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The police challenges in responding to Islamophobic hate crime

Paul Giannasi

Introduction

I joined the UK police as a constable in 1984 and retired as a mid-ranking officer in 2014. When reflecting on that 30-year period, I left a vastly different organisation from the one that I joined in my early 20s. This paradigm shift in culture is difficult to quantify, but is perhaps best described as a shift from a ‘police force’ to a ‘police service’. My initial training in the 1980s coincided with the National Miners’ Strike and was very much about exercising control, influenced by a view that public order was maintained by the strength of a disciplined, pseudo-military organisation. The most significant catalyst for change was the public inquiry into the tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence, which was published in February 1999 and made recommendations that went on to fundamentally change this landscape for all criminal justice agencies but particularly the police. Most notably, it exposed racist hate crime to public and criminal justice scrutiny. The vast majority of current UK hate crime legislation and policy has its roots in this Inquiry.

As an operational patrol officer and detective in the 1980s and 1990s, I had witnessed first hand the significant impact that racism and other types of hate crime had on victims, their families and wider communities. However, my first recollection of being involved in tackling widespread anti-Muslim hate crime was during the years 2000 and 2001, when there was a perceptible hardening of racist attitudes in response to certain local and international incidents. This brought a trend of deep-rooted hostility to my attention, and I observed more indicators of community tensions than I had seen at any time since the riots in 1985. In my experience at that time, there were three particular incidents that triggered this adverse reaction to our Muslim and ‘South Asian’ communities. They were events in (i) Istanbul and (ii) Oldham, and (iii) the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Istanbul

In April 2000, a large number of Leeds football fans travelled to Istanbul to watch their team play a UEFA Cup match against Galatasaray. Ahead of the event, violence broke out between rival supporters and two Leeds fans were killed in knife attacks during the clashes. These deaths...
caused significant grief among the victims’ family and friends, but also sparked anger in the wider football community in the UK.

**Oldham**

In April 2001, a 76-year-old man named Walter Chamberlain was walking through Chadderton, an area in Oldham in Greater Manchester, when he was approached by a group of young men of South Asian descent who demanded to know his address. Mr Chamberlain was assaulted and sustained significant facial injuries and his picture was given extensive media coverage. Although Mr Chamberlain stated that his attack was not racist in nature, it was widely reported in the media as being so. Some journalists claimed to have interviewed young ‘Asian’ men who described the area as ‘no-go’ for white people. This was denied by local authorities but, nonetheless, the reporting had caused considerable distress and anger.

A week after the incident, Stoke City were due to play a league football match against Oldham. Ahead of the game, a large number of their supporters marched through Chadderton and performed a coordinated racist attack on locals and their property. Specifically, they claimed to target victims who they deemed to be ‘Pakistani’, in retaliation for the attack on Mr Chamberlain. Local and travelling racists continued these acts of provocation in the weeks that followed and these tensions eventually escalated into ethnically-fuelled rioting in the Glodwick area of Oldham. This then spread out into many towns and cities in the North of England.

**9/11**

In September 2001, the USA was subjected to a coordinated series of Al Qaeda terrorist attacks, including those on the Twin Towers in New York. During this time, the UK did not have comprehensive national hate crime data and the best indicative data available was the ‘Racist Incident Data’, published as part of the Home Office Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System (2003). This information was limited in that it included both crime and non-crime incidents and did not differentiate racial from religious cases. It did, however, show a marked rise in racist incidents in England and Wales, from 47,814 in 1999/2000, 53,092 in the next year and peaking at 54,370 in 2001/02 before dropping back by 11% the following year, to 48,525 (ibid., p. 17).

At the time of the 9/11 attacks, I was a local police commander in an area with a diverse community. I also had experience of policing football clubs that had overtly racist supporters within their fan bases. While the offenders were a small minority, the decent majority either could or would not prevent it being a regular feature of match-days. My colleagues and I were keen to understand the backlashes that would be suffered by innocent Muslim and ‘South Asian’ residents in our area. Despite the lack of definitive national data, we did record racist and religious hate crimes locally, in response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Using this data together with interviews with local community leaders, we attempted to measure the impact of these significant events on the lives of our local people.

