



Understanding and Responding to Blasphemy Extremism in the UK

Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens

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Executive Summary

- Anti-blasphemy activism in the UK is gaining momentum and showing signs of becoming increasingly radicalised. Responses to perceived acts of blasphemy in the UK are more organised than ever and some of the most prominent voices involved have links to violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan.
- Anti-blasphemy activism in the UK is focused on what are perceived to be two of the major threats Islam faces: the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, whose beliefs are viewed by activists as blasphemous, and non-Muslims who insult Islam usually by disrespecting either Mohammad or the Koran.
- Three recent blasphemy flashpoints in the UK – protests in 2021 against a teacher at a school in Batley after they allegedly showed students a picture of Mohammed, protests against the screening of the Shia-influenced film *Lady of Heaven* in 2022, and protests against schoolboys in Wakefield for allegedly disrespecting a copy of the Koran in 2023 – are linked to a new generation of UK-based anti-blasphemy activists who are working to make blasphemy a key issue of concern for British Muslims. In two cases, Batley, and Wakefield, those accused of blasphemy are also reported to have received death threats.
- None of the activists linked to these three incidents call for violence in the UK, and expressly call on British Muslims to express their anger in peaceful and democratic ways. However, their rhetoric and the support some of them have expressed for violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan has the potential to radicalise their audience around the issue of blasphemy.
- The most alarming recent development covered in this study is the emergence of a UK wing of the extremist Pakistani anti-blasphemy political party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP). Before his death in 2020, TLP founder, Khadim Rizvi, had a long record of calling for and supporting vigilante violence and murder against accused blasphemers. He also celebrated the 2016 murder of Asad Shah in Scotland, which was inspired by anti-blasphemy activism.

- A number of influential UK anti-blasphemy activists have links to TLP-UK or have publicly praised Rizvi and called for British Muslims to learn from his teachings and support the work of the TLP. Since Rizvi's death, there have been three annual events in the UK organised by TLP-UK commemorating him and celebrating his work to violently eliminate blasphemy against Islam.

Note on citations and footnotes

The majority of this report relies on primary sources gathered from mostly online sources. In many cases these sources contain calls for violence, hateful rhetoric, or the names of individuals accused of blasphemy which have not previously been made public. In such cases, the author has not provided links to the materials or specific details of where they can be found. All of these materials are however stored in a secure location by the author and, where appropriate, may be shared upon request.

Introduction

Islamic anti-blasphemy sentiment has been part of the religious activist landscape in the UK for decades. While most religions have a long record of intolerance, intimidation, and violence towards groups and individuals accused of blasphemy, it is most prevalent today among certain Islamic movements, both in Muslim-majority nations and some parts of Europe.¹ This report will outline the current landscape of anti-blasphemy activism in the UK, identifying key actors and organisations which contribute to social division, sectarianism, and an exaggerated sense of threat among their followers through anti-blasphemy activism. It will show that there are several groups and individuals working to keep this issue at the forefront of British Muslim concerns while connecting it with wider conspiracy theories about a Western desire to destroy Islam and Muslims. Following this, the paper will provide a brief overview of how jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State encourage Muslims in the West to commit acts of terrorism in response to blasphemy. It will then provide an overview of cases of blasphemy violence in the UK, before concluding with policy recommendations.

Anti-blasphemy activism comes in various guises, and with different targets. This report will focus on the two most pervasive and inflammatory: anti-blasphemy activism against non-Muslims deemed to have insulted Islam, usually by showing or producing images depicting Mohammed or disrespecting physical copies of the Koran; and anti-blasphemy activism against sects viewed as heretical, such as the Ahmadi Muslim sect or certain Shia groups. It is important to note here that most of this activism in the UK does not make direct calls for violence, and some activists are clear in their condemnation of attacks such as the *Charlie Hebdo* office massacre in 2015. The activism does, however, likely contribute to an increase in communal tension, persecution of the minority Ahmadi sect, and the spread of a conspiratorial view of non-Muslim societies as engaged in a deliberate and coordinated war on Islam. One of the key overarching messages produced by anti-blasphemy activists in the UK is that issues and incidents they identify as blasphemous demonstrate an inherent flaw and anti-Muslim bias baked into Western societies and the values upon which they are based, in particular free speech.

Blasphemy-related incidents in the UK which involve extreme sectarianism, intimidation, and threats of violence have increased in frequency over recent years. While more research is

¹ Joelle Fiss, "Anti-blasphemy offensives in the digital age: When hardliners take over," Analysis Paper 25, September 2016, *Brookings*; Nilay Saiya, "Blasphemy and terrorism in the Muslim world," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no.6 (January 2016); Ron E. Hassner, "Blasphemy and Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no.1 (March 2011).

required, the findings of this study suggest that this is more than a coincidence. The reactions to each incident have been orchestrated by anti-blasphemy activists in the UK, some of whom have associations to violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan. Since 2021, there have been three major flashpoints which have inspired British anti-blasphemy activists.

In March 2021, a religious education teacher at the Batley Grammar School shared with students a caricature of Mohammed. This led to protests by anti-blasphemy activists outside of the school, some of whom called for the teacher to be fired or otherwise sanctioned. As a result of the attention the incident received, the teacher was suspended by the school, then forced to go into hiding after receiving death threats.² They, along with their partner and children, remain in hiding at the time of writing amid reports that they were given a new identity.³ One of the most prominent leaders of the protests outside of the school is a promoter and supporter of the Pakistan-based extreme anti-blasphemy group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).

Following this, in June 2022, protests were held outside of a Cineworld branch in Birmingham objecting to its screening of *The Lady of Heaven*. In response, the cinema chain cancelled screenings of the film nationwide, citing concerns for the safety of its staff and customers.⁴ The film, written by a Shia cleric, depicts the life of Mohammed's daughter Fatima from a Twelver Shia perspective. The film was deemed by Sunni anti-blasphemy activists as blasphemous, partly because it portrayed Mohammed on film (including showing his face), and also because of its negative portrayal of Abu Bakr and Umar bin Khattab, two of the most important followers of Mohammed who, according to Sunni orthodoxy, went on to succeed him as Caliph after his death.⁵ While there were no death threats issued, some protesters outside of Cineworld

² Talia Shadwell, "'Devastated' Batley teacher 'fearing for his life' as he goes into hiding after Prophet Muhammad cartoon row," *YorkshireLive*, 29 March, 2021, <https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/devastated-batley-teacher-fearing-life-20282177>.

³ Richard Adams, "Batley teacher suspended after showing Charlie Hebdo image can return," *The Guardian*, 26 May, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/26/batley-teacher-suspended-after-showing-charlie-hebdo-image-can-return>; Vivek Choudhary, "Teacher suspended after showing pupils a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed during RE lesson at West Yorkshire school nearly two years ago has a new identity but is still in hiding," *Daily Mail*, 7 March, 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11830621/Teacher-suspended-showing-pupils-cartoon-Prophet-Mohammed-hiding.html#newcomment>.

⁴ Helen Pidd, Jessica Murray, and Andrew Pulver, "This article is more than 1 year old UK cinema chain cancels screenings of 'blasphemous' film after protests," *The Guardian*, 7 June, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/jun/07/uk-cinema-chain-cancels-screenings-of-film-the-lady-of-heaven-after-protests>.

⁵ The main objections to *The Lady of Heaven* are laid out in detail in an editorial for 5Pillars, a media outlet sympathetic to British anti-blasphemy activists: "Lady of Heaven: pure, unadulterated sectarian filth," 24 December, 2021, <https://5pillarsuk.com/2021/12/24/lady-of-heaven-pure-unadulterated-sectarian-filth/>.

chanted extreme anti-Shia slogans including “Shia kafir, kafir kafir, Shia kafir”, which claims that Shia Muslims are infidels.⁶ As will be discussed in more detail below, there is also evidence of the presence of supporters of the TLP.

Most recently, in February 2023, a group of schoolboys in their early teens from Wakefield were involved in taking a copy of the Koran into school where it was slightly damaged and may have fallen on the floor. The incident soon received national coverage and drew the ire of a range of local and national Muslim organisations, led by the local mosque, the Jamia Masjid Swafia. The mosque held at least two emergency meetings on the incident to express what its leadership claimed was the outrage of British Muslims, warning that such incidents will not be tolerated.⁷ The four boys were suspended from school and reportedly received death threats. The mosque did, however, make clear its rejection of violence or intimidation in response to the incident.⁸ This study will show that the mosque has connections with anti-blasphemy activists and – as set out below – has hosted guest speakers on several occasions who are TLP supporters.

None of the activists linked to these three incidents call for violence in the UK, and expressly call on British Muslims to express their anger in peaceful and democratic ways. However, their rhetoric and the support some of them have expressed for violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan has the potential to radicalise their audience around the issue of blasphemy. This, in turn, may increase the likelihood of sectarian violence and terrorism in the United Kingdom. While the UK has seen relatively little violence related to blasphemy, it is not immune to the threat, and there have been at least 11 anti-blasphemy related plots, attacks, and illegal threats of violence since the publication of the Satanic Verses in 1988, with two cases leading to terrorism convictions in 2023.⁹ In another – the 2016 murder of Ahmadi Muslim Asad Shah in Glasgow – the killer had direct links to the TLP and its leader Khadim Rizvi. Tanveer Ahmed,

⁶ Footage of protests in author’s possession.

⁷ Hafiz Mateen, “Qur’an Incident,” Facebook, 24 February, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/HafizMateenAnwar/videos/572081124957701/>.

⁸ 5Pillars, “The truth about the Wakefield school Quran desecration,” YouTube, 14 March, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOL8LQ_-Tmo; The BBC published a picture of the Koran in question in early March: Julia Bryson, “Police speak to child about death threats after Quran damaged at Wakefield school,” *BBC News*, 4 March, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-64835023>.

