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Between Critical and Uncritical Understandings: A Case Study Analyzing the Claims of Islamophobia Made in the Context of the Proposed 'Super-Mosque' in Dudley, England

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Abstract: Research highlights how usage and claims of Islamophobia tend to be simplistic and without nuance. Using a case study approach, this article considers the claims of Islamophobia made in relation to the proposed Dudley 'super-mosque'. Setting out a narrative of the 'super-mosque', this article draws upon primary and secondary research to consider the claims and discourses of the major actors in the Dudley setting: the Dudley Muslim Association, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, the far-right especially the British National Party and the English Defence League, as well as individual political figures. Considering each in detail, this article seeks to evaluate the extent to which each of the actors and the claims of Islamophobia made against them might be valid. As well as exploring claims of Islamophobia within a 'real' environment, this article seeks to critically engage the opposition shown towards the mosque, the way in which the opposition campaigns were mobilized and engineered, and how the ideological meanings of Islamophobia was able to be readily utilized to validate and justify such opposition. In doing so, this article concludes that the claims and usage of Islamophobia was weak and that a more critical and nuanced usage of the term is urgently required.

Keywords: Islamophobia; mosques; local politics; English Defence League; far-right; Dudley

1. Between Claim and Counter Claim

There is little doubt that the impact of the proposed "super-mosque" in the town of Dudley, England has caused emotions and tensions to run high in the surrounding area. Following the latest decision by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (Dudley Council) to refuse the Dudley Muslim Association

(DMA) permission to build its mosque, the DMA's chairman-Khurshid Ahmed-responded to the decision: 'decisions in Dudley Planning committee are driven by the influence of bigotry, racism and Islamophobia' [1]. In response, Councillor (Cllr) Tim Wright, deputy leader of Dudley Council refuted the claim adding that, 'over the time that I was [on the planning committee], we passed [planning permission for] two mosques so how can that be Islamophobia?' [1]. This was not the first time that Ahmed had made such claims. During interviews undertaken as part of a research project on behalf of the European Muslim Research Centre (EMRC) in 2010, he suggested similar, describing the actions of Dudley Council in relation to its opposition to the proposed mosque as being 'tantamount to institutional Islamophobia' [2].

In addition to Dudley Council, senior figures from within Dudley's Muslim communities and organizations have also made claims of Islamophobia as regards the actions of the English Defence League (EDL) and those from within the far-right milieu more widely. As one who was interviewed put it, the EDL were undoubtedly Islamophobic through 'using Dudley as its flagship…coming here to use the mosque as an excuse' to promote anti-Muslim, anti-Islam hatred. As they went on, the actions and activities of Dudley Council and the far-right have created hostility and opposition: 'The true facts have never been given much attention…it's all been distortion and hype…' Possibly somewhat naively, that same interviewee believed that had both Dudley Council and the far-right have not perpetrated such distortion and hype about the proposed mosque, local residents would have seen the value of the Pride of Dudley project as it was called and welcomed it as '…a gift from the Muslim community' (Muslim community leader interview, 2010).

1.1. Using Islamophobia

Almost a decade and a half on from the publication of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia ('CBMI') seminal report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* [3], Islamophobia as both a term and a concept has entered into the social and political lexicons. But as Shyrock notes, usage tends to focus on the simplistic and simplified and so 'impervious to nuance' [4]. Whether used polemically or analytically, Allen argues that the overly simplistic and simplified way in which Islamophobia has been routinely conceived, defined and understood has resulted in the reality and recognition of the phenomenon being weak and unconvincing in the public and political spaces [5]. Sayyid differentiates these criticisms. Analytically, he suggests that Islamophobia is rarely understood to be little more than 'a nebulous and perpetually contested category' [6]. Polemically, he suggests that Islamophobia is something that is repeatedly located within discourses of those venting grievances, smugly pontificating, or canvassing politicians and policymakers. For Sayyid as Allen, because understandings of Islamophobia remain weak and unconvincing, attempts to counter or combat the phenomenon have been rendered ineffectual and thereby have little real meaning or resonance.

Because of this, when claims of Islamophobia are made, such claims often lack specificity, relying instead on conjecture and accusation and so leaving them open to challenge and question. Likewise, because the events prompting such claims tend to be highly emotive, the ensuing debates as also the counter claims tend to be as equally emotive, roundly contested as also hotly disputed. For those who dispute and contest, a number of arguments are typically manifest. Acknowledged by the CBMI [4], many detractors subjectively dismiss claims of Islamophobia on the premise that they are invalid. For

detractors, claims of Islamophobia are rarely more than a mere shield behind which Muslims, their communities, organizations and advocates-extremists and Islamists in much of the accusatory discourse-are able to deflect legitimate and rightful criticism [5,6]. Others arguing from a similar perspective roundly dismiss claims of Islamophobia as a form of 'cultural censorship' [7], or in the popular vernacular, an extreme example of political correctness that has 'gone mad' [6]. Similarly, claims of Islamophobia are also negated and dismissed as smokescreens behind which lurk uncritical forms of Islamophilia [6,8] or in its most extreme manifestation, a creeping dhimmitude by stealth [9]. Irrespective of legitimacy or validity therefore, and as Shyrock notes [10], at any given juncture claims and counter-claims of Islamophobia are not only highly emotive and subjective but so too typically oppositional. As he goes on, claims of Islamophobia can be easily used to shut down or close debates. As he concludes rarely, if indeed ever, are those claims and counter claims nuanced [10].

