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# Identifying Counter Radical Narratives from Within British Muslim Communities: The Case of “Muslim Patrol” and Muslim Community Responses

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ZACHARIAS P. PIERI

## **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes the concept of Muslim morality policing through commanding good and forbidding evil as interpreted and implemented by some Islamists in Britain. The focus is on the activities of Muslim Patrol, and their attempts to create Shari’a zones and enforce hisba, often with distressing consequences including verbal and physical harassment of those not complying. Muslim community responses to Muslim Patrol are also discussed, in particular counter radical narratives that stem from a religious perspective. The paper asks what constitutes sin within Islam and how Muslims should respond to sin, and the extent to which individual Muslims are empowered to enforce Islamic moral standards in non-majority Muslim contexts. Where the state does not provide means for countering sin, the perception is that the responsibility on individuals to do so increases and often results in violence.*

## **Introduction**

In January of 2013, a little-known Islamist group calling itself Muslim Patrol posted a series of three short videos on YouTube (roughly 3–4 minutes each) showing young Muslim men in London’s Eastend “policing” the streets in order to enforce Islamic moral standards. Claiming that they were part of a larger organization called the Shari’a Project,<sup>1</sup> these young men were preoccupied with issues of morality: particularly how to protect Muslims from the effects of “sin”. The actions of Muslim Patrol included confiscating alcohol from passers’ by, instructing couples not to hold hands, ordering women to cover up, and harassing young men whom they suspected of being gay. Ultimately five members of the self-appointed patrol were arrested in January 2013 and three were sentenced to prison terms in December of the same year.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of sin and especially that of public sin has become an increasingly topical issue among Muslim communities in the west, as has the question of how Muslim communities should deal with sin in public spaces. For many Muslims, a distinction is drawn between an act that is committed in private and an act that is committed in public, with the latter carrying more severity due to its potential to influence others in acting in the same way. For a large part, the narrative over sin has also been conflated with growing concern over the impact of westernization and globalization. Jacobson et al. have

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shown that for many Muslims, there is a growing perception that Western influence has the capacity to corrupt traditional moral values leading to societal depravity.<sup>3</sup>

The question of how to combat sin and subsequent effects of sin among Muslim communities has become an increasingly important one, and it is one aspect of this that this article will focus on. While there have been a number of different suggestions, one solution that has gained traction in some (especially Islamist) quarters has been a return to emphasizing the classic Islamic principle of the obligation to command good and forbid evil. The concept which in Arabic is known as *al-amr bi al-Ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, obligates Muslims to “object sincerely to the preparation of any offense, be it a wrongdoing or failure to act rightly; they are then urged to voice their demands and concerns, and finally they are required to oppose the offender”.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally this responsibility was taken on by the state in Muslim majority countries, but in the contemporary period, it has come to constitute the basis of an Islamic doctrine of responsible citizenship. Indeed, it is within this framework that groups such as Muslim Patrol have rationalized their actions. As Pieri et al. argue, a central theme in this discourse stresses the “obligation of individual Muslims, as opposed to Muslim states or rulers, to engage in these actions”.<sup>5</sup>

This paper presents a contextualized understanding of the concept of commanding good and forbidding evil as interpreted by different actors in British Muslim communities, and examines the ways in which this has played out in the streets of Britain. The focus is on the activities of Muslim Patrol and their attempts to impose morality policing on the diverse communities of East London, though examples will also be drawn from prior attempts at establishing so-called Shari'a and gay-free zones in Britain. Even though Muslim Patrol is a movement at the fringe of Muslim communities in Britain, it capitalized on a more prevalent international Islamist milieu, and served to reinforce the image of Islam as a socially conservative force in Britain, as well as the idea that Islam was here to “take over”. As well as analyzing attempts to institute morality policing on the streets of Britain, the article gives equal weight to the response of Muslim community leaders, who have become increasingly adept at delegitimizing Islamic extremists from within Muslim communities through highlighting how in their interpretation such actions are contrary to the teachings of Islam. Such drives from within Muslim communities have become an ever more important part of coopting Muslim leaders and representatives into the British government's counterterrorism strategy,<sup>6</sup> but also out of awareness that left unchecked, the actions of groups such as Muslim Patrol could do irreparable damage to Muslim communities through stirring up Islamophobia. The argument made in this article is that there is a tendency for groups such as Muslim Patrol to see the West as a source of sin that requires effective and sometimes-violent countermeasures, but that there is also an increasingly robust counter-narrative from within Muslim communities, that challenges this.

## Methodology

The conclusions reached in this paper stem from a mixed methods approach that included ethnographic work among Muslim communities in London, particularly in Boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets, between January 2010 and January 2014, and which consisted of community engagement, interviews with imams and residents, and textual and discourse analysis of various pamphlets, posters and other materials pertaining to morality policing. In addition to this, a video ethnography was conducted on YouTube video footage of Muslim Patrol “policing” in action. Posters proclaiming

Shari'a zones, leaflets outlining the views of the *hisba*,<sup>7</sup> and pamphlets decrying homosexuality as sinful were also collected from the research sites, often found taped to lamp-posts and on the iconic red London public telephone boxes. All of these materials were publicly available, though the footage of Muslim Patrol has since been removed from YouTube due to the content being in violation of YouTube rules.

