



# BRITISH MUSLIMS: CHARITIES AND ORGANISATIONS

There are several types of Islamic organisation in the UK, including civil society groups, campaigning bodies, think tanks and charities. This guide focuses on a number of the better known and more influential organisations.



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## KEY POINTS

- Since the late 1980s British Muslims have founded Islamic organisations to represent their interests nationally and to work with government and other civil society groups. These have included the UKAction Committee on Islamic Affairs, the Muslim Council of Britain, the British Muslim Forum, the Sufi Muslim Council, the Muslim Association of Britain, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board, and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies.
- In addition to mosques and Islamic reform movements, there are several other types of Islamic organisation in the UK, including civil society groups, campaigning bodies, think tanks and charities.
- Muslim organisations have been established with diverse objectives in mind, including open debate and discussion, advocacy, campaigning, critique of Government policy, the reporting and recording of anti-Muslim attacks and media coverage, consciousness raising of gender issues, countering extremism, global development and fund-raising.
- Civil society organisations are not aligned in their interests or wider relationships; in some cases, they are in competition or dispute with one another. Claims by some that others work too closely with Government are common, whilst others critique those they hold to be extremist or Islamist.

- British Muslims have founded charities to provide humanitarian aid and development funding worldwide (including for UK causes), and to collect and distribute the obligatory Islamic alms, *zakat*.
- Young Muslim volunteers see charity work as providing opportunities for active citizenship and ethical living.
- Allegations about charities having extremist links and providing support to terrorists have been made but rarely substantiated in later investigations.

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## REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

*UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs; Muslim Council of Britain; British Muslim Forum; Sufi Muslim Council; Islamic Society of Britain; Muslim Association of Britain; Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board; Federation of Student Islamic Societies*

Following the controversy over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in the late 1980s, Muslims in Britain recognised the need to organise and represent themselves at national level. The *UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs* was founded in 1988, and the *Muslim Council of Britain* (MCB) in 1997. In the mid-2000s, these were followed by the *British Muslim Forum* (BMF) and the *Sufi Muslim Council* (SMC). Seeking to challenge the dominance of the MCB, the BMF claimed to represent a broad range of Muslim bodies, whilst the SMC claimed to tap into the grassroots Islam practised by the silent majority. All of these bodies sought to represent British

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Muslims to Government and the wider public, with each facing criticisms for being insufficiently representative, too compliant, too political, too controversial or too critical.

The largest of these umbrella bodies today is the MCB, which, according to its website, has more than 500 affiliated mosques and Islamic organisations. The MCB is a non-sectarian network which works for the common good and encourages Muslim participation in British public life. Despite facing a series of challenges to its public position over the years as a result of its earlier connections to the Islamist organisation, Jama'at-i Islami, it has managed to salvage its reputation.

Several other representative organisations have also reflected sectarian perspectives. The *Islamic Society of Britain* (ISB), founded in 1990, took its early inspiration from two Islamist sources, Jama'at-i Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. It focused on promoting Islamic values and engagement with non-Muslims, especially through its Islamic Scouts movement and the initiation of 'Islam Awareness Week'. Supporters closer to the Muslim Brotherhood split from the ISB and founded the *Muslim Association of Britain* (MAB) in 1997. Although MAB shared many of the Brotherhood's principles, its focus was on the active participation and citizenship of British Muslims, and to this end it sought to work closely with the UK Government and other public and civil society bodies.

MAB came to public prominence in 2003 during the 'Stop the War' campaign when it played a role in bringing British Muslims into a coalition with peace groups, unions, political parties and campaigning organisations. It was called on in 2005 to take over the management of Finsbury Park Mosque following the removal of the extremist, Abu Hamza.

Despite controversy surrounding its links to the Muslim Brotherhood and ultimately to Hamas, through a change of leadership MAB was able to continue in its public role working closely with Government. In 2006, it participated in the establishment of another umbrella organisation, the *Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board*, whose roles were to oversee mosque governance and to support the training of imams.

