



**Standing up to division.** (From L-R) Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, Imam Qari Asim, 7/7 survivor Gill Hicks and the Reverend Bertrand Olivier during an event to promote religious unity in central London. (AFP)

## ‘Missing Muslims’ report looks to British-born imams

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

To promote the integration of British Muslims, mosque imams should ideally be British-born, fluent in English, knowledgeable of British culture and more forceful in condemning religious hatred, an independent report said.

The report – “The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All” – was published by the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life, led by Conservative MP Dominic Grieve after an 18-month study.

“It is of great importance that British-born imams, who have a good understanding of British culture and who fluently speak English, are encouraged and appointed in preference to overseas alternatives,” the report advised.

It explicitly called on British mosques to “invest” in British-born imams, who should be “equipped

with pastoral skills so they are able to deal with the challenges facing British Muslims.” The report said mosque management committees should “better understand, and respond to, modern British life.”

The report recommended British universities forge ties with Islamic seminaries to put forward an accreditation plan for imams so preachers receive an educational qualification alongside religious qualifications.

After four terrorist attacks in Britain so far in 2017 – three radical Islamist attacks and one Islamophobic hate crime – and increased fears about radicalisation, the call for mosque imams who understand and empathise with the struggle young British Muslims face regarding identity and radicalisation makes sense.

“It is hard to disagree with the recommendations that mosques must invest in British-born imams, pay them a decent living wage and equip them with pastoral skills so they are able to deal with the challenges facing British Muslims,” said Qari Muhammad Asim, senior imam at Leeds’s Makkah Mosque.

“Many of my colleague imams have opted to become a chaplain in a hospital or prison due to lack of an appropriate salary package offered by a mosque,” he said.

■ While “Missing Muslims” recommendations were cautiously welcomed by prominent Muslims and Islamic groups, questions remain.

It is very important that sermons in mosques be conducted in English, Asim wrote on Imams Online. “The English language is a common denominator and a strong enabler for young people to understand the rich traditions of their faith, count and be proud of their British Muslim identity,” he said.

Many foreign-born mosque imams, perhaps with limited English language skills, faced difficulties connecting with young worshippers, the report said.

“Second- and third-generation Muslims benefit less from a non-native speaker who may not ap-

preciate the subtlety of the English language and sometimes cultural sensitivities,” it said.

“Islamic seminaries provide Islamic studies but not with the additional services to meet the expectations of the community,” acknowledged one trainee imam in the East Midlands quoted in the report. He said he had sought leadership and counselling courses to better connect with worshippers.

Other recommendations in the report included an independent review of the government’s controversial anti-terrorism Prevent programme, advice for media reporting on issues relating to Islam and adoption of a legal definition of anti-Muslim prejudice.

While “Missing Muslims” recommendations were cautiously welcomed by prominent Muslims and Islamic groups, questions remain.

“It is very much a top-down approach, rather than a genuine bottom-up one,” said Jahangir Mohammed, director of the Centre for Muslim Affairs.

“While the report touches on

many issues that are relevant, it is a shame the way discussions have been framed avoids the much tougher questions that I hear being raised in the Muslim community on a regular basis, that are the true barriers for Muslims achieving their potential in society,” he added, writing for online Muslim site Islam21c.

Grieve, the government’s top lawyer from 2010-14, said the report was part of continued efforts to support integration.

“The shocking terrorist attacks in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park demonstrate the terrible impact extremism has on innocent citizens,” Grieve said.

“The response to those attacks with communities coming together in unity and defiance demonstrates why the recommendations in this report should be acted on as a matter of priority, so the UK can build on the positive work already happening.”

Mahmud el-Shafey is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

## Befriending refugees in the United Kingdom

Lin Taylor

London

When Sudanese refugee Abu Haron arrived in England in 2010, after clinging to the underside of a school bus from Calais in northern France, the teenager found himself at a police station surrounded by people speaking a strange language.

He was 16, alone and unable to speak English. Haron said he was terrified British authorities would deport him to his home in Sudan’s Darfur region where war had broken out.

“I felt scared and lonely and lost because I was just sitting there waiting for an interview,” said Haron.

“I didn’t know anything about English. People (were) passing around me and speaking. I didn’t know what was going on, what they were saying,” he said.

Though Haron spent the next year studying English and socialising by playing football, he said he had nobody to rely on when he got to London, an overwhelming

city compared to the small village in Darfur he fled from when it was burned to the ground by militias.

Then a letter arrived from a British woman Anneke Elwes, inviting him on a walk through London’s Hampstead Heath park. The pair were introduced through a befriending service run by British charity Freedom from Torture.

As the mother of two sons who are of a similar age to Haron, Elwes, 55, said the young man quickly became part of the family, even celebrating Christmas for the first time with a traditional lunch and an egg-and-spoon race a few years ago.

■ A sense of loneliness and isolation is common among asylum seekers and refugees.

“All the family they welcomed me like their son and I’m glad I have a mum in England. So many of the migrants, they don’t have this chance,” said Haron, sitting next to his “UK mum” at her home in north London.

“When you have someone in your life, who even just speaks to you on the phone, it gives you confidence. You’re not alone. It’s a big difference,” he said.

Meeting Haron inspired Elwes to found HostNation, a website that matches adult refugees with volunteer befrienders in their neighbourhood.

“For a lot of refugees and asylum seekers the only English people they actually get to meet are officials,” she said.

A sense of loneliness and isolation is common among asylum seekers and refugees due to language barriers, poverty and a lack of social support, charities say.

“We know that refugees and asylum seekers experience isolation. It’s a massive problem,” said Mariam Kemple Hardy, campaigns manager at Refugee Action. “Being unable to speak to your neighbour, let alone make friends beyond that, can be extremely isolating for these people who come to the UK to rebuild their lives.”

Travel can also be difficult for refugees and asylum seekers be-



cause many cannot afford public transport and often walk for hours to access services or to meet friends and families.

The British Red Cross said it helped more than 14,000 homeless and destitute asylum seekers in 2016 who relied on an asylum allowance of about \$46 a week.

There are plenty of families in London who would like to help and ensure new arrivals “see a more positive side to English life,” said Elwes.

After launching HostNation in March, she is starting to match refugees with befrienders across Lon-

don, a lengthy process that requires referrals from refugee agencies, rigorous screening and reference checks.

“We want other people to benefit and have a rewarding relationship like we’ve had,” said Elwes, as she and Haron smile over the first letters they exchanged six years ago.

“Things, like being invited into someone’s home or meeting their family can be really special. It can be quite transformative.”

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