When comparing the community response after the three aforementioned events, I had expected 9/11 to have triggered the most dramatic rise in hate crime reported locally, since it had the most devastating impact on society in general. What we actually found was quite the opposite, as this had the least impact of the three events. The most notable spike in hate crime was instead attributable to the death of the Leeds football fans and it is further arguable that the organised and coordinated attack on Chadderton was the most damaging and sinister of all of
The police and Islamophobic hate crime

The police and Islamophobic hate crime. Thus we posed the question: why did the most significant event appear to have led to the least immediate retaliatory reaction against Muslim and South Asian residents? This was a difficult question to answer, as the lack of empirical national data meant that there was also a dearth of academic research. Also, since two of the events took place outside of the UK, they were not examined by inquiries, and the Report into the 2001 Riots by Professor Ted Cantle (Home Office 2001) concentrated on the broader societal causes of the breakdown of community cohesion, such as education, segregation and poverty.

In order to better understand the impact of global events on our local community, we examined the circumstances of the recorded hate crimes, as well as the behaviour of perpetrators. It was the latter that I found to be more informative. What we gauged from this was that, while our policies were strongly ‘victim focused’ in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, we needed to view the situation from the perpetrators’ perspectives. We had to consider what had offended their sensibilities, rather than considering what offends the moral majority population who can be shocked, saddened or angered without resorting to a violent backlash against an innocent victim, who just so happens to have the same characteristic as someone who has offended them.

One thing that stood out to me was that the type of people who commit hate crimes are likely to conflate characteristics and have a limited capacity to understand the nuances of diverse identities. We have seen many examples of this over the years, with Sikhs attacked in retribution for Islamist terrorism or anyone who looks to have South Asian or Middle Eastern heritage being seen as ‘Pakistani’ in the eyes of the racist. Another important conflation is often between ethnic and religious identities; graffiti outside Mosques tended to be racist in nature rather than anti-religious and, as I explore later, this renders hate crime data less definitive. At this time, we found that there was a strong link between football fan groups and racist crime and this was, perhaps, one of the reasons for the strong identification with the Leeds fans who were killed. For many months, local racist fans would regularly chant ‘I’d rather be a ⭐⭐ than a Turk’. This was not endearment to Pakistani people but showed the contempt that they held for the former incident. This was surprising, given that the local fans had an animus to rival Leeds fans, but we took it as a sign that they found it easier to identify with travelling English football fans than they did with business people working in Lower Manhattan.

This principle of trying to understand what is likely to trigger retaliation has underpinned UK police efforts to reduce community tensions and there are many more contemporary examples to highlight this. One such comparison would be the responses to recent Islamist terrorist attacks, as with the horrific murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in 2013 and attack on the Palace of Westminster in 2017, which included the murder of PC Keith Palmer. I would suggest that most reasonable citizens would view these attacks with similar disgust; both were an attack on our democracy and resulted in the senseless murder of unarmed men who dedicated their lives to protecting us from harm (among others in the latter). Yet, despite the equal horror felt by most reasonable citizens, the adverse reaction was much more vociferous in 2013. Many of the racist minority would have a confrontational view of the police and would see Parliament as a seat of the ‘Westminster Elite’ rather than the democracy that underpins the country that they would hold so dear.