⁹ Liam Duffy, “Violence Against Blasphemers in the West: From Khomeini’s Fatwa to the Present,” Counter Extremism Project, July 2023. The two terrorism convictions are for Edward Little and Ajmal Shahpal (see “Incidents of Anti-Blasphemy Violence and Terrorism in the UK” section of this study for more details).

who killed Shah, referred to Rizvi as his mentor; Rizvi praised the murder and called for other Muslims in the West to follow suit.¹⁰

Defining Anti-Blasphemy Activism and Extremism

This study will use the term anti-blasphemy activism to describe activities carried out by Islamic activists who publicly protest perceived insults to Islam and/or beliefs held by Muslim sects which the activists define as heretical. Not all anti-blasphemy activism is extremist in nature, however, and this study does not cover all forms of anti-blasphemy activism.

The focus of this study is anti-blasphemy activism which includes forms of anti-blasphemy extremism. Drawing from J.M. Berger's definition of extremism, anti-blasphemy extremism is defined in this study as any form of anti-blasphemy activism which targets specific groups or individuals with accusations of blasphemy while presenting them as a threatening out-group subject to "hostile acts." These acts include verbal expressions of diminishment, hatred, virulent sectarianism, discrimination and, in the most extreme cases, physical violence or justifications thereof.¹¹

While this study is concerned primarily with anti-blasphemy extremism, it also covers anti-blasphemy activism which has, at times, bled into extremism (such as the threatening or public naming and therefore endangerment, whether intentional or unintentional, of individuals accused of blasphemy; and the targeted killing of perceived blasphemers.).

Methodology

This study is a scoping exercise which seeks to begin mapping the anti-blasphemy activism and extremism landscape in the UK. Its goal is to encourage a more systematic and in-depth understanding of the nature of the anti-blasphemy movement in the country. This is in response to three major incidents of blasphemy accusations which lead to threats of violence against individuals residing in Britain over the last three years, along with the murder of two people by anti-blasphemy extremists since 2016, alongside other incidents of violence and intimidation.

The research for this study began by gathering data and information related to the three major blasphemy incidents in the UK noted above. The focus here was on individual activists and organisers of anti-blasphemy protests. Once these were identified, the author conducted a survey of their activities with a focus on their speeches, sermons, written materials,

¹⁰ Sajid Iqbal and Calum McKay, "Asad Shah murder: Killer Tanveer Ahmed releases prison message," *BBC News*, 31 January, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-38815366>.

¹¹ J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

livestreamed events, and social media posts to determine the nature of their ideology and beliefs. The findings of this first part of the research went on to inform the next stages, which sought to determine the organisational connections of this movement and the methods used to disseminate its message and how, at times, this can lead to the promotion of narratives which encourage violence or intimidation against accused blasphemers.

This study only provides a partial picture of the issue based on online research. It is intended to act as the starting point for future, more in-depth and fieldwork-based research on the nature of anti-blasphemy extremism in the UK.

Sectarianism and Anti-Blasphemy extremism: From Pakistan to the UK

In some Muslim-majority countries, anti-blasphemy activism and laws have been linked to vigilante violence and terrorist attacks against those accused of insulting Islam.¹² According to one study on blasphemy and terrorism in Muslim-majority states, “laws against religious defamation weaken reform-minded moderate Muslims, silence members of minority faiths and political dissidents, and promote violence and terrorism.”¹³ Another study found that it was in countries where extreme Islamic groups were free to organise protests but did not receive moral support from the state where the most anti-blasphemy violence occurred.¹⁴

Pakistan is identified as a Muslim-majority state with some of the highest levels of anti-blasphemy violence, and this has been linked to the activism of a range of Islamic organisations and movements, including Jamaat-e-Islami, Dawat-e-Islam, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, and Khatme Nabuwat.¹⁵ An incident which is central to the evolution of anti-blasphemy extremism in Pakistan, and its spill-over into the UK, is the murder of Pakistani politician Salman Taseer in 2011 by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. Taseer was an influential critic of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, which criminalise blasphemy against any religion (although in practice against Islam) and include the death sentence among other penalties. Qadri, who was a follower of the Sufi Barelvi anti-blasphemy movement Dawat-e-Islami, took matters into his own hands to both preserve blasphemy laws and demonstrate loyalty to the honour of Islam and its prophet. He soon became a hero among some anti-blasphemy activists in Pakistan, primarily Barelvi groups which place the honour of Islam and Mohammed at the top of their religious and or political agenda.¹⁶ They rallied around his cause as he was arrested and sentenced to death, arranging mass protests against his execution. After his execution in 2016, there were further protests, and approximately 100,000 people attended his funeral.¹⁷ Qadri’s actions and subsequent

¹² Fiss, “Anti-blasphemy offensives in the digital age,” 5; Sana Ashraf, “Honour, purity and transgression: understanding blasphemy accusations and consequent violent action in Punjab, Pakistan,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no.1 (January 2018).

¹³ Saiya, “Blasphemy and terrorism in the Muslim world,” 1088.

¹⁴ Hassner, “Blasphemy and Violence.”

¹⁵ Alix Philippon, “For the Love of Prophet Muhammad,” in *The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam*, ed. Rachida Chih, David Jordan, and Stefan Reichmuth (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 393 - 397; Abdul Basit, “Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP),” *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 21, no.3 (August 2020).

¹⁶ Basit, “Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan,” 374-375 ; More than 500 Barelvi scholars signed a statement in support of Qadri after the murder, Salman Siddiqui, “Hardline Stance: Religious bloc condones murder,” *The Express Tribune*, 5 January, 2011, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/99313/hardline-stance-religious-bloc-condones-murder/>.

¹⁷ Jon Boone, “Thousands at funeral of Pakistani executed for murdering governor,” *The Guardian*, 1 March, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/funeral-pakistani-mumtaz-qadri-executed-salmaan-taseer>.

execution contributed significantly to the growth of anti-blasphemy extremism in Pakistan. Groups such as the anti-Ahmadi group Khatme Nabuwwat gained further support, and new, more extreme, groups emerged, including Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which evolved from a pro-Qadri protest movement into a political party.¹⁸

This is particularly relevant to the UK, where the activism of such groups has seeped into some communities via mosques, Islamic organisations, and influential preachers. In some cases, such as that of Tehreek-e-Labbaik, Dawat-e-Islami, and the Khatme Nabuwwat movement, these groups have a physical presence in the UK. Most UK based anti-blasphemy activists covered in this study explicitly reject anti-blasphemy violence in the UK and condemn terrorist attacks such as those which have targeted the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris; while a few have expressed sympathy for anti-blasphemy-related attacks in Pakistan, or have partnered with, promoted, and praised others who have. All anti-blasphemy activists covered here, however, call for stricter laws in the UK against blasphemy and seek to criminalise insults against Islam. They also present such insults, in particular showing images of Muhammad, as part of a wider war on the faith by so-called enemies of Islam in the West. The activism does therefore have the potential to contribute to an increase in communal tension and spread of a conspiratorial view of non-Muslim societies as engaged in a deliberate and coordinated war on Islam.

It is important to note here that, while they are growing in influence, anti-blasphemy activists represent a small proportion of British Muslims, and there is nothing to suggest that the majority follow such extreme interpretations of blasphemy, nor do they view the issue as a central and urgent concern in the way demanded by blasphemy activists.

Jihadist Anti-Blasphemy Terrorism

While jihadists and extremist Barelvīs have deep doctrinal differences and are often in opposition to each other, they share a strong commitment to violence against blasphemers.¹⁹ Jihadist groups have for years made explicit calls for Westerners to undertake terrorist attacks in their home countries against people and groups deemed to have insulted Islam or Muhammed. Propaganda focusing on this is readily available online via a range of platforms,

¹⁸ Basit, "Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan," 381; "700-strong lawyers' alliance remains defiant after Qadri's execution," *The Express Tribune*, 7 March, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1060789/lawyers-group-behind-spike-in-blasphemy-cases-in/>.

¹⁹ Mark Woodward, Muhammad Sani Umar, Inayah Rohmaniyah, and Mariani Yahya, "Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no.6 (2013), 60.

from mainstream download sites such as archive.org, to social media platforms like Telegram. The general diagnosis provided by jihadists differs little from other non-jihadist blasphemy activists. Blasphemy is not only viewed as a grave sin, but its supposed prevalence in the West also proves that Western societies are inherently hostile to Islam and Muslims. The production and tolerance of insulting images of the Prophet, for example, is presented as symptomatic of a wider conspiracy to undermine and destroy the faith. Muslims in the West, according to this reasoning, are therefore dutybound to react with what jihadists claim is religiously legitimate violence to protect and preserve the honour of the faith.

Activism against so-called blasphemy comes in various guises, and with different targets. This report will focus on the two most pervasive and inflammatory of these: anti-blasphemy activism against non-Muslims deemed to have insulted Islam, usually by showing or producing images depicting Mohammed; and anti-blasphemy activism against sects viewed as heretical, such as the Ahmadiyya movement or certain Shia groups.

Anti-Blasphemy activism in the UK

Islamic anti-blasphemy activism in the UK has roots which stretch back to the protests against the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. The episode and those involved in organising protests and mobilising British Muslims is covered in detail by Kenan Malik in his 2009 book *From Fatwa to Jihad*. He identifies the Rushdie affair as the starting shot of an ongoing and ever-evolving "cultural conflict" between Muslims in Britain driven for the first time by "a sense of hurt" about a work that "offended their deepest beliefs," and traditional British ideas around rights, duties and entitlements.²⁰ He provides a detailed account of the involvement of Islamist activists in the United Kingdom, mostly linked to Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, who with financial backing from Saudi Arabia oversaw the first ever mass political mobilisation of Muslims in the United Kingdom.

Today, however, the Islamists of Jamaat-e-Islami are no longer at the forefront of anti-blasphemy activism. This now emanates mostly from Barelvi and Deobandi groups based in Pakistan which have gained a foothold in certain sections of British Islam over recent years. The context of such activism has also changed. Anti-blasphemy activists are operating in a different socio-political context shaped by the post-9/11 era, and in the shadow of a string of terrorist murders inspired by anti-blasphemy extremism in South Asia and Europe.

²⁰ Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad* (London: Atlantic Book, 2017), xxii.

