

# Islamophobia and the Problematization of Mosques

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## **Islamophobia and the Problematization of Mosques: A Critical Exploration of Hate Crimes and the Symbolic Function of ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Mosques in the UK**

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CHRIS ALLEN

### ***Abstract***

*Most scholarly studies have tended to focus on the building of new and proposed mosques, and in particular how they are sites of conflict and contestation symbolic of wider ‘problems’ associated with Muslims and Islam in the U.K.. This study focuses on an overlooked aspect within this, the extent to which attacks on mosques that are neither new nor proposed perform a similar symbolic function. Presenting new empirical evidence from research undertaken with ten mosques across the United Kingdom that had been targeted for attack, we begin by exploring the existing literature on the problematization of mosques using the lens of critical Islamophobia studies to do so. Setting out what is known about attacks on mosques in the British setting, empirical findings from the research are used to illustrate the type and manifestation of attacks experienced, going on to consider the drivers and catalysts for them. Exploring the similarities and differences between the conflict and contestation associated with new mosques and the attacks on mosques that are not new, this study concludes that some resonance exists in the symbolic function mosques continue to serve in the community. In conclusion, the significant resonance between Islamophobic-motivated attacks against mosques with those against the individuals are considered.*

**Keywords:** *mosques; Islamophobia; Muslims; problematization; hate crime; United Kingdom*

### **Introduction**

The content of the existing scholarly canon or literature about mosques in Britain and Europe is almost singularly focused on the socio-political opposition, conflict and contestation directed towards ‘new’ mosques, be that mosques that are merely proposed or mosques that have been more recently built. As a result, very little knowledge is available about existing mosques or those that might be termed ‘old’ in existing scholarly works. This study therefore not only responds to this significant gap in the field but so advances knowledge by presenting the findings from new, previously unpublished research into hate crimes targeting existing or what might be termed ‘old’ mosques in Britain.

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It is noteworthy that this is the first time research of this kind has been undertaken. Building on the premise that opposition, conflict and contestation directed at new and proposed mosques is somewhat symbolic in that it reflects the wider socio-political ‘problematization’ of Muslims and Islam in contemporary society, we argue that while innately and uniquely different, existing and old mosques also perform a symbolic function when they become targets for hate crimes. Consequently, this study posits that all mosques – irrespective of whether old or new, existing or proposed – not only have the potential to be associated with the socio-political ‘problems’ attributed to Muslims and Islam but so too have the potential to be sites through which those same socio-political ‘problems’ are able to be played out. The analysis presented here builds on existing knowledge and understanding about mosques in Britain whilst simultaneously presenting new thinking that will further challenge accepted understandings and meanings.

### **Mosques, Conflict and Contestation**

It was just over a decade ago that the first batch of studies relating to the ‘problems’ associated with the building and construction of mosques in contemporary Europe first began to emerge. Focusing on various locations, studies began to explore the process of problematization through the lens of opposition, conflict and contestation. In doing so, they drew critical attention to the potential detrimental impacts that were becoming evident at the regional, national and local levels. In the French setting, Cesari<sup>1</sup> for example considered how opposition to the building of new mosques reflected wider societal tensions about how the influence of Muslims and Islam were perceived to be moving from the private to the public sphere. As she pertinently noted, it was extremely rare that any opposition being expressed was about the buildings themselves. Similar too Saint-Blancat & di Friedberg<sup>2</sup> who noted how the building of new mosques in Italy was also linked to broader questions about Muslims and Islam in the country: how Italy was seen to be changing and what ramifications the presence of Muslims and Islam were likely to have. For them, new mosques functioned symbolically in that they provided a focus onto which concerns and fears about the perceived cultural and religious ‘Otherness’ of Islam and Muslims could be projected. For Landman & Wessels<sup>3</sup> and McLoughlin<sup>4</sup> in the Netherlands and England respectively, it was the impact of new mosques on the physical landscape that was most important; in both settings, the changes were used as evidence to fuel increasingly pervasive discourses about the Islamification of Europe’s inner cities.

