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OPEN

# Fight the power: how CAGE resists from within a “suspect community”

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**ABSTRACT** Against the backdrop of the War on Terror, the British government has introduced a strict counter-terrorism regime that has disproportionately targeted Muslim communities through on-going practices of racialization and surveillance. This paper examines the ways in which grassroots organizations have developed responses and strategies to resist counter-terrorism policy and state Islamophobia in the context of the United Kingdom and the United States. The paper uses a practitioner’s perspective to locate real-life experiences of working within such an organization, as a means to understand the complex processes by which structural power is exercised to suppress legitimate voices of colour seeking to critique policy and practice. It examines the consequences of such silencing and the wider risks this poses for dissent and debate in democratic societies.

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## Introduction

On 11 September 2001, the attacks perpetrated against the United States by non-state actors heralded a “state of exception” resulting in governments around the world instituting counter-terrorism policies in almost every aspect of public life at an unprecedented global level (Agamben, 2005; Wuchte, 2014). The widespread agreement between states and international organisations has resulted in a “sprawling official “counter terrorism” apparatus” that perpetuates and produces Islamophobia (Sayyid, 2010; Massoumi *et al.*, 2017). Ultimately, these policies can be seen as resulting in structural racism, as institutions, both public and private coalesce to suspect specific communities (Powell, 2007:796; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009: 646).

CAGE, formerly CagePrisoners, is an advocacy organisation developed to resist this racism/Islamophobia within the space of civil society, but despite this, has continued to face serious challenges (Massoumi *et al.*, 2015). This is not something new or unique. History shows us that multiple movements set up to resist racism have faced serious structural and physical violence (Galtung, 1969: 172) by the state that seeks to suppress and discipline legitimate voices of colour critiquing state policy and practice (Marqusee, 2005; also Krug, 1999; and Argentine Commission, 1986).

Using a practitioner’s auto-ethnography, this article seeks to reflect on the challenges faced by CAGE to understand the nature of the relationship between the state and “suspect communities”. As a practitioner, the auto-ethnographic approach allows for reflection based on empirical data that we have personally gathered—this is not merely an academic exercise—as the article will show that the consequences are real. As Tami Spry explains, an auto-ethnography permits us to find meaning through our connections and disconnections by reflecting on our own pain (Spry, 2011: 125).

Over the last 14 years, CAGE has had to overcome socio-economic, political and economic barriers that are severely impacting its daily operations and work. While theoretical models will be relied on in this article, this paper is written from a practitioner’s perspective and is about practitioners. It therefore seeks to discuss our experiences as we are faced with serious challenges by the state, and the methods we adopt in resisting them. To do so, this article is structured in the following way: it opens by providing an overview of who CAGE is, situating the organisation as being an organic response to the creation of, what Hillyard (1993) calls, a “suspect community”. Key to this situating is to highlight how CAGE operates as an organisation engaged in resistance that seeks to challenge structural racism and Islamophobia. In the two subsequent parts, the article highlights the ways in which violence/repression has been targeted at CAGE, and some of the ways CAGE has resisted it. Here, the article argues that violence and repression that has been targeted at CAGE is very much a continuation of historic policies targeted at people of colour/anti-racism activists in circumstances such as the Black Civil Rights movement in the United States or the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. The article concludes by offering some thoughts on what the targeting of a group such as CAGE, which seeks to engage in counter-hegemonic resistance activities suggests as well as the repercussions of the state’s coercion and violence against such resistance.

## The story of CAGE

CAGE was never supposed to exist. The founders of the organization felt that the detentions at Guantanamo Bay, starting on 11 January 2002, were a major issue of concern and would pose long-term and far-reaching consequences for Muslims across the

globe. Owing to their concern, CAGE approached major Muslim organisations in the United Kingdom that may have had some mandate to be able to take on the issue. The team, however, was met with a range of unfortunate responses including: “It is not in our remit”, “The issue is too ‘hot’ for us”, and perhaps most worryingly, “There is no smoke without fire.” These objections convinced the founders of CAGE that some form of Muslim-led response was required to a Guantanamo filled with Muslims—leading to the creation of an online information portal which sought to document all the individuals, one by one, that were being detained as part of the so-called “war on terror”. CAGE’s ability to access material in both English and Arabic language made this portal unique to the extent that the Washington Post credited an early “definitive list” of detainees at Guantanamo Bay to CAGE (Washington Post, 2004).

As the popularity of the website grew internationally, it became clear there was a greater need for CAGE. We had calls from mothers in Sudan, fathers in Bosnia and brothers in Pakistan, all attempting to find loved ones who had been disappeared into a network of prisons within the global War on Terror (Qureshi, 2009). This activity led to an important question of identity for CAGE. We understood our remit to be focusing on working for due process, and against arbitrary detention, torture, rendition and extra-judicial killings. CAGE did not bring these cases to human rights organizations already operating within this terrain, including Amnesty International and Reprieve. This is because we felt that a voice must emerge from within the Muslim community that was authentic, confident, and able to speak for those who were being constructed as a “suspect community” (Peirce, 2008). CAGE in this sense sought to become a resistance movement *of the suspect community, by the suspect community, and for the suspect community.*

CAGE’s activities are based on three platforms: knowing our own identity, owning our own narrative, and holding the state to account while holding true to our ethical principles. According to Labonte *et al.*, “storytelling has re-emerged as a method with which people might begin to challenge dominant social discourses (and hence social structures) through their assertion of non-dominant cultural constructions, personal identities and world views in the public sphere”, (Labonte *et al.*, 2003: 34). CAGE seeks to do exactly this through their advocacy work that challenges and resists the unfair exercise of state power by telling the stories of those who cannot write or share their own stories. It is this approach of speaking for those who are powerless and speaking inconvenient truths to power without fearing the consequences that arguably separates CAGE from other community-based organisations, who are often conflicted due to funding they receive from the state, operate in a climate of fear that does not permit them to challenge what they see as governmental excess (Schneider, 1991: 115) or are often afraid of the perceptions that their critique of the government will generate (Independent Voices, 2015).