Video ethnography in its broadest sense refers to “any video footage that is of ethnographic interest or is used to represent ethnographic knowledge”.<sup>8</sup> One advantage of video ethnography is in the ability of the researcher to return to the footage for unlimited observations of the “scene” in a way that is not possible in conventional anthropology, and as such has been a major innovation in the field. As Gobo notes, this allows for a more detailed analysis to take place, the researcher may take unlimited notes, pause, rewind, and play the “scene” all over again.<sup>9</sup> Video ethnography can also allow for a sense of greater authenticity in that it can capture and present behaviors as they occur. In this case, Muslim Patrol was filming their own activities with their own camera phones as they were attempting to implement Shari'a policing. It is clear that the videoing here was part of a propaganda attempt to publicize the patrols, as well as to gain some level of notoriety, but the events are still captured as they were. As Fitzgerald et al. note, “as the camera becomes part of the environment, this reactivity tends to become less likely as participants become more accustomed to the presence of video cameras and/or operatives”.<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted here the video footage which Muslim Patrol posted to YouTube is not taken in this paper as a full representation of the group, but rather as one aspect of the group's activities. As per Caughey's suggestion, the video ethnography was treated in the same critical way as any other piece of data, and additionally, the videos were viewed in the context of my broader longitudinal research in the area.<sup>11</sup>

Interviews with a cross-section of Muslims residing and working in the vicinity of where Muslim Patrol carried out their activities were used to gain a better contextual understanding of what was taking place. In particular, voice was given to a number of prominent British imams who publicly condemned the actions of Muslim Patrol, and who did so from the basis of Muslim scriptures.<sup>12</sup> The paper concludes through emphasizing that combating radical narratives from within Muslim communities can be an effective way of delegitimizing them, though it should also be noted that such messaging may function to placate the media and government more so than actually changing the mindsets of those involved in extremist activities. Radical is defined as “individuals and organizations that seek to affect profound political, sociocultural, and/or religious transformations either within Muslim minority communities or Muslim majority states”.<sup>13</sup>

### **Forbidding Evil**

Those affiliated to Muslim Patrol have justified the group's actions, as well as the attempts by other Islamists to initiate Shari'a and gay-free zones in Britain, as part of their Islamically mandated obligation to forbid evil. The focus of groups such as Muslim Patrol has been on the immodesty of women, the drinking of alcohol in public, and the move towards equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community. From their perspective, the freedoms afforded under democratic systems have done nothing to improve the moral character of citizens, rather allowing them to commit multiple sins and harmful actions in public. With the moves towards greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities in western liberal democracies, notably with the passing of laws to allow same-sex marriage (legal in the UK since 2014), the question of homosexuality, and its impact on

the moral fabric of society has become a fundamental point of contention for Islamist groups. Indeed, as Leaman notes, homosexuality is often regarded as a “feature of western decadence and something that should not and does not exist in Muslim countries, and if it does, then it is merely a reflection of the unwelcome spread of corrupt ideas from without”.<sup>14</sup> As part of this discourse, there has been discussion as to what should be done to reverse the prevalence of sin in society, and especially so in western and increasingly secular societies where Muslims are viewed as most at risk from non-Islamic influences. One proposed solution has been a return to emphasizing the classic Islamic principle of the obligation to command good and forbid evil.

This principle of commanding good and forbidding evil is one that is well established in Islam and is rooted in the Qur’an and the Hadith, as well as the writings of prominent Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah (750–1258), Al Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), and Mohammad Ibn Wahhab (1703–1792). In the Qur’an, the following verses relate to the principle:

Faithful men, and the faithful women are friends one to another: They command that which is just, and they forbid that which is evil; and they are constant at prayer, and pay their appointed alms; and they obey God, and his apostle: Unto these will God be Merciful; for He is Mighty and Wise. (Qur’an 9:71)

Let there be one community of you, calling to good, and commanding right and forbidding wrong: those are the prosperous. (Qur’an 3:104)

You are the best community ever brought forth to men, commanding right, forbidding wrong, and believing in God. (Qur’an: 3:110)

From the Hadith, the following is cited as the best example of the injunction to command good and to forbid evil:

He from among you who observes something evil should reverse it with his hand; if he is unable to do that he should condemn it with his tongue; if he is unable to that he should at least resent it in his heart; this is the lowest level of faith.<sup>15</sup>

It is from these textual excerpts that the practice of *hisba*, that of monitoring the community in order to ensure a moral standard emerged, and which has long historical precedence in Islam. Ibn Taimiyya, whose writing inspires contemporary Islamist discourse, described the practice of *hisba* as the ultimate form of jihad, while Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) argued that *hisba* is a religious duty, falling under the rubric of “enjoining good and preventing wrong”—an obligatory duty of leaders.<sup>16</sup> As Pieri et al. note, within an Islamic state, the person who holds political authority appoints an officer in charge (*Muhtasib*), who is tasked with investigating abuses and applies appropriate correct measures and punishments.<sup>17</sup>

Kadivar writes that the duties of the *Muhtasib* vary but can include reminding Muslims to attend prayer, detaining people who are not dressed in an appropriate Islamic style, and reprimanding those who publicly break the fast during Ramadan.<sup>18</sup> Kadivar further notes that those implemented to command good and forbid evil, when having permission from a recognized jurist may in a few cases “dole out swift and immediate punishment of offenders”. This action is known as *ta’zir* and can involve “enforcing commanded actions; forbidding prohibited activity; and again, should public interest require, to inflict punishment (*ta’zir*) on offenders and violators”.<sup>19</sup>