For Jonker<sup>5</sup>, a different perspective emerged out of research that focused on the ‘unsolved’ conflict surrounding the proposed mosque in Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany. Noting that something of a concerted opposition to the proposed mosque began in 1999, Jonker<sup>6</sup> went on to explain how this dramatically changed after 9/11. Not only did the level of opposition significantly increase but so too was there a marked shift in arguments about why the mosque should be opposed. For her, the 9/11 attacks catalysed a ‘curve of anger’ across Germany – indeed replicated across much of Europe<sup>7</sup> – that created a greater mistrust and suspicion about Muslims and Islam among the German populace. As Jonker<sup>8</sup> illustrated, opposition to the proposed mosque became increasingly informed by this mistrust and suspicion whereby they would increasingly question the ‘true’ motive for building the

mosque. So too was the opposition increasingly focused on the perceived 'Otherness' of Muslims and Islam, both of which were routinely being referred to as an enemy of Germany, Europe and 'the West' at different junctures. Stressing the symbolic function of new mosques as highlighted previously, Jonker's<sup>9</sup> findings went further by showing that local opposition to new mosques was as readily influenced and shaped by international events as indeed those relevant to the local or national settings. For her, new mosques functioned as mere proxies for all that was seen to be problematic about Muslims and Islam without any differentiation whatsoever. A number of scholarly works have sought to develop this including Allievi<sup>10</sup>, Göle<sup>11</sup>, Kassimeris & Jackson<sup>12</sup>, Arab<sup>13</sup> and Kuppinger<sup>14</sup>.

One new mosque that has attracted significant scholarly inquiry is in Dudley, England. While Reeves, Abbas & Pedroso<sup>15</sup> and Kassimeris & Jackson<sup>16</sup> offer interesting perspectives, Allen's<sup>17</sup> various studies offer particular insight into the wide range of factors that shape and inform the opposition being shown towards new mosques. Across these studies, these have variously included: the town's medieval skyline; the height of a nearby church steeple in comparison to the proposed mosque's minaret; the 'Islamification' of Britain; Governmental counter-terror legislation; the 'War on Terror'; and the threat of Islamist terror groups globally<sup>18</sup>. What emerges is an amalgam of local, national and global factors which at once appear to be equally relevant but which at the same time are in a constant state of flux given the wider global, national and local contexts. All however were underpinned by the distinct notion of the 'Otherness' of Muslims and Islam and the view that this 'Otherness' was very 'real' in the threat it posed to Dudley and its residents. Quoting one local resident, this was evident when opposition was justified on the belief that mosques were not places of worship. As they put it, the minarets resemble "...look out posts...I know what they say they are...but the design of the buildings seem more fortified castles than spiritual houses"<sup>19</sup>.

Another useful illustration of the problematization of new mosques can be seen in Switzerland and the 57% majority who voted in favour of banning the building of minarets in 2009<sup>20</sup>. Given that only four of the country's 150 mosques had minarets at the time of the referendum, the outcome was somewhat surprising given it placed no restrictions whatsoever on the actual building of new mosques. According to Nussbaum<sup>21</sup>, the vote offered an unprecedented illustration of how extremely minor and at times seemingly irrelevant issues attributed to Muslims and Islam have the potential to be easily and rapidly transformed into public crises that have profound national, political and cultural significance. For Stussi<sup>22</sup>, the referendum has to be understood as entirely symbolic: irrespective of how few minarets there were in Switzerland, the referendum symbolised the concerns, fears and anxieties the Swiss public had about Muslims and Islam. Consequently, the referendum also empowered those who had concerns, fears and anxieties to act. While the outcome of the referendum was little more than a hollow victory, the majority vote was seen to be an overwhelming success. From a symbolic point of view, it could be interpreted that halting the building of minarets was a small step in the process of halting Muslims and Islam and by default, the further Islamification of Europe.

Given that the primary focus of these studies has been on new mosques, a concurrent process has been underway *albeit* one that has been largely overlooked in scholarly studies. As Allen<sup>23</sup> noted in Dudley, while the proposed mosque provided the main focus of attention there was a ‘curve of anger’ emanating from the new mosque’s epicentre which seemed to catalyse a number other mosques being attacked nearby. Having been established for a number of decades before the proposed new mosque, preliminary investigations would appear to suggest that none of what might be referred to as ‘old’ mosques had previously experienced any sustained or long-term attacks or backlash. However as Allen<sup>24</sup> noted, two ‘old’ mosques near the site of the proposed ‘new’ mosque in Dudley suffered arson attacks while another had a nail bomb detonated outside it. It is interesting to note that this would appear to be the extent of any investigations into the type and nature of attacks against ‘old’ as opposed to ‘new’ mosques in the existing scholarly literature. Here, the findings of new qualitative research not only sought to address this identified gap in the scholarly literature but so too build upon and develop Allievi’s<sup>25</sup> theoretical premise that like ‘new’ mosques, ‘old’ mosques also function as convenient symbols against which those wishing to vent their anxieties, anger and bigotry about Muslims and Islam can do so. In essence, this study seeks to begin to explore the similarities and differences that might exist between attacks on ‘old’ and ‘new’ mosques.