2. Approaches to Research

As Vakil [11] rightly states, it would be very easy to suspend engagement with Islamophobia in the face of such uncritical uses of the term and indeed as equally uncritical dismissals also. But as he goes on, to ask whether the term is valid or not is to miscast the issue. The term is indeed established and has had much invested in from both its critics and advocates. As Vakil adds, it matters more what we mean by Islamophobia than what Islamophobia means in any essential sense [11]. This article uses this as its start point. Recognizing and working with the term Islamophobia as opposed to rejecting or suspending it, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing and necessary critique of the term in particular in the way in which it is used by those claiming Islamophobia. To do so, this paper builds on preliminary research undertaken as part of a project commissioned by the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre. Replicating previous research that had been undertaken in London [12], research undertaken in the West Midlands highlighted how the socio-political landscape of Dudley and the fallout from the proposed "super mosque" had initiated numerous voices claiming and subsequently decrying Islamophobia [2]. This prevalence of claim and counter-claim therefore provides a unique opportunity to undertake this critique and to draw wider correlative understandings and knowledge, appropriate for the study of such a topic locally, nationally and internationally also.

A case study approach was preferred in undertaking the additional research that was required. As Gomm *et al.* note [13], case studies provide opportunities for a range of different voices and methodological approaches to be pulled together as a means of deepening and improving understanding. This approach also meant that the existing research undertaken could be built upon and furthered without necessarily needing to replicate what had gone before. Having overseen the EMRC's research which required a full and systematic review of the print media at both national and local levels including accessing online news resources and portals that were West Midlands specific, some identified gaps necessitated additional enquiry. To address this, semi-structured interviews were undertaken in April 2010 with key individuals from community and faith-based organizations in the town as well as those with specific community, sector or political responsibilities. All interviews were transcribed and these were checked with interviewees to ensure accuracy. Because of the ongoing political and community sensitivities relating to the proposed mosque, it was agreed that any

quotations or references would be anonymised. Where quotations or references are made to sources that are available in the public domain however, rightful attribution has been made.

The identified gaps in the existing EMRC research also necessitated additional secondary research to be undertaken. This included in-depth analyses of all resources available in the public domain relating to the views, opinions and decision-making of Dudley Council. In part, this was necessary as a number of Council representatives and councilors were either reluctant or unwilling to directly participate in the research not least, one might suspect, because of the ongoing possibility of legal action. This additional analysis included reviewing documents and statements available via the Dudley Council website as well as reports in the local and national media. Because of the high profile nature of the reporting about the proposed mosque, the amount of information and data available was substantial and so a full picture was established.

3. Conceptualizing Islamophobia

As before, whilst Vakil [12] is right to note how it matters more what we mean by Islamophobia than what Islamophobia means in any essential sense, to be able to fully critique the term and its usage and the way in which it is claimed it is necessary to consider how the phenomenon has been both defined and subsequently framed. Since the publication of the CBMI report referred to previously, Islamophobia has been increasingly referenced, referred to and spoken about. Despite this, there has been a distinct lack of clarity and understanding about the phenomenon and how the term should be used: about what Islamophobia is, what it is not, and what can be done about it [11]. Sadly, the asking of these questions has tended to result in further contestation and confusion [14]. Despite the undoubted influence and legacy of the CBMI definition and conception of Islamophobia, it has been shown that Islamophobia cannot merely be a process of constructing simplistic definitions which offer ever more simplistic criteria against which something is uncritically deemed to be, or not be as the case may be, Islamophobic. If defined in this way, then it is likely that Islamophobia will escape censure where meaningless definitions and conceptualizations become duly and unhelpfully over-inflated thereby removing any concretized or empirical grounding. If however definitions are without grounding, then discourses that would otherwise be regarded as socially unacceptable can begin to attain social legitimacy as well as political agency. Therefore, both the definitions and purported solutions relating to Islamophobia can easily obscure the specificity and complexity of the phenomenon; undermining, hindering and even negating the problem through a lack of critical engagement or perspective.

3.1. Allen's Model of Islamophobia

Recognizing the complexity of this, Allen [5] sought to establish a more critical and nuanced theoretical frame through which to understand Islamophobia. Recognizing it as a threefold ideological phenomenon, Allen suggests that Islamophobia is both conceived and evident in the form of patterns of thought and meaning as well as through systems of signifiers or symbols which pertain to influence, impact upon or inform the social consensus about 'the other'. Employing this model, Islamophobia does not necessarily become restricted to any specific action, practice, discrimination or prejudice but instead gives meaning to that which is widely perceived and thereby accepted as natural and normative

of Muslims, Islam or both. As Clarke explains, such a premise functions in such ways as to 'create a form of order, who we are, or perhaps more precisely who we are not, by the stigmatization, marginalization and intolerance associated with this' [15]. On the basis of this 'form of order', so discrimination and prejudice can be founded upon inaccuracies, misunderstandings and misrepresentations as indeed it can upon accurate, correctly understood and true representations of Muslims or Islam: all become seen to be 'normative truths' whether that be the case or not [5]. If a 'form of order' is therefore created that establishes Muslims and Islam as being 'who we are not' then it would seem that such a form of order would be Islamophobic.

