# What motivates Muslims to engage in counter-extremism? The role of identity, efficacy, emotions and morality

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**Abstract:**

Western governments increasingly encourage Muslims to challenge Islamist extremism. However, the dominant academic and public discourse regards Muslims as deeply alienated and thus reluctant to do so. The article investigates motivations for Muslim counter-extremism engagement and based on that formulates policy recommendations that are useful to government agencies that seek to mobilize Muslim communities to fight Islamist extremism. The analysis finds that Muslims are more likely to mobilize if governments highlight how Islamist extremism violates Islamic and universal values, how it negatively affects particular sections of Muslim communities and how it can be successfully tackled by Muslim-based action.

**Keywords:** counter-extremism, Muslims, motivations, activism, collective action theory

**Introduction**

Modern counter-extremism approaches put a premium on active engagement of civil society, be it ordinary citizens, family members, friends, non-governmental organizations or entire communities.[1] In this "civilianization" of counter-terrorism policies,[2] citizens become co-producers of security.[3] In particular, Muslim communities in the West are "responsibilised" and "mobilized" to take a role in countering Islamist extremism.[4]

However, academic research has described Muslims as being deeply alienated by counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies, which are thought to compound the negative effects of widespread anti-Muslim discrimination, anxieties and hatred.[5] Manifested in suspicion, fear and distrust of the authorities, alienation is thought to limit the willingness of Muslims to engage in counter-extremism.[6] Those Muslims who do engage and receive government support in their efforts are often labelled as "sell-outs" and viewed with suspicion.[7] Public discourse on the issue also seems to lean towards the idea that Muslims are not active enough when it comes to challenging Islamist extremism.[8]

Yet, the media also report on Muslims participating in one-off collective actions against Islamist extremism (e.g., demonstrations or petitions) in response to particular events and on Muslim activists engaged in long-term counter-extremism efforts.[9] This indicates that at least some sections of Muslim communities are either not alienated or are willing to overcome their alienation when it comes to taking action against Islamist extremism. Either way, if Western governments want to encourage more Muslims to challenge Islamist extremism, it is important to study the motivation of both one-off and long-term Muslim activists. Finding out what motivates Muslims to stand up and act against Islamist extremism would help to focus government agencies' and civil society organizations' mobilizing efforts and avoid alienation. Indirectly, such investigations will help make counter-terrorism policies more effective.

The objective of this article is thus to investigate motivations of Muslims to engage in counter-extremism in spite of widespread alienation and based on this to formulate policy recommendations for government agencies or civil society organizations that seek to mobilize Muslim communities for the fight against Islamist extremism and terrorism. The study focuses on the case of British Muslims, because the British context represents a case with a sizeable Muslim minority, a history of Muslim homegrown terrorism and long-standing policies centered on encouraging Muslim communities to co-produce in counter-terrorism.[10] Thus, in the UK we find Muslims engaged in the fight against Islamist extremism, despite an alledged high degree of Muslim alianation in regards to counter-terrorism.

The theoretical framework of this study borrows from van Zomeren's[11] review of social-psychological theories of motivations for collective action, which identifies four core motivations for engaging in activism: identity, efficacy, emotions and morality. The predictive power of these motivations in the case of Muslim counter-extremism engagement is tested with the use of an original survey of British Muslims (n = 825). This deductive approach is complemented by an analysis of an open-ended question about motivation for action against Islamist extremism, which is included in the survey, as well as semi-structured interviews with British Muslim counter-extremism activists (n = 30). The interviews shed light on the motivations of long-term counter-extremism activists and whether these motivations are similar to the ones driving one-off action.

The article proceeds as follows. First, based on van Zomeren's outlined motivational framework, I derive five hypotheses about British Muslims' motivation to counter-extremism. Next, I describe the collection of the survey data and the interviews, the key variables and controls used in the analysis of the survey data and the coding procedure for the analysis of the interview data. Then, I present and discuss the results structured along four main motivations: identity, efficacy, emotions and morality. I conclude by discussing the policy implications of the findings.

**Motivations for counter-extremism**

In the absence of a theory that deals specifically with motivations for engagement in counter-extremism, this study draws on recent insights from social-psychological theories of motivation for collective action. According to the definition of collective action by Wright et al., "[a] group member engages in collective action any time that he or she is acting as a representative of the group and where the action is directed at improving the conditions of the group as a whole".[12] This definition has been extended to include other goals than improving the condition of one's group.[13] It could be argued that Islamist terrorism and extremism, apart from directly victimizing Muslims, contributes to anti-Muslim anxiety, prejudice and discrimination, which puts entire Muslim communities under pressure and leaves them in a disadvantaged position. Therefore, a Muslim who takes an action against Islamist extremism can be seen as improving the condition and the status of Muslims as a group.

Collective action can be collective in form (e.g., a demonstration), but it can also be individualistic in form (e.g., a petition), as long as the individual action is linked to a larger group of people on whose behalf or for whose sake it is being done. In this light, a Muslim who engages another Muslim in a private discussion with the aim of dissuading him or her from extremist ideas can be regarded as engaged in a form of collective action, assuming the engagement is being done on behalf of or for the sake of other Muslims.

There is a heterogeneity of approaches to understanding motivations for collective action. Some are rooted in rational choice theory, some in social identity theory and others in emotions. In his review of existing approaches and theories, van Zomeren[14] identified four recurrent motivations for taking collective action: *identity*, *efficacy*, *emotions* and *morality*.

The concept of identity motivation derives from *social identity theory*,[15] which asserts that people understand themselves in terms of social categories and group memberships. On the group level, members share a *collective identity* that defines what the group is about and feeds back to the individual's social identity, which defines what the individual is about.[16] *Group identification* is the link between social identity and collective identity.[17] The strength of group identification influences how much we are prepared to act on behalf or for the sake of our group, for example to enhance or protect its status.[18] If one strongly identifies with women as a group, one will be more likely to participate in collective protest activities against a law that is harmful to women's interest.[19] By extension, assuming that Islamist extremism is harmful to Muslims in both direct (e.g., as victims of terrorist attacks) and indirect (e.g., as victims of anti-Muslim anxieties) ways, I formulate the following hypothesis:

*H1a: The stronger British Muslims identify as Muslims, the more likely they are to take action against Islamist extremism.*

Research has also shown that a specific identification beyond a broad and "objective" social category (such as sex) can have even more predictive power. For example, identifying with a specific feminist organization, movement, or activist identity would be a better predictor of collective action than identification with women in general.[20] This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H1b: The stronger British Muslims identify with counter-extremism activists, the more likely they are to take action against Islamist extremism.*