The *Federation of Student Islamic Societies* (FOSIS) was first established in 1963 by Arab, South Asian and Malaysian students from the Muslim Brotherhood and Jama'at-i Islami studying in the UK. Since then, it has sought to represent the interests of Muslim students at universities and colleges in the UK and Ireland, to run activities, Qur'an camps and speaker tours, and to promote Muslim student activism and charitable work (FOSIS website). It has campaigned for prayer rooms, freedom of expression, and the civil liberties of Muslim students. Many university Islamic Societies or ISocs are affiliated to FOSIS.

Over the years FOSIS has attracted criticism, for its association with Islamist groups and for offering a platform to extremist organisations and speakers, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

By FOSIS's own estimate, in 2017 there were approximately 130,000 Muslim students in universities and colleges in the UK and Ireland, served by 120 ISocs organised in seven regions (FOSIS website).

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND CAMPAIGNING GROUPS

*The City Circle; Cage; Quilliam; iEngage/MEND; Inspire; Tell Mama.*

The number of British Muslim interest groups and non-governmental organisations has grown since the 1990s, with most established by second generation Muslims. They have been established with diverse objectives in mind, including open debate and discussion, advocacy, campaigning, critique of Government policy, the reporting and recording of anti-Muslim attacks and media coverage, consciousness raising of gender issues, and countering extremism. Muslim organisations operating in the public arena have not been aligned in terms of their interests or wider relationships, and have often been in competition or dispute with one another. Claims by some groups that others work too closely with Government are common, whilst others criticize those they hold to be extremist or Islamist.

A range of groups have been selected for discussion, on the basis of their reputation and significance. In the absence of academic research on such organisations, information has been gathered from the groups' self-promotional websites, and from external media or other public commentary. They are discussed in order of date of foundation.

### ***The City Circle***

The City Circle was established in 1999 by young professional Muslims who recognised the need for a venue for debate independent of existing religious and political organisations. It became known for its weekly discussions and its Saturday schools. Its key aim has been 'to empower the Muslim community network to regain the moral and ethical voice of Islam in Britain', whilst also seeking to build alliances between Muslims and non-Muslims and 'to challenge the belief that there is a conflict between a Muslim and British identity' (City Circle website).

From its inception it has been seen as a space where Muslims could openly talk about Islam, politics and ethical issues. It has broadly avoided negative public criticism by other groups, and retains its registered charitable status.

### **CAGE**

Formerly CagePrisoners, CAGE was established in 2003 as an independent advocacy NGO 'with the purpose of raising awareness of the plight of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and other detainees held as part of the War on Terror' (CAGE website). It seeks to work closely with survivors of the war on terror, 'challenging the dominant narrative of suspect communities and the perceived threat of terrorism', to document any 'abuse of due process and the erosion of the rule of law', whilst 'empower[ing] communities through workshops, events and seminars highlighting and campaigning against state policies' (CAGE website).

CAGE has come under significant public scrutiny over the years because of its contact and campaigning on behalf of those arrested or imprisoned for terrorism offences, including Moazzem Begg (who joined CAGE after his release from Guantanamo in 2005), Michael Adebolajo, Shaker Aamer and Mohammed Emwazi. It has been fiercely critical of the UK Government's PREVENT programme, and of what it refers to as the 'science of pre-crime' that underpins it. This stance of holding Government to account, alongside its reputation for working with those accused of terrorism offences, has raised the question of whether CAGE is an important human rights group or an apologist for terror (Henrietta McMicking, BBC News, 2015).

Support for CAGE's work was compromised after 2015 when Amnesty International declined to share a platform with it, and the UK Charity Commission asked charities to cease funding it because of its controversial links with Emwazi. It is now funded by donations.

### **Quilliam**

The Quilliam Foundation (now Quilliam) was established in 2007 by three former members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ed Husain, Maajid Nawaz and Rashad Zaman Ali, who had moved away from Islamism. Today it describes itself as the 'world's first counter-extremism organisation', and aims to 'lead the way in advising others on counter-extremism strategy and policy, develop and communicate research to shape a public conversation about extremism and terrorism, and build counter-extremism programmes to build the capacity of others to get involved' (Quilliam website). It publishes reports and provides consultancy and training.