Since the *Satanic Verses* mobilisation, there have been several blasphemy related events in the UK and abroad which have energised anti-blasphemy activists in the UK. Among the first was the 2005 publication of cartoon depictions of Muhammad by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*. This sparked protests from a range of groups. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) used the controversy as an example of how freedom of speech needed to be constrained in the UK when it came to offending religious sensibilities.²¹ They were clear, however, in their condemnation of violent threats. Extremist pro-jihad groups including al-Muhajiroun and its offshoots also organised protests but called instead for violence and terrorism. Three members of the group were charged and convicted for soliciting murder due to their use of slogans such as “bomb, bomb Denmark, bomb, bomb, USA.”²²

In 2012, the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* revived the cartoon controversy by publishing its own series of sketches of Mohammed. The immediate response in the UK was muted, however, and the first large scale protests were organised three years later by the Muslim Action Forum (MAF) a group which is today one of the groups at the forefront of blasphemy activism in the UK.

The Muslim Action Forum (MAF)

The MAF first emerged in 2015 when it organised a large protest outside of Downing Street to express anger over plans by *Charlie Hebdo* to republish its 2012 cartoons of Mohammed. Leaders of the group see themselves as continuing the tradition of political activism for the protection of the honour of Islam begun by those who organised the original *Satanic Verses* protests. This view was expressed by one of its leading members, Tauqir Ishaq, who in an interview with conservative Muslim media outlet 5Pillars discussed his own involvement in the campaign against Rushdie’s book and the ongoing work of groups like the MAF.²³

For Ishaq, like other blasphemy activists in the UK, the *Satanic Verses* affair and all subsequent insults to Islam expose an anti-Muslim hypocrisy at the heart of Western notions of freedom, in particular free speech. Free speech, according to this argument, is often curtailed in Europe

²¹ “Danish Cartoons Depicting the Prophet Muhammad Abuse Our Freedoms,” Muslim Council of Britain, accessed 25 January, 2024, <https://mcb.org.uk/danish-cartoons-depicting-the-prophet-muhammad-abuse-our-freedoms/>.

²² “Four jailed over violent slogans at cartoon protest,” *The Guardian*, 18 July, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/jul/18/terrorism.religion>.

²³ 5Pillars, “Shaykh Tauqir Ishaq: Salman Rushdie, Dawah Priorities & Muslim Unity,” YouTube, 21 May, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z56maRhYonw>, at 26:52.

when it comes to issues such as antisemitism or national security but is simultaneously used to protect those who seek to insult Islam. Ishaq even uses the same argument put forward in 1989 by anti-Rushdie organiser Sher Azam. In an interview with Kenan Malik, Azam points out that *Spycatcher*, a book published around the same time as the *Satanic Verses*, was banned by the British government due to its revelations about the operations of Mi5 in the UK during the Cold War: "There are limits in England. Look at how the government banned *Spycatcher*. Why can't they ban this filthy novel?"²⁴ For Ishaq, making the same argument over 30 years later, their reason is clear: "they absolutely hate political Islam, they fear political Islam. And the reason they fear it is because I'm sorry to say they're just corrupt people, corrupt internally, and corrupt externally. They fear Islam because Islam can't be bought...like other religions have been bought and that scares them."²⁵

The MAF has helped organise anti-blasphemy activism around two of the most recent and controversial blasphemy campaigns in the UK over recent years, *The Lady of Heaven* film, and the displaying of an image of Mohammed to students by a teacher at the Batley Grammar school. Its strategy is based on street protests and open letters to the Prime Minister signed by numerous imams and activists around the UK.

The group is clear in its condemnation of violence and in a 2015 press release condemning the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons also condemned the attack on the magazine's offices in Paris, calling for "responsible debate." Instead, the MAF campaigns to make what they define as Islamophobia a criminal offence in the UK, asking MPs to amend the 1986 Public Order Act so that "malicious depiction of images and use of malevolent language against revered personalities of all religions" is classified as a hate crime.²⁶ During the 2015 MAF protests which accompanied the letter, another spokesman for the group, Faiz Siddiqi, further explained the group's position and goals:

there are those who say that we are extremists. There are those who say we are fundamentalists. I say this: we are extreme in love of rasool allah [Mohammed]. We are extreme in our values and our virtues because the one personality to give extremity of values was your master and my master Muhammad!... We are extreme in the reconstruction of society – in Islam in the sunnah and in the seerah [prophetic biography]

²⁴ Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad*, 30.

²⁵ 5Pillars, "Shaykh Tauqir Ishaq."

²⁶ Muslim Action Forum, "Press Release," 8 February, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20150310145801/https://www.muslimactionforum.com/Press_Release_8thFeb.pdf.

we will reconstruct civil values, civil dialogue, best manners, and extremely good behaviour. We are British Muslim citizens of this country...we are true British Muslims and represent true conservative British values in this society.²⁷

After it emerged that a teacher at the Batley grammar school showed students one of the infamous caricatures of Mohammed during a religious studies lesson, the MAF organised protests outside of the school and published several open letters. The MAF open letters provide useful insight into the framing of the issue by MAF and, via its signatories, the extent of the anti-blasphemy network in the UK.

In a letter dated 28 March 2021, the MAF goes as far as naming the teacher facing the accusations, despite a well-established record of the danger such public identifications can place people in.²⁸ Only five months prior, French school teacher Samuel Paty was murdered after facing the very same accusation.²⁹ That this was not taken into account by the MAF suggests a serious and concerning lack of judgement and consideration of the consequences of their activism.³⁰ The letter also used severe language in its attack on the teacher, accusing him of “inciting hatred” and intentionally offending and provoking “1.6 billion Muslims on this planet.”³¹ The teacher’s supporters, meanwhile, were “guided by their blind hatred of the Muslim community.”

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP)

The TLP is a Pakistan-based extremist Barelvi movement and political party founded by Khadim Hussain Rizvi in the aftermath of the killing of Salman Taseer and the conviction and death sentence handed down to his murderer Mumtaz Qadri. Several Pakistani blasphemy activists mobilised protests in support of Qadri, and Rizvi was among the most prominent of them.³² Since his death in 2020, the TLP has been headed by Rizvi’s son, Saad Hussain Rizvi. After

²⁷ Muslim Action Forum, “Muslim Action Forum DEMO | Shaykh Faizul Aqtab Siddiqi | 10 Downing Street, London | 8th Feb 2015,” YouTube, 8 February, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puxANIDPMOw>

²⁸ Open letter in author’s possession.

²⁹ “Macron calls Paris beheading ‘Islamist terrorist attack’,” *BBC News*, 17 October, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54579403>.

³⁰ A later version of the letter removed the name of the teacher, although the original version remains on the Facebook page of one of its signatories and a copy is in the author’s possession.

³¹ Open letter in author’s possession.

³² Ahmad Sabat, Muhammad Shoaib, Abdul Qadar, “Religious populism in Pakistani Punjab: How Khadim Rizvi’s Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan emerged,” *International Area Studies Review* 23, no.4, 365.

providing a brief background on the Pakistani group's links to extremism and violence, this section will introduce the TLP support network in the UK.

The TLP represents a new and increasingly popular form of Barelvi violent extremism in Pakistan which is centred on persecuting, attacking, and killing people who are deemed to have committed blasphemy against Islam.³³ The group campaigns for the preservation of Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws, and has been accused of spreading inflammatory rhetoric about preserving the honour of Islam and its Prophet, which has inspired extra-judicial killings, lynchings, and other attacks on accused blasphemers in Pakistan and beyond.³⁴ The two main targets of TLP's activism are Ahmadi Muslims and non-Muslims who are accused of insulting Islam.

The group and its leadership have a history of encouraging violence and praising Muslims who take matters into their own hands and kill or attack blasphemers. In 2018, for example, at a protest against a change in electoral law in Pakistan which removed a statement about the finality of the Prophethood from an oath that members of Parliament are required to take, Khadim Rizvi accused those overseeing the change of blasphemy, and stated that, "there is only one punishment for those dishonouring the Prophet: to remove their heads from their bodies!"³⁵ In 2017, Rizvi also celebrated vigilante violence carried out by anti-blasphemy extremists in Europe, praising Tanveer Ahmed, the killer of Asad Shah in Glasgow, and referred to him using the Urdu honorific "Ghazi".³⁶ Rizvi began to use images of Tanveer Ahmed alongside Mumtaz Qadri at TLP rallies in Pakistan and placed special status upon Ahmed due to his willingness to attack and kill blasphemers in a non-Muslim country.³⁷ Rizvi also claimed to be in regular contact with Ahmed from prison, noting that "I'm proud of the fact we are in

³³ Naeem Ahmed, "Countering Violent Barelvi Extremism in Pakistan: Challenges, Implications and Way Forward," in ed. Muhammad Saleem Khilji, Shafqat Munir Ahmad, and Abid Qaiyum Suleri, *Policy Perspectives on Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan*, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, October 2021.

³⁴ Roohan Ahmed, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: An emerging right-wing threat to Pakistan's democracy," Atlantic Council, 15 January, 2022, 1-3 (the article also refers to Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah or TLYR, this is the Barelvi pro-Mumtaz Qadri coalition from which TLP emerged); Muhammad Suleman, "Institutionalisation of Sufi Islam after 9/11 and the Rise of Barelvi Extremism in Pakistan," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, no.2 (February 2018), 9-10.

³⁵ Asad Hashim, "Shooter of Pakistan's Ahsan Iqbal linked to Tehreek-e-Labbaik," *Al-Jazeera*, 7 May, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/7/shooter-of-pakistans-ahsan-iqbal-linked-to-tehreek-e-labbaik>.

³⁶ Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Official, "Ghazi Tanveer Ahmad Qadri's Letter," YouTube, 12 March, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmK3i8jgkJg>.