If Islamophobia is ideological, and thereby the first component of the broader phenomenon, then it must function as such, where ideological content meaning about Muslims and Islam must be disseminated to the public and private spaces: through a vast range of different actions, utterances, images and texts that are recognized and digested as meaningful by its recipients. In this instance, both dissemination and reception are as equally important. To achieve this, the second component of Islamophobia is the modes of operation through which meaning is sustained and perpetuated. It is imperative to stress though, that modes of operation are not equitable with the symbolic forms through which Muslims and Islam are either identified or recognized. These modes and strategies are neither concretized nor unchanging, and so new modes and strategies may at some stage appear whilst others may similarly disappear, be replaced or substituted: this can also occur in different geographical, cultural and social settings as indeed others also. Neither the modes nor strategies are in themselves ideological: they only sustain ideological meaning, whether intentional or otherwise. The final component of Islamophobia is exclusionary practices: practices that seek to disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres. Exclusionary practices must also include the subjection to violence as a tool of exclusion. Given this necessary complexity, it is maybe unsurprising that the employment of both the term and concept of Islamophobia becomes problematic; even more so the claims and counter claims made as regards any manifestation. It is for this reason that this article seeks to analyze how claims of Islamophobia are made and justified in the public and political spaces; going beyond these to also try and improve any critical understanding about Islamophobia in an essential sense.

4. A Timeline of the Dudley 'Super-mosque'

4.1. Dudley and Its Muslim Communities

Dudley sits adjacent to Birmingham within the West Midlands conurbation in England and is the administrative centre of the wider Dudley metropolitan borough. According to 2001 Census data, the town's population is around 194,000 which making it England's second largest town and of which 2.45 per cent identify as Muslim. Residentially clustered both in the town and borough, Reeves *et al.* [16] note how 62 per cent of Dudley's Muslims live in just five of its 24 wards. Older Muslim representatives in the town recall how Dudley has been home to Muslim communities since the 1960s. The first place of worship in the town was a house-mosque which was established in Wolverhampton Street in the mid-1960s, soon after followed by another in nearby Broad Street. Having outgrown those premises, Dudley's Muslims purchased a former schoolhouse from the Church of England in 1976 which once

converted, became known as the Dudley Mosque and Muslim Community Centre. Located on Castle Hill, opposite the town's landmark castle and zoo, it remains today the main mosque for Dudley's Muslims. Another smaller mosque has been established on the outskirts of the town since the late 1990s and two further mosques have been granted planning permission in recent years [1].

By the late-1980s, the numbers using the Castle Hill mosque had once more outgrown the facilities. In response, the DMA began to explore sites where a new, purpose-built mosque could be established. Having purchased a piece of land on Porter Street, one interviewee says that the DMA were contacted soon after by Dudley Council as part of the land was where the new Dudley bypass was to be built. After significant negotiations, disused land in Hall Street was identified by Dudley Council in the late-1990s and subsequently offered as part of a land-swap agreement on the proviso that significant building work would be completed on the site by the end of 2008. In 2001, the DMA submitted initial plans for what it called the Pride of Dudley project and included a purpose built mosque with dome and minaret as well as separate community centre. At the launch of the plans for Pride of Dudley in 2003, one interviewee who attended the launch spoke about how the 'sketches' accompanying the plans were not to scale and so misrepresented the dimensions of the mosque, in particular what appeared to be a disproportionately large dome and minaret. For one interviewee, these 'misrepresentations' were quickly seized upon by critics and opponents who subsequently began to describe the Pride of Dudley as the 'Dudley super-mosque'.

4.2. Opposing the 'Super-mosque'

Opposition was initially voiced by a few local people although opposition quickly escalated once covered by the local media and taken up by the far-right. Reiterating the size of the super-mosque, opposition focused on the perceived "Muslim village" that would surround the mosque and more pertinently, how a "giant minaret" would overshadow the town's castle and "Top Church", an iconic and highly visible church that sits atop the town. Whilst the previous interviewee suggests such claims were 'misrepresentations', there is evidence to suggest that if the proposals had gone ahead then the minaret would have been taller than the spire on Dudley Top Church. Lesser opposition at the time focused on how the mosque would be out of keeping with the town's architecture, that the community centre would be for Muslims only, and that it would significantly increase traffic congestion. Opposition also accentuated the perceived differences between Islam and Christianity, with the super-mosque failing to reflect the Christian ethos of the area and, as Cllr Malcolm Davis put it, the needs of our Christian society. One final aspect of opposition was the speculation about the amount of public money that would need to be invested into the project, most recently cited as circa £18 million [17]. Whilst such claims have attracted widespread interest and indeed outrage, supporters of the mosque have repeatedly refuted such claims [18]. Similarly, from investigations undertaken, there is a lack of evidence available to support the claims of £18 million or indeed of any concrete amounts of public funding being invested.