In the aftermath of the murder of Lee Rigby, there was a number of major arson attacks on Islamic centres and mosques, including notable crimes in Muswell Hill and Grimsby, and a gathering of around 1,0001 far right protesters outside Downing Street in a protest organised by the anti-Islam group, English Defence League. While we observed a short term increase in recorded crime following the 2017 Westminster attack, the crimes were less notable in their veracity. Also, a similar far right march into central London attracted between 100 and 3002 individuals and a much larger anti-fascist counter-march.
I would suggest that the above comparison and my observations over recent years would indicate that a person who has a propensity to commit racist violence is likely to have a greater affinity to our armed services than they would to a police officer or to the occupants of the Palace of Westminster. This is just one example of the myriad of factors that will influence the extent of adverse reactions to critical incidents. For me, this reinforces the need to understand the psyche of the potential perpetrators of hate crime, as it will not always be the same as those of us who contain our anger and recognise that we are not culpable for the actions of criminals from within our community, just because we happen to share a personal characteristic.

Islamophobia, racism or anti-Muslim hate

I think that it is imperative that we distinguish the different terms used to describe animosity aimed towards Muslims. However, similarly to other types of hostility, such as antisemitism, it is unlikely that we will ever achieve a general consensus on such definitions. In my personal view, the term ‘islamophobia’ is unhelpful when seeking to establish policy and legislative approaches towards the problem. A phobia, as defined by the UK National Health Service, is ‘an overwhelming and debilitating fear of an object, place, situation, feeling or animal’.\(^3\) Given this, the term ‘islamophobia’ effectively defends hate crime perpetrators by suggesting that their hostility can be excused by a medical condition. It also encompasses those who have no experience of Muslims but a genuine fear of the impact that the tenets of Islam may have on the community. Also, fundamentally, Islam, like any other theology, is not protected in UK and European laws. Therefore a more accurate term would perhaps be ‘anti-Muslim hate crime’ and ‘anti-Muslim sentiment’ to describe non-criminal discrimination. While states should rightly seek to eradicate discriminatory views through engagement and education, the criminal justice agencies would understandably concentrate on those who act out illegally because of their hostile views.

There have been attempts in international government organisations to try to reach a consensus over the competing rights of, for example, free speech and religious freedom but they have not succeeded as different state ‘red-lines’ are often poles apart. International debates, such as the conferences surrounding the UN Resolution 16–18 on Combatting Religious Intolerance, created in 2011\(^4\) often expose more questions than they provide consensus. This Resolution limits its considerations to the need to combat the discrimination of ‘persons based on religion or belief’ echoing the European and UK stance that this is a part of a ‘human rights’ framework underpinned by a duty to protect the citizen’s fundamental right to freely observe their religious beliefs or to argue against the tenets of any or all religions, so long as they do not unlawfully attack on the rights of another. Despite this, there are individuals, religious groups and even states that believe that such provisions should extend to laws to outlaw blasphemy, intended to protect the tenets of a religion from challenge, denial or ridicule. One example of this call was Article 22(c) of the Cairo Declaration of the Organisation of Islamic Conference\(^5\) in 1990, which said:

> Information is a vital necessity to society. It may not be exploited or misused in such a way as may violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets, undermine moral and ethical values or disintegrate, corrupt or harm society or weaken its faith.

My strong belief is that it is right to separate out the rights of citizens from efforts to promote, teach or defend the tenets of any belief and, for this reason, the protection of fundamental human rights in a framework such as the European Convention on Human Rights is more relevant to the challenges we face in modern, diverse communities. There are occasions where
anti-religious acts have been criminalised, but this would be because the act, such as the burning of a religious text, was done to cause harassment or threaten an individual, rather than defaming a religion. For these reasons, I believe the much more accurate term for us to adopt is ‘anti-Muslim hate crime’. While the term ‘hate crime’ does not, itself, have universal support, most states have a definition that applies to all forms of monitored hate crime in their jurisdiction. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the definition is published in the College of Policing’s *Hate Crime Operational Guidance* and includes ‘Any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person’s religion or perceived religion’ (College of Policing 2014). This definition applies to all ‘monitored strands’ of victims and rejects any hierarchy, using a similar construct for all protected characteristics. I believe this is an important principle of policy, to hold our responses to scrutiny and maintain our core belief, that protection from hate crime is a human right that we all share and no one victim is less worthy than another. It is inevitable that affected communities will be more focussed on their own experiences and while a state should consider the individual elements of each crime type and will undoubtedly offer more resources to more prevalent crimes, the aspirational outcome should be universal.