## **Approaches and Methods**

In identifying the gap in the existing body of scholarly evidence, this study presents the findings from qualitative research that surveyed the occurrence of attacks perpetrated against mosques that had been established for longer than five years. We shall begin by considering the scale and prevalence of attacks against mosques in the British context, setting out what is currently known, including a focus on how such attacks are manifested. There will also be some consideration of the impact such attacks have. Drawing on the emergent themes, the findings will be positioned within the existing scholarly evidence relating to new mosques.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the findings will be critically contextualised through the theoretical lens of recent Islamophobia studies. In conclusion, some reflections will be offered on why existing studies have to date overlooked attacks on ‘old’ mosques; the ways in which this study contributes new knowledge towards establishing a better understanding of how mosques are symbolic of wider processes of problematization; and finally what questions might necessarily need to be asked in terms of future research.

The methodological approach underpinning this research was co-designed and co-produced with the charitable organisation Faith Matters and its Government funded Tell MAMA service (MAMA being an acronym for ‘Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks’). MAMA offers a third-party reporting service for those who become victims of Islamophobic hate crime whether be that against the individual or the material (for instance mosques, schools, businesses and so on). Designed to largely replicate a similar reporting service facilitated by the Community Security Trust (CST) for those who become victims of Anti-Semitism, MAMA not only records attacks but so too signposts victims to other sources where

additional support can be found, be that legal, emotional or other. Like the CST service, MAMA also collates and subsequently publishes its data as a means of establishing a more comprehensive picture of the scale and prevalence of Islamophobic attacks. This is a welcome development because as Hargreaves<sup>27</sup> rightly notes, data relating to Islamophobic hate crime has historically been as weak as it has been problematic. While MAMA's data is still embryonic, it is expected over the next half decade a more robust picture will begin to emerge thereby going some way towards addressing the somewhat disparate data that currently exists.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting however that it is currently estimated that around 70 per cent of all Islamophobic attacks are never reported to any statutory organisation or service<sup>29</sup> and so even with greater monitoring and recording, the emergent picture is likely to remain somewhat incomplete.

This presents methodological barriers for researchers given that it is difficult to know exactly which and indeed how many mosques have been targeted for hate crimes against them. Co-designing and co-producing the research with MAMA provided a means to overcome this. Given that MAMA had established relationships of trust with those reporting attacks, its support staff first sought to identify and then secondly recruit participants for the research. Acting as a bridgehead, they made initial contact with those who had reported attacks against mosques. Introducing the research to them, MAMA's support staff addressed any initial questions potential respondents had. It was only then, once consent to participate had been sought that those reporting attacks against mosques were introduced to researchers. Having collaborated with MAMA to design the questions, researchers went on to undertake in-depth interviews. In total, ten in-depth interviews were undertaken. In addition, informal discussions were had with MAMA's support staff from which notes were compiled and subsequently used to inform broader thinking and analysis.

The approach to sampling was necessarily non-probabilistic and purposive given the constraints of identifying those that had reported attacks *via* MAMA and were necessarily trusting to participate and share their experience. Of course, this has implications for generalizability. While so, the fact that all respondents had direct knowledge and experience of hate crimes being perpetrated against their respective mosques also meant that their identification and subsequent participation was also undeniably appropriate. As a further safeguard, it was required that all respondents had been the person reporting the attack to MAMA and equally important, that they held a suitable position of responsibility within the mosque, for instance being a member of the executive committee or centre manager. This ensured that respondents had credibility in terms of the nature of the attack and on the impact it had on those affiliated or using the mosque. Unsurprisingly, this placed considerable constraints on the number of appropriate respondents that were first identified and secondly expressed a willingness to participate. Nonetheless, it was still possible to engage a geographically diverse number of respondents: three were based in the South East of England (including London), one in the South West, four in the Midlands, and one in each of the North West, North East and Northern Ireland. Of those interviewed, eight respondents identified as being male, two as female. Of these, the majority (eight) identified as being of Asian ethnicity (Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani). One each of the two other respondents

identified as Arab and White British. For the protection of those interviewed, the names of respondents have been replaced by pseudonyms as indeed have the names and precise locations of mosques.

