

UK Politicians Are Whipping Up an Anti-Muslim Panic. Where's the Evidence?

Remarks by House of Commons speaker and Labour leader Keir Starmer have led to an explosion of Islamophobic hatred against Muslims protesting against Israel's war on Gaza

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Over the last few months a troubling narrative has steadily been gathering strength in [British](#) politics.

It goes: radical Islamists are taking over the streets of London. They are using their muscle to intimidate politicians, and are destroying the authority of parliament. As a result, democracy itself is under threat.

Over the past 24 hours, this narrative that British Muslims are [corrupting](#) the British political system has gone viral.

Robert Jenrick, a former cabinet minister, speaking in the Commons on Thursday, [said](#) that Britain has "allowed our streets to be dominated by Islamist extremists".

He spoke of "a pattern of Islamist extremists intimidating those they disagree with, backed by the prospect of violence". Penny Mordaunt, leader of the House of Commons, [replied](#) that she "could not agree more".

On Thursday, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak fanned the flames, warning that "we should never let extremists intimidate us into changing the way in which parliament works."

These are powerful accusations - and neither Sunak nor Jenrick produced evidence to support them.

Islamophobic Rhetoric

It's important to explain the context of this latest epidemic of Islamophobic rhetoric. It was unleashed in the wake of Wednesday's [chaotic events](#) at Westminster after the Scottish National Party (SNP) tabled a Commons motion [supporting a ceasefire](#) in Gaza.

This motion was acutely embarrassing for Labour leader Keir Starmer, many of whose MPs are [deeply opposed](#) to [his support for the war](#).

This helps explain why both the SNP and the Conservatives tore into Commons Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle when he [over-ruled](#) the advice of his Commons clerks and defied parliamentary convention to allow [a Labour Party](#) amendment which got Starmer off the hook.

Amidst furious [calls for him](#) to quit, Speaker Hoyle went on the record to [say](#) that when making his controversial decision he had been "very, very concerned" about the safety of MPs, their families and members of their staff.

Yesterday, he came back to the Commons to repeat his alarm:

"The details of the things that have been brought to me are absolutely frightening," adding that "if my mistake is looking after members [of parliament], I am guilty".

He made clear that he had been influenced in his decision-making by [Starmer's own concern](#) about threats to his MPs.

The Speaker, however, did not explain exactly who it was that threatened the safety of Labour MPs - but nobody at Westminster was in any doubt who he was referring to: Muslims.

A Media Storm

As night follows day, the British media supported these claims.

Alicia Fitzgerald, a political reporter, fuelled the sense of panic on [Talk TV](#) when she said she'd been talking to Labour MPs, particularly women, who were "absolutely terrified" of leaving the Commons in the face of a pro-Palestinian "mob" outside.

He added:

"We have crossed a line now. We are not a properly functioning democracy if this is a factor in how our elected representatives act."

Mail on Sunday journalist Dan Hodges [tweeted](#) that he had spoken to an MP "who told me he had weighed up his own physical safety when deciding on how to vote on yesterday's Gaza motion".

I spoke to an MP yesterday who told me he had weighed up his own physical safety when deciding on how to vote on yesterday's Gaza motion. We have crossed a line now. We are not a properly functioning democracy if this is a factor in how our elected representatives act.

— (((Dan Hodges))) (@DPJHodges) [February 22, 2024](#)

Far-right commentator Douglas Murray [announced](#) on X (formerly Twitter) that “it seems that British MPs are finally waking up. Now that the Islamist threat is coming at them”.

It seems that British MPs are finally waking up. Now that the Islamist threat is coming at them: pic.twitter.com/zBLoDU5YF

— Douglas Murray (@DouglasKMurray) [February 22, 2024](#)

Telegraph journalist and prospective Tory MP Nick Timothy [accused](#) Starmer of backing down to “Islamist intimidation” and destroying “the impartial institutions that make our system work”.

In the end more important than the Speaker is the reaction of Keir Starmer to Islamist intimidation, which was to back down, reward the unacceptable, and in the process destroy the impartial institutions that make our system work. <https://t.co/eSoJqplqu1>

— Nick Timothy (@NJ_Timothy) [February 22, 2024](#)

Former home secretary [Suella Braverman](#) writes in Friday’s Daily Telegraph that “the Islamists, the extremists, and the anti-semites are in charge now”. According to Thursday’s Sun leader column, MPs faced “violent threats from Islamist thugs”.

Meanwhile, on a panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference alongside former Prime Minister Liz Truss, Nigel Farage, the former Ukip leader, [declared](#) that “radical Islam is becoming mainstream in British politics”. Farage predicted that “by the 2029 general election, we will have a radical Islamic party represented in Westminster”, adding that “you can’t be a proper country, unless you control your borders”.

And so on and so on. A narrative has been established in just 24 hours. British democracy is under threat from dangerous Islamists.

This narrative is being peddled by our most powerful politicians and media writers.

Where Is the Evidence?

It goes without saying that these are very serious allegations. If it is indeed the case that “radical Islamists” (or any other group) are threatening the lives of MPs and others, then drastic action is needed.

But I issue one word of warning.

No evidence has been provided. No evidence from the Speaker, who set the media storm in motion. Nothing from Starmer, who briefed him.

Remember that physical and verbal intimidation are [crimes](#). That includes common assault and even the use of threatening language – including online.

Anyone who physically threatens an MP – or any other politician – can and must be

prosecuted.

If such threats have been made, as Starmer and Speaker Hoyle claim, then charges must follow, and then jail sentences. Thus far such claims are not standing up.

Alicia Fitzgerald's excitable report seems to have been contradicted by another political reporter, Hugo Gye, who [reported](#) that he left parliament at 7.30pm "and didn't see a single protestor".

