

The Hidden Victims of September 11: The Backlash Against Muslims in the UK

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I. Introduction

Due to the lack of any organized UK wide effort to monitor reprisal attacks against Muslims after 9/11 IHRC committed itself to do so. It found through its work both a sudden and drastic surge in aggression towards Muslims. Almost a year on, the initial escalation in serious violent attacks against Muslims, since the immediate aftermath, seems to have fallen, but this is still far from the ideal situation. Muslims still have violence directed towards them simply because they are Muslim. The level of implicit Islamophobia however after an initial drop, has remained significant throughout the year.

Islamophobic images seem forever forced in to the minds of non-Muslims as a direct result of the media onslaught on 9/11 and thereafter. With the approach of the one year anniversary of the attacks, the media, if it continues to be as irresponsible as it was immediately after 9/11, will reconstruct the fervour against Muslims through the stereotypes it relays to the nation, where Muslims are depicted as the archetypal international terrorist as well as the unsuspected neighbour. Bearing in mind that the media is a source of reference for most people, it is crucial that it is not used to incite hatred. If the media continues to use its power in a way that is foreseeably damaging to the safety of a minority group, it will almost certainly fuel antagonisms that will lead yet again, to more aggression towards that minority.

Collating information in a methodical way has been difficult to say the least. IHRC has gathered reports of incidents themselves as well as from other organisations that are trying to do the same. Other than this however, there has been very little if any input of resources into assessing in any systematic way the impact of 9/11 on Muslims. However recent research conducted in Leicester found that out of the five religious groups assessed, 'Muslims were found to have not only the greatest risk of being victims of both implicit racism and general discrimination before September 11th but also the highest increase in experiences of racism and discrimination since that day and consequently the greatest risk of being victims'.¹ The report goes further and concludes that religion is more important than ethnicity in indicating which groups are most likely to experience racism and discrimination post-September 11th.² This seems to indicate an openly significant shift in perspectives with regards to society in general. In addition racist organisation such as the BNP have capitalised on this new found tolerance of intolerance against Muslims to propagate their agenda. Their appeal seems to have suddenly broadened.

Although councils across the country do generally monitor racially motivated crime, those who were willing to share their information still failed to take into account whether such crime was on the grounds of religion.³ This is yet another factor which hindered

¹ Dr Lorraine Sheridan 'Effects of the Events of September 11th 2001 on Discrimination and Implicit Racism in Five Religious and Seven Ethnic Groups: A brief Overview.' University of Leicester 2002

² Ibid

³ An exception is David Landau of Redbridge Racial Equality Council, who was kind enough to break down his findings from 9/11 to early 2002 for our report.

attempts to gather information as well as attempts to break down and divide the results on regional bases, as any attempt to do so would simply yield grossly inaccurate results.

The lack of any involvement, specifically government initiatives, to tackle the growing intolerance has been criticised by organisations other than ourselves. Minority Rights Group International has also warned that ‘without positive engagement by the government with the causes of Islamophobia, polarisation between communities and expressions of antagonism against British Muslims will continue.’⁴ It is interesting to note that other minority groups have also added their voices to the chorus of Islamophobia. ‘Mistaken identity’ posters have gone up in parts of the country stating ‘Sikhs are not Muslims, Sikhs are not terrorists’. Although this may seem like a misfired attempt at protecting the Sikh community, it seems that right wing factions of the other communities such as parts of the Hindu community are also doing their bit in collaboration with the BNP.⁵ Although these attitudes are not the case for every member of either the Sikh or Hindu community it is nonetheless an alarming situation and one which spells disaster for Muslims.

II. Nature and cases

1. Verbal and written abuse

The kind of verbal and written abuse reported has varied from offensive through to obscene and / or threatening. This includes malicious phone calls and written death threats which were received by many if not most of the Muslim institutions that IHRC made contact with. However malicious phone calls and death threats were also received by individuals. In one particular case an English convert had been receiving threatening letters telling him and his family to leave his current address or die. He was stabbed just days later. After the council re-housed him, a week after the attack, he received another letter to his new address threatening to do the job properly.

In addition to shouting abuse at individuals in public, there have also been several cases where congregations of worshippers were abused whilst praying by persons entering the place of worship at prayer times and leaving before prayers were completed.

Women and children comprised the largest group that suffered the greatest number of verbal abuse and children especially experienced a dramatic rise in anti-Muslim or Islamophobic incidents at school.

Approximately half of the verbal written abuse reported involved death threats.

⁴ Minority Rights Group International, Press release, 4 September 2002

⁵ Details on the BNP website

2. Discrimination

Discrimination takes various forms and takes place in equally varied settings. School children are again the main victims of discrimination where they have faced great pressure at school from peers and worst still, school teachers also. Some school teachers have openly stated their disdain for Muslims and in one particular school Muslim children were taken aside so that their views on Osama bin Laden and the twin tower attacks could be assessed.

Other forms of discrimination reported include economic boycotting. Some Muslim run businesses have reported a significant drop in non-Muslim custom since the 9/11 attacks.

Work related discrimination has also been reported.

