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Confronting Islamophobia and its consequences in East London in a context of increased surveillance and stigmatisation

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Abstract

Islamophobia is an issue faced by Muslims across Europe. In the UK, there is a growing acceptance that the government's counter-terrorism policy, Prevent, has led to increased discrimination. Current research is split on whether discrimination among Muslims is leading to disengagement and a retreat from public life or whether this has inspired a feeling of responsibility to participate more actively and engage in politics or alternative forms of political resistance. This paper presents the results from the London case study of a larger comparative project which seeks to assess the political consequences of the experience of discrimination by evaluating the individual and collective responses of Muslims in terms of political participation and representation. Based on qualitative research including semi-structured interviews and participant observation in Tower Hamlets (East London), we show how Muslim individuals, including civil society actors, have responded to Islamophobia, and the discrimination associated with it, in a context of increased surveillance after the introduction of the 'Prevent Duty' in 2015. We focus on individual responses to confronting discrimination and stigmatisation and include a case study of an initiative by the campaigning group Citizens UK which sought to explore the potential for collective responses and wider coalitions against discrimination faced by Muslims. We investigate the emerging strategies that are being adopted as a reaction to discrimination and examine the extent to which responses constitute a means of 'fighting back' through political participation and engagement and whether this new climate has

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fostered either mobilisation or demobilisation. Our findings indicate that individual forms of resistance are more prominent than mass mobilisation and some evidence of Muslims retreating from political engagement.

Keywords
Islamophobia, discrimination, political engagement, Muslims, Prevent duty

Introduction

Muslims in Britain, like their counterparts across Europe, form a ‘suspect community’ whose actions and behaviour are placed under intense scrutiny (Hickman et al., 2012; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009). UK government policy towards its Muslim citizens is influenced by the imperatives of counter-extremism and counter-terrorism strategies, according to which there is a direct link between religious radicalisation and subsequent participation in terrorist activity. This has led to the development of a ‘policed multiculturalism’ whereby diversity is managed through a security perspective (Ragazzi, 2016) and British Muslims have become, ‘in the imaginations of counterterrorism officials, not citizens to whom the state was accountable but potential recruits to a global insurgency’ (Kundnani, 2014: 163). The Prevent strand of the UK government’s counter-terrorism strategy (Contest) is one of many soft security measures that ‘constituted a developing array of managerial techniques that sought to know, reform and discipline British Muslims’ (O’Toole et al., 2016: 164). Emphasis was placed on funding local associations and organisations that would encourage ‘integration’ and ‘community cohesion’ as well as supporting ‘mainstream interpretations’ of Islam. Designed as a hearts and minds approach, sensitive to the controversial nature of such an intervention, it was hoped that this strategy would get Muslims communities ‘on board’ and consequently dissuade those who might have been vulnerable to radicalisation. This was based on an understanding of engagement in terrorist activity as a result of a lack of integration. Since its inception, Prevent has been the object of a number of critiques, particularly from anti-racist organisations, but also other actors working on the ground who recognised a contradiction in terms of its stated aims to improve community cohesion (Birt, 2009; Heath-Kelly 2013; Thomas, 2010). There is a growing acceptance that the UK’s counter-terrorism policy, designed to promote integration and social cohesion as well as identify those who might be vulnerable to radicalisation, might be having the opposite effect (Arènes, 2016; Powell, 2016; Taylor, 2020; Thomas, 2016).

In an op-ed that accompanied the publication of a government commissioned report into ‘integration and opportunity’, Dame Louise Casey (2016) admitted that there was a vicious circle whereby ‘some Muslims feel they are being blamed for terrorism, extremism and everything else that is going wrong in the world. In turn, that’s causing some to withdraw into their own communities, leading to suspicion, mistrust and hostility on all sides, and exacerbating disadvantage’. Whilst Islamophobia is an issue faced by Muslims across Europe (and beyond), it would be inaccurate to suggest that the only reaction to this

form of prejudice is increased isolation or even 'radicalisation'. There are, in fact, examples of politicisation that constitute a willingness to participate in public debate by fighting back against discrimination and suspicion. This article seeks to demonstrate how Muslim individuals, including civil society actors, have responded to Islamophobia, and the discrimination associated with it, in a context of increased surveillance as part of the UK government's Prevent Strategy and, in particular, the 'Prevent Duty' that was introduced in 2015. As part of a wider project (Talpin et al., 2021), we propose a focus on individual responses to confronting discrimination and stigmatisation, knowing that the former (being deprived of resources), generally goes hand in hand with the latter (being assigned low status). Through a case study of an initiative by the campaigning group Citizens UK, we also explore the potential for collective responses and wider coalitions. If stigmatisation can be a resource for mobilisation, what are the strategies employed by civil society actors to engage and mobilise those on the receiving end? We investigate the emerging strategies that are being adopted when confronting discrimination and examine the extent to which responses constitute a means of 'fighting back' and whether this new climate has fostered either mobilisation or demobilisation and a retreat from public life.

