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# Research Note: 'The Lady of Heaven'

## Latest Target of Islamist Blasphemy Activists

Dr Paul Stott

Foreword by Nus Ghani MP and Khalid Mahmood MP



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## About the Author

**Dr Paul Stott** joined Policy Exchange in August 2021, where he is Head of Security and Extremism. An experienced academic, he received his PhD in 2015 from the University of East Anglia, for research entitled 'British Jihadism: The Detail and the Denial.' A prominent writer and commentator on terrorism, Islamism and the political fringe, his publications include "Iranian Influence networks in the UK: Audit and Analysis" (2021) and an examination of the 1999 London nail bombings "The White Wolves: The Terrorist Manifesto that wasn't?" (2019).

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## Foreword

*Nus Ghani is the MP for Wealden*

*Khalid Mahmood is the MP for Birmingham Perry Barr*

Whilst the country was marking the Platinum Jubilee, a small but determined group of activists was taking to the streets in several of our major cities. As this research shows, the protests in English cities against the film *The Lady of Heaven* were not the beginning, but the culmination of events, long in gestation, which have their origins in Iran.

As far back as December 2020 the Iranian government, which considers itself a leader of the ummah (the global Muslim community) was expressing its opposition to this particular movie. In February 2021, the then Iranian ambassador to the UK wrote to Sunni and Shia Islamic centres across the country, encouraging them to oppose it. When the protests began, Iranian broadcaster Press TV was on hand to platform those at the thick of sometimes unruly scenes outside cinemas. The momentum which developed was enough to ensure, regrettably, that what was shown or not shown in our movie theatres was determined by those taking to the streets.

This is not acceptable. We need to get much smarter in this country. It is time to recognise the internal and external challenges that exist to our social cohesion, of which Iran is certainly one. We also need to speak up for, and defend, our own values. We need to look much more critically at some of those who claim to represent or even to lead Muslims in this country, but who seem to struggle with basic British values such as freedom of speech, not just for themselves, but for those they oppose.

When our values are threatened by foreign governments and by mobs outside cinemas, we cannot afford to be distracted the next time.

Although Sunni Muslim Britons have been at the forefront of protests against the recently released film *The Lady of Heaven*, it was Iran which set the ball rolling in this campaign eighteen months ago – beginning with negative statements by senior regime officials. Just as Ayatollah Khomeini helped to stoke unrest in Britain when he issued a fatwa in 1989 against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*,<sup>1</sup> so his successors prepared the ground for unrest in their attempt to ban *The Lady of Heaven*.

### What is it?

*The Lady of Heaven* is a 2021 British film directed by Eli King,<sup>2</sup> first shown in Ireland at the end of April this year.<sup>3</sup> A promotional website for the movie, including a trailer, can be viewed online<sup>4</sup> as can a twitter feed.<sup>5</sup> Adverts for the film's screening began on 24 May 2022, ahead of general release in England, Scotland and Wales on 3 June.<sup>6</sup>

The film is based on a historical drama originally written by Yasser Al-Habib, a Kuwaiti Shia cleric based in Buckinghamshire, where he operates Al-Muhassin Mosque.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Yasser Al-Habib is himself a controversial figure, who on various occasions went out against core Islamic figures such as the Prophet's wife Aisha and the first Caliphs.<sup>8</sup> He was sentenced in Kuwait and charged in absentia in 2003 with "insulting the Prophet Mohammed's companions, abusing a religious sect and distributing an audiotape without a licence", in connection with an audiotape recording of a closed lecture that he gave on Islamic historical issues,<sup>9</sup> and went to Iran and Iraq before finally arriving in the UK in 2004 and being accepted by this country as an asylum seeker<sup>10</sup>.

*The Lady of Heaven* is the work of a British company named Enlightened Kingdom – with a team of producers and executive producers whose names indicate that they are of Muslim heritage: Hussein Ashmere, Mehpe Al Hussaini, Jawad Salah and Malik Shlibak. Filming began in 2019, but was delayed due to covid. The plot revolves around Laith, an Iraqi child who lost his mother in the midst of a war-torn country. He finds himself a new home with an elderly woman who tells him the story of Muhammad's daughter Fatima (whose face is never shown).<sup>11</sup>

Part of the controversy centres around accusations that Muhammad is featured in the movie. Malik Shlibak told GB News that it is "very normal" to portray the Prophet Muhammad in film and media, and claims that the film was blasphemous was "just nonsense". Moreover, "This whole topic of showing the Prophet is a contentious issue across the Muslim world. Wherever you go in every corner of the Muslim world you will find a different interpretation and in many places in the East you will find artistic interpretations of the Prophet. From our perspective it's very normal to portray the Prophet as long as you portray him in a proper manner."<sup>12</sup>

Malik Shlibak is a Sunni Muslim (2.09 in the attached video):<sup>13</sup>

*Was a pleasure being with @Nigel\_Farage on @GBNEWS to highlight the hypocrisy we are seeing from radical Islamists towards #TheLadyOfHeaven*

1. Ayatollah issues Rushdie fatwa, 14 February 1989. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/ayatollah-issues-rushdie-fatwa-1989/zfnvy9q>
2. *The Lady of Heaven* (2021) - IMDb
3. *The Lady of Heaven* on Twitter: "TODAY *The Lady of Heaven* hits theaters in Ireland & Northern Ireland! Tickets are on sale at all participating theater locations for Omniplex Cinemas (Dublin | Cork | Galway | Belfast), The Reel Picture (Ballincollig), and Century Cinemas (Letterkenny)! See you at the movies! <https://t.co/Ht1GAqFmHY>" / Twitter, 29 April 2022.
4. Home | *The Lady of Heaven*
5. *The Lady of Heaven* (@TLOHmovie) / Twitter
6. *The Lady of Heaven* on Twitter: "OFFICIAL UK RELEASE DATE! We are excited to announce *The Lady of Heaven* is coming to UK cinemas on 3 June 2022! We will be adding the full list of cinemas soon. Be sure to follow us for updates! #theladyofheaven <https://t.co/wqGCKGPaYO>" / Twitter 24 May 2022.
7. <https://www.almuhassin.org/> ; <https://alhabib.org/en/>
8. See for example <https://www.amazon.com/Islam-Hijacked-Sheikh-Yasser-al-Habib/dp/1517514983>
9. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110218151217/http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&yr=2005&c=KWT>
10. Oliver Scharbrodt, *Creating a diasporic public sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia networks in London*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 30, 2019. [http://pure-oai.bham.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/67747130/CICM\\_S\\_19\\_00043.pdf](http://pure-oai.bham.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/67747130/CICM_S_19_00043.pdf)
11. Cineworld Bolton pulls *The Lady of Heaven* film after protest, 6 June 2022. <https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/20189479.cineworld-bolton-pulls-lady-of-heaven-film-protest/>
12. Jamie Micklethwaite, Muslim producer of film banned for 'blasphemy' says 'it's perfectly normal to portray the Prophet Muhammad', 7 June 2022. <https://www.gbnews.uk/news/muslim-producer-of-film-banned-for-blasphemy-says-its-perfectly-normal-to-portray-the-prophet-muhammad/312688>
13. Malik Shlibak, 7 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/Shlibaks/status/153424868335782402>

## Overseas governments: Timeline of agitation

**27 December 2020:** Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, Iran's secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), denounced *The Lady of Heaven* as a western "plot to sow discord among the Muslim world". He said the polices orchestrated by the West, Israel, and Arabic axis ranged from "establishing ISIL and through making Lady of Heaven". Iranpress added that *The Lady of Heaven* was produced "by the UK-supported pseudo-Shia groups to cast division and aspersion between Muslims of the world so that the West can exploit the gap and expand its imperialism".<sup>14</sup>