³⁷ Secunder Kermani and Sajid Iqbal, "Murderer Tanveer Ahmed inspires Pakistani hardliners from Scottish jail," *BBC News*, 1 March, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39112840>.

contact.”³⁸ Other senior TLP members have also called for violence, including Pir Afzal, who in 2018 called on the guards and drivers of Pakistani judges who opposed blasphemy legislation to kill their employers in the name of Islam.³⁹

Unsurprisingly, members and supporters of TLP have been involved in anti-blasphemy violence both in Pakistan and Europe. In May 2018, TLP member Abid Hussain attempted to assassinate Pakistan’s Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal, in part due to his support for the change in the oath noted above.⁴⁰ In Europe, Tanveer Ahmed is one of several anti-blasphemy attackers inspired by TLP and other Pakistani anti-blasphemy groups. In September 2020, Zaheer Hassan Mehmood attempted the murder of two men in Paris whom he believed to be associated with *Charlie Hebdo*. He later told investigators that, similar to Tanveer Ahmed, he was inspired both by Khadim Rizvi after watching videos of him on YouTube, and by the founder of Dawat-e-Islami, Ilyas Qadri.⁴¹ Most recently, in May 2023 Ajmal Shahpal, a TLP follower based in Nottingham, was convicted for encouraging terrorism after posting messages on Twitter glorifying the murder of Samuel Paty and encouraging people to behead those who insult Islam. The messages were published in 2020, shortly after Shahpal returned from a trip to Pakistan.⁴²

In Pakistan, the TLP has at times been treated as a violent extremist and terrorist threat by the state. In November 2018, Khadim Rizvi was arrested on terrorism and sedition charges after inciting violent protests which demanded the public execution of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was accused of blasphemy by her co-workers in 2009.⁴³ She was initially convicted of breaking Pakistan’s blasphemy law and sentenced to death, but was acquitted in October 2018,

³⁸ Kermani and Iqbal, “Murderer Tanveer Ahmed;” Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi Official, “Ghazi Tanveer Ahmad.”

³⁹ Ahmad Sabat, Muhammad Shoaib, and Abdul Qadar, “Religious populism in Pakistani Punjab: How Khadim Rizvi’s Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan emerged,” *International Area Studies Review* 23, no.4 (December 2020), 370.

⁴⁰ Iqbal Mirza, “Main accused in Ahsan Iqbal assassination case handed 30 years in jail,” *Dawn*, 27 October, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1441747>; Hashim, “Shooter of Pakistan’s Ahsan Iqbal linked to Tehreek-e-Labbaik.”

⁴¹ “Charlie Hebdo office attacker ‘radicalised by Pakistani groups’,” *The Straits Times*, 24 March, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/charlie-hebdo-office-attacker-radicalised-by-pakistani-groups>; “Attaque à Paris: les enquêteurs cherchent à authentifier une vidéo de l’assaillant,” *Le Monde*, 28 September, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/09/27/attaque-a-paris-huit-gardes-a-vue-en-cours-les-enqueteurs-cherchent-a-authentifier-une-vidéo_6053792_3224.html.

⁴² Duncan Gardham, “Twitter user who published image of severed head sentenced to five and a half years in prison,” *Sky News*, 11 May, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/twitter-user-who-published-image-of-severed-head-sentenced-to-five-and-a-half-years-in-prison-12878501>.

⁴³ “Pakistan arrests TLP leader behind blasphemy protests,” *Al-Jazeera*, 24 November, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/24/pakistan-arrests-tlp-leader-behind-blasphemy-protests>; “TLP leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi booked under sedition, terrorism charges: information minister,” *Dawn*, 1 December, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1448807>.

leading to the nationwide protests which shut down much of the country and led to seven deaths and 200 injuries.⁴⁴ Alongside Rizvi's call for the execution of Bibi, TLP co-founder Muhammad Afzal Qadri made calls for vigilante murder against the judges who acquitted Bibi: "They all three deserve to be killed. Either their security should kill them, their driver kill them, or their cook kill them...Whoever, who has got any access to them, kill them before the evening."⁴⁵ Thus, while TLP calls for Pakistan to uphold and use its blasphemy laws, it is also clear in its endorsement of extra-judicial, mob, and vigilante violence and murder in cases where its supporters view the state as having failed to adequately respond.

In April 2021, TLP was banned under Pakistani anti-terrorism laws after further TLP protests against the arrest of Saad Hussain Rizvi in April, who had taken over the leadership of TLP after his father's death in November 2020. The protests turned into violent riots which led to the deaths of seven policemen.⁴⁶ The ban did not last very long, however, and in the months that followed Pakistan's then Prime Minister Imran Khan gave in to protesters' demands, releasing Saad Rizvi from prison and lifting the ban.⁴⁷

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) in the UK

In recent years, TLP has begun to make inroads into certain sections of UK Islam via preachers and activists who openly support either the group or its founder Khadim Rizvi. Supporters of Rizvi's, or those who promote his supporters, have been, amongst others, at the forefront of blasphemy protests and incidents in the UK, including Batley Grammar School, the school in Wakefield, and the Lady of Heaven.

While it is unclear if it is officially recognised by TLP leadership in Pakistan, a group calling itself TLP UK currently maintains a presence, both on the streets and in mosques, and across social media, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, with a total following of over 3300.⁴⁸ TLP UK has reportedly organised at least three street protests in the UK. The first in April 2021 was

⁴⁴ "Asia Bibi: Huge protests in Pakistan over Christian woman released after eight years on death row for blasphemy," *The Independent*, 31 October, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/asia-bibi-case-protests-pakistan-blasphemy-christian-woman-released-supreme-court-a8610786.html>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Imran Gabol, "Government has decided to ban TLP under anti-terror law, says interior minister," *Dawn*, 14 April, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1618186> ; "Pakistan takes far-right leader off terror list to end protests," *Al-Jazeera*, 12 November, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/12/pakistan-far-right-leader-saad-rizvi-terrorism-list-protests>.

⁴⁷ "Pakistan takes far-right leader off terror list," *Al-Jazeera*.

⁴⁸ The author has accessed and saved the content of these social media channels.

held outside of the Pakistan High Commission in London to express anger at the ongoing support the French government expressed for cartoonists who depict Mohammed and demanding that the Pakistani government expel the French ambassador and boycott French products.⁴⁹ It was likely deliberately held to coincide with the TLP protests taking place in Pakistan that same month. Supporters held a TLP banner and chanted TLP slogans, including “Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah.”⁵⁰ According to one report, they also chanted a slogan which incites violence against blasphemers.⁵¹ Another TLP UK protest was held outside the Pakistani High Commission in London in October 2021, this time protesting the TLP’s treatment by the Pakistani government, which at the time had banned the group and jailed many of its members on charges which included terrorism.⁵² After an anti-Islam activist in Sweden burned a Koran in January 2023, TLP UK protesters mobilised again in London, this time outside of the Swedish Embassy.⁵³ Most recently, the TLP UK YouTube page livestreamed a pro-TLP protest outside the Birmingham Town Hall in July 2023, also against the burning of a Koran in Sweden which took place in late June. Here, too, TLP slogans are chanted by protesters with placards bearing the name “TLP-UK”, while Khadim Rizvi is quoted and praised by the speakers.⁵⁴ The man recording the video is shown wearing a TLP hat and footage includes one speaker praising Khadim Rizvi and warning that that “when it comes to the honour of the Koran we will...sacrifice our lives and also the lives of the enemies, and these are the teachings of Amir al Mujahideen...the great Imam Khadim Hussain Rizvi.”⁵⁵ Protesters are also told to lend their support to the current TLP head, Saad Husain Rizvi, in the 2023 Pakistani general election. The social media presence of TLP therefore has clear links to the physical protests in the UK. Alongside the July 2023 livestream from the TLP-UK YouTube account, the TLP UK Instagram account contains footage claiming to be of supporters travelling to London to take part in a protest on the same day as the October 2021 protest in London. It also depicts a TLP supporter printing leaflets about the protest.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Atika Rehman, “TLP protests outside mission in London,” *Dawn*, 16 April, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1618505>.

⁵⁰ Rehman, “TLP protests outside mission in London.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Murtaza Ali Shah, “TLP supporters stage protest in London,” *The International News*, 29 October, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/904048-tlp-supporters-stage-protest-in-london>.

⁵³ Footage of protests obtained via TLP UK social media channels, in author’s possession.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Obtained via TLP UK social media channels, videos, and images in author’s possession.

TLP UK's online output is aimed at British Muslims, and it produces original media glorifying Rizvi along with other prominent TLP members and Mumtaz Qadri. In one meme depicting TLP member Syed Inayat ul Haq Shah, he is quoted as celebrating how "when it comes to the respect of the Prophet, Mumtaz [Qadri] shoots bullets into chests."⁵⁷

The group also appears to be the main organiser behind annual events run across the Midlands and northern England commemorating the death and celebrating the life of Khadim Rizvi, who is often referred to affectionately by supporters as "Baba Jaan" or "Baba Ji".⁵⁸ The events are referred to as "*urs*", an Urdu term for the death anniversary of a Sufi saint, which Rizvi is regarded as among blasphemy activists. The events have been held in November 2021, 2022, and 2023 in mosques, Islamic centres, and rented event halls in Birmingham, Manchester, and Stockton.⁵⁹ TLP UK produces flyers for the events and disseminates them both online and as paper copies. In the promotional material for the events, Rizvi is referred to as "Amir al-Mujahideen" (leader of the holy warriors, or those who pursue jihad), a title which is also used to describe him by those speaking at the events. Videos of the events show speakers, most of whom are based in the UK, praising Rizvi's work and legacy, and offering prayers and support to the current TLP head, Hafiz Saad Rizvi.⁶⁰ During the events, crowds and speakers chant a slogan which is popular at TLP and other blasphemy extremist gatherings in Pakistan.⁶¹ The slogan, "Labbaik, Ya Rasool Allah," translates to "I am at your service Mohammed," is also linked to the full title of the TLP, Tehreek-e-LabbaiK Ya Rasool Allah. One speaker at the Birmingham event in 2022, Imam Asrar Rasheed, also claimed that he was in direct phone contact with Rizvi shortly before his death.⁶²

The TLP and Batley Grammar School

One of the men at the forefront of the protests against the Batley Grammar School teacher, Adil Shahzad, has gone on record praising Khadim Rizvi on a number of occasions, and openly associates with and promotes the TLP in the UK. He has addressed at least two of the TLP UK

⁵⁷ Obtained via TLP UK social media channels, image in author's possession.

⁵⁸ At least one flyer for the events contains the term "TLP UK" and on TLP social media accounts there are videos of the flyer being printed, along with footage from the events.

⁵⁹ The most recent event took place in November 2023 in Birmingham. Promotional material and video footage in author's possession.

⁶⁰ Promotional material and video footage in author's possession.

⁶¹ Video footage in author's possession. On the TLP slogan, see Sushant Sareen, "Tehreek-E-LabbaiK Pakistan: The New Face of Barelvi Activism," Observer Research Foundation, September 2021.