### **A Critical Perspective on Islamophobia**

MAMA encounters two challenges when recording hate crimes against mosques: first, in terms of how to define an attack; second, how to appropriately categorise them for recording purposes. The situation is made more complex by the fact that Islamophobia remains a contested concept<sup>30</sup> what with the most oft cited definitions tending to be literalist and therefore not fit for purpose. Many resonate with that posited by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia<sup>31</sup> which defined Islamophobia somewhat over-simplistically as a mere fear or dislike of Islam and by consequence, all Muslims. In both the public and political spaces, similarly simplistic definitions have been all too recurrent in the rhetoric of both advocates and critics alike, the latter routinely arguing that it is far from irrational to 'fear' Islam thereby negating how Islamophobia is far more akin to other discriminatory phenomena such as racism or homophobia. Consequently, Shyrock<sup>32</sup> is right to note that general references to Islamophobia remain largely impervious to nuance. Vakil<sup>33</sup> therefore is correct when he argues that it is more important to be clear about what is meant by Islamophobia when using it rather than what it means in any essential sense.

Within scholarly literature, changes are afoot with those such as Klug<sup>34</sup> suggesting that the study of Islamophobia has 'come of age'. Moosavi<sup>35</sup> too who suggests that gone is the time to question or contest Islamophobia; now it just needs to be better understood. This can be seen in a number of key texts to have emerged over the past half-decade or so including Allen<sup>36</sup>, Sheehi<sup>37</sup>, Lean<sup>38</sup>, Taras<sup>39</sup>, Tyrer<sup>40</sup>, Chakraborti & Zempi<sup>41</sup> and Carr<sup>42</sup>. Common to these is a more critical approach to how Islamophobia is both conceived and understood. Both Allen<sup>43</sup> and Sheehi<sup>44</sup> for example conceive Islamophobia as an ideological phenomenon in that what is known and understood about Muslims and Islam is embedded in variously complex systems of signifiers and symbols which shape and inform the social consensus<sup>45</sup>. Accordingly for them, Islamophobia is not restricted to any specific action, practice or discrimination but is instead evident in a vast array of different social, political and cultural processes whereby the identification and recognition of Muslims and Islam as both 'Other' and 'problem' are routinely consumed without question or contestation. What is known and understood about Muslims and Islam therefore can be seen to be little more than ideological constructs.

For Clarke<sup>46</sup>, ideological constructs function through reinforcing and reifying notions that purport to demarcate who 'we' are and more importantly, demarcate who 'we' are not. Deploying processes of stigmatization and marginalization, what ensues is an unquestioned acceptance that all Muslims and Islam without differentiation can be reduced to a unidimensional homogenous entity. Undeniably 'Other', that unidimensional homogenous entity also becomes attributed with a series of negative and stereotypical characteristics that are at once, not only irremovable but more importantly eternally fixed. Referred to by Allen<sup>47</sup> as 'normative truths', through informing what he goes on to describe as 'Islamophobia

thinking’ so they become the sole means through which Muslims and Islam are known and subsequently understood. Given the normative truths confer the belief that it is therefore ‘common-sense’ to be suspicious and fearful of Muslims and Islam<sup>48</sup>, so it becomes relatively easy to rationalise and justify the need to respond or resist– as indeed hate and attack them also, in the most extreme circumstances. Consequently, the normative truths provide a means by which those seeking to vent anger, bigotry or hate in the form of a hate crime – in particular, an attack which targets a mosque – are able to locate justification and legitimacy. Though Allen<sup>49</sup> is keen to stress that not all recipients to such normative truths are Islamophobic, he adds that ‘Islamophobia thinking’ is far from the preserve of those perpetrating attacks.

It is from this understanding that MAMA defines what constitutes an Islamophobic hate crime. For it, an Islamophobic hate crime is any malicious act that is directed at Muslims (or those thought to be Muslim), their material property (including mosques), or organisations where there exists evidence that the motivation, content or perpetrator focused on a perceived Muslim identity or other symbol of Muslims or Islam. Understood within the theoretical frame of Islamophobia, such an attack is one that would appear to be motivated, rationalised or justified on the basis of the normative truths relating to Muslims or Islam. This enables a clear and coherent understanding of what constitutes an Islamophobic hate crime while ensuring resonance with the scholarly and theoretical canon also. In doing so, it goes some way towards closing the gap between academic and practice-based settings while also acknowledging Vakil’s<sup>50</sup> concern about the need for clarity when referring to Islamophobia.

