

A brief response to right-wing media accusations

There is currently a co-ordinated right-wing media attack on MEND, that is being fuelled by selective quoting and misrepresentations by a selection of primarily neoconservative and Islamophobic groups and individuals. MEND is currently in the process of compiling a comprehensive document which fully refutes all allegations ever made against us. We expect to have this rebuttal within the coming few days. In the meantime, we would like to take this opportunity to respond to some of the recently levied and unfounded allegations against us by right-wing journalists.

In order to contextualise some of these allegations, it is important to note that many of them have been raised by the Henry Jackson Society (HJS) – an organisation that is known to be notoriously right-wing and Islamophobic, and which has been labelled as ‘corrupt’ by its own founder. HJS is known for its distinct anti-Muslim and xenophobic tendencies.

These tendencies are exemplified by many of the key figures within HJS, including Douglas Murray, who has made serious and disturbing comments about Muslims, including suggesting that Islamophobia is a “nonsense term”,¹ and that “conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board” so that Europe would appear to be a less attractive proposition.²

At a recent Home Affairs Select Committee hearing, the current Home Secretary, Amber Rudd was forced to distance herself from the HJS when a committee member read out their appallingly Islamophobic record.

One example of HJS’s activities is its project “Student Rights” (SR). Which, despite claiming to tackle extremism on university campuses, seems to focus almost exclusively on potential Islamic extremists and does not contain a single student member, nor is it affiliated with any student union. Its attempts to discredit Islamic societies by publishing sensationalist and misleading reports led to it being condemned by the NUS for a witch hunt against Muslims.³

In fact, The Institute of Race Relations has noted with concern that SR’s work and reporting has been used by far-right groups to target Muslim student events.⁴ Indeed, several British universities have been forced to cancel events after material from SR has resulted in threats of violence from far-right groups, including the EDL.⁵

¹ Douglas Murray, "The Outsider's Diary," Standpoint, August 2008, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/251/full>.

² Conservative frontbench broke off relations with Douglas Murray – and what happened afterwards," Conservative Home, October 17, 2011, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2011/10/by-paul-goodman-the-struggle-against-islamist-extremism-demands-from-the-start-the-separation-of-islam-a-complex-religion.html>

³ Reyhana Patel, "NUS condemns 'anti-Islam' group Student Rights," The Independent, May 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/istudents/nus-condemns-anti-islam-group-student-rights-9369023.html>.

⁴ "Far Right targets Islamic events," Institute of Race Relations RSS, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/far-right-targets-islamic-events/>.

Also see UniOfReading, "Statement on Discover Islam Week events at the University of Reading – University of Reading," University of Reading, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.reading.ac.uk/news-and-events/releases/PR490014.aspx>.

⁵ "EXPOSED: Quilliam leadership directly involved with neocon Douglas Murray's Henry Jackson Society," Loonwatch.com, August 20, 2016, <http://www.loonwatch.com/2013/12/exposed-quilliam-leadership-directly-involved-with-neocon-douglas-murrays-henry-jackson-society/>.

Regarding MEND itself, Muslim Engagement and Development is a community funded organisation that seeks to encourage political, civic and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to effectively interact with political and media institutions. We firmly believe that enhancing mainstream participation by communities that are under-represented and vulnerable is an important step towards deepening and strengthening our democracy.

During the course of our work, we have accumulated numerous global accolades, including having our work being ranked as “best practice” in Human Rights “protection and promotion” by the World Economic Forum, and being rated as “best example for civil society organisations” by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Moreover, around 40,000 British Muslims have benefited from our media and politician literacy programmes. More about our achievement can be seen at www.mend.org.uk/achivements

We also have the largest grassroots support base and community recognition of any Muslim organisation in the UK. With twenty-six working groups and hundreds of volunteers across the country,⁶ MEND can provide greater access and insight into Muslim communities than any other organisation.

Descriptions of MEND as an extremist organisation

According to the Government’s definition of extremism, it is difficult to see how MEND could be considered in any way extremist. According to the definition, extremism is “the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”. It also, “regard[s] calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist.” In deconstructing that definition, it is clear that MEND does not fall into this category:

- **Democracy:** political participation of British Muslims is our raison d'être. Our ‘Get Out and Vote’ campaign and the educational masterclasses we deliver encouraging political engagement have empowered tens of thousands of Muslims to become politically involved in the democratic process.
- **The rule of law and individual liberty:** MEND fully supports the rule of law and individual liberty. MEND works closely with parts of the CPS and police constabularies across the country to this end. In fact, we successfully lobbied to ensure Islamophobia is recorded as a separate category of hate-crime similar to racism and anti-Semitism.
- **Mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs:** MEND has developed a series of educational resources and training programs to aid in the teaching of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred. The issues surrounding anti-Semitism were also mentioned 11 times in our 2017 Manifesto, where we also called for better legal protections against homophobic and disability related hate crime as well.⁷ Furthermore, there have been numerous occasions when our working groups have shown solidarity and support to Jewish and other communities in times of crisis.⁸
- **Calls for the death of members of our armed forces:** MEND has never made or supported such a call. Accusations which occur in parts of the media (see below) are a deliberate distortion of the comments made by Azad Ali prior to his time at MEND.