Having established a universal framework for hate crime in the UK, it is also important we consider the context of each manifestation of hate, to ensure that we not only react to criminal activity but seek to reduce the hostilities and tensions that motivate a perpetrator to act. This requires an understanding of the global and historical influences that affect relationships in any society and the promotion of an inclusive community that celebrates and respects diversity. As I mentioned above, my experience would suggest that perpetrators are likely to conflate ethnic and religious characteristics and many Muslims will perceive an attack on them to be racist rather than anti-religious. This is particularly true for Muslims in Europe, where the majority would also be an ethnic minority, doubly identifying them as ‘other’ in the minds of the perpetrator. This situation can be even more stark if the victim has other ‘minority characteristics’ such as being gay or disabled. There is a huge disparity in the recording of hate crime, even between states with similar legislative approaches to human rights. By way of comparison, according to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Italy recorded 803 hate crimes in 2016, whereas, with a smaller population size and similar demographic factors, England and Wales recorded 80,393. I should add that I do not believe that the United Kingdom is a more hostile location but it reflects the work done in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry to improve reporting systems and to build confidence in affected communities.

Despite the relatively robust data collection systems in the United Kingdom, it does not provide a definitive picture of the nature and extent of the experiences of Muslims and those perceived to me Muslim. The data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows us that, despite the UK having relatively high recording levels, all hate crime is under-reported. The latest available data estimates that there were actually 222,000 hate crimes that took place. This underreporting is likely to be greater in more isolated communities or in certain circumstance, such as those who work in the night-time economy where they are exposed to customers affected by alcohol. One reason the data does not give a complete picture is the issue I raised earlier about the conflation of characteristics. The police record a crime based on the perception of the victim (or other person with knowledge of the crime) and this leads to a lot of reported hate crime against Muslims being recorded as racist. There are also many non-Muslims who are victims of anti-Muslim hate crime either due to mistaken identity or because they were supporting the rights of Muslims.

Hate crime data in the UK has been gathered in its current form since 2008 but it does not routinely break the data down other than between the 5 different monitored strands.
In October, 2015 the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced that religious hate crime data would be disaggregated and the first set of formal data is expected late in 2018. The police have, however published the results of retrospective analysis of this data for 2011 and 2015/16. The data for 2011 was heavily caveated but found that 35% of the 1,829 Religious hate crimes recorded that year were anti-Muslim. This extended to 52% of the crimes, which were distinguishable (the target group was not ascertained in 35% of the reports). In 2015/16 the police were able to identify the hostility in 88% of the 4,213 religious hate crime and anti-Muslim crimes accounted for 56% of the total (64% of those with a hostility recorded).

When the above data is applied to the census data (as was done in the 2011 data) it would suggest that Muslims are significantly less likely to suffer hate crime than Jewish people; however, the report points out that comparisons could be misleading. There are a number of reasons for this including that many Muslims report crimes as racist and that ‘third-party’ reporting structures were significantly more robust and long-standing in the Jewish community. It also acknowledges that Jewish and Sikh people have been identified by UK courts as ethnic identities, and as such antisemitism would include some race hate crimes against Jews.

