corruption is endemic... One of the things you have to make absolutely clear is that it’s not acceptable.”⁷⁶ Inevitably, after this

74 Dominic Grieve, *Multiculturalism – A Conservative Vision of a Free Society*, Lord Smith lecture delivered on 4th March 2013, https://git.macropus.org/conservative-speeches/speeches/2008/12/dominic_grieve_multiculturalism_-_a_conservative_vision_of_a_free_society.html

75 http://www.tariqmodood.com/uploads/1/2/3/9/12392325/who_doesnt_feel_british.pdf

76 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10469448/Corruption-rife-in-the-Pakistani-community-says-minister.html>

interview Grieve was accused of racism. This he denied.⁷⁷

If there is a thread linking such statements with those made later by Grieve 2.0, it appears to be his concern that Muslims were not well integrated into British civil society and public life. But while he had once blamed this problem on Muslims' religious and political attitudes, he later came to identify a very different culprit – Islamophobia. Muslims, it seemed, were no longer to be held responsible for their own supposed alienation. It stemmed instead from anti-Muslim hatred.

What might have influenced this shift? It may have been the company Grieve began to keep.

In 2017, the year before he wrote the Foreword to the APPG report, Grieve chaired a Citizens' Commission convened to consider "Islam, Participation and Public Life". Its report,⁷⁸ *The Missing Muslims*, named the MCB's then Chair, Muhammad Abdul Bari, as a key "advisor". It also listed the members of a "Muslim leadership group" that Grieve and his colleagues consulted. Among them were none other than Akeela Ahmed and her friend Qari Asim, and the MCB's media monitoring chief Miqdaad Versi. Joining them were Sahar al-Faifi, MEND's regional organiser in Wales, who in a June 2017 Facebook post blamed the London Bridge terrorist attack that killed 11 people on "pro-Zionists, pro-war individuals such as Robert Rosenkranz, Lord Ashcroft and Lord Kalms the owner of Dixons".⁷⁹ She had also tweeted support for Hamas.⁸⁰ Also acknowledged was Shenaz Bunglawala, MEND's former head of research.

For Grieve, the Citizen's Commission marked a watershed. In place of his staunch defence of free speech and attacks on political correctness, its report said "anti-Muslim prejudice" and "recent media reporting" had targeted Muslims unfairly. And part of the solution, included in its recommendations, was for "the Government to adopt a definition of anti-Muslim prejudice".

The Tory Government of the day did not oblige, but the APPG on British Muslims took up the reins. Its 2018 report containing Grieve's Foreword

⁷⁷ <https://www.thetimes.com/best-law-firms/profile-legal/article/we-are-too-respectful-of-other-cultures-z9txcv52mk9>

⁷⁸ https://citizensuk.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Missing_Muslims_Report.pdf

⁷⁹ <https://order-order.com/2019/11/18/plaids-taffy-jihadi-blamed-lord-ashcroft-london-terror-attack/>

⁸⁰ <https://bod.org.uk/bod-news/board-of-deputies-statement-on-suspended-plaid-cymru-activist-sahar-al-faifi/>

and its Islamophobia definition duly followed. Like Angela Rayner in her announcement about the Working Group last year, the report insisted on page 11 that it had no intention of trying to impose limits on free speech or stifle legitimate criticism of religion. But two paragraphs further on it stated that “our deliberations on the appropriate limits to free speech” had been guided by what it called “the harm principle”, for “the tensions arising between freedom of speech and freedom of religion” in any democratic society had to be “negotiated”. And at a time when “Muslim communities in the UK are experiencing heightened levels of Islamophobia”, they were essential.

It is likely that some of those who shaped the report had very different ideas about what might constitute harmful, Islamophobic speech to a white, wealthy, formerly liberal-minded KCs such as Grieve. For example, it acknowledged the “considerable support” and “immensely valuable help” provided by Dr Antonio Perra. On his own LinkedIn page, Perra stated he had “co-edited” it. Strangely, the report failed to note that until July 2018, he had been the senior policy analyst at MEND.⁸¹

The report also repeatedly cites⁸² evidence given to the APPG by a Professor David Miller of the University of Bristol – the academic later sacked for his anti-Zionism, who nowadays makes his living as a talk show host on the Iranian regime channel Press TV.⁸³ Responding to this year’s huge protests that were bloodily crushed by regime forces, leaving thousands dead, he has urged the regime to show “no leniency towards saboteurs”, and to “liquidate the Zionist threat”.⁸⁴ He has also posted on the need to eradicate what he calls “Jewish supremacy”.⁸⁵

Asked to comment by the FSU, Grieve said it was true that his interest in Islamophobia had originated in his concern that Muslims were not “well integrated” into civil society and public life. But he denied his opinions on how to achieve this had changed, saying: “The two problems you cite, of a problem of integration due to religious and political attitudes and suffering anti-Muslim hatred which excludes you from your host society are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary they are mutually reinforcing, which helps create deeper divisions and makes understanding and integration

81 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Defining-Islamophobia.pdf>

82 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

83 <https://www.presstv.ir/aboutus/details/103>

84 <https://x.com/ZacGoldsmith/status/2009929124366721164>

85 https://www.instagram.com/reels/DSven_MCIQv/

harder.” Over time, he said, “generalised anti-Muslim hatred” had become more widespread.

As to his contacts with those who held extreme opinions, he said: “I appreciate that governments face difficult choices in determining whether to engage with individuals who articulate views that appear to be incompatible with pluralist democracy. But as an individual, I think that a willingness to listen, try to understand the perspective of the other and then challenge and try to influence is important, which is what I have set out to do.” He also said that although he had written the Foreword to the 2018 APPG report, he did not attend its evidence sessions or decide whom they should consult.

Conclusion

This briefing has deepened and amplified the concern raised in Lord Young's letter to Angela Rayner last July: that the connections, backgrounds and previous statements by members of the Islamophobia Working Group suggest that it neither met the necessary standards of objectivity, nor reflected the perspectives of Muslims who reject both Islamism and Islamists' demand for an official definition of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate. That it did not include a representative from Tell MAMA, the principal organisation that spent public funds to combat anti-Muslim hate crime during the period 2012 – 25, is inexplicable, especially since it did include one of its main adversaries, as well as the Chief Executive of the new organisation that has taken its place.

The late Christopher Hitchens once commented in a famous debate on free speech that the term Islamophobia was “beginning to acquire the opprobrium that was once reserved for racial prejudice”. This, he said, was intolerable, for he claimed the right to treat all religion “with ridicule, hatred, and contempt”.

But this right was under threat, and although militant Islam was a powerful, global force, backed by enormous wealth, able to warp the minds of the young and inflict great violence, in the West it posed “as a cringing minority whose faith you might offend, which deserves all the protection that a small and vulnerable group might need”. To give into its demands for censorship, Hitchens said, would mean “giving away what's most precious in your own society, and... giving it away without a fight”.⁸⁶

This briefing supports what has been the FSU's position since long before the Working Group was announced: that any definition would either be pointless, since anti-Muslim hate crime and discrimination are rightly condemned by existing law, or represent an intrusion into essential freedoms.

⁸⁶ <https://christophererichitchens.com/free-speech-university-of-torontos-hart-house-debating-club/>

The Dominic Grieve who once denounced identity politics and worried that “the price of diversity must be restrictions on freedom” appeared to share that view. Then, like Hitchens before him, he was right.

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