**4 January 2021:** Pakistan's government banned *The Lady of Heaven*. The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority directed social media platforms to remove trailers of the "sacrilegious" film, and social media platforms -- including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter -- were instructed to block all content related to the movie. The Minister for Religious Affairs, Pir Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, took action after hearing about the directives of a grand cleric that "viewing and spreading such content should be avoided, as it creates divisions among Muslims". Qadri informed Pakistan's prime minister that "In order to curb the sectarian conflict among Shias and Sunnis -- Grand Ayatullah Naser Makarem Shirazi of Iran has issued a decree that strictly condemns all concerned with the production, release and propagation of the said movie." Qadri asked the prime minister to issue directives to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take up the matter with Britain.<sup>15</sup>

**6 January 2021:** Seven Shia clerics signed a 'Joint Statement from Shia Muslim scholars in UK regarding the film made about the life of Hazrat Zahra'. The clerics expressed their opposition to the film -- "because anything that causes friction and disunity between Muslims is against our faith".<sup>16</sup> One of the signatories -- Seyed Hashem Moosavi,<sup>17</sup> Director of the Maida Vale-based Islamic Centre of England -- is a central figure in Shia Islam in Britain, because he is appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and is considered to be the representative of the Supreme Leader in Britain.<sup>18</sup> The Islamic Centre of England, which serves as an office for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,<sup>19</sup> received an official warning from the Charity Commission,<sup>20</sup> after gatherings were held in 2020 in support of General Qassem Soleimani,<sup>21</sup> the assassinated leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The Islamic Centre of England is a UK-registered charity.<sup>22</sup> It is a Shia Mosque and cultural centre whose stated aim is "advancing the religion of Islam and education, and the provision of social and religious welfare facilities". Its memorandum of association stated in 1996 that "at all times at least one of the trustees shall be a representative of the Supreme Spiritual Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran".<sup>23</sup>

**8 January 2021:** The Pakistani ban prompted social media activists, Al-Azhar scholars and sheikhs of the Salafist currents in Egypt to call for banning the film. They urged the issuance of fatwas prohibiting its viewing and sent demands to the United Kingdom to stop showing the film worldwide. Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest religious authority, had issued

14. Iran's Shamkhani slams 'Lady of Heaven' film as West's strategy of division, 27 December 2020.

<https://iranpress.com/content/31693/iran-shamkhani-slams-lady-heaven-film-west-strategy-division>

15. Kalbe Ali, Govt bans 'sacrilegious' movie made in Britain, 4 January 2021.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1599534>

16. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 3 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1532850919238520832>

17. <https://ic-el.uk/blog/category/icel-speakers/speaker-group-5/hiwm-seyed-hashim-moosavi/>

18. Hujjat al-Islam Mousavi will be appointed as head of Islamic Center of England, 10 June 2019. [https://en.abna24.com/index.php/news/hujjat-al-islam-mousavi-%E2%80%8Ewill-be-appointed-as-head-of-islamic-center-of-england\\_949193.html](https://en.abna24.com/index.php/news/hujjat-al-islam-mousavi-%E2%80%8Ewill-be-appointed-as-head-of-islamic-center-of-england_949193.html)

19. Richard Spencer, Iran leader's office took £100,000 furlough grant from UK taxpayers, 4 November 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/iran-leader-s-office-took-100-000-furlough-grant-from-uk-taxpayers-hmrprg0hh>

20. Charles Hymas, Iran targets UK political system with fake websites, 6 June 2021. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/06/06/iran-targets-uk-political-system-fake-websites/>

21. Message of Thanks from the Director of the Islamic Centre of England to the participants and attendees in the commemoration of the martyrdom Hajj Ghasdem Suleimani and Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes.

[http://web.archive.org/web/20200124024016/http://www.ic-el.com/en/show\\_news.asp?idnum=1427&state=news](http://web.archive.org/web/20200124024016/http://www.ic-el.com/en/show_news.asp?idnum=1427&state=news)

22. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/1058998>

23. Andrew Norfolk, Scholar spreads Iranian propaganda in Britain, 11 January 2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/scholar-spreads-iranian-propaganda-in-britain-3q90fvzxd>

a press statement on 27 December 2021, confirming the steadfastness of Al-Azhar's position regarding the prohibition of the embodiment of the Prophet Muhammad, all prophets and the family members of the prophet (wives, daughters and sons). The statement asserted that the release of the film shows the continued disrespect by the West and some Shiite extremists for the sanctities and beliefs of others. Al-Azhar, however, did not announce any measures to ban the screening of the film, saying it is not an authority that can ban or permit a film, and simply expresses the Sharia opinion. A source from the Ministry of Culture told Al-Monitor that the Authority for Censorship of Artistic Works, which is affiliated with the ministry, is the authority competent to ban or allow the screening of a film when its distributors apply for a request for its release in Egypt, and a film cannot be banned before it is viewed.<sup>24</sup>

**15 January 2021:** Pakistan's Minister for Religious Affairs, Pir Noor-ul-Haq Qadri met Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan, Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini. *The Lady of Heaven* was discussed at the meeting. Qadri said the film was "an action against unity", and that Pakistan called on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to convene a forum with representatives from all its members to specifically monitor measures such as the production and screening of anti-Islamic films. Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini described the film as "the latest conspiracy by foreign powers to stir up sectarian strife and destroy the atmosphere of peace and brotherhood among Muslims".<sup>25</sup>

**1 February 2021:** This is when direct agitation in the UK appears to begin, with the then Iranian ambassador, Hamid Baeidinejad, placing the Islamic Republic of Iran's opposition into a British context, seeking to engage British Muslims on the issue. Hamid Baeidinejad posted two tweets on social media, the first declaring he had written to both Sunni and Shia Islamic centres in the United Kingdom to condemn *The Lady of Heaven*. He pointed out that the film had been produced here in Britain and was an attempt to create hatred and division between Muslims.<sup>26</sup> In the second, he argued the Muslim community must "act in unity to condemn this film and resort to legal steps to ban this film in the UK".<sup>27</sup>

Iran's role here replicates that of its agitation against Salman Rushdie in 1989, where it argued that the laws of Islam, or more accurately its interpretation of them, applied to the streets of Britain and to the words of a British author. Whilst the fatwa condemning Rushdie to death has not been repeated, little else seems to have changed in the intervening thirty-three years. The Iranians still do not understand that a piece of literature or film is unlikely to be banned in a western liberal democracy unless it directly incites violence. Being offended or insulted are not grounds to proscribe something other people may wish to make their own minds up about.

24. Amr Mostafa, Islamic scholars, activists call for ban on British film about prophet's daughter, 8 January 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/01/egypt-al-azhar-ban-movie-prophet-daughter-sunni-shiite.html>

25. Pakistani Religious Minister meeting with Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan, 15 January 2021.

<https://islamabad.mfa.ir/en/newsview/624467/Supreme-Leader%E2%80%99s-decree-a-source-of-inspiration-to-overcome-divisions-Pakistani-Religious-Minister>

26. Hamid Baeidinejad on Twitter: "In a letter to the Shia and Sunni Islamic centres in the UK, I categorically condemned the film "the Lady of Heaven" produced in the UK as a divisive action, and expressed our concern over the attempts to create division and hatred among Muslims at this sensitive time." / Twitter 1 February 2021

27. Hamid Baeidinejad on Twitter: "Such divisive attempt undermines the fundamental principles of Islam as well as the teachings of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Muslim community both Shia and Sunni, need to be vigilant and act in unity to condemn this film and resort to legal steps to ban the film in the UK." / Twitter 1 February 2021



## Pre-release Protest campaign in the UK

**24 December 2021:** Prominent Islamic journalist Roshan Salih posted a review of *The Lady of Heaven* on the 5Pillars website, describing it as “pure unadulterated sectarian filth”.<sup>28</sup> Among a litany of complaints, Salih accuses the film of comparing ISIS and two of the Prophet’s companions, and of propagating a myth that the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima, was assaulted by these companions.