3. Psychological harassment and pressure

A number of those reporting incidents to IHRC and of those calling in generally or for advice have stated that either they or someone they know has felt pressurised into doing something contrary to their religious principles due to fear for their physical safety. This type of incident ranges from Muslim women removing their hijab (headscarf) to Muslim men shaving off their beards. There is also a general sense in which Muslims feel that they are being pushed to feel some sort of responsibility by wider society.

Muslim people have reported being wary of leaving home. At least two Muslim schools felt that they could not open in the days immediately following the September 11 attacks, for fear of reprisals.

Other cases include verbal abuse and discrimination against children at school. Whilst these also fall under the sub-categories above and below, IHRC sees them as being psychologically disturbing for their victims, some of whom are as young as 4 years of age. Incidents include children being isolated or being informed by their non-Muslim friends that their parents will no longer allow them to play with Muslim children. In some schools disparaging remarks about Islam and Muslims have been made in the presence of teachers and gone unchallenged and in a number of cases have been made by teachers themselves. In one incident that took place on the afternoon of September 11, a teacher announced the news of the attacks on the WTC to a class of 12 year olds saying 'the Palestinians have attacked America.' Needless to say this was an irresponsible description, but sadly one which will have a profound impact on the impressionable minds of pupils. In another incident a young child was given two weeks of detention for making what was deemed by the teacher to be a pro-Bin Laden remark.

Other forms of bullying have included taunting by non-Muslim children that Muslim children are murderers etc.

Much of the community perceives that they are being shunned by the non-Muslim population e.g. people who were previously friendly have begun to ignore and avoid Muslims they know. There is a general feeling that there is a sense of tension in public arenas where visible Muslims are present. This has been compounded in areas where anti-Muslim graffiti e.g. the slogans in South Shields and Liverpool calling for Muslims to be killed, create a highly pressurised public environment.

In some cases where harassment was reported to the police, the advice given to the victims was to 'stay at home.' This is particularly worrying for IHRC. The current spate of attacks on Muslims clearly creates a pressure on Muslims to remove vestiges of their identity or retreat from public arenas in order to protect themselves and this should be recognised as a form of harassment in itself. Police advice that victims should stay at home is a depressing acknowledgement, albeit unintentional, that such harassment is acceptable. IHRC recognises that police forces around the country are overstretched. However this type of advice without any other form of victim support is not acceptable as it legitimises the further isolation and marginalisation of an already excluded community.

4. Serious crimes of violence

(i) Physical violence

Physical violence has ranged from pushing, shoving, being spat at to violent attacks leaving victims hospitalised and in one case paralysed.

A large number of reported incidents included being spat on, other cases involve egg and rotten fruit etc being thrown at Muslims.

Many reported cases involved Muslim women having their head scarves forcibly pulled off and or having alcohol thrown at them. These types of incidents are serious assaults in themselves but comprise an added element of spite. They have a particularly humiliating aspect to them, to a Muslim a head scarf is not just an item of clothing and alcohol is not just any drink. In an incident reported, a schoolgirl had her headscarf pulled off by a parent of another child at the school gates - to the sound of laughter by those watching.

IHRC has received direct reports of serious physical assaults including beatings and kicking's and has also monitored press coverage of attacks. Amongst the most severe assaults, there have been: at least three clubbing incidents with bats, an attack on a child with pepper spray and a Muslim being deliberately run over by a car. The example of a 55 year old woman who was stabbed in the head and face as she got out of her car is not the only incident of its kind.

Three rape cases were also reported although details were not disclosed. Whilst there has been no official recognition that these cases may have an anti-Muslim component there is a strong feeling from amongst those from which the victims hail that an anti-Muslim component is indeed part of the violence.

(ii) Criminal damage

Systematic attacks against Muslim institutions such as mosques and Islamic centres have taken place over the year. However individuals were also victims to horrendous acts of violence against their property. An attack on a Muslim owned house in an area predominantly housing Muslims was subject to a petrol bomb attack. The attack took place at around midnight after the telephone lines and power and alarm cables were deliberately cut. The victim having returned at a later date to assess the damage found anti-Muslim messages on the blackened walls and unequivocally linked his own experience with the attacks in America.

In the majority of cases there were repeated and persistent attacks on the victims' property. Damage included graffiti, arson, general destruction and more sinisterly, petrol bombing.

