

U.K. Home Office-backed Counter-extremism Group Waging Twitter Campaign Against Corbyn

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An interfaith organisation which has frequently attacked Jeremy Corbyn over allegations of antisemitism and which has described the Labour Party as a “Stalinist cult” is receiving support from the UK’s Home Office.

Faith Matters receives funding through a Home Office counter-extremism programme, Building a Stronger Britain Together (BSBT), which offers grants and other assistance including social media training to help recipient organisations to “amplify” their work.

The organisation has regularly used its Twitter account to attack Corbyn, both directly and by retweeting critical articles.

A number of those attacks have related to Corbyn’s handling of complaints of antisemitism within the party which have beset Labour since he was elected leader in 2015, but are by no means limited to that topic.

It has also posted and shared content suggesting that Corbyn is:

- sympathetic to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad
- supportive of governments and organisations responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslims
- considered a threat to national security by British intelligence agencies

The Home Office’s funding for Faith Matters appears to raise fresh questions about political attacks on the leader of the official opposition by organisations benefiting from government support.

Last year, the foreign office faced questions from Labour over its support for a Scottish-based think tank, The Institute for Statecraft, which was found to have shared material critical of Corbyn on its Twitter feed.

Speaking in parliament about that case at the time, Emily Thornberry, Labour’s foreign affairs spokesperson, said: “It is a cardinal rule of public life in our country that official resources should not be used for political purposes.”

The head of the Institute for Statecraft was subsequently reported to have [written to Corbyn](#) to apologise for “mistakes” made by the organisation.

‘Democracy, free speech, mutual respect’

Faith Matters describes itself as “a vehicle to enable faith communities to reduce conflict using conflict resolution tools” and says that it works on “integration, cohesion, hate crime and countering extremism projects”. Its work has included providing “counter-messaging projects” and it lists government agencies among its stakeholders, according to public records filed by the organisation.

The organisation is named as a recipient of support from the BSBT programme in a [list](#) published by the Home Office.

“The BSBT programme is built on a foundation of shared values, including democracy, free speech, mutual respect and opportunity for all,” the Home Office says in guidance for applicants.

It also says that organisations must be transparent about support they receive through the programme and would likely be required to acknowledge it on their websites.

According to a [Home Office evaluation](#) published last month, more than £9m (\$11.5) in grant support has been awarded to recipients since BSBT was launched in 2016, while in-kind communications support had been provided for 115 projects which had created 373 “products” to date.

In-kind support is delivered by advertising agency M&C Saatchi and includes “support to develop communication materials or training in social media”.

Middle East Eye contacted Fiyaz Mughal, the director of Faith Matters, to ask what support the organisation had received through the BSBT programme.

In his response, Mughal refused to engage with the issues which MEE had raised, which included legitimate questions about the use to which Faith Matters puts public funds.

After MEE followed up with further queries, Faith Matters took the extraordinary step of publishing a pre-emptive article on its website attacking both MEE as well as individuals at the organisation.

Bizarrely, Faith Matters suggested that for MEE to ask questions about a potential conflict of interest (namely, that Faith Matters is a recipient of government money yet mounts political attacks on the opposition leader) amounted to peddling a “conspiracy theory”.

Faith Matters said it had used BSBT funding to “counter far-right and online extremism and promote civil society and democratic engagement to young people”. It said it had chosen not to highlight that funding because members of its staff had been subjected to “threats, intimidation and abuse”.

It said it had not received social media training or assistance in counter-messaging from the Home Office.

Defending its attacks on Jeremy Corbyn and Labour, Faith Matters said it “has been and will continue to be critical of the poor way in which antisemitism has been tackled within the Labour Party and the way that Jeremy Corbyn has linked up with groups who have a very poor track record of relationships with communal Jewish organisations”.

Faith Matters also stated that it had been equally strident in attacking the Conservatives over their approach to problems of Islamophobia within the party, including past comments by Boris Johnson.

It is the case that Faith Matters and Mughal spoke out against Johnson's comments in a newspaper column in August 2018 in which he compared Muslim women who wear the veil to "letter boxes" and "bank robbers", and it has backed calls for an investigation into Islamophobia in the Conservative Party.

But an analysis of Faith Matters' tweets since it was listed by the Home Office as a recipient of BSBT support in February 2018 demonstrated that it has tweeted about Labour and Corbyn more than 200 times, while tweeting less than 40 times about the Conservatives, Johnson and Theresa May, his predecessor as party leader and prime minister.