Reacting to discrimination

In recent years, a body of research has developed that investigates the way stigmatised individuals and groups react to discrimination and stigmatisation. The findings of this literature are, however, rather mixed when it comes to understanding whether this results in political action or, instead, a retreat from social and political life. Regarding the latter, François Dubet et al. (2013) offer interesting insights by highlighting the different, individual attitudes that can be adopted in the face of discrimination, ranging from humour and denial, to anger. They found that many individuals do not want to be seen as 'victims' and therefore, not only fail to testify about their experience, they even reject forms of collective action related to discrimination. However, scholars such as Michèle Lamont and her colleagues have been at the forefront of research aiming to show the different reactions to discrimination and the political frames and social and cultural contexts in which they are more likely to take place. Lamont et al. (2016) distinguish five types of reaction: confronting (ranging from insulting, speaking out and engaging in legal action); management of the self; not responding; a focus on hard work; and self-isolation. Analyzing 'ideal responses' among Afro-Americans, they notice a decline of collective mobilisation compared to more individual self-improvement as the ideal response (Lamont et al., 2016: 108). However, their research is more succinct concerning the way confronting can be analysed as a political response, and the way it could eventually lead to collective action against discrimination in the long term, which is one of the aims of the overall research project of which this article is part.

In this article we specifically focus on the agency of individuals confronting discrimination and how their responses can be interpreted as political action. Much of the more recent scholarship in this field has indicated that the relationship between perceived discrimination and political engagement is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple binary of increased/decreased political engagement. So, for example, visible minorities

who have experienced discrimination may express simultaneously a lower propensity to vote but also be more active in non-electoral activities (Bilodeau, 2017). Likewise, different experiences with discrimination might produce divergent political behaviours. Oskooii (2020) distinguishes between societal and political discrimination and shows that, whilst experiences of political discrimination may motivate individuals to take part in mainstream politics, the same conclusion cannot necessarily be drawn for those who experience societal rejection. By focussing on a variety of responses, including that of not responding, the complexity of this issue is revealed. We found in the wider project that, among our panel, 'confronting' was as recurrent as the other types of responses identified by Lamont and her colleagues. In this particular article, we seek to interrogate the response of 'confronting' in order to add to existing research on the practical forms of resistance and confrontation and the tactics employed by stigmatised individuals and groups. We also aim to understand how 'confronting' is articulated whilst politicising the experience of, and eventually engaging in collective action against, discrimination. Influenced by the work of James Scott (1990), we develop an analysis of how everyday responses contribute to forms of 'infrapolitics' for minority groups, understood as a 'subterranean world of political conflict which [leaves] scarcely a trace in the public record' (Scott, 2012: 113). Repeated individual reactions to discrimination can also be analysed as a step toward political action against discrimination when it 'reaches that of recurrence and takes on a collective meaning' (Bayart, 1985: 359). In a related way, the experience of discrimination often contributes to creating minority group self-identification, as shown in the wider project (Talpin et al., 2021). It can then lead to 'oppositional consciousness', which is 'an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination' (Mansbridge and Morris, 2001: 4).

As a sub-category of the research on discrimination and political responses, much focus has been given to the case of Muslims in the West, who are under particular scrutiny. Recent work on the UK case has discussed how Islamophobia and the securitisation of Muslims impacts on their political activity. However, the findings are somewhat mixed regarding whether this inhibits mobilisation or whether, on the other hand, the situation of prejudice against British Muslims has inspired a feeling of responsibility to participate more actively and eventually to engage in politics or in alternative forms of political resistance (Brown, 2010; Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011; Peace, 2015). The 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Study has been used by a number of studies as it contained specific questions about discrimination and political behaviour among certain minority groups. Sanders et al. (2014) reveal that among these groups, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, other things being equal, are more engaged than other minority groups and are just as democratically engaged as members of the white majority.[1] In a qualitative study in London, DeHanas (2016) backs up these findings by showing that South Asian minorities mobilise much more than Black-Caribbean ones and that, among minority groups, Muslim organisations are more active in pushing people into politics than Christian ones. Regarding the more specific effects of counter-terrorism policy, Shanaah (2020) observes that anti-Muslim discrimination did not reduce the willingness of British Muslims to take action against Islamist extremism and engage in counter-extremism. Yet a number of other

scholars have observed a general phenomenon of isolation, retreat from public life and demobilisation among Muslims in the UK (Awan, 2012; Bonino, 2012). This retreat can be characterised by a loss of faith in the political system and political parties. For example, Martin (2017) shows that, for British Muslims, group-level perceptions of discrimination are associated with political alienation, a greater likelihood of engaging in non-electoral participation, and a lesser likelihood of voting. In particular, those with experiences of egocentric and sociotropic discrimination might see mainstream political institutions and actors as insufficient, leading some to disengage. Concerning the specific case of Scotland, Finlay and Hopkins (2020) also demonstrate that, when Islamophobia intersects with political participation, it can discipline and marginalise political agency but show that it can also engender political and activist resistance. Given the mixed findings in the literature, we decided to investigate the impact Islamophobia, and the Prevent policy in particular, has had on Muslim individual and collective participation in public life in Britain without pretence to answering the broader question as to whether this has increased or decreased overall engagement. Instead, we investigate how some individuals and groups have tried to confront this stigmatisation, from informal responses to more organised ones. This allows us to understand how the experience of discrimination and stigmatisation is having an impact on the political agency of Muslims in East London.