On the back of the project being launched, Simon Darby, deputy leader of the British National Party ('BNP') who stood as councillor in the town and won Castle and Priory ward with 43 per cent of all votes. Losing the seat by just 36 votes the following year, Dudley remained a key target for the BNP largely because of the resonance of its anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic campaigns and the opposition being

shown towards the mosque. In the 2005 General Election, the BNP polled around 4,000 votes in Dudley North on the back of a clear anti-mosque agenda whilst a year later, it was bolstered by the success of its post 7/7 'Islam out of Britain' campaign. A feature in the Observer shortly after noted how the BNP were 'particularly determined to sound its knell in Dudley…' with Darby clarifying, 'We are giving voice to the concerns of ordinary people…Yes, part of it is still about race. But particularly after 9/11 and 7/7, things have changed: the new issue is Islam' [19]. And there appeared to be an audience for his message in the town. One anonymous local resident was quoted: 'Muslims, they're taking the piss…They're talking about building a new mosque and a Muslim village in Dudley' [19]. It was clear that at least some local residents were far from supportive of the mosque from very early on.

4.3. Politicizing the 'Super-mosque'

One of those prominently campaigning against the mosque was Cllr Davis. First elected as a Liberal Democrat councillor in 2000, Davis defected to UKIP in 2005. Despite losing his seat a year later, Davis was re-elected in 2007 in St James' ward. A few months before his re-election and in response to the DMA having submitted an outline planning application to Dudley Council, Davis began a vigorous campaign against the proposals and presented Dudley Council's Development Control Committee (DCC) with a petition signed by more than 22,000 people. On the basis that the land should be used for job creation, the DCC unanimously rejected the plans and refused planning permission in February 2007 [20]. While opponents saw this as a success, it was in relation to this particular decision that Ahmed, leader of the DMA, first laid claim to the decision being Islamophobic or as he put it, 'tantamount to institutional Islamophobia' [2]. Consequently, the DMA appealed against the decision to the Secretary of State. With a Planning Inspectorate public inquiry arranged for June the following year, Davis stepped up his campaign and called for local people to 'create crowds' outside the Council House to 'show by example what chaos will ensue…If the mosque is allowed to go ahead…We need to show the planning inspector the difficulties that the mosque will cause' [21]. During the subsequent inquiry, protests were held inside and outside the Council House.

Following the inquiry, the Inspector on behalf of the Secretary of State granted planning permission. Described as a 'victory for common sense and democracy and a defeat for prejudice and bigotry' by the DMA's Ahmed, Dudley Council's leader at the time, Cllr David Caunt responded by warning that 'there were many hurdles to negotiate before the mosque became reality' adding that '…this decision is a real kick in the teeth because this application was turned down on sound planning grounds' [22]. Dudley Council noted however that the decision granted outline planning permission only and that along with the need to submit detailed planning permission, the original land swap agreement still required the mosque to be substantially built by the end of 2008. On this basis, Dudley Council took its case to the High Court to challenge the Secretary of State's decision. The case was heard on 28 July 2009 and was immediately rejected. Despite being reported as costing taxpayers around £16,000, Cllr Anne Millward, then leader of Dudley Council, continued to suggest that other avenues to stop the mosque would need to be explored [23]. Contradictorily, Deputy Council leader Cllr Les Jones stated there was no choice but to abide by the decision and co-operate with the DMA, maybe to try and find an alternative location.

4.4. The English Defence League-Opposing Islamification

Against this backdrop of planning regulations and legal challenges, the impact of the proposed mosque on local communities was becoming increasingly significant. Whilst no direct linking evidence exists, a new mosque in neighboring Cradley Heath was subject to an arson attack shortly after [23]. Months later, a building earmarked for conversion to an Islamic centre in nearby Oldbury was also destroyed by fire [24]. Interviews with local faith leaders also suggest that some tensions begun to appear between different faith communities, especially evangelical Christians who opposed the mosque and collectively signed the petition. More significant though has been the impetus given to the far-right to forge a voice within possibly on behalf of local residents. Most prominent has been the EDL. Organizing a march in Dudley in April 2010, the EDL amassed around 3,000 supporters and one of its biggest marches to date to protest against the mosque and what they described as the Islamification of the area [25]. In anticipation of violence, the preventative measures taken reportedly cost Dudley Council a further £150,000 [26]. Prior to the march, cross political party support saw a number of councilors-including Conservative Cllr Millward, Labour's David Sparks, Liberal Democrats Dave Tyler and UKIP's Davis sign a public notice in the *Express & Star* [27] newspaper that called for the EDL to abandon its plans in the town because of its detrimental impact on community relations. The march went ahead however with minor skirmishes being reported.

Two months later, the EDL returned to Dudley once more, staging a rooftop protest on the disused building occupying the proposed mosque site in Hall Street. Complete with banners proclaiming "No to the burka" and with enough food to last a week, the protestors were set to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times a day through a PA system so that local people could experience what it would be like once the mosque had been built [28]. Unparalleled when compared with other locations where mosques were being proposed and where groups from within the far-right were campaigning against them in England, it was in relation to these extraordinary activities that some from within Dudley's Muslim communities began to speak about the EDL and the wider far-right using Dudley as 'a flagship' through which to promote and foster anti-Muslim, anti-Islam feelings amongst and between local communities. Whilst the protestors were quickly removed by local police amid growing community tensions, Dudley Council announced within days of the protest that it had reached agreement with the DMA to develop the existing mosque on Castle Hill. Cllr Jones in the *Daily Telegraph*:

> The current mosque is not really fit for purpose and we have been working with them to come up with some plans and would have been looking to submit an outline planning application in the next few months. The DMA can achieve their ambition of a new mosque which won't impinge on the lives of anyone else in Dudley, and meanwhile we can return Hall Street to council use [29].