⁶ Numbers that are steadily increasing

⁷ https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MEND-Muslim-Manifesto-2017_FINAL_lowres-1.pdf

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/muslims-leeds-synagogue-swastika-graffiti-facebook-jewish-support-hate-crime-police-a8000441.html>

Arguments that MEND attempts to alienate other Muslims – such as Sara Khan, Mak Chishty, Quilliam Foundation and Tell Mama,

MEND is not a theology based organisation. We concern ourselves with issues that affect all Muslims⁹ (hate crime, employment, education etc.), regardless of religious ideology, sect or background. We - like all organisations operating in any public arena – support the policies and positions advanced in our manifesto and may disagree with the analysis and political positions of others. A healthy democracy calls for healthy debate. Perhaps the accusation here is that we do not always agree with those that our opponents would like us to.

However, it would be useful to remember that policies of only engaging with those who already agree with you are not likely to foster change or fresh ideas. Engagement does not mean agreement on every issue, but it does mean working together to tackle issues of mutual interest and concern. If the Government truly intends to tackle issues affecting Muslim communities, it is going to have to engage with a wider spectrum of organisations – and, considering MEND’s grassroots support, that includes MEND. In fact, this precise criticism of the Government’s “broken relationship” with Muslim communities was stressed in the Citizen’s UK report entitled *The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All*.¹⁰

Regarding our opposition to some of the views expressed by the aforementioned individuals and groups, our main concern with these organisations that receive government funding - or have received government funding in the past – is that they are not free from political agendas and thus cannot truly represent Muslim communities as they are forced to work within government narratives. To honestly represent any community, organisations must be able to criticise and debate freely for the benefit of those they claim to represent.

Accusations of anti-Semitism and Homophobia

MEND also categorically rejects all accusations of homophobia and anti-Semitism. As previously mentioned, the issues surrounding anti-Semitism were mentioned 11 times in our 2017 Manifesto, where we also called for better legal protections against homophobic hate crime as well.¹¹ We applaud solidarity amongst all social and religious groups in a conjoined effort to tackle all forms of hatred. Indeed, MEND itself is proud to co-operate with both of these groups (homosexual and Jewish), and others, in joint efforts to tackle hate crime and hate speech. We have worked with many Jewish and homosexual MPs over the years and continue to do so. Accusations of homophobia or anti-Semitism are baseless.

The accusation levied by the Daily Mail that MEND organised to boycott Holocaust Memorial Day is entirely untrue and we are currently looking to take legal action regarding this libellous allegation.

The PREVENT Strategy

When it comes to criticism of current UK counter-terror strategies, certain groups often present legitimate criticism of the development, implementation and impact of such strategies as an attempt to “undermine” government efforts. We firmly believe that government policies in all areas should be open to critical review for the benefit of ensuring their effectiveness and monitoring any unintended consequences such strategies may have.

MEND has voiced concern with current counter-terror strategies – concerns that have also been raised by two special rapporteurs to the UN, the NUT, the NUS, the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Rights Watch UK, the Open Society Justice Initiative, and countless academics, politicians and experts, to name but a few.

⁹ and indeed, many non-Muslims

¹⁰ see http://www.citizensuk.org/missing_muslims

¹¹ https://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/MEND-Muslim-Manifesto-2017_FINAL_lowres-1.pdf

Far from attempting to undermine efforts, all of our recommendations concerning counter-terror legislation has an emphasis on constructive engagement in devising effective strategies which work with Muslim communities.

Accusations that MEND promotes an Islamist grievance narrative of a Western war against Islam, through asserting that the UK suffers from gross media, institutional and state-level Islamophobia.

The accusation that highlighting issues of biased and misleading reporting in the media is part of a “grievance narrative of a Western war against Islam” is absurd. With a government inquiry into fake news currently underway¹² and numerous studies highlighting the widespread demonization of Muslims within Western and UK media, MEND’s work to highlight issues with current media regulation is not only part of legitimate debate, but also an example of how MEND is actively engaged within political institutions to promote a strong and democratic society built upon respect.

