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# **Alienation or Cooperation? British Muslims' Attitude to and Engagement in Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Extremism**

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# **Alienation or Cooperation? British Muslims' Attitude to and Engagement in Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Extremism**

## **Abstract:**

The dominant academic narrative portrays British Muslim communities as alienated by counter-terrorism policies and consequently reluctant to cooperate with authorities by taking action against Islamist extremism. This article reassesses and nuances the “alienation narrative” with the use of unique data from three robust surveys of British Muslims. It finds that although a minority shows signs of alienation, most British Muslims are satisfied with and trust counter-terrorism policies as well as the government and the police. The level of willingness to take action against Islamist extremism is also high. The study confirms that aspects of alienation correlate with reduced willingness to take action against Islamist extremism, although they do not necessarily lead to disengagement.

**Keywords:** counter-terrorism, Islamist extremism, Muslims, United Kingdom, alienation, survey

## **Introduction**

Since the Terrorism Act 2000, the UK government has enacted various counter-terrorism<sup>1</sup> legislation primarily in response to the growing threat of Islamist terrorism. This legislation has progressively broadened the scope of terrorism-related offences, increased the power of state security agencies and involved more actors (including non-governmental) in counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>2</sup> Counter-terrorism has shifted markedly into the preventative, pre-crime space, which is the domain of Prevent, one of the four main strands of CONTEST, the UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Further widening of the security net is evidenced by the passage

of the UK Counter-Extremism Strategy in 2015, which “commits the Government to addressing all the broader harms that extremism can cause, not just where it may lead to terrorism.”<sup>3</sup>

Responding to this development, a continuous stream of academic literature argues that British counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies have alienated Muslim communities.<sup>4</sup> According to this dominant narrative, Muslims feel stigmatized, isolated, angry, afraid, and distrustful of authorities. Some researchers have used the concept *suspect community* to describe the position of Muslims in Britain in the context of counter-terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Membership in a suspect community entails, among other things, feelings of fear<sup>6</sup> and “deep resentment”<sup>7</sup>, which are thought to “undermine security” due to Muslims’ social and political disengagement<sup>8</sup>, or even radicalization.<sup>9</sup> Both disengagement and radicalization imply non-cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism. Some studies are even more explicit in linking Muslim alienation to reduced willingness to cooperate in counter-terrorism (for example with respect to intelligence sharing).<sup>10</sup>

This is problematic in terms of social cohesion but also in light of the mantra “communities defeat terrorism” that underpins the UK government counter-terrorism efforts. This approach can be illustrated by the following two quotes. In response to the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, then Prime Minister Tony Blair opined that “[i]n the end, government itself cannot go and root out the extremism in these communities. [...] It’s better that we mobilise the Islamic community itself to do this.”<sup>11</sup> The same underlying idea was expressed by Ian Blair, then head of the UK Metropolitan Police: “It will not be the police and intelligence services that defeat terrorism, it will be communities.”<sup>12</sup> Engaging Muslim communities in counter-terrorism has since been one of the purported aims of the UK government.<sup>13</sup> If counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies alienate Muslim

communities, they might have limited interest in helping the government to “defeat terrorism”.

However, the vast majority of studies that point to the alienation thesis rely on either purely theoretical accounts or empirical data from small-N qualitative research. While rich, in-depth data obtained through qualitative methods are certainly valuable, especially for investigating the impacts of counter-terrorism on particular sections of Muslim communities, it is difficult to generalize from them to the larger population. It is even more difficult to make judgements about the level of actual or potential engagement in counter-terrorism activities among Muslims. In fact, the few existing quantitative studies indicate that trust in the government<sup>14</sup> and the police<sup>15</sup> is higher among British Muslims than among the majority population, the level of “political alienation” is comparable or lower among Muslims than in the rest of society<sup>16</sup> and Muslims show very high levels of readiness to take action against Islamist extremism.<sup>17</sup>

The objective of this article is to reassess and nuance the widespread assumption about Muslim alienation and Muslims’ willingness to engage in counter-terrorism. This is achieved by: a) outlining the core arguments of the dominant narrative of Muslim alienation; b) introducing new quantitative data that allow for a more rigorous assessment of the extent of Muslim alienation, willingness to engage in counter-terrorism/counter-extremism and the relationship between alienation and engagement.

The study focuses on Muslims living in the United Kingdom, but its findings have wider implications for other Western countries with a similar context. The British preventative and community-focused approach has become a source of inspiration to countries such as the US, Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark,<sup>18</sup> while worries about Muslim alienation due to excessive securitization and widespread anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination have been expressed in almost every Western country with sizable Muslim minorities. This article

thus contributes to the research on the reaction to and engagement in counter-terrorism of Muslim communities in the UK and in the West by supplying much needed quantitative data with higher external validity. It situates the existing qualitative in-depth studies within a larger picture of Muslims' attitudes and behaviour regarding counter-terrorism and it tests the assumed connection between Muslims' alienation and reduced willingness to engage in counter-terrorism.

The remainder of the article is organized in five sections. The first section outlines the core arguments of the dominant narrative of Muslim alienation. The second section specifies the sources of my data and their use in the analysis. The third section presents the findings in three parts, which mirror the core arguments of the alienation narrative. The first part investigates British Muslims' attitudes to counter-terrorism policies and other potential indicators of alienation; the second part sheds light on the extent of Muslims' intended and actual engagement in counter-terrorism/counter-extremism; the third part analyses whether alienation correlates with reduced willingness to take action against Islamist extremism. The fourth section discusses the findings and their limitations. The fifth section summarizes the findings and suggests areas for further research.