**Policy responses**

In 2007, the UK government established a cross-government Hate Crime Programme. I was seconded in to manage the programme activity and I have held that post ever since. The programme was established following an examination of the progress made in response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. A review led by the Honourable Mr Justice Fulford, reported in 2006 and the then Attorney General established the programme to continue to oversee the progress since 1999 (see United Kingdom Attorney General’s Office 2006). It was not established to take control away from individual ministers or criminal justice executives, but rather to coordinate a joint working approach for maximum benefit and to deliver some of the changes needed to improve services to victims. It has survived several changes of government, through which it has maintained some key underpinning principles, including:

- that solutions can only come from a cross-disciplinary strategy that brings all state actors together to find holistic solutions to targeted abuse;
- that victims should be at the heart of any policy and executives should consider their advice when making decisions and developing strategies;
- that we need to build collaborative relationships with key actors, such as academia and relevant industries (e.g. Internet providers); and
- that there can be no hierarchy of hate, with solutions originating from the adoption of a human rights-based strategy.

Successive governments and criminal justice executives have maintained a broadly consistent approach since 2007. Oversight of policy rests with a Hate Crime Strategy Board that includes representatives from all relevant government departments and agencies. Importantly, the programme is supported by a dedicated Independent Advisory Group and a similar Youth Group, which bring together victims, advocates and academics to support the above principles. In 2012, the government also introduced the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group to challenge, more broadly, the underlying negative sentiments towards Muslims. They address a number of issues, such as education, community cohesion and the advice given to media professionals.
Prevalence of anti-Muslim hate crime and hostility

In my opinion, despite the data restrictions outlined above, it is clear that anti-Islamic beliefs and anti-Muslim hostility are among the most entrenched in sections of our society. As mentioned above, I believe that it is vital to separate these two emotions, yet they are often interrelated. In other words, it is possible to have anti-Islamic views without being anti-Muslim, although the opposite is not common in my experience. There are, of course, citizens, including academics, who have a negative view of Islam, its validity and its impact on society, just as there are similar opponents to other or all religions. Such views are an integral part of a free society and many can debate this without ever presenting a threat to anyone.

However, sadly there are also many who would act on those views in a hostile, violent and even murderous way. Such individuals will rarely target the person who caused their ire, but will instead take retribution against a random, innocent individual who merely shares a characteristic with the person at the root of that anger. All too often the victim of an anti-Muslim hate crime is chosen because of their perceived or actual weakness, with examinations of anti-Muslim hate crime in the wake of terrorist attacks showing that women are more likely to be targeted. Indeed in 2016, the charity Tell MAMA noted that 56% of victims who came forward to report street-based incidents were female. This imbalance could have several contributing factors, such as victims’ willingness to report, however this is still a higher proportion than I have observed for other victim groups. This disparity may be more stark because one of the common criticisms of Islam and Muslims from elements of the far right is that both encourage misogynistic violence. The vast majority of Muslims, of course, reject such violence, but this narrative remains prevalent in offender groups and is fuelled by rare yet horrific acts of violence based on historic or warped cultural or theological beliefs.

The fact that these perpetrators position themselves as some sort of moral defenders of women’s rights is as bizarre as it is disingenuous. Pulling the hijab from the head of a Muslim woman in the street to ‘liberate’ her from her oppression is grotesque and the irony of attacking a woman to defend her rights would only be missed by a small-minded, bigoted individual. This transferred culpability in the eyes of hate crime perpetrators has exacerbated the problem of anti-Muslim hostility in Europe and the UK. It is, however, fuelled by lazy, discriminatory or cynical narratives expressed in society more generally. It is true that the more vociferous anti-Muslim sentiment is more likely to be found on social media than more traditional forms of mass information, but it is the traditional media that has greater influence on both perpetrators and societal views in general.

