

MEND Rebuttal to Dispatches presented by John Ware, 26th March 2018.

Channel 4's Dispatches programme launched an attack on MEND today as a consequence of our credible and sustained engagement in the public sphere.

The first thing to note is the title of the programme: "*Who speaks for British Muslims?*". MEND would like to state firmly and categorically: **Muslims speak for themselves**. MEND proudly advocates for issues that affect British Muslim communities – we have never claimed to represent British Muslims.

MEND would like to take this opportunity to address some of the accusations contained within the programme.

St Stephen's School

MEND has not denied that there was a health and safety concern raised by St Stephen's school. However, in January 2018 the Times reported that the Headteacher, Ms Neena Lall's, motivation for enforcing the hijab ban was in order "*to help the pupils integrate into modern British society*", and Mr Arif Qawi claimed he was on a "*crusade to limit Islamisation*". It was to these comments that MEND had a responsibility to respond.

Our statement on the hijab ban clearly reflected the views of a large proportion of parents who felt that the ban was a restriction on religious freedom. MEND, and others, believed that the hijab ban was contrary to the Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which guarantees the right to enjoy one's own culture.

It is the case that MEND attended a meeting between parents and the school, at the invitation of the St Stephen's Parents Forum. However, as the programme correctly stated, the hateful emails received by staff at the school were not sent on behalf of or by the suggestion of MEND. We were made aware of the insulting emails that were being sent to the school staff and at the time fiercely encouraged constructive dialogue between the parents and the school that would be damaged by unacceptable communications.

MEND makes no apology for its actions in relation to St Stephen's School. We remain of the view that the hijab ban was highly improper and we are pleased that we were able to make a contribution to the community by supporting parents and encouraging dialogue between parents and the school.

Concerning Mr Qawi's resignation, Mr Qawi resigned because he sent an offensive email in which he stated "*crucify the unholy bastard ... I will put an end to this disgusting mullah menace permanently*" in reference to a local imam. This was only mentioned in passing in the Dispatches programme. In the minutes of a school meeting held on 22nd January 2018, Ms Lall confirmed that Mr Qawi had resigned because he used "*inappropriate language in a communication*", and stated that she was "*shocked and disgusted*" by his comments.

MEND's criticism of PREVENT

MEND has indeed criticised the PREVENT programme, and we continue to do so. However, we are not the only organisations and individuals who have been heavily critical of it, many others have done so as well, including UN Special Rapporteurs, the NUT, Royal College of Psychiatrists and countless academics.

MEND criticises PREVENT for the following reasons amongst others:

1. PREVENT has a poor evidentiary basis and the research underpinning it is not in the public domain and has not been peer reviewed
2. The PREVENT strategy focuses unduly heavily on ideology without consideration of other factors influencing radicalisation
3. PREVENT delivery officers rely on inadequate training: some PREVENT delivery officers receive only 45-60 minutes of training to identify signs of radicalisation
4. PREVENT involves unacceptable levels of collateral damage. The lack of an evidentiary basis combined with poor training has led to dozens of cases where Muslims have been falsely implicated as being at risk of radicalisation. Indeed, recent figures suggest that 95% of individuals referred to PREVENT are not judged as in need of Channel support.¹

Encouraging Bloc Voting

Encouraging the political participation of British Muslims is MEND's raison d'être. Our 'Get Out and Vote' campaign and the educational masterclasses we deliver encouraging political engagement have empowered thousands of Muslims to become politically involved in the democratic process.

Far from claiming that MEND itself has influence over the democratic process, Mr Sufyan Ismail was encouraging British Muslims to participate in the democratic process because Muslim communities have a great potential to influence the balance of power in elections.

Furthermore, MEND is politically neutral, and as such it would be impossible to play "kingmaker" as we have no policy of endorsing one party over another. While we do provide breakdowns of different party policies in the run-up to elections in order to help the public better understand party manifestos, our only objective is to encourage and facilitate the increased voting of Muslims and minority communities.

Volunteer Tweets

When addressing social media posts from volunteers, it should be remembered that the views expressed on personal social media accounts are not the views of MEND as an organisation. **NONE** of the social media posts mentioned in the programme were from the official MEND Twitter or Facebook accounts.

MEND expects the highest possible standards of probity from all of its staff and volunteers and will not tolerate any unlawful, racist or inciteful comments or views. However, MEND cannot be expected to monitor the past and present social media accounts of the entirety of its

¹ "Only 5% of people referred to Prevent extremism scheme get specialist help", *The Guardian*, November 9, 2017, accessed 23.01.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/09/only-5-of-people-referred-to-prevent-extremism-scheme-get-specialist-help>

staff and hundreds of volunteers. Where MEND is made aware of any issues, it has internal disciplinary procedures in place and appropriate measures are taken.

Sahar al-Faifi

With regard to Ms Sahar Al-Faifi's Facebook post following the Manchester attacks, we certainly do not accept the interpretation of her post as suggesting that the Conservative Party colluded to allow the attack to go ahead. Her post was a reflection of the anger across large swathes of the community, Muslim or otherwise, that signs of radicalisation were missed by the authorities.²

Ms Al-Faifi assures MEND that she was simply making the point about the Conservatives making political capital from this tragedy in the middle of the 2017 General Election campaign and the fact that the security services had known about the bomber, but yet failed to prevent the attack.

For the avoidance of doubt, neither MEND nor Ms Al-Faifi believe the Manchester attack in 2017 was the work of the Conservative Party or the police.

MEND would also like to highlight that it initiated a charity appeal to assist the victims and families of the Manchester attack and raised £38,000 in the process.³

Shakeel Begg

Shakeel Begg is not a member of MEND, and as such we are not responsible for his views or statements. It is plainly wrong to suggest that, by sharing a platform with him on a handful of occasions across five years, MEND endorses or shares all his views.

Sara Khan

With regard to Sara Khan and Ms Al-Faifi's "Oreo" reference, like large swathes of the Muslim and wider community, Ms Al-Faifi has deep-seated and legitimate concerns surrounding Ms Khan's support for the PREVENT programme and her recent appointment as the Commissioner for Countering Extremism. It is widely felt within the Muslim community that, in the pursuit of her own political ambitions, Ms Khan has 'sold out' and has failed to support their concerns surrounding the highly discriminatory PREVENT programme, and has in fact been detrimental to their welfare by actively promoting it.

Ms Al-Faifi accepts that the wording she used was wrong. However, this should not distract from the wider issue and legitimate criticism that Ms Khan actively promotes a policy that is inherently damaging to Muslim communities. MEND is firmly of the view – which is supported by evidence – that the PREVENT policy is simply not the solution and is proving to be highly counter-productive.

MEND and CAGE

There is considerable common ground between MEND and CAGE with regards to our concerns about the PREVENT programme. CAGE is a legitimate organisation and has done valuable work in highlighting human rights and issues surrounding civil liberties within counter-terror legislation. Like MEND, innumerable public figures have engaged with CAGE

² as an example, see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/24/security-services-missed-five-opportunities-stop-manchester/>

³ <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/muslim-peace-group-raise-38000-13736396>

(including Max Hill QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation). However, this does not change our prerogative to profoundly disagree with CAGE on certain matters.

Mr Ismail has in the past donated to CAGE in a personal capacity to support what he considers to be the progressive and constructive work they undertake in particular sectors.

Attempts to “Define Islam”

MEND is not a theology based organisation. We have no intention nor desire to define Islam in any religious, theological or philosophical sense. Our exclusive concern is with issues that affect all Muslims (hate crime, employment, education etc.), regardless of religious ideology, sect or background.

Who speaks for British Muslims?

Muslims speak for themselves.