### **The Narrative of Muslim Alienation**

The alienation narrative can be summed up in two core arguments. The first argument suggests that Muslims' attitude to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies is predominantly negative in terms of dissatisfaction with these policies and distrust of authorities (mainly the police and government). The second argument, less often explicitly articulated, holds that this negative attitude translates into limited willingness to cooperate in counter-terrorism. Below, I review both components of the alienation narrative.

### *Negative Attitude to Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Extremism Policies*

As noted in the introduction, the prevailing view of the recent (Conservative) UK governments has been that non-violent extremism is linked to violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>19</sup> Hence, preventing non-violent extremism among Muslim communities is thought to mitigate domestic Islamist terrorism. Muslims, therefore, have to contend with both counter-terrorism security measures and broader efforts by the state to “superimpose a mono-cultural framework” on them.<sup>20</sup>

Before the War on Terror, Muslim communities were described as “already beleaguered” due to widespread racism and socio-economic deprivation.<sup>21</sup> It is argued that the increased focus on Muslims after 9/11 made things even worse. A number of studies report negative impact of post-9/11 security measures on Muslims living in the West.<sup>22</sup> In Britain, Muslims have been subjected to increased profiling, surveillance, and security checks at points of entry to the country, stop and search policies, highly mediatized police house raids, long pre-charge detention, deportation, control orders, financial scrutiny, passport confiscations and other counter-terrorism measures. Although some of these measures concern only few individuals, the argument goes that because of the extensive social networks of those who experience them, the impact of the measures, and the dominant media, political and civil society discourses, Muslim communities at large feel alienated, stigmatized and under siege.<sup>23</sup>

For example, extensive qualitative research by Blackwood and colleagues<sup>24</sup> that mainly focused on the experiences of British Muslims at UK airports reported “ubiquitous feeling of rejection, of hurt and of humiliation”.<sup>25</sup> According to their studies, Muslims experienced, due to perceived unwarranted treatment by authorities, denial and misrecognition of valued identities and loss of agency and autonomy associated with various degrees of alienation.<sup>26</sup> Among other things, the authors argued that this could result in a heightened sense of “us and them” polarization and a shift away from moderation to confrontation.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of the negative impacts of security measures on British Muslims is the use of the “stop and search” powers under now repealed Section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which allowed the police to stop and search individuals without any reasonable suspicion. Arguably, Muslims (or Muslim-looking individuals) found themselves disproportionately at the receiving part of this power, which eroded trust between them and the police and disenfranchised them socially and politically.<sup>28</sup> Discrimination by the hands of the security apparatus can thus deepen already existing Muslim grievances generated by progressively more robust security responses to Islamist terrorism. The resulting “strong and enduring feeling of victimization”<sup>29</sup> causes loss of trust in authorities<sup>30</sup>, particularly the government and the police. With it comes disengagement from these authorities<sup>31</sup> and the political life in general<sup>32</sup>.

Most scholars do not investigate the effects of security measures alone, but in combination with the political and public discourse as well as long-standing prejudices towards Muslims. For example, Bonino points out that by securitizing Muslim communities beyond particular individuals’ direct involvement in terrorism activities, the British state transposes Huntington’s clash of civilizations into the national context.<sup>33</sup> Driven by a “security syndrome”, the British state relegates Muslims into the category of minority citizens “in a limbo”, where they live in fear in the permanent state of emergency.<sup>34</sup> This, according to Bonino, only drives young alienated Muslims into the hands of extremist recruiters.<sup>35</sup>

Other scholars too find that young Muslim men experience feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, frustration, and anger, because they are constructed by the security and intelligence services and public discourse as particularly risky in terms of terrorism.<sup>36</sup> Some studies suggest that this creates a “chilling effect”, which means that young Muslims are less willing to voice their political opinions to avoid being labelled as extremists.<sup>37</sup> Arguably, it can also lead to “defensive resentment”<sup>38</sup> or even radicalization<sup>39</sup>.



It should be noted that there is no shared conceptualization of alienation across the studies mentioned above or attempts to define alienation within these studies. In addition, some researchers investigate the impact of particular components of counter-terrorism policies such as the Prevent Strategy<sup>40</sup> or stop and search police practice in the UK<sup>41</sup>, while the focus is sometimes on particular subgroups of Muslims such as British Pakistanis<sup>42</sup>. At times, the conclusions of these studies are carefully phrased, for example noting that counter-terrorism policies “*may have alienated sections of Muslim communities*” (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup> Some scholars also highlight the fact that there is no single Muslim monolithic experience of counter-terrorism policies and victimization caused by anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination in general<sup>44</sup>, pointing out the role of individual perceptions and social and psychological factors that likely result in different forms of recognizing and adapting to potential grievances.<sup>45</sup>

However, despite such caveats and nuancing acts, we still know very little about how widespread alienation actually is in Muslim communities. One of the few quantitative studies of British Muslims’ *political* alienation concluded that British Muslims are equally, and on some indicators even less alienated than the non-Muslim population.<sup>46</sup> The measure of alienation used in the study consisted of indicators of political attitudes and behaviour such as voting, trust in politicians, political efficacy, or satisfaction with democracy, and it was based on data from 2010. On these indicators, the non-alienated part of the British Muslim population was estimated to be between 60 and 70 % at the time. Another study, based on even older data from 2007, reports much higher levels of trust in the government among British Muslims than among Christians.<sup>47</sup> This suggests that alienation of British Muslims stemming from counter-terrorism policies is not necessarily as widespread as often assumed.