Cllr Jones stressed the decision was not a result of the protests. Again contradictorily, the DMA responded: 'We are waiting to see details…if the offer is not suitable we will have no alternative but to pursue Hall Street' [30].

Against the backdrop of Dudley Council and DMA, the EDL have continued to voice their opposition, arguing that any redevelopment of the existing site would be detrimental to the town given its position opposite the medieval castle. Following the EDL's announcement of a second march in the town on 17 July 2010, Cllr Banks responded by categorically stating that 'plans to build the mosque

were no longer going ahead' [31]. Still, the second march went ahead and was marked by violent clashes. At the time, the BBC reported that six people had been seriously injured when a car hit pedestrians [32], an incident an EDL-related website suggested was a deliberate attack by local Muslims on innocent bystanders [33]. A week later, on the day the EDL rooftop protestors were released from custody, the *Dudley News* reported that violent disorder had broken out in the town centre including reports of gunshots [34]. Unverified sources also began to report that young Muslims dubbed the Muslim Defence League (MDL) had attacked cars outside a bar in the town [35]. Around the same time, a group dedicated to the MDL appeared on *Facebook* [36].

4.5. A Shared Enemy, A Tenuous Co-operation

Despite further outline plans being submitted to Dudley Council to redevelop the existing Castle Hill site, these were rejected on the basis of 'technical issues' and the need to compulsorily purchase nearby land [17]. Whilst the DMA suggested that they were prepared to exhaust all options to identify an alternative location for the mosque, it also announced that it had little option but to pursue plans for developing the Hall Street site. One point of agreement however between Dudley Council and DMA was the announcement that they are going to collaboratively try and ban the EDL from marching in the town in the future not least because the costs to the town would appear to have now exceeded £1 million [37]. Whilst there has been little success in banning the EDL from Dudley, the level of activity has decreased in recent years. Whether this is a consequence of the collaborative approach adopted by Dudley Council and the DMA remains open to question however. Despite having found some common ground, the mosque issue remains far from being resolved. Having again submitted plans for the Hall Street site [38], Dudley Council has again refused permission to build the mosque. Somewhat combatively, the DMA's Ahmed responded by claiming that the decisions 'are driven by the influence of bigotry, racism and Islamophobia' [1]. Whilst Dudley Council duly refuted such claims by arguing that two other mosques had been developed in the town, such a refutation could be seen as smokescreening or at least reducing the significance of the Pride of Dudley to the DMA.

5. Critical and Uncritical Claims of Islamophobia

As mentioned at the outset, most claims and counter-claims relating to Islamophobia tend to be oppositional. Likewise also, claims and counter-claims tend to be both contentious and emotionally entrenched. From interviews with those representing Muslim communities and organizations in Dudley it might be suggested that their claims to Islamophobia were indeed contentious and emotionally entrenched. Interviews with key figures from within Dudley's Muslim organizations highlighted the depth of feeling being attributed to the claims as well as clearly identifying who they believed were Islamophobic: Dudley Council and far-right milieu in particular the EDL. Across these two constituencies however exists a disparity of different speech, actions and attitudes. As such, it might be difficult for all of these to be analytically incorporated and categorized as Islamophobic. Given these unequivocal stances, this section seeks to critically analyze the extent to which the claims and counter claims might be legitimate; to try and improve understanding about the extent to which they might be mere polemical claims and accusations or something more credible and valid. In doing so, it is not the intention either intentionally or unintentionally to criticize or chastise those making

such claims. However, in trying to critically engage with the way in which such claims are made, and on what basis, it is necessary at times at least to question the claimant, the evidence upon which the claim is being made, and against whom it is being made.

5.1. Dudley's Muslim Representatives

Consequently, some considerations about those interviewed are necessary. Having interviewed a number of key figures from within Muslim communities and organizations in the area, most have been involved in the mosque campaign since the mid-1990s and so have an informed perspective on the unfolding situation. However, these same voices also have a clear vested interest in the mosque being built and so this must also be acknowledged. Interestingly, all were dismissive of the fact that other mosques exist and have been developed in the area when asked about this. This could be that such representatives identify themselves as being from a different theological, ethnic, cultural or other heritage. However, this could also somewhat simplistically be concluded as being evidence that claims of Islamophobia about the "super-mosque" have been posited because such individuals and groups have received legitimate criticism, reflecting the suggestion that Islamophobia can be used as a shield with which to deflect legitimate criticism [3,6]. At the very least, it could be that such techniques are being employed as a means to close down debate. Such conclusions would, at this stage at least, be unfair. It is necessary therefore to consider where and how claims of Islamophobia have been made in more detail: to consider the evidence relating to both Dudley Council and also the far-right, in particular the EDL.