⁶² Video footage in author's possession.

events commemorating Rizvi in November 2022, praising him, and referring to him as “Amir al-Mujahideen.”⁶³ Rizvi was, according to Shahzad, a “fearless knight”, who “did not back away from any issue”. He urged his audience to “take knowledge” about their faith from Rizvi. Shahzad also praised the TLP directly in the speech, noting how in Pakistan it is at the forefront of confronting what he perceived to be threats to Islam, including the Ahmadiyya movement and homosexuality, noting that “this is why we associate with them [TLP].” He calls on the audience to follow TLP campaigns in Pakistan and “just as they speak out there [Pakistan]...it is our responsibility and duty to also speak out against the *fitnas* [threat to, or test of, Islam] that are affecting our children and our youngsters in this country as well.”⁶⁴ Muslims, he concluded, must remain “loyal to the mission of Baba Ji.”

Shahzad was, until his resignation in December 2022, a director of the al-Hikam Institute, a Sufi Islamic centre based in Bradford. His former colleague at al-Hikam, Muhammad Asim Hussain, who resigned as director in 2019, also has a record of supporting blasphemy extremism. Reports following the execution of Mumtaz Qadri found that Hussain had used his Facebook account to praise Qadri, writing that his death was “A dark day in the history of Pakistan; the day Ghazi Mumtaz was wrongfully executed and martyred in the way of Allah, when he did what he did in honour of the Prophet.”⁶⁵

Shahzad also tours Mosques around the country as a preacher and teaches classes at an Islamic seminary in Oldham which aims to provide its students with “a high-quality education to students seeking to deepen their knowledge of Islam.”⁶⁶ He gained national attention as a key organizer of protests outside of the Batley Grammar school, featuring in media reports about the protest calling for harsh sanctions against the teacher and for the British government to “insist on respect for Islam.”⁶⁷ He praised the school for suspending the teacher but asked that it “go

⁶³ Video footage in author’s possession.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “Imam hits back after criticism over his support for murderer Mumtaz Qadri,” *Asian Image*, 4 March, 2016, <https://www.asianimage.co.uk/news/14321559.imam-hits-back-after-criticism-over-his-support-for-murderer-mumtaz-qadri/>; “Head Imam Muhammed Asim Hussain condemns Mumtaz Qadri’s execution, calls him a martyr,” *India Today*, 3 March, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/mumtaz-qadri-pakistan-punjab-imam-hussain-salman-taseer-311651-2016-03-03>.

⁶⁶ “Our Story,” Greengate Islamic College, accessed 25 January, 2024, <https://greengateic.co.uk/OurCollege.html>.

⁶⁷ Hannah Al-Othman and Sian Griffiths, “PM must insist on respect for Islam’ in Batley School Row,” *The Times*, 28 March, 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pm-must-insist-on-respect-for-islam-in-batley-school-cartoon-row-gxn5l36mk>; Phoebe Fuller, “Batley Grammar teacher showed Prophet Muhammad image next to Donald Trump, Pope Francis and Boris Johnson, pupil claims,” *Yorkshire Live*, 9 May, 2021, <https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/local-news/batley-grammar-teacher-showed-prophet-20558472>.

one step further” and fire them.⁶⁸ Shahzad urged Muslims to respond in a “democratic way” when expressing their anger at the incident, including writing to their local MP and to avoid “inciting hate.” Freedom of speech, in his view, was being used to “justify insults against the best of creation [Mohammed].” In a common argument put forward by British blasphemy activists, he claims that freedom of speech is only used as a defence for those who insult Islam, while insults against other groups, such as Jewish or LGBT people, are shut down more forcefully.

Shahzad’s Facebook page also focused heavily on the incident, containing videos of him speaking about the school and the wider issue of insults against Islam in the Britain and the West.⁶⁹ Concerningly, he also posted what appears to be an early version of an open letter by the MAF about the incident in which the accused schoolteacher is directly named.⁷⁰ The post is still active on his Facebook page at the time of writing. The MAF Facebook page also posted a version of the letter on the same day but omitted the name of the teacher.⁷¹ Naming the teacher in this way in the context of blasphemy and how the TLP (which Shahzad has aligned himself with), react to such accusations, placed him in increased danger. Shahzad is not the only blasphemy activist involved in the Batley incident to publicly name the teacher. A local charity, Purpose of Life, which is run by Mohammad Sajjad Hussain, also posted an online statement revealing their name.⁷² The charity was later issued with an official misconduct warning from the Charity Commission. According to the warning the charity “Publicly named a person at the centre of a protest, despite there being a foreseeable risk to the person’s safety” in an open letter which was “written in such a way as to be likely to inflame existing tensions within the local community.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Copies of these posts are in the author’s possession.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Camilla Turner and Gordon Rayner, “Islamic charity ‘put Batley cartoon row teacher in danger’ by outing him,” *The Telegraph*, 26 March, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/26/islamic-charity-put-cartoon-row-teacher-danger-outing/>.

⁷³ Charity Commission for England and Wales, “Official Warning of the Charity Commission for England and Wales to Purpose of Life,” 29 September, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211004164900/http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/SCHEMES/004772.PDF>.

The Wakefield School Incident and the TLP

The reports of a schoolboy in Wakefield allegedly disrespecting a copy of the Koran became an issue of grave concern for the local Jamia Swafia mosque. One of the mosque Imams, Hafiz Anwar, chaired a meeting condemning the boy and stating that “the slightest bit of disrespect [against Islam and the Koran] is not accepted and is not going to be tolerated at any point in any city in any country by any Muslim.”⁷⁴

While the mosque and its representatives have been clear in their desire for peaceful responses to accusations of blasphemy and expressed concern for the wellbeing of all students at the school, anti-blasphemy campaigning around the incident which the mosque was involved increases the risk of threats being made against the accused. While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the mosque’s leadership in their stated desire to avoid violence, it is a concern that both a senior member of the mosque and guests invited to the mosque have close connections to the TLP and have praised Mumtaz Qadri and Khadim Rizvi.

An Imam of the mosque, Hafiz Abdul Qadir Naushahi, who attended the mosque’s meeting about the incident and is seen sitting next to Hafiz Anwar⁷⁵, has a record of support for TLP members and causes. Like Adil Shahzad, he also spoke at one of the TLP UK events honouring Khadim Rizvi in Manchester in 2022, providing a recitation in his honour.⁷⁶ In a video from 2016, he is shown attending a “Ghazi Mumtaz Qadri Conference”. In the video he recited in honour of Qadri, referring to him as “Ghazi” and “shaheed” (martyr).⁷⁷

In June 2022, the mosque hosted a popular Islamic poetry reciter and TLP supporter from Pakistan named Owais Qadri.⁷⁸ While it is unclear what the topic of his talk at the mosque was, Qadri’s close associations with TLP and his promotion at the mosque pose a risk of introducing TLP to more British audiences or normalising the group’s extreme positions in Pakistan, even if he visited as a poet. In May 2022, only shortly before his visit to the mosque, Qadri had campaigned for the TLP in Pakistan. He is a regular attendee to the group’s events and has a long association with TLP in Pakistan.⁷⁹ In October 2015, on the day that Pakistan’s Supreme Court upheld Mumtaz Qadri’s death sentence, Owais Qadri posted a message on his Facebook page which read “Long Live Ghazi Mumtaz Qadri” and was accompanied by a picture of the

⁷⁴ Video in author’s possession.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Social media posts in author’s possession.

⁷⁹ Videos of Owais Qadri’s participation at TLP events in author’s possession.

killer.⁸⁰ Owais Qadri has attended numerous TLP events and rallies, both before and after Khadim Rizvi's death, during which he expresses his love and respect for the former TLP leader.⁸¹ After Rizvi's death, he recited a *manqabat*, a Sufi devotional poem reserved for Sufi Saints, in Rizvi's honour.⁸² Qadri's appearance at the mosque is not is not the only time he has been invited to address British Muslim audiences. In 2018, he was advertised as addressing an event organised by Adil Shahzad's al-Hikam Institute.⁸³ In July 2022, Qadri was also advertised as appearing at an event in his honour at an Islamic centre in Waltham Forest, London.⁸⁴

In October 2022, the Jamia Swafia also hosted Pakistani anti-blasphemy activist Hassan Haseeb ur Rehman, who has a record of praising and supporting Mumtaz Qadri, including speaking at his funeral in 2016 and at other events in Qadri's honour.⁸⁵ In the past, ur Rehman has been subject to criticism in the UK. In 2016, his visit to the UK to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury was condemned by a number of prominent voices, including the sons of Salman Taseer, because he was a leading figure in a campaign to support their father's killer.⁸⁶ This, however, has not prevented him from visiting the UK on at least one more occasion, including his visit to the Jamia Swafia in Wakefield and a 2018 appearance at an anti-terror conference in Manchester.⁸⁷ He has also appeared on the UK-based Ummah Channel.⁸⁸

TLP supporter Adil Shahzad has also spoken at the mosque at least twice in the last year, at events in July and December 2022.⁸⁹ In his talks he praises the work of the mosque and its imams but does not specifically mention anything related to the TLP or Khadim Rizvi.⁹⁰ The appearances at the mosque of TLP supporters Owais Qadri and Adil Shahzad, alongside Mumtaz Qadri supporter Haseeb ur Rehman are a cause for concern due to the possibility that

⁸⁰ Social media post in author's possession.

⁸¹ Videos of Owais Qadri's participation at TLP events in author's possession.

⁸² Video in author's possession.

⁸³ Promotional material in author's possession.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Video of Hassan Haseeb ur Rehman appearance at the mosque and at Qadri's funeral in author's possession.

⁸⁶ Tom Porter, "Pakistani 'hate preacher' who glorifies Islamist murder welcomed by Archbishop of Canterbury," *International Business Times*, 21 July, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/pakistani-hate-preacher-who-glorifies-islamist-murder-welcomed-by-archbishop-canterbury-1571418>; Tom Porter, "Son of murdered Pakistani liberal outraged as cleric who inspired assassin is allowed to speak in UK," *International Business Times*, 5 May, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/son-murdered-pakistani-liberal-outraged-cleric-who-inspired-assassin-allowed-speak-uk-1558463>.