### ***Willingness to Engage in Counter-Terrorism***

Empirical data on the effect of alienation on Muslims' counter-terrorism engagement is limited. Some scholars speculate that alienation reduces the willingness to engage. Vertigans writes that counter-terrorism policies and measures have "diminished the prospects of Muslims being willing to cooperate with police and security services."<sup>48</sup> Taylor claims that while many British Muslims might be alienated, the vast majority are not radicalized but "passively alienated."<sup>49</sup> Passive alienation, he argues, leads to "a disengagement from the everyday counter-terrorism aims prescribed to communities by successive UK governments."<sup>50</sup> Innes and colleagues argue that the erosion of trust between Muslims and the authorities reduces the willingness to pass community intelligence to the police<sup>51</sup>, although in a follow-up study<sup>52</sup> they point out that Muslims' reluctance to engage concerns cooperation with authorities rather than autonomous community actions. Finally, Thomas points out that counter-terrorism policies "may have created even further suspicion of, or an alienation from, the state, thereby damaging the 'human intelligence' vital to the defeat of domestic extremism and terrorism."<sup>53</sup>

Another reason to expect low engagement of ordinary Muslims in counter-terrorism is that their designation as "moderates" and government allies might place them in "an invidious position of being labelled as sell-outs and traitors by their own community."<sup>54</sup> The likelihood of Muslim counter-terrorism activists being labelled as sell-outs or otherwise ostracized by their own community is raised by several studies.<sup>55</sup> Expounding on the reasons for ostracism, Grossman notes that Muslims will never be fully in charge of counter-terrorism policies.<sup>56</sup> They will remain "denizens in the realm of countering terrorism", and so those who engage would function in "the well-worn structures of imperial control in the colonies, in which 'native' administrators and local rulers [...] were offered very limited forms of local power."<sup>57</sup> In a similar vein, Ragazzi describes Muslim counter-terrorism activists as "trusted

Muslims”, who “occupy a similar function to that of the local leaders trusted by colonial powers to properly carry out the demands of indirect rule.”<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, some Muslim organization and individuals do engage in counter-terrorism, some of them even in overt cooperation with authorities, but little academic attention is devoted to this group. Some researchers note that these activists often creatively modify government policies on the ground, for example by giving projects more positive and less security-oriented names or by extending the focus to more general civic education or all forms of extremism, in the effort to avoid alienating Muslim communities.<sup>59</sup> In the Australian context, Cherney and Hartley note how public statements made by politicians about the need for Muslims to fight Islamist extremism and prevent terrorism, which either directly or indirectly imply that Muslims are not doing enough, “quickly undermine [...] the level of good will by passionate Muslims already engaged in the cause of counter-radicalisation.”<sup>60</sup> This would be particularly pertinent to Britain where such calls on Muslims are frequent.

A few existing quantitative studies indirectly confirm aspects of the narrative about the negative impact of alienation on counter-terrorism engagement. Studies of American and British Muslims show that perceptions of police procedural justice are positively correlated with the willingness to cooperate in counter-terrorism policing.<sup>61</sup> Another study of Australian Muslims found that the feeling of being unfairly targeted by counter-terrorism policies reduces the willingness to cooperate with the police and that this effect can be negated if the police uses procedural justice when dealing with Muslims.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, the study shows that 75 % of the sample reported a high sense of their community being targeted.

Yet, the study also revealed that the mean scores for the “willingness to work with the police in community-based counter-terrorism efforts” and to “report suspicious terrorism-related activities to police” were high (4.15 and 3.96, respectively, with the maximum mean score of 5). Similarly, a recent qualitative study by Thomas and colleagues on community

reporting showed that the majority of British Muslim participants are willing to contact the police with a concern about relatives or close friends.<sup>63</sup> This suggests that Muslims' reluctance to cooperate with the authorities might be exaggerated, which again calls for analyses of more representative data.

## **Data and Methods**

This study draws on data collected in two original surveys (*Survey 1* and *Survey 2*) of British Muslims conducted by the author and the *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-2011*, which was commissioned by the UK Department of Communities and Local Government.

*Survey 1* and *Survey 2* were conducted in December 2017/January 2018 and October/November 2018, respectively, by the survey company Qualtrics. Both surveys used a non-probability sampling method using quota that reflected the British Muslim population with respect to gender and age. Because Muslims form a small minority in the UK (between 3 and 5 percent), Qualtrics aggregated panels used by partner companies in addition to its own UK panel. The surveys were then offered to those panel members previously identified as Muslims. If they agreed to participate, they had to confirm whether they self-identified as Muslims (practicing or not) living in the UK. Apart from the quota on gender and age, measures were introduced to eliminate speeding respondents. The final participants were remunerated through Qualtrics panel scheme. *Survey 1* had 825 respondents (430 men and 395 women), and *Survey 2* had 917 respondents (457 women and 460 men). The full sample characteristics of the surveys were reported in studies that had a different research objective: *Survey 1* was used to investigate the role of action appeals and trust in Muslims' collective action against Islamist extremism,<sup>64</sup> and *Survey 2* to investigate the impact of anti-Muslim discrimination on counter-extremism engagement<sup>65</sup>.

The *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11* offers older data, but it is included in the analysis because of its unique character. First, the survey includes a large nationally representative sample of British Muslims (n=3 491) along with 13 475 non-Muslims based on probability sampling, which allows for comparisons between the two groups. Second, it includes a battery of questions on actual past counter-extremism behaviour, which have not been systematically analysed in publicly accessible academic work. The data in this survey was collected by the companies Ipsos MORI and TNS-BMRB via face-to-face interviews in England and Wales between April 2010 and March 2011. An online technical report details the sample characteristics and the methodology of data collection.<sup>66</sup>

The following analysis is therefore built on a cross-sectional research design, where the variables are related to both counter-terrorism (e.g. satisfaction with counter-terrorism policies) and counter-extremism (e.g. intended actions against a public lecture by an Islamist extremist). The first two parts of the analysis concerning the levels of alienation and willingness to engage in counter-terrorism/counter-extremism are largely descriptive. I also use statistical tests of mean differences to shed light on variations within British Muslims communities regarding immigration status, gender, age and education level. Immigration status of Muslims seems to matter when it comes to trust in authorities.<sup>67</sup> Gender, age and education level are included because of the widespread view that young and marginalized Muslim men are more alienated and susceptible to anti-social behaviour than the rest of the Muslim population. If not stated otherwise, all variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale and subsequently scored on a scale from 0 to 1. The third part of the analysis uses correlational methods (multiple regressions) to uncover the relationship between alienation and counter-terrorism/counter-extremism engagement.