Methodology and data

This article presents results from the London case study of a larger comparative research project *Experiences of Discriminations, Participation and Representation* (EODIPAR) which sought to assess the political consequences of the experience of discrimination by evaluating the individual and collective responses in terms of political participation and representation.[2] The main research question of the project focused on the conditions under which the experience of discrimination becomes politicised. Discrimination was conceptualised as being (1) territorial; (2) ethno-racial and (3) religious, although it is only the latter two features that are specifically considered in this article by focussing on the experiences of Muslim individuals, including civil society actors, in East London. The increase in unfair treatment linked to religious assignation has been identified as evidence of increasing Islamophobia in society (Elahi and Khan, 2017). This results in the exclusion and discrimination of Muslims and has led to the racialisation of Muslim identity (Meer and Modood, 2019).[3] For each city case study in the project, one neighbourhood was selected for the fieldwork on the basis of both the level of social and ethnic diversity and its particular political tradition. For London, the borough of Tower Hamlets was selected as the 2011 Census showed that it has one of the most diverse populations in the country, including the largest Bangladeshi community. More than half (55%) of the borough's population belong to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups with the Bangladeshi population making up almost one third (32%).[4] The borough is also known as an area that has a strong tradition of political activism, in particular anti-racist activism in the 1970s and 1980s and is the home of The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), the founding chapter of Citizens UK. Our aim was to interrogate experiences of

ethno-racial or religious discrimination and/or stigmatisation by research participants and to deepen the understanding of both individual and collective experiences and responses.

Data were collected using both individual semi-structured interviews and through participant observation. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for the interviews through interactions in mosques and community centres and included individuals involved in anti-racism groups such as Stand Up against Racism, the Black Students' Campaign, Bangladeshi Youth Movement or the Graduate Forum. Additional participants were subsequently recruited via snowball sampling. In total, 30 people who either lived or worked in Tower Hamlets were interviewed between 2015 and 2017. We recruited more female interviewees (18) than males (12) and most interviewees self-identified as Muslim. It is these respondents who have been quoted in this article. In terms of ethnicity, 16 identified as South Asian, six as White, four as Black and four as Arab. This sample is not aimed at being representative but did seek to take into account the diverse nature of the Muslim community in Tower Hamlets. Selected participants for the interviews were questioned on eight themes: neighbourhood and public spaces, housing, education, employment, religion, immigration, family and politics. These themes and the interview questions were standardised across all the city case studies and the resulting data have been analysed in a comprehensive fashion using ATLAS.ti software with the anonymised transcripts coded inductively. For the whole project, more than 1500 codes have been created to capture the interviewees' biographical trajectories, their experiences of discrimination and its short and long-term consequences and their relationship to politics and identity. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identities of those who shared their experiences with us. The local dynamics of mobilisation against discrimination were also studied through the direct observation of the organisation Citizens UK that had just launched an independent Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life at the beginning of our fieldwork. One of the authors had worked with and studied this broad-based community organisation several years prior (Balazard, 2015) and proposed the idea of helping with the work of the commission. This involved taking part in several meetings and sessions of the commission, conducting interviews to collect data and advising on the writing and editing of the report. The same author also participated in different events organised by the Black Student Campaigns of the National Union of Students (NUS) and to different Islamophobia Awareness Month events in 2015 and 2016.

Finding a voice: individual responses to discrimination in East London

A clear majority of the interviewees in East London declared that they had experienced one or more personal experiences of discrimination or stigmatisation whether this be religious discrimination in the form of Islamophobia or broader ethno-racial discrimination. Among the participants we identified different responses within the 'confronting' category used by Lamont et al. (2016: 10) to describe the reactions to the experiences of racism and discrimination. In this section, we want to stress how the individual responses ranged from verbal 'tit for tat' reactions or physically challenging the aggressor to boycotting businesses. This could be described as an 'unorganized voice', moving from

individual to unorganized collective forms of protest, from blaming to claiming. We argue that these unorganized voices are part of more or less 'discreet' or 'emerging' politicisation processes (Carrel, 2017). Even if they are not engaging in formal forms of collective action, individuals are far from being passive receptacles of symbolic violence. They develop multiple skills, knowledge and know-how to deal with discrimination and build more or less coherent 'infrapolitical' (Scott, 1990) forms of protest against it.

Firstly, we argue that individual verbal or physical confrontation can often be analysed, if not explicitly justified, as a form of anti-racist group combat. As a 40-year-old British Muslim, who is a youth worker in a Muslim school and specialised in the fight against gangs in London, explains, 'I would verbally challenge people and I would physically defend myself if I'm attacked. The way I would challenge them was by saying that my grandad was killed fighting in the Second World War, so he was a servant of the King'.[5] His account reveals the entanglement between individual tactics of confrontation and a historical and critical reading of racism and discriminatory treatment at work in majority society and the identification with a minority group. He is politicising his experience by linking injustice to the UK's colonial past. He also states that it was his family's socialisation which incited him to protest against the stigmatisation he suffered since childhood:

> Every day I used to go to my primary school and get racially bullied. So it was a very tough time. Muslim women had their headscarves taken off…they used to call us 'Paki' even though we were Bangladeshi! It never made sense…but I was taught by my parents to challenge it, you know, and also physically. You have to stand up for your rights, and you have to defend yourself.[6]

This form of physical self-defence has been a necessary response to stigmatisation since the first conflicts between far-right gangs and South Asian youths in Tower Hamlets (Glynn, 2014). Though, for one Black-Caribbean resident, it was also seen as a more recent response by his South Asian neighbours to confront the rise of anti-Muslim racism. This had led him to reconsider his 'Black' group boundaries. As a boxing coach, he felt it was his duty to train them as part of a wider 'black community':

> I would say now mostly the [South] Asian people get it [racism]. Asian people now know what it is like to be black…obviously because of ISIS and because of terrorism…now they get treated like how black people have always been treated, arrested for nothing...Many Asian guys come to train here, I teach and I train them for the community.[7]