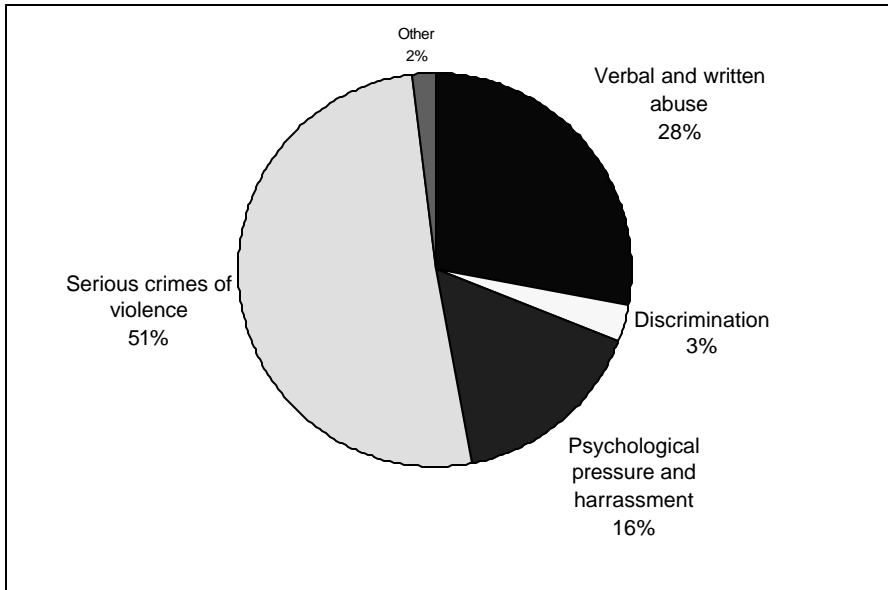
In a number of incidents Mosques had dog excrement put through their letterboxes and in one particular case a Muslim graveyard was vandalised and graves desecrated.

The use of alcohol both poured through letterboxes or in and around property is again noticeable.

III. Breakdown of cases reported.

Breakdown

Categories	Numbers
Verbal and written abuse	188
Discrimination	20
Psychological pressure and harassment	108
Serious crimes of violence	344
Other	14



IV. Conclusions and recommendations

The backlash against Muslims has shown that there is a direct and noticeable link between the 9/11 attacks and the widespread discrimination and racism against Muslims in the UK. It is important to recognise therefore that world events do aggravate social prejudices in other countries. It is also interesting to note that Muslims of English origin have also experienced and reported a drastic increase in Islamophobia directed against them. This reiterates our findings that the prejudice and violence the Muslim community experiences is based primarily on the grounds of their religion as opposed to race alone.

IHRC is aware that that the vast majority of incidents including serious physical assaults go unreported. IHRC also notes that women and children have been particularly targeted. Many of the victims we interviewed expressed views that showed signs of a serious lack of confidence in the police to deal effectively and efficiently with the crime being reported. This in itself would consequently put them, the victims in a more vulnerable position. We are also deeply concerned that there is a chronic shortage of victim support schemes both in mainstream and Muslim communities.

Whilst this report focuses largely on the statistical breakdown of incidents reported it should be noted that the nature of incidents, however few, in any given category have very worrying implications. The number of businesses reporting economical boycotts may so far be relatively small, but the possible repercussions and implications are profound. The historical precedents of economic boycotts, particularly in 1930s Germany, should sound alarm bells. This is compounded by the fact that both the British National Party and the National Front have called for such action to be taken at various times in the last year.

The recommendations made in the previous Backlash report still stand with little amendment:

- I. Victims of crime and other forms of harassment should be encouraged to report these incidents to the police and monitoring groups such as IHRC. Third party reporting mechanisms must also be organised for those victims who do not want to report incidents directly to the police.
- II. The government and appropriate agencies should encourage and support the development of community based support groups and networks.
- III. The law should be changed and the current protection afforded to other religious communities under the Race Relations Act 1976 should be extended to include Muslims.
- IV. The proposed legislation to make incitement to religious hatred a criminal offence should be carefully drafted so that legitimate religious, political and philosophical debate is not stifled.
- V. Muslim organisations should become more security conscious both in terms of their own physical security as well as the security of their congregations. They should develop into first points of call and reference for victims and agencies when dealing with the type of incidents detailed above.
- VI. Muslim organisations should organise Muslim groups in local areas to assist the community to maintain a high level of security, as the Jewish community already does.
- VII. That the government, police and other relevant agencies should provide similar support and training to such groups as has been given to the Community Security Trust and other Jewish groups concerned with security issues for their community.
- VIII. That police include anti-religious motivation in their monitoring of hate crimes.
- IX. That crimes aggravated by religious hatred incur harsher penalties, as they currently do if found to be aggravated by racial hatred.

IHRC notes that its recommendations have been taken on board by various institutions including the Metropolitan Police Service who do now include anti-religious motivation in their monitoring of hate crimes. In addition the Muslim Safety Forum an organisation launched to protect the Muslim community has been supported by MPS. However IHRC has concerns that the organisation should be treated in the same manner that other community security organisations such as CST are treated. This means in effect that the Muslim Safety Forum should remain community based and free from undue pressure from outside.

IV Acknowledgements

The IHRC would like to acknowledge the campaign and monitoring work of the many members and campaigners associated with it. Many organisations and other groups have also assisted in the monitoring and feedback that formed the basis of this report. In particular we would like to acknowledge the Kafel Centre, RAHMA (Racial Attacks & Harassment Monitoring Association) in Swansea, An-Nisa society, Minority Rights Group International, Dr Lorraine Sheridan, Redbridge Racial Equality Council, Paltrey Girls School, Newham Monitoring Project, Fair, Tahirah Azarpay, various Islamic centres in England, Scotland and Wales and all the individuals and organizations that came forward with incidents.



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