## Results

### *The Level of British Muslims' Alienation*

Extreme forms of alienation can be manifested by anti-mainstream and anti-social orientation. Therefore, I first assess the support for extremism and political violence among British Muslims.

In *Survey 2*, 87 % of respondents somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “Islamist extremism seriously hurts Muslims living in the UK”, and 9 % neither agreed nor disagreed. Male respondents younger than 25 years did not differ significantly from other respondents.

According to *Survey 1*, 64 % of the respondents somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed that “Islamist extremism is a serious problem in the UK”, and 18% neither agreed nor disagreed. There was no statistical difference in case of young men under 25.

Finally, the *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11* showed that 90% of Muslim respondents thought it was always or often wrong for people to use violent extremism to protest perceived injustice and unfairness. This response is not statistically different from responses given by non-Muslim respondents (although twice as many Muslims as non-Muslims answered, “I don’t know”). Muslim men under 25 were less likely to reject categorically the use of violent extremism ( $M=4.6$ , where 1 was “always right” and 5 was “always wrong” to use violent extremism;  $SD=.87$ ) than other Muslim respondents ( $M=4.8$ ;  $SD=.59$ );  $t(3369)=5.91$ ,  $p=.000$ . However, non-Muslim young men showed the same tendency.

Important indicators of less extreme forms of alienation can be found in the attitudes toward and trust in counter-terrorism policies and authorities. When it comes to trust in counter-terrorism policies, 53 % of respondents in *Survey 1* somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I trust the current government to act in my best interest in the area of counter-terrorism”. 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 27 % had the opposite

opinion. While there was no significant difference between young male and other respondents, female respondents and Muslims born in the UK were less likely to trust counter-terrorism policies than male respondents and Muslims born outside the country, respectively. Respondents with lower level of education tended to have higher trust in counter-terrorism policies than those with higher secondary and tertiary education, although the difference was only significant on a 90% confidence interval.

*Survey 1* also measured satisfaction with the government's counter-terrorism policy. On this indicator, 44 % of respondents were satisfied (slightly, moderately or extremely), 26 % were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 30 % were slightly, moderately or extremely dissatisfied. Young Muslim men did not report significantly different mean scores for satisfaction with the government's counter-terrorism policy, nor were there differences pertaining to education level or place of birth. However, female respondents reported significantly lower means ( $M=.50$ ;  $SD=.28$ ) than males ( $M=.55$ ;  $SD=.28$ );  $t(825)=2.30$ ,  $p=.02$ .

When it comes to trust, *Survey 2* measured trust in government via an index ( $\alpha=.71$ ) based on replies to three items on a 7-point Likert scale: (1) "I trust the government to make decisions in a fair way"; (2) "I trust the government to do a good job in carrying out its responsibilities"; and (3) "You can't really trust the government to do the right thing" (reversed values). The index was scored from 0 to 1 with a mean of .49 ( $SD=.22$ ). Based on scores on the index, 44 % of respondents trusted the government, 39 % did not, and the remainder were neutral. The level of trust in the government among British Muslims found in the survey surpasses that of the general population reported in the same year.<sup>68</sup> On this measure too, young Muslim men did not significantly differ in their responses from the rest of the sample.

Trust in the police was measured in the *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11*. Overwhelmingly, 83 % of Muslim respondents indicated that they trust the police "a lot" or "a fair amount".

This corresponded exactly to the level of trust expressed by Christian respondents and was not statistically different from that expressed by all other respondents (82 %). A one-way ANOVA test showed that young Muslim male respondents (under 25) reported lower trust in the police ( $M=.75$ ,  $SD=.43$ ) than other Muslim respondents ( $M=.83$ ,  $SD=.37$ ) [ $F(1, 3463) = 12.46$ ,  $p=.000$ ]<sup>69</sup>, which is the same trend as within the non-Muslim sample.

Finally, alienation linked to counter-terrorism/counter-extremism can be detected in the way Muslims perceived co-religionists who engage in countering Islamist extremism. In *Survey 1*, 45 % of respondents somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I identify with Muslim activists who counter Islamist extremism”; 27 % had the opposite feeling, and the remainder neither agreed nor disagreed. Young male respondents did not significantly differ from the rest of the sample, but respondents who were male, born in the UK, highly educated and strongly identified as Muslims were more likely to agree with the statement than those who were female, born outside the UK, and with low education level, respectively.

In addition, *Survey 2* showed that 78 % of respondents somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Muslims in the UK who actively take a stand against Islamist extremism are doing an important thing for the sake of fellow Muslims.” Only 8 % indicated the opposite, while the rest neither agreed nor disagreed. There was no statistically significant difference for young male respondents. However, respondents born in the UK and highly educated were more likely to agree with the statement than those born outside the country and with low education level, respectively.

### ***Willingness to Engage in Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Extremism***

All three surveys that are analysed in this paper included dependent variables on the spectrum between counter-extremism and counter-terrorism.



In *Survey 1*, respondents were asked to imagine a “deadly terrorist attack” in the UK, perpetrated by British Muslims, and to indicate how likely they were to engage in various forms of actions (against Islamist extremism) in response to the attack. Table 1 provides an overview of actions and responses.