Moving to unorganized collective action constitutes another form of these 'infrapolitical protests' (Scott, 1990) against discriminatory experiences. Discreet boycotting of a business following a negative experience is another example of this unorganized voice. This is what a 45-year-old British Muslim woman, a manager at a non-departmental public body, and her friends decided to do when verbal self-defence had not paid off:

> When I have been out with my [veiled] friends, people looked at us differently, people talked to us differently...So you have to challenge people. We've been refused in places where people don't want to serve us and sometimes you argue and sometimes you think 'well OK, I'm not going to spend my money here'.[8]

Without truly opening up to forms of organised collective action, the work of 'confronting' is expressed here 'behind the scenes' and either at the individual level or, as in this case, with a group of friends who are joint victims. If these different individuals do not organise into more recognised forms of collective action, it is partly because they do not know organisations that could help them or because they feel that theirs is a lost cause. This woman explains:

> No, I do not know campaign groups. It's such a big thing to fight. What are you fighting? What you *can* do is tell your family and friends, 'do not use that place because I had an awful experience'.[9]

She later explains that she also developed a 'voice' following the growing stigmatisation faced by Muslim Women. She feels she had an individual responsibility to defend her religious identity each time she was confronting stigma:

> I think faith is a really personal matter so it's not something I tell everyone because I think it's a very personal decision. Certainly, what the 9/11 attacks made me do, which I was not very happy about, is that I had to come out and say, 'I'm a Muslim.' And then you think 'why do I have to tell everyone I'm a Muslim?' Because there was so much backlash against Muslims and especially towards women who wore hijab…because things were so bad you just had to say 'actually I can't keep quiet on this issue'. By keeping quiet, I'm actually denying myself an opportunity to tell people there's so many of us here that are *not* terrorists.[10]

Affirming and valorising their Muslim identity has therefore become a new way to break down negative stereotypes, and eventually reverse the stigma. The affirmation of a positive sense of self is often pursued online and a number of popular Muslim 'influencers' were mentioned by our interviewees which fed this appetite for positive role models, whether they be political activists or those promoting fashion and lifestyle. A 16-year-old young British Muslim woman who ran for the Youth Mayor of Tower Hamlets explained that she is always ready to confront people verbally if an incident occurs and refers to role models who run beauty lifestyle websites:

> I can sense that people on public transport feel uncomfortable around me, and sometimes I am mistreated, or stared at. I am always paranoid that someone will make a distasteful comment about me, but I am always prepared to verbally defend myself. I think that people often forget to look beyond the headscarf and I believe the media is very influential. Bloggers like Dina Torkia and Amena Khan have shown that British Muslim women are ordinary women, and people are slowly beginning to accept this.[11]

Some, like this young woman, even described themselves as being part of 'Generation M', the millennials that represent a youth movement of Western Muslims that, although distancing themselves from rigid tradition, still have a belief in an identity encompassing both faith and modernity. This generation has been shaped by two key factors: the events since 9/11 with the response to extremism and terrorism and the pervading influence of the internet (Janmohamed, 2016). Although the focus on this demographic has tended to be their role as 'enthusiastic consumers', there can be no denying that, for many, their belonging and identity as young British Muslims are also caught up with their involvement in more political pursuits, like running for Youth Mayor for this young participant. As Lamont et al. (2016: 87) explain it, 'confronting' ranges from 'antiracist responses that serve long-term purposes (e.g., redefining the racial hierarchy and educating whites) as well as short term needs (i.e., emotional release for victims or preventing other incidents)'.

Many interviewees spoke of a turning point in their lives which made them realise that they had a responsibility to do something. After the London bombings of 2005, one activist with civil society group Citizens UK describes how this moment made her realise that instead of retreating inside her community it was necessary to go out there and present a different image of Muslims in Britain as a way of breaking down prejudice:

> I remember 7/7 happening and going out the next day and having people shout at me and throw bottles at me and thinking 'OK, something has changed! Why has it changed?' Then, over time, I realised that Muslim communities were becoming more and more insular, which to me, on a very personal level, isn't the solution. It's even more important now to go out there and work alongside people of all faiths, all backgrounds or of no faith, to demonstrate that first and foremost you're a human being, you're a citizen.[12]

Through the reference to 'Generation M' and events such as 9/11 or the London bombings in 2005, the 'social imaginary' of the 'global Muslim community' (Jacobsen and Andersson, 2012) seems to be a source of identification that motivates people to individually respond to stigmatisation as a collective responsibility. These unorganized voices alternatively mobilise political analyses and structural causes: systemic racism, Islamophobic prejudices, post-colonialism, etc. The experience of discrimination or stigmatisation seems to leave a mark on the interviewees' relationship to the world and to politics, activating what one might call a potential for more organised collective engagement. We argue that these unorganized responses constitute a day-to-day form of informal resistance for minority actors which could be qualified as 'infrapolitics' (Scott, 1990). In some cases though, they could, on the contrary, constitute a first step that can eventually lead to more conventional forms of political engagement.

This is the case of a 29-year-old British Muslim woman working as an administrator at a university in London. During an interview, she described her determination to not let the insult pass when she is told to 'go home': 'I'm not going back; this *is* my home! If you do not like it, you can migrate to Spain or wherever these ex-pats go. I do not care. This is my country and I'm here to stay'.[13] Beyond verbal confrontation, the same respondent also developed the habit of reporting such incidents as hate crimes. She explained that for her this is the next step after shock and direct confrontation with the perpetrator. One day, she

overheard students in an elevator talking about a Muslim academic she knew well, comparing him to Osama Bin Laden:

> I'm shocked, and I'm disgusted, but I had to say something. So I turned around and said to the boy 'you can't say stuff like that, it's not OK, it's not cool, you could get into trouble for saying things like that'…I went to a manager and I said I want to report this, I want to take this student down a disciplinary route…I was quite upset about that. I was offered counselling. I spoke to [the professor] about it and said 'you need to know what is happening. Are you OK for me to take it to the police?' And he said yes, so I reported it as a hate crime.