The complexity of the classical interpretations of *hisba* was reinterpreted and made popular among contemporary Islamists primarily through the work of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966). Qutb was an influential Egyptian ideologue “credited with establishing the theoretical basis for radical Islamism in the postcolonial Sunni Muslim world” and who “repackaged and reformulated Islamic heritage to pose a challenge to authority, including those who claimed (falsely, he believed) to be Muslim”.<sup>20</sup> Under Sayyid Qutb’s doctrine of complete submission to the sovereignty of Allah, the concept of *hisba* became a matter of social action—the necessity of every individual to challenge all forms of public sin and to promote virtuous deeds as a means of fulfilling the Qur’anic commandments.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of *hisba* has not remained constant over time, but has changed, taking on different meanings with each new attempt at reinterpretation, as well as being impacted by the hugely diverse contexts in which it emerges. Of course, it should be noted that in the context of non-Islamic states such as liberal democracies in the west, few Muslims would expect a nominally Christian or secular state to accept the responsibility of policing sin, especially in terms of sexual promiscuity, drinking alcohol, and smoking tobacco. Instead, what this paper proposes is that in the absence of a Muslim authority to take on this responsibility within these states, some have argued that the obligation has now become incumbent on non-state actors—namely on Muslim communities and individuals within those states. It is in this context that the actions of Muslim Patrol must be interpreted and understood.

It does not take much effort to identify the central importance of commanding good and forbidding evil as mobilizing concept—a call to action—in contemporary Islamist discourse in the west. The best case of this in Britain is through the efforts of Anjem Choudary, a well-known Islamic extremist. Choudary has had a long and contentious history in promoting Shari’a law, often making headlines through calling for the implementation of floggings, amputations and active Shari’a police to monitor and enforce moral standards in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods in Britain. Choudary is also known for his active membership and leadership roles in the now banned groups of Al-Muhajiroun, Islam4UK, and Muslims Against Crusades, which glorified terrorism, and spouted homophobic and anti-Semitic views. Choudary was himself convicted in July 2016 for the inviting support of Islamic State and imprisoned in September of 2016 for five and a half years.<sup>22</sup> Choudary was instrumental in inspiring almost all attempts at creating Shari’a zones and morality policing in Britain, and paints a picture of British society as broken; one in which Muslims must take on the task of commanding good and forbidding evil as a personal responsibility, as a means of providing a space to conduct their lives in settings free from moral corruption. This was reflected in what Choudary said at a 2013 rally on Brick Lane in which he wanted all Muslim shop and restaurant owners to desist from selling alcohol:

There will be no more pubs, no more gambling houses, no more national lottery. All women would have to be covered up appropriately and wear the *niqab* or veil and so there will be no prostitution. By 2050, Britain will be a majority Muslim country. It will be the end of freedom of democracy, and submission to God. We don’t believe in democracy, as soon as they have authority, Muslims should implement Sharia. This is what we’re trying to teach people.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that Choudary conflates democracy and western lifestyles with deeply immoral and corrupting influences that should be resisted by all Muslims. Choudary’s

ultimate goal is to see the implementation of Shari'a in Britain as the law of the land and a shift in the demographics of the country to create a Muslim majority state.

### Carving Out Spaces of Purity

The kind of Islamist activism which has sought to push for the morality policing of British Muslim communities has taken place at the fringe of Muslim communities, but has been consistent for at least the past decade.<sup>24</sup> The climaxing of this was in the short-lived activities of Muslim Patrol, but in order for the activities of Muslim Patrol to be understood, they must be contextualized within the wider nexus of such instances. On 28 July 2011, a story broke in the populist British newspaper, *The Daily Mail* that, "Islamic extremists had launched a poster campaign across the UK proclaiming areas where Shari'a law enforcement zones have been set up."<sup>25</sup> Bright yellow pamphlets appeared across a number of predominantly Muslim residential areas in culturally diverse areas of East London such as Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest ordering that in the "zone" there should be "no gambling", "no music or concerts", "no porn or prostitution", "no drugs or smoking", and "no alcohol". This was one of the first attempts to explicitly enforce morality on the streets of Britain outside of the jurisdiction of the established law enforcement agencies. The architect of the "zones" was Anjem Choudary, who has been consistent in his calls for Shari'a law to be implemented in Britain. Choudary justified his followers' actions regarding the Shari'a posters, commenting:

The Prophet said, it is not allowed for you to live among the non-Muslims and not to distinguish yourselves. Therefore we have no choice, we cannot isolate ourselves and certainly we cannot integrate into the pornography, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, thug life, loutish behavior, that the cities of Britain have sadly become accustomed to.<sup>26</sup>

Choudary's comment is a direct attack on policies of community integration and cohesiveness which after the 2001 disturbances in Northern British cities, became the flagship policy of government and ushered in the demise of multiculturalism. The argument was that urban riots in the North of England and especially the city of Bradford were a product of self-segregating Muslim communities. Social policy in Britain pivoted from one emphasizing "integration to assimilation, and the turn from socio-economic factors to cultural causes to explain the failure of multicultural policy".<sup>27</sup> Choudary's argument stands in contrast to the assimilationist position arguing that Muslims should not have to integrate into contemporary Britain because of what they are being asked to integrate into. Choudary sees British values and identity best represented by the antithesis of what Islam allows, namely "pornography, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, thug life, and loutish behavior". This sentiment is further reflected in the comments of Abu Izzadeen, one of Choudary's acolytes:

This is the first step towards turning Britain into an Islamic state. There are nearly three million Muslims in this country. Islam is a sleeping giant that is waking. We have moved on from the debate about the provision of halal meat to more political issues. Twenty-five areas around Britain have large Muslim populations, including Bradford, Dewsbury, Leicester and Luton. We want to turn them all into Islamic Emirates, where the excesses of Western civilization are not tolerated.<sup>28</sup>

It is clear that both Choudary and Abu Izzadeen see western values as a source of moral depravity, or at least keen to further this as the predominant discourse through which they want Muslims to view the west. Just as the news on the “Shari’a Zones” was dying down, on 10 January 2012, the British-based *Guardian* newspaper reported that five Muslim men from Derby, an ethnically diverse city in Britain’s Midlands had gone on trial for distributing pamphlets calling for gay people to be killed, in what was the first ever prosecution under new legislation making such actions a hate crime.<sup>29</sup> The anti-gay pamphlets link to the discourse around Shari’a zones, for in both instances homosexuality was seen as part of the “depravity” of modern societies—something that needs to be stopped. The pamphlets distributed in Derby state that gay people should be “given the death penalty” and that “gay sex is a great sin that leads to hell”. In a second pamphlet entitled “Dead Derby”, homosexuality is described as a “vile, ugly, cancerous disease”. The pamphlet headline read “Gay today, pedophile tomorrow?” In one of the pamphlets, the word “GAY” was laid out as an acronym to read “God Abhors You.” Yet another pamphlet called “Turn or Burn” showed an image of a person who appeared to be burning in a lake of fire, accompanied by the word homosexuals with a red line drawn through it. At around the same time, posters appeared in London’s Eastend proclaiming certain areas as “gay-free zones” and including text from the Qur’an that homosexuals would be punished.

Indeed, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments were further reflected in a 2016 ICM poll in which more than half of British Muslims (52%) stated that homosexuality should not be legal in Britain, while 47% argued that it is not appropriate for gay people to teach in schools.<sup>30</sup> Such attitudes were in marked contrast to the rest of the British population, which was far more liberal on issues of human sexuality. Only 11% of the wider population stated that homosexuality should be illegal, and 14% saying that it was not appropriate for gays and lesbians to teach in schools.<sup>31</sup> This compares with a 2009 Gallup poll, which found that of the 500 British Muslims interviewed none believed that homosexual acts were morally acceptable.<sup>32</sup> Yet, while this indicates a negative attitude toward homosexuality, it is not reflective of how Muslims integrate into Britain. The ICM poll found that 86% of British Muslims feel a strong sense of belonging in Britain, which is higher than the national average of 83%.<sup>33</sup> This signals that even though Muslims feel a strong sense of belonging in Britain, many still hold conservative moral values and it is this that Choudary and Muslim Patrol have tried to exploit.

During the trial relating to the Derby incidents, the reasoning behind the actions became increasingly clear as the defendants were given an opportunity to speak to their actions. Kabir Ahmed, a 28-year-old father of two from Derby who had links to Choudary’s banned Al-Mouhajiroun group, and who was one of the men who distributed the homophobic pamphlets, told the court that he felt he was doing his duty as a Muslim by handing out the pamphlets. Ahmed said, “My intention was to do my duty as a Muslim, to inform people of God’s word and to give the message on what God says about homosexuality.”<sup>34</sup> Ahmed went on to say that, “my duty is not just to better myself but to try and better the society I live in... We believe we can’t just stand by and watch somebody commit a sin, we must try and advise them and urge them to stay away from sin”.<sup>35</sup> In his own opinion, he had taken it upon himself to enforce what he imagined to be good and to forbid what he considered to be evil, on the basis of his interpretation of the Qur’an.

By 20 January 2012, the three Muslim men from Derby became the first people in Britain to be convicted of inciting hatred on the grounds of sexuality after they distributed leaflets calling for gay people to be killed. In a landmark case, a jury at Derby Crown

Court ruled that the men had breached hate-crime legislation by distributing their pamphlets outside the Rosehill Street Jama Mosque, in Derby, as well as putting them through nearby letterboxes.<sup>36</sup> The report proceeds to explain that The Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, which came into force in 2010, made it an offence to stir up hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation.<sup>37</sup> Ahmed later went on in 2014 to blow himself up as a suicide bomber for Islamic State in 2014, killing himself and eight others in the town of Baiji, north of Baghdad.<sup>38</sup>

On 13 December 2013, Anjem Choudary reignited the issue of Shari'a and Shari'a patrols in the UK after leading a march in London's Eastend on Brick Lane. Brick Lane is a vibrant, multicultural and diverse part of London and popular for its restaurants, shops and bars. It is an area that has a large Bangladeshi population, many curry restaurants, and at the heart of the community stands the Brick Lane Mosque, which at previous times served both as a church and a synagogue to the transient populations of the area. Choudary demanded a ban on alcohol being sold by Muslim owned establishments threatening consequences for those who did not adhere.<sup>39</sup> The focus of the event here was not on the wider population, but rather on Muslim shop owners, reminding them that in Islam, the consumption of alcohol is *haram* (forbidden), and that through selling alcohol they are themselves engaging in activities that are forbidden irrespective of who drinks the alcohol. In this sense, Choudary was again taking on the responsibility of commanding good and forbidding evil, and asserting it at the local level in London to intimidate a segment of the Muslim population. Choudary was clear in explaining the purpose of the event and in framing it within the context of commanding good and forbidding evil, and that this applied to Muslims even in a non-Muslim liberal democracy:

What we did is we posted a notice to the shop owners saying that under Shari'a and under the Qur'an the sale of alcohol is prohibited and if one were to also drink alcohol, that would be 40 lashes. We were there to teach them that just because they are living among non-Muslims is no excuse because Sharia law will be implemented in Britain, and so they should be aware that just because it is not Sharia today, they can't just do whatever they like.<sup>40</sup>

Choudary said that the Shari'a Project would organize groups to command good and to forbid evil. Muslim Patrol was a direct manifestation of this.