**[Table 1 near here]**

According to these results, more than 90 % (n=745) of the respondents were likely to take at least one of six actions against Islamist extremism in the aftermath of the hypothetical terrorist attack. About a third of the respondents (n=239) were likely to take all six actions. Based on a simple formative index of all types of action as the dependent variable, there was no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of engagement when it came to young Muslim men, Muslims born outside of the UK, or gender. Respondents with low level of education were more likely to take action than those with higher levels.

In *Survey 2*, the dependent variable was based on a two-stage scenario. First, the respondents read the following text: “Imagine that a Muslim speaker is going to hold a public talk in your neighbourhood. The topics of the talk include the duty of Muslims to reject democracy and to punish homosexuals.” Then they were asked to indicate how likely they were to engage in five types of action, ranging from signing a petition against the event to physically obstructing it.

An analysis of the results found that 69 % of the respondents were likely to take at least one action. Table 2 shows that the most frequent choice was the least demanding, signing a petition, as 58 % of the respondents were slightly, moderately or extremely likely to take this action. However, over one third of the respondents were likely to participate in a demonstration, oppose the speaker on social media or confront him in a face to face

discussion. In addition, almost a quarter of the respondents indicated a likelihood of physically obstructing the event.

**[Table 2 near here]**

The second stage of the scenario was designed to present a more acute threat to public safety than a public talk. Following their replies to the first stage, the respondents were presented with the following text: “Imagine that the public talk described earlier happened as planned. A few days after the talk, you notice that an individual from your neighbourhood has suddenly become very vocal about the need to physically attack homosexuals, encouraging fellow Muslims to do so.” As before, respondents were asked to indicate how likely they were to take part in each of five types of action in response to this individual, such as making a report to the authorities (e.g., the police) or contacting a non-governmental organization that deals with extremism or similar issues.

In the second stage of the scenario, 91 % of the respondents were likely to take at least one of the five actions. Table 3 shows that the most favoured type of action was to report the extremist individual to the authorities, such as the police. 64 % of the respondents were likely to take this course of action, with no significant difference in case of young Muslim men.

**[Table 3 near here]**

As in *Survey 1*, neither young Muslim men nor Muslims born outside the UK reported significantly different scores compared to other respondents in either stage of the scenario (the dependent variables were simple formative indices of all types of actions in each stage of the scenario). In both stages, females were less likely to take action than male respondents. In

the second stage, respondents with low levels of education were less likely to take action than those with higher level of education.

Finally, the *Citizenship Survey 2010-11* offers a rare window to the actual, as opposed to the intended, engagement of British Muslims in countering violent extremism. The dependent variable in the survey was based on the following question: “In the last five years, have you done any of the things on this card in order to reduce or lower support for violent extremism in the name of religion?” 29 % of Muslim respondents replied affirmatively by choosing one or more types of action on the card. The most frequent type of action was disagreeing with “violent extremist beliefs” in private conversations with other people (n=810). The other actions were signing “a petition against violent extremism” (n=213), speaking out publicly against “people who encourage others to support violent extremism” (n=155), attending “a public meeting to talk about how the community can protect itself against violent extremism” (n=122), joining “a campaign against violent extremism” (n=60) and something else not on the card (n=3). In comparison, the level of actual past engagement among non-Muslim respondents (n=13,475) for the same question was 23 %, which is lower than among Muslim respondents.

### ***The Relationship Between Alienation and Counter-Terrorism/Counter-Extremism***

#### ***Engagement***

In this part of the analysis, I first present data from two survey questions that directly ask the respondents about the reason for their inactivity when it comes to taking action against Islamist extremism. Then, I investigate the correlation between aspects of alienation and intended and actual engagement in counter-terrorism/counter-extremism behaviour reviewed in the previous two parts of the results section.

*Survey 1*, which presented the respondents with the fictional scenario of a terrorist attack in

the UK, included an experimental component reported in another study (author 2019a). In the experiment, the respondents were asked how likely they were to participate in a demonstration against Islamist extremism following the terrorist attack. The experiment was based on varying the source of the appeal to attend the demonstration (an appeal coming from the government versus a Muslim organization versus no specific appeal). Immediately after the respondents indicated their likelihood to participate in the demonstration, they were asked to explain their answer (i.e., why they indicated they were (un)likely to participate). Since the experiment found no significant effect of the source of the appeal, we can aggregate the data in this study. Out of 825 respondents, 201 indicated that they were (extremely, slightly or moderately) unlikely to attend the demonstration. Their written reasons for being unlikely to attend the demonstration were coded into more general categories, which are displayed in Figure 1.

**[Figure 1 near here]**

The most frequent categories are fear (e.g., of being attacked or misrepresented by the media), the feeling of low efficacy and principled refusal to participate in demonstrations. A category related to alienation is “Unfair responsabilisation”. It captures the anxiety of Muslims about being linked to Islamist terrorists through collective blame and responsibility. The following answer is an example of reasons that were coded in this category:

Why would I do that, why we Muslims blame ourselves about terrorism, although it has nothing to do with Islam. I consider myself like any other British, Muslim or not, have nothing to feel bad about except feeling bad for losing innocent people, why do we have to explain ourselves except because the media want us to

feel that way.

Another category linked to alienation is “Problem with the organizer”. This category includes answers that justify low likelihood of attending the demonstration by referring to the source of the appeal (in the experimental condition). In the condition where the government made the appeal, 19% (n=13) of respondents who were unlikely to participate justified it by expressing low trust in or outright hostility to the government.