She went on to explain that in the face of this phenomenon of stigmatisation of Muslims, the UK has adopted simplified laws and procedures and that it is therefore 'her duty' to make this contribution so that the problem is recognised:

> You have a right, and it's a crime, so you need to report it. To be active. Because sometimes I do feel like, 'Oh what's the point? Another crime, another form to fill in, another phone call to the police. What's the point?' But actually, you need to do this. Because people don't really think it [Islamophobia] exists at all, so you have to be vocal about it.

These isolated acts are articulated with a desire to go beyond the individual dimension by encouraging her friends to do the same, or even to go further by taking action or getting involved in more political activities. We met this particular respondent during an anti-Prevent conference which she was attending for the first time. Islamophobia, in her eyes, is thriving because of 'political speeches' and she wanted to see how she could get involved. These different steps illustrate the several forms 'confronting discrimination' can take and how it can lead to more collective mobilisations with the starting point being the shock induced by the initial experience of discrimination. In the following section we explore the particular response to Prevent, viewed by many as a set of discriminatory policies impacting on all Muslims.

Mobilisations against prevent policies: how to resist without being suspect?

The introduction of the *Prevent duty* as a result of the *Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015* requires those working in the public sector, including teachers, social workers and doctors, to refer any suspicions they have about people to a local Prevent body (Spiller et al., 2018). This duty requires people to report not only individuals suspected of harbouring radical views, but even those 'vulnerable to radicalisation'. Such a situation meant that those working in the public sector were asked to effectively 'spy' on those they worked with, further intensifying the feeling of Muslim communities that they were under siege. Prevent became an issue of civil liberties when teachers were expected to identify children who may be vulnerable to radicalisation by reporting them for otherwise innocuous changes in behaviour such as displaying 'feelings of grievance and injustice' and 'a desire for political or moral change'.[14] This duty naturally put teachers in an uncomfortable position and ultimately risks damaging the pedagogical relationship.

Moreover, 'when dissent is pathologised and seen as a marker of an individual "vulnerable to radicalisation", this risks silencing students and precluding dialogue about difficult and complex ideas' (O'Donnell, 2016: 58). Over 7500 referrals were made to the scheme in 2015–2016 alone and, on average, a third of referrals have come from the education sector (Busher and Jerome, 2020). The strategy was even questioned in a report by the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2016: 19) which suggested that

> [T]he concerns about Prevent amongst the communities most affected by it must be addressed. Otherwise it will continue to be viewed with suspicion by many, and by some as 'toxic'. Rather than being seen as the community-led approach Prevent was supposed to be, it is perceived to be a top-down 'Big Brother' security operation.

The same report notes that Islamophobia contributes to young Muslims feeling alienated from mainstream society. It has been argued that this strategy is contradictory to the aims of community cohesion and that, instead of building resilience against extremism, the process of education-based surveillance inherent in the Prevent Duty has simply stigmatised Muslim youth and hardened existing defensive identifications within this population (Taylor, 2020; Thomas, 2016). Being targeted as a suspect community leads to a series of dilemmas for Muslim citizens in Britain. On the one hand, how does one criticise the government without being suspected of, at best, disloyalty and a lack of integration, and at worst extremism and radicalisation? On the other hand, how can one seek to work or open a dialogue with the government or local authorities without being accused of selling out or 'fraternising with the enemy?' How can one mobilise in this context without falling into any of the aforementioned categories?

Our interviews took place after the introduction of the Prevent Duty and this issue was often mentioned by interviewees in relation to its impact on the wider Muslim community. One employee of a large London mosque explained that the Prevent agenda had made their life difficult because 'we feel that we always have to make excuses for a very small minority, whereas we shouldn't have to because our religion already states that this [terrorism] is not right …there have been police raids [at the mosque] and then it turns out the police made a mistake, so people in turn have lost trust in the police'.[15] A journalist previously involved with a Muslim lifestyle magazine, and who also contributed to a number of initiatives regarding British Muslim identities, commented on the psychological effect of being constantly under suspicion:

> Nearly every day there is a story about Muslim extremism. And it's really difficult and really worrying for British Muslims and Muslims everywhere. Because that's the perception that's projected everywhere. And now on a government level we've got Prevent that's coming into schools, and universities…It's horrible, even toddlers in nurseries are under surveillance! We're very much a community under surveillance, which isn't healthy at all, for growth and to feel confident and proud of our country. And we are constantly questioned. I was questioned on a radio show recently about my loyalty to Britain. The interviewer asked 'do you feel loyal to your country or do you feel loyal to your faith?' They wouldn't ask the same of a Christian. Islam is still seen as something very foreign.[16]