### **Hate Crimes Targeting Mosques: Nature and Scope**

The British Government’s National Counter Terrorism Security Office<sup>51</sup> has previously expressed concern about what it believed to be a worrying rise in the number of attacks being perpetrated against mosques. While it failed to evidence this or indeed support its claims with appropriate statistics, MAMA’s various annual reports and associated datasets would appear to confirm the Government’s concerns. When recording attacks on mosques, MAMA uses six categories: graffiti smashed windows, desecration, violent break-ins arson, and bombings. In terms of research, these categories reflect the ‘high-level’, ‘low-level’ categories of Islamophobic attack first posited by Allen & Nielsen.<sup>52</sup> In this way, graffiti, smashed windows and desecration would be low-level while violent break-in, arson and bombings high-level. Of the hate crimes recorded by MAMA, most might be best deemed as being low-level. Accounting for just over 70 per cent of all hate crimes recorded, this too concurs with Allen & Nielsen’s<sup>53</sup> finding that the majority of Islamophobic incidents are typically low-level. Whilst so, it is necessary to stress that low-level does not equate to low impact<sup>54</sup>. Take for instance hate crimes involving graffiti. While rightly categorised low-level, the potential impact of graffiti is extremely wide, going way beyond those who first saw it and reported it. If that graffiti was to include a threatening message – a common feature of much graffiti appearing on mosques - so the threat has the potential to impact everyone who sees it or at least identifies with the group the threat is directed at. Routine dismissals of low-level attacks are therefore not only unfounded but also quite inappropriate<sup>55</sup>.



A recurrent feature of mosque graffiti reported to MAMA was the linking of Muslims and Islam to evil, violence and terrorism. Others included messages about not belonging in Britain and the need to ‘go home’. The incorporation of far-right and neo-Nazi groups or the emblems appropriated by them were also prominent. Of these, the English Defence League (EDL) and National Front (NF) () were particularly recurrent as were swastikas. Three of the participants reported graffiti at their mosques. At the Medina Mosque and Jamia Mosque, participants spoke of incidents targeting the mosque as being *ad hoc*, the perpetrators appearing to throw paint over external walls. At the Medina Mosque, the paint was accompanied by eggs and rotten tomatoes also. At the Al-Salafi Masjid, Suleiman explained how the graffiti included a clear anti-Muslim message and a far-right emblem. Islam was sceptical though about whether this was ‘proof’ of the far-right’s involvement. Explaining how he tried to keep an open mind, he said: “I genuinely can’t tell if these people necessarily belong to a far-right group...it only takes one or two individuals to commit these kinds of incidents”.

Unlike Suleiman, Musab Hassan at the Holt Road Mosque was convinced of far-right involvement. Accounting for around 23 per cent of all mosque attacks recorded by MAMA, smashed windows were common in that they seemingly require little planning or pre-meditation. One might speculate whether smashed windows are more opportunistic than other types of attack. At the Holt Road Mosque, various windows were smashed during evening prayers. Hassan explained how on hearing glass being broken, worshippers ran outside and confronted three men who “were causing a commotion”. Verbally abusing the worshippers, the three men then proceeded to enter an adjoining yard where old chairs and tables were stored. Emerging with a large table, the participant explained how the men threw it through another large window causing shattered glass to spray everywhere. Hassan referred to the men as “EDL members”. When asked about this, he explained that the EDL had not only targeted the mosque in recent weeks but had also uploaded abusive and intimidating videos to YouTube. Hassan said he recognised the men from the videos. Stressing the perceived culpability of the EDL, he spoke of further incidents including attacks on local Muslim-owned shops and young Muslims being subjected to abuse and intimidation on their way home from school.

While none of those interviewed had reported incidents involving desecration or forced entry, MAMA’s data states that these account for 15.0 and 13.5 per cent of all attacks respectively. Attacks involving desecration appear to be becoming increasingly common however. Most focus on the belief that pig meat and blood is *haram* (forbidden) for Muslims and thereby unclean. Consequently, desecrations increasingly involve pig meat or carcasses – especially heads, feet and blood – being left in or around mosques. The earliest recorded attack of this kind in Britain was post-9/11 when ten pigs’ heads were found outside a mosque in Exeter.<sup>56</sup> Since then, numerous others have occurred in such diverse locations as Blackpool<sup>57</sup>, Cheltenham<sup>58</sup>, and Ellesmere Port.<sup>59</sup> Similar incidents involving pig’s heads have also been shown to target individual Muslim families as well.<sup>60</sup>

As regards high-level attacks, MAMA recorded attacks involving forced entry, arson

and bombings. From analysing the data, forced entry was nearly always accompanied with menacing or abusive behaviour that intimidated worshippers and mosque staff. Some of the hate crimes recorded also noted that forced entry was accompanied by material damage, most typically involving the smashing of furniture. While none of the participants experienced forced entry, three experienced arson while another experienced bomb attacks. From MAMA's data, arson attacks targeting mosques appear to be increasingly timed to coincide with communal prayers. This was what occurred at the Markazi Masjid. Shagufta explained how she was outside the mosque at the time and saw the firebomb land on the roof. Accompanied by her husband, she said she immediately called 999 while he tried to evacuate the mosque. Given the fire service arrived soon after, Zeb said the amount of damage caused was minimal but as she noted, "it could have been far worse...especially if we'd not been outside the mosque and everyone had not acted so quickly". She went on to explain how many in the local community had been shocked by the attack. As she said, the fact that those behind the attack would have known "it was a mosque and that we use it for praying" was particularly chilling.