The *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11* also featured a question that directly asked the respondents about the reason for their inactivity when it comes to actions against violent extremism in the name of religion. Out of 2,465 Muslim respondents who said they had not taken any action in the preceding five years, most were coded under the category “it has never occurred to me to do anything” (n=980). Other reasons given were linked to efficacy, i.e., doubts that engagement would make a difference (n=431), not knowing what to do (n=360), low salience of the problem within one’s community (n=388) or in the UK (n=247), and fear of getting involved (n=135). Importantly, only 36 respondents chose the option “I don’t really care enough about violent extremism to do anything.”

Finally, when it comes to the relationship between alienation and willingness to take action against Islamist extremism and terrorism, Table 4 shows four multiple regressions using all key variables from the three surveys and several demographic controls. The dependent variables in the first three models are based on simple formative indices of the combined willingness to engage in actions described in Tables 1, 2 and 3, respectively (see Appendix 1.1 for more details).

**[Table 4 near here]**

Table 4 shows that low trust and satisfaction in counter-terrorism policies is associated with lower intention to engage in action against Islamist extremism. Distrusting police, on the other hand, increases the odds of taking action against Islamist extremism. Respondents who did not regard Islamist extremism as a serious problem, did not think it was hurtful to Muslims, did not identify with Muslim counter-extremism activists and did not consider the action of these activists beneficial to Muslim communities, were less inclined to take action against Islamist extremism.

## **Discussion**

The results are consistent with other surveys of British Muslims in that they portray Muslim communities as being opposed to political and religious violence.<sup>70</sup> The tiny minority of British Muslims who are tolerant of the use of violence in certain cases appears to be proportionally comparable to a similar minority within the non-Muslim part of the society.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, a large majority of British Muslims seems to look positively on other Muslims who are active in countering Islamist extremism.

Admittedly, it is perfectly possible to reject (violent) extremism and still be alienated by counter-terrorism policies, even to the point of limited willingness to cooperate with authorities or engage independently in countering extremism and terrorism. This would be the main thrust of the arguments put forward by the existing literature on Muslims in the UK and other Western countries reviewed at the beginning of this article. However, the findings suggest that Muslim alienation is not as widespread as argued in the literature and public discourse.

The results show that the majority of British Muslim trust the government's counter-terrorism policies, and the plurality is satisfied with these policies. The plurality of British Muslims also trust the government, while a vast majority trust the police. The approximately one third of British Muslims who seem to be dissatisfied with and distrust counter-terrorism

policies are not a negligible number and indicate possible alienation among sections of Muslim communities, although we lack comparable data from the non-Muslim majority population. Importantly, the results show that it is not the young Muslim men who are most distrusting of authorities and dissatisfied with counter-terrorism policies. Rather, other demographic indicators such as gender or immigration status seem to play more significant role.

When it comes to Muslims' willingness to take action against Islamist extremism, the findings show a very high level of readiness and comparatively (to the non-Muslim majority) high level of actual past engagement. That reporting a potential violent extremist to the authorities was the most favoured course of action among the respondents in *Survey 2* contradicts the worries expressed in the literature about reduced willingness of British Muslims to share intelligence. Again, there is little indication in the data that young Muslim men are less willing to take action against Islamist extremism, unlike Muslim women who seem to be less likely to engage – a finding worth investigating in future research.

Finally, with respect to the link between alienation and engagement in counter-terrorism and counter-extremism, the analysis of an open-ended question in *Survey 1* (Figure 1) showed that the direct involvement of the government in responsabilizing Muslims for Islamist terrorism and extremism likely has a counter-productive effect on a minority of Muslims. On the other hand, the question from the UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11 about reasons for not taking action against violent extremism in the name of religion did not reveal alienation (as opposed to, for example, lack of efficacy) as an important barrier to engagement. Admittedly, the fact that the respondents had to choose their answer from pre-determined categories could have affected these results.

The correlational analysis of the relationship between aspects of alienation (such as trust in or satisfaction with counter-terrorism policies) and the willingness to take action against Islamist extremism supports the alienation narrative in that alienation can reduce the

willingness to engage in counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. However, the data also shows that respondents who are dissatisfied with or distrust counter-terrorism policies and the government still score means above the neutral values when it comes to taking action, including reporting a suspect to the authorities (see Appendix 1.2 for details). This suggests that alienation does not necessarily lead to disengagement and that alienated individuals are possibly still largely willing to stand up against Islamist extremism. The only exception was Stage 1 of the scenario in *Survey 2*, where respondents who do not trust the government scored mean values of intended action below the neutral point. A possible explanation is that the situation described to the respondents – a public lecture by an extremist – constitutes a less urgent threat in terms of potentially criminal or violent behaviour that would require an intervention.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the highly charged issue of extremism and terrorism lends itself to social desirability bias, meaning that some respondents may give answers that they think are more acceptable to the researcher and the societal mainstream. The bias can be also motivated by fear of security services monitoring the answers or a wish to give a positive image of Muslim communities. Such bias is hard to avoid, but it should be less pronounced in the case of online, anonymous, self-administered surveys (*Survey 1* and *Survey 2*).<sup>72</sup>

Second, it can be argued that the non-probabilistic sampling method used to recruit respondents in *Survey 1* and *Survey 2* results in limited generalizability of the data to the British Muslim population. This might be true but hardly avoidable because a probabilistic sampling of a minority population is so costly that usually only the government could afford to collect data in this way. This is why this study included the government's *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-11*. In addition, the bias due to the sampling method was not necessarily as high as it would be using a simple convenient sampling method, since both *Survey 1* and *Survey 2* used quotas to reflect the population share in terms of age and gender. The surveys also



showed a diversity in respondents' socio-economic background (e.g., 46% and 44%, respectively, had no or secondary education) and their responses to key variables. Financial remuneration in the case of the two surveys also helped to recruit respondents beyond those who would self-select because they were generally more pro-social and -volunteering (and hence more likely to help society by engaging in counter-terrorism).

