How has anti-Muslim speech by Conservative Party politicians contributed to Islamophobia?

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Abstract

This research investigates the Conservative party's approach to Islamophobia while in government between 2010 and 2025, highlighting its failure to address the issue seriously. Drawing upon a neo-Orientalist approach, this dissertation demonstrates how passing comments uttered by Conservative political elites reproduced the process of 'othering' in their depictions of Muslims. It explores how this anti-Muslim rhetoric was not dealt with in full accordance with some of the Seven Principles of Public Life. It also explores how far-right actors were emboldened to foster a prejudiced environment. Situating these failures within broader historical and socio-political contexts, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Conservative political elites inadvertently gave legitimacy to a permissive space for anti-Muslim hate in British society.

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1   Introduction

In a world where words hold significant power, we live in a British society in which innocent Muslim women are labelled as "letter boxes" (BBC, 2018), Muslim politicians are accused of being controlled by "Islamists" (Toth, A. 2024), and innocent Muslim children are unfairly demonised and referred to counter-terrorism programmes like Prevent (Taylor, D. 2021). The British government's failure, under the Conservative Party, to curtail anti-Muslim hate speech has inadvertently opened Pandora's box, notwithstanding their inability to deal with Islamophobic allegations, which further complicates the issue.

Islamophobia, a hatred, fear or prejudice against Muslims, has seen an average increase of 276% in the UK since October 2023 (Islamophobia Response Unit, 2024). This includes verbal and physical abuse, as well as online persecution, which has provided a space for anti-Muslim hate (hereafter AMH) and entered mainstream discourse far too easily (Ekman, M. 2015, p.1986). Ebner (2024) also highlights this trend by confirming that extreme ideas that were once confined to exclusive places on the internet or secret meetups, have now shifted into the mainstream by being echoed through parliaments (Ebner, J. 2024, p. 16) and subsequently politicians. Verbal anti-Muslim abuse examples include Sheymaa, a hijab-wearing Muslim woman who was told at her workplace in London, she looked like she "worked with bombs" (Welsh, T. 2022), EDL protestors on

the streets of Britain chanting "Give me a gun and I will shoot the Muzzie scum" (Jackson, L. 2018, p.89); and in the case of physical abuse, a London Muslim bus driver was repeatedly spat at after being called a "Muslim terrorist bastard" by a man who was refused permission to board the bus after he could not afford the fare (Anglesey, A. 2024).

These recorded acts of Islamophobic hate follow the Muslim Council of Britain (hereafter MCB), an umbrella body of Muslim organisations in the United Kingdom, along with official government statistics, which recorded that 10,484 religious hate crime offences were reported in the year ending March 2024. Of those religious hate crimes, 38% were targeted towards Muslims (Home Office, 2024), see Figure 1. This makes Muslims the most targeted religious faith group in the UK (Muslim Council of Britain, 2023). The escalating prevalence of anti-Muslim hate speech within British society necessitates an understanding of the underlying factors driving this trend, and the role elite politicians from within the Conservative-led government play in this increase of Islamophobia.

Figure 1: Number and proportion of religious hate crimes recorded by the police, by the perceived targeted religion, year ending March 2024.

Numbers and percentages	England and Wales		
Perceived religion of the victim	2023/24	Proportion of religious hate crimes 2023/24 (%)	Religious hate crimes rate per 10,000 population
Buddhist	20	0	1
Christian	702	7	0
Hindu	193	2	2
Jewish	3,282	33	121
Muslim	3,866	38	10
Sikh	216	2	4
Other	503	5	14
No religion	196	2	0
Unknown	1,382	14	[u]

Notes: In some offences more than one religion has been recorded as being targeted, therefore the sum of the proportions do not add to 100%. Figures exclude Devon and Cornwall Police. (Source: Home Office, 2024).

This study posits that a significant growing concern contributing to the rise of Islamophobia is a series of explicit and implicit perceived anti-Muslim comments and feckless speech made by Conversative political elites, and the lacking decisive action against the alleged offender whilst in government. In chapter 3 of this paper, I focus on accountability within the Conservative party, highlighting their failure to take meaningful action in upholding the Principles of Public Life. The Principles of Public Life were created in 1995 by a committee led by Lord Nolan under Prime Minister John Major to improve standards in public life and clarify what is expected

of people in public roles, such as government, the civil service, the police, and other public offices (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995; Chalmers, 2025). The seven principles include values such as objectivity, honesty, and accountability (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995; Philp, 2024). In this research, I use the Nolan Principles as an accountability benchmark to judge whether anti-Muslim speech by some Conservative politicians was tolerated within the party, and whether that may have helped fuel Islamophobia (Philp, 2024; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995).