Either way, Faith Matters has not explained how its concerns about Labour and alleged antisemitism can possibly justify unrelated, purely political attacks on Corbyn with no conceivable relevance to the antisemitism issue, such as tweets describing a "Stalinist cult of Corbyn".

Muslims Against Anti-Semitism

Faith Matters is also linked to another campaign group called Muslims Against Anti-Semitism (MAAS) which has been highly critical of Corbyn.

In September 2018, it sent copies of a book by the former chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks to Labour MPs after Sacks had [described Corbyn as an antisemite](#) and compared him to Enoch Powell, a Conservative politician who was accused of fuelling racism against immigrants in his so-called "rivers of blood" speech in 1968.

Labour called the comments "absurd and offensive".

They are off! Books and letters to some Labour MP's around the need to stand up against antisemitism.

If you are Muslim and believe that there is NO perpetual conflict between Muslims & Jews, & you care and empathise with our Jewish brothers & sisters, then join us. pic.twitter.com/9itRL3XFqx

— MAAS (@MAAS_UK) [September 11, 2018](#)

While 30 Labour MPs were sent a copy of Sacks' "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence", Corbyn was also sent another Sacks book entitled "Lessons in Leadership".

Faith Matters said MAAS did not receive any government funding.

Corbyn 'utter poison'

Mughal, the founder of both Faith Matters and MAAS, has also written opinion articles and been quoted in stories attacking Corbyn.

In March, Mughal was [quoted in an interview](#) with the Telegraph newspaper describing

Corbyn as “utter poison”, telling the newspaper that he believed the politician had refused to meet him because of his links with Jewish groups.

A Labour spokesperson told the paper that the party was not aware of any request from Mughal to meet Corbyn. MEE asked Mughal to clarify whether he had made a request and to whom it was directed. Mughal did not respond.

And in an [opinion article](#) in Israel’s Haaretz newspaper in July, Mughal questioned Corbyn’s track record of pro-Palestinian activism, suggesting that “years of imbibing the conspiracy theories of the far left as well as political Islamists” had “led him into the realms of virulent conspiracism in relation to Israel”.

Another [article](#) retweeted by Faith Matters last month was a comment piece by Azeem Ibrahim published on the Spectator website under the headline “Is Jeremy Corbyn a friend of all Muslims?”

In a tweet thread promoting the article, Ibrahim, who is a Faith Matters patron, wrote: “I estimate that Corbyn has openly supported regimes and groups that have killed over 690,000 Muslims (the most conservative estimate).”

11/13: I estimate that Corbyn has openly supported regimes and groups that have killed over 690,000 Muslims (the most conservative estimate).

— Dr Azeem Ibrahim (@AzeemIbrahim) [October 11, 2019](#)

In another tweet, Ibrahim suggested that Corbyn had not supported Palestinians in the Yarmouk refugee camp fighting against the Syrian government during the country’s civil war because he supported Assad as an “anti-imperialist”.

Faith Matters commented:

“This is SO important. When Palestinians were massacred in the Yarmouk camps by Assad forces, was there a peep from Corbyn? Not a thing.”

This is SO important. When Palestinians were massacred in the Yarmouk camps by Assad forces, was there a peep from Corbyn? Not a thing. <https://t.co/Plgi1xVvFe>

— Faith Matters (@FaithMattersUK) [October 11, 2019](#)

In fact, however, Corbyn has put his name to a number of parliamentary [early day motions](#) condemning the Syrian government since 2011 including motions in 2013 and 2014 specifically highlighting the plight of Palestinians and Syrians under attack and besieged in Yarmouk and other areas.

Mughal and Faith Matters have had close links to successive Conservative-led governments. In 2012, Mughal set up the Tell MAMA project which monitors anti-Muslim hate crime with government funding.

He currently sits on a panel of experts advising the Home Office-appointed Commission for Countering Extremism, and was a member of former prime minister David Cameron's Extremism Task Force and an advisor to former deputy prime minister Nick Clegg on preventing radicalisation and extremism.

MEE also asked the Home Office for details about the support it had provided to Faith Matters.

A spokesperson said:

“The Building a Stronger Britain Together programme allows independent organisations to administer vital projects to tackle extremist narratives that can spread through communities.

“All groups undergo strict due diligence prior to being given funding and the support they receive is kept under constant review.”

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