Although Prevent was mentioned negatively by interviewees, it was acknowledged that this also spurred a number of initiatives. Calls to boycott the programme have grown since 2015 and have often led to the formation of new alliances with other social movements such as anti-racist groups and trade unions. Two notable campaigns on university campuses against Prevent are *Students Not Suspects* and *Educators Not Informants* which aim to get the Prevent duty repealed. These are supported by trade unions including the National Union of Students (NUS), the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) as well Muslim organisations such as Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS).[17] In November 2017, the NUS launched a survey looking into the experiences of Muslims in further and higher education in the UK. Its published report found that Muslim students were experiencing worrying levels of abuse at their place of study. The findings of this report reinforced existing concerns about the effect of the Prevent duty on Muslim students and led the NUS to reaffirm its call to abolish Prevent as a whole. One in three respondents for their survey reported having felt negatively affected by Prevent and almost a half of those affected (43%) felt unable to express their views or disengaged from political debate altogether. Additionally, the correlation between those targeted by Prevent and those who are 'visibly' Muslim (e.g. Muslim women wearing the hijab, niqab, and jilbab) was 'deeply alarming, thereby lending weight to the argument that Prevent magnifies a variety of existing biases and prejudices that may exist about Muslims' (NUS, 2018: 13). One in three respondents reported having experienced some type of abuse or crime at their place of study and over a half experienced some form of online abuse. The findings of the NUS survey are also supported by other research on the Muslim student experience of Islamophobia and the counter-terrorism agenda in the UK which highlight negative experiences from fellow students and administrators with members of Islamic Societies coming under particular scrutiny (Brown and Saeed, 2015; Guest et al., 2020; Saeed, 2019). The awareness of Muslim students that they are under surveillance leads to acts of self-censorship and even controls their intellectual interests. Indeed, Ghani and Nagdee (2019: 193) claim that 'Prevent causes discomfort for students engaging in politicised aspects of student life'.

For those who do decide to engage in student politics and even actively oppose Prevent, the experience can be a real baptism of fire. A member of the NUS' Black Student Campaign explained how she was even marginalised within her own union because of her uncompromising stance: 'If you want to take on Prevent, all of a sudden you're being watched, you're being monitored, you're being questioned even by your union and staff, then if you're Muslim on top of that it becomes a whole other ordeal'.[18] This same interviewee also explained that one of the positive effects of the introduction of the Prevent Duty in 2015 was the shock it produced among non-Muslims:

> The anger this stirred and the desire, even on behalf of non-Muslim students, to stand up and resist was impressive. Whereas before 2015 it might have been mainly Muslim groups that were trying to mobilise against Prevent, afterwards it became easier to overcome previous divisions and involve students *en masse*. Even academics could be drawn to the cause as they were expected to report on students and therefore staff realised that it wasn't 'just a Muslim

> thing' but about policing all our thoughts and controlling what we do and destroying the very notion of what a university and what a space of education is.[19]

The climate associated with Prevent and surveillance has also made those who go to Mosques and Islamic cultural centres particularly nervous and even paranoid. As one young unemployed British Muslim woman explained, 'you have to be careful, they [police] are closing a number of Islamic societies and cultural circles…Muslims are under intense pressure. There are always ongoing investigations that lead to things getting closed down'.[20] This paranoia even extends to when other Muslims invite them to take part in political activities. One activist recounted how, on a visit to a mosque to speak about an upcoming demonstration, many people asked what her group's real agenda was and whether she had been sent to spy on them. Universities have been a key site for counter-radicalisation initiatives and policies, in particular attempts to monitor and constrain university Islamic societies (Brown and Saeed, 2015). Since the Prevent duty was introduced, many interviewees remarked on a silencing effect for British Muslim students, leading to a desire to avoid 'rocking the boat' and a retreat from participating openly in politics. A Muslim organiser from the community organisation Citizens UK who works to mobilise university students explained that, as a result of the Prevent duty, both Muslim and non-Muslim students are much more hesitant to get involved with their campaigns:

> You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. You're damned if you get involved in politics, and when we don't get involved, they're always saying that Muslims are not getting involved in British culture, and British identity.[21]

Concern about a retreat from public life due to fears of being tarnished as extremists led Citizens UK to launch a Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life (CCIPPL) in September 2015 that sought to reach out and organise Muslim voices in the UK and make them audible. It is to the findings of this research, which intersected and complemented our own fieldwork, to which we now turn in order to understand the role of community organising by non-Muslim organisations in fostering further political engagement as a reaction to discrimination.

A case study of community organising against discrimination – The citizens commission on Islam, participation and public life

Whilst discriminatory experiences can contribute to a reservoir of collective action that is relatively untapped by political or community organisations, the CCIPPL sought to reach out and organise Muslim community voices and make them audible. Citizens UK is a broad-based organisation with hundreds of member institutions coming together to campaign on various issues such as improving wages, street safety, electoral accountability or developing more affordable housing (Balazard, 2015). They try to include as many organisations as possible to better represent civil society. One of their organisers who was then the secretary of the Commission explains:

> The Citizen's Commission was first put together as a result of conversations we had with Muslim leaders from Citizens UK's member institutions. We'd found that Muslim organisations were less likely to get involved with Citizens UK and other institutions and activities that were engaging in public life and when we looked into it, it was due to the fact that the Muslim community often felt that they were pilloried more than any other community when they did try to engage and so often they'd retreat and become quite insular.[22]

This isolation was first attributed to media discourses, but Citizens UK thought an investigation gathering different stakeholders could help to find all the obstacles to engagement and the possible solutions that could be put forward.