Third, one can wonder whether indicating willingness to engage in counter-extremism in a survey is the same as taking such action in the real life. Although it is true that intentions do not predict behaviour perfectly, past research has shown that behavioural intentions substantially predict actual behaviour.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the *UK Citizenship Survey 2010-2011* provided measures of actual past behaviour rather than intentions.

Fourth, some of the key aspects of alienation such as trust and satisfaction in counter-terrorism policies lack comparison data from the non-Muslim majority. Such comparison would indicate whether the data reflect particular Muslim alienation due to disproportionate impact of counter-terrorism on Muslim communities or merely a shared sentiment across society.

Finally, this study does not extensively disaggregate the extremely diverse British Muslim population to particular sub-groups, for example based on ethnic origin or sectarian creed, and therefore cannot make conclusions about their attitudes and behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

The dominant narrative in the literature on the impact of counter-terrorism on Muslim communities in the UK and in the West more generally portrays Muslims as alienated and, consequently, reluctant to cooperate in counter-terrorism. This study provides rare large-N data to reassess and nuance the dominant narrative, which is largely based on qualitative small-N research. It finds that although a (non-negligible) minority shows signs of alienation,

most British Muslims are satisfied with and trust counter-terrorism policies, the government and the police. Their level of willingness to take action against Islamist extremism is also high. The study further confirms that aspects of alienation correlate with reduced willingness to take action against Islamism extremism but do not necessarily lead to passivity or disengagement in terms of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism.

This article joins the few existing quantitative studies of Muslim alienation in the framework of counter-terrorism and in so doing contributes to reassessing what perhaps is an overly gloomy Muslim alienation narrative. One should bear in mind, though, that this narrative describes a dynamically changing social reality and could have been more justified in certain periods. The British government, like many others, has implemented counter-terrorism policies in response to Islamist terrorism in a trial-and-error way. Partially informed by failures and partially by academic research as well as the rulings of the highest British and European courts, the policies and their communication to the public have evolved. For example, the early Prevent focused exclusively on Muslim communities and used highly securitized language, but now it covers all types of violent extremism (e.g., far right) and is couched in the language of safeguarding. In addition, the threat of Islamist extremism may have gradually dawned on many British Muslims, especially in the light of high-profile attacks conducted in the UK and Europe in the last couple of years and hundreds of British volunteers joining ISIS. Therefore, what may have been alienating ten years ago might be more accepted today. This study should not be viewed as a rebuttal to the alienation narrative but as friendly invitation to subject it to more rigorous and nuanced investigation.

Further research on counter-terrorism and Muslim communities in the West should start with sharpening the conceptualization of alienation and its operationalization in order to increase the internal validity of studies that attempt to measure alienation and its impact. To be able to generalize and to enhance the ecological validity of their studies, researchers should

complement in-depth qualitative analyses with the use of large-N data, preferably representative of the Muslim population. A particularly promising research strategy, which does not require costly nationally representative surveys, would be to employ experimental designs. Experiments are almost absent in studies of the effects of counter-terrorism policies on Muslims, and they can help to uncover socio-economic and psychological factors that make alienation and its effects more or less pronounced. This would push the boundaries of our existing knowledge and produce results with high policy relevance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, and in this study, counter-terrorism is understood as any activity aimed at preventing terrorism, while counter-extremism addresses “all the broader harms that extremism can cause, not just where it may lead to terrorism” (HM Government, 2018, see note 3 below, 23). Extremism is then defined as a “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs” (HM Government, 2015, see note 13 below, 9).

<sup>2</sup> Imran Awan, Keith Spiller and Andrew Whiting, “The Development of UK Counter Terrorism Policy and Legislation,” in *Terrorism in the Classroom* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 25-42.

<sup>3</sup> HM Government, *CONTEST: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering Terrorism* (London, UK: HMSO, 2018), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Tahir Abbas and Imran Awan, “Limits of UK Counterterrorism Policy and Its Implications for Islamophobia and Far Right Extremism,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4, no. 3 (2015): 16-29; Imran Awan, “Muslim Communities, Conflict and Terrorism: A Study of Alum Rock,” *Safer Communities* 11, no. 4 (2012): 195-204; Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, “What Does It Mean to Be a Moderate Muslim in the War on Terror? Muslim Interpretations and Reactions,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, no. 2

(2016), 159-181; Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, "The Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities," *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 25, no. 3 (2011): 151-181; Mary Hickman, Lyn Thomas, Sara Silvestri, and Henri Nickels, "*Suspect Communities?*" *Counter-Terrorism Policy, the Press, and the Impact on Irish and Muslim Communities in Britain* (London, UK: London Metropolitan University, 2011); Gabe Mythen, Sandra Walklate, and Fatima Khan, "'Why Should We Have to Prove We're Alright?': Counter-Terrorism, Risk and Partial Securities," *Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2013): 383-398; Francesco Ragazzi, "Suspect Community or Suspect Category? The Impact of Counter-Terrorism as 'Policed Multiculturalism'," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 5 (2016): 724-741; Joel D. Taylor, "'Suspect Categories,' Alienation and Counterterrorism: Critically Assessing PREVENT in the UK," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018): 1-23.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Breen-Smyth, "Theorising the 'Suspect Community': Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public Imagination," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2014): 223-240; Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, and Nickels, "*Suspect Communities?*" *Counter-Terrorism Policy, the Press, and the Impact on Irish and Muslim Communities in Britain* (see note 4 above); Gabe Mythen, "'No One Speaks for Us': Security Policy, Suspected Communities and the Problem of Voice," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 3 (2012): 409-424; Christina Pantazis and Simon Pemberton, "From the 'Old' to the 'New' Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation," *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 5 (2009): 646-666.