Similar acts of Islamic vigilantism have been reported in a number of European countries, most notably in the German city of Wuppertal where small groups of young Muslim men dressed in bright orange reflective vests with "Shariah Police" printed on the back, attempted to detract others from going to nightclubs and gambling venues.<sup>41</sup> The common thread across these was a focus on morality and sexuality, especially around the roles of women and homosexuals.

### **Muslim Patrol**

In early January 2013, three YouTube videos, which went on to become viral, surfaced showing a small group of self-appointed Muslim vigilantes patrolling the streets of East London, attempting to impose what they described as Shari'a law on passersby. The group called themselves Muslim Patrol and stated that they were part of the Shari'a Project—the initiative started by Anjem Choudary to usher in the implementation of Islamic law in Britain. It should be noted though that the Shari'a Project organizes its own morality patrols in East London under the leadership of Abu Abbas, who distanced

himself from the approach taken by Muslim Patrol. Abbas said that his focus was instead on rooting out prostitution and alcohol abuse in predominantly Muslim areas, and doing this in a less aggressive way, for example, not covering their faces. Muslim Patrol was made up of several young Sunni Muslim men who self-identified as Salafis, and at least three of whom were converts to Islam: Jordan Horner, Ricardo McFarlane, and Royal Barnes. The video footage of Muslim Patrol in action was filmed by members of the group on a camera phone and posted on the group's YouTube channel (since removed due to the threatening nature of the content), and shows hooded men accosting members of the public, trying to impose hardline Islamic morality standards on them. The members of Muslim Patrol believe that the traditional Islam of mainstream Muslim organizations in Britain is not doing enough to assert Islam in the public space, and so decided to take it upon themselves to impose their own interpretation of Islam upon those whom they saw as violating Islamic moral standards. As with previous discourse on sin in the public space from fringe radical groups, the focus is on women, those perceived as homosexuals and those identified as drunk or with alcohol.

The vigilantes were active in the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets (including directly outside the prominent East London Mosque) and Waltham Forrest. According to the 2011 England and Wales Census, these two boroughs have among the highest proportions of Muslims in London. Tower Hamlets and Newham have Muslim populations of 34.5% and 32.0%, respectively, and Redbridge and Waltham Forest have Muslim populations of 23.3% and 21.9%, respectively.<sup>42</sup> It is in these boroughs that the activities of Islamist groups have been most pronounced (including the attempts to impose Shari'a and gay-free zones). Those affiliated with Muslim Patrol, patrolled late at night and when filming their confrontations with passersby, made sure to keep their own faces hidden from the view of the camera. In the videos, the vigilantes repeatedly call out to passersby that "this is a Muslim area" and that "no alcohol is allowed here". In confronting a passerby, one of the patrolling vigilantes states, "alcohol is evil" and forced the man to pour the alcohol away. In another confrontation with someone drinking, one of the vigilantes says, "you are clearly drunk—this is democracy, this is secularism ... don't consume alcohol it is haram for you".

As well as those who were identified as being drunk, women who were not dressed in the way the vigilantes regarded as Islamic, and those whom the vigilantes perceived as being gay were also targeted. In one of the videos, the vigilantes confront a man walking through the area and whom they identify as being gay. They harassed him saying:

Mate, don't you know this is a Muslim area? What's wrong with your face, mate?  
Why you dressed like that for? You're walking through a Muslim area dressed like a fag mate ... you're a gay mate ... get out of here you fag.

The vigilantes proceed to tell the man that he is "dirty" and then attempted to force him to repeat after them and admit that he is "dirty".

In an exchange with one woman near the East London Mosque, one of the patrolling vigilantes told her to cover herself up. The vigilantes shouted out that women need to be prevented from dressing immodestly and that immodest women should be stopped from passing by the mosque. One of the women being confronted responded to the vigilantes saying that the area was not Muslim, but that "this is Great Britain". Responding to her, the vigilante said, "We don't care whether you're appalled at all. This is not so Great Britain, do you understand? Cover yourself up!" The issue of women having to cover up has been a long-time grievance of Islamists in Britain. In events occurring prior to the formation of Muslim Patrol billboards advertising a £3.99 (\$5) bikini top from

high-street fashion retailer H&M, where a scantily-dressed model stands on a sun-kissed white sand beach, were sprayed over in Newham with black paint. In many instances, the spray over was done in such a way as to resemble a *burqa*.

