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**FROM THE OMBUDSMAN**

4 December 2015

Miss Bianca Strohmann  
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Dear Miss Strohmann,

**Ref: IPSO 09324-15: "1 in 5 Brit Muslims' sympathy for jihadis", 23 November 2015**

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to state the Sun's case for publishing the results of the Survation survey.

The newspaper has also received a large number of complaints and this is clearly an emotive issue, but one that it believes is crucial to air and discuss openly.

There can be no doubt that the thrust of the story is accurate, and that a significant minority of Muslims have sympathy for those going to fight for ISIS in Syria. There also can be no doubt that this is a subject firmly in the public interest.

Of course, the Sun recognises its responsibility as a national newspaper to take care in how it covers issues of sensitivity. It has given careful consideration to the criticism it has received since the story was published, and understands that much of it – including from the lead complainant here – is based on a genuine desire to ensure that the debate around ISIS, and indeed the Islamic faith, is conducted calmly and properly.

At no stage did the paper seek to cause distress to complainants or to sensationalise the information in its possession. It took a decision to place on its front page a story relating to arguably the most pressing issue of our age: the rise of a militant, brutal Islamist sect that has – extraordinarily – been able to extend its influence into the West.

Below, I will seek to address the points made in the complaint, alongside other criticisms that have been made.

**The question: “Which of the following statements is closest to your view?**

**..... I have a lot of sympathy with young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria etc”**

Any conventional interpretation of this question must relate to people who leave the UK to fight for ISIS. This is clear from the preceding statements addressed in the survey, two of which referred specifically to ISIS (“Islamic leaders in the UK have publicly condemned ISIS too much”; “Thinking about the root causes of ISIS terrorist attacks, which do you think is the single biggest root cause”), with a third statement referring explicitly to "terrorism" (“It is the responsibility of Muslims to condemn terrorist acts carried out in the name of Islam”).

One of the answers to the question “which do you think is the single root cause?” (which immediately precedes the question about “sympathy”) was “ISIS leaders who exploit vulnerable young people”. Again, this provided a clear context for the following question about “young Muslims” and their sympathies.

This answers the complaint that "there is no mention of so-called Islamic State" in the question itself. The references to ISIS are explicit in the survey, and came immediately prior to the “sympathy” question. Especially when it is taken into account that this was a telephone poll -- and therefore more of a discursive exercise with the respondent than a simple online poll -- the context of that question could not be clearer.

I attach a copy of the full poll with this response.

In any event, there can be no question that the entire comprehensible narrative around “young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” has solely rested upon those joining IS. Using a Factiva search, the number of stories about Muslims joining IS in Syria has increased from around 90 in 2013 to around 600 this year alone. In that period, we can find only one story relating to a British Muslim joining the PKK and none joining the Free Syrian Army.

While the situation within Syria may be complex, it is therefore untrue to suggest that this somehow muddies the waters in connection with the specific behaviour of young British Muslims who leave the country to go there.

The question itself was written by the pollsters Survation (a registered member of the British Polling Council), which has undertaken a significant body of research work amongst minority ethnic populations in the UK, including at sensitive times such as these. Survation’s CEO Darren Lyons-Lowe spoke to Sun Political Editor Tom Newton Dunn on the day of publication and confirmed that the question referred to those joining ISIS. Although Survation issued a public statement later as a result of PR pressure, it has never suggested that the question was misinterpreted on this point.

Indeed, it was the same question that Survation asked in March of this year in a poll for Sky News, which reported the survey – without complaint – as reflecting “sympathy for extremists”, “groups like IS” and “terrorist groups”. This poll was followed up by the Daily Mail website, which referred to British Muslims having sympathy with “terror organisations such as ISIS” and “Jihadi runaways”. No complaints were made about this interpretation.

The figure of 1 in 5 was considered to be robust not least because it was aligned with the Sky poll, but also because it was similar to a BBC poll conducted in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack. That poll found that 27 per cent of British Muslims said they had “some sympathy for the motives behind the attacks”.

I would also like to draw your attention to a speech on 3rd December by former Prime Minister Tony Blair in Washington (attached), in which she stated that support for Isis stretched “deep into parts of Muslim societies”. He also said that “a belief in innate hostility between Islam and the west is not the preserve of the few.”

The Prime Minister’s words to the House of Commons on Wednesday 2nd December are also relevant here:

“The terrorist threat level to the UK was raised to severe last August in the light of the threat from Daesh, meaning an attack is highly likely. Eight hundred people – including families and children – have been radicalised to such an extent that they have travelled to this so-called caliphate. The House should be under no illusion: these terrorists are plotting to kill us, and to radicalise our children, right now.”

We would submit that concern about the Sun’s editorial decision to put its story on the front page has been displaced into an attempt to find fault with the terminology used. The ordinary meaning of the question is clear nonetheless.

### **The Sun’s full coverage of the poll**

It is worth drawing your attention to the full coverage of the poll (attached), which was over two pages inside. It contained the questions and all responses in full. It also contained positive comment from two positive Muslim voices, Sadiq Khan and Anila Baig. It referenced the March Sky poll clearly, and showed to readers that the number of those sympathetic had reduced. The headline referred to the “minority” of Muslims with such sympathies.

Overall, great care was taken to ensure the poll findings were not presented in an inflammatory fashion. To that end, we sought no reaction from politicians who might seek to capitalise on the findings, confining ourselves to reaction from major Muslim figures only. Quite deliberately, we did not write a leader ourselves on the day of the poll.

### **Would readers have been misled?**

In this context, readers of the full newspaper could not possibly have been misled as to precisely what had been asked, and how it had been interpreted.

The front page was also not misleading in itself. The headline referred to "jihadis", which means – in accepted vernacular – those pursuing their religious beliefs via violent struggle. That is an accurate description – by any normal meaning – of young Muslims fighting in Syria in a conflict born of, inspired by, and saturated with religion.

As I have explained above, the front page reference to IS itself was clearly justified by the ordinary meaning of the question, and the clear context in which the question was asked.

#### **The issue of taste and freedom to editorialise**

The Sun recognises that there can be legitimate debate about editorialising around sensitive issues. It understands that concern has been expressed about this. However, that is not a matter for the Editors' Code or IPSO to consider: complaints to IPSO cannot lead to judgements about taste or propriety. Questions of editorial selection and prominence must remain – according to the principle of freedom of expression – in the hands of the editor, not any regulatory body.

The Sun has a proud record of supporting the contributions of Muslim communities, and will continue to do so. I enclose some examples of our reporting, including our iconic "United Against IS" front page. This campaign sought deliberately, and sensitively, to mobilise an integrated approach between Muslims and non-Muslims in opposition to this savage sect.

The Sun believes that there is a very strong public interest in reporting any sympathy Muslims might feel for young jihadis. Senior figures (including the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, counter terrorism officials and police officers) have all suggested that a failure to condemn young British jihadis' actions is part of the problem. They argue that defeating ISIS also means debating their narrative and ideology, and proving it is wrong and false at every step. It is without question that young British recruits to ISIS are drawn almost entirely from the Muslim community, and the Prime Minister and others have repeatedly insisted that the onus is upon that community most of all to make this argument too. This was also a point that Sadiq Khan made in The Sun alongside the poll on Monday.

The reporting of this poll, taken in context and as a whole, was not inaccurate and did not breach Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PK Kennedy". The letters are cursive and fluid.

**Philippa Kennedy OBE**  
**Ombudsman**