Originally founded to raise awareness of Islamism as a political ideology, the Foundation sought to expose the dangers of Islamism in its various guises. In 2010, in a confidential but leaked report for the UK Government (*Preventing Terrorism: Where Next for Britain?*), Quilliam named a number of Muslim individuals and organisations as pro-Islamist, including the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Association of Britain and FOSIS, linking them to Jama'at-i Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. This and other activities provoked criticism among other prominent Muslims who accused Quilliam of McCarthyism and spying on British Muslims.

In a document called 'Setting the Record Straight' (Quilliam website), the organisation sought to counter these and other accusations. Among other things, it rebuffed the idea that Quilliam was funded by Government (funding ceased in 2010) and that it had given Tommy Robinson, the ex-leader of the English Defence League, respectability by facilitating his defection in 2013.

### **iEngage/MEND**

iEngage was formed in 2008 with the declared purpose of promoting greater media awareness, political participation and civic participation amongst British Muslims. It played a significant

role in highlighting Islamophobic content in the UK news media, engaged with academic researchers working on Islam and its representation, developed a travelling Islamophobia awareness exhibition, and lobbied Government and other public bodies on related issues, including serving for a time as Secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia. This ceased after accusations of extremism were made and public support for the organisation was questioned.

In 2014 iEngage relaunched as *MEND: Muslim Engagement and Development*. It describes itself as 'a not-for-profit company that helps to empower and encourage British Muslims within local communities to be more actively involved in British media and politics' (MEND website). It encourages and offers training in active citizenship and political engagement among British Muslims, and fights against anti-Muslim prejudice. It runs an Islamophobia Response Unit which enables incidents to be reported online, and provides a media toolkit and resources for teachers (MEND website).

Despite its positive pro-social agenda, MEND continues to generate controversy as a result of the ideological statements and history of its leaders, and its critical stance towards UK media and Government. MEND stands accused by its ideological opponents of being 'Islamists masquerading as civil libertarians' (the Henry Jackson Society).

### **Inspire**

Inspire was established in 2008, and describes itself as 'an independent non-governmental counter-extremism and women's rights organisation' founded to respond to the inertia of male Muslim leaders on key matters relating to extremism and women's issues (Inspire website). Since its formation, it has campaigned against violence, extremism and ISIS in particular, provided training and teacher resources on human rights and gender equality, and produced

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online counter-narrative videos for young people (Inspire website). Its 2014 'Making a Stand' initiative, supported with funding from the Home Office, encouraged British Muslim women to tell their stories about extremism and radicalisation and to work against them in their families, mosques and communities (Inspire website). This initiative was one of several critiqued by CAGE because of its support from Government.

Sara Khan, one of Inspire's co-founders, entered the debate about Islam in the UK in 2016 with her book, *The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism*, in which she identified many of the key protagonists in what she described as the 'new conglomerate' of Islamists and Salafists who claim to speak on behalf all British Muslims. Objecting strongly to this, she discussed the importance of women taking a stand against extremism and its appeal for young Muslims, as well as the need for greater understanding and better communication by Government to Muslim communities.

### **Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks)**

Tell MAMA was initiated in 2012 by Fiyaz Mughal as a project within Faith Matters (established in 2006, to enable faith communities to reduce conflict). It was set up as an independent human rights NGO,



with Government backing and funding (2012-13), for the reporting, recording and analysis of anti-Muslim hate crime and the support of victims (Tell MAMA website). It has worked locally and regionally with the Police, and reports annually on the nature, extent and geography of anti-Muslims attacks.

Taking a stance on all forms of bigotry and discrimination, in 2014 Tell MAMA invited the LGBT activist, Peter Tatchell, and former chief executive of the Community Security Trust (a charity that protects British Jews from anti-Semitism and related threats), Richard Benson, to become Patrons. This led to accusations of it being pro-Zionist and anti-Islamic by Islamist groups.

In summary, at the level of political ideas, arguments between these civil society groups revolve around the place of Islam in the West, the battle for British Islam, views about the secular state, and the UK Government and its policies. On such issues, the groups differ considerably, with CAGE and MEND adopting a critical stance towards the UK Government's counter-terrorism and extremism policies and practice, whilst Quilliam, Inspire and Tell MAMA are more open to working with Government or taking Government funding to counter extremism and Islamophobia.