Political and social actions are goal-directed, meaning there is usually an explicit or implicit desirable outcome envisaged behind them, whose realization motivates people to action. More precisely, people are motivated by the perception that the realization of these goals is actually achievable, i.e. they have to feel efficacious. Hornsey et al.[21] suggested that besides the ultimate or formal goal of a particular collective action (e.g., reducing extremism), there are other goals, whose fulfilment can draw people into action, like influencing a third party (e.g., the media or the non-Muslim part of the society) or attracting more activists to the cause. In this article, I focus on *group efficacy*, which is the belief that the group effort (not just the individual contribution) will bring about the desired goals. Building on this, I hypothesize the following:

*H2: The more British Muslims believe that their group effort can make a difference, the more likely they are to take action against Islamist extremism.*

In the past, scholars like Le Bon or Freud regarded emotions as irrational and potentially destructive aspect of collective action. Contemporary researchers consider emotions as a coping reaction based on a rational cognitive appraisal of one's situation.[22] Emotions therefore are "associated with states of action readiness that prepare individuals for adaptive action".[23] There has been a special emphasis on the role of *anger*, which is thought to be the most potent predictor of political action because it is an approach oriented emotion that encourages action, rather than withdrawal.[24] This leads to the next hypothesis:

*H3: The more anger British Muslims feel against Islamist extremists, the more likely they are to take action against Islamist extremism.*

People can also take action in response to the violation of their strongly held norms and values.[25] An *inner moral obligation* to act[26] develops from the need to protect *moral convictions*,[27] which are defined as "strong and absolute stances on moralized issues".[28] Absolute stances on moralized issues are also referred to as "sacred values", understood as "any value that a moral community implicitly or explicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with bounded or secular values".[29] Therefore, the final hypothesis is as follows:

*H4: The more British Muslims feel that it is their moral obligation to act against Islamist extremism, the more likely they are to take action against Islamist extremism.*

**Methodology and Data**

This study combines a deductive and inductive research strategy to investigate the motivations of British Muslims to counter-extremism. The deductive approach is employed when testing the formulated hypotheses using survey data of British Muslims, while a more inductive approach is applied to the qualitative data from the survey's open-ended question and interviews with British Muslim counter-extremism activists.

*Representative survey with British Muslims*

The survey data was collected between December 2017 and January 2018 by the survey company Qualtrics. The survey included an experimental component, which is reported elsewhere.[30] The variables reported on here were not affected by the experimental manipulation. The respondents were self-identified Muslims living in the United Kingdom and the final sample (n = 825) was representative of the UK Muslim population in terms of gender (men = 430, women = 395), age and

education (although the age groups above 55 were slightly underrepresented and the sample was slightly overrepresented on the graduate and postgraduate levels).

*Measures*

*Intention to take counter-extremism action.* The respondents were presented a short scenario in which they were asked to imagine that a terrorist attack occurred and that the perpetrators were British Muslim. The dependent variable was measured on a 7-point Likert scale from extremely unlikely to extremely likely in response to the question: *Provided you had the opportunity, how likely is it that you would take any of these actions in response to the attack?* The actions were: signing a petition, donating to counter-extremism organizations, joining a march against extremism, opposing extremists on the social media, opposing extremists in face-to-face discussions and physically preventing them from staging public events. An index of the intention to take counter-extremism action was constructed out of these six items ($\alpha = .85$) with a mean of .67 (SD = .22). This and all other measures below were scored on a scale from 0 to 1.

*Identity.* An index was constructed measuring Muslim identity strength based on three items on a 7-point Likert scale that correspond to Cameron's (2004) three aspects of social identity: in-group ties (*I feel strong ties to other Muslims*), in-group affect (*In general I am glad to be a Muslim*) and cognitive centrality (*Being a Muslim is an important part of my self-image*). The index showed good reliability ($\alpha = .88$), with a mean score of .78 (SD = .24).

*Group efficacy.* An index was constructed measuring the perception of group efficacy based on three items ($\alpha = .78$) on a 7-point Likert scale, following Honsey et al.[31] observation that people judge the effectiveness of collective action by different criteria: reaching the overall desired goal of the action (*As Muslims, I think we can help to reduce the level of Islamist extremism in the UK*), influencing third parties *(As Muslims, I think we can prove to the rest of society that Muslim*

*communities in the UK do not support Islamist extremism) and* building a movement (*As Muslims, I think we can inspire fellow Muslims in the UK to become involved in countering Islamist extremism*). The index had a mean of .78 (SD = .21).

*Emotions.* Four emotions in response to Islamist extremism were measured, each by a single item on a 7-point Likert scale (*Islamist extremists make me feel angry/guilty/ashamed/afraid*). Mean scores and standard deviations were .79 (.24), .47 (.33), .66 (.33), and .67 (.30) respectively.

*Moral obligation.* An index was constructed measuring felt moral obligation to act against Islamist extremism based on two items ($\alpha$ = .85) on a 7-point Likert-scale (*I feel a sense of moral duty to take action against Islamist extremism*; *I feel a sense of religious duty to take action against Islamist extremism*). The mean score for the combined index was .73 for (SD = .22).

Apart from the main dependent and independent variables, a number of control variables were measured: *age*, *gender*, *education*, *place of birth* (in/outside of the UK) and *past protest experience*. The last variable was constructed by listing fourteen forms of political activism (ranging from liking a Facebook group to fighting with police or rival demonstrators, in randomized order) and asking the respondents to indicate for each whether they have done it in the past twelve months. A simple formative index of past experience in political activism was created by adding up responses. Since it is commonly assumed that at the heart of collective action there are *grievances*,[32] I included an item that measured the extent of grievances vis-à-vis Islamist extremism on a 7-point Likert-scale (*Islamist extremism is a serious problem in the UK*). The variable had a mean of .65 (SD = .28).

The survey also included an open-ended question that was posed to the respondents after they indicated their likelihood to join a specific counter-extremism demonstration (the dependent measure of the experimental component of the study). This question simply asked the respondents about the reason for their answer. I have analyzed the reasons given by those respondents who were slightly, moderately and extremely likely to participate (n = 495). Their written replies were sorted using two

rounds of coding in Microsoft Excel. In the first round, I applied open coding, using labels that summarized respondents' replies about reasons for engagement.[33] In the second round of coding, I grouped together those open codes that expressed the same core reason (see Table A1 in the Appendix for the coding frame).

