

# Terrorism research: understanding Muslim communities

Imran Awan and Sara Correia report on their Cardiff study

*The 2011 census revealed that there are 2.7 million Muslims in the United Kingdom. Muslim communities in Britain are diverse and have grown since the Industrial Revolution: a microcosm of this development can be found in Cardiff. The 2001 census showed that Cardiff was home to 11,268 Muslims and according to the most recent census in 2011 this number has increased by 2.7 per cent. The implications of multiculturalism and the balance between civil liberties and security for the Muslim communities have come to the fore, especially since events such as the London bombings on 7 July 2005 and the Woolwich murder in 2013 of Fusilier Lee Rigby.*

## Engaging communities

Our study looked at the practical and theoretical challenges of researching the impact of counter-terrorism legislation upon Muslim communities in Cardiff, by directly engaging them in the debate. Our research poses a number of questions for researchers within this context, such as what are the best methods to engage with Muslim communities? We hope it will contribute towards a paradigm shift in terrorism research, which, we argue, should start by asking communities how they would like to see research being framed, thus focusing on the priorities of communities themselves first and only then the academic framework.

Cardiff's plural Muslim communities remain under researched. In order to engage them, the authors argue that five key structural factors need to be taken into account: 1) examining the diversity in Cardiff's Muslim

communities, 2) exploring the impact of gender on the research process, 3) discussing possible language barriers, 4) considering the timing of the research and 5) taking into account media representations of Muslims. These elements are important because, regardless of what the aims a piece of research may be, they will always have an impact upon the research process. The Muslim community is not a homogenous group and any research designs will be more effective if they can encompass methods of how to engage with Muslim communities. Indeed, we found a variety of Islamic schools of thought present in Cardiff including the Deobandi, the Ikhwān Al-Muslimoon, the Barelwī and the Jamā'at-I Islāmī movements.

## Unhelpful blurring

We argue that terrorism research has been hindered by the proliferation of published work on terrorism that has blurred academic work with journalistic and political comment, as well as with work by the so called 'terrologists' (George, 1991). Some researchers have criticised what Herman and O'Sullivan (1990) call 'the terrorism industry', claiming that 'much of what passes for orthodox "terrorism studies" is often unreliable, biased and propagandistic, and simply does not fit the grounded reality of the political violence we have studied' (Sluka, 2009).

As a result, some communities have been stereotyped as either being passive, ignorant, manipulated, terrorised by terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. At the same time, researchers who talk to terrorists, their families and neighbours, or seek to

understand their point of view, also incur the risk of being demonised as terrorist sympathisers themselves, as if understanding terrorism was equivalent to condoning it. Consequently, the study of terrorism is mostly a-historical, state-centric, policy or event-driven. Moreover, the 'symbiotic relationship' between terrorism and the UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy (Contest) has also been neglected, despite indications that counter-terrorism tends 'to escalate rather than alleviate levels of perceived threat, actual violence and alienation of the base population' (Breen-Smyth, 2009).

Additionally, terrorism studies, especially on militant 'Islamist' groups, are characterised by what Edward Said (1978) described as 'Orientalist bias': Arab and Muslim culture/religion is (wrongly) depicted as antithetical to Western and Judeo-Christian culture/religion, as a means of exerting Western dominance. This gives rise to a research climate and process of 'othering' that allows for the demonisation of 'the "terrorist" research subject to operate' (Breen-Smyth, 2009).

## The Cardiff study

We had four main objectives with regards to our study. To try and develop a model of how to engage Cardiff's Muslim communities in further research; to explore what issues regarding the implementation of counter-terrorism legislation and policing are of relevance to Muslim communities in Cardiff; to identify the methodological implications of the above framework by identifying fourthly, to establish the feasibility of using interviews and focus groups as data collection methods and considering relevant alternatives.

## What we found

We developed a model of engagement for the purposes of informing further research with Cardiff's Muslim communities. This model centres on the interplay between four dimensions: 1) participants' attitudes towards research, 2) whether or not researchers are able to develop relationships of trust within communities, 3) whether participants

view the research project as beneficial or harmful and 4) the structural context within which research takes place. We hope that these will be useful to other researchers conducting research with Muslim communities, in so far as they may anticipate what we found to be the spectrum of attitudes in the field and design their methodologies.

Our data indicated that the key to addressing the common negative attitudes towards research and establishing relationships of trust within communities is to conduct research seen by participants to be beneficial to those communities. As such, research into terrorism and counter-terrorism needs to move away from the statist priority of security and towards a framework which communities themselves see as beneficial. Considering the category of 'beneficial and harmful research', it was found that beneficial research 1) is capacity building, 2) challenges negative stereotypes and promotes positive images of Muslims, 3) informs policy and improves practice, 4) gives a voice to the grassroots of communities and 5) brings about positive change within communities. Consequently, the nature of the topic requires that researchers are aware of the multiple ways in which research could harm

communities and consciously make an effort to avoid harm being caused. Key to this process is re-thinking the framework of terrorism and counter-terrorism research. Researchers, we argue, need to understand that 'terrorism' research can lead to the 'othering' of communities. Starting with an understanding that media and political constructions of Muslims in Britain are perceived by them as damaging, researchers also need to move away from the language of security preoccupations such as Jihad and radicalisation. 'To take terrorism research beyond, secondary glorified terrorism-related studies, the researcher must go out in

the field to engage communities in framing research around community needs' (Silke, 2004).

### Challenges

Part of building relationships of trust with participants involves demystifying the process of research and attempting to identify in advance how the research may inform policy and practice. However, attitudes were not static among participants. A number of participants oscillated between different attitude-types throughout interviews. In order to engage communities, it is thus essential for researchers to develop responses to the concerns associated with each attitude-type and be ready to communicate these effectively.

This piece of research makes a case for engaging the grassroots of communities in future research on terrorism and counter terrorism, highlighting considerable challenges facing researchers seeking to do just that. On the one hand, the timing of any piece of research, alongside the negative media discourse and the politically charged climate

surrounding Muslims in Britain, may lead to scepticism towards the benefit that research can bring to communities or even fear, which may deter participation.

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As noted above, the interplay between the notion of 'insider' and 'outsider' not only helps to define communities, but it affects the research process. Additionally, belonging to a particular community is often but one of the individual's identities. This is particularly poignant with respect to Muslims in Britain, whose identity may encompass identities relating to nationality, race, ethnicity, language or theological perspective.

In the context of the current legal landscape surrounding terrorism, there are considerable risks for researchers, and even greater risks

for participants. Participants may fear, perhaps with good reason, the impact of damaging disclosures. Whilst ethical research must acknowledge this risk to funders and to participants, this may have a chilling effect on participation, affecting researchers' ability to secure ethical approval and funding for future work. Therefore, it is necessary to demystify the process of research and attempt to identify in advance how it may inform policy and practice. It is also necessary to work toward research practice that can be beneficial in that it attempts to reach the grassroots and to build capacity within the communities that it studies. ■

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**Imran Awan** is Deputy Director, Centre for Applied Criminology, Birmingham City University and **Sara Correia** is Research Coordinator, Swansea University

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