Both MEND and Tell MAMA focus on holding the media to account for anti-Muslim prejudice and encouraging the reporting of hate crimes against Muslims, but they take different approaches, with MEND working independently and Tell MAMA using official measures and co-operating with the Police and Government. Quilliam and Sara Khan of Inspire share a liberal perspective and a commitment to critiquing the views of Islamist ideologues and working to counter the dangers of Islamism in the UK; along with Tell MAMA, they are accused of political collaboration by CAGE and others. The City Circle remains aloof of inter-group conflict.

## MUSLIM CHARITIES

*Islamic Relief; Muslim Aid; Muslim Hands; Penny Appeal.*



From the mid-1980s, in response to conflict and disasters abroad, some young Muslim activists saw a need for the formation of dedicated Islamic charities. As well as accepting donations in support of appeals to help refugees, victims of environmental disasters and those in conflict zones, these charities have assisted Muslims to fulfil their annual obligation to give a portion of their surplus wealth to the poor (*zakat*). There are now more than 3,000 Muslim charities in the UK, ranging from large international ventures to small grassroots concerns. As well as being an expression of *zakat*, they are a demonstration of active Muslim citizenship, locally and globally.

*Islamic Relief* was the first UK-based Muslim charity. Founded in 1984 by postgraduate students to support disaster and emergency relief, it now has field offices in more than forty countries and undertakes development programmes for food, water, education and health, as well as relief (<https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/>). It was followed in 1985 by *Muslim Aid*, founded in response to the famine in Africa, and 1993 by *Muslim Hands*, which focused initially on

providing humanitarian support during the war in Bosnia. They all belong to the *Muslim Charities Forum*, an umbrella organisation for international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) run by Muslims and based in the UK.

These large charities operate like businesses, often using a corporate model. A different approach has been adopted by *Penny Appeal*. Founded in 2009, its principle is 'We take small change and make a big difference with it'. The charity supports many of the same causes as Islamic Relief and the other big charities (as well as helping UK groups in need), but uses different methods. It has a YouTube channel showcasing its work, and holds a variety of events around the country – from Muslim pantomimes and comedy shows, to Islamic conferences and training programmes. Through advertising, it supports the work of British Muslim TV.

Many young Muslims see charitable work as a form of engaged activism. For some, it is an expression of their Islamic identity and moral code, whilst others are less concerned by the boundary between the religious and the secular and more motivated by the desire to live and work ethically.

Muslim charities in the UK, US and elsewhere have faced allegations that they provide material support to terrorists or have links with terrorist organisations, though the charities themselves counter this by saying they are part of the solution not the problem.

There have been a number of investigations of Muslim NGOs, and several have been banned from operating in particular countries. For example, *Islamic Relief Worldwide* (IRW) was banned from Israel and the United Arab Emirates in 2014 for alleged support for Hamas. An independent audit found no evidence of links. The bank, HSBC, severed its ties with IRW in 2015 because of its work in high-risk

jurisdictions. *Muslim Aid* was investigated by the Charity Commission for England and Wales in 2010 for funding terrorist-related groups, an allegation that was not substantiated.

In 2015, a report published by the Overseas Development Institute, *UK Humanitarian Aid in the Age of Counter-Terrorism: Perceptions and Reality*, examined the issues faced by international NGOs seeking to provide humanitarian aid in the context of counter-terrorism. It recommended that Muslim organisations become more engaged, open and transparent, and that they:

*should be more proactive in raising public awareness of the important work they do in some of the world's most dangerous places, as well as the values and standards that they adhere to and their part in the wider British aid effort.*

A key concern was how such organisations could be fortified against physical attacks and the threat of reputational damage in the media, both of which have the potential to damage their ability to conduct their charitable activities.

Proven cases of abuse by registered Muslim charities are rare in the UK; indeed the regulation and oversight of such organisations by the Charity Commission and financial regulators would make the resourcing of crime or terrorism difficult, even if this was their goal.

## READ MORE

This is one of a series of CREST guides on British Muslims. Download and read the full series at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/BritishMuslims](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/BritishMuslims)



### READ MORE

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