### *Interviews with British Muslim counter-extremism activists*

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with British Muslims counter-extremism activists (18 men and 12 women), whose age span from early 20s to late 60s, with an average of around 40 years. The interviews lasted an hour on average and took place in various areas of England (mainly in London, Birmingham and Manchester) in October and November 2017. Eight of the interviews were conducted remotely over a video chat application, while the rest was conducted face to face. Part of the interviewees were identified with the use of the British media reports and with the help of existing prior contacts of the author. Additional interviewees were identified through a snow-ball method by asking interviewees to recommend further contacts.

In line with the abovementioned definition of British Muslim counter-extremism activists, the interviewees covered a wide range of activism. Some were primarily engaged in inter-faith and cohesion work, where counter-extremism was included only as one of many other activities. Some work with vulnerable people, for example with drug addicts or troubled youth, and address extremism as another threat these people face. Others are focused on religious education and engage in activities against Islamist extremism as a part of their efforts to promote "true" Islam among Muslims and non-Muslims. The interviewees were either volunteers in their activism, semi-paid or full-time paid professionals. Some of them worked for the government at some point in their careers and four of them were former activists who worked for the government at the time of the interviews.

The interviews flexibly followed a structure that consisted of questions about the activists'
background, the first time they encountered Islamist extremism, their motivation for countering it
(with follow-up questions probing emotions and perception of group efficacy), major challenges to
their activism, their assessment of the government counter-extremism policy and their assessment of
other Muslim counter-extremism activists or organizations. All interviews were transcribed and
coded using the software package NVivo. As in the case of the qualitative survey data, two rounds of
coding were applied. First, using a closed coding strategy,[34] a priori meta-codes consisting of the four
core motivations for collective action were created. Subsequently, relevant sentences or paragraphs
from the interview transcripts were assigned to one of the four meta-codes. In the second round of
coding, I grouped these excerpts together to create more specific sub-categories within the meta-
codes. For example, sub-categories *protecting women* and *protecting vulnerable Muslims* were
created within the meta-code *identity motivation.* I then re-read all sub-categories of the meta-codes
and arrived at four final labels covering the most frequent reasons given as a motivation for long-term
counter-extremism activism (see Table A2 in the Appendix for the coding frame).


**Results**

***The likelihood and types of counter-extremism engagement***

The survey data indicates that the likelihood of British Muslims taking action against Islamist
extremism is high. Although this might be a product of social desirability bias or simply driven by
the low-cost low-risk category of "signing a petition", it nevertheless casts doubt on the dominant
narrative of Muslim alienation and reluctance to stand up against Islamist extremism. Over 90% (n =
745) of the survey respondents indicate to be slightly, moderately or extremely likely to take at least
one of the six types of action against Islamist extremism in response to the terrorist attack (see Table
1). Around 5% (n = 42) indicated that they were "neither likely nor unlikely" to take any action.

Almost one third of the respondents (29%, n = 239) were slightly, moderately or extremely likely to engage in all of the six actions. Concerning the different forms of action, the respondents were unsurprisingly more likely to engage in low-cost and low-risk actions like signing a petition or debating extremists on-line than donating money for the cause or physically preventing extremists from staging public events. This is in line with existing scholarship on activism.[35] What stands out, however, is the reluctance to take part in a public march against Islamist extremism, which might partially explain the lack of "visible" collective street actions by Muslims against Islamist extremism, sometimes criticized by sections of the majority society. Female respondents especially were less likely to participate in a march.

**Table 1 about here**

***The role of identity, efficacy, anger and moral obligation in motivating counter-extremism activism***

In order to test the formulated hypotheses, I ran two multiple linear regressions. The first regression, presented in Table 2, shows the relationship between the four hypothesized motivations and the index of counter-extremism behavioral intentions. In the second regression, presented in Table 3, I disaggregated the index into the six specific types of action. Below, I discuss the results from the regressions and complement them with findings from the open-ended survey question (Figure 1) and the interviews.

**Table 2 and Table 3 about here**

*Identity*

When it comes to identity, measured as the strength of identification with Muslims, there is no statistically significant effect on taking counter-extremism action in any of the regressions (Table 2 and Table 3). Therefore, we do not find support for hypothesis H1a. On the other hand, Table 2 shows

that identity in terms of identification with Muslims who counter Islamist extremism has a positive coefficient, which is statistically significant (although only at $p < 0.1$). Similarly, this measure of identity has a positive and statistically significant relationship with two out of the six types of counter-extremism action (Table 3). This lends some support to hypothesis H1b. Those respondents who strongly identified with Muslims engaged in counter-extremism were statistically more likely to be men, highly educated, strongly identifying themselves as Muslims, perceiving Islamist extremism as a major problem, feeling efficacious and having past experience in protesting.

These findings are in line with research that holds that the strength of *politicized identity*[36] or *opinion-based group identity*[37] is a better predictor of engagement in collective action than identification with broad social categories. Broad categories of identification are usually employed in studies of political and social protests, which are usually about ingroup-outgroup conflicts, where the disadvantaged ingroup (e.g., workers, students or ethnic minorities) fights for equality and justice. McGarty et al.[38] argue that in the real world there are often deep divisions within disadvantaged groups that cannot be captured by such an approach. Our case of British Muslims can be regarded as a case of infighting within one such group. This does not necessarily imply that there is an open conflict between Muslims who support extremism and those who do not. Rather, it is likely that the missing relationship between Muslim identity and the willingness to engage in counter-extremism reflects, among other things, strong suspicions about and contestation of counter-extremism policies, which some Muslims feel are discriminatory and stigmatizing.[39]

Yet, identity seems to play an important role for taking counter-extremism action, despite the fact that it does not have predictive statistical power. In Figure 1, I categorized the reasons for participating in a demonstration against Islamist extremism after a hypothetical terrorist attack, which were given by the survey respondents. Reasons are not the same as motivations and so getting at the underlying motives behind some of the answers can be challenging. Nevertheless, I argue that linked to the

identity motivation is the category *Distancing from extremists*. This category captures the desire to protect the image, and thus the status, of the respondent and his or her social group, i.e., Muslims. An example of this category is the following answer: "To show I am the definition of a Muslim, and they are not." *Supporting the country and fellow citizens* is another category related to identity motivation. Here, the respondents emphasized their belonging to the UK and the British society and the corresponding need to protect both from the threat of extremism. Identity motivation is also likely behind the need to demonstrate Muslim unity captured by the category of the same name. Finally, the category *Helping or protecting Islam or Muslims* straddles both identity and moral motivations, because the responses express concern for either Muslims or Islam, but it is unclear if the concern stems from the threat to the status of the group (related to identity) or violation of deeply held values (related to moral obligation).