> We want the Muslim community to be part of our organisation. So, what is the obstacle? What is the barrier? We went out and approached various different commissioners ranging from politics, academia, media, business and the armed forces, with the aim of creating a diverse group of commissioners but also one that is credible to government, to business and to civil society. For example, we've got two Conservative MPs on there and you do need that in order to be engaging with our current government…What Citizens UK does very well is listening, it goes out there listens to stories and uses those to develop recommendations.[23]

Between October 2015 and January 2017, a series of public hearings, roundtable discussions and closed sessions were held. During this time, the Commission also welcomed written submissions from Muslim individuals and representatives from organisations across the UK who could not attend the sessions in person. The commission found that the Prevent strategy was at the core of the retreat from public space but also noted that a number of other recent events have contributed to the feelings amongst British Muslims of alienation and being under siege. The referendum to leave the European Union in June 2016 led to a wave of racist attacks that often targeted Muslims.[24] Just prior to this, the electoral campaign for London Mayor demonstrated how Islamophobia could be deployed for political ends (Gani, 2016). According to the testimonies of those who took part in the hearings for the Commission, some Muslims have indeed been put off engaging in politics. Its report claimed that 'discrimination, and fears of being discriminated against, are actively discouraging participation and contributing to disillusionment with the political process amongst young British Muslims' (Citizens Commission on Islam Participation and Public Life, 2017: 44). After the hearings, the commissioners, recruited from different political parties and diverse civil society organisations, drafted recommendations seeking to enable British Muslims to develop confidence in their equal standing as citizens in the UK, but also aiming to provide the broader population with the confidence to view British Muslims as active contributors to, and an integral part of, British society.

The co-founder and then executive director of Citizens UK explained that they could not have engaged as many Muslim individuals in the process without having a track record of working with Muslim communities for a long time:

> One reason we were able to do it is because we've been here for 30 years and I think we have a reasonable reputation in the Muslim community even though we're not a Muslim

organisation. We want to engage, partly because the mosques are full of people and churches are not, and the Muslim community is the poorest community in Britain and yet it's also the most generous…for the last 15 years since 9/11, we understand it's been more and more difficult for British Muslims to participate without being accused of having another motive.[25]

Initially, back in the 1990s, Citizens UK mainly involved churches and Christian groups before recruiting Muslim, non-religious and later Jewish organisations and then trade unions and schools. Citizens UK was therefore motivated to organise the Commission by pragmatism – Muslim institutions being instrumental in their quest to recruit members that can easily contribute to their campaigns with hundreds of participants – but also by solidarity, which is one of the other objectives of broad-based community organising. The executive director explains that they recognised they had more time and energy than most of the main Muslim representative civil society organisations, whose objectives were hampered due to the time they had to spend merely justifying their existence:

The Muslim Council of Britain, which is very close to us, are permanent fire fighters. They're permanently having to meet to put out official statements about atrocities, saying that Islam is a peaceful religion and that this was not done in the name in the name of Islam. Even when they put out such statements, people still criticize them for not having done so quickly enough or for not condemning strongly enough, which is hard but also it means they can't get on with their main business.[26]

The strategy of engaging commissioners with different points of view to fight against systematic stigmatisation began to pay off as the president of the commission, a conservative MP, accepted an invitation to meet with the Muslim Council of Britain, even if this was considered a controversial organisation for some of his government colleagues:

So [the conservative MP] Dominic Grieve was very important as the head of the commission to the whole thing and he has continued to deliver because we've just heard the Muslim Council of Britain has now been offered a meeting with the Home Secretary. That is actually one of the first main proposals for the state in our report, which is that the state needs to work with and recognise a body like the Muslim Council of Britain, whereas some people say the MCB is toxic and they will never work with it…[27]

To achieve trust in its findings, the co-writing of the report was essential, even if it was quite difficult to get every commissioner to agree on the wording. Citizens UK's aim was to support all of the report's recommendations, either via a direct role in their implementation, by working with partner organisations, or through advocacy and lobbying efforts.

Most of the individuals who took part in the hearings were mobilised through member institutions thanks to the grassroots activism of Citizens UK. A Muslim university student in East London explains that she came because she had been formerly introduced by a

friend to actions around welcoming refugees organised by Citizens UK and she trusted them.

> I like the work that they do around the community where they base their goals on individuals leading social action projects based on what their community needs…that's how I got involved with Citizens UK because I do feel that they make a tangible change through the mechanisms that they have to engage citizens…Citizens UK is affiliated to the student union but that is just something that helps them to get their word around on campus because obviously a lot of students do volunteer with them. One of my friends was volunteering with them at the time and then she told me and then that's how I got involved.[28]

The Commission also coincided with increasing stigmatisation she felt she was facing, and it really motivated her to engage:

> This commission has arrived at the right time, to investigate a lot of the problems that we're facing as Muslims in the UK. It highlighted so many issues that in the past I've had to deal with, which made me want to take part in this…in terms of integrating our beliefs and sort of showing our Muslim identity publicly because it is so scrutinised.[29]

Community organising methods were instrumental for the feasibility of the process, inviting different Muslim individuals and institutions around the table, drafting the report with different stakeholders and the implementation of the recommendations. But the commission, and its report, were also a means to develop their methods and organisation. The first recommendation that was put forward was indeed to develop more broad-based, community organising dynamics based on the model of Citizens UK where diverse communities of faith are working together on issues for the common good.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to demonstrate how Muslims in East London are trying to confront and resist Islamophobia and perceived discrimination. We have shown that our respondents, and those part of their wider community, have been articulating different types of responses in a context of increased surveillance and stigmatisation. Our findings indicate that individual forms of resistance are more prominent than mass mobilisation. Less visible forms of 'politics' may also have been developed as a response, such as mutual aid and increased solidarity within communities. Our findings confirm much of the recent literature which indicates that the general tendency is one of either demobilisation or at least a form of quiet activism and low-key dialogue (Brown and Saeed, 2015; Martin, 2017). This might appear to be a surprising finding, especially in the East London context, where there is a history of political activism among the Bangladeshi community (DeHanas, 2016; Eade and Garbin, 2006; Glynn, 2014). Moreover, given that many of our interviewees were already involved in civil society groups, one may have assumed that they would be more predisposed to activism. This is also an indictment of current

anti-racist activism that has failed to sufficiently include Muslims and mobilise specifically against Islamophobia.