Unlike at the Markazi Masjid, the arson attack on the Al-Manar Islamic Centre took place overnight while the mosque was empty. It also completely destroyed the mosque. As Rafiq rhetorically asked, "the attack was really shocking, why would someone go to such lengths?" Resulting in thousands of pounds of damage, Rafiq explained that it was not the first time the mosque had been attacked. On a previous occasion, he said that someone had broken into the mosque, "...made a big pile of stuff and tried to set it alight. It was deliberate...it didn't ignite like this time though". At the Newtown Mosque, Aneesa said that the arson attack followed a break in. As she explained, two young men - who were subsequently arrested by the police - got into the mosque through some smashed windows. Once inside, she said the two men started a fire just behind the mosque's front doors. Despite igniting, she explained how the fire failed to spread meaning that the damage was minimal. As she went on, it was only evident around the doors of the mosque and part of its frontage.

Of the two mosques where bombs attacks occurred - the Islamic Dawah Centre and Makki Masjid - the respondents at each said they had no recollection of their mosques having been attacked previously. The attacks at both mosques were however extremely similar: an explosive device being left outside the mosque before being detonated while worshippers were inside praying. At the Makki Masjid, this coincided with one of the evening prayers; at the Islamic Dawah Centre the bomb was detonated to coincide with Friday prayers when the mosque was at its most full. Despite both bombs being detonated, there were no injuries at either location. Shaikh from the Makki Masjid said, "we heard a loud noise but couldn't see anything and just thought that someone was messing around...so we didn't do anything about it". At the Islamic Dawah Centre, Waqar recounted similar occurrence. There, worshippers only reacted once an unusual amount of debris was found in the car park and road outside. According to both participants, it was only after police had undertaken a full investigation were worshippers prepared to accept the debris was the result of detonated explosives. At the Makki Masjid, Shaikh explained how the general response was one of incredulity adding how it was only after the police's forensic officers showed him the remains of the bomb did he

himself believe it was a bomb.

### **Hate Crime Targeting Mosques: Drivers and Catalysts**

There was some disagreement among the respondents as to what the drivers and motivations for the hate crimes targeting their respective mosques might have been. Eight respondents said they felt they were direct consequence of various atrocities and terror incidents involving Muslims typically claim to be acting in the name of Islam. At Al-Manar and Newtown Mosque, respondents were less sure but at the same time could not think of any other reason why their mosques might have been targeted. At Al-Manar, Rafiq said he would prefer to believe the attack was unprovoked and perpetrated by opportunists. If it was not, he added, it would require him to lose faith in humanity. Similar too for Aneesa at Newtown Mosque: “there was not any apparent reason for it...It was an unprovoked attack”. When pressed, Aneesa was adamant there was no evidence to link the attack to any incident involving Muslims elsewhere. It was interesting therefore that she later acknowledged the possibility of a link in the mind of the perpetrators between those Muslims who commit atrocities and acts of terror and those “ordinary” Muslims who used the facilities at the Newtown Mosque. While clearly reluctant, she resigned herself to the fact that there was a chance that her mosque being targeted was the “result of prejudices and anger that some groups have in society towards Muslims.”

Among those respondents who made the link more explicitly, there were however some differences of opinion. Shaikh for example was receptive to the possibility that “...anybody would turn to the idea that [any attack] was a backlash to an incident”. But he tempered this by adding how “...it could just be a random attack or a revenge on someone or something that is not connected to anything...but we think it may be connected.” For Asif at the Medina Masjid, there was little doubt about a link. He was clear that events that occurred at the national and international levels were present in the minds of those perpetrating attacks against mosques and indeed, individual Muslims at the local level. At the Jamia Masjid, Yahya agreed: “It was definitely a reaction to recent events” citing the murder of Lee Rigby in London and the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. As he explained, his mosque had always enjoyed good relations with local non-Muslim communities and so for him it would need something significant and undoubtedly horrific to change the views of those who know the mosque. Suleiman at the As-Salafi Masjid voiced similar: “...because the incidents are so horrific...they cause a backlash and antagonise a lot of people”. For him, this was the key driver for perpetrators.