A police investigation was launched into the actions of Muslim Patrol on the basis of harassment and intimidation of members of the public. Three members of the group, all converts to Islam (Jordan Horner, 19, Ricardo MacFarlane, 26, and Royal Barnes 23) were arrested and subsequently prosecuted.<sup>43</sup> At the point of sentencing in December 2013, Judge Rebecca Poulet QC told the young men that their actions violated the law because they caused “real fear”. The judge continued with,

One of the many good things about living in Great Britain is the tolerance and respect members of the public generally show to one another’s religious beliefs, his dress or his chosen way of life. When, on occasions, a person shows their intolerance of another individual, whether by aggression or violence and in such a way as to cause real fear to the individual, then the law can be invoked to protect that individual.<sup>44</sup>

Despite swift action against Muslim Patrol and a near unanimous condemnation of the group’s actions from within British Muslim communities, the large-scale damage had been done. The news of a group of Muslims attempting to enforce Shari’a in the streets of London had been broadcast around the world. In order to gain a perspective from within the Muslim community, a two-hour interview was conducted with Imam Ibrahim Mogra, a prominent British Imam, and well known throughout the country for his regular appearances in the media. Mogra is also the Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)—an umbrella organization established in 1997 to represent and highlight issues faced by Muslims in the UK, and which currently represents over 500 mosques and Islamic schools in Britain. While the MCB has played an instrumental role in condemning Islamist extremism, and in working alongside government, “the extent to which ... it is representative of the wider Muslim population is questionable”.<sup>45</sup> As Spalek and Imtoul argue, the MCB may constitute a “legitimized identity” whereby it “conforms to wider governmental expectations about the kinds of identities that Muslims in Britain should hold”.<sup>46</sup>

Mogra described the damage done by Muslim Patrol as adding further “fear among non-Muslim Britons—a fear plays on the misguided notion that Muslims are here in this country to implement Shari’a and that what happened here is a taste of things to come”.<sup>47</sup> Mogra argued that Shari’a requires Muslim individuals to be compliant but that they are prohibited from forcefully applying it to others. Mogra stressed that part of the blame for the amplification of Muslim Patrol was down to the media, which he sees as a major player in shaping discourse around Muslim communities. Mogra is not the only one to note the powerful effect of media amplification. Vasterman et al., for example, note that the media can play a leading role in the social construction of a given issue, for instance,

by creating a news wave based on magnification of one specific perspective. Operating in this mode, the media can have a huge impact on the way that a disaster and the risk issues involved are defined and perceived by the public as well as the authorities.<sup>48</sup>

For Mogra, the media gave Muslim Patrol this news wave through time and attention in a way that was unrepresentative of the actual clout the group held among Muslim communities in Britain. The Media’s focus on Muslim Patrol:

has done communities a lot of damage. Such groups and their views should not be given more media attention than their influence—giving them oxygen and airtime to espouse and promote their views, and creating a furor around the situation only makes things worse.<sup>49</sup>

### **Muslim Community Response**

While those involved in the actions of the Muslim Patrol were a handful of young men, the consequences for how Islam is viewed in Britain as well as for community relations have been immense. The image of Islam as a patriarchal religion that is opposed to freedoms and liberties was reinforced and Muslim communities were again viewed with fear. Islam came to be seen as a dangerous religion bent on curtailing British freedoms. Securitization is the process of turning a community or issue from a political matter to a threat. As Croft notes, securitization is something deemed to be so concerning that it bypasses normal political debate and becomes an emergency. The perception in western countries of Muslims as the “other” has grown enormously since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and especially in Britain since the public transport bombings of 7 July 2005.<sup>50</sup> Islam is often portrayed in the media as a religion of hatred, violence and intolerance, and this fans the flames of populist fears. As Githens-Mazer and Lambert argue, sections of the media have created a situation where the one serves to heighten the claims and anxieties of the other—“such that politicians from Austria to Britain, and the Netherlands to Spain, feel comfortable in using terms like ‘Tsunamis of Muslim immigration’, and accuse Islam of being a fundamental threat to a ‘European way of life’”.<sup>51</sup>

The YouTube videos of the self-styled Muslim Patrol as well as the series of actions that predated them, often amplified by the press, have fed into the notion of Muslims as a triple threat—“as violent terrorists, subversives working to overcome ‘British’ values such as gay rights and gender equality, and a population danger with their proportionally higher birth rates”.<sup>52</sup> The actions of a small proportion of Muslims at the fringe of Islam in Britain have had disproportionate and negative impacts for Muslims as a whole.

The response from within Britain’s Muslim communities was quick, with a unified message presented, condemning the actions of the patrols as un-Islamic and describing the individuals involved as “vigilantes”. One of the few publicly outspoken supporters of the patrols was Anjem Choudary who was himself an instigator in pushing for the patrols. The level of support or opposition among ordinary Muslims for Muslim Patrol is unclear, though those interviewed as part of this research unanimously stated that either Muslim Patrol was not Islamic or that the approach they were using was not an appropriate one for Britain. Muslim religious and community leaders, however, were able to carve out spaces in the media and ensured that prominent voices from within Muslim communities were heard.

In the interview with Mogra, we discussed the question of how Muslim Patrol was perceived from within British Muslim communities, as well as the terms that should be used to describe the group and its actions. Mogra was clear that he did not believe that Muslim Patrol was a legitimate organization, nor representative of Islam in Britain. In Mogra’s words:

Call them vigilantes. There is absolutely no justification for their actions in a secular and liberal democracy. It is unacceptable to impose Shari’a on non-Muslims so their actions were pure vigilantism, bullying and intimidating be-

havior to people were just doing what they do in their own lifestyles on a regular basis.<sup>53</sup>

Mogra made the important point that Muslims living in Britain have to recognize the context of Britain and to act in accordance with the laws of the land. For Mogra, this does not mean that Muslims should not be concerned about the state of the society, but rather they cannot impose their own beliefs on society, and especially not through violent or illegal means. Mogra made this clear in the following comment:

Of course there is a genuine concern about the way in which society is progressing but vigilante action is not the way to deal with social concerns. The way to deal with concerns is through debate and dialogue—these are the ways to teach an Islamic vision for society—not violence or vigilante actions. There are concerns for hedonism and hedonistic lifestyles and especially the way the young in Britain are pursuing this and the way it impacts society. We need to find ways for these people to have fun, but doing so without destroying their lives and their livelihoods.<sup>54</sup>

In essence, the diagnosis of contemporary western societies as having fallen into a trap of immorality and degeneracy is widely accepted among many in Muslim communities, with the outlook between Anjem Choudary and Ibrahim Mogra not being too dissimilar. What is different, however, is the way in which Muslims approach the problem and it is here that mainstream British Muslim imams and community leaders have shown an alternative path. In our interview Mogra said:

The way to tackle the subject of how Islam can provide guidance in these areas is not through what the vigilantes have been doing but rather through using logical methods to the issues of hedonism. We need to stress arguments such as the burden that these lifestyles have on the NHS [National Health Service] the way that they drain the country's resources, on A&E departments on Friday and Saturday nights, and through the loss of work hours and productivity.<sup>55</sup>

Mogra realizes that Britain is an increasingly secular society, and as such Muslims must adapt their arguments to these contexts. This gives the impression of pragmatism over principle and may seem to some as an incoherent Muslim response. Yet it should be noted that context does play an important role, and in the case of minority jurisprudence doctrine, in this case, “prohibiting evil” is modified by circumstance. If one's message is to have salience and garner action and change, then it needs to be framed in a way that best resonates with the target audience. It is exactly this sort of framing that Muslim leaders in the UK have become more adept at doing, and this again was highlighted by Mogra in our interview when he argued that Muslims need to use the language of “logic to convince society that things that happen on Friday and Saturday evenings across the UK are damaging”.<sup>56</sup> Here the message over the consequences of what are considered to be the damaging consequences of public sin are not framed as morality issues, but rather in a way that assesses the economic impact to critical British institutions such as the NHS. This line of reasoning indicates that doctrine can and does evolve over time and context, and need not follow the official “orthodoxy” of a Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Another significant figure to publicly condemn Muslim Patrol was Sheykh Shams Ad Duha of London's Ebrahim College. Sheykh Shams is a young and charismatic imam who is familiar with the cultural landscape of East London due to having grown up there. From East London, Ad Duha studied at the Deobandi Darul Uloom (Institute

of Islamic Education) in Dewsbury and later internationally in Bangladesh. He established Ebrahim College in the Eastend of London not too far from the East London Mosque in 2003,

as a Darul Uloom style seminary appropriate for the modern world. The aim was to benefit from the rigor and credibility of the traditional Darul Uloom and, where it was deemed beneficial, merge it with the best in modern curriculum development, pedagogy, technology and research.<sup>57</sup>

Given Ad Duha's respected position within the community, his sermon condemning the Patrols was significant.

Ad Duha used one of his Friday sermons to condemn the actions of the patrols, filming this and posting it online. In his "An Islamic Response to Muslim Street Patrols", the Sheikh quickly dispelled the idea of any area in Britain being a "Muslim area".<sup>58</sup> He commented instead that, "this is England, this is London, this is Tower Hamlets". He was also swift to say that, "the idea of implementing Shari'a has to be governed by Shari'a. It can't be based on our whims and or passions".<sup>59</sup> The majority of the sermon was aimed at a Muslim audience, delving into the responsibilities and obligations upon Muslims in society, and the message is clear—the actions of the "patrol" were wrong and harmful. Duha's sermon leaves no doubt, ending with:

What these brothers [those who took part on the patrols] need to understand and what we need to explain to them is that they will be accountable before Allah for doing these things; for damaging the image of Islam and for misrepresenting the Shari'a of Allah. This is painful to us and is no doubt painful to the Prophet and will do nothing but bring the wrath of Allah.<sup>60</sup>

This is something that Mogra agreed with and tried to better explain the concept of commanding good and forbidding evil, and as to how it should be interpreted outside of Muslim majority countries. Mogra argues that religious communities of all faiths have leaders whose job it is to preach and promote good and limiting of evil among their own flocks and congregations. They are tasked and given authority to reprimand members of their flock for wrongdoing and at the same time encourage what is good. Similarly, Mogra asserts that in the work place, it is the role of the boss or the supervisor to ensure that rules which again usually promote some form of good and limit wrongdoing are followed.<sup>61</sup> At yet a broader level, the government of the day has a responsibility to make sure that the law of the land is respected. Through the use of these examples, Mogra is making the point that commanding good and forbidding evil is not a concept that is unique to Islam, but rather is at the bedrock of most societies and organizational structures. Even in Muslim countries where the Shari'a exists as a legal system, according to Mogra, "it is not right to force Shari'a on non-Muslims at all".<sup>62</sup> This is a concept that Cook explores arguing that in an Islamic state the role of monitoring and acting to promote good and limit evil often falls to state-sanctioned *hisba*.<sup>63</sup> Aside from those tasked with this role, it should not be a matter for the individual. Yet, it this taking of commanding good and forbidding evil as a personal responsibility that we are seeing among some Muslims in Britain, and which is ultimately proving to be most problematic. In response to this, Mogra states that:

In the UK we don't have the implementation of Shari'a and so each individual Muslim is answerable for their own actions before Allah. As such force cannot be used against them in order to change their actions. It is even wrong for a

Muslim to physically force another Muslim in this context. It is clearly wrong to force or use force against non-Muslims both in the UK and in states where the Shari'a is established.<sup>64</sup>