Increased surveillance appears to have made it more difficult to mobilise collectively for British Muslims. These findings also align with those of the nationwide study that was carried out by the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life. The authors of this report noted an increasing absence of Muslims from British civil society and anti-Muslim prejudice contributing to a sense of alienation. Certainly, if we consider Muslim communities as a whole, rather than merely those we specifically interviewed, the message was that the increased climate of suspicion has had a silencing effect on Muslims. This is particularly the case in places like universities where Muslim students are under heightened scrutiny since the passing of the *Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015* (Guest et al., 2020). We can attribute this to a change in the political opportunity structures for mobilisation. Put simply, Prevent, and the surrounding climate of Islamophobia, has made it less likely for Muslims to mobilise due to a feeling of being under siege. Some of the interviews also suggest a gap between recognising discrimination experienced personally and having the networks, confidence, opportunities and political education to feel that activism against Islamophobia is actually possible.

This does not mean, however, that everyone has decided to accept this fate without resistance. Indeed, as already noted by Justin Gest (2010) in his research in the same part of the city, whilst many Muslims may retreat into their communities and become increasingly alienated, others do engage in some sort of confrontation that is more or less political and organised, as a result of discrimination. Far from apathy, fatalism or disinterest in the fight against discrimination and Islamophobia, some victims do react politically. Mobilisations on campus are developing and it has become easier to involve the wider student body through campaigns such as *Students not Suspects*. The support of the NUS is important for legitimacy and, although it was not mentioned specifically in our interviews, organisations such as Prevent Watch also provide a means of support for those impacted by the policy.[30] Yet, most of those who challenge discrimination act and react in myriad ways and are far from being limited to engaging in organisations that explicitly fight against discrimination. This could be interpreted as a rejection of existing associations, and an attempt to move away from organisational forms of resistance. Likewise, it could also reflect the weakness of the associative landscape which, in turn, could be linked to increased suspicion regarding any collective action with a religious identity, that is by Muslim organisations. Individuals are understandably reluctant to draw more attention to themselves in a context of hostility (compounded by the racist backlash engendered by the Brexit referendum and ensuing debate). This makes collective responses to discrimination an uphill struggle and explains the more individual responses. Politicising the experience of discrimination is, therefore, an ongoing battle for civil society actors in the current climate. The resistance exists, but it is mostly under the political radar.

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Notes

1. Oskooii (2020) notes that Sanders et al.'s index of democratic engagement conflates behavioural variables such as participation in the 2010 general election with attitudinal and psychological measures such as a sense of civic duty, political trust, political interest and knowledge, satisfaction with British democracy and party identification.
2. The wider research project looked at different forms of discrimination and was not exclusively dealing with that experienced by Muslims. This also applied to the London case study, but in this article we deal specifically with discrimination based on the participants' Muslim identity. This is, of course, just one of several identities that can be held and, as the literature on intersectionality has demonstrated, discrimination and racism may intersect to cover different parts of a person's identity. The book published at the end of project focuses mainly on the French case studies (Talpin et al., 2021).
3. By 'Islamophobia' we mean 'a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness' (All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2018).
4. For more information on ethnicity in the borough see Tower Hamlets (2013).
5. Interview with 'Nadhim'.
6. Interview with 'Nadhim'.
7. Interview with 'John'.
8. Interview with 'Farah'.
9. Interview with 'Farah'.
10. Interview with 'Farah'.
11. Interview with 'Fadila'. The blogs of Dina Torkia and Amena Khan are no longer online but these influencers still use social media platforms such as Instagram to communicate with their followers.
12. Interview with 'Norah'.
13. Interview with 'Safina'.
14. See the online training module for the Channel programme which focuses on providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism. https://www.elearning.prevent.homeoffice.gov.uk/channel_awareness/01-welcome.html
15. Interview with 'Amira'.
16. Interview with 'Nadiya'.
17. These campaigns linked up to organise a national conference in June 2016 entitled *Prevent, Islamophobia and Civil Liberties*. This later developed into a national 'Students Not Suspects

Tour' around different university campuses organised by NUS Black Students Campaign and FOSIS as part of Islamophobia Awareness Month (IAM).
18. Interview with 'Soumaya'.
19. Interview with 'Soumaya'.
20. Interview with 'Samia'.
21. Interview with 'Naima'.
22. Interview with 'Norah'.
23. Interview with 'Norah'.
24. This led to a wave a racist attacks that often targeted Muslims. Tell MAMA (2017) recorded a 475% increase in the number of anti-Muslim incidents in the week following the EU referendum vote (from 12 incidents in the week beginning 17th June 2016 to 69 incidents in the week beginning 24th June 2016).
25. Interview with 'Neil'.
26. Interview with 'Neil'.
27. Interview with 'Neil'.
28. Interview with 'Maila'.
29. Interview with 'Maila'.
30. Prevent Watch provides a free help line with case workers who provide advice to people affected by Prevent including access to lawyers. See https://www.preventwatch.org/

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