It was Zeb from the Markazi Masjid whose articulation was particularly pertinent. For her, the attack was a manifestation of “a form of hatred towards Islam”. As she went on, the mosque “was targeted...because the building is a symbol of Islam”. By making this link, Zeb was suggesting similar to that being expressed in various scholarly works where mosques were shown to have a symbolic function. Suleiman too inferred something similar in relation to how mosques have been shown to have a symbolic function in the existing literature. Albeit with less clarity, Suleiman said that the Markazi Masjid was an “easy target” for those seeking revenge against Muslims and their religion. In recalling Allen<sup>61</sup>, it is likely that such

views would have drawn upon the notion and role of normative truths. Indeed, these were evident in other ways too including how a number of respondents spoke about the ongoing problematization of Muslims and Islam in contemporary British – and for some, Western - society. For Shaikh, evidence of this could be seen in how “the media and authorities constantly create negative portrayals of Muslims”. Going on, he said this was particularly problematic because “people are simple...they look at headlines and they make their minds up for them”. For Shaikh, this contributed to the process of “creating Islamophobia”. In other words, the recurrence and perpetuation of the normative truths about Muslims and Islam function by reinforcing and reifying Islamophobia and Islamophobic thinking.

At the Islamic Dawah Centre, Awan said that it was important to remember how the present setting was “difficult times for Muslims...” before adding that “...the media does not help in this sense”. For him, the national media was guilty of constantly reinforcing a whole raft of negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, many of which were accepted and subsequently digested without question or critique by the general public. While Awan felt “the media has a responsibility” in society, Khan agreed although added that there was little evidence of this when it came to Muslims and Islam. Zeb’s observations were again pertinent in this respect. Agreeing with Awan’s view that these were ‘difficult times for Muslims’, she added how in “...times of trouble, the politicians and media do not help us [Muslims]”. Stating that she felt personally disappointed by this, she said it was so important that politicians and the media “play a very crucial role in the ways some people react to these types of incidents”. But as she went on, even if Muslims and Islam were to be presented in more positive frames she believes that “...the damage is already done”. As she concluded, “...the vilification of Muslims and Islam is increasing more and more”.

At the South Street Mosque, Dawud explained how people “always want a scapegoat” when terror atrocities occur. Suleiman at the As-Salafi Masjid agreed, adding that a “sort of vulnerability” becomes quickly apparent among both Muslims and non-Muslims in the wake of such incidents. As he put it, “not only does it feel that the [Muslim] community is attacked collectively for a crime that is committed by someone else...it also feels they are under siege and held responsible for what happened wherever that may be”. The result for him is the view that “the whole [Muslim] community has been punished”. Some resonance with ideological Islamophobia would again appear to be apparent in the way in which the participants seem to believe that there are certain meanings and understandings about Muslims and Islam that duly inform the social consensus. So too would there seem to be some resonance with the notion of reductionism within emergent theories relating to Islamophobia, where Muslims and Islam become a unidimensional; homogenous entity attributed with a series of negative and stereotypical characteristics. This would seem to underlie the views expressed about how all Muslims without differentiation appear to be seen to be unquestionably culpable.

### **Symbols, Problems and Targets**

As noted previously, this study aims to contribute to new knowledge and thinking to what

appears to be a gap in the existing body of scholarly literature relevant to the problematization of mosques. To date, studies have largely focused on the conflict and contestation associated with the building and construction of new and proposed mosques, in particular how they function symbolically where perceived problems, anxieties and fears associated with Muslims and Islam are more widely seen to be played out. The study seeks to go beyond this, instead focusing on what appeared to be a somewhat overlooked yet concurrent phenomenon that incorporated all mosques – including those that in the context of this study might be described as old and established - as a way of trying to improve understanding about the process of problematizing mosques. Before considering the new insights achieved by doing so, it is worth reflecting on why this particular focus of inquiry appeared to be overlooked in scholarly studies. Probably the most realistic explanation would appear to relate to the issue of information and data. It is only in recent years that the systematic recording of data relating to Islamophobic hate crimes, whether against individual Muslims or the material entities associated with them or their communities, has begun in earnest. The findings presented here then go some way to establishing a new frontier for scholarly inquiry and investigation in the field of critical Islamophobia studies.