<sup>6</sup> Mythen, "'No One Speaks for Us': Security Policy, Suspected Communities and the Problem of Voice" (see note 5 above), 418.

<sup>7</sup> Pantazis and Pemberton, "From the 'Old' to the 'New' Suspect Community: Examining the Impacts of Recent UK Counter-Terrorist Legislation" (see note 5 above), 660.

<sup>8</sup> Breen-Smyth, “Theorising the “Suspect Community”: Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public Imagination” (see note 5 above), 223.

<sup>9</sup> Abbas and Awan, “Limits of UK Counterterrorism Policy and Its Implications for Islamophobia and Far Right Extremism” (see note 4 above), 18; David Parker, Julia M. Pearce, Lasse Lindekilde, and Brooke Rogers, “Challenges for Effective Counterterrorism Communication: Practitioner Insights and Policy Implications for Preventing Radicalization, Disrupting Attack Planning, and Mitigating Terrorist Attacks,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2017): 264-291, 277.

<sup>10</sup> Abbas and Awan, “Limits of UK Counterterrorism Policy and Its Implications for Islamophobia and Far Right Extremism” (see note 4 above); Martin Innes, Laurence Abbott, Trudy Lowe, and Colin Roberts, *Hearts and Minds and Eyes and Ears: Reducing Radicalisation Risks through Reassurance-Oriented Policing* (Cardiff, UK: Universities’ Police Science Institute, Cardiff University, 2007); Taylor, ““Suspect Categories,’ Alienation and Counterterrorism: Critically Assessing PREVENT in the UK” (see note 4 above); Paul Thomas, “Prevent and Community Cohesion in Britain: The Worst of All Possible Worlds?,” in Christopher Baker-Beall, Charlotte Heath-Kelly, and Lee Jarvis (Eds.), *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014); Paul Thomas, “Changing Experiences of Responsibilisation and Contestation within Counter-Terrorism Policies: The British Prevent Experience,” *Policy & Politics* 45, no.3 (2017): 305-321; Paul Thomas, “The Perception of Counter-Radicalisation by Young People,” in Lore Colaert (Ed.), *De-radicalisation’. Scientific Insights for Policy* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> BBC, “Muslims ‘Must Root out Extremism’,” July 4, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5144438.stm> (accessed February 10, 2019).

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- <sup>15</sup> Julian Hargreaves, "Half a Story? Missing Perspectives in the Criminological Accounts of British Muslim Communities, Crime and the Criminal Justice System," *The British Journal of Criminology* 55, no. 1 (2015): 19-38.
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- <sup>19</sup> Phil Edwards, "How (not) to create ex-terrorists: Prevent as ideological warfare," In *Counter-Radicalisation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 54-70; John Gearson and Hugo Rosemont, "CONTEST as Strategy: Reassessing Britain's Counterterrorism Approach," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 12 (2015): 1038-1064.
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- <sup>22</sup> Victoria Brittain, “Besieged in Britain,” *Race & Class* 50, no. 3 (2009): 1-29; Adrian Cherney and Jason Hartley, “Community Engagement to Tackle Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Challenges, Tensions and Pitfalls,” *Policing and society* 27, no. 7 (2017): 750-763; Adrian Cherney and Kristina Murphy, “Being a ‘Suspect Community’ in a post 9/11 World – The Impact of the War on Terror on Muslim Communities in Australia,” *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 4 (2016): 480-496; Alpa Parmar, “Stop and Search in London: Counter-Terrorist or Counter-Productive?” *Policing and Society* 21, no. 4 (2011): 369-382.
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- <sup>29</sup> Karen Bullock and Paul Johnson, "Police Engagement with Muslim Communities: Breaking out, Breaking in, and Breaking Through," *Policing and Society* 28, no. 8 (2018): 879-897, 884.
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Us': Security Policy, Suspected Communities and the Problem of Voice" (see note 5 above);

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<sup>31</sup> Cherney and Hartley, "Community Engagement to Tackle Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Challenges, Tensions and Pitfalls" (see note 22 above).

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<sup>33</sup> Bonino, "Prevent-ing Muslimness in Britain: The Normalisation of Exceptional Measures to Combat Terrorism" (see note 20 above).

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas, “The Perception of Counter-Radicalisation by Young People” (see note 10 above), 127.

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g., Awan, “Muslim Communities, Conflict and Terrorism: A Study of Alum Rock” (see note 4 above).

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- <sup>51</sup> Innes, Roberts, Lowe, and Abbott, *Hearts and Minds and Eyes and Ears: Reducing Radicalisation Risks through Reassurance-Oriented Policing* (see note 10 above).
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<sup>56</sup> Michele Grossman, "Disenchantments: Counterterror Narratives and Conviviality," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 3 (2014): 319-335.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 327.

<sup>58</sup> Ragazzi, "Suspect Community or Suspect Category? The Impact of Counter-Terrorism as 'Policed Multiculturalism'" (see note 4 above), 732.

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- <sup>66</sup> The technical report on the data collection of the UK Citizenship Survey 2010-2011 can be found here:  
[http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/7111/mrdoc/pdf/7111\\_technical\\_report.pdf](http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/7111/mrdoc/pdf/7111_technical_report.pdf)
- <sup>67</sup> Maxwell, “Trust in Government among British Muslims: The Importance of Migration Status” (see note 14 above).
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<https://www.edelman.co.uk/research/edelman-trust-barometer-2018-uk-findings>
- <sup>69</sup> Trust in the police was measured as a binary variable, where 0 corresponds to the responses “not very much” and “not at all”, and 1 to the responses “a fair amount” or “a lot”.
- <sup>70</sup> Ipsos MORI, *A Review of Survey Research on Muslims in Britain* (London, UK: Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, 2018).
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