**Figure 1 about here**

Issues of identity also appeared in the interviews with Muslim counter-extremism activists. In these interviews, I have identified four motivational themes in total. *Protecting vulnerable Muslims*, was the second most frequent theme and it expressed the need to protect vulnerable people, especially Muslim women and youth. Although activists expressed concerns about the negative impact of Islamist extremism on the status of all Muslims, it seems that identifying with particular sub-groups within the Muslim communities was particularly motivating to a number of activist for their counter-extremism engagement. For example, three women activists *(I13, I21, I26)* emphasized the need to protect girls and other women from experiencing overly conservative or isolationist tendencies in their communities. These concerns often stemmed from their own experience, projected on the next generation:

I know so many people that privately have so many doubts, feel restricted, especially women, but they can't, they can't say anything, they feel scared, they don't want to be tarnished. … I don't want people to feel bad, I don't want people to feel less, that's why I do this for my daughter, I don't want her to grow up feeling completely minimized like I did. *(I13)*

Another group of activists expressing strong motivation to protect vulnerable Muslims were those who had been engaged in different forms of helping activism, like supporting drug addicts or delinquent youth. It was often the case that these activists had been themselves in the shoes of the people they were now trying to help and they felt a duty to "give back". They would approach counter-extremism as a safeguarding issue, in addition to other risks that vulnerable Muslims face:

This is for me my passion and my calling, working with young people … it is based on my personal experience. As I have mentioned, I grew up with all these issues: racism, feeling self-harm, isolation, feeling not integrated in society, not having belonging. So for me, I'm driven by purpose. I see young people in particular, making the same mistakes … we need to connect and we need to reach out. We need to be there for them. *(I28)*

The protective motivation also developed as a reaction to far-right extremism and racism. Seven interviewees emphasized traumatizing encounters with racism as a motivation to protect other victims of racism, with whom they identify, from following the self-destructive path of radicalization:

I just can't allow the next generation to feel the way that I did. … I just feel like these

people are in a tough situation and I understand their pain. … If I didn't suffer racism as

a young guy and see people banged up and throw their lives away — I think [that]

motivated me more than anything else. *(I5)*

Another interview theme, *Correcting the reputation of Muslims*, captures the need to distance

"normal" Muslims from the extremists: "[W]e as a Muslim community are trying to disassociate

ourselves from ISIS, because ISIS is something – is a terror that we really don't want to be linked

with *(I11)*." A different interviewee used the word "friend" to denote Islam or Muslim communities

in an allegory meant to explain the felt obligation to act: "If you have a friend who people think is

bad and they are talking bad around his back, you have to give the true side of this person *(I29)*." The

need to exonerate one's identity is both inward and outward oriented. "[A]s a Muslim you don't want

people to fear Muslims" *(I29)* is a practical concern regarding becoming a member of a suspect

community. The inward oriented, more psychological concern has to do with defending social identity

in one's own eyes: "So if these people [extremists] are thinking that the religion is only about killings

and shedding blood … if this is the true Islam, so why I am Muslim now *(I29)*?"

The need to set the record straight was typical of those active on the soft end of counter-extremism

(i.e., activities dominated by education, cohesion and inter-faith work). Particularly veiled women, as

visible Muslims, and members of Islamic minority communities like the Shias or Ahmadis, felt the

need to cleanse their Muslim identity from the stain of extremism.

*Group efficacy*

Moving on to the perception of efficacy as a motivation for counter-extremism, Table 2 shows a

positive and statistically significant relationship with the likelihood of taking action against Islamist

extremism. What was measured in the survey was *group* efficacy and accordingly, Table 3 shows

that group efficacy is not statistically significant (or only marginally in case of physical confrontation) when it comes to individualistic actions, like confronting extremists on social media or face to face. Other types of action that imply more of a group effort have positive and statistically significant relationship with group efficacy, which together with the result from Table 1 supports hypothesis *H2*. Those respondents who perceived high group efficacy were statistically more likely to be men, born outside of the UK, feeling strongly morally obliged to act, score high on all four emotions and on both measures of identity. Past protest experience was not correlated with group efficacy.

Turning to the data from the open-ended survey question (Figure 1), the category *Instrumental reasoning* cover replies that focus on the specific outcome of the action, for example sending a message to the extremists or stopping terrorism. It is likely that the motivation behind taking action in such a goal-oriented approach has to do with felt group efficacy – the perception that it will matter. Admittedly, efficacy, rather than identity, can be the dominant motivation behind the category *Distancing from extremists*. It may therefore be that two British Muslims who want to distance from extremists and who identify equally strongly with their Muslim identity would differ in their participation on the basis of their perception of whether a demonstration against extremism can achieve (or contribute to) the goal of distancing.

All interviewed activists felt efficacious in what they were doing. Some of them even emphasized their skills as a motivation for getting involved. I named this motivational theme *Applying and improving skills*. Self-efficacy, rather than group efficacy, comes to the fore here. These activists would stress their unique skills to tackle extremism and a greater understanding of the issue than the average person has. This is typical of former extremists who are providing intervention work: "So, I do know radicals. I know their mindset and how they're thinking, how they get into that stage, as well as, I know how important it is actually to counter that. Especially, if you know their thinking *(I22)*." Motivation through knowledge applies also to activists who gained a lot of experience dealing

with radicalized Muslims: "I have a pretty good understanding on this and this is what drives me now because there's no one left [who truly understands the issue and takes a politically balanced position] *(I5)*." They would be mostly engaged in pure counter-extremism work (as opposed to social cohesion or inter-faith dialogues) and regard it as a profession that only a handful skilled practitioners can and should be doing: "I did it because it's a challenge, mentally. And I did it because it was a job, which used my skills *(I20)*."

*Anger*

When it comes to anger as an emotional motivation, Table 2 shows a positive and statistically significant relationship with the likelihood of taking action. Disaggregating different types of action, anger has a positive and statistically significant relationship with all of them, except for marching and physical confrontation. These two types of action are the least popular and it is possible that feeling angry is not enough to overcome the unwillingness to resort to them. Overall, however, I find support for hypothesis *H3*. Those who felt angry were statistically more likely to feel afraid and ashamed, but less likely to feel guilty and have past protest experience. They tended to be born in the UK and score high on feeling morally obliged to act and on perceived group efficacy.