Some examples of press coverage of Islam and Muslims are individually outrageous, peddling palpably untrue myths and information. However, perhaps even more damaging is the ‘drip-drip’ effect of lazy or malicious headlines, which, strangely, are often accompanied by a factually correct and balanced subtext. Examples of this can be seen in the reporting surrounding community support for terrorism, criminal acts committed by Muslims or even offenders who have heritage in countries associated with Islam. Our Independent Advisory Groups have been monitoring the coverage of certain groups susceptible to hate crime in the UK traditional media, including, but not restricted to, Muslims. They would express a view that the perceived or presumed religion of a perpetrator is far more likely to be mentioned if a headline relates to a Muslim perpetrator than would be true for other religions. They would go on to say that this is not replicated in positive news stories. For example, Sir Mohamed Farah is rarely described as a ‘Muslim athlete’ in headlines about his sporting successes and, despite his heritage, he is more likely to be referred to as ‘Britain’s most successful distance runner’ or as The Sun referred to him on 11 August 2017: ‘Brit athletics legend Sir Mo Farah’.
I believe that this ‘drip-drip’ negativity in our everyday narrative creates an environment where hostility can ferment and, while the vast majority of citizens will resist this or not act out on such imbalanced information, it will have an inevitable motivational force on those with a propensity to discriminative actions. As well as increasing risk and fear in affected communities, it also creates frustration and anger towards society, which can make disaffected individuals even more susceptible to radicalisation. This frustration was best summed up for me in a conversation that I had with a tearful Muslim mother of three young children at a public event in the Midlands. She told me about the pressures she faced in everyday conversations that she had about Islamist terrorist attacks and said:

How many times do I have to make a stand against the actions of a fascist terrorist? I hate what they do but people are waiting for me to tell them that in every single conversation on the subject. Did you have to do that when [Anders Breivik] murdered the young people in Norway or [David Copeland] set off the bombs in London?

It perhaps goes without saying, but as a member of the majority European population group, I did not feel that pressure and would presume it would be taken for granted. This was a luxury that was not available to this distressed and dismayed Muslim mother.

The development of Tell MAMA

Since the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, one of the key strands of the UK response to hate crime has been the vital role of civil society and charity groups in offering a service to victims and supporting those who are less likely to report crimes to the police. While their effectiveness has been inconsistent, the best examples are an invaluable part of the state response to hate crime. Some, such as Stop Hate UK and Kick it Out, offer services to all victims, albeit in the football environment in the case of the latter. Others, like GALOP (LGBT) and the Community Security Trust (CST) work to support victims from specific community groups. Perhaps the most effective of these groups has been the CST, which supports Jewish communities in the UK. It is a charity that does not accept state funding but is supported by charitable donations. Established in 1994, the CST has grown to become, in my view, the most robust and effective support group for victims of hate crime in the world. They have developed quality systems for data and victim support and have, most helpfully, a core commitment to help other communities achieve this same level of service. Not only is this commitment enshrined in its charitable documents but it is demonstrated in its everyday practice. Its common mantra is that it does not want for the Jewish community anything that it would not want for other hate crime victim groups.

From 2010 to 2012, the programme agreed that the threat to Muslims in the UK was significant but that we also knew many victims were not coming forward to report crimes. There were many reasons for this, including that Muslim citizens were more likely to work in the ‘night-time economy’ than some other communities, where alcohol fuelled offending is more prevalent but reporting is less common. Some also reported a lack of confidence in the police and other state institutions. We believe that the absence of a national service, such as that provided by the CST, also contributed to the problem of underreporting. As we set out to facilitate the establishment of a similar service to the CST for the Muslim community, we knew that we were going to face additional challenges here. Not only is the UK Muslim community around 10 times larger than our Jewish community, but the group is also more geographically diverse.
and more likely to be from a visible ethnic minority. We also knew that the ‘theological hierarchy structure’, which exists in many religious communities, is not present in the Muslim community, with sectarian, cultural and heritage differences meaning that no individual or group is likely to be considered to represent the entire community.

Having agreed to work with potential groups to replicate the work of the CST, the Strategy Board agreed certain principles that needed to be met before it would support Government funding, including:

- That the host group would need to offer a service to all Muslim victims of hate crime, regardless of the sectarian identity, heritage or if they were, for instance, a Muslim victim of LGBT hate crime or intra-religious sectarian hate crime.
- The group would need to sign up to the ideals contained in the ‘Race for Justice Declaration’, which required a support for universal human rights. While it accepted services may dedicate their efforts in support of one victim group, they must at least be prepared to condemn all forms of hate crime.
- They must be prepared to work with the police to encourage and support victims to report, either directly or through their third party services.
- The organisation must have robust and effective data systems and services that meet the standards expected by victims who access services through traditional victim support structures.

