

**Coping with the Backlash in the Wake of
9/11
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Transcript of presentation given at the seminar, 'Human Rights, Justice and Muslims in the Wake of September 11, 2001' organised by Islamic Human Rights Commission.

I've been asked to talk briefly about our local perspective on the Muslim community in Swansea about how we have dealt with and coped with the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in America by persons unknown. We recognised straight away that there was going to be a backlash, as we had a precedent with Oklahoma City bombing to give us a reason for suspecting we would become a target.

We had played about with the idea of setting up an organisation to deal with racial attacks, harassment, Islamophobia in general and its many branches as far back February 1999 / 2000 when Islamic Human Rights Commission launched its report into anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment in the UK and since then it never really took off until the Oldham riots. When things were quite hot up in the north no-one was looking at South Wales. Swansea is actually a town very much like Oldham which has been targeted by the BNP in an aggressive manner, but fortunately the youth have not been provoked into responding to the type of unacceptable provocation which occurred in Oldham.

So we did was decided on an acronym RAHMA which obviously Muslims understand means the mercy or compassion – Racial Attacks and Harassment Monitoring Association. We set it up because we feel that local Race Equality Councils only focused on racial attacks and harassment, and we need to provide a purely religious perspective and recognise that some attacks against Muslims in particular have nothing to do with racial motives but are motivated by religious animosity rather than anything else.

So what we have seen since 9/11 is a marked increase in attacks and harassment against Muslims. In Swansea they have ranged from the lower end of the scale from spitting and verbal abuse to death threats in the post and bomb scares, attacks on property, vandalism and physical attacks on individuals. There have been according to some reports in South Wales 180 racially motivated attacks in South Wales alone. In Swansea our organisation has had reports of in excess of 30 and we know that that is the very small tip of a very large iceberg. The Muslim community for various reasons are not reporting things. The reasons vary and include the lack of faith in the police and the belief that they may not take the incidents seriously; some still have a colonised mentality that we should not complain, that we should not make waves that we should suffer silently. They tend to be from the older generation but not exclusively.

There are others who think that with incidents such as being verbally abused in the street it will be hard to find the perpetrators as they can only give very sketchy descriptions and that the case may not amount to anything. So we formed an organisation that would help the Muslim community deal with these problems in an active and organised manner.

Initially we only had about 50 members, now we have in excess of 200. The community we – and we leave it up to them to be as active or passive as they wish - some members just give their email addresses and we inform them of anti-Muslim, Islamophobic articles and news programmes and we give them the avenues and causes to complain and protest about these things. Other people are actively going around the community and collecting reports of incidents and reporting them so that we can report them to the

police on their behalf if they do not feel confident, although of course at some stage they have to deal with the police themselves.

So since then we have contacted schools because we noticed that it was mainly the women and children in the community that were suffering the most. Obviously cowards pick on the most vulnerable in the community. There have been many incidents in schools ranging again from silly comments e.g. by prefects saying we can't let you into the school because you may be carrying a bomb and things like that to one ten year old girl having her *kehimar*¹ or *hijab*² forcibly removed outside the school gates. We realised that there were lots of problems within schools so sent a lot of letters out and guidelines out to schools so that they would be aware of the attacks. So went sent letters out to something like 70schools and copied them to the local authority head of education and the race equality council so that the people knew that other people received these letters and they couldn't just file them away and not act upon them. We have also identified the key movers and shakers and key decision and policy makers and we are targeting them on Islamophobia on the causes of the Oldham riots and so on so that they are made aware of the very real problem of Islamophobia in the UK and Muslim victimisation and demonisation in this country. We identify key policy makers including officers in the Minority Support Unit, the local assembly - obviously coming from Wales we have our own assembly, key people within the council, MPs, key people within the racial equality council and so on. We distribute this information as widely as possible so that hopefully we can get as many people on side so that more people can campaign with us to get a change in the law.

I don't know what was discussed here before I came here. I was hoping to listen to the other speakers and maybe tailor broadly what I had to say to their points of view but I haven't been able to hear them, so speaking off the cuff as I am I may disagree with some of their points I don't know. But we know that David Blunkett has spoken about new legislation he wants to bring out something very rushed and hurried - legislation to protect against religiously motivated crimes or incitement to religious hatred. What we are campaigning for is Islamophobia to be recognised in exactly the same way as anti-Semitism. What we are asking for at least in Swansea and we hope nationally is that we are not going to be happy with any legislation that is woolly and claims to cover everybody when it is clearly Muslims at this time that are being attacked and harassed. It is not the Hindus or Buddhists or Bahais, and the fact that some Sikhs have been attacked is only because they unfortunately resemble Muslims.

So we know that the current race relations law has major loopholes that are being exploited by the BNP and fascist groups and that its long overdue that something is done about that. We feel that although the Jewish community, Sikhs and Rastafarians are protected under race relations law, the Jewish community are in an enviable position in that they are protected against anti-Semitism. I do not know what form that legislation or case law takes as I am not a lawyer but whatever it is, it is extremely effective in the way they have worded things and even if the Muslim community have protection where they copy the words verbatim and where there is written 'anti-Semitism' write Islamophobia and where they have the word 'Jew' to be replaced by Muslim I think that probably is the best protection we can get in the UK because we can see the results of that in that the kinds of attacks, harassment even irresponsible and libellous often

¹ Head covering
² head covering

slanderous comments made against Muslims in the media would never ever be tolerated if the victim were Jewish. In the UK if you get the word anti-Semite attached to you might as well be called a paedophile - you are finished. Your career is finished, you become a social pariah. We look forward to the day in the UK when the word Islamophobe is equated with anti-Semite with paedophile and it is seen that it is something so disgusting and vile that people do not want this to stick to them or follow them. That is what we as an organisation are doing and we hope that other groups in the UK are set up to do similar things and we hope that this will be a new direction and that we will get some proper legislation to protect us.

One final thing, putting this in a global perspective whatever we do in the UK to protect ourselves I think it should be clear in our own minds that this is not the reaction of a selfish part of the *ummah*³ which is suddenly experiencing suffering this type of attacks and harassment – in fact they are something we have been facing for a long time, its just intensified at the moment. This is not a selfish part of the *ummah* which is suffering a little bit in comparison to Iraq, Kashmir, Chechenia and Afghanistan our suffering pales into comparison with whatever is happening to them. But that we see what we are doing in he UK to remove the demonisation of Muslims globally – that if we make it unacceptable in Britain in a lot of countries even those ruled by Muslims but which treat Islam and Muslims in an oppressive and suppressive manner will follow like puppies whatever governments in the West do. If we make it unacceptable to have such policies here then I a sure in places like Turkey they will follow not out of sincerity but to be like their old former colonial masters.

If there is anything that I have said which is beneficial then please feel free to use it and adapt it. If there is anything that I have said of no value then please fell free to leave it.

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This presentation was given at 'Human Rights, Justice & Muslims in the Wake of September 11' organised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies, London, UK in October 2001. For a copy of the seminar video or more information, please contact IHRC on (+44) 20 8902 0888, fax (+44) 20 8902 0889, email: info@ihrc.org, web: www.ihrc.org.uk

³ entire Muslim community