Interestingly, the regressions show that other emotions, namely guilt and fear, have positive and statistically significant relationship with taking action. Fear is often thought of as a paralyzing action inhibiting emotion. However, Table 2 indicates that fear can stimulate those types of actions that avoid physical and virtual contact with the feared adversary (e.g., signing a petition or donating money). When it comes to guilt, a possible explanation is that this emotion might induce action as an ego protective measure with the purpose of soothing one's negative feelings.[40]

Anger showed up in the open-ended survey question too (Figure 1). Here, I coded replies as anger whenever respondents explained their intention to take action solely with invectives addressed to extremists. A (mild) example of what typically were very short answers is: "Because I hate terrorists."

The majority of activists that I interviewed expressed strong negative feelings about extremists. While these feelings would flare up in the form of anger and moral outrage in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, sometimes prompting organization of or participation in one-off action like anti-violence vigils, anger did not seem to sustain long-term activism. In fact, six activists *(I3, I9, I10, I17, I12, I20)* said they did not feel anger, but rather sadness (sometimes combined with shame). Two ex-extremists felt guilt *(I8, I22)* and one activists said he was feeling already "numb". He also summed up the likely effect of emotions by describing them as reactive, while he, as an activist, wanted to be pro-active *(I1)*. Such accounts fit well into the distinction between reactive and, more stable and longer lasting, affective emotions,[41] where anger belongs to the former category, while hatred, hostility or loathing fall on the affective end of the emotional continuum.

*Moral obligation*

Moral obligation has a positive and statistically significant relationship with both the index of counter-extremism behavior (Table 2) and all the separate six types of action (Table 3). This supports the last hypothesis *H4*. The standardized beta coefficients for moral obligation, group efficacy and anger are .28, .13 and .14, respectively, which suggests that it is the strongest motivation for taking action against Islamist extremism. Those scoring high on moral obligation to act against Islamist extremism were statistically more likely to perceive high group efficacy, feel angry, have past experience with protest and identify strongly as Muslims.

That moral obligation to act is the strongest motivation for British Muslims to act against Islamist extremism is also reflected in the most frequent category of the responses to the open-ended survey

question – *Expressing own values and rejecting extremism*. An example of such a response is the following quote: "I feel morally obligated to fight against people who pose a threat to my life and way of living. They also conduct multiple cruel and unfair practices which I feel that they should not be allowed to." *Religious reasoning* is equally about moral values. This category applies to all responses that referred explicitly to religious duty or paraphrased religious sources about obligation to forbid evil. Together, these two categories make up about one third of all reasons given for taking action against Islamist extremism.

The most frequent motivational theme that came out from the interviews with counter-extremism activists confirms the importance of moral obligation to act. This theme was coded *Protecting and fulfilling religious and humanist values* and captures two types of moral obligation. One is explicitly linked to religious duty, while the other was expressed in non-religious language of humanism and human rights. Starting with the former, over half of the interviewees said they were motivated to counter Islamist extremism because their Islamic values compelled them to do so. One typical example:

> I'm doing it not because the government says so, but because I understand this as the best way to serve my faith. … I'm seeking my salvation … so everything I'm doing with the Home Office, counter-radicalization, or talking with these Islamists, is my way of being a dutiful slave of God. *(I17)*

Interviewees who stressed religious values frequently referred to passages of the Quran and ahaadeeth (the examples of the Prophet) that deplore taking innocent lives and command to right wrong and challenge evil. They would regard their activism as a "wajib" (duty), believing that Islam is a religion that requires social action against injustice.

Quran, basically, is the best guidance you can get. And, if you read it, you can't stop yourself from stopping the wrong. Stopping the wrong, if a wrong is happening, innocent people are dying here, there, everywhere. … These people are dying because of extremism. Extremism which Muslims can't say is not present in Muslim societies. It is. And, sometimes the things they say, are so inhumane, if you are reader of Quran you can't even stop yourself from stopping them. *(I6)*

Activists who instead stressed humanistic values would talk about "injustice", "human rights" or broader, universal, ethics and morality. This attitude is exemplified in the following quote:

I wouldn't describe it as an Islamic religious duty. I would say it's a — you know, for example, when I walk past somebody who is sleeping on the street, I feel a sense of "we should be able to do something about this" … So, I feel a moral responsibility towards that. *(I8)*

Although the quote above makes an explicit distinction between a religious duty and a moral dimension beyond religion, most of those who used the religious framework understood Islamic values as fully encompassing "secular" humanistic ones. Therefore, in their minds, there was no difference between British values or universal values and Islamic values.

**Conclusion**

Western governments, the media and publics increasingly encourage and demand Muslims to challenge Islamist extremism. However, both academic and public discourse suggests that Muslims

deeply resent counter-terrorism policies, which allegedly results in Muslim alienation and reluctance to engage in counter-extremism. This article investigated motivation for counter-extremism engagement of British Muslims in spite of such alienation, using a social-psychological framework of collective action motivation. The findings inform policies aiming at mobilizing Muslims against Islamist extremism in the following way.

The strongest motivation of British Muslims to take both one-off and long-term action against Islamist extremism is the moral obligation to act. This is understandable given that extremism is an issue heavily loaded with values and so collective action against extremism would likely be what Turner and Killian[42] called a *value-oriented action*. Policy makers should, thus, systematically and strongly support communication campaigns and civil society organizations that stress how specifically Islamist extremism and terrorism violate Islamic values, principles and norms and how these principles correspond to universal human values that need to be defended. Where involved directly, Western governments should communicate this message in a self-critical way to avoid charges of hypocrisy and double-standards.

Policy makers can also increase Muslim participation in actions against Islamist extremism by strengthening the motivational dimension of perceived efficacy. For a start, this can be done by clearly communicating what type of actions, precisely, can be taken and how. Positive effects of one-off actions by regular Muslims, such as inspirational confrontations with extremists captured on social media or police tip-offs leading to successful safe-guarding of young and vulnerable Muslims from extremism, should be publicized. The work and positive impact of Muslim counter-extremism activists engaged over the long term should also be highlighted. These activists usually have high perception of efficacy, but they too often complain about insufficient material and moral support from the government. Such support was sought only on more equal terms and with less restrictive caveats attached to it, which indicates that policy makers should re-double their efforts to build more trusting,

democratic, transparent and inclusive relationship with various Muslim communities and organizations.