By being a grassroots organisation that emerged organically, CAGE are not only free from the strings of state funding but are able to proactively resist the structural pressures that seek to make the powerless self-discipline and self-censor their ideas and activities. CAGE can therefore operate with a sense of freedom and take up cases and causes that not only seek to hold the state to account but work to avoid reproducing reductive assumptions about Muslims that ultimately feed structural racism and Islamophobia by not complying with the demands and desires of government. This allows CAGE to go further and question the very framework on which policy-making and practice is produced in the so-called “War on Terror”, including the governmental assessments of the threat from non-state politically motivated violence.

Politically motivated violence is not exceptional but rather, as observed by Sageman (2016), a part of the milieu of violence that is seen across the world. To talk of state violence being one of the contributing factors to the use of politically motivated violence by non-state actors is to essentially say that the former motivates the latter. In other words, power is always subject to resistance when it is unfairly exercised. In the next section of this chapter, I want to demonstrate how one can theoretically understand CAGE's resistance by examining how power is exercised against the organisation (and the "suspect community" more broadly) not by examining how force and violence has been directly and physically used against it but how state power operates against it on a structural level, and especially through the medium of "language".

### Theorising structural racism and CAGE's resistance

I am aware always of the prevailing narrative of the media, because it is there that we, who are not of the predominant culture but who write in its language, who feel ourselves always implicated in two worlds, read about ourselves most. We know how language can be used to beat the rhythm of the war drum, mustering ranks upon ranks of public support. We know how language itself can wage war against us, by mimicking the same casual dehumanization of a bomb. Everyone you know and love: terrorists. Militants. Strategic targets. Collateral damage. (Mounzer, 2016)

Lina Mounzer's essay "War in Translation" encapsulates some of the difficulties of living within two worlds. The struggle for identity discussed above, crashes into a war of narrative, as multiple forces seek to claim an epistemology of the "crisis". Mounzer's tragic prose describes the pain of translating, not just between two different languages, but also through two different cultures, histories and reference points. It is precisely between the intersection of language, identity and epistemology that CAGE seeks to redress the assumptions that are made about Muslims, to discipline them.

CAGE understand that part of the challenge of working for due process, is to change the baseline about who Muslims are, and the perceived threat that they allegedly pose (Sageman, 2016). CAGE has sought to do this through the language it uses. Stylebook decisions, for example, have meant that they removed words like "Islamist" or "extremist" in their output and have proactively sought to describe Muslim activity or belief through a non-Orientalist lens. As Fanon (2001, 73) observes, this is a way of humanizing rather than reinforcing dehumanizing narratives. Part of the process of humanization is to therefore reject a language that has become "common-sensical" and therefore goes unquestioned and unchallenged. Language, in other words, is a site through which power is exercised, and of course, a site through which such power can be resisted. As a result, CAGE pro-actively seeks to refrain from using terms like "extremists", "terrorists" and so forth and instead proactively use an alternative language. In his important work on political Islam and decoloniality, Salman Sayyid very eloquently explains how the process of using your own language is an absolutely vital ingredient in bringing yourself into existence. He thus writes:

The act of naming is also the act of becoming. The act of naming is an exercise in history making: only those with names can write their own history; only those with names can give themselves a destiny. Thus, the division of the world between the named West and nameless non-West

becomes a division between people who have their own history and those who do not. The name of Islam has brought Muslims into history and, in circumstances when the name cannot be evoked, Muslims become a 'people without history', thus ceasing even to be a people. People become without history not because they lack a past but because, paradoxically, they cannot narrate themselves into the future. People without history are either nameless (and thus not really a people) or they are named by others (Sayyid, 2010: 2).

If one can describe and refer to themselves only in the language of the powerful and cannot devise their own language and terminology, one cannot humanize themselves. Language therefore is not merely a medium through which an object or person is described but rather the medium through which a particular social reality is constructed and created (Hall, 1992: 187). This is accomplished by devising our own language and refusing to use the language and discourse of the "war on terror", an example would be useful here. By using the term "politically motivated violence" instead of "terrorism", CAGE are more likely to generate more of a question in the mind of the listener/observer around what is being discussed than the word "terrorism", which is often taken for granted and remains unquestioned. By using alternative phrases and modes of language, CAGE therefore participates in actively resisting racism and Islamophobia that articulates itself through language and structures of power. In other words, they seek to make an idea and/or practice visible that is perceived as being "common-sensical" or rather "hegemonic". The use of an "alternative" language is therefore a way of challenging the exercise of racism and Islamophobia that operates structurally that reinforces notions of Muslims as a "threat" (Massoumi *et al.*, 2017, see Introduction). Because of CAGE's proactive efforts to use their own language and to make overt the ways in which racism and Islamophobia is operating structurally, it will come as no surprise that they have come under sustained criticism and attack; not merely by the state's coercive apparatus but also through civil society.

Antonio Gramsci explored this relationship by examining power within a political context (Buttegieg, 1995: 6)—to what extent is civil society an actual check to power, or is it a function that is there for the purposes of supporting power? To what extent is civil society coerced, and indeed a tool of coercion? In his important article that uses Gramsci's work around the intricate and often blurred lines between coercion and consent, Sabir (2017: 8) demonstrates how civil society, rather than being an independent and free space in which ideas and activities are organised is actually one the main avenues through which the state maintains and exercises its power and generates consent for its ideas and activities. Civil society, in other words, is complicit in helping the state fight the so-called "war on terror", which makes resistance to structural modes of power even more challenging, even when articulated non-violently and peacefully (Sabir, 2017: 8).

This is similar to what Jules Boycoff discusses. For Boycoff (2007: 285), repression is the coercion of dissent that is exercised within the space of civil society. Liberal democracies, he contends, maintain their legitimacy by using alternative means of social control, and that is principally achieved through the regulation of behaviour of the dissenters conforming to normative standards (Boycoff, 2007: 303). In summary, civil society is often considered to be a free and open space in which resistance to the government and its policies can be exercised. However, civil society is not a free space but rather one of avenues through which structural violence manifests itself, especially against those who resist in non-violent ways. As the next section of this article now discusses,

history demonstrates this in relation to the conflict in the North of Ireland as well as the Black Power Movement in the United States.

**Learning from history.** History shows how movements resisting non-violently and operating within the sphere of civil society have faced repression in similar ways to what CAGE (and the Muslim community more broadly) are facing. Here, Ireland is a notable case. Hillyard (1993), for example, who coined the phrase “suspect community” in his very important work, demonstrated how the British state had constructed an entire community as “suspect” by not distinguishing between combatants and civilians and subjecting them across the board to highly coercive and violent actions (Hillyard, 1993). We see the same logic at play in regards to the treatment of the UK’s Muslim communities too, and how even those operating peacefully in civil society continue to face repression by the state. An additional challenge that has been faced by Muslim communities, however, is the lack of the support they have received from prominent people. The human rights lawyer, Gareth Peirce, whose essay “Was it like this for the Irish?” summarized this well:

No similar [celebrity or political] allies for the Muslim community are evident today, capable of pushing and pulling the British government publicly or privately into seeing sense. Spiritually, the Muslim Ummah is seen as being infinite, but the powerful regimes of the Muslim world almost without exception not only themselves perpetrate oppression, but choose to work hand in hand with the US and the UK in their “war on terror”. (Peirce, 2008)

The structural nature of the injustices that Muslim communities face has been described by others (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009) and in a wider sense by the civil liberties group Liberty who write of the “New Suspect Community” and make a point about the media playing a role in “fostering stereotypes of Muslims as the other” (Said, 2003).

The notion of Muslims being targeted by the state has been questioned by some, and explicitly by Steven Greer. Rather than accepting the assertion of a “suspect community”, Greer claims that any suspicion on Muslims and heightened Islamophobia is caused to politically violent incidents rather than being a result of wider media and political narratives around Muslims and Islam (Greer, 2010: 1187). Greer was responding to the point put forward by Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) that a “suspect community” had been created because of the exceptional policy and legislation that followed acts of political violence—and they followed this with a further response to Greer by arguing that the definition of a “suspect community” changes with time and cannot be reduced to race (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2011: 1059). In his assessment of the work of Pantazis and Pemberton, Francesco Ragazzi explains how they do not conceive of the “suspect community” as being a legal category, but rather as a sociological experience of the experience of communities with the law. The construction is thus “racialised” as signifiers are used to identify potential threats:

They define suspect community as a sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being “problematic”. Specifically in terms of policing, individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrong doing, but simply because of their presumed membership in the group. Race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, accent, dress, political ideology or any

combination of these factors may serve to delineate the subgroup’s characteristics. (Ragazzi, 2016: 728)

In this sense it is important to understand that the system of laws and policies have been structured to find guilt for crimes that did not previously exist in the criminal justice system. As stated by Ragazzi, Britain’s counter-terrorism policy operates predominantly as a factor of political demobilisation (Ragazzi, 2016). This notion is further reiterated by Sabir (2017), who argues that:

...counter-terrorism policy is about excluding and preemptively incapacitating individuals and groups by drawing on sophisticated and highly coercive surveillance and propaganda practices targeted at not only those considered to be “future” terrorists but those individuals and communities who speak through the “language of Islam”

Social control or coercion, manifests in discussions of Muslim communities centred on engagement—that is, to what extent Muslims should play a role in assisting the government’s narrative on the “threat” of terrorism? Think-tanks such as RAND had been pushing for “moderate” Muslim voices through their notion of “civil-democratic Islam” (Benard, 2003). This was challenged by communities in the United Kingdom, who pushed for wider as opposed to “representative” engagement (Merali, 2007). This debate was central to the positioning of CAGE on “securitization” issues. In other words, there should not be a single point of government contact within Muslim communities, to represent the issues of those diverse communities.

These debates are not new in contexts of repression and CAGE has sought to learn from historical movements that have sought to fight repression and resist oppression. The experience of those impacted by the policies of Apartheid in South Africa, or the Black civil rights movement in the United States, were crucial as CAGE opted for independence as the model for its existence. By instituting a mandate of financial and political independence, our expression of the voices of survivors would be authentic to their experience and thus lift them from disenfranchisement to empowerment. From this vantage point, we would be best placed to hold authorities to account. It is also through that independence though, that the state seeks to find alternative modalities of control (Boycoff, 2007: 284).

Exchanges between the celebrated African-American sportsmen Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson during the black civil rights movement is just one case highlighting how independence is central to notions of empowerment. Robeson, the leading black actor and singer during the 1940s, was vilified by the state for his anti-establishment positions—to the extent that he was subjected to a McCarthyite with-hunt with repercussions, such as having his passport confiscated. Mike Marqusee suggested during this period the key battle was that between authentic black men vs. black men “staged for white men”. In the context of the McCarthyite House of Un-American Activities, the debate was reduced to the question: where do the loyalties of black America lie? (Marqusee, 2005: 36). Robinson was considered, “the white man’s hero” by Malcolm X (Marqusee, 2005: 78). He was pitted as the ideal black man because of his condemnation of those he considered to be “extremist” in their opposition to “white” America. None of this was to any avail for Robinson, as after J Edgar Hoover launched his Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) in August 1967, he was perhaps ironically included as a “dangerous black nationalist” despite his presentation as the foil to Robeson (Marqusee, 2005: 193).

Experiences such as those of Robinson and Robeson helped to place CAGE’s understanding of resistance within a wider structural context—that notions of justice, equity, equality and



morality are not restricted to the field of law, but rather traverse every aspect of civil society. CAGE understood that calling for justice and accountability, would mean that we would be decried as somehow anti-British, or anti-Western, even while our critique was also levelled against authority in the “East”. This identity of resistance is forged out of a particular form of knowledge that the modalities of oppression cannot be separated from one another easily. Political and media narratives are linked to policymaking, which is associated to public perceptions, and intertwined with jury trials, which are closely tied to public sector employees under a statutory duty to inform—all of this culminates to give form to the structural racism—through repression and coercion.

CAGE predicted that the climate of fear would self-perpetuate a structural form of Islamophobia, lending itself to discrimination (Hooper, 2016). The focus of the organisation, therefore, was to maintain an ethos that focused on due process of law, but derived from the strength and spirituality of being a Muslim. The key to change for the organisation was not representation in the corridors of power, but first building a sense of equal citizenry before the law that did not equivocate on rights, even for the most hated sections of society.

As with the Robinson/Robeson debate, issues of representation are not new. CAGE’s resistance to the excesses of national security policy is not predicated on a desire to see Muslims in “power” or “represented” within elite ranks, but rather can be found rooted in its Islamic ethos—one that places primacy on human dignity—a foundation of the Islamic social contract. From this starting point, CAGE’s relationship is first with its own communities, listening to their concerns and assisting survivors of abuse and their families. The organization’s commitment to independence allows CAGE the opportunity to transcend concerns over conflicted interests, leaving us free to engage in accountability processes, whether political, legal or through public discourse. This transcendence however also meant that CAGE was pitting itself against the received wisdoms of the state—effectively the epistemology that the state had chosen (which will be discussed at greater length in the next section).

### Resisting structural islamophobia in practice

The policies and practices that have been used against CAGE, and which this article will highlight in this section are not new. Whilst there is an entire body of literature talking about how the practices being used in the War on Terror were initially trialled in the colonies they have also been used against domestic populations and communities. One community is the Black Power movement in the United States. To highlight how the treatment and targeting of CAGE has some striking parallels with the way this movement was treated, CAGE launched a national tour of the FBI Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) that was used between the 1950s to the 1970s. With speakers from the United States, CAGE warned that the United Kingdom was developing similar practices, to shut down civil society that sought to hold the government to account (CAGE, 2012). COINTELPRO was used to not only infiltrate and surveil civil rights groups in the United States, but also to actively use the apparatus of the state to shut them down. It is then, not without some irony, that in 2015 Martin Bright wrote an article for the Spectator claiming, “Cage, the Islamic-focussed advocacy organisation, is the new equivalent of the Black Panthers” (Bright, 2015). The significance of this history was perhaps best described by Alicia McWilliams, the aunt of David Williams who was convicted of terrorism offences as part of the FBI planned Newburgh 4 plot in the United States:

COINTELPRO. The Black Panthers. The use of informants in churches, back in the 1940s and 1950s. This is happening all over again. But now the profile is Muslims. It just has a different name, and they’re using different terms. (cited in Kundnani)

The state has in effect resurrected COINTELPRO in the form of the Prevent strategy in the UK, with its brand of intervention called Countering-Violent Extremism more globally. For Arun Kundnani, the political and cultural disaffection is read as markers of radicalisation:

Having conceived of radicalization in this way, tackling it implies the mass surveillance of the religious and political lives of Muslim populations. In the US, thousands of informants in Muslim communities have been recruited to this end. In the UK, non-police public service providers are drawn in the process of gathering intelligence on those suspected of radicalism. In both countries the state has criminalised expressions of Islamist ideology. Sting operations in the US have been deployed against those thought to be travelling on a radicalization journey. The grim legacies of COINTELPRO-style countersubversion policing has been revived. (Kundnani, 2014)

Programmes such as COINTELPRO find their roots in the surveillance societies created in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as the European nations attempted to surveil the threat posed by those they deemed to be anarchists—a new era of repression based on the state of exception that had emerged (Zamoyski, 2015: xvi). For the first time, Europe witnessed formalised policing, systems of informants, and interventions of the state into policing the ideas taught in schools and universities (Zamoyski, 2015: 33). These historical examples are all manifestations of what Jules Boycoff referred to as the “four mechanisms of repression”: resource depletion, stigmatization, divisive disruption and intimidation (Boycoff, 2007: 293). These four mechanisms are actualised by the state through what Boycoff further refers to as the “action modes” of repression:

- Direct violence
- Public prosecutions and hearings
- Employment deprivation
- Surveillance and break-ins
- Infiltration, “badjacketing”, and the use of agent provocateurs
- “Black propaganda”
- Harassment arrests
- Extraordinary rules and laws
- Mass media manipulation
- Mass media deprecation (Boycoff, 2007: 304)

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed explanation of Boycoff’s modelling, for the purposes of understanding the structural racism and repression of CAGE, it is clear that the organisation has been subjected to a number of the action modes. This article now proceeds to highlight how some of these have articulated themselves in practice, and the ways CAGE has sought to resist them.

**Resisting the politics of condemnation.** The civil war in Syria and emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) resulted in CAGE being invited to present an alternative narrative in the media. We saw this as an opportunity to help establish a new baseline by which terrorism and political violence could be understood. On 30 January 2014, the author was invited to a discussion on Channel 4

News on why individuals fought in Syria, and why they should not necessarily be criminalised for doing so—our starting point was that engaging in foreign conflicts meant that individuals could be prosecuted for war crimes when they engaged in atrocities. The further point was made that there was a dissonance in the way British-Israelis who trained and fought for Israel were treated in relation to their non-criminalisation (Newman, 2014). CAGE had begun the process of injecting narratives into a public discourse that challenged the prevailing assumption that those travelling abroad proved to be a potential threat to the United Kingdom and therefore tougher laws were required to deal with the problem.

The narrative around CAGE providing expertise on issues, however, changed dramatically on 14 August 2014, when Channel 4 News again invited the author to discuss a humanitarian corridor for Yazidi refugees under international law. Switching topic at the end of the interview, the presenter Matt Frei asked if the author supported the establishment of a Caliphate or supported ISIS. Shocked by the question, the author chose to express his displeasure with Frei for the Islamophobic nature of the question and the reasons why he felt it to be inappropriate—that the question had no locus to the discussion and was only directed at the interviewee because he was Muslim (Frei, 2014). CAGE, in other words, was being asked to condemn the atrocities of those with whom they had no relationship. Condemnation is a phenomenon that has been highlighted by the British Islamic scholar Ismail Ibrahim, who wrote a detailed tract: “75 Reasons Why Muslims Must Stop With Their Terrorism Condemnation Ritual” after mosques in Batley condemned the killing of Jo Cox MP, despite it having been carried out by a non-Muslim man:

I believe this was an inadvertent spillover from what can be described as the “condemnation culture” of Muslims against the terrorism that is done in their name. It is a trend that has burdened Muslims for 15 years, ever since the 9/11 attacks, in which Muslims genuinely felt Islam’s name could have been tarnished by not speaking out. Now, it is a phenomenon that Muslims—especially in the West—have allowed themselves to be consumed by, either willingly or unsuspectingly. (Ibrahim, 2016)

CAGE again found itself in the spotlight in February 2015. At a press conference organised by CAGE, which went live to over 600 million viewers across a range of networks across the world, Muhammad Emwazi (dubbed “Jihadi John” in the media) was being discussed, and especially how he had been harassed by the police and the security agencies (CAGE, 2015). Emwazi was the man alleged to have been responsible for the unlawful executions of journalists and aid workers in areas under ISIS control. This resulted in an unprecedented backlash against CAGE by the press and politicians, most notably in the United Kingdom. Claims were made that the organisation was apologising for Muhammad Emwazi and therefore his killing of civilians. What was never acknowledged was that the opening comments of the press conference paid tribute to the victims of Muhammed Emwazi’s actions, and throughout the press conference, calls were made for him to be prosecuted for war crimes. Assessing the treatment of CAGE, a detailed response was written by academics David Miller, Narzanin Massoumi and Tom Mills:

Qureshi’s comments were seized upon and shamelessly distorted by the right-wing press. The *Telegraph*, for example, reported that Qureshi had said that “Emwazi is ‘extremely gentle’”, removing the past tense from his

comments, which had made clear he was referring to Emwazi *before* his apparent “radicalisation”...

The organisation’s representatives were in fact unequivocal in their condemnation of “Jihadi John” and the violence of ISIS. In an interview on *Sky News*, CAGE spokesperson Cerie Bullivant said: “nobody here is apologising or trying to make an excuse for what happened... We are shocked when we see beheadings... I am shocked by something as brutal as this... everybody should be held accountable for any torture that they do or any killings”. Yet CAGE has continually faced claims that it is in some way responsible for, or has condoned, such acts. (Massoumi *et al.*, 2015)

CAGE was constantly called to play the politics of condemnation—something we felt worked against the interest of our communities—as our concern was that it would establish a notion that somehow we were culpable. Further than that, it presupposed a lack of humanity; that Muslims condoned unless they publicly condemned. The discussions turned quickly from what CAGE was saying, to indeed what we were not—and this was most evident at an interview the author conducted with Andrew Neil on his late night show (Prince, 2015). The questions started on the work of CAGE and around the topic of “Jihadi John” but soon the author was being asked to condemn Islamic scholars for opinions they may or may not hold. CAGE’s commitment to reject the politics of condemnation led to assumptions about positions that organisation takes on Islam that have no bearing on the organisation’s work or indeed the non-Muslims who work for CAGE (Prince, 2015).

The allegation that CAGE does not condemn recently resurfaced by Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who, in her new book, argues that while CAGE does important work, its refusal to condemn acts of terrorism left a dangerous example for young people (Warsi, 2017, 257). What Warsi and others fail to explain, however, is what impact condemnations have on communities. In other words, to what extent do young British citizens who are of the Muslim faith feel that it is necessary for them to condemn acts of terrorism, and to see leading organisations do so? Also, what message does it send to the rest of society, that an expectation of owning a particular act of violent criminality is connected to a faith practised by close to 2 billion people? The lack of answers by those who promote a “condemnation culture” leaves us somewhat perplexed as to its role in promoting citizenry of Muslims and social cohesion—in our view it further leads to the dehumanisation and criminalisation of Muslims by placing false expectations on how they should behave.

CAGE’s refusal to condemn acts as a site of resistance to reframe the debate around citizenry and cohesion—it is part of the process of what we determine to be a balancing of cultural expectations within UK society. CAGE resists the trend of what is considered to be “normal” or “expected” as a means of highlighting how structural Islamophobia is ever-present in such debates—ultimately this therefore becomes an act of “counter hegemonic” resistance. Engaging in such forms of resistance, and by highlighting deeply Islamophobic and common-sense practices such as “condemning” have not been without consequence. I will now briefly demonstrate some of the more coordinated actions that have been taken against CAGE to try and silence them and dry them of their financial resources and support.

**Resisting financial pressure.** The narrative constructed around CAGE and disseminated by politicians and the right-wing media has resulted in an environment where organisations such as Amnesty International and our former funders, The Joseph

Rowntree Charitable Trust and Roddick Foundation, were pressured to dissociate from us. This meant little to CAGE, in respect that we had no formal working relationship with Amnesty and because of our bank accounts having been closed (covered later in relation to the 2014 arrest of Moazzam Begg), could not receive grant funding anyway. Funders found themselves in a difficult position and despite internal calls saying that public dissociation was not what they wanted, the public outcry was too strong to resist (Rawlinson, 2015). The irony of this, of course, was not lost on us, as we were being castigated for asking questions to the state about the treatment of a former client who was allegedly involved in politically motivated violence, whereas in the context of Ireland and South Africa, Amnesty had supported individuals who had taken part in acts of political violence (Massoumi *et al.*, 2015). Even the charity sector exposed a double standard in the expectations that surround Muslims appearing in public life. Had these organisations assessed the matter outside of the hysteria directed at them, they would have perhaps based their decisions on what we actually said, rather than what was not said or falsely reported (Cook, 2015).

Among the hundreds of cases of those arrested without due reason, CAGE Outreach Director Moazzam Begg was arrested for alleged terrorism-related activities in Syria one year before the Muhammad Emwazi press conference, in February 2014. HM Treasury immediately froze Begg's assets, and at the same time Barclays Bank froze the accounts of CAGE and those within the organisation who had accounts with the bank. This began a process by which CAGE would come to resist the state's attempts to interfere, and go on to recognise how much support they had from Muslim communities at home and abroad.

CAGE received a letter from HM Treasury dated 14 March 2014, explaining that as Begg had been designated under Section 4(2) of the Terrorism Asset Freezing Act 2010, measures would need to be taken by the organisation to remove his name as a signatory to the account. The freezing, and ultimately closing of the CAGE account led to a loss of £3,000 per month in small standing order donations that had been set up by supporters of the organisation. This was exacerbated by two significant donors, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Roddick Foundation, not being able to provide us with funds that they had cleared to support the organisation. It also gave the perception that somehow, CAGE's activities were suspect and delegitimized.

Dealing with the financial situation CAGE was forced to take a back seat as our colleague had also been detained by British police for suspected terrorism offences. Working day and night, our priorities were first and foremost to find Moazzam Begg legal representation; ensure his family were being taken care of; design a public campaign and bring communities across the United Kingdom together in support, and of course, to work for his release. CAGE's resistance to the state lay in our confidence of Moazzam Begg as never having been interested in terrorism, and as someone who successfully managed to help young people steer away from violence as a solution to their problems. On 1 October 2013, charges were dropped against Begg (Casciani, 2013).

With no money coming into the organisation and no ability to access our funds, our staff of seven employees agreed to work without a salary to keep the organisation open for business. CAGE was forced to make its plight public through email shots and social media—expressing the need for emergency cash payments and even arranging for cash to be picked up from certain points in London. The organisation was able to raise enough to cover its running costs. CAGE has managed to continue for 3 years without a bank account, being reliant on cash donations to survive—all of which come from communities within the United Kingdom. CAGE resisted the state financially,

by being reliant on its support base—one that does not donate in large amounts, but rather in small individual donation. So far, in the last 2 years alone, we have managed to raise over £400,000 this way; an indication, I believe, of how much support CAGE has at the grassroots level.

When the Muhammad Emwazi press conference was to take place the following year in February 2015, further pressure was applied to CAGE. Here, the Charity Commission wrote to the organisations that had previously funded CAGE and demanded that the organisations would never “associate” with CAGE again—even in the future. We decided to judicially review the decision of the Commission as it was felt that such a challenge would benefit other charities where the Charity Commission overstepped its boundaries (Ramesh, 2015b). At the High Court, the Charity Commission requested to settle out of court which we agreed to on the basis that certain express guarantees were given—the Commission agreed that they could not fetter the activities of foundations to fund CAGE (Ainsworth, 2015).

In subsequent revelations through the legal case, it was revealed the extent to which different parts of the state worked cooperatively to undermine CAGE's work by placing pressure on the Charity Commission to shut down the organisation's funding—this was particularly telling through political lobbying by members of Parliament (Cook, 2015). The victory though was not just in the favour of CAGE but in the interests of the whole charity sector. It showed that the actions of a small organisation brave enough to challenge undue influence can have a positive impact for the whole of civil society. The intervention by the Charity Commission would become only one example of how the state has the ability to interfere with the activities of civil society, but with the Prevent strategy, a part of the UK government's wider CONTEST counter-terrorism policy, there were wider ways in which the state has sought to undermine resistance and, by default, undermine the small amount of freedom within civil society as a whole.

**Learning from our actions (on our own terms).** The commitment CAGE has to its ethics has meant that on occasion, we have not been able to play by the standard of behaviour “expected” of Muslims in the United Kingdom. This does not mean however that we are not willing to be reflexive about where we have made mistakes—evidenced by CAGE conducting an external review that was published publicly after the period of media vilification because of the Muhammad Emwazi press conference. It was an exercise in self-reflection and accountability. As an organisation that is funded by the donations of the public, we felt we had a duty to catalogue and learn from our mistakes (Ramesh, 2015a, b) as well as hold ourselves to account and fulfil our ethical obligations. Outside of the beating drums of those who used the occasion to demonise us, there were friendly voices who continue to support CAGE, but questioned the way in which we made our decisions surrounding the press conference. We listened to those voices carefully and responded appropriately considering the publicity that surrounded CAGE's work. Thus, recognition of our mistakes was on our own terms, and despite the vilification, the public continued to support CAGE both actively and financially.

What was perhaps most tragic for CAGE in this entire period, was that we had spent months and (in the case of our Outreach Director Moazzam Begg) even made efforts from prison, to try and save the life of Emwazi's victim, Alan Henning (Begg, 2015). Begg's previous appeals for Christian Peace Makers resulted in their release when held by al-Qaida in Iraq (the group that would later become ISIS) and so there was confidence that had the government permitted an appeal, it would have worked (Begg, 2015). We organised the media to run public messages calling on



Alan Henning to be released, as well as the wife of a Muslim doctor who was killed by Bashar al-Assad's forces to make a public appeal for Henning's life. It was, however, with great sorrow and regret that our efforts came to no fruitful end. Our ability to assist was lost within the hate being directed towards us—a lesson that resisting prevailing narratives comes at a cost when faced with state repression and structural racism; not just for those who do the fighting but those innocent people like Henning caught in the midst of political point-scoring and posturing.

### Liberal complicity in structural islamophobia

In the previous section, this article demonstrated the ways in which action has been taken against CAGE and the suspect community. Here, the article now shifts its attention to demonstrating how such actions are not possible without the support of liberal groups and organisations, who, in the name of protecting our liberties and rights end up, *in practice*, being complicit in “epistemic” or structural violence targeted at Muslims (Spivak, 1987). In other words, in addition to those who point to Muslims as a threat and construct them as suspicious while calling for them to be publically and openly disciplined and controlled (see Mills *et al.*, 2011) it is worth assessing the ideas and actions of those who claim neutrality. This is important as claiming neutrality, as shall become clear, is not only a political position within itself but it is a position that permits and enables inequality and injustice to continue largely unchecked. To understand how this operates in practice, we can assess the actions and statements of David Anderson QC; the former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation who is chosen and appointed by the government. The Muslim Council of Britain, one of the largest Muslim umbrella groups in the United Kingdom also serves as an interesting case study.

In a lecture delivered to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 11 October 2016 entitled “Terrorism, Tolerance and Human Rights”, David Anderson is on record as noting the following:

Those laws need, firstly to be strong. They have to identify and punish the extremists who espouse violence—the thousands, in my country, who are motivated by either residual grievances in Northern Ireland, by the extreme right wing or by militant Islam. (Anderson, 2016)

I will go on to show that within this one paragraph, there is a duality between the “epistemic crisis of counter-terrorism” (Jackson, 2015) and its link to structural Islamophobia (Schwartz, 2017).

For Anderson, the laws need to be “strong” because of prejudice against Muslims heightening, and thus strong laws ward off “vigilantism” as there is a perception that something is being done (Anderson, 2016). This does not tell us much about the actual danger allegedly posed by Muslims in the United Kingdom, nor are we offered any justification for his proposal of “stronger” laws in western societies—indeed his only figure of the threat, are the 28,300 deaths—the majority taking place in Muslim majority countries. He makes no mention of why the “strong” laws are needed for a western context.

Anderson is not alone in his construction of a Muslim “threat”. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) for example, have adopted a similar approach. In the MCB’s “Response to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill” (2015) their Assistant Secretary General Miqdaad Versi began by “strongly” supporting the government’s approach to stricter counter-terrorism measures. More significantly, Versi goes on to reassert the claim that “...the threat of terrorism and extremism continues to blight our

communities” (Versi, 2015). Like Anderson then, Miqdaad Versi provides little evidence to suggest what the MCB’s assessment of the actual threat of terrorism within the West is based on.

Anderson seems to be suggesting that a public display of strength by the state will reduce the likelihood of “vigilantism” against Muslims:

If the authorities are powerless to act against it [terrorism], some will be tempted to vigilantism... (Anderson, 2016)

It is telling that he does not refer to violence against Muslims—something which he says he is trying to stop—as “hate-crime” or Islamophobia but rather refers to it as “vigilantism”; as if there were almost an element of truth behind the fears of the hate-criminals or “vigilantes”. Violence by Muslims, on the other hand, is treated as something exceptional since it is driven by an ideology which he calls the, “murderous ideology of Salafi jihadism”, and recommends it be directly countered (Anderson, 2016). In helping shape his understanding around the so-called drivers of politically motivated violence used by Muslims, he turns to Muslims as a way of giving himself legitimacy. The people he consults, however, are telling: King Mohammed VI of Morocco, Matthew Wilkinson of the Cambridge Muslim College, and finally Maajid Nawaz of the Quilliam Foundation (Anderson, 2016). These voices exist in a securitised narrative of Muslim communities—they have all assisted in their own ways, to perpetuate the myth of the existential Muslim threat.

King Mohammed VI is given protection by Anderson through the claim that he is a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. Matthew Wilkinson is cited as a source, one who has only ever appeared to give evidence in court at the request of the UK Crown Prosecution Service and has had his credentials called into question on a number of occasions throughout terrorism trials (Brittain and Qureshi, 2011; Thibeault, 2015). Finally and most surprisingly, Anderson relies on Maajid Nawaz from the Quilliam Foundation to make points about the future of engagement—but he is a figure who is considered to be extremely controversial and divisive (Miller and Sabir, 2013; Shariatmadari, 2015).

Anderson attempts to discipline Islam and Muslims by deploying Muslim voices that he approves of and feels are best placed to make political points about who they are and how they should be “treated”. This is reminiscent of the critique of David Cameron’s Munich Speech by Professor Brian Klug, whose words could equally apply to Anderson:

Thus, he disavows the view of Islam and the West that we associate with a Bernard Lewis or a Samuel Huntington. Again, this seems like a defence of Islam against its enemies. However, as we have seen, his way of reconciling “Islam and the West” is to make the former fit for purpose. Defending Islam, denying that it is the “root of the problem,” he is disciplining it, keeping it within the bounds, barring it from the political realm, confining it to peaceful and devout observance, rendering it “safe” - so that it does not pose a threat to “us”. (Klug, 2015, 71)

From this view, what we find is that David Anderson QC can be situated squarely within the ranks of those who practice epistemic violence and therefore contribute to the disciplining of Muslims through a framework that is protected by liberal language and ideas. We thus end up returning to Boycoff’s notion of repression (Boycoff, 2007) where liberals end up reinforcing and participating in the legitimisation of structural violence.

**Prevent—the need to do “something”.** Liberals seemingly operate within a particular framework that is set by the State. They start with the assumption that the threat is precisely as the government set it out. Their point of disagreement largely rests on the methods with which it is implemented, and the potential negative impacts that may occur. Liberals very rarely will attempt to question the underlying narrative of the government.

In the context of the Prevent strategy, they claim that it should not be disproportionately targeted at the whole Muslim community, only the “bad Muslims”. Laws are needed but we need to ensure that they are “proportionate” (Versi, 2016). In other words, liberals and people like Versi and Anderson do not question the foundations of what the state is doing and neither the principles that guide the counter-terrorism infrastructure. There is nearly always an emphasis on the “need to provide an alternative” as a means of seeming to moderate in response to government excess (Versi, 2016).

