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Dear Sir,

The ever readable Christina Patterson in her column, 'Two legal systems, and two choices. Which do we want?', The Independent, 3rd August), conflates the issues of "Sharia courts, or Sharia law, or Sharia "zones"" in a manner which does a disservice to the British Muslim community.

Shari'ah law is an indispensable part of the Islamic faith providing guidelines for a Muslim lifestyle. Shari'ah councils are mandated under the Arbitration Act which allows those who seek mediation and arbitration of an alternative, religious, nature the freedom to do so under English law (the jurisdiction of the former being superseded by the governing jurisdiction of the latter). They operate in much the same way as Beth Din courts used by those British Jews who seek their services. Shari'ah councils are authorised to deal with civil disputes and not criminal matters.

Shari'ah "zones" are the deliberately provocative idea of that extreme fringe element among British Muslims, Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades (MAC), who try to outdo themselves in dreaming up publicity stunts that are designed to incite mischief and polarise our communities. By exaggerating the influence of Islam4UK and MAC, Patterson provides them with just the sort of publicity and profile they desperately crave.

To characterise the work of Shari'ah scholars in the UK as the "edicts of men schooled in a medieval interpretation of a 1,500-year-old religion" is to misrepresent their work.

We profoundly agree that more needs to be known about the work of Shari'ah councils and those using this avenue of arbitration should be better informed of its modus operandi. Reducing the complexities of this area to the "zones" dreamt up by Islam4UK does little to advance that search for knowledge and transparency in this area.

Yours sincerely,

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