I thereafter discuss in chapter 4 that these comments made by high-ranking Conservative politicians, has not only contributed to a rise in anti-Muslim hate, but has set a political tone that subsequently gives a green light to circulating, expanding and permitting anti-Muslim hate speech. This analysis also puts forward that the corresponding impact and circulation of anti-Muslim invective by Conservative party elites has encouraged external major political actors outside of the Conservatives, such as Tommy Robinson and Paul Golding to operate within a permissive space and perpetuate this anti-Muslim political tone.

I therefore argue that the three themes of; i) a lack of accountability with regard to alleged anti-Muslim hate speech, ii) expressions of anti-Muslim hate by Conservative politicians contributes to a rise in Islamophobia, and iii) the impact of those anti-Muslim expressions has given an underlying

green light to external actors that facilitates the proliferation of anti-Muslim prejudice that targets Muslim and perceived Muslim communities.

Conservatives Impacting the Permissive Space and External Actors

Anti-Muslim statements, sentiments and the political tone by the Conservative-led government impacted, contributed to, and has given a continued green light to a permissive space of anti-Muslim hate. The lines of what *is* and is *not* socially acceptable norms of behaviour and attitudes towards British Muslims within the Conservative Party have shifted. Just as Sayeeda Warsi, former chairwoman of the Conservative party highlighted, that where extremist right-wing views have now become mainstream, in previous Conservative parties they would have been "outright rejected" (Channel 4 News, 2024). I posit that these once rejected extreme views have contributed to the permissive space for AMH speech within which external political elites and those engaged in public expressions of anti-Muslim hate, such as political entrepreneurs Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), Paul Golding, and their ilk feel emboldened to continue in Islamophobic activities.

This permissive public space facilitated by anti-Muslim political tones, in my argument, allows societal grievances, such as the lack of quality housing, the economic crisis and public services, to be exacerbated, by which the blame is placed upon the Muslim (Aked, H. 2017, p.166), and in turn is considered acceptable behaviour which circulates anti-Muslim stereotypes

and tropes. Although far-right ideology is not at the core of this discussion, the purpose of this section is to briefly highlight the impact of Conservative elites' anti-Muslim speech on other external anti-Muslim proponents and groups. This is important because while analysing the public space for anti-Muslim hate, we should identify who are the main actors and what their modus operandi is, to further understand the true impact of political elites and their speech within this arena.

This political tone from Conservative politicians and its impact on wider society, specific to this thesis, coincides and runs parallel with this permissive space. By the political tone, I refer to the speech and behaviour which is publicly manifest by politicians. The impact of this political tone can greatly influence society at large, particularly with reference to anti-Muslim hate, as was evidenced by the example of Boris Johnson and his burqa comment, which will be explored in further detail in chapter four. Kim and Ogawa (2024) state that one of the mechanisms behind this kind of hate speech becoming mainstream is the acceptance of social norms or shared rules of behaviour (Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. 2024, p.1162). Kim and Ogawa (2024) posit that individuals in prominent social positions, such as politicians, otherwise termed 'social referents', have a significant impact on shaping social norms and this change in social norms can be attributed to influence by the conduct, behaviour and speech of political figures. Global examples of this include the case of right-wing politicians like Trump, whose rise to power and 2016 presidential victory coincided with an upsurge in

hate crimes and xenophobic online content in the US, while also correlating with increased racial bias across European nations (Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. 2024, p.1162) such as the UK.

This have further been evidenced by Dame Sara Khan, the former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's independent adviser for social cohesion and resilience, and former counter-extremism commissioner under previous Prime Ministers' Theresa May and Boris Johnson. Khan had stated that the role of political leadership and the conduct of elected officials is "really critical", as there is observable evidence that politicians have, both explicitly and implicitly, "undermined social cohesion" through the deployment of inflammatory language (Boffey, D. 2024).

The statements from Dame Sara Khan come after she said she had visited parts of the UK and had upfront conversations with members of the public who admitted that due to some of the inflammatory and controversial language used by politicians (about migrants, Muslims and non-white people), the "same language would then be co-opted by, you know, far-right extremists and others" (Boffey, D. 2024). This is another clear example of where we see the real impact of politicians and their speech filtering down to wider society, impacting the space for Islamophobia, where dehumanising Muslims and migrants is actively practiced. Which is what Khan echoed when she was further told this kind of behaviour and

speech was used by actors of the far-right to *"undermine cohesion in a local area"* (Boffey, D. 2024).

Another example of anti-Muslim hate speech, demonisation of Muslims, and stoking racial and religious tensions which impact the permissive Islamophobia space came from the former Home Secretary Suella Braverman. Braverman, like Johnson, wrote in the Telegraph that "Islamists[1] were now in control of the UK" and specifically referenced pro-Palestine demonstrations across Britain as evidence for her claim (Middle East Eye, 2024). Braverman's broad generalisations and perpetuations of Muslims caused outrage by many, which is explored further in chapter four, including Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain Zara Mohammed. Zara Mohammad had stated that "a former Home Secretary has shamelessly peddled extremist tropes about so-called 'Islamist' takeovers." The Secretary General for the NGO further emphasised that this publication coincided with concerning statistics, