

PART II: MUSLIMS PERCEPTIONS OF BRITISH COBAT TROOPS

Ahmed Hankir^{1,2,3}, Frederick R. Carrick^{2,4,5}, Rashid Zaman^{2,6} & Jamie Hacker Hughes^{7,8,9,10}

¹Department of Psychiatry, Carrick Institute for Graduate Studies, Cape Canaveral, FL, USA

²Bedfordshire Centre for Mental Health Research in association with the University of Cambridge (BCMHR-CU),
Cambridge, UK

³Leeds York Partnership Foundation Trust, Leeds, UK

⁴Department of Neurology, Carrick Institute for Graduate Studies, Cape Canaveral, FL, USA

⁵Harvard Macy and MGH Institutes, Boston, MA, USA

⁶Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

⁷Veterans and Families Institute Anglia Ruskin University, Norwich, UK

⁸Visiting Professor of Psychology, University of Hertfordshire, UK

⁹Visiting Professor of Military and Veteran Psychology, University of Northumbria, UK

¹⁰Honorary Professor of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

SUMMARY

Background: On the 22nd May 2017, suicide bomber Salman Abedi detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Manchester Arena killing 22 people and injuring 116 others. Following the 'massacre in Manchester', the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, linked UK foreign policy with terrorism on British soil. Controversial and contentious though Corbyn's claims may be, the terrorists themselves have also reported that what motivates them to carry out their abominable atrocities are British military operations in Muslim majority countries. Indeed, on the 22nd May 2013, British serviceman, Lee Rigby, was brutally attacked and killed by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, southeast London. The perpetrators of this heinous act told passers-by at the scene that they wanted to avenge the killing of Muslims by the British Armed Forces.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study on Muslim perceptions of British combat troops and UK foreign policy. Participants were selected by purposive sampling. We crafted a survey that explored Muslim perceptions of the British military and the government's foreign policy. Response items were on a Likert-scale and there was white space for free text comments which were subjected to thematic analyses.

Results: 75/75 (100%) of the participants recruited responded. (75/75 (100%) Muslim participants, 43/75 (57.3%) female participants, 32/75 (42.7%) male participants, mean age 20.5 years, (Std. Dev. ±2.5)). 66/75 (88%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that British military operations in Muslim majority countries have negatively influenced perceptions towards combat troops. 42/75 (56%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that contact with a combat troops or veterans would positively influence their perceptions towards them.

Themes of free text comments included the role that the media plays in demonising Muslims, the transcendental bond that Muslims around the world have for each other and 'the brainwashing' of British combat troops by the Government.

Discussion: The fact that many of the participants in our sample agreed or strongly agreed that social contact with service personnel or veterans would positively influence perceptions towards them is encouraging. The results of our survey lend support for future intervention studies investigating whether contact between Muslims residing in the UK and British combat troops would promote unity and community cohesion.

Key words: stigma – Islamophobia – Muslims - social contact - British combat troops - radicalisation

* * * * *

Background

This paper is part II of a series of papers on radicalisation, Islamophobia and Muslim mental health. It is best read in conjunction with paper I.

On the 22nd May 2017, suicide bomber Salman Abedi detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in a concert by American singer Ariana Grande in the Manchester Arena killing 22 people, including an 8-year-old girl, and injuring 116 others. The "massacre in Manchester" was the worst terrorist attack on British soil since the London suicide bombings on 7th July 2005. Muslim communities throughout the UK have

resolutely rejected the multitude of absurd claims that such heinous actions have any place in Islam and have expressed their deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of all those who were affected by the explosion. Indeed, multiple members of the Muslim community in Manchester reported Salman Abedi to the British Intelligence Services on at least five separate occasions before he executed his horrific attack due to their concerns about the extremist views that he was expressing and their forebodings that he posed an imminent threat to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Leaders of all the political parties in the UK suspended their campaigns for the general election follo-

wing the callous and cowardly bombing that caused horror and outrage throughout the world. The leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, however, controversially resumed electioneering soon after the atrocity. The former chair of the Stop the War coalition emphatically exclaimed in a general election campaign speech that: "Many experts, including professionals in our intelligence and security services, have pointed to the connections between wars our government has supported or fought in other countries and terrorism here at home."

Corbyn's claims, controversial and contentious though they may be, are not unfounded, especially if one considers what the terrorists themselves have said, and indeed continue to say, about what motivates them to carry out their abhorrent activities. On 22nd May 2013, British serviceman, Lee Rigby, was brutally attacked and killed by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, southeast London. The perpetrators of this abominable act told passers-by at the scene that they wanted to avenge the killing of Muslims by the British Armed Forces (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22630303>). Indeed, militants of (and those inspired by) terrorist organisations like Daesh (ISIS) repeatedly report that what motivates them to carry out their heinous atrocities are British military operations in Muslim majority countries.

The perversion of Islam

Daesh (ISIS) is a terrorist organization founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999 and based in the Levant (Middle-East), primarily controlling territory in Iraq and Syria. As of 2016, US officials estimate that there are between 15,000 – 20,000 listed militants (<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>).

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi promulgated a vitriolic ideology that has no regard for the sanctity of human life, Muslim or non-Muslim alike. Indeed, the United Nations has designated Daesh as a terrorist organisation and holds them responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes (Amnesty International 2014). Daesh's manifesto is anathema to the teachings of the blessed prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Succinctly put, Daesh does not represent Islam. Most of Daesh's victims are Muslim and most people engaged in combat against Daesh are Muslim.

Calling oneself a Muslim does not necessarily make that person a Muslim, a fact which was not lost on a bystander of the Leytonstone tube station knife attack in 2015. The bystander, a non-Muslim named by the media only as John, coined the phrase, "You ain't no Muslim, Bruv" in response to the fanatic Muhyadin Mire's ravings whilst he was being tasered and arrested by London Metropolitan Police. The phrase soon started to trend on Twitter and the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, praised the commentator declaring that "(he) stated it all much better than I could have done". Acts such as these have been collectively and cate-

gorically condemned by Muslim communities in Britain (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/dec/13/you-aint-no-muslim-bruv-man-leytonstone-denounces-extremism>).

Recruitment of foreign fighters to join Daesh

The British Government is deeply concerned about Britons who have been recruited to join Daesh through their propaganda campaign. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization report that more than 700 Britons have joined Daesh since the inception of this terrorist organisation in part due to their propaganda campaign (<http://icsr.info/tag/foreign-fighters>).

The Quran explicitly prohibits the killing of innocent civilians and non-combatants as evidenced in the following passage:

'... If you kill one human life, it is as if you have killed the whole of humankind...'

(Quranic scripture, Chapter 5, Verse 33).

Muslims believe Muhammad (PBUH) to be the Prophet of God and, as such, he was the keeper of prophecies. Muhammad (PBUH) prophesied that terrorist organisations such as Daesh would sprout and he issued the following clarion call about them:

"...They are the worst of the creation. Blessed are those who fight them and are killed by them. They call to the Book of Allah but have absolutely nothing to do with it. Whoever fights them is better to Allah than them."
(Sunan Abi Dawud 4765)

We, the authors, would like to take this opportunity to clearly express that we collectively and categorically condemn the terrorist attacks that have taken place over recent years in Nigeria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Australia, USA, Canada, Lebanon, France, the UK, the USA and elsewhere. We share the deep concern that the British Government has towards the youth from the UK who are being recruited by so-called 'Islamic State' to engage in unlawful battle with them. We would like to make it absolutely and explicitly clear that Muslims residing in the UK do not 'quietly condone' terrorism in any of its many forms (i.e. the so-called 'Islamic State') but rather we vociferously and vehemently condemn these barbaric and abhorrent terrorist acts. The primary author (AH), who identifies himself as a British Muslim, lamented inconsolably when he discovered that the British humanitarian, Alan Henning, was beheaded by his captor Mohammad Emwazi (known by the media as 'Jihadi John') in Syria on the 3rd December 2014 (Hankir et al. 2015). We offer our sincerest condolences to the loved ones of Alan Henning who we regard and revere as a valiant hero who selflessly served the most impoverished and vulnerable people in our world today.

MI5 Behavioural Sciences Unit report

The MI5 Behavioural Sciences Unit conducted sophisticated in-depth analyses of hundreds of case studies

related to terrorism. They concluded that, ‘...far from being Islamist fundamentalists, most (terrorists) are religious novices who do not practise their faith regularly... some are involved in drug-taking, drinking alcohol, and visiting prostitutes (all haram (forbidden) in Islam) ...’ MI5 reported that, ‘... there is evidence to support that a well-established religious identity actually confers protection against violent radicalisation...’ (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1>).

Daesh document revealing characteristics of militants

A leaked Daesh document verified as genuine by the US military’s Combating Terrorism Centre exposed the personal details of 4,188 militants who joined Daesh in 2013 and 2014. 70% of respondents described their knowledge of Islam as ‘basic’. These findings suggest that Daesh has twisted the Quran to serve its own brutal and ‘un-Islamic’ ideology. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-files-documents-leak-will-throw-group-into-crisis-mode-as-thousands-of-fighters-british-names-a6922441.html>)

Factors that motivate militants to commit terrorism

Professor Hamed El-Said is the United Nations’s consultant on radicalisation and in his magnum opus, ‘*Deradicalizing violent extremists: Counter-Radicalisation and Deradicalization Programmes and their Impact in Muslim Majority States*,’ he argues that those who are engaged in radicalisation aim to cause division. El-Said also reports that what motivates terrorists to carry out their abominable acts are military operations in Muslim majority countries. These assertions are consistent with what other experts on terrorism report (Coid et al. 2016, Bhui et al. 2016) and what the terrorists themselves have said. The acculturation process (Bhugra et al. 2017) and myriad other factors such as mental illness, poverty and unemployment (Bhui and James et al. 2016, McGillo-way et al. 2015, Bhui et al. 2014) have also been reported in the literature to contribute to the phenomenon of violent radicalisation.

Perceptions of British Combat Troops

Sir Simon Wessely is Regius Professor of Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King’s College London, President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (UK) and Director of the King’s Centre for Military Health Research. Wessely et al. report that there was evidence to suggest that, although the public were less supportive of the UK’s military involvement in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, their support of the Armed Forces themselves increased. (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/research/kcmhr/publicperceptions.aspx>).

The social research institute, Ipsos Mori, conducted a study with King’s College London entitled ‘Hearts and minds: Misperceptions and the military’. This was an international survey on perceptions of the military compared with ‘reality’. 5010 interviews were conducted between 24th April 2015 and 8th May 2015 across 5 countries: Australia, UK, USA, Canada and France. This international survey revealed some ‘extraordinary’ misperceptions on other issues. For example, the British respondents in the survey reported that they perceived 21% of the population in the UK to be Muslim (actual 5%). French respondents perceived 31% of the population in France to be Muslim (actual 8%). British respondents perceived that 16% of teenagers in the UK give birth each year (actual 3%). American respondents perceived that 24% of teenagers in the US give birth each year (actual 3%) (<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3587/Hearts-and-Minds-misperceptions-and-the-military.aspx>).

Interestingly, although the British Government has expressed deep and grave concerns over Britons being recruited to join Daesh, and terrorism experts report that those engaged in violent extremism cite that military operations in Muslim majority countries motivate them to carry out terrorist acts, none of the participants selected from the UK for the Ipsos Mori and King’s College London international survey were Muslim. As far as the authors are aware, there have been no studies to date that explore the perceptions that Muslims residing in the UK have towards the British military.

Muslims residing in the UK and their perceptions of British Combat Troops

Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study on Muslims residing in the UK and their perceptions of British combat troops. Participants were selected by purposive sampling. We crafted a survey that explored Muslim perceptions of the British military and the government’s foreign policy. Response items were on a Likert-scale and there was space for free text comments which were subjected to thematic analyses.

Results

75/75 (100%) of the participants recruited responded. (75/75 (100%) Muslim participants, 43/75 (57.3%) female participants, 32/75 (42.7%) male participants, mean age 20.5 years, (Std. Dev. \pm 2.5)). 69/75 (94%) of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that, ‘Being Muslim means that you cannot be British’ (Figure 1). 66/75 (88%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that British military operations in Muslim majority countries have negatively influenced perceptions towards combat troops (Figure 2). 65/75 (86.7%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that British military operations in Muslim majority countries have negatively influenced perceptions of the British Government (Figure 3). 42/75 (56%) respondents either

agreed or strongly agreed that contact with service personnel or veterans would positively influence their perceptions towards them (Figure 4).

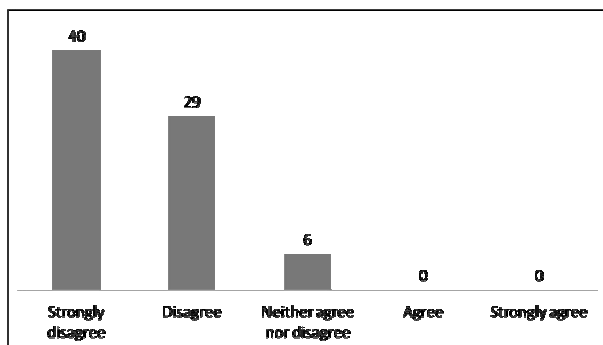


Figure 1. Being Muslim means that you cannot be British

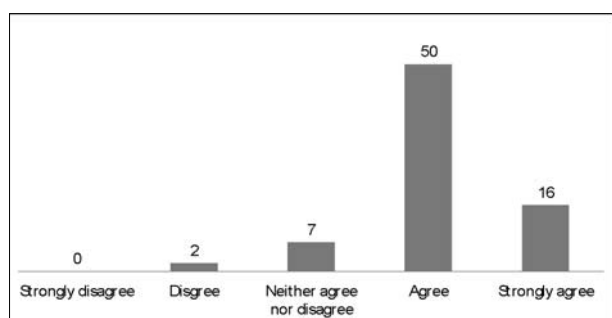


Figure 2. British military operations in Muslim majority countries have negatively influenced perceptions of British combat troops

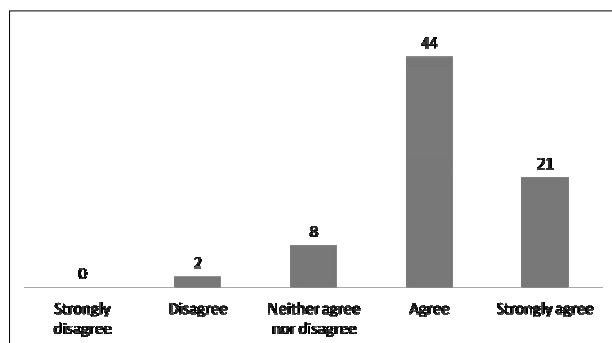


Figure 3. British military operations in Muslim majority countries have negatively influenced perceptions of the British Government

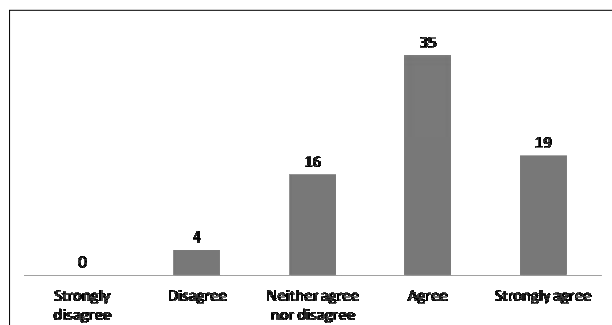


Figure 4. Muslims should not enlist in the British Armed Forces due to military operations being conducted in Muslim majority countries

Themes of free text comments included the role that the media plays in demonising Muslims, the transcendental bond that Muslims around the world have for each other and ‘the brainwashing’ of British combat troops by the Government (Figure 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

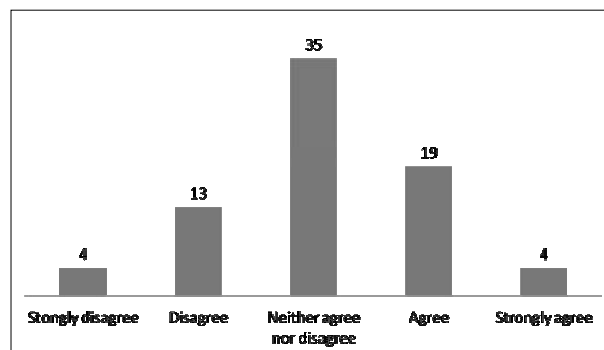


Figure 5. The British Armed Forces are less likely to recruit Muslims

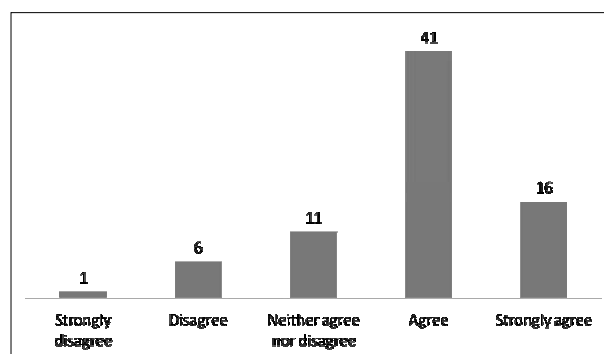


Figure 6. Being Muslim can reduce empathy towards British combat troops engaged in military operations in Muslim majority countries

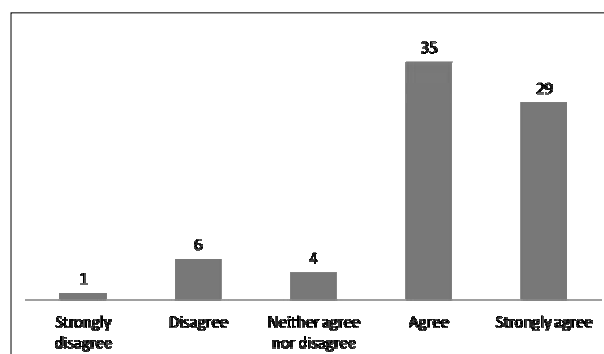


Figure 7. Being Muslim can increase empathy towards civilian casualties and deaths due to British combat troops engaged in military operations in Muslim majority countries

Thematic analyses of free text comments

Themes of free text comments included the role that the media plays in demonising Muslims, the transcendental bond that Muslims around the world have for each other and ‘the brainwashing’ of British combat troops by the Government and how they are not primarily to reprehensible for their actions.

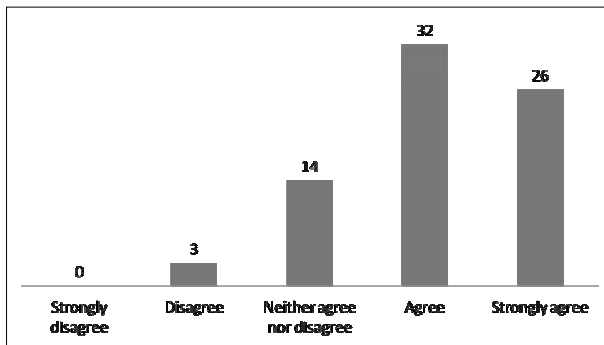


Figure 8. Media and film portrayals influence empathy towards British combat troops

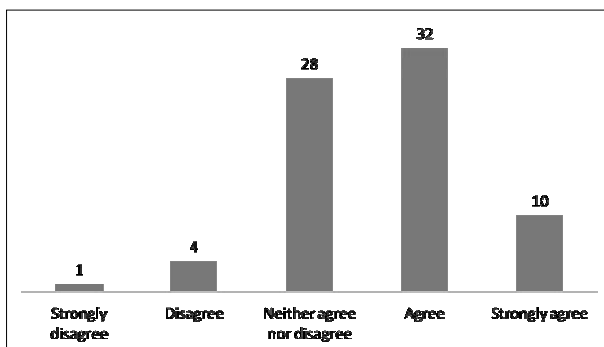


Figure 9. Contact with British service personnel or veterans might positively influence perceptions towards them

‘Are they sure they know what they are doing?’
 Participant 1

‘The soldiers are so brainwashed that they don’t understand what they’re doing. I think once they see the reality of what they’re being told to do, most change their ways...’
 Participant 2

‘I don’t believe the actual soldiers are to blame, they are led to believe that what they are fighting for is a worthy cause...’
 Participant 3

‘The troops are of course not primarily to blame. However, it is an obligation for every human being to research into the effects of their actions and the activities that they are participating in.’
 Participant 11

‘Undisciplined as reports and cases that come out show troops abusing, torturing and humiliating prisoners out of their own boredom...The military is over-extended and becoming seemingly unnecessary as they are causing more harm than good (attacking more than protecting).’
 Participant 4

‘From personal experience, there is a feeling amongst Muslims and Pakistanis that British troops are to blame for the dealings of the British military abroad/in Muslim countries. Although I agree that Muslims should avoid dealing with the British military due to their Imperial history and/or current military occupations, this should not decrease the empathy felt for the soldiers (and their families).’
 Participant 8

‘Perhaps if the media wasn’t constantly attacking us from all angles and demonizing us we wouldn’t be so defensive towards occupation of Muslim lands by Western troops. We’d perhaps give them more of a chance to hear why they are involved in what they do.’
 Participant 10

‘Thank you. Engaged in a war and suffering loss of life, paying a burden the troops should not pay. There is no benefit at all to the foreign or domestic countries in their military intervention.’
 Participant 13

‘Racist, Islamophobic, ignorant...’
 Participant 14

‘The love Muslims have for each other transcends words alone...’
 Participant 12

Discussion

In this series of papers entitled, *‘Muslims, social inclusion and the West. Exploring challenges faced by stigmatised groups’*, we have discussed and described some of the factors that have given rise to radicalisation. We have then elucidated how radicalisation subsequently causes an increase in Islamophobia which has been shown to be associated with psychological distress in Muslims (Kunst et al. 2013). In Paper I, we provided a brief introduction of Islam to educate readers to challenge negative stereotypes of Muslims. Paper I also included qualitative feedback from an evaluation of an anti-stigma programme that was delivered in the UK and the US. Our findings were encouraging and lend support to scaling up the programme to reach out to an even larger audience nationally and internationally.

In Paper II, the authors contend that Muslims residing in the UK hold stigmatizing views towards British combat troops (and vice versa) thus promoting division as opposed to peaceful co-existence. Corrigan et al conducted a meta-analysis of outcome studies challenging public stigma (towards a stigmatised group) and revealed that social contact was the most effective way of reducing stigma (Corrigan 2012). The fact that many of the participants in our sample agreed or strongly agreed that social contact with service personnel or veterans would positively influence perceptions towards them is encouraging. The results of our survey lend support for future intervention studies investigating whether contact between Muslims residing in the UK and British combat troops would promote unity and community cohesion.

The British government is exploring ways to recruit more Muslims to join the British Armed Forces since the latest figures revealed that of the 160,500 personnel currently serving, only 650 (less than 0.5%) are Muslim. However, as enumerated above, Daesh have already recruited more than 700 foreign fighters from Britain to join them since their inception in 1999. Figures such as these betray a worrying fact that authorities simply cannot ignore or dismiss and we must elucidate what the factors are that contribute to these alarming statistics.