5.2. Dudley Council

In terms of Dudley Council, its opposition to the proposed mosque seems to be underpinned by two factors. The first of these relates to the interpretation and application of planning regulations. Whilst Dudley Council's objection that the land was originally intended for job creation appears tenuous, they knew a mosque was being proposed for the site, there would appear to be some legitimacy to its opposition on the basis of the conditions of the original land swap and the need for the mosque to be 'significantly built' by the end of 2008. Clearly, this did not happen. Given the breaking of the conditions, then it might be right to conclude that any ensuing decision-making on this basis be legitimate. Had any similar binding agreement been broken, it must be presumed that the same outcomes would have ensued irrespective of religion, ethnicity and so on. As Cllr Caunt stressed, Dudley Council turned down the application '…on sound planning grounds'. This was also reiterated by Cllr Wright. If true, then there can be no legitimacy to any claims to Islamophobia.

Islamophobic exclusionary practices must be able to be evidenced as differentiating, prejudicing or discriminating on the basis of an anti-Muslim, anti-Islam ideological content [5], none of which would seem to be applicable given the allegation of 'sound planning grounds'. However, given the Secretary of State and High Court both rejected Dudley Council's decisions, some discrepancy exists. For this to be concluded as Islamophobic though, there would still need to be evidence of Dudley Council making incorrect or wrong decisions on the basis of an informed anti-Muslim or anti-Islam premise. From secondary research undertaken, it would seem that rather than being ideologically driven, Dudley Council's mistakes were rather more consequential of poor decision-making, possibly incompetence

and the need to save what might be described as "political face" rather more so than anything else. In this instance, it would seem unwarranted to claim that Dudley Council was Islamophobic despite this being the unequivocal view of those Muslim community and organization representatives interviewed. Such a claim is therefore weak and unconvincing, having resonance with the acknowledgement that some polemical claims of Islamophobia can be mere smokescreens for those wishing to vent grievances.

Worthy of further consideration is the claim of 'institutional Islamophobia'. A later CBMI report stated that institutional Islamophobia occurs where 'established laws, customs and practices…systematically reflect and produce inequalities in society between Muslims and non-Muslims' before adding 'If such inequalities accrue to institutional laws, customs or practices, an institution is Islamophobic whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have Islamophobic intentions' [39]. The critical issue is whether the poor decision-making of Dudley Council reflected or produced inequalities between Muslims and others. The critical question then is if the proposed mosque had been any other place of worship and all conditions were the same-the land swap agreement, the requirement to be 'significantly built' by the end of 2008 and so on- would the outcome have been any different? Such a question can only be responded to with conjecture, but given that little evidence exists to suggest or validate that this was anything more than poor decision-making and face-saving, the actions and responses of the DMA as well as its relationship with Dudley Council cannot be overlooked. Rather than suggest that the outcomes have been as a result of institutional Islamophobia, it might be more appropriate to consider the deterioration of the relationship between the two parties, the (deliberately?) contradictory nature of their announcements and actions, and the fact that in the public face of voters, communities and the far-right milieu, neither would have wanted to look as though they had backed down from their respectively entrenched and unmovable standpoints. With this in mind, it might be more appropriate to suggest that the ensuing situation is more a result of this deteriorating relationship than institutional Islamophobia *per se*.

5.3. Dudley's Councilors

The second factor underpinning Dudley Council's opposition has to be the size and scale of the opposition from local residents, evidenced by the petition which is now reported as having exceeded 50,000 signatories [40]. As democratically elected representatives, councillors would be expected to represent the views of their constituents and so in the face of such overwhelming public opposition it might be that decisions have since begun to reflect this. This of course does not mean that decisions should be made that go against planning regulations but it does give some insight into why some may have maybe changed their stance over time. To what extent though have those with political responsibilities drawn upon Islamophobic ideas and meanings to garner support? In terms of councillors, a good number from different political parties signed the letter opposing the first EDL march, recognizing the divisive impact it could have [41]. Cutting across party political differences including Davis, there is an opportunity to interpret this positively, seen as an attempt to reassure Muslim communities and to voice collective rejection of any divisive messages about Muslims and Islam that might ensue. But to what extent might this interpretation be valid: was it a collective opposition to the EDL and by default, Islamophobia also, or was it more about political expediency and the need for elected councillors to stand together when presented with an external political rather

than party political enemy? From those interviewed, it was clear that the former interpretation was given little credence. Most felt that much more needed to be done.

In many ways, those interviewed from within Dudley's Muslim communities may have been right especially when it comes to the individual. At this level of critical engagement, the situation becomes much less clear. Take Davis for instance. Despite having originally signed the cross-party letter, he then issued a public letter which appeared rather more empathetic to the EDL [42]. However, Davis does make clear who he believes is to blame for the EDL's presence in Dudley:

> The top and bottom of the whole affair revolves round the [land swap agreement] and had this been called in as demanded of this Council by the people there would be no excuse to call into Dudley or use it as an excuse to demonstrate at all. This Council has denied the rights of every citizen of Dudley, who asked for this Giant Mosque to be stopped. They had every right morally and in law to service the covenant and take back land that was gifted to a few outspoken greedy members of our society who think they have the authority to dip into the public purse [42].

In voicing opposition based on the long standing agreement, Davis would not appear to be voicing an overtly anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic message. Presumably he does target the DMA-'a few outspoken greedy members of our society'—but such a suggestion would appear rather more critical than Islamophobic *per se*. However, Davis has also used language that draws upon the ideological content of Islamophobia to exacerbate difference and make sense of this in the context of Dudley: stressing the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims, Islam and Christianity, how the super-mosque goes against the Christian ethos of the town and the needs of "our" Christian society. As such, it would be very easy to interpret this as being informed by Islamophobic ideologies if not Islamophobia *per se*.