⁸⁷ Iran Ramzan, "Pakistani Hate Cleric Hassan Haseeb ur Rehman feted at anti-terror talks," *The Times*, 29 July, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pakistani-hate-cleric-hassan-haseeb-ur-rehman-feted-at-anti-terror-talks-fq0bmj9s>.

⁸⁸ Video in author's possession.

⁸⁹ Video footage and promotional materials in author's possession.

⁹⁰ Video footage in author's possession.

the mosque's endorsement of such figures increases the likelihood of anti-blasphemy extremism being introduced to its audiences.

Lady of Heaven Cineworld Protests and the TLP

There are indications that elements of TLP UK were also present at the July 2022 protests outside the Cineworld branch in Birmingham which was screening *The Lady of Heaven*. Footage of the protests were posted by the TLP UK Facebook, and Instagram accounts depict protesters chanting the familiar TLP slogan "Labbaik ya Rasool Allah."⁹¹ The videos also depict speeches by one of the main organisers of the protests, a British preacher Ijaz Ahmad Shaami. While there are no suggestions that Shaami is involved with TLP UK, he has used his own Instagram account to praise TLP founder Khadim Rizvi.⁹² After Rizvi's death, he posted a picture of him and wrote "We have truly lost a giant of the Ahlus Sunnah [Sunni Islam]. Words cannot do justice to such a personality. A great loss for the entire Ummah. Allah raise their ranks and allow us to continue spreading the love of His Beloved Prophet."⁹³

⁹¹ Video footage in author's possession.

⁹² Copy of social media post in author's possession.

⁹³ Ibid.

The Khatme Nabuwwat movement

The Urdu term “Khatme Nabuwwat” translates to “finality of the Prophet” and refers to the belief within mainstream Islam that Mohammed is the last of the prophets sent by the god of the Abrahamic faiths. Belief in Khatme Nabuwwat is considered by most Muslims as a crucial component of Islamic faith and is not an inherently extremist position. However, some groups and movements have adopted the upholding of the finality of the prophethood as their *raison d’être*, often using the term Khatme Nabuwwat to name their groups and as their slogan. They will be referred to in this study as members of the Khatme Nabuwwat (KN) movement and includes those who do and do not advocate violence. KN groups take on extreme positions towards those whose beliefs they view as undermining this tenet, often accusing them of blasphemy and declaring them as infidels. Specifically, they target Ahmadi Muslim minorities around the world, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Their focus on Ahmadi Muslims stems from the sect’s claim that the group’s founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was sent by God as a prophet and the Messiah.⁹⁴ This, it is argued by KN groups, places Ahmadi Muslims out of the fold of Islam.

One of the most influential such groups is the Aalmi Majlis Tahaffuz Khatm-e-Nubuwwat (AMTKN), which was founded in Pakistan in 1954. It, along with other anti-Ahmadi organisations often go by the shorthand of Khatme Nabuwwat. In 1974, the campaigning of AMTKN and other anti-Ahmadi groups led to an amendment to the Pakistani constitution which declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims. Today, members of AMTKN continue to campaign against Ahmadis and call for them to be tried under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and executed. AMTKN members, along with many other anti-Ahmadi activists and organisations, often use hateful rhetoric about Ahmadi’s and refer to them as “Qadiyani,” a derogatory and sectarian term.⁹⁵

KN movement leaders and publications have a record of inciting hatred and violence against Ahmadis. There are numerous examples of this, which will not be covered exhaustively in this

⁹⁴ “What are Ahmadiyya Beliefs?,” Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at, accessed 26 January, 2024, <https://www.ahmadiyya.ca/public/what-are-ahmadiyya-beliefs>.

⁹⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedoms, “Factsheet: Ahmadiyya Muslims,” October 2021, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Ahmadiyya%20Persecution%20Factsheet.pdf>; United States Department of State, “2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan,” 2 June, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>. There are various spellings of the term, including “Qadiyani,” and “Qadiani”

study.⁹⁶ However, according to a report by the US State Department, in 2011 the ATKNM in Pakistan “issued a pamphlet that urged Muslims to kill Ahmadis, which would give the killers a status comparable to a martyr.” The pamphlet also listed the names and addresses of 50 prominent Ahmadis.⁹⁷ Another pamphlet called the Ahmadiyya community *wajibul qatl* (liable to be killed).⁹⁸ According to sociologist Dietrich Reetz, ATKNM and other members of the Khatme Nabuwwat movement undertake activities which “directly contribute to the heightened religious tensions in Pakistan, and to a lesser extent India, but around the world wherever Muslims live.”⁹⁹ These religious tensions have contributed to an atmosphere in which a number of violent vigilante attacks and targeted killings against Ahmadis have occurred in Pakistan and neighbouring Bangladesh.¹⁰⁰ During the trial of Salman Taseer’s killer Mumtaz Qadri in Pakistan, he was defended by a member of the Khatme Nabuwwat Lawyers association who argued that his actions were justified because Taseer had committed blasphemy simply by questioning the country’s blasphemy laws.¹⁰¹

The Khatme Nabuwwat movement in the UK

In the UK, the presence of the KN movement has been a cause for concern for both British Ahmadis and members of the UK government. After the 2016 killing of Asad Shah, who was targeted because he was an Ahmadi, his killer Tanveer Ahmed issued recorded messages from his prison cell expressing views identical to those spread by Khatme Nabuwwat movement groups, including calling Ahmadi Muslims “frauds” and urging that “Whoever and wherever is

⁹⁶ For more details on this see the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community report, “Suffocation of the Faithful,” July 2020, https://apppg-ahmadiyyamuslim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Suffocation_of_the_faithful_30_05_21.pdf

⁹⁷ United States Department of State, “Religious Freedom Report for 2011,” 2011, 20, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/193145.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Shamsul Islam, “Targeting Minorities: No Friend to Ahmadis in Faisalbad,” *Express Tribune*, 9 June, 2011, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/185179/targeting-minorities-no-friend-to-ahmadis-in-faisalabad/>

⁹⁹ Dietrich Reetz, “The Deoband Universe: What Makes a Transcultural and Transnational Educational Movement of Islam?,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no.1 (2007), 146.

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Pakistan: Surge in Targeted Killings of Ahmadis,” 26 November, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/26/pakistan-surge-targeted-killings-ahmadis>; Human Rights Watch, “Breach of Faith: Persecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh,” 15 June, 2005, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/06/15/breach-faith/persecution-ahmadiyya-community-bangladesh>

¹⁰¹ “700-strong lawyers’ alliance remains defiant after Qadri’s execution,” *The Express Tribune*, 7 March, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1060789/lawyers-group-behind-spike-in-blasphemy-cases-in/>

listening my voice must make a resolve to protect the finality of prophethood.”¹⁰² This led then Labour MP Siobhain McDonagh to call for Khatme Nabuwwat to be proscribed in the UK due to its “persecution of the Ahmadi community.”¹⁰³

Since at least 1990, KN movement groups have maintained a presence in the UK via a number of organisations. These include the Khatme Nabuwwat Centre located in a mosque in Stockwell, London, which was previously named Aalami Majlise Tahaffuze Khatme Nubuwwat.¹⁰⁴ In 2016, a BBC investigation found that pamphlets urging Muslims to “kill Ahmadis” were found in the mosque.¹⁰⁵ This led to an investigation by the Charity Commission which found past links between the mosque and the ATKNM. The investigation report also expressed concern about the ATKNM links because the ATKNM’s organisation’s website “contains literature in both English and Urdu which is dominated by subjects relating to the Ahmadi community and is concerning due to the inferences readers may draw concerning violence promoted against this minority sect.”¹⁰⁶ The investigation concluded that while the mosque was unable to disprove its links to the ATKNM, the charity which controlled the mosque was poorly run and had little to no control over the materials which were disseminated at the mosque, and therefore did not find the charity responsible for the content of the materials. The charity was issued with a formal warning for failing to ensure that it complied with UK charity law. The mosque leaders deny any links to Pakistan’s ATKNM. In January 2022, the Charity Commission officially withdrew its decision, satisfied that the mosque has met the conditions laid out in its official warning.

Also linked to the ATKNM is the Khatme Nabuwwat Academy based in Forest Gate in London, via one of its main producers of English-language output Abdul Bawa, who is also the magazine editor for the ATKNM in Pakistan.¹⁰⁷ It produces and disseminates via its website a large number of English language pamphlets. The majority of its output focuses on Ahmadis, serially referring to them as Qadiyanis and using sectarian, hateful, and dehumanising language,

¹⁰² Brendan Cole, “Ahmadi Glasgow shopkeeper murderer calls on supporters to behead Islam ‘insulters’ via YouTube,” *International Business Times*, 7 March, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/ahmadi-glasgow-shopkeeper-murderer-calls-supporters-behead-islam-insulters-via-youtube-1582848>

¹⁰³ Siobhain McDonagh (@Siobhain_Mc), “As Chair of the Ahmadiyya APPG I felt compelled to write to the Home Secretary @AmberRudd_MP calling on her to proscribe Khatme Nabuwwat,” Twitter post, 22 September, 2016, https://twitter.com/Siobhain_Mc/status/779005239991103489/photo/1

¹⁰⁴ Charity Commission for England and Wales, “Decision: Khatme Nubuwwat Centre,” 21 March, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-khatme-nubuwwat-centre/khatme-nubuwwat-centre>

¹⁰⁵ Sajid Iqbal and Noel Titheradge, “Kill Ahmadis’ leaflets found in UK mosque,” *BBC News*, 10 April, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35928848>

¹⁰⁶ Charity Commission for England and Wales, “Decision: Khatme Nubuwwat Centre.”