The insight from the analysis pertaining to identity motivation can help policy makers to magnify the impact of some of the recommendations above. Violation of Islamic and universal values by Islamist extremists can particularly reverberate among Muslim communities if it is related to the negative effects on certain groups of Muslims, such as women and young people. Similarly, examples of successful Muslim interventions can be made more powerful by illustrating their positive effect on these groups. Since identification with Muslim counter-extremism activists proved to predict engagement, policy makers should promote the personal stories of activists who can serve as role models.

Most, if not all, of these recommendations would stir some emotions among Muslims. It is likely that highlighting how Islamist extremism violates Islamic and universal values and how it negatively effects the lives of Muslims, especially certain groups of Muslims, will further magnify the overall motivation to take action. However, for ethical reasons and due to the high risk of backfire, policy makers should not attempt to manipulate emotions like guilt or fear to increase Muslim engagement in counter-extremism.

One limitation of this study is its relative silence regarding potential barriers to taking part in counter-extremism. Obviously, it is not only important to study what motivates Muslims to engagement, but also what hinders them from engaging. The data I collected on this all point in one direction. Some of the biggest obstacles to engagement are the perception of unfair responsibilisation for Islamist extremism, the lack of efficacy and fear. The first obstacle alone opens a debate about the potential counter-productiveness of counter-terrorism policies and qualifies the recommendation to policy makers made above by noting that putting exclusive responsibility on Muslims can backfire. The barriers to Muslim-based counter-extremism is therefore a promising topic for further research.

Another limitation and a potential area for further research is the mutual relationship between the different motivations to counter-extremism. For example, there could be a link between moral obligation and perceived group efficacy to the effect that strongly felt moral obligation to act inflates the perception of the action's effectiveness. A related move beyond correlational study would entail the deployment of experimental designs that could ascertain the causal link between different motivations and engagement in counter-extremism.

The study showed a high level of readiness by British Muslim to engage in various counter-extremism actions, including high-risk actions such as physical confrontations. Since there is only a limited number of paid Muslim counter-extremism activists, who are unlikely to be among the survey respondents, and even if we discount the potential social desirability bias, this calls into question the dominant narrative of Muslim alienation, at least when it comes to willingness to cooperate in counter-terrorism policies. Future studies should scrutinize the alienation narrative in order to paint a more nuanced picture of the extent of Muslim resentment and its alleged effect on cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism. This also opens up an avenue for more theoretically guided research into the ways Muslims can (and demonstrably do) overcome the risks, the lack of selective incentives and the free rider problem linked to collective action against Islamist extremism.

A final note on the generalizability of the results. The context in which British Muslims find themselves is in many ways similar to the situation facing other minority Muslim communities in the Western countries. One variable that could vary more substantially depending on the national context is the perceived group efficacy. The UK has a strong culture of collective action and communitarianism, which might affect the assessment of the likelihood that collective action can reach its desired goal, in contrast to countries with weaker civil society and socio-politically marginalized minorities. In principle, the findings should be also generalizable to non-Muslim counter-extremism activism, with the same caveat on perceived group efficacy. As already

mentioned, extremism is an issue primarily about values and emotions that result from the violation of values. Apart from perceived efficacy, the another potential difference might lie in identity motivation, depending whether the conflict lines run within the ingroup or between groups, understood in terms of broad social categories.

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**Interview list**

I1: Male, member of the executive committee of a Muslim community organization, London, 29.9.2017.

I2: Female, a former director of a Muslim organization, Skype interview – Ireland, 4.10.2017.

I3: Male, a government advisor and activist, London, 10.10.2017.

I4: Female, a director of an anti-extremism NGO, Birmingham, 11.10.2017.

I5: Male, a self-employed counter-extremism activist, Birmingham, 11.10.2017.

I6: Male, an on-line activist, Birmingham, 11.10.2017.

I7: Male, an imam and a member of a counter-extremism organization, London, 12.10.2017.

I8: Male, a director of inter-faith organization, London, 12.10.2017.

I9: Male, a director of counter-extremism organization, Skype interview – Middlesbrough, 13.10.2017.

I10: Female, an activist for an Ahmadi Muslim community, London, 14.10.2017.

I11: Male, an activist for a Shia Muslim community, London, 17.10.2017.

I12: Male, a Muslim community activist, Skype interview – Leicester, 17.10.2017.

I13: Female, an employee of a counter-extremism organization, Blakedown, 18.10.2017.

I14: Male, a government employee in the field of counter-radicalization, Birmingham, 18.10.2017.

I15: Male, a co-director of a Muslim association, Birmingham, 18.10.2017.

I16: Female, an online activist, WhatsApp interview – Cambridge, 19.10.2017.

I17:  Male, director of a Muslim charity, WhatsApp interview – London, 20.10.2017.

I18: Female, director of a Muslim organization, London, 20.10.2017.

I19: Female, a local leader of a Muslim association, London, 23.10.2017.

I20: Male, a former director of a Muslim organization, London, 24.10.2017.

I21: Female, a government employee in the field of counter-radicalization, London, 24.10.2017.

I22: Male, a senior fellow at a counter-extremism organization, London, 31.10.2017.

I23: Female, a local leader of a Muslim association, Manchester, 1.11.2017.

I24: Male, a co-director of a counter-extremism organization, Manchester, 1.11.2017.

I25: Male, a spokesman of a Muslim counter-extremism group, Manchester, 1.11.2017.

I26: Female, a government employee in the field of counter-radicalization, Skype int. – Bristol,

3.11.2017.

I27: Female, a member of a Muslim organization, London, 6.11.2017

I28: Male, a director of a counter-radicalization organization, WhatsApp interview – Birmingham,

7.11.2017.

I29: Female, a member of a counter-extremism organization, London, 8.11.2017.

I30: Male, an imam and counter-radicalization practitioner, Skype interview – Bradford, 9.11.2017.