My colleagues and I met with a number of individuals and groups who felt that they were well positioned to provide this service. The majority of these either could not or would not sign up to this list of ideals and, as we did due diligence, we even found that some organisations had circulated or condoned hostility aimed at other groups, including sectarian Muslim subgroups, Jews, or lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) groups. In 2012, ministers agreed to support a proposal that Faith Matters should be asked to establish a service supporting Muslim victims of hate crime. Tell MAMA was founded under the direction of Fiyaz Mughal OBE and, more recently, his successor Iman Abou Atta OBE. Recognising the importance of the success of Tell MAMA to service Muslim victims, myself and other professionals dedicated time to support its development. The CST in particular, shared its knowledge to ensure that it has developed into the trusted partner it has become to the police and to victims.

I have been incredibly impressed by the work undertaken by Tell MAMA since its establishment, as it provides a voice to individual victims and communities who often go unheard, while effectively partnering with other professionals. Perhaps one of its greatest efforts has been the work to reassure Muslim communities in the wake of terrorist attacks. Whether these acts are committed against the Muslim community or by someone from within, both pose the risk of retaliatory violence and, given that perpetrators aim to divide communities and exacerbate tensions, this work is essential to prevent an escalation of violence. By establishing such valuable partnerships we are able to deploy them in times of greatest need. One such example was in the days following the horrific terrorist attack in Manchester on 23 May 2017. In the days that followed, I worked closely alongside Tell MAMA and local colleagues to meet with angry and terrified groups from all sections of the community, to help reduce the tensions that both the terrorist and anti-Muslim hate-mongers would seek to create.

Despite the high praise that I have for Tell MAMA, it has not been without its critics and its leaders have been under almost constant attack from different and even opposing directions including:
From the far right: This was perhaps the most unsurprising hostility faced by Tell MAMA and its leadership. Their unprincipled and ill-informed views hold any Muslim responsible for the acts of an individual from within that community, but especially for one who is seen to be defending the human rights of the innocent. For this reason, any public statement of support for victims attracts a myriad of ‘what about. . .’ comments, as though the defence against hate seeks to justify and equivalent act. A permanent characteristic of a fascist bigot is that they will defend the rights of their group while justifying the same abuse of another. The Tell Mama leaders have been stoic in the face of this abuse, which often contains death threats.

From within the Muslim community: Perhaps more unexpectedly, Tell MAMA has also been subject to vociferous abuse from within the Muslim community. This has included many unfounded allegations, some of which have been outright racist in nature. For example, some have accused the organisation, and particularly Fiyaz Mughal, of being ‘Zionist’ because they have worked with the CST. Others have attacked their ‘grassroots’ support because of their close working relationship with the police. However, perhaps the greatest inter-group hostility came when Tell MAMA made a stance in support of the human rights of others, despite this being one of their founding principles. This was perhaps the most perceptible when they stood against anti-Gay hate crime and appointed Gay rights advocate Peter Tatchell as a trustee in 2014. While there have been some genuine challenges for Tell MAMA over the years, I believe that the most vociferous criticism towards them has been ill-informed and disingenuous.

General detractors: Hate crime policy is never universally supported and there will always be those who, for political or other reasons, will argue against it. Some claim that it provides a two-tier level of justice and others argue that it takes away services from ‘more deserving’ crimes. The prevalence of anti-Muslim hostility in recent years means that Tell MAMA receive more exposure than other similar groups, perhaps eliciting greater scrutiny and challenge. Despite this, I hold Tell MAMA and its leaders in the highest regard and their continued success is essential if we are to further the rights of Muslims and break down the ignorance and hostility that sadly exists in all communities.