Resistance for Muslims becoming servicemen has been reported to be partly attributable to the UK's involvement in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the findings of our survey are consistent with this, with most (72%) of our participants endorsing the statement that, "Muslims should not enlist in the British Armed Forces due to military operations in Muslim majority countries." However, Imam Asim Hafiz, Islamic adviser to the chief of staff of the British Armed Forces, reported that, in his view, "the values of the armed forces are fully compatible with the values of Islam as well as other faiths." (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/06/british-army-recruit-muslims-low-number-iraq-afghanistan>)

If the British government is serious about challenging radicalisation, it must take into consideration the perceptions that Muslims residing in the UK have towards them, their foreign policies and their combat troops. The British government and its Armed Forces need to increase and improve efforts to reach out and engage with members of the Muslim community domestically and abroad, particularly Muslim youth, by collaborating with organisations such as the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, the national umbrella organization aimed at supporting and representing Islamic societies at colleges and universities in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

By addressing, and rectifying, the problems with our current foreign policy, Muslims might perceive the British Armed Forces as a legitimate branch of the government's Ministry of Defence and not as aggressors who occupy Muslim majority states. British Muslims may then feel duty-bound to protect their fellow citizens by joining the Armed Forces. Terrorist organisations have launched seductive propaganda campaigns to recruit foreign fighters. The British Armed Forces need to enhance its recruitment strategy if they want to enlist more Muslims than the number of militants Daesh enrolls to defeat terrorism.

Our results were presented in a meeting with military officials at the Ministry of Defence, Whitehall, London on the 23rd November 2015.

References

1. Amnesty International: *Ethnic cleansing on a historic scale: The Islamic State's systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq (PDF)*. 2 September 2014. Archived from the original (PDF) on 12 March 2015

2. Bhugra D, Ventriglio A, Bhui K: *Acculturation, violent radicalisation, and religious fundamentalism*. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2017; 4:179-181. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30357-1.
3. Bhui K, Silva MJ, Topciu RA, Jones E: *Pathways to sympathies for violent protest and terrorism*. *Br J Psychiatry* 2016; 209:483-490. Epub 2016 Sep 8.
4. Bhui K, James A, Wessely S: *Mental illness and terrorism*. *BMJ* 2016; 354:i4869. doi: 10.1136/bmj.i4869.
5. Bhui K, Everitt B, Jones E: *Might depression, psychosocial adversity, and limited social assets explain vulnerability to and resistance against violent radicalisation?* *PLoS One* 2014; 9:e105918. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0105918. eCollection 2014.
6. Coid JW, Bhui K, MacManus D, Kallis C, Bebbington P, Ullrich S: *Extremism, religion and psychiatric morbidity in a population-based sample of young men*. *Br J Psychiatry* 2016; 209:491-497. Epub 2016 Oct 20.
7. Corrigan PW, Morris SB, Michaels PJ, Rafacz JD, Rüsch N: *Challenging the public stigma of mental illness: a meta-analysis of outcome studies*. *Psychiatr Serv* 2012; 63:963-73. doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.201100529.
8. Hankir A, Carrick FR, Zaman R: *Islam, mental health and being a Muslim in the West*. *Psychiatr Danub* 2015; 27(Suppl 1):S53-9.
9. See comment in PubMed Commons below - Kunst J, Sam D, Ulleberg P: *Perceived islamophobia: Scale development and validation*. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 2013; 37:225-237. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.11.001.
10. McGilloway A, Ghosh P, Bhui K: *A systematic review of pathways to and processes associated with radicalization and extremism amongst Muslims in Western societies*. *Int Rev Psychiatry* 2015; 27:39-50. doi: 10.3109/09540261.2014.992008. Epub 2015 Mar 4.

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

Contribution of individual authors:

Ahmed Hankir conceived the idea for the paper, conducted a review of the literature on Islamophobia and the history of Islam and carried out the evaluation of the anti-Islamophobia programme.

Frederick R. Carrick conducted a review of the literature for the entire manuscript.

Rashid Zaman and Jamie Hacker Hughes supervised Ahmed Hankir, made substantial revisions to the manuscript and were responsible for the design of the paper.

Correspondence:

Ahmed Hankir MBChB, PG Cert Psych, PG Cert Epi
Leeds York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust,
Leeds, UK
E-mail: ahmedzakaria@doctors.org.uk