This kind of contestation is a form of Muslim *politics*, pitting not just radicals against “conservatives”, “liberals” or “the mainstream”, but even radicals against each other. The contestation involves not just what obligations inhere in minority situations, but what status “minority Islam” has today in broader Islamic understandings. Mogra argues that using physical violence in order to put right what is perceived as wrong can constitute *haram* (wrongdoing) itself. This is hugely important because what Mogra is saying is that those who are taking it upon themselves to implement Shari'a on others whom they perceive as committing sin in public, may actually be committing a sin themselves through their very actions. It is this sort of argument, on the basis of Islamic knowledge that can serve to produce a powerful counter-narrative from within Muslim communities. In Mogra's words:

The use of violence in any setting is against Islam and for any Muslim to take violent action in to their own hands is wrong. This must be left to the police and the security forces and for them to deal with if laws have been broken. For example if I were to destroy a casino or any other property because I thought it was *haram*, this would be totally wrong and a *haram* action in itself.<sup>65</sup>

In a statement from the East London Mosque, outside of which a number of the patrols took place, the actions of the patrols were condemned as “utterly unacceptable and clearly designed to stoke tensions and sow discord”.<sup>66</sup> The statement went further in saying that the “actions of this tiny minority have no place in our faith or on our streets” and that leaders from the mosque had “contacted the police and authorities to alert them to the presence of these individuals and videos”.<sup>67</sup> The perspective from Muslim community and religious leaders were that the actions of the patrols were illegal, that it was a matter for the police to deal with, and that these individuals had brought harm to the image of Islam and to community relations in London.

The MCB was also quick to respond to the patrol videos, with its Assistant General Secretary, Ibrahim Mogra, posting a video response on the website of Britain's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper.<sup>68</sup> Mogra described the actions of the vigilantes as “very very un-Islamic” and that “for a Muslim to command a non-Muslim as I saw in the video not to drink alcohol, or to say leave this area because it's a Muslim area; I find that unacceptable”.<sup>69</sup> Mogra is clear to point out that those involved in the patrol are “just a couple or may be a small group of young men who have definitely misunderstood the requirements of the Shari'a upon non-Muslims”.<sup>70</sup> For Mogra as well as for many Muslim religious and community leaders, it was unfortunate that such a small group of men who appointed themselves as a morality police, imposing their views on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, were given so much attention, as well as being seen as representative of Islam. The message from across Britain's Muslim communities was clear—such actions have no place in Britain, and are damaging to Islam and community relations.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights the issue of sin, and especially public sin, as an increasingly important concept among Muslim communities in the liberal democracies of the West. It is

clear that perceptions around what constitutes as sin have also been conflated with growing concern around vast social changes in the west (particularly around women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights) and the broader impacts of westernization and globalization. It is often the case that westernization is seen as a synonym for and cause of immorality and as such should be resisted by Muslims where possible. Yet the ways in which Muslim communities have dealt with these pressures of change have varied greatly. For the most part, while some Muslims in the West may bemoan the increasingly liberal nature of society, they have not resorted to violence. The actions around the Shari'a and gay-free zones, as well as the actions of Muslim Patrol, take place at the fringe of Muslim communities in Britain, and often without communities knowing about such actions until they appear in the media.

It is in the contexts of liberal democracies such as Britain, where there is an absence of a centralized Muslim authority to take on the traditional responsibility of monitoring the public behavior of the community—in essence commanding good and forbidding evil—that some Muslims have argued that the obligation has become incumbent on Muslim communities and individuals. This has given rise to what Pieri et al. describe as Muslim community (self) policing—“where by some Muslims within an existing Muslim community aim to implement a system whereby public sin can be monitored and eradicated”.<sup>71</sup> The result is that many of the issues around sin become symbols in a hegemonic discourse system, symbols that are often manipulated by Islamists and often have the largest and most detrimental impact on Muslims who do not follow the Islamist way of life. Shaykh Ad Duha has argued that there is a:

very specific narrative that convinces people that this is actually their religious duty and this is what they need to do as Muslims. And the idea of enjoining good and forbidding evil is contextualized to their reality and that's how they end up on the streets of east London ... they're misrepresenting Islam.<sup>72</sup>

The broader impact of this has been that Muslim communities have been criticized for not doing enough to tackle extremism from within, and that there is a fundamental problem with Islam as a religion as to why young Muslim men are motivated to join groups like Muslim Patrol, having a sense of urgency to take on the concept of commanding good and forbidding evil as a personal responsibility. Yet, as also seen in this episode, Muslim communities are becoming increasingly adept at standing against extremism, and challenging it on the basis of Islamic principles.

For Mogra, the solution has been for Muslim leaders to continue in being publicly active in their stances against extremism, commenting that “We need to stand up and say that this is not what mainstream Muslims believe in.”<sup>73</sup> The case of Muslim Patrol was almost unique, because for the first time Muslim community leaders from a range of different traditions within Islam came together quickly, utilizing the traditional media, as well as more innovative forms of social media, to unequivocally condemn the activities of Muslim Patrol. In the words of Mogra, “With regards to this, we did very well to put statements out in the media and to do it very quickly. There was a utilization of YouTube and other technologies to utterly condemn these actions.”<sup>74</sup> These messages of condemnation were heard by people, which reassured them that Muslims were equally outraged by the actions of this small group of individuals as anyone else. The statements also served to discredit the actions of the vigilantes. Mogra said, “We spoke as theologians and as community representatives and these messages were welcomed across many sectors of British society.”<sup>75</sup>

## NOTES

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