As highlighted in this research , some clear resonance exists between the canon of scholarly literature relevant to new and proposed mosques and the new evidence presented here relevant to hate crime targeting older and more established mosques. In this way and quite irrespective of whether new or old, all mosques would appear to function as sites where the problematization of Muslims and Islam can be played out, be that *via* opposition and conflict in the case of new and proposed mosques or *via* graffiti, damage or arson among others in the case of older and more established mosques. In line with Landman & Wessels' observations about the visible identification of new mosques on the changing urban landscape<sup>62</sup>, Suleiman appears to be suggesting similar when speaking about how he felt the distinct architecture of the As-Salafi Masjid made it an "easy target". In explaining this, he said that not only had the mosque originally been built in an area where few Muslims lived but so too did it embody a style that was starkly different from other buildings in its locale. While Suleiman seems to inadvertently make a link between some of the factors that are relevant for both new and old mosques – architectural design - maybe there is a tangible impact relating to 'difference', be that real or symbolic. If so, might it be possible that the tangible differences of mosques become more noticeable and therefore more symbolic in the wake of terror atrocities. It might also be possible that tangible difference also feeds into what McLoughlin<sup>63</sup> referred to as an increasingly pervasive discourse about Islamification.

This too resonates with Saint-Blancat & di Friedberg's<sup>64</sup> observations about how new mosques were increasingly being seen to symbolise cultural and religious 'Otherness, not least because of the number of respondents who made explicit links between hate crimes targeting their respective mosques and terror atrocities and incidents both nationally and internationally. Similarly, this would seem to reinforce Saint-Blancat & di Friedberg's<sup>65</sup> other observation that mosques are increasingly becoming sites through which "symbol[s] of a national debate" can be played out. It would also appear that mosques are increasingly sites where anxieties, anger and other similar feelings can be directed and vented. As such, a local-

national nexus can be seen in the widespread acknowledgement that an incident occurring either nationally or internationally involving Muslims committing atrocities had the very potential to prompt and catalyse a hate crime targeting a mosque and its Muslim community locally. Here too was clear evidence to support Stussi's<sup>66</sup> explanation of the symbolic function of mosques, in particular how wider societal fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam and the problems associated with them become the lens through which mosques are framed. And as with the Swiss minaret ban, so it might be that this provides some insight into why individuals and groups choose to perpetrate such attacks if, that is, the attacks are considered in the context of seemingly needing to have a 'response' to Muslims and Islam.

This can also be framed by Jonker's<sup>67</sup> study and the transformative impact of atrocities and incidents where Muslims or Islam are blamed or held responsible. Catalysed by the 'curve of anger', Jonker<sup>68</sup> showed how opposition to the building of new mosques became more angry, vitriolic and hateful following 9/11. For the majority of those interviewed here, a similar although again unacknowledged 'curve of anger' was seen to have been catalytic in the perpetration of most of the attacks. As well as Jonker<sup>69</sup>, so too does this resonate with studies that have shown the impact of 'trigger events' and the preponderance of Islamophobic attitudes and attacks that follow.<sup>70</sup> Knowing that trigger events prompt a sharp but temporary increase in attacks against Muslims, existing scholarly literature has only been able to illustrate this with regards to attacks perpetrated against the individual. Here though, it would seem that something similar might also occur as regards Islamophobic incidents that target the material and physical as well. While noting the limitations of this research as regards generalizability, it is however legitimate to posit that in the contemporary setting it would appear that distinct similarities exist between the problematization of new and proposed mosques and those that are older and established as regards the symbolic function each perform. Likewise also, that there appears to be some significant similarities between Islamophobically motivated attacks catalysed by trigger events quite irrespective of whether they are perpetrated against the individual or the material.

To what extent might this also be a basis upon which to affirm broader theories about new and proposed mosques from the existing body of scholarly evidence? As Göle<sup>71</sup> noted, because mosques are no longer seen as mere places of worship but as cultural constructions of difference and 'Otherness', so they become symbolic of all that is contemporarily known and understood about Muslims and Islam, in particular that which is believed to be problematic. As before, the building and development of new mosques was shown to be inextricably bound to the social and political constructions about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting. Might it be that now, all mosques without differentiation of age, history, design and so on can – at times – also be inextricably bound to the social and political constructions about Muslims and Islam? If those social and political constructions are seen to be equivalent to the concept of normative truths, in that they shape and inform that which is contemporarily known about Muslims and Islam – thereby informing the social consensus – then it would be fair to conclude that the symbolic function performed by mosques is indeed underpinned by an ideological Islamophobia. The lens of critical Islamophobia studies therefore provides a better understanding and explanation of the

processes of problematizing mosques, of why they become sites of conflict and opposition, and also the symbolic function they perform in the contemporary social and political settings. Consequently, it would appear correct to suggest that ‘Islamophobia-thinking’ – founded on the normative truths - can be not only easily and swiftly deployed but so too deployed in ways that are rather more dynamic, protean and transient. With this in mind, further investigation into the ongoing problematization of all types of mosques would appear to be something that is increasingly necessary and undoubtedly overdue.

## NOTES

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