**25 May 2022:** The day after *The Lady of Heaven*’s UK release was advertised, Salih took to twitter to repost his review, stating “complaints should be made to cinemas which are distributing this filth”.<sup>29</sup>

**4-6 June 2022:** Robert Carter, a reporter for Iran’s Press TV, wrote that the “release of a sacrilegious film in the UK has sparked protests among the country’s Muslim community”; that “thousands of British Muslims are expressing outrage”; and that “Community anger is on the rise across the country and protests continue to spring up all across the UK. All demanding the same thing that British cinemas abandon the movie.”<sup>30</sup> Carter took the view that *The Lady of Heaven* is guilty of racism, sectarianism, and Islamophobia.<sup>31</sup> He also tweeted:<sup>32</sup>

BREAKING: Angered Muslim protested outside @cineworld in Bradford after launch of “blasphemous” sectarian film *The Lady Of Heaven*. The film, which depicts Islam’s Prophet and insults his wife Aesha, has sparked outrage across Muslim community.

#TheLadyOfHeaven #Bradford

On Twitter, Robert Carter describes himself as a “Journalist and researcher” but does not mention his association with Iran’s Press TV in his biography.<sup>33</sup>

**6 June 2022:** IQNA, Iran’s International Quran News Agency, reported that the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) had urged Muslims to boycott *The Lady of Heaven*, which “tries to sow discord among Muslims”. The IHRC referred to Yasser Al-Habib as “a well-known hatemonger”, and condemned “the motives of Cineworld Group in giving a notorious hate preacher a platform to sow discord. Given the strength of feeling against it in Muslim communities, the criminal background of the writer and the pernicious intent of the film, the company should never have agreed to screen it.”<sup>34</sup>

IHRC declares no affiliation to Tehran but its chairman, Massoud Shadjareh, hailed Iran in 2019 as “the only nation standing against tyranny”. One of its four directors, Saied Reza Ameli, is the Tehran-based secretary of one of Iran’s leading policymaking bodies, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>35</sup> The IHRC is a registered charity in this country.<sup>36</sup>

In January 2020, the IHRC’s Massoud Shadjareh spoke about Qasem Soleimani to a crowd of mourners outside the Islamic Centre of England. From 1998 until his assassination in 2020, Qasem Soleimani was the commander of the Quds Force, a division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which is primarily responsible for extraterritorial and

28. Lady of Heaven: pure, unadulterated sectarian filth – 5Pillars (5pillarsuk.com) 24 December 2021
29. Roshan M Salih on Twitter: “The anti Sunni sectarian hate fest of a film Lady of Heaven is being released in the UK on June 3. Complaints should be made to cinemas which are distributing this filth. Here’s my review: <https://t.co/jKQKuG5RHY> <https://t.co/LauChOp9cs>” / Twitter 25 May, 2022.
30. Robert Carter, Blasphemous movie sparks protests in UK, 6 June 2022.  
<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/06/06/683398/blasphemous-movie-sparks-protests-in-UK>
31. Robert Carter on Twitter: “In the same way British cinemas wouldn’t tolerate a propaganda film being aired by Tommy Robinson, Anjem Choudary or Britain First - The Lady Of Heaven, written by notorious hate preacher Yasir Habib shouldn’t be platformed. Racism, sectarianism and Islamophobia are NOT OK!” / Twitter 5 June 2022.
32. Robert Carter, 4 June 2022: [https://twitter.com/Bob\\_cart124/status/1532863615430279168](https://twitter.com/Bob_cart124/status/1532863615430279168)
33. [https://twitter.com/Bob\\_cart124](https://twitter.com/Bob_cart124)
34. UK Rights Group Calls for Boycotting Controversial Movie, 6 June 2022.  
<https://iqna.ir/en/news/3479188/uk-rights-group-calls-for-boycotting-controversial-movie>
35. Andrew Norfolk, Scholar spreads Iranian propaganda in Britain, 11 January 2020. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/scholar-spreads-iranian-propaganda-in-britain-3q90fvzxd>
36. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/3994176>

clandestine military operations. Massoud Shadjareh declared: “We work hard to make sure there will be many, many more Qasem Soleimanis. We aspire to become like him.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally it should be noted that the Organisation for Islamic Co-operation (OIC)<sup>38</sup> an intergovernmental which brings together the world’s Muslim majority nations, has not commented on The Lady of Heaven.

## 5Pillars

This UK news site has been the most dedicated resource in opposing this film. The 5Pillars editor Roshan Muhammed Salih described *The Lady of Heaven* as a “sectarian hate film that will soon be available in the UK and could provoke serious Sunni-Shia tensions”. Salih portrayed the film as “two hours plus of the most extreme Shia sectarian narratives about how the caliphate was supposedly “usurped” from the Ahl ul Bayt”<sup>39</sup>[People of the house, or Muhammad’s family and descendants]. Furthermore, “Muslims will find the fact that the Prophet (pbuh) is depicted by an actor – and yes we can see his face clearly – deeply shocking and disrespectful to the best of creation.” Salih feared that “Non-Muslim viewers may find the film engaging too which makes it even more dangerous. As for Muslims, it is bound to cause a firestorm if it is widely disseminated in the UK. For this reason alone we should give some thought to petitioning platforms not to carry it.” He added that the Shia community needs to “distance itself from the film if they are really interested in communal harmony”.<sup>40</sup>

On 26 May 2022, 5Pillars sent out a tweet condemning the film, copied to two of the major cinema companies:<sup>41</sup>

The anti-Sunni sectarian hate film *Lady of Heaven* will be shown in UK cinemas from June 3. The film was scripted by the hate preacher Yasser Al Habib. It shows the face of an actor depicting the Prophet (pbuh) and slanders some of the most beloved Sahaba.

@vuecinemas @cineworld

On the same day, Roshan Salih tweeted:<sup>42</sup>

A message to the following cinema chains: You’re planning to show the sectarian hate film *Lady of Heaven* in your theatres. I’m very concerned this could provoke sectarian tension among Muslims and would urge to reconsider.

@vuecinemas @cineworld @VertigoRel @ShowcaseCinemas

On 1 June, Roshan Salih set the stage for potential protests by listing screening locations in a tweet:<sup>43</sup>

Here’s a list of cinemas showing the anti-Sunni hate film *Lady of Heaven* from Friday June 3. Many of the venues are in Muslim areas.

37. David Brown, Inquiry into charity Islamic Centre of England that called Iran’s Soleimani a martyr, 7 January 2020.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/inquiry-into-charity-islamic-centre-of-england-that-called-irans-soleimani-a-martyr-zp25l3lpc>

38. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (oic-oci.org)

39. *Lady of Heaven*: pure, unadulterated sectarian filth – 5Pillars (5pillarsuk.com)

40. *Lady of Heaven*: pure, unadulterated sectarian filth, 24 December 2021.

<https://5pillarsuk.com/2021/12/24/lady-of-heaven-pure-unadulterated-sectarian-filth/>

41. 5Pillars, 26 May 2022: <https://twitter.com/5Pillarsuk/status/1529770157836488706>

42. Roshan M Salih, 26 May 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1529776580352000000>

43. Roshan M Salih, 1 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1532043204060663810>



On 2 June 2022, Roshan Salih tweeted that “The film is backed and supported by mysterious financial backers and some un-named ‘lobby groups’ (if you know what I mean)”.<sup>44</sup> It is unclear who he means by this.

