

February 2025

THE ROTHERHAM GROOMING SCANDAL AND THE CREATORS OF THE ISLAMOPHOBIA DEFINITION

A Policy Exchange Research Note

Andrew Gilligan and Paul Stott





Policy Exchange is the UK's leading think tank. We are an independent, non-partisan educational charity whose mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas that will deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.

Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development and retains copyright and full editorial control over all its written research. We work in partnership with academics and other experts and commission major studies involving thorough empirical research of alternative policy outcomes. We believe that the policy experience of other countries offers important lessons for government in the UK. We also believe that government has much to learn from business and the voluntary sector.

Registered charity no: 1096300.

Trustees

Karan Bilimoria, Alexander Downer, Andrew Feldman, David Harding, Patricia Hodgson, Greta Jones, Andrew Law, Charlotte Metcalf, David Ord, Daniel Posen, Andrew Roberts, William Salomon, Salma Shah, Simon Wolfson, Nigel Wright.

The British Government is being urged to adopt a highly-contested definition of Islamophobia developed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims. Recently, in a signal that ministers may agree with this demand, it emerged that the Government is likely to appoint Dominic Grieve, the former attorney-general, to chair a working group to develop an Islamophobia definition.¹

Grieve is closely associated with the APPG. He wrote a foreword to the APPG report which proposed the definition, saying: “I greatly welcome this report, which makes an important contribution to the debate as to how Islamophobia can best be addressed. It is well researched and can give all of us food both for thought and positive action.”²

This short research note deals specifically with links between the APPG and the grooming scandal in Rotherham. One key individual on the APPG’s staff, Muhbeen Hussain, closely involved in the report which developed the definition, is from Rotherham. He played a prominent, and to many in the town deeply unhelpful, part in events around the scandal – leading a boycott of the police for “scapegoating” Muslims - although there is no suggestion he is himself guilty of any crime.

In its report calling for the definition, the APPG repeatedly states that it should be “legally binding”³ and that even if it was not it could be operationalised legally. Faith-based hate crime or discrimination on the grounds of religion is already illegal, of course. But the new definition, the APPG says, should be used to control and police a much wider range of activity in respect of Islam, extending “far beyond” anything that can currently “be captured as criminal.”⁴ Adopting the definition would set “appropriate limits to free speech” when talking about Muslims,⁵ and create “tests... for ascertaining whether contentious speech is indeed reasonable criticism or Islamophobia masquerading as ‘legitimate criticism.’”⁶

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/02/03/angela-rayner-set-rules-islam-free-speech-dominic-grieve/>

² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

³ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> – for instance, on pages 27, 30, 32, 35.

⁴ Ibid, page 32.

⁵ Ibid, page 11.

⁶ Ibid, page 36.

The APPG report specifically lists “the issue of ‘grooming gangs,’” which it places in inverted commas, apparently disputing the concept, as a “real life example” of illegitimate, Islamophobic criticism which “humiliates, marginalises and stigmatises Muslims.”⁷ It makes clear that permitted criticism of Islam must be narrowly circumscribed, because the “supposed right to criticise Islam results in nothing more than another subtle form of anti-Muslim racism.”⁸

As multiple official reports into the Rotherham grooming scandal have found, not only did the gangs exist but a major reason why they went largely unhindered was that people in authority were afraid of being branded racist or anti-Muslim if they acted.⁹ The perpetrators in Rotherham, largely Pakistani Muslim men, were given special treatment because of their race and/or religion. (The APPG, incidentally, conflates race and faith: its proposed definition begins with the statement that “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism.”)¹⁰

In Rotherham, the special treatment was only de facto. If adopted by government, an Islamophobia definition – any definition, not just the one proposed by the APPG – would constitute an official, de jure form of special treatment for Islam: there is no such additional protection, or protection from criticism, for any other faith (the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism is sometimes cited as a parallel, but is primarily framed as a protection for a race, not a religion, and is not intended to be legally binding or operationalised.)

The Government has rejected claims that the UK practises “two-tier policing,” with its official review of extremism even seeking to define such claims as “extreme right-wing.”¹¹ For it to adopt an Islamophobia definition – any definition – would be officially to create two-tier policy, formalising and institutionalising different treatment of people depending on their religion, and if

⁷ Ibid, page 35.

⁸ Ibid, page 35.

⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8152f4ed915d74e33fd945/46966_Report_of_Inspection_of_Rotherham_WEB.pdf and <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/279/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-exploitation-in-rotherham>

¹⁰<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2feb1a90cfffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf>

¹¹<https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Extremely-Confused-The-Governments-new-counter-extremism-review-revealed.pdf>

the APPG has its way also two-tier legislation. Little could be more harmful to community cohesion, or the position of Britain's Muslims.

A formal, officially-accepted definition – any definition - could also further inhibit the exposure, stopping and punishment of any future sexual or other crimes. The charge of Islamophobia is often used by wrongdoers, criminals or bad faith actors who are Muslim to smear or deter those who seek to expose them. As we show, it was repeatedly used for this purpose in the Rotherham scandal and in other instances of grooming. It continued to be used in this way even years after the facts were established beyond doubt.

In previous reports, Policy Exchange has described the bad faith actors behind the APPG report, the partiality of its evidence base (contrary to Grieve's claim that it is "well researched,") and listed some recent attempts to use the term Islamophobia – even without the power of an official definition - to stifle political debate.¹² This report adds an extra layer of understanding to the issue.

We know that many people of goodwill do not realise the agenda of the activists who are behind the creation and promotion of an Islamophobia definition. We know that many use the term Islamophobia sincerely, to describe anti-Muslim discrimination, hate speech, incitement and violence which is real, and serious, and should not be downplayed – but which is already illegal. The answer to these wrongs against Muslims, as against people of any other faith, is to enforce the existing laws against them.

The APPG's links with the Rotherham grooming scandal

A man named Muhbeen Hussain was a key member of the APPG's staff when it wrote the report creating the Islamophobia definition, including the extracts quoted above, and he remains so to this day. There are repeated references to his role in the APPG during the spring and summer of 2018, when the report on the definition was being prepared and written.¹³ On its publication Hussain was congratulated for "all the work [he] did" on the report by one of those who gave evidence for it.¹⁴

¹² <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-definition-of-Islamophobia.pdf>

¹³ For instance, <https://x.com/LondonFaiths/status/1014193643568160768> and https://x.com/adel_chowdhury/status/990946783433027584

¹⁴ <https://x.com/mshafiquk/status/1067481265757143040>

He is the only staff member listed in these references, though another report by the APPG in December 2017 said it had four staff, including Hussain, at that point.¹⁵ The Islamophobia definition report thanks “our secretariat for their continuous hard work and all their efforts before, during and after the evidence sessions and community consultations. This inquiry ran smoothly due to their diligence and commitment.”¹⁶ One prominent Muslim activist describes Hussain as “absolutely central” to the Islamophobia report.¹⁷ As of January 2025 Hussain still provides secretariat services for the APPG, as well as being a researcher for the Labour MP Naz Shah.¹⁸ He attended the APPG iftar in 2024.¹⁹



Muhbeen Hussain (left) on the House of Commons terrace.

Muhbeen Hussain is from Rotherham. His uncle,²⁰ Mahroof Hussain, was a Labour cabinet member and councillor in the town during the grooming scandal. Mahroof resigned from both posts in February 2015 after the official Casey

¹⁵<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5a38feee53450a36410e66c8/1513684791406/Report+I%3A+A+Very+Merry+Christmas>

¹⁶<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> – page 60.

¹⁷ Interview with Policy Exchange.

¹⁸ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmsecret/250110/register.pdf>

¹⁹ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2066608233712987&id=100010914903692

²⁰ Community leaders and senior politicians in Rotherham and the “Rotherham Politics” blog state this to be the case. When asked directly by Policy Exchange in a telephone call whether Mahroof was his relative, Muhbeen refused to deny it, stating that he was too busy to answer the question and immediately ending the call.

report into the scandal found council staff felt he had “suppressed discussion [about the problem] for fear of upsetting community relations.”²¹

The report quoted a police officer as saying: “We discussed targeting taxi drivers and the Pakistani heritage community in relation to CSE [child sexual exploitation]. We were even discussing particular families we had concerns about. These members [Mahroof Hussain and another councillor, Jahangir Akhtar] would push back.... They were saying to us ‘it will cause a lot of community tension if they are targeted specifically.’”²²

A few months later, in October 2015, Muhbeen Hussain, Mahroof’s nephew and the future APPG staff member, organised Rotherham’s Muslims to boycott South Yorkshire Police for their Islamophobic behaviour over the grooming scandal. Asked the reason for the boycott, he told the BBC: “First and foremost, the police pushed a pernicious lie suggesting that they didn’t make arrests for the grooming scandal because of fears of being called racist.”²³ He also said police had not done enough to protect local Muslims from demonstrations by the far-right. One one occasion Muslim and far-right protestors who fought each other in the street were charged with violent disorder; the Muslims were acquitted after a jury found they had acted in self-defence.