Furthermore, it is difficult to see how anyone could object to our attempts to highlight and tackle Islamophobia. Our Islamophobia Response Unit has already recorded and dealt with hundreds of cases since its launch in April this year. Meanwhile, our Islamophobia Awareness Month campaign works with Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC), local councils, journalists and local media, councillors and local MPs, mosques, universities, schools, community organisations and others to raise awareness of Islamophobia and encourage better reporting of incidents to the police.

Accusations against Sufyan Ismail and MEND’s stance on Israel: “MEND founder Sufyan Ismail said that MEND organised to “batter the Israeli lobby” ... and [the 2015 MEND Manifesto stated:] “support for an independent Palestine and end of Israeli occupation by December 2017”.

Mr Ismail’s comments regarding the Israeli lobby were made in connection to the successful vote in Parliament to recognise Palestinian statehood, which many in the pro-Israel lobby had objected to and lobbied against.¹³ What is concerning here is the implication that discussions surrounding Palestine and Israel’s actions towards Palestinians is somehow outside the realm of legitimate debate. MEND, along with countless academics, politicians, Human Rights campaigners, faith groups (including Jewish faith groups), and activists, is unequivocal in its desire to see a peaceful solution to Israeli occupation of Palestine. Indeed, recognition for an independent state of Palestine has been highlighted in both the Labour and Liberal Democrat 2017 election manifestos.

As such, presenting our support for an independent state of Palestine as something sinister and ‘extremist’ equates to a slur against all those who support the Palestinian cause and serves as an attempt to shut down legitimate political debate. Some right-wing journalists have tried to use the reference of ‘300 years’ as somehow pointing towards anti-Semitism. This is again most bizarre when one considers that a Jewish state has been an objective for Zionists from biblical times and beyond, let alone the last 300 years.

However, both Mr Ismail and MEND recognise that the use of the word ‘batter’ was perhaps a poor choice of words and could have been misinterpreted as having connotations of physical violence. Thus, with the benefit of hindsight, a better word would have been ‘defeat’.

Accusations against Azad Ali

Azad Ali has been involved in social activism through involvement in a range of British Muslim organisations for over 25 years. He has provided vital support and platforms for dialogue with Muslim communities for a variety of statutory and law enforcement agencies including the Metropolitan Police Service and the Civil Service. Despite his years of positive intervention in the area of interfaith dialogue and Muslim engagement in public life, Ali has been repeatedly victimised by certain journalists and

¹² <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry2/>

¹³ Mr Ismail has unequivocally clarified his comments on the above issue at <http://www.sufyanismail.com/blog/setting-the-record-straight-comments-at-cheddle-mosque-2014/>.

bloggers with accusations of ‘extremism’ surfacing in a number of interlinked blogposts and newspaper articles. A good portion of the negative commentary is based on a blog, 'Between the Lines' that Ali contributed to and which was run by the Islamic Forum Europe, one of several British Muslim organisations to which he has been affiliated. The blog is no longer active.

Ali “justified the killing of American and British troops. He was suspended for six months in 2009 as a result”

Mr Ali is on record stating that he has never called for – and never will call for – attacks against British soldiers.¹⁴ This is an accusation that emerged in an article published by the Mail on Sunday in 2009. Extracts from one of Ali’s blog entries in which he quoted someone else in a discussion about the ethics of correct conduct during wartime, were used to suggest he supported the view that "killing British troops in Iraq is justified". Ali proceeded to sue the newspaper for libel. In his judgment, Mr Justice Eady acknowledged that the arguments advanced by Ali's lawyers – that the newspapers selectively quoted from the blog entries to misrepresent the thrust of his argument and wilfully ignored a large body of other content that dispelled the notion that Ali was a "hardline extremist" – were "deserving of careful consideration". The related allegations of Mr Ali losing a libel action are not true. Mr Justice Eady simply did not consider there to be enough merit in Mr Ali’s case to proceed to a full hearing, where all of the aforementioned evidence would have been critically examined.

The investigation mounted by the civil service into Ali's conduct and any possible breach of the Civil Service Code exonerated Ali of the allegations and he returned to his post in June 2009. It is unthinkable that, had Mr Ali really held these views that he would have been allowed to return to his post in any Public Body, let alone a Government department.