**Table 1: Means and percentages of the likelihood to engage in six types of action against Islamist extremism (7-point Likert scale).**

| | Petition against extremism | Donation to counter-extremism | Opposing extremists on social media | Marching against extremism | Discussing extremists face to face | Physically confronting extremists |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mean** | 5.7 | 4.9 | 5.2 | 4.8 | 5.1 | 4.4 |
| **Extremely / moderately unlikely** | 5 (43) | 10 (83) | 9 (76) | 11 (91) | 10 (76) | 18 (146) |
| **Slightly unlikely** | 2 (15) | 6 (51) | 4 (34) | 6 (46) | 5 (38) | 8 (66) |
| **Neither likely nor unlikely** | 13 (109) | 23 (188) | 20 (165) | 25 (203) | 19 (160) | 30 (245) |
| **Slightly likely** | 15 (120) | 17 (142) | 16 (129) | 20 (166) | 18 (150) | 12 (97) |
| **Moderately / extremely likely** | 65 (538) | 44 (361) | 51 (421) | 38 (319) | 48 (401) | 33 (271) |
| **Total** | **100 (825)** | **100 (825)** | **100 (825)** | **100 (825)** | **100 (825)** | **100 (825)** |

*Number of observations are in brackets. Percentages are in front of the brackets.*

**Table 2: Direct effect of motivational factors on the likelihood to engage in action against Islamist extremism, controlled for biographical factors, past protest experience and grievances.**

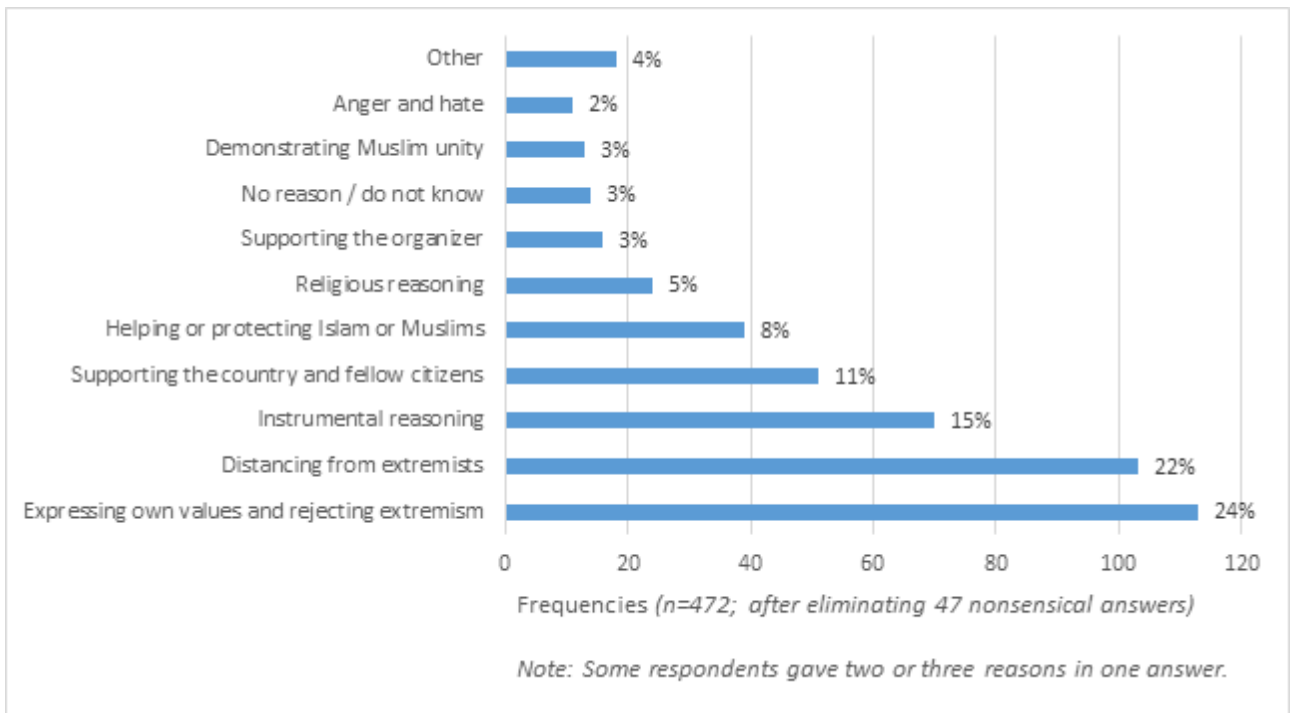| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age (base=18-24)** | | | | | |
| 25 - 34 | -.036* | -.038* | -.035* | -.038** | -.036* |
| | (.020) | (.019) | (.018) | (.017) | (.020) |
| 35 - 44 | -.034* | -.036* | -.036* | -.039** | -.036** |
| | (.021) | (.021) | (.020) | (.018) | (.018) |
| 45 - 84 | -.031 | -.030 | -.029 | -.035 | -.038* |
| | (.025) | (.025) | (.024) | (.023) | (.022) |
| **Gender (base=male)** | | | | | |
| Female | -.006 | -.003 | .006 | -.005 | .001 |
| | (.015) | (.015) | (.014) | (.013) | (.013) |
| **Education** (base=no or secondary) | | | | | |
| Post-secondary/vocational | -.075*** | -.076*** | -.064*** | -.054*** | -.045** |
| | (.023) | (.023) | (.021) | (.020) | (.020) |
| University degree | -.026 | -.034 | -.033* | -.032* | -.027 |
| | (.021) | (.021) | (.020) | (.019) | (.018) |
| **Place of birth** (base=born in the UK) | | | | | |
| Not born in the UK | .041** | .044*** | .032** | .024* | .025* |
| | (.016) | (.016) | (.015) | (.015) | (.014) |
| **Past protest experience** | .027*** | .024*** | .024*** | .022*** | .020*** |
| | (.005) | (.005) | (.005) | (.004) | (.004) |
| **Grievances** | .140*** | .123*** | .086*** | .032 | .027 |
| | (.026) | (.026) | (.025) | (.024) | (.023) |
| **Identity (Muslim)** | | .087*** | .008 | .027 | -.006 |
| | | (.030) | (.030) | (.028) | (.028) |
| **Identity (Muslim C-E activists)** | | .072*** | .042* | .041* | .034* |
| | | (.024) | (.022) | (.021) | (.021) |
| **Group efficacy** | | | .343*** | .236*** | .127*** |
| | | | (.035) | (.035) | (.037) |
| **Anger** | | | | .181*** | .132*** |
| | | | | (.032) | (.031) |
| **Shame** | | | | -.007 | -.008 |
| | | | | (.026) | (.025) |
| **Guilt** | | | | .106*** | .096*** |
| | | | | (.024) | (.024) |
| **Fear** | | | | .068** | .061** |
| | | | | (.027) | (.026) |
| **Moral obligation** | | | | | .267*** |
| | | | | | (.035) |
| Constant | .599*** | .510*** | .351*** | .225*** | .186*** |
| | (.030) | (.037) | (.039) | (.039) | (.038) |
| Observations | 825 | 825 | 825 | 825 | 825 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .086 | .106 | .199 | .284 | .331 |