Or let's look at the illuminating case of Scottish MSP Paul Sweeney who said that his Glasgow office had been "stormed" by Gaza protests. They were "terrifying and threatening our staff," he added.

Yet, according to [the National](#), "Police Scotland has now confirmed it was not aware of anyone storming in or threatening Labour staff."

The National reports that "Police Scotland also said it was made aware of a 'peaceful protest' that officers attended with no issues because the protesters involved left of their own accord."

A Legitimate Democratic Protest

This is an important episode because it may explain the basis of the claims made Wednesday that "Islamists" were intimidating Labour MPs.

The MPs may have felt, genuinely, that they were threatened, but to others - including the police - they were obliged to endure no more than peaceful protest. A demonstration outside their office for sure. Chanting no doubt. Perhaps abuse. But all was within the limits of legitimate democratic protest.

If something worse took place, and the protest descended into threats to the personal safety of MPs, then the evidence must be handed to the police and charges pressed.

At present all we have is hearsay. And this brings me to Speaker Hoyle and Starmer.

There are many questions to be asked about the cozy conversation between two of Britain's most senior politicians on Wednesday.

We know from [Gary Gibbon](#), the respected Channel 4 political editor, that Starmer warned that Labour MPs could face threats in their constituencies unless the Labour motion was heard.

We also know that Hoyle took heed of this remark. Did he ask for evidence supporting Starmer's allegations? There has been - so far - no suggestion that he did.

Let's take at face value the accepted account of events. Starmer told Hoyle, face to face, of a serious threat to British democracy. If that had been the case, why didn't Starmer and Hoyle make a public statement about a threat of such gravity to British politicians?

The government chief whip should have been at the meeting so that he could be told about the threat to parliament. Had he been present - as he should have been - events would have taken a different turn.

Let's note one other thing: the story of the Islamic threat to parliament suits both the Commons Speaker and the Labour leader down to the ground.

A Broader Threat

As far as Starmer was concerned, it was enough to avoid a deeply embarrassing vote that would have exposed deep divisions in the Labour Party.

When he told MPs of his concerns about their safety, the narrative changed at once. The story was no longer about a weak Speaker bowing to intimidation from the Labour leader. It became an Islamist threat to parliamentary democracy.

I get more abuse, threats and racism than most MPs. So I don't say this lightly.

And to be clear: no-one in public life should have their safety threatened, nor be subject to unacceptable abuse.

But I find the debate about public engagement with MPs concerning. Here's why. 1/10

— Zarah Sultana MP (@zarahsultana) [February 23, 2024](#)

A story that has been swallowed without inspection, or a sight of a shred of evidence by Britain's Islamophobic media.

I am not underestimating the seriousness of the charges.

The physical threat to British MPs is real and it is deadly. Indeed I was one of the first to raise the warning about violence against MPs after George Galloway, then MP for Bradford West, was [hospitalised](#) in 2014 following a brutal attack in a London street by a thug apparently enraged by his views on Israel.

[Not a single](#) MP expressed sympathy, least of all then-Speaker John Bercow. And aside from my article, there was no press concern. Yet, that Galloway episode was a hideous warning of what was to follow. Labour MP Jo Cox was [murdered](#) during the runup to the Brexit referendum by a right wing fascist. Sir David Amess was [murdered](#) by a Muslim in 2019.

The threat to MPs is broader than a threat from Islamists. And recent history shows that it should be taken with great seriousness. So far both Starmer and Hoyle have been acting on hearsay or innuendo.

That is reckless and deeply irresponsible.

It means that they are open to the charge, [in the words](#) of left-wing commentator Owen Jones, that they were "Trying to portray British Muslims peacefully protesting against the mass slaughter of largely Muslim Palestinians as a dangerous, menacing mob".

Both Hoyle and Starmer need, as a matter of urgency, to explain exactly what went on in their furtive meeting on Wednesday. What evidence is there that MPs have been physically intimidated? If there is such evidence, why have suspects not been charged? Why was no statement made in the Commons on Wednesday about physical intimidation of MPs?

Aspersions and Innuendo

They need to act because the Speaker's remarks in the House of Commons, whether deliberately or not, have led to an explosion of Islamophobic hatred against Muslims protesting against Israeli actions in Gaza.

It may be that hard facts do lie behind the Speaker's remarks. If so he, with the help of Starmer, should make them public. Prosecutions should follow.

If not he should withdraw his comments.

It is important to remember that this is not the first time false aspersions and innuendo have been made about opponents of Israel's war in Gaza. Remember Home Secretary Braverman's demonisation of protests as "hate marches", and her attempt to ban one London march on the Armistice weekend.

Yet Open Democracy [reported](#) in early February that arrests at pro-Palestine marches were at a lower rate than at the Glastonbury music festival last year. It [estimated](#) that an average of 0.5 demonstrators at Palestine protests were arrested for every 10,000 attendees.

Between October and December – during which time millions protested – there were [153 arrests](#) at the protests. Of those, 117 arrestees were released without charge.

Mainstream British politicians are claiming that British Muslims are a security threat and are subverting British democracy. This is a deadly serious and inflammatory claim. The Speaker of the House of Commons and the leader of the Labour Party now have a duty to substantiate their claims.

If not they have a duty to withdraw them.

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Peter Osborne won best commentary/blogging in both 2022 and 2017, and was also named freelancer of the year in 2016 at the Drum Online Media Awards for articles he wrote for Middle East Eye. He was also named as British Press Awards Columnist of the Year in 2013. He resigned as chief political columnist of the Daily Telegraph in 2015. His latest book is The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam, published in May by Simon & Schuster. His previous books include The Triumph of the Political Class, The Rise of Political Lying, Why the West is Wrong about Nuclear Iran and The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism.

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