5.4. Dudley's Far-Right Milieu

Something similar would also appear to be evident in the rhetoric of the far-right. On one level, the EDL's opposition is stated as being about resisting the "Islamification of Britain" of which the super-mosque is seen as evidence. Without question, such unfounded claims can only be Islamophobic: there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Dudley is being "Islamified", whatever that might mean. The concerns and opposition being voiced by the EDL also has a distinct overlap with Davis, stressing how the mosque is against "our" culture, way of life, values. Essentially, the mosque is against "us", that is who the EDL perceive "us" to be. To reiterate Clarke [15] and the way in which ideological content functions, it creates a form of order, of who we are, or perhaps more precisely, of who we are not, by the stigmatisation, marginalization and intolerance associated with this. Typifying the other therefore can only be seen to be Islamophobic. In this respect the EDL's refutation of claims of Islamophobia may even be understood as being Islamophobia in itself.

How this has became resonant with local residents was explained during an interview with an individual leading an anti-racism organization based in the Black Country. For them, a very specific "sentiment or vibe" has become apparent in the area in relation to the proposed mosque:

> People talk about the culture of the country changing…it's all part of the Islamophobia, it's like everyone else against the Muslims and I think that's a huge sentiment at the moment. People have already got this fear

of Muslims, dislike etc because of the diatribe from the media and I think the far-right have just tapped into that. It's the easy way to get into people's heads (Interview with anti-racism worker, 2010).

Specifically in terms of the mosque, 'You can kind of tap into that, then drip-feed other things later when you've kind of got it all worked out'. Clearly, it was this 'sentiment or vibe' that the far-right, the EDL and Davis all tapped into. Theoretically, this 'sentiment or vibe' must surely be the manifested ideological content of Islamophobia that problematizes Muslims and Islam as being inherently and essentially different. What becomes normative therefore is the establishment and acceptance of Muslims and Islam as inherently and oppositely different, something that can be then 'tapped into' to mobilize, consolidate and duly oppose quite irrespective of whether opposition to the mosque is legitimate and accurate or indeed otherwise.

6. Analyzing the Claims

Of course, legitimate opposition must be afforded a voice: Islamophobia cannot be used to suppress criticism or opposition. Without any doubt, those who oppose must have the same rights as those who support. If all legitimate opposition is dismissed as Islamophobic or not allowed an outlet, no matter how unappealing and unwanted this might be to Muslims or indeed any other community including majority communities also, then it is likely that those in opposition will feel marginalized and seek alternative outlets. And this is how the far-right and others have found resonance with local residents. Local residents in Dudley have persistently felt that their voices, not just their objections and opposition, have been ignored. Resultantly, the far-right has identified and contextualized local issues within a broader landscape, propagating certain anti-Muslim and Islamophobic messages as a means to establish political footholds and ultimately exacerbate inter-community tensions. In tapping into that 'sentiment or vibe' and positioning the super-mosque in the context of wider issues of 9/11 and 7/7 amongst others, not only does it locate a resonance but so too an urgency that those from within the far-right are only too keen to exploit.

This is evidenced in the way in which the proposed mosque has acted as a catalyst at different times for the BNP, EDL and UKIP. Rather than being overtly Islamophobic, all have been keen to identify and understand the mosque within a much broader ideological landscape. Undoubtedly therefore some have opposed the mosque on the basis of an Islamophobic ideology that has found a resonance with local residents but this must be necessarily differentiated from legitimate criticism and opposition that has been repeatedly overlooked and neglected. Consequently, it is likely that because legitimate criticism and opposition was dismissed out of hand, many have reluctantly begun to identify, support and be subsumed within far more ideologically informed discourses. It would be wrong therefore, despite opposition to the mosque now being voiced by many local residents, to suggest that Dudley residents were Islamophobic *per se*. Some may though, because of various external influences and incidents, have become more receptive to such messages.

As easy as it is for perceptions and attitudes about Muslims and Islam to be exaggerated and exacerbated by the far-right and indeed others, so too is it as equally easy for Muslims and their groups, organizations and representatives to interpret all criticism about Muslims and Islam through a lens of Islamophobia, whether direct or indirect. So in Dudley, it would be very easy to conclude and indeed, it would fulfill a political purpose, that all opposition to the mosque is Islamophobic. Similarly,

that all Dudley residents support the EDL and their ilk. Both though would be grossly incorrect and wholly misrepresentative. Even if the full range of criticisms and arguments of opposition have not always been heard, lazy assumptions cannot be made that homogenize all those voicing opposition in the same way that homogenizing all Muslims or indeed any others would be wrong and damaging. It is very easy for those who see themselves as victims irrespective of difference to detrimentally interpret everything within a 'victim mentality'. If so, it merely reinforces the view of many who are averse to or outright reject Islamophobia as a real and tangible phenomenon not least by reverting to an overly simplistic bipolar approach to understanding Islamophobia. In these instances, Muslim individuals, organizations and representatives may indeed be guilty of—or at least perceived to be—using claims of Islamophobia as a shield and should be rebuked as much as those espousing Islamophobia should be. This is not to say that any individual or organization in Dudley is culpable of this. Indeed, at no time during this research was there any evidence even to suggest such an interpretation. Instead, it is merely an acknowledgement of the potential dangers of making such claims and more importantly, how laying claim to Islamophobia can be easily reduced, rebuked and refuted. It also highlights how difficult it is for Muslims to lay claim to Islamophobia and uphold them as valid.