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

**Table 3: Direct effect of motivational factors on the likelihood to engage in six different types of action against Islamist extremism, controlled for age, education, place of birth and past protest experience.**

| | Petition against extremism | Donation to counter-extremism | Opposing extremists on social media | Marching against extremism | Discussing extremists face to face | Physically confronting extremists |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age (base=18-24)** | | | | | | |
| 25 - 34 | -.008 | -.008 | -.063*** | -.036 | -.041* | -.060** |
| | (.021) | (.024) | (.024) | (.025) | (.025) | (.026) |
| 35 - 44 | .023 | -.030 | -.084*** | -.016 | -.062** | -.048* |
| | (.023) | (.025) | (.025) | (.026) | (.026) | (.027) |
| 45 - 84 | .009 | -.059* | -.079** | -.006 | -.026 | -.071** |
| | (.028) | (.031) | (.031) | (.032) | (.032) | (.033) |
| **Education** (base=no or secondary) | | | | | | |
| Post-secondary/vocational | -.003 | -.071*** | -.032 | -.055* | -.028 | -.076** |
| | (.025) | (.027) | (.028) | (.029) | (.029) | (.030) |
| University degree | -.009 | -.052** | -.023 | -.040 | .016 | -.051* |
| | (.023) | (.026) | (.026) | (.027) | (.027) | (.028) |
| **Place of birth** (base=born in the UK) | | | | | | |
| Not born in the UK | .009 | .012 | .028 | .033 | .013 | .058*** |
| | (.018) | (.020) | (.020) | (.021) | (.021) | (.022) |
| **Past protest experience** | .008 | .014** | .026*** | .032*** | .014** | .027*** |
| | (.005) | (.006) | (.006) | (.006) | (.006) | (.006) |
| **Grievances** | .080*** | .003 | .077** | -.004 | -.027 | .029 |
| | (.029) | (.032) | (.033) | (.034) | (.034) | (.035) |
| **Identity (Muslim)** | -.027 | .016 | -.021 | .006 | -.000 | -.009 |
| | (.035) | (.039) | (.039) | (.040) | (.041) | (.042) |
| **Identity (Muslim C-E activists)** | .023 | .101*** | .029 | .030 | .069** | -.044 |
| | (.026) | (.029) | (.029) | (.030) | (.030) | (.031) |
| **Group efficacy** | .196*** | .082 | .210*** | .123** | .037 | .108* |
| | (.046) | (.051) | (.052) | (.053) | (.054) | (.056) |
| **Anger** | .212*** | .275*** | .097** | .024 | .193*** | -.023 |
| | (.039) | (.043) | (.043) | (.045) | (.045) | (.047) |
| **Guilt** | -.007 | .096*** | .085*** | .102*** | .043 | .241*** |
| | (.027) | (.030) | (.030) | (.031) | (.031) | (.033) |
| **Fear** | .101*** | .045 | .136*** | .079** | .037 | -.040 |
| | (.032) | (.035) | (.035) | (.036) | (.037) | (.038) |
| **Moral obligation** | .155*** | .281*** | .163*** | .315*** | .306*** | .379*** |
| | (.044) | (.049) | (.049) | (.051) | (.051) | (.053) |
| Constant | .241*** | .114** | .157*** | .181*** | .229*** | .190*** |
| | (.048) | (.053) | (.053) | (.055) | (.055) | (.057) |
| Observations | 825 | 825 | 825 | 825 | 825 | 825 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .216 | .261 | .224 | .197 | .167 | .224 |

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

**Figure 1. Reasons given for participation in a demonstration against Islamist extremism**



Frequencies (n=472; after eliminating 47 nonsensical answers)

Note: Some respondents gave two or three reasons in one answer.

**Appendix**

Table A1: Coding frame for the open-ended survey question about the reasons to participate in a demonstration against Islamist extremism

| Main code | Sub-codes (open coding) | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Expressing own values and rejecting extremism | Standing for one's values<br><br>Being against extremism<br><br>Standing up for justice<br><br>Duty as a human/citizen | Emphasis on the rejection of extremism and upholding of different values, principles and norms. |
| Distancing from extremists | Muslims are not extremists<br><br>Islam is religion of good | Emphasis on rejecting the link between extremism and Muslims or Islam. |
| Instrumental reasoning | Stopping extremism<br><br>Sending message to extremists<br><br>Protecting/helping people<br><br>Educating Muslims and others about true Islam | Emphasis on the result of the engagement in terms of achieving a specific outcome. |
| Supporting the country and fellow citizens | Showing solidarity and unity with Britain<br><br>Supporting fellow citizens | Emphasis on the need to protect/advance the country and fellow citizens. |
| Helping or protecting Islam or Muslims | Protecting Islam<br><br>Protecting Muslims | Emphasis on the need to protect Islam or Muslims. |
| Religious reasoning | Extremism is against Islam<br><br>Feeling religious duty | Emphasis on the religion either in terms of incompatibility with extremism or as an explicit religious duty to engage. |
| Supporting the organizer | Supporting government actions<br><br>Supporting MCB | Emphasis on the need to support the organizer of the demonstration. |

| Demonstrating Muslim unity | Advancing Muslim unity/community | Emphasis on the need to demonstrate Muslims' unity. |
|---|---|---|
| Anger and hate | Hating extremists<br><br>Angry with extremism | Emphasis on the emotions felt towards extremism or extremists. |

Table A2: Coding frame for interviews with Muslim counter-extremism activists (only codes pertaining to motivations for engagement)

| Meta codes (closed coding) | Sub-categories | Final label (most frequent reasons for long-term engagement) |
|---|---|---|
| **Identity motivation** | Protecting women<br>Protecting vulnerable youth<br>Protecting all people | Protecting vulnerable Muslims |
| | Duty to clean reputation of Muslims<br>Need to disassociate Muslims from extremism | Correcting the reputation of Muslims |
| **Efficacy motivation** | Learning and applying skills<br>Satisfaction from success<br>Having smaller realistic goals | Applying and improving skills |
| **Morality motivation** | Duty as a Muslim<br>Moral duty expressed non-religiously | Protecting and fulfilling religious and humanist values |
| **Emotional motivation** | Anger<br>Sadness<br>No feelings<br>Shame<br>Guilt and responsibility | - *no reason identified as important in this meta-code* |