Since the inception of the Prevent strategy, CAGE has been fighting this programme on the basis that it criminalises thoughts and beliefs (CAGE, 2011). Ever since the strategy was placed on a statutory footing, forcing all public sector workers to watch those under their care for signs of “radicalization”, we have been particularly interested in the impact of the policy. CAGE’s resistance to the state is based on our assessment that the entire policy is based on a false epistemology, and thus the conclusions and policies derived will only harm communities, not help them. Despite Freedom of Information Act requests regarding the Prevent strategy training and materials, no information on the inner workings of the strategy has yet been provided under claims of national security. CAGE’s commitment to accountability meant that we were interested in not only being able to see the material, but also being able to have a public debate about its efficacy. In July 2015, after individuals approached the organisation expressing discomfort over what was being taught, CAGE publicly leaked the first set of Prevent training materials (CAGE, 2015b), and it did so again 6 months later (CAGE, 2016)—this was only after continual Freedom of Information denials by the government to release the material on the grounds of national security.

At the same time, hundreds of cases began to filter through of young people in particular, who had been reported to Prevent, or at least been suspected of being “radicals” because of an environment created by Prevent. These cases strongly suggested that everyday suspicion and bigotry against Muslims was escalating (CAGE, 2015c). One case study was of a student who no longer felt safe to go to the doctor:

I felt as if my doctor was acting like some kind of spy for the government. I know a little bit about the way all of this PREVENT stuff works, and honestly believed that my doctor was fishing for some information about me to pass on to someone else. (CAGE, 2015c)

While the publication and media attention of cases where Prevent had failed as a policy were important, CAGE felt that these were still failing to address the heart of the issue. Our resistance to Prevent was not on the basis that there was bad practice, but that it was a bad solution to an ever worse diagnosis. In 2016 we changed our emphasis, and concentrated on ascertaining the empiricism that built Prevent and to establish the extent to which it was scientifically sound. This process led us to the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+)—a government study by psychologists working within the Home Office that laid out how the government felt it could scientifically justify its view on the processes of radicalization—but also predict future behaviour in what it termed the pre-criminal space (CAGE,

2016b). Although the study was and is still hidden through claims of national security, CAGE managed to track down a journal article based on the study, and with the assistance of psychologists and specialists, were the first organisations to highlight and critique the very foundation of the Prevent programme.

Whenever CAGE has raised issues at a governmental level, instead of responding directly to the issues that we are raising, the government and media have instead sought to respond through ad hominem attacks against the individuals and organization (Bracchi and Lemanski, 2015). Although the information we presented regarding the ERG22+ was well documented and raised at the highest levels of government, parliamentarians instead chose to focus on CAGE’s lack of condemnation of terrorism attacks and ignored the evidence we presented. Perhaps the entire discussion of this article then, can be summarised into one specific incident: CAGE being invited to give evidence before the Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee on the topic of Extremism. CAGE accepted the invitation, and instead of focusing on the useful contribution that we were making to assist the panel on the ERG22+ process, they instead chose to attack the organisation in what can only be described as a McCarthyite witch hunt—condensed into Keith Vaz MP saying to CAGE Director Dr Adnan Siddiqui, “If you do not condemn, then you must condone.” (Home Affairs Committee, 2016) It is precisely these platitudes that CAGE have been resisting since the beginning of the War on Terror and will continue to do so.

## Conclusion

CAGE’s resistance is not limited to accountability and to advocate for communities that have borne the brunt of highly violent and coercive policies since 9/11. It also seeks to question the very foundation of the ideas and practices that are implemented, mostly without question or scrutiny by so-called Muslim “gatekeeper” organizations or from independent scrutiny offered by liberals such as the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation. However, by doing this, CAGE continues to face significant pressure, whether this be through the very public demand that we condemn politically motivated violence, through the use of financial pressure brought to bear on us or whether through direct and overt acts of coercion and violence being used against our staff such as Moazzam Begg. Despite these challenges, expectations and pressures, CAGE has and will continue to fight the power, regardless of whether this power articulates itself physically or structurally.

In 1989, the US-based artist Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy says “Fight the power. We’ve got to fight the powers that be”. When the author reads these words, fighting the power does not mean that he or CAGE have set themselves up in opposition to the state for no reason or because it may be “cool” to do so. For CAGE, their activism and resistance is driven by the desire to speak truth to power—but as was the case with Chuck D, *with purpose*. CAGE are guided by the notion that the greatest struggle is for us to be engaged in an active process of truth speaking. Of course, this course of action by CAGE has led it to suffer from consistent attacks and vilification. Our starting point is that we are telling a story about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. By knowing ourselves, we not only seek to fight unfair power, injustice and inequality but, as instructed by the Prophet Muhammad, declare that the greatest *jihad* (struggle) is to speak a word of truth to power (Ibn Hanbal, 2012: 18449).

This form of ethical representation has led us into hot water. Accusations of being terrorist sympathisers are often directed towards us (McMicking, 2015; Home Affairs Committee, 2016), but this is nothing historically new. During the black civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X and Huey P

Newton held the state to account for their egregious violations of the rights of African-Americans, and yet they were all referred to as extremists, vilified and castigated by the state. Similarly, in South Africa, accusations of extremism and terrorism were levelled against Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela. Their resistance was bottom-up, from the suspect community itself, and they were the first to pay the price for defending the rights of their communities.

When assessing the state's response to CAGE through the lens of Boycoff's "mechanisms of repression", her model emerges from the media narratives decrying CAGE, the statements of politicians seeking to harm the organization, the arrest and charging of its members, the closure of its bank accounts. These are all manifestations of what Boycoff summarises as resource depletion, stigmatisation, divisive disruption and intimidation.

There is however something deeper than the actions of the state against CAGE that must be borne in mind, as the organisation seeks to resist—and that is the intra-community debates around the role of resisting hegemony and structural racism. As evidenced through the Robinson/Robeson debate, the Muslim communities in the United Kingdom are engaged in a process of trying to understand to what extent they have agency within their own narrative. For some, being championed by interlocutors between communities and the state is a way forward—for CAGE however, that is evidence of weakness. CAGE's starting point that Muslims of the United Kingdom are equal citizens before the law, and that does not just mean that there should be equal due process rights, but that also the wider debate, discussion and narrative must also remove the everyday suspicions and bigotry that assist in creating a suspect community.

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## Data availability

All data analysed is included in the article.

## Additional information

**Competing interests:** The author declares that there are no competing financial interests.

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