To repeat the parallels between *The Lady of Heaven* and the blasphemy accusations against Salman Rushdie, Roshan Salih displayed his continuing grievance about Rushdie, 33 years after *The Satanic Verses* first hit the headlines:<sup>45</sup>

*The honouring of Satanic Verses author Salman Rushdie in the Queen’s Birthday Honours is another slap in the face of Muslims. But we’re used to it, we get insulted every day in this society.*

As much of the country enjoyed the extended bank holiday to mark the Platinum Jubilee, Dilly Hussain, the deputy editor of 5Pillars,<sup>46</sup> echoed Roshan Salih’s grievance.<sup>47</sup>

*First Tony Blair, and now Salman Rushdie.*

*This is what Her Majesty thinks and feels for Muslim subjects.*

Two consecutive tweets by Roshan Salih on 3 June 2022 reveal just how committed to preventing the film’s broadcast activists were:

*Cineworld Bradford have told me that they cancelled the screening of Lady*

44. Roshan M Salih, 2 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1532284315207446529>

45. Roshan M Salih, 2 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1532286242930405376>

46. <https://5pillarsuk.com/about/our-team/>

47. Dilly Hussain, 2 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/DillyHussain88/status/1532333327344099328>

of Heaven tonight due to “safety concerns” and “local police guidance.” Can anyone on the ground confirm this? <sup>48</sup>

OK apparently Cineworld Bradford did play out Lady of Heaven despite telling me they had cancelled the screening. I will be chasing them up about this. Anyway, a sizeable protest did take place. Report to come soon.<sup>49</sup>

By 7 June 2022, the cinema in Bradford capitulated. A week earlier, Bradford had been crowned as the ‘UK City of Culture 2025’. Its new status means that the city will receive initial seed funding of £275,000 to begin preparation for a year of ground-breaking cultural activities in 2025.<sup>50</sup> Those festivities are now off to an inauspicious start.

After this local success of closing transmission in Bradford, Salih sought to maintain the momentum of the protests:

My best guess is that Cineworld has not banned the Lady of Heaven film. I think local branches have panicked and limited screenings but this is not an official policy as yet. So peaceful, orderly protests need to continue.<sup>51</sup>

Breaking news: @cineworld have confirmed to me that future screenings of Lady of Heaven have been cancelled. More to follow. #LadyOfHeaven <sup>52</sup>

On 4 June 2022, 5Pillars promoted a petition to ban the film:<sup>53</sup>

The petition to remove Lady of Heaven from UK cinemas has reached around 65,000 signatures. Remove The lady of Heaven from UK cinemas

<https://www.change.org/p/remove-the-lady-of-heaven-from-uk-cinemas>

By close of day on 7 June, there were 121,000 signatures. By that date, it was unclear if any cinemas were still showing *The Lady of Heaven – Showcase*, Vue and Cineworld all having removed listings.

## Imam Irfan Chishti

Imam Irfan Chishti MBE is the Co-Founder of Me and You Education.<sup>54</sup> He is a former prison chaplain, and is currently the Executive Imam at Manchester Central Mosque, Director of Communications for the Rochdale Council of Mosques, and Chairman of the Light of Islam Academy, Rochdale.<sup>55</sup>

Me and You Education has been a Prevent partner since 2013, and has given training to the police, the NHS and schools on how to spot extremists and neutralise radicalisation<sup>56</sup>. In 2016 an official Prevent Training catalogue stated his firm fights radicalisation for up to £1,500 a day.<sup>57</sup> It continues to do Prevent work, with recent examples coming from Burnage Academy School in Manchester<sup>58</sup> and via Sheffield City Council.<sup>59</sup>

Chishti has at times been involved in controversy. When some British-Pakistani groomers were convicted in 2012, for example, Chishti said discussing the “race card” was “unhelpful”.<sup>60</sup> In 2021, he was caught on film telling a rally in Rochdale that Israel is a “terrorist state”, and

48. Roshan M Salih, 3 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1532807543260598273>

49. Roshan M Salih, 3 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1532815580851490818>

50. Bradford crowned UK City of Culture 2025, 31 May 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bradford-crowned-uk-city-of-culture-2025>

51. Roshan M Salih, 7 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1534094390418935815>

52. Roshan M Salih, 7 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/RmSalih/status/1534114382438858753>

53. 5Pillars, 4 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/5Pillar-suk/status/1533043417755828226>

54. <https://twitter.com/ichishti> ; <https://meandyoueducation.co.uk/our-team/>

55. Me and You Education: Our Team: Profile Imam Muhammad Irfan Chishti LLB (Hons) MA, MBE <https://meandyoueducation.co.uk/our-team/>

56. Cleric probed for calling Israel a 'terrorist state' returns to 'well-paid' counter-extremism role, 26 August 2021.

<https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/exclusive-cleric-probed-for-calling-israel-a-terrorist-state-returns-to-well-paid-role-1.519807>

57. HM Government, Prevent Training Catalogue, March 2016: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/503973/Prevent\\_Training\\_catalogue\\_-\\_March\\_2016.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/503973/Prevent_Training_catalogue_-_March_2016.pdf)

58. Burnage Academy Bulletin, May 2022: <https://sway.office.com/82B6tE0l1UAXGueV?ref=Link>

59. Me and You Education, 22 February 2021: <https://twitter.com/MenYouEducation/status/1363900318048780296?s=20&t=HR5MajfEr-89j1CdiK6DgA>

60. Imam says race card 'unhelpful' in grooming case, 9 May 2012.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-18007679>

“We ask you Allah that you accept every single shahid (martyr) who has given their life for Palestine.” He also said that Muslims must be smart, adding that “our Jewish brethren” are “a lot smarter than us”; and that Muslims knew “exactly the strategy that those Jewish, Zionist politicians are doing and we also know how to respond. It’s got to be long term, it’s got to be economic, it’s got to be with strategy”. Chishti suggested to the crowd that if they wanted to become “mujahideen”, holy warriors, then they should emulate the Muslim general Saladin, who expelled the Crusaders from Palestine in 1187. “Where is the modern-day Saladin?” he asked, and he went on to praise shahids, or martyrs. Home Secretary Priti Patel ordered an inquiry into Chishti. He apologised, received a written warning, and then returned to his paid role as an adviser on Prevent.<sup>61</sup>

On 5 June 2022, Chishti celebrated the success of those who were protesting against *The Lady of Heaven*. In response to a Facebook post by Imam Qari Asim criticising *The Lady of Heaven*, Imam Irfan Chishti posted “A couple of areas I’ve heard today have had it stopped. Blackburn and Sheffield. Alhamdulillah.”<sup>62</sup>



61. Cleric probed for calling Israel a 'terrorist state' returns to 'well-paid' counter-extremism role, 26 August 2021. <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/exclusive-cleric-probed-for-calling-israel-a-terrorist-state-returns-to-well-paid-role-1.519807>

62. Imam Irfan Chishti, 5 June 2022: [https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/575757043911096?comment\\_id=1182740712485516](https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/575757043911096?comment_id=1182740712485516)

Alhamdulillah means 'praise be to God'. This is a man paid to conduct anti-extremism work by the British government, celebrating the closure of film screenings by protestors standing outside cinemas.

### Shakeel Afsar

On 7 June 2022, Muslims Against Antisemitism (MAAS) posted a video of a man at a cinema protest in Birmingham, that had originally appeared on the Iranian broadcaster Press TV. Speaking in exceptionally robust terms that potentially bordered on the threatening, the individual stated: <sup>63</sup>

Birmingham will not tolerate the disrespect of our prophet (pbuh). There will be outcomes from your actions. You will have repercussions for your actions. We have been trained from birth that we must defend the honour of our prophet & we will lay our life on the line.

The speaker is Shakeel Afsar - who describes himself as an "Entrepreneur, Private Landlord, Real Estate and Property Developer".<sup>64</sup> Afsar has been prominent in a series of Islamist and related campaigns in recent years.

- He protested outside Birmingham schools in 2019 in opposition to LGBT lessons; eventually receiving an injunction banning him from demonstrating outside a primary school.<sup>65</sup>
- He harangued the Labour candidate Kim Leadbeater during the Batley and Spen by-election.<sup>66</sup>
- On British Muslim TV, he refused to apologise to Kim Leadbeater for his behaviour.<sup>67</sup>
- He also agitates around the Trojan Horse affair, arguing that there were no issues of concern in Birmingham schools;<sup>68</sup> campaigns on Kashmir;<sup>69</sup> has declared war on the Israeli establishment;<sup>70</sup> and over what he sees as Britain's "responsibility" for a genocide of Palestinians.<sup>71</sup>

63. Muslims Against Antisemitism (MAAS), 7 June 2022: [https://twitter.com/MAAS\\_UK/status/1534243728096894977](https://twitter.com/MAAS_UK/status/1534243728096894977)

64. <https://twitter.com/ShakeelAfsar8>

65. Birmingham anti-LGBT school protesters had 'misinterpreted' teachings, judge says | Birmingham | The Guardian 26 November 2019.

66. Robert Carter, 25 June 2021: [https://twitter.com/Bob\\_cart124/status/1408444266968403970](https://twitter.com/Bob_cart124/status/1408444266968403970)

67. British Muslim TV, 15 January 2022: <https://twitter.com/BritishMuslimTV/status/1482451203757850633>

68. Shakeel Afsar, 12 April 2022: <https://twitter.com/ShakeelAfsar8/status/1513893876033105920>

69. Shakeel Afsar, 25 May 2022: <https://twitter.com/ShakeelAfsar8/status/1529548174515482625>

70. Shakeel Afsar, 14 May 2021: <https://twitter.com/ShakeelAfsar8/status/1393279580308492291>

71. Shakeel Afsar, 23 May 2021: <https://twitter.com/ShakeelAfsar8/status/1396411693543137281>

72. Independent expert appointed to tackle Islamophobia - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) 23 July 2019

73. See the contribution of Lord Mann, Islamophobia - Hansard - UK Parliament 15 November 2021.

74. Qari Asim, 8 July 2019: <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/884170748603031>

### Imam Qari Asim

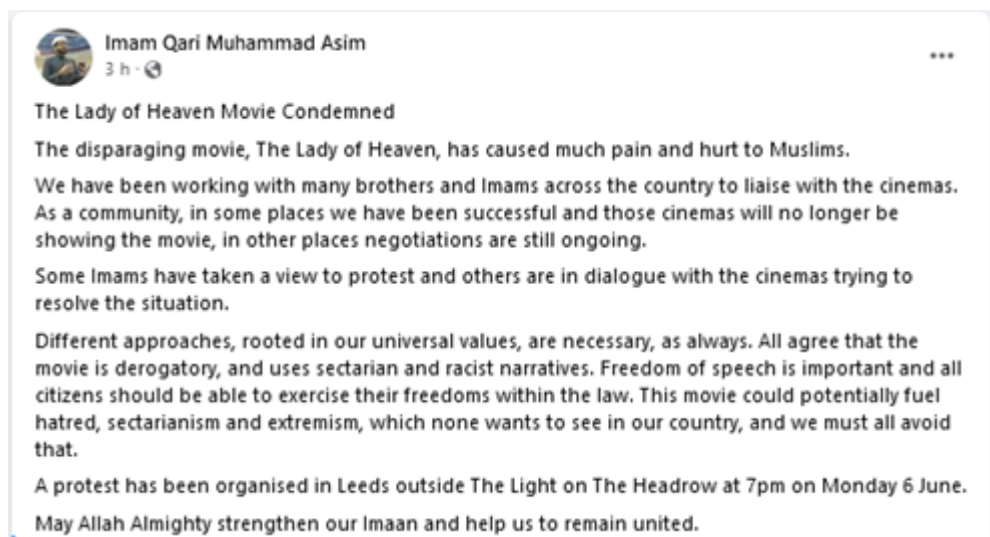
Qari Asim is the Imam of the Makkah Mosque in Leeds. In 2019 he was appointed as an independent advisor to government to define Islamophobia, and a government press release also recorded him as a member of the cross-government Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group.<sup>72</sup> The government has faced accusations that Qari Asim was under employed and that Ministers have not utilised his experience.<sup>73</sup>

Qari Asim has been involved in several debates concerning freedom of speech and blasphemy. On 8 July 2019 he posted a petition on Facebook,<sup>74</sup> developed by his own Makkah Mosque, which called for social networks to face laws restricting "hate preaching on religion(s)". The petition went on state:

In the recent years numerous far right groups have insulted prophets of faiths including Prophet Muhammad PBUH, using public YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms. I believe there needs to be a legal boundary set when discussing criticism against religions and their respective Prophets.<sup>75</sup>

In 2020, after being criticised by the former Chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Trevor Phillips, Qari Asim issued a public statement in which he declared “I greatly value free speech and am fully committed to protecting it. The answer to Trevor Phillips’ question is very simple: I do not support restrictions on free speech”.<sup>76</sup>

Despite this background, and association with organisations such as the counter-extremist group Hope not Hate, where he is a Trustee,<sup>77</sup> Asim has been a prominent figure in objecting to screenings of *The Lady of Heaven* and on his Facebook page gave the details of a protest in Leeds against the film, along with a call for Muslims to remain united.<sup>78</sup>



The reference above to ‘many brothers and Imams’ is unlikely to be an accident – video footage of cinema protests showed demonstrations that were either entirely or very largely male.<sup>79</sup> Those concerned about the status or rights of women in Muslim communities in Britain will have seen little to reassure themselves in recent days. Asim’s reference to ‘freedom of speech’ is curious. He appears to recognise that there is a right to criticise a film, but there is no recognition here that authors or film makers have a right to free speech, or that the public has a right to hear his criticisms, to see *The Lady of Heaven*, and to make up their own mind?

Qari Asim at one point appeared confused as to what his arguments against the film were. In a post on his Facebook page on 5 June he argued that the view of Muslim leaders in Britain was that the movie was offensive, and also derogatory and Islamophobic:<sup>80</sup>

75. Petition: Laws to be introduced on social networks on hate preaching against religion (s): <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/236874>

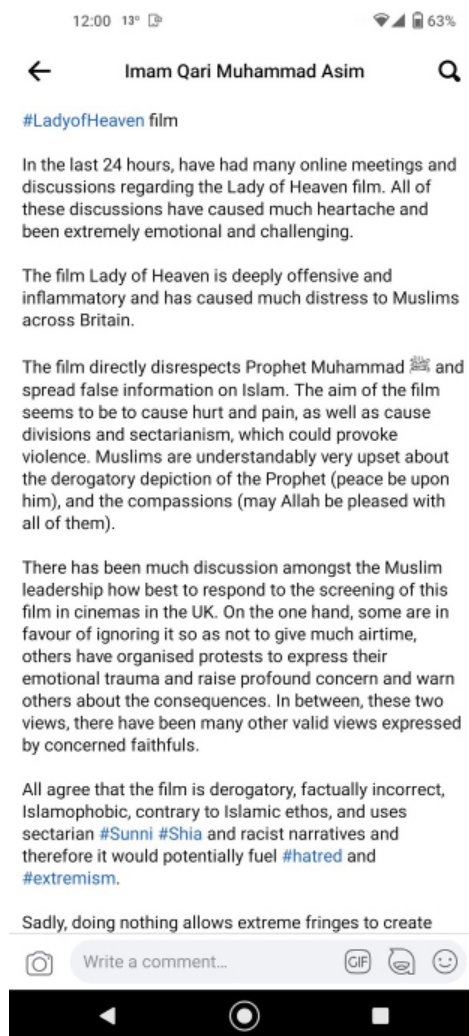
76. Qari Asim: Free speech and challenging hatred, 9 February 2020: Makkah Mosque » Qari Asim: Free Speech and Challenging Hatred

77. HOPE not hate Charitable Trust – HOPE not hate

78. Imam Qari Asim, 6 June 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/576912430462224>

79. See for example footage from Bradford (2) Robert Carter on Twitter: “BREAKING: Angered Muslim protested outside @cineworld in Bradford after launch of “blasphemous” sectarian film *The Lady Of Heaven*. The film, which depicts Islam’s Prophet and insults his wife Aesha, has sparked outrage across Muslim community. #TheLadyOfHeaven #Bradford <https://t.co/5goGG5OAXf>” / Twitter 4 June 2022

80. A pdf of the full post is in the authors possession. A screenshot follows below:



The same day however, this position was adjusted, and Asim edited his Facebook post to remove the word 'Islamophobic' from the text.<sup>81</sup> The question of why Asim moved from the position where "all" of the Muslim leaders consulted took the view *The Lady of Heaven* was 'Islamophobic' to the term not even being mentioned, is potentially very significant.

Had Asim realised that describing a film written by a Shia Muslim cleric as 'Islamophobic' looked ridiculous to the wider community? Had he somehow overlooked that the preference of many supporters of the APPG British Muslims Islamophobia definition is that the term should only be applied to the behaviour of non-Muslims towards Muslims?<sup>82</sup> The definition itself states: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".<sup>83</sup> What are we to do if we have conflicting perceptions of 'Muslimness' within Muslim communities?

The question of blasphemy is one that has at times proved extremely divisive in the west – consider the Rushdie Affair, and the controversies in Denmark and France over cartoons of Muhammad. But the two countries that have suffered the most destabilising violence around accusations of

81. The edited version of the text can be viewed online here: <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/575757043911096> 5 June 2022.

82. See for example the views of Tariq Modood, APPG British Muslims, Islamophobia+Defined.pdf (squarespace.com) p. 41

83. APPG British Muslims, p. 11



blasphemy have been Nigeria and Pakistan. In May a Christian Nigerian schoolgirl, Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu was reportedly stoned then beaten to death by classmates for blasphemy. That month Borno and Bauchi states saw rioting by religious mobs<sup>84</sup>. In Pakistan sporadic outbreaks of violence, and the political divisions that follow, have periodically destabilised the country, most notably when the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer was assassinated by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, in 2011.<sup>85</sup> Taseer had been a vocal critic of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Qadri became a hero to the religious right in Pakistan and upon his execution in 2016, was much mourned. Hundreds reportedly visit a shrine to him in Islamabad, every day.<sup>86</sup>

It is therefore particularly concerning to know that Qari Asim has long engaged with two Pakistani clerics who venerated the killer of Salman Taseer. Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman was a prominent supporter of Mumtaz Qadri, attending and speaking at his 2016 funeral, where he described Qadri as a martyr.<sup>87</sup> Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman's father, Muhammad Naqib ur-Rehman, is a like-minded figure whose visit to the UK in 2016 provoked anger from the Taseer family.<sup>88</sup> Muhammad Naqib ur-Rehman has described Mumtaz Qadri as a shaheed (martyr).<sup>89</sup>

In December 2017 Qari Asim met both of the Rehman's at their offices in Pakistan. In a post on his Facebook page he praised the younger of the Rehman's, uploaded three pictures of them together and stated that Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman "speaks out against all forms of extremism and promotes integration and peace within communities." Qari Asim referred to the visit as a privilege.<sup>90</sup> Qari Asim has also publicised meetings with the Rehman's on his Facebook page in January 2020.<sup>91</sup> A 2015 talk by Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman was described by Qari Asim as "blissful."<sup>92</sup> Qari Asim clearly considers Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman an important voice. After the terrorist attack at Fishmongers Hall in November 2019, which eventually saw terrorist Usman Khan killed by the police on London Bridge, Qari Asim tweeted out a statement by ur-Rehman condemning the attack.<sup>93</sup>

There are risks in praising such individuals. In 2018 the then Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Sara Khan raised Hassan Haseeb ur-Rehman's ability to combine travelling to the UK and discussing inter-faith dialogue and opposing terrorism, whilst in Pakistan promoting hatred and intolerance.<sup>94</sup>

## The dismissal of Qari Asim

On 11 June 2022 the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities wrote to Qari Asim, with regards to *The Lady of Heaven* protests. The government terminated his appointments with immediate effect stating of his conduct "This clear involvement in a campaign to limit free expression is incompatible with the role of a government adviser."<sup>95</sup>

The next day, Qari Asim issued a statement in his defence, declaring that he did not personally attend or organise any protests about *The Lady of Heaven*. He also criticised the government for failing to engage with him on developing a definition of Islamophobia.<sup>96</sup>

84. Farahnaz Ispahani and Sean Nelson, 3 June 2022: [https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2022/06/03/nigeria\\_is\\_following\\_pakistan\\_on\\_blasphemy\\_and\\_mob\\_violence\\_835319.html](https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2022/06/03/nigeria_is_following_pakistan_on_blasphemy_and_mob_violence_835319.html)

85. BBC News, 29 February 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35684452>

86. The Express Tribune (Pakistan), 27 February 2017: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1340245/mumtaz-qadris-followers-set-fete-hero-first-anniversary>

87. Iram Ramzan, 29 July 2018: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pakistani-hate-cleric-hassan-haseeb-ur-rehman-feted-at-anti-terror-talks-fq0b-mqj9s>

88. Tom Porter, 21 July 2016: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/pakistani-hate-preacher-who-glorifies-islamist-murder-welcomed-by-archbishop-canterbury-1571418>

89. Hal GP Colebatch, 29 April 2017, <https://www.spectator.com.au/2017/04/the-cup-the-martyrs-and-the-archbishop/>

90. Qari Asim, 25 December 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/541176802902429>

91. Qari Asim, 3 January 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/1025008741185897>

92. Qari Asim, 12 August 2015: <https://www.facebook.com/ImamQariAsim/posts/103978656622248>

93. Qari Asim, 30 November 2019: <https://twitter.com/QariAsim/status/1200705635580547072>

94. Commission for Countering Extremism, 3 August 2018: <https://extremismcommission.blog.gov.uk/2018/08/03/thoughts-before-the-ahmadiyya-convention/>

95. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 11 June 2022, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1081996/DLUHC\\_to\\_Imam\\_Qari\\_Asim\\_-\\_11062022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1081996/DLUHC_to_Imam_Qari_Asim_-_11062022.pdf)

96. Qari Asim MBE on Twitter: "My response to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities' recent letter removing me as Government's Adviser to define #Islamophobia 🇬🇧 <https://t.co/EcdoWivXwZ>" / Twitter

## Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)

As large crowds developed outside cinemas in Bradford, Sheffield, Blackburn, Bolton and other cities, the MCB did not call on the protestors to return to their homes. Those wishing to see *The Lady of Heaven*, and those wishing to watch other movies, had to negotiate their way through crowds of protestors. The words of the protestors demonstrated the nature of their objections: “We are very offended, as you can see we are very insulted” proclaimed a demonstrator in Bradford.<sup>97</sup>

For the MCB – the organisation which claims to be the largest representative organisation of British Muslims, making policy out of people being ‘insulted’ or ‘offended’ is not a straightforward task. Its eventual statement, on 5 June, was short and contained little in the way of substantive comment.<sup>98</sup> It categorised *The Lady of Heaven* as ‘divisive’ and stressed their commitment to inter-faith relations.

### MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN RESPONDS TO THE RELEASE OF A DIVISIVE FILM IN BRITISH CINEMAS

Statement from the Muslim Council of Britain, 5th June 2022

A new film entitled ‘The Lady of Heaven’ has been condemned as divisive and sectarian by scholars across the rich traditions of Islam. The MCB, which proudly represents affiliates from across the different schools of thought in our faith, **supports those scholars and leaders who are advocating for greater unity and for the common good, as commanded by our Holy Prophet (PBUH).**

The MCB has always advocated for respectful dialogue of intra-faith relations. There are some – including many of this film’s supporters or those engaging in sectarianism in their response – whose primary goal is to fuel hatred.

**We must not let them succeed.**

**See full statement:**

[tinyurl.com/FILMRESPONSE](https://tinyurl.com/FILMRESPONSE)



97. Robert Carter on Twitter: “BREAKING: Angered Muslim protested outside @cineworld in Bradford after launch of “blasphemous” sectarian film The Lady Of Heaven. The film, which depicts Islam’s Prophet and insults his wife Aesha, has sparked outrage across Muslim community. #TheLadyOfHeaven #Bradford <https://t.co/5goGG5OAXf>” / Twitter 4 June 2022.

98. Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) responds to the release of a divisive film in British cinemas - Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) 5 June 2022.

In many ways it was a reminder of how little the MCB has to offer in support of core British values such as freedom of speech, or to address the fears of those concerned about the implementation of blasphemy codes. Contentious events within British Islam appear to occur with the MCB as a spectator, perhaps reflecting why successive governments have declined to engage with the organisation.

One of the MCB’s more prominent officials, Miqdaad Versi of its

Centre for Media Monitoring, did offer a clear position as to whether *The Lady of Heaven* was 'Islamophobic'. In a difference from the initial position of the government's then independent advisor on Islamophobia, Qari Asim, Versi stated that the film was sectarian, and that the Islamophobia definition should not include sectarianism.<sup>99</sup>

Miqdaad Versi's position is however deeply contentious. Society does not normally adopt different policies or laws for different racial or religious groups. The very idea is anathema. Guidance or legislation on issues such as racial equality conventionally applies to all. If the Islamophobia definition can only be applied to non-Muslims, how can it work in practice?

### Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi

Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi describes himself as being from Halifax and a "Student of Knowledge. Interests in theology, metaphysics, philosophy and Islamic Jurisprudence. Against liberalism, modernism."<sup>100</sup> He has been a prolific tweeter on the protests against screenings of *The Lady of Heaven*, describing the film as 'Islamophobic', and retweeting a poster to that effect.<sup>101</sup>



Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi marked one tweet with the words 'Important clip'. The tweet includes a video of a speaker saying: "We are here, Deobandi; we are here, Ahl-e-Hadith; we are here, Bareilvi... but we are Muslim; we stand together".<sup>102</sup> Further tweets by Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi provide an idea of the content of intra-Islamist discourse:

99. Miqdaad Versi on Twitter: "As usual, Paul Stott displays his ignorance about the @APPGBritMuslims definition that he criticises so heavily Objectively, the below is sectarianism not Islamophobia And it is right that sectarianism isn't included in the definition of Islamophobia" / Twitter, 5 June 2022.

100. <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi>

101. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi @ on Twitter: "A call to my beloved brothers and sisters to immediately boycott @myvue @cineworld @ShowcaseCinemas @BBFC due to their promotion of the Islamophobic movie which promotes themes of racism and hate speech. Share the message! #Boycottcinemas <https://t.co/V8Li8JeAay>" / Twitter 4 June 2022.

102. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 4 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533041724934823936>

In sha Allah we will be staging a protest outside Bradford Cineworld tomorrow. Highly sunni populated area should not allow such a blasphemous film to take place.<sup>103</sup>

103. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 3 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1532291689414533123>

104. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 4 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533210370852196361>

105. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 4 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/15332120205056317>

106. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 4 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/153301122359539777>

107. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 5 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533535756819607553>

108. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 5 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533468660253196291>

109. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 6 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533945092972625920>

110. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 6 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/aliasgharhanafi/status/1533894967319531521>

111. Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi, 6 June 2022: (1) Ali Asghar Al-Hanafi on Twitter: "Kaafir Kaafir Shia Kaafir" / Twitter

112. habibi, 6 June 2022: [https://twitter.com/habibi\\_uk/status/1533747604831580160](https://twitter.com/habibi_uk/status/1533747604831580160)

113. habibi, 7 June 2022: [https://twitter.com/habibi\\_uk/status/1534124730059456514](https://twitter.com/habibi_uk/status/1534124730059456514)

114. Lancashire Council of Mosques, 5 June 2022: Lancashire Council Mosques | LCM Notices (lancashire-mosques.com)

115. Qari Asim, 5 June 2022: "Continuing meetings with scholars about the distress that #LadyofHeaven film has caused and the approach that the #Muslim leadership must take during such emotional and sensitive times to resolve the issue in an amicable way. @MINAB\_UK @BMScholars @LancsMosque @ImamsOnline <https://t.co/Ubjpkt1zf9>" / Twitter

116. Huddersfield Council of Mosques, 6 June 2022: Huddersfield Council of Mosques on Twitter: "PRESS RELEASE Re: Screening of 'Lady of Heaven' @vuecinemas @ShowcaseCinemas @cineworld @BBFC <https://t.co/Hlws1U1tDS>" / Twitter

117. Bolton Council of Mosques, 5 June 2022: BCoM on Twitter: "The recently released film 'Lady of Heaven' has caused much distress to Muslims globally BCoM representatives have visited Cineworld to speak to management regarding the showings.#muslimcommunity <https://t.co/6GaaSIFfzu>" / Twitter

118. Bolton Council of Mosques, 6 June 2022. BCoM on Twitter: "<https://t.co/JOpb2lb5dr>" / Twitter

For all those liberals claiming that the protest against the Islamophobic movie is intolerance to freedom of speech; see if you would reinstate blasphemy laws if i burn the UK flag outside Parliament on the Jubilee holidays. Double standards and hypocrisy. No morals.<sup>104</sup>

Maybe receive a knighthood for writing a blasphemous story on the Queen.<sup>105</sup>

Although we have differences, within even creedal matters, the Muslims of the UK will unite against the Rafidhi Shia Kufri filth. I call on all brothers and sisters from all backgrounds to come forth and stand against this blasphemous movie. Start with boycotting the cinemas!<sup>106</sup>

The movie has been cancelled in Birmingham and Sheffield. ALHAMDULILAH<sup>107</sup>

According to census analysis, Islam will become the most dominant religion in Britain by 2050. I bet you Atheist liberals and dying Christians can't wait.<sup>108</sup>

Kaafir Kaafir Shia Kaafir.<sup>109</sup>

We win! Movie banned in Leeds.<sup>110</sup>

Sectarian elements have clearly been present in the protests. Asghar's tweet above, celebrating the movie's cancellation in Leeds, includes the words "Kaafir Kaafir Shia Kaafir"<sup>111</sup> – that Shia Muslims are non-believers. The term 'Shia kaffir' was heard in a number of protests, including those in Sheffield,<sup>112</sup> and in Leeds.<sup>113</sup>

Such language ironically undermines the argument that *The Lady of Heaven* is a sectarian movie – such language is coming from the protestors outside the cinemas and is spoken by Sunni Muslims towards Shia. As a Shia himself, Miqdaad Versi would perhaps agree.....

## Council of Mosques campaigning

In some areas of the country, Councils of Mosques issued statements calling for *The Lady of Heaven* to be banned. Examples include Lancashire Council of Mosques,<sup>114</sup> a statement that was retweeted by Qari Asim.<sup>115</sup> Huddersfield Council of Mosques also called for proscription,<sup>116</sup> as did Bolton Council of Mosques (BCOM) who stated that they had visited Cineworld about the issue.<sup>117</sup> This was followed the next day by a BCOM statement thanking supporters and announcing that screenings had now ceased thanks to the unity shown.<sup>118</sup>

## Responses within the UK to criticism of *Lady of Heaven*

Distracted by the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the challenge to Boris Johnson as leader of the Conservative party, political responses to the protests at cinemas were initially distinctly muted, accommodating mob rule by default. This contrasts with the protests against 'blasphemy' at Batley Grammar School in 2021, where strong media interest brought at least some rhetorical support from politicians for the school teacher. Baroness Fox of Buckley was a rare exception. She responded to a tweet by the trade unionist and writer Paul Embery:

**Paul Embery, 6 June 2022:**<sup>119</sup> This is reportedly the manager of a cinema in Sheffield addressing a theocratic mob protesting at the screening of a "blasphemous" film (*The Lady of Heaven*). Thoroughly depressing to see him capitulate to their demands and confirm the film has been binned.

**Claire Fox, 6 June 2022:**<sup>120</sup> Creep of extra-parliamentary blasphemy law censoring film. Same "I Find that Offensive" cancel culture arguments now being used far beyond campus activism. Disastrous for the arts, dangerous for free speech, a lesson to those who argue identity politics are no threat to democracy.

There was to be no broad response until Health Secretary Sajid Javid spoke up on 8 January, denouncing 'cancel culture' and stressing that freedom of speech was a fundamental value.<sup>121</sup> This intervention was to be followed by Dame Sara Khan, the government's independent advisor on Social Cohesion and Resilience, who the next day bemoaned the lack of leadership from parliamentarians, public institutions and government. A scenario where viewpoints could be silenced by religious mobs was a threat to our social cohesion.<sup>122</sup>

## The response of cinemas to the protests

At the local level, the cinema protests must have been extremely difficult for employees to deal with. Footage of one protest in Leeds, for example, shows a large crowd combining chants of Allahu Akbar with demands that the manager come out and face them.<sup>123</sup> Policing and any private security presence appears to have been negligible. At a protest on 8 June at the Westfield Centre in Stratford, London, security guards stood by to allow demonstrators into the main shopping area, so they could protest directly outside the cinema.<sup>124</sup> In perhaps the worst footage to emerge during the entire controversy, on 5 June in Sheffield a cinema manager was pressed into holding the demonstrators megaphone and delivering a statement to them which was reminiscent of a hostage video. To cries of 'Allahu Akbar' the manager announces "we will not be showing this film again" whilst the crowd jostles him. He then goes on to stress that the cinema is part of the community, and that the cinema is not prepared to show the film. To further cheers, the video ends.<sup>125</sup>

At the national level there seemed little initial evidence that Cineworld, Showcase or Vue knew what to do in the face of protests. Corporate or

119. Paul Embery, 6 June 2022: <https://twitter.com/PaulEmbery/status/1533784431818858498>

120. Claire Fox, 6 June 2022: [https://twitter.com/Fox\\_Claire/status/1533797750143320065](https://twitter.com/Fox_Claire/status/1533797750143320065)

121. Nadia Khomami, 8 June 2022, Sajid Javid attacks 'cancel culture' as UK cinemas pull 'blasphemous' film | Film | The Guardian

122. Sara Khan, 9 June 2022, Religious mobs are a threat to British democracy (telegraph.co.uk)

123. Habibi, 7 June 2022: "Bring the manager out!" It seems that, wisely, no one appeared. Now the Board's censorship is being accepted for a quiet life. That will ensure much more nastiness to come, of course. Yes, this is the UK in 2022. 4/4 <https://t.co/EpaPJZH0oo> / Twitter

124. Habibi, 9 June 2022, habibi on Twitter: "Now the thugs want to decide what films you can see in Stratford. A scene from Westfield, last night. "Take it down!" "Allahu akbar!" It appears that a handful of police officers and security guards in attendance simply looked on. <https://t.co/X8oRltXlhQ>" / Twitter

125. Habibi, 6 June 2022, (1) habibi on Twitter: "Our new blasphemy law - a hateful sectarian mob. Sheffield, last night. If you don't stand up to religious thuggery, it will only get worse. <https://t.co/GvhuoLgzwo>" / Twitter

political leadership was lacking. On 8 June Cineworld informed the BBC that: “Due to recent incidents related to screenings of *The Lady of Heaven*, we have made the decision to cancel upcoming screenings of the film nationwide to ensure the safety of our staff and customers”.<sup>126</sup>

The protestors are winning.

## Policy Recommendations

Throughout *The Lady of Heaven* controversy, Iran has enjoyed a significant presence. Its Ambassador canvassed British Islamic centres against the movie at a time when few, if any British Muslims had heard of it. The Iranian broadcaster, Press TV, has provided a platform for opposition to the film. Regardless of the geopolitical relationship with Iran, the British government needs to recognise that Iran poses a threat, domestically, to our social cohesion. A strategy to address that challenge needs to be developed as a matter of urgency. That strategy needs to consider Iranian dawah, but it also needs to recognise that whilst Iran is a Shia nation, its ambitions to lead the Muslim world ensure that it is perfectly happy to lead Sunni Muslims against what it sees as dissident Shia.

Government assessments of Iran’s role in British Islamism need to be broad ranging – from JTAC (the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre) right down to the type of counter-radicalisation work conducted by Prevent practitioners at the local level.

The proposed ‘Islamophobia’ definition by the APPG British Muslims was always likely to crash and burn when placed against the reality of life in a multicultural liberal democracy, where people are free to both practice and criticise religion. British Muslims appear unable to agree on whether *The Lady of Heaven* is Islamophobic, sectarian or a movie worthy of public understanding. That of course is how people respond to controversial publications, films or events – with differences of opinion. It is an indication of how baleful the Islamophobia definition is, that had the authors of this movie been non-Muslim, there would be concerted demands for its proscription, on the grounds of ‘Islamophobia’. Policies which treat people differently on grounds of race or religion, are undesirable. It is time for the government to declare that there is no possibility of a viable working definition of Islamophobia, and the issue put to rest.

In areas such as social cohesion, it is vital for policy makers to focus on what community representatives and those involved in counter-extremism do. What are their actions, especially at times of political controversy or crisis? *The Lady of Heaven* controversy has demonstrated that approach must be at the forefront of government thinking when choosing partners.

In 2020, Imam Qari Asim declared that he supported freedom of speech. His words have now been tested by events, and his actions found wanting. The government has correctly terminated his appointment. The importance of conducting due diligence before appointments are made, and of continuous review, has been emphasised. Much the same applies to Imam Irfan Chishti. If the Prevent review has not already audited those in receipt of Prevent funding, the Home Office should conduct a further

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126. BBC News, 9 June 2022: Cineworld cancels *The Lady of Heaven* film screenings after protests - BBC News

review to ensure that there are no more Irfan Chishtis employed in such sensitive roles.

In the case of both the Batley Grammar school teacher, and *The Lady of Heaven* movie, a de facto blasphemy law has been instituted by mob pressure. If the government wishes there to be a blasphemy law in this country, it should propose legislation to that effect. If it does not, Ministers and officials must speak up for the status quo, and in defence of the rule of law. The distractions of the Jubilee or the fate of the Prime Minister are not an excuse for their failure in this instance – either Ministers stand behind our values, or they do not. Much the same applies to opposition parties, who have been equally mute.



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Policy Exchange  
1 Old Queen Street  
Westminster  
London SW1H 9JA

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