¹⁰⁷ ANTKM leaflet outlining Bawa’s connections to the ANTKM and the KN academy in author’s possession.

including presenting them as deceptive “scheming” infidels and apostates involved in a “conspiracy against Islam.”¹⁰⁸

Alongside established KN organisations in the UK, there is also a semi-annual event called the Tajdar e Khatme Nabuwwat Conference which is held at different locations across the UK. Here, prominent anti-Ahmadi preachers are given platforms to disseminate anti-Ahmadi sectarianism.¹⁰⁹ One regular guest to these conferences is Abdul Qadir Jilani who in 2011 stated on live television that “It is your duty, the duty of those who recite the holy verse, to kill those who insult Prophet Mohammed...Under the guidance from Islamic texts it is evident that if a Muslim apostatises, then it is not right to wait for the authorised courts; anyone may kill him.”¹¹⁰ Other advertised speakers at recent Tajdar e Khatme Nabuwwat conferences include Adil Shahzad and Asrar Rashid, who spoke in praise of Khadim Rizvi at the 2022 event in the TLP founder’s honour.¹¹¹ The Tajdar e Khatme Nabuwwat Facebook page also contains posts in praise of Khadim Rizvi.¹¹²

Unlike the recent developments related to TLP influence and presence in the UK, the work of the KN movement has continued unchanged for decades. While groups associated with the KN movement in the UK are cause for concern and present a threat to wellbeing of British Ahmadis, there has therefore been little material change in their activities, rhetoric, or ideological output in recent years. In addition, KN groups focus almost solely on Ahmadis and have not expanded their activism to include the targeting of non-Muslims accused of blasphemy.

Faizan-e-Islam

Faizan-e-Islam is a mosque, Islamic centre and registered charity based in London and run by Ghulam Rabbani. It came to prominence in October 2020 as one of the main organisers of large protests outside of the French embassy after French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his

¹⁰⁸ KN academy leaflets in author’s possession.

¹⁰⁹ Video footage of these events in author’s possession.

¹¹⁰ OFCOM, “Sanction: Decision by OFCOM to be Imposed on DM Digital Television Limited,” 9 October, 2011,

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20160704225645mp/http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/content-sanctions-adjudications/Rehmatul-DM-Digital.pdf>; David Barrett,

“Preachers of Hate on British TV: what they said that broke broadcasting rules,” *The Telegraph*, 9 February, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/9859822/Preachers-of-hate-on-British-TV-what-they-said-that-broke-the-broadcasting-rules.html>

¹¹¹ Leaflet in author’s possession

¹¹² Copies of social media posts in author’s possession.

stance on not banning caricatures of Mohammed in solidarity with Samuel Paty, who was murdered earlier that month.¹¹³

Videos from the Faizan-e-Islam YouTube page from the protests show Rabbani speaking and joining in amidst chants of “tajdar khatme nabuwwat zindabad,” another popular slogan of the TLP and other Pakistan-based anti-blasphemy activists, and “labbaik ya rasool allah.” The speaker introducing Rabbani warned that “under no circumstances will we tolerate a single finger raised against the honour of rasool allah.”

Rabbani, like other British anti-blasphemy activists, views arguments around the preservation of free speech and expression as a cover to attack Islam and continue a conspiracy to insult and destroy the religion. President Macron, according to Rabbani, “opened a Pandora’s box by saying he will allow people to depict the prophet, and all this nonsense and unacceptable attitude they are adopting under the beautiful banner of freedom of expression. This is only to deceive people under the banner of freedom of expression and telling people it is the core pillar of our democracy...but is it freedom of expression insulting the hero of 1.7 billion people around the world?”¹¹⁴

Faizan-e-Islam also holds regular conferences and events. In January 2022, a guest of honour at one of these conferences was the Mumtaz Qadri supporter and promoter Haseeb ur Rehman, whose involvement with other anti-blasphemy groups in the UK is discussed earlier in the paper.¹¹⁵ During the *Lady of Heaven* controversy, the Faizan-e-Islam YouTube channel “Faizan TV” broadcast an event on the issue which included address from Seyed Hashem Moosavi of the Islamic Centre of England, a pro-Iranian regime group which has been officially warned in the past by the Charity Commission for holding events in London eulogising the former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani.¹¹⁶ Moosavi noted in his address that the event coincided with the anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and referred to the fatwa calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie, invoking Khomeini’s legacy in the context of the *Lady of Heaven* controversy.

¹¹³ Video footage in author’s possession.

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ HM Government, “Press Release: Regulator launches inquiry into Islamic Centre of England,” 22 November, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulator-launches-inquiry-into-islamic-centre-of-england>

Jihadist anti-Blasphemy Propaganda Targeted at English Speakers

Despite their disdain for Sufis, Salafi-jihadist groups share a similar view on preserving and defending the honour of Islam to violent extremist Barelvīs like the TLP. Al-Qaeda became active on the issue of blasphemy after the Danish Mohammed cartoons controversy. While they were initially slow to react, by 2008 it had become a central concern to ideologues and propagandists who were reaching out to English-speaking Muslims. While during the controversy Osama bin Laden issued a vague threat on the matter – warning that “if there is no check on the freedom of your words, then let your hearts be open to the freedom of our actions”¹¹⁷ – it was American jihadist ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki who provided the first full discussion on the matter, and a religious justification for murdering anyone who insults Islam.¹¹⁸ His work on this has formed the template for jihadist calls for murder of blasphemers in the West ever since.

In a May 2008 lecture, Awlaki delivered an online lecture entitled “The Dust Will Never Settle Down”. During the talk, he drew on examples from the history of Islam to call for targeted assassinations of people who insulted the religion. Depictions of Mohammed in the West were framed by Awlaki as another aspect of the ideological war on Islam; the defaming and ridiculing of Muslims in wider Western discourse. Publicity for the sermon, which appeared on several popular Islamic forums, presented it as a scholar’s guidance on how Western Muslims should react to this issue. Listeners were promised that they would receive the required information on “what is the ruling of *Shari‘a* on such incidents [insulting the Prophet] and how did the *Ṣahāba* [Mohammed’s disciples] deal with such people and what do our scholars say about them.”¹¹⁹

Referring to the original fiasco, triggered by the cartoon of Mohammed which appeared in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, Awlaki stated that “the Muslim world was on fire.” Yet the reaction to the subsequent drawings by Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks was, in Awlaki’s view, unacceptably lethargic.¹²⁰ Unlike the original followers of Mohammed during his lifetime, Awlaki complained that Western Muslims were not displaying sufficient love and devotion for the prophet. In their search for answers, he suggested that they again draw inspiration from the

¹¹⁷ Osama bin-Laden, “May Our Mothers be Bereaved of Us if We Fail to Help Our Prophet,” *as-Sahab*, 19 March, 2008.

¹¹⁸ Bin Laden issued a statement warning that, “if there is no check on the freedom of your words, then let your hearts be open to the freedom of our actions,” Osama bin-Laden, “May Our Mothers be Bereaved of Us if We Fail to Help Our Prophet,” *as-Sahab*, 19 March 2008.

¹¹⁹ Promotional materials in author’s possession.

¹²⁰ Anwar al-Awlaki, “The Dust Will Never Settle Down,” 2008.

early history of Islam: 'let's go back [to the time of the Prophet] and see how things were then...that is the way we should follow, the way of the *Ṣahāba* [followers of the prophet].'

Awlaki focused on figures from Islamic history who had shown their devotion to Mohammed and held them up as examples for Western Muslims to follow. He told the story from a *ḥadīth* found in *Sahih Bukhari* about Ka'ab ibn al-Ashraf, a poet and Jewish tribal leader in pre-Islamic Mecca who wrote poems insulting the prophet and lamenting the victory of the Muslims over the tribe of the Quraish in the Battle of Badr. Awlaki informed listeners that Mohammed sanctioned his murder.¹²¹ One of the *Ṣahāba*, Mohammed ibn Maslama, volunteered to assassinate al-Ashraf, was praised by Awlaki for his zeal and devotion to Mohammed; but what of modern-day, Western Muslims? 'How concerned are you?,' he asked, 'how concerned are we when it comes to the honour of *Rasool*, when it comes to the honour of Islam, when it comes to the book of Allah? How serious do we take it?...We want the spirit of the *Ṣahāba*.'¹²² While Awlaki avoided direct incitement to murder, the lecture can nonetheless be read as a call to kill those deemed to have ridiculed or insulted Mohammed.

"The Dust will Never Settle" lecture also formed the basis of a campaign promoting the murder of blasphemers in Awlaki and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) English language magazine *Inspire*. An entire section of the magazine's first issue was devoted to discussing the necessity of responding to the Mohammed cartoons with violence.¹²³ It began with a detailed timeline listing various instances where Mohammed was "attacked," and Muslims in Europe responded with violence. The list included the initial controversy sparked by *Jyllands Posten* and attempts made by Muslims in the West to kill cartoonists such as Lars Vilks and Kurt Westergaard. Here is also where an infamous "hit-list" can be found containing the names of people whom AQAP identified as the main instigators behind the campaign to malign Mohammed, including author of *The Satanic Verses* Salman Rushdie and outspoken former Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

¹²¹ Awlaki's presentation of this *ḥadīth* has been challenged by a variety of scholars and experts. While few deny that al-Ashraf was killed, it is often pointed out that he was targeted not simply because of his poetry but also due to him being a spy and conspiring against Mohammed with the Meccan tribes he was fighting. According to Badr ul-Din al-Ayni in his commentary on al-Bukhari: "he [Ka'ab ibn al-Ashraf] was not killed merely for insulting the [Prophet], but rather it was surely for the fact that he was an aide/spy against him, and conspired with those who fought wars against him, and supported them." For more see: Badr ul-Din al-Ayni, "*Umdat ul-Qari Shar'h Sahih al-Bukhari*," Vol. 24, p.121, (Dr Ihya Turath al-Arabi Beirut - Lebanon 2003).

¹²² Awlaki, "The Dust Will Never Settle."

¹²³ "The Dust Will Never Settle Down Campaign," *Inspire* 1.