7. Resolving Dudley, Resolving Islamophobia

7.1. Resolving Dudley

The outcome of the situation in Dudley continues to remain unclear. For those operating as part of the far-right milieu and some others with political responsibilities, the mosque will remain an issue that will continue to bring about and be used to exacerbate tensions and discord. In doing so, it will continue to feed the 'sentiment or vibe' that exists about Muslims and Islam in and around the town and beyond. For this reason, the mosque will continue to be a cause upon which further ideologically informed attitudes and messages will be established and ultimately justified. All involved will continue to take largely unflinching positions that will, without doubt, ultimately further entrench bi-polar positions. For many, the mosque represents and is symptomatic of a much larger battle, one that is against a whole raft of different issues and arguments but most prominently, the relatively abstract battle to protect what some see as "our" town, culture, values and way of life: the battle for the self, for the normative, for Britain, a battle between Islamophobia and Islamophilia maybe. Quite irrespective of when, where or even if the mosque is built, it now represents an entity that serves the function of being the antithesis of all that "we" are. The mosque has therefore become the ideological content of Islamophobia in material form. Resultantly, the veracity of opposition will neither wane nor go away of its own accord: it is far too valuable for far too many to be thrown away.

Because of this, Dudley Council and the DMA need to recognize the landscape within which they operate. Both have continued to take combative standpoints, not least because neither can afford to be seen to "lose". If Dudley Council find a site and agree planning permission, then amongst other things they will be subject to criticism for the amount of public money that has been spent on its legal challenges to date. Not only might this result in political change, maybe even political rejection, but that change might result in a swing towards a re-invigorated far-right should the Council be seen to kowtow to the other. So too might it result in less political participation and an underwhelming

commitment to the Dudley Council's political mandate. Another issue relevant in the particular current economic climate is the rising costs of opposing and also building the mosque. With millions already being suggested as being squandered on the mosque, continuing to use tax-payers money to reach a stalemate also has the potential to be extremely damning but more so, extremely dangerous.

As for the DMA, its most recent public rhetoric suggests they will continue trying to develop the existing Hall Street site and so continue a process that has already been to no avail and at significant expense. As a result, legitimate questions might be asked about whether it has the necessary funds available to eventually build the mosque should it have to again enter legal process. In these circumstances, should the DMA seek funds from overseas to support the building of the mosque, then it would leave itself open to greater scrutiny what with recent furores about the sources of Muslim groups and organization's funds, a point that is likely be latched onto by those who both legitimately and illegitimately oppose the mosque. Were the DMA and Dudley Council to agree an alternative site, then it is unlikely that the EDL and others will drop its fight: any new mosque will be seen as evidence of the further Islamification of Dudley. With this in mind, whilst any resolution between the DMA and Dudley Council looks unlikely, so too might a resolution be as potentially problematic. At present though, neither Dudley Council nor the DMA seem to be losing their respective appetites to fight. Maybe offering a slight distraction is the common enemy both now have in the EDL. For however long this stalemate continues, it will be local residents from all communities who lose. All will be pulled in many different directions, all of which have the potential to have a detrimental impact on already fragile community relations and cohesion.

7.2. Resolving Islamophobia

The situation in Dudley also highlights the complexity involved in trying to understand and evidence Islamophobia. Whilst some evidence exists of more obvious or overt manifestations and discourses of Islamophobia, much of that which has been considered in this article, and has indeed shaped the discourse and development of the situation, has been far less obvious and concretized. Consequently a variety of inferences, suggestions, meanings and perceptions that can only be understood and conceptualized as sitting within the 'grey areas' of Islamophobia comprise the bulk of that which has been considered and explored here, few of which are easily categorized or understandable. From political campaigning to rhetorical inference, from institutional discrimination to community agitation, whilst Maussen rightly suggests they might all be related and feed into one another, he is also right in suggesting that they cannot be simply equated and duly treated as comparable manifestations [43]. Despite being typically founded upon similar ideological bases, they cannot be considered on a like for like basis nor can they be responded to in the same way either.

However, all of this would seem to feed into a seemingly self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating 'sentiment or vibe'. That 'sentiment or vibe' is of course the ideological core of Allen's model of Islamophobia. As Islamophobia is essentially ideological, so meaning is disseminated and subsequently attributed in ways that understands Muslims, Islam or indeed both to be abnormal and the antithesis of that which might be normal or normative: 'the Other'. And as shown, these meanings can be as much established upon gross inaccuracies, misunderstandings and misrepresentations as indeed they can accurate understandings and representations. Despite being grounded in reality and actuality,

they might also be skewed, re-focused or reinterpreted for a whole raft of different reasons. Consequently, this approach provides a means by which understanding and conceptualizing Islamophobia is able to take into account the 'grey areas' that were previously incapable of being acknowledged, at the same time as providing a way of understanding, if not necessarily explaining or resolving, the phenomenon. Maybe that in itself is also an explanation for the situation that has unfolded in Dudley.

Acknowledgments

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