Muslim community challenges

It would be wrong to discuss anti-Muslim hate crime without mention of the hostilities that exist within the UK and other Muslim communities. There are the fascist and hate-fuelled extremists who seek to attack and divide communities based on their warped and hateful interpretation of religious or other ideology, but there are other hugely harmful hostilities including:

Sectarian hostility: The horrific murder of Ahmadiyya Muslim shopkeeper, Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016 was one of the most publicised and outrageous demonstrations of sectarian hatred within the UK Muslim communities in recent years. However, this is not the only example. Hostility based on theological interpretations, cultural or political activity elsewhere in the world, or a desire for representative power in communities, is a recipe for division. When these divisions are promoted or allowed to ferment they then undermine the rights and safety of all citizens, with an ever-increasing risk of escalating violence. Theological and community leaders have a responsibility to promote inclusivity and to stand beside their counterparts to defend universal rights; all too often populist speakers fan the flames of hostility rather than seeking to quell it. The UK stance is clear; sectarian violence is a hate crime, but we know that it is massively underreported and this is to the detriment of us all, particularly the non-violent, decent majority who value diversity.
Gay Muslims: The clash between religious communities and LGB citizens is not uncommon in the UK and worldwide. Europe is better placed than many parts of the world, as the European Convention on Human Rights protects all rights equally. Rights such as the right to life, to protect free speech and to be protected from discrimination are all enshrined and, where one person’s right impinges on another’s freedom, the Convention guides courts in balancing them. In terms of hate crime, this usually appears in the clash between religious expression and practices and the LGB communities right to be protected from discrimination and abuse. The cultural objection to LGB people who are Muslims or originate from less ‘enlightened’ states is greater than it is where their rights have been fought for in open debate. I believe that LGB individuals are less likely to be open about their sexual orientation in these more traditional, conservative cultures and, as such, they are more likely to be subject to isolation, hostility and abuse. LGB and transgender Muslims are likely to face multiple types of abuse in their lives and have every right to demand our protection and also to expect the support of community leaders in speaking out against hostility. This is why the acts of leadership and courage from LGBT Muslims who speak out about their sexual orientation are so important, as is the support of others, such as that mentioned about Tell MAMA above.

Atheist and ex-Muslims: The Oxford English Dictionary describes ‘apostasy’ as ‘the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief’ and this is a contentious issue for fundamentalist sections of many religions, including some Muslims. Indeed the American civil society group, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, state that there are still 13 predominantly Muslim States where apostasy or blasphemy can effectively bring about the death penalty. It is not surprising, then, that secularists and atheists are fearful of their safety, particularly when they speak out publicly against violence or in support of their rights.

The UK and European laws are clear that we have an equal right to have no faith and to reject the teachings of any or all religions. It is vital that all religious communities and their leaders share this stance and uphold the rights of individuals, even if they have chosen to reject their earlier religious beliefs. There is an absolute need for Muslims and community advocates to demand that the state and the community in general, support their fundamental rights to be protected from targeted abuse and hate crime. However, it is also incumbent on the same voices to condemn similar abuses against others, whether they are gay Muslims, from other Muslim sects, former Muslims or Jews. The best way of protecting the rights of any group is to stand up for everyone else’s. As the Race for Justice Declaration states: ‘If you can condemn all hate crime you are part of the solution, if you can only condemn some then you are part of the problem.’

Notes
1 The Guardian reported ‘More than 1,000’ ITV news reported ‘around 1,000’.
2 The Independent reported 100–250 protesters and The Guardian ‘less than 300’.
3 See www.nhs.uk/conditions/phobias.
4 See www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18_en.pdf.
6 Populations estimated at 60 million for Italy and 54 million for England and Wales.
8 It does administer some security funds on behalf of the government and has had small financial grants to develop specific products on behalf of all victims.
References