In an accompanying article, Awlaki attempted to subvert Western liberal ideas such as pluralism and freedom of expression in a similar way to anti-blasphemy activists covered earlier in this paper but taking it a step further by using the argument to justify murder. He couched his justification for killing people who insult Mohammed in terms of individual and collective “rights”: ‘If you have the right to slander the Messenger of Allah, we have the right to defend him. If it is part of your freedom of speech to defame Mohammed, it is part of our religion to fight you.’¹²⁴ Awlaki framed the cartoons as a symptom of the West’s war against Islam, writing that the production of the cartoons was part of “a deeply rooted historic hatred for Islam and Muslims...[During the Crusades] it was in the name of Christianity; today it is in the name of Democracy.”¹²⁵ These cartoonists and satirists were just a symptom of a secular Western political system designed with the intention of destroying religion, in particular Islam. Attacking this system through any means possible was not only legitimate, but a necessary act of survival.¹²⁶

Awlaki’s call for assassinations has influenced several attacks in the West against people who jihadists deem to be defaming or attacking Islam through art, and its reach has also expanded beyond the English-speaking world. In January 2015, more than three years after his death, Awlaki’s name emerged in connection with what at the time was France’s biggest terrorist attack in decades, when two brothers of Algerian descent, Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, stormed the Paris offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing eleven of its staff. The attack was in response to the publication’s regular lampooning of Mohammed in various cartoon strips. In a live interview given by Cherif Kouachi while he was on the run, he claimed that Awlaki helped co-ordinate the attack, and that it was planned years earlier.¹²⁷ This claim was later backed up in a statement issued by AQAP, in which senior official Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi laid claim to the attack and referred to Awlaki’s involvement.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Anwar al-Awlaki, “May Our Souls be Sacrificed for You,” *Inspire* 1.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ “Paris Killer Cherif Kouachi Gave Interview to TV Channel Before He Died,” *NBC News*, 9 January, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-magazine-attack/paris-killer-cherif-kouachi-gave-interview-tv-channel-he-died-n283206>

¹²⁸ Jason Burke and Monica Mark, “Al-Qaida in Yemen uses video to claim responsibility for Charlie Hebdo attack,” *The Guardian*, 14 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/14/al-qaida-claims-responsibility-charlie-hebdo-attack-paris>.

Since Awlaki's death in 2011, and the subsequent decline of al-Qaeda as international terrorist threat, the Islamic State (IS) has continued to encourage lone actor terrorist attacks against blasphemers in the West. Its propaganda has not contributed in terms of further ideological justifications for murder, however, and its output continues to draw inspiration from Awlaki's work and highlight the story of Ka'ab Ibn al-Ashraf and Muhammad ibn Maslama. In issue 2 of IS magazine *Rumiyah* from late 2016, for example, readers are told of how Muhammed dealt with "harm" against Islam "through mere speech": "The Prophet would not leave one who harmed Islam and the Muslims safe within the confines of his home, even if his harm was through mere speech and incitement, as was the case with the Jew, Ka'ab Ibn al-Ashraf. He incited against Allah's Messenger, recited abusive poetry...at this point, the order was issued from Allah's messenger to eliminate this *taghut* [idol worshipper]... 'Who will deal with Ka'b Ibn al-Ashraf, for indeed he has harmed Allah and His Messenger?' Muhammad ibn Maslamah stood up and said, 'O Messenger of Allah, would you like me to kill him?' He said, 'Yes'."¹²⁹

During one of the most recent blasphemy controversies in Europe in January 2023 in which Swedish far-right journalist Rasmus Paludan publicly burned a Koran, online IS networks again took the opportunity to call for attacks against blasphemers in the West.¹³⁰ In one of the group's chatrooms on the Rocket.Chat communications platform, followers are called to "incite Muslims to revenge with power and following Allah's orders." An audio message was also issued on the site, warning that IS followers do not address this issue through protests and "empty chanting." Instead, they are the ones who "take revenge from such people [blasphemers] by separating their flesh from their bones and spilling their blood." The "warriors of the Islamic state," the message warned, "are people of action." IS followers, too, seek to point out the supposed anti-Muslim hypocrisy inherent to freedom of speech. One meme posted on Rocket.Chat read: "Burning gay pride flag: homophobia. Burning Israel flag: Antisemitism. Burning Quran: Freedom of Speech. The Hypocrisy of Europe."

¹²⁹ *Rumiyah* 2, 22.

¹³⁰ Jennifer Rankin, "Burning of Qur'an in Stockholm funded by journalists with Kremlin ties," *The Guardian*, 27 January 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/27/burning-of-quran-in-stockholm-funded-by-journalist-with-kremlin-ties-sweden-nato-russia>.

Incidents of Anti-Blasphemy Violence and Terrorism in the UK

While the UK has not faced a similar level of violence related to blasphemy as other European nations, there have been a few notable incidents over the last two decades:

- In 2008 the impending UK publication of *The Jewel of Medina*, a book about Muhammad's wife Aisha, was met with criticism by blasphemy activists. While it did not lead to mass protests, the controversy inspired members of the British jihadist group al-Muhajiroun to attack the home of the book's publisher, attempting to set it on fire. The plot's ringleader, Ali Beheshti, and his two accomplices were each sentenced to over four years in prison.¹³¹ The attack achieved its purpose, however, and plans to publish the book in the UK were shelved.
- In February 2016, Jalal Uddin, an imam in Rochdale, was murdered by IS supporters Muhammed Hussain Syeedy and Mohammed Kadir. Uddin was targeted because of his involvement in *ruqya*, a form of Islamic spiritual healing which is viewed by some orthodox Sunnis as blasphemous. Syeedy was convicted of murder in 2016 and sentenced to life, while his associate, Kadir fled the country shortly after the killing.¹³² A third man, Mohammed Syadul Hussain was convicted in April 2017 for helping Kadir leave the country.¹³³
- In March 2016, Ahmadi Muslim Asad Shah was murdered by Tanveer Ahmed in Glasgow. Ahmed cited anti-blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi groups and ideology as his inspiration for the attack and he is celebrated today by violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan, including the TLP.¹³⁴
- In July 2021, Hatun Tash, a Christian convert from Islam who is a public critic of her previous faith, was attacked and slashed with a knife in London while wearing a Charlie

¹³¹ Peter Walker, "Three jailed for arson attack over Muhammad bride novel," *The Guardian*, 7 July, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jul/07/muslims-jailed-arson-book-protest>.

¹³² Chris Slater, "The latest chapter in the tragic case of a much-loved imam murdered in Rochdale," *Manchester Evening News*, 5 December, 2020, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/latest-chapter-tragic-case-much-19406831>.

¹³³ "Jalal Uddin killing: Public inquiry to examine imam's murder," *BBC News*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-67652920>.

¹³⁴ Kermani and Iqbal, "Murderer Tanveer Ahmed inspires Pakistani hardliners from Scottish jail.", [Murderer Tanveer Ahmed inspires Pakistani hardliners from Scottish jail - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-67652920)

Hebdo shirt. The attacker remains at large, and police investigating the matter remain unsure about the exact motive.¹³⁵ A year later, in September 2022, Tash was also the target of a plot to shoot her while speaking at Hyde Park Corner. The plotter, Edward Little, was arrested on his way to commit the attack and later convicted of preparing to commit acts of terrorism and jailed for 16 years.¹³⁶

- In May 2023 Ajmal Shahpal was convicted on terrorism charges after posting messages on Twitter glorifying the murder of Samuel Paty and encouraging people to behead those who insult Islam. The messages were published in 2020, shortly after Shahpal returned from a trip to Pakistan.¹³⁷ He is alleged to be a member or supporter of the TLP.

¹³⁵ "Speakers' Corner: Woman attacked with knife," *BBC News*, 25 July, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57965251>.

¹³⁶ Nadeem Badshah, "Man jailed for at least 16 years over Speakers' Corner gun attack plot," *The Guardian*, 15 December, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/15/edward-little-jailed-speakers-corner-gun-attack-plot>.

¹³⁷ Gardham, "Twitter user who published image of severed head sentenced to five and a half years in prison.", [Twitter user who published image of severed head sentenced to five and a half years in prison | UK News | Sky News](#)

Recommendations

Despite calls by British anti-blasphemy activists to reject violence and pursue peaceful means to express their anger, the possibility of further anti-blasphemy violence is heightened by the activism of the groups and individuals covered in this study. Accused blasphemers and Ahmadi Muslims are often demonised and presented as direct threats to Islam. Some of those identified in this study seek to present Islam as facing significant existential threats and have praised individuals in Pakistan who have a track record of anti-blasphemy extremism. This presentation of the supposed threat faced by Islam, coupled with the model of lone actor anti-blasphemy violence provided by Mumtaz Qadri in Pakistan and Tanveer Ahmed in Scotland, and the availability of jihadist propaganda online which calls for lone actor attacks against accused blasphemers have the potential to act as an inspiration for future violence by individuals radicalised by anti-blasphemy activism who decide to take matters into their own hands.

While anti-blasphemy activism and extremism remains a relatively small issue in the UK, it is important that the government acts pre-emptively to ensure that it does not continue to grow in the way it has over recent years. This will help reduce the potential of future violence or sectarian tensions being played out in the streets of the UK. To do this, it may wish to consider the following recommendations:

- The government should consider adopting anti-blasphemy extremism as a specific category of extremism in the UK and using this term in official statements and documents. It could, for example, include anti-blasphemy extremism as a category for Prevent referrals.
- The government should consider ways in which it can discourage the naming and shaming of private individuals accused of blasphemy. This should be considered as a form of incitement to persecution, hatred, and in some cases violence, even if this is not the direct intention of those making the accusation. As the recent incidents in Batley and Wakefield demonstrate, being identified, and accused of blasphemy has real world consequences and can destroy lives and place people in danger, no matter the intentions of those naming or otherwise identifying them. This should not, however, extend to banning or otherwise preventing peaceful protests against the wider issue of insulting Islam. The right of anti-blasphemy activists to protest this issue in a responsible way must be preserved where possible.

- The government should review the charitable status of bodies and organisations linked to anti-blasphemy extremism, especially those linked to supporters of blasphemy violence abroad, such as in Pakistan.
- This study provides only an exploratory foray into the anti-blasphemy activism in the UK. The extent of this network remains unknown and requires further investigation into any connections amongst principal actors and existence or role of co-ordination actions. As part of its counter-extremism work, the government should investigate principal actors and the existence or role of co-ordination activities and connections to violent anti-blasphemy extremists in Pakistan.
- Related to this, the government should consider proscription of groups associated with anti-blasphemy extremism, such as the TLP; and a ban on their non-British members and supporters entering the country.
- The government should consider recognising “Qadiyani” (and other variations of this spelling), the derogatory term used to describe Ahmadis, as a hate term and its public use as a hate crime recognised under the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006.