Ali “has said he opposes democracy if it is at the expense of not implementing sharia”

In the words of Mr Ali *“This was broadcast on Channel 4’s Dispatches programme, where an undercover reporter followed me around for 8 months according to Channel 4... the secretly filmed scene is of myself with my colleagues broadcasting our live radio show which was being streamed online. The comment was in response to a caller who asked a question about democracy in a Muslim majority country and whether I support it. I answered yes of course and I gave the example of how some of the Muslim rulers were elected in history. The caller then asked would people - that is Muslim people in a Muslim majority country - accept democracy if it didn’t implement shari’ah – to which I answered of course they wouldn’t.”* As such, Mr Ali’s comments were taken out of context. He was not expressing any kind of personal disdain for democracy, or even commenting on British Muslims perceptions of democracy. Rather, he was making a comment on how people in Muslim-majority countries may approach democratic institutions. This was not a debate about the UK, nor indeed any country in the Western world.

Ali said the Westminster Bridge was 'not terrorism'

While Mr Ali has already promptly clarified¹⁵ that the event was “a barbarous and cruel act of murder for which there was no possible justification or mitigation”, his comment ought to be contextualised within the wider, and crucial, debate surrounding the difference between *Terrorism* and *Lone Wolf* attacks.

Mr Ali commented that the Westminster attack was not terrorism, in the sense of “organised acts co-ordinated by terrorist groups”, and at the time, there was no evidence that the attacker was part of a wider terrorist network. Mr Ali was simply reflecting a view based on several news outlets reported at the time, i.e. that the Metropolitan Police’s view was that this was a ‘lone wolf’ attack.¹⁶ For the record,

¹⁴ See <http://azadali.blogspot.ae/2015/07/fyi-clarity-on-repeatedly-published.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4396832/Islamist-head-Muslim-pressure-group.html#ixzz4xB60G5fb>

¹⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/masood-was-lone-wolf-say-met-police-gfn29h3dd>

Mr Ali accepts that this attack could be described as an act of terrorism in the light of further information that has come to light.¹⁷

It is important here to stress that Mr Ali's comment was thus referring to the difference between organised terrorist attacks carried out by a cell with links to external terrorist organisations (terrorism) and a lone wolf, which is traditionally described¹⁸ as someone who operates on their own and is not part of a group, network, or directed by an outside organization. Azad Ali clearly attempted to stress this important difference.

MEND's removal from the APPG

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia established in 2010 was marred by some controversy after a campaign was launched to deprive us of the status of secretariat on the basis of a number of unfounded accusations.

According to the disgraced journalist Andrew Gilligan,¹⁹ we were allegedly removed from our position due to defence of extremists. Gilligan's accusations have been repeatedly proven inaccurate.²⁰

In reality, our removal as secretariat to the APPG was the result of a malicious campaign waged by the Jewish Chronicle and other groups – groups we believe were disinclined to our advocating for Palestinian human rights. We were removed from the APPG in July 2011 after a group of Conservative MPs turned up in force to secure our removal, having previously failed in an earlier attempt in January 2011. At the time, Conservative MP, Sir Peter Bottomley, spoke in our defence and called on those who attempt to frustrate our work to recognise it for what it is and “face their own demons”.

The context to these allegations

MEND firmly believes that all citizens have a responsibility in contributing to the positive and sustained development of a Britain in which all members of society are valued and respected, whatever their religious, racial or ethnic background, their gender or their sexual orientation. However, British Muslims have remained on the margins of public and political debate about their religion and place in modern Britain for too long and the level of Muslim participation in media and politics remains woefully low. As such, MEND's attempts to instil British Muslims with the confidence, competence and awareness to effectively engage with political and media institutions is our contribution to strengthening our democracy and building a just society. The above allegations need to be seen as attempts to thwart the efforts of grassroots Muslim organisations and to dissuade politicians, journalists, policymakers and others to work with us.

If they implement a policy of non-engagement towards organisations such as MEND, policy makers will only lose valuable insight and engagement opportunities with vulnerable and marginalised communities. As previously stated, engagement does not mean agreement on every issue, but it does mean working together to tackle issues of mutual interest and concern. If the Government truly intends to tackle issues affecting Muslim communities, it is going to have to engage with a wider spectrum of organisations – and, considering MEND's grassroots support, that includes MEND. Once again, lessons must be learned from Citizens UK's report and the broken relationship between the Government and Muslim communities must be fixed.²¹

¹⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/28/westminster-terror-attacker-khalid-masoods-final-message-revealed/>

¹⁸ <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501426>

¹⁹ For a background on Andrew Gilligan's journalistic credentials, see <http://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/The-truth-about-a-liar-Andrew-Gilligan.pdf>

²⁰ See <http://mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MENDs-response-to-Andrew-Gilligan.pdf>

²¹ see http://www.citizensuk.org/missing_muslims