The group Muhbeen founded and led at the time, British Muslim Youth, said police “piggybacked on this hostile environment towards the Muslim community by deflecting the attention of their own failures by scapegoating us.... We, the Muslim community of Rotherham, have voted for all Muslim organisations and institutions (whether religious or secular), which claim to represent Muslims in Rotherham, to cut all lines of engagement and communication with South Yorkshire Police...”

“Any Muslim groups or institutions in Rotherham that do not adhere to this policy of disengagement will also be boycotted by the Muslim community....We will not be treated as criminals any longer, nor will we be held responsible for acts of personal self-defence. If South Yorkshire Police cannot adequately protect and serve the Muslim residents of Rotherham; then moving forward we

²¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8152f4ed915d74e33fd945/46966_Report_of_Inspecti_on_of_Rotherham_WEB.pdf

²² Ibid

²³ <https://youtu.be/N2q2eYjWeGs?si=H3o5EpZTCbcpytzu&t=171>

will take all the necessary action to protect ourselves within the confines of the law.”²⁴

The boycott lasted less than two days before cooler heads prevailed. In an editorial, the local newspaper accused Muhbeen of an “ill-informed bit of posturing... steeped in belligerent and threatening language” and an “idiotic political own goal” which had “managed to embarrass every right-thinking Muslim that calls Rotherham home.”²⁵

Muhbeen Hussain was subsequently shunned by the new Labour council leader, Chris Read, who refused to meet him, saying the boycott had “sent a terrible signal to the rest of our town. I can only assume that you did not care that it would look like trying to position some people as being above the law... or you didn’t realise the implication, which may be worse.”²⁶

Muhbeen then issued an indignant press release questioning Read’s “fitness to lead” for refusing to meet him.²⁷ He had claimed the boycott was “successful in facilitating the correct dialogue needed to hear the concerns of many ordinary law-abiding Muslims living within Rotherham and silently enduring hate crimes” and had produced a number of positive outcomes.²⁸

In August 2017, Muhbeen went on the BBC’s Newsnight to attack Rotherham’s Labour MP, Sarah Champion, for writing in The Sun that Britain “has a problem with British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls.” He said that it had had “fuelled” discrimination.²⁹ He may already have been working for the APPG by this point; he was credited in a report it published in December that year.³⁰

Muhbeen did not mention that his uncle, Mahroof, had had to resign over the scandal, nor that in 2012 Mahroof had been Champion’s rival for the Labour

²⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20151030042336/http://www.britishmuslimyouth.org.uk/south-yorkshire-police-boycotted-by-the-muslim-community-of-rotherham/>

²⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20181203193033/https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/editor-s-comment-muslim-group-s-fleeting-boycott-has-done-untold-damage-to-rotherham-1-7541010>

²⁶ <https://rotherhampolitics.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2-response-from-chris-reade1.jpg>

²⁷ <https://5pillarsuk.com/2017/01/17/rotherham-council-leaders-fitness-to-lead-questioned-after-refusing-to-meet-muslim-activist/>

²⁸ <http://web.archive.org/web/20151030013048/http://www.thestar.co.uk/news/local/rotherham-muslim-boycott-of-south-yorkshire-police-ends-with-new-proposals-agreed-1-7540516>

²⁹ <https://x.com/BBCNewsnight/status/897942176100777984>

³⁰ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2feb8d1a90cffdd8a9/t/5a38fee53450a36410e66c8/1513684791406/Report+I%3A+A+Very+Merry+Christmas>

parliamentary candidacy in Rotherham – when dozens of his supporters walked out of the selection meeting in protest that he was kept off the shortlist.³¹

Writing in 2018, Muhbeen said: “We all remember why child sexual exploitation was so prevalent in Rotherham. It was because the police were too scared to make arrests due to political correctness, wasn’t it? I’m sorry, but this is far from the truth....To deflect from their own incompetence South Yorkshire Police had to now show everyone that they were getting “tough” on the Pakistani community, to make up for their previous shortcoming.”³²

Muhbeen Hussain and his group did speak out against the grooming scandal in 2014, calling for prosecutions, as soon as the first of the reports, by Alexis Jay, had been published. He held a press conference and demonstration at the time, saying that “the council, the social services and the police authorities have totally failed us... We want the investigations to go back to 1997, cases reopened and prosecutions made.”

But he strongly questioned “this idea that people were afraid because of racism or because it might be charged as racist – it’s not in the name of our community... I am a Pakistani and I am a Muslim and there is nothing in the religious faith of Islam that would condone the act of child grooming, it completely condemns such things.”³³ He said that “saying it’s about race is just an excuse for the failure of the local council.”³⁴ He declared: “There is this propaganda and misconception going that the community were aware.” He acknowledged that the inquiry had shown that most abusers were of Pakistani heritage, but he disowned the perpetrators and said: “It is not a Pakistani or a Muslim problem. There is nowhere within the Pakistani culture that condones such action.”³⁵

This continued to be his view as further incidents of grooming networks of mainly South Asian Muslim men came to light, including in Newcastle in 2017.³⁶ Speaking after the Newcastle convictions, he said: “I think we are framing it

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/nov/13/labour-party-members-protest-rotherham>

³² <https://www.counterfire.org/article/rotherham-islamophobia-structural-racism-and-the-far-right/>

³³ Times, 28.8.14.

³⁴ Associated Press, 28.8.14.

³⁵ Billy Kenber, Muslims disown grooming gangs, 30 August 2014.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/muslims-disown-grooming-gangs-0rkv6qjn99d>

³⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/09/newcastle-sex-grooming-network-operation-shelter>

incorrectly... Islam is a religion of all cultures, you find Japanese Muslims, you find Indonesian Muslims...and to say this is somehow a Muslim problem, let's look at these grooming gangs. These grooming gangs were individuals that were using alcohol, using drugs, and actually having sessions exploiting these young girls. I don't know what's Islamic about drinking alcohol, drugs, and exploiting young girls."³⁷

Muhbeen said that deporting dual nationals to the country of their other nationality (a provision used against some of those convicted of grooming)³⁸ was "moving towards a modern form of colonialism."³⁹ In October 2018, he said the Casey report into the Rotherham scandal – the one which resulted in his uncle having to resign - was "based on hearsay."⁴⁰

As well as child grooming, Hussain has sought to reframe cases of terrorism involving Muslims. The day after the murder of the soldier Lee Rigby, he said that "officials were wrong in the way they went about it, I think they came out and said it was a terrorist, Islamic jihadist attack when they had no information on the matter itself...When I see analysts and editors and commentators use the word 'jihadist'... jihad means to struggle in the way of good, and Islam completely condemns all acts of violence and terrorism and killing, and this has nothing to do with Islam... it has to be seen as a criminal matter."⁴¹ In fact, the previous night, footage had emerged of one of the killers stating: "We swear by almighty Allah we will never stop fighting you. The only reason we have done this is because Muslims are dying every day. This British soldier is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."⁴²

Discussing the terror attack by Salman Abedi at Manchester Arena, which killed 22 people and injured more than a thousand, Hussain wrote: "Could Salman Abedi's Libyan heritage have been a grievance, caused by a failed British intervention destroying Libya?...Could an open dialogue have prevented such a drastic conversion? We too easily ready accept ideology as a factor in

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7sElhMJgSI&t=9s>

³⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-63404698>

³⁹ <https://x.com/BritishMuslimY/status/1227190600275054592>

⁴⁰ <https://x.com/i/web/status/1057402264267247616>

⁴¹ <https://youtu.be/OPcCF-GBDQQ?si=pXF8i2F1xL0btvP&t=85>

⁴² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/22/police-respond-serious-incident-woolwich>

radicalisation, whilst not accepting that grievances caused by our foreign adventures may be a significant factor?”⁴³

Muhbeen Hussain has close links to the Labour Party. As well as currently working for a Labour MP, he appears to have sought selection as a Labour parliamentary candidate.⁴⁴ In 2016, he spoke alongside then shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, on “political policing and state racism.”⁴⁵ At this event he used inflammatory rhetoric about British Muslims, claiming that they were put in “separate lines” at airports. “If you’re a British Muslim and you go to the airport, you know how it feels to be a suspected community. You know you’re not going into that separate line because it’s an odd chance of a random selection.”⁴⁶

Use of Islamophobia to attack critics of the grooming scandal

As Policy Exchange discussed in its previous report, the term Islamophobia is often used by bad actors who are Muslim to smear and intimidate their critics. The term has often been directly used to attack those who sought to expose the Rotherham grooming scandal, and other such scandals.

As late as November 2018, more than four years after the first official report⁴⁷ confirmed what had gone on, Sarah Champion was shortlisted by a prominent UK Muslim group, the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), for its annual “Islamophobe of the Year” award.⁴⁸ Louise Casey, the author of one of those reports, was shortlisted by the IHRC for the same accolade the year before – again, years after the facts had been established beyond doubt.⁴⁹

One of the two people who wrote the Islamophobia definition in the APPG report,⁵⁰ Salman Sayyid, “professor of social theory and decolonial thought” at the University of Leeds, has close links to the IHRC. He has spoken at least six events⁵¹ organised by it, including the launch of its “counter-Islamophobia

⁴³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/manchester-attack-salman-abedi-young-british-muslims-voiceless-islamophobia-a7756926.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/six-running-labours-next-stoke-1046857>

⁴⁵ <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/subversion-sabotage-and-spying-political-policing-and-state-racism-uk>

⁴⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Alw_OfWN3vo

⁴⁷ <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/279/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-exploitation-in-rotherham>

⁴⁸ <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-release-uk-nominees-announced-for-islamophobia-awards-2018/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/press-releases/press-release-uk-islamophobia-awards-2017-26-november/>

⁵⁰ <https://x.com/SSPLeeds/status/1068537026461556737>

⁵¹ <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/an-evening-with-salman-sayyid/>

<https://www.ihrc.org.uk/author-evening-with-salman-sayyid-recalling-the-caliphate/>

toolkit”⁵² and at the 2014 Islamophobia Awards – the year they gave it to Barack Obama.⁵³

In 2019, Andrew Norfolk, the Times reporter who did most to bring the Rotherham scandal to public attention, was the subject of a 72-page report from the Media Reform Coalition written by Brian Cathcart, of the Hacked Off campaign, Paddy French and Julian Petley, a media academic, accusing him and his newspaper of working to “amplify an increasingly prevalent Islamophobia,”⁵⁴ including by claiming “that ‘the left’, along with leading Muslims and others, have deliberately obfuscated or kept silent about serious problems involving British Muslims, and... made those problems worse by sowing the fear that anyone who tackles them will be accused of racism or Islamophobia.”⁵⁵ This is, of course, precisely what had happened in Rotherham. The website “Islamophobia Watch,” which purported to “document anti-Muslim bigotry,” targeted the then Labour MP Ann Cryer⁵⁶ and the journalist Julie Bindel⁵⁷ for their work exposing grooming gangs.

The report attacking Norfolk was co-sponsored by MEND, an Islamist political lobbying group named by the previous government as being assessed for extremism.⁵⁸ In opposition, the Labour Party also said that it would not engage with MEND.⁵⁹ MEND has played a major part in the campaign to promote the concept of Islamophobia as a broad-brush construct extending well beyond anti-Muslim hatred, prejudice and discrimination. Policy Exchange and others have repeatedly exposed MEND’s deceit and bad faith in doing so.⁶⁰ MEND also played a part in the APPG report which created the Islamophobia definition. Its

<https://www.ihr.org.uk/author-evening-with-salman-sayyid/>

<https://www.ihr.org.uk/islamophobia-diversity-and-the-crisis-of-democracy/>

<https://www.ihr.org.uk/counter-islamophobia-toolkit-launch-european-parliament/>

⁵² <https://www.ihr.org.uk/counter-islamophobia-toolkit-launch-european-parliament/>

⁵³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1sTd4xViR8&list=PL0BCSWzStP7Wyx2Rmgn0lqfwlcOfGh7YJ&index=6>

⁵⁴ <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/unmasked-andrew-norfolk-the-times-and-anti-muslim-reporting-a-case-to-answer>

⁵⁵ https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Norfolk_Report-FINAL.pdf

⁵⁶ <https://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/?s=ann+cryer&submit=Search>

⁵⁷ <https://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/?s=julie+bindel&submit=Search>

⁵⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-03-14/debates/4E9FCBC1-F151-470C-840B-1CC58EBF73F4/ExtremismDefinitionAndCommunityEngagement>

⁵⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/04/01/labour-cuts-ties-with-muslim-organisation-named-as-islamist/>

⁶⁰ <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-definition-of-Islamophobia.pdf> and <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/shop-hjs/profitting-from-prejudice-how-mends-iam-campaign-legitimised-extremism/>

then senior policy analyst,⁶¹ Antonio Perra, is thanked in the APPG report for his “considerable” and “immensely valuable” support.⁶²

⁶¹ <https://www.mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/MEND-Approaching-a-definition-of-Islamophobia-More-than-words-Executive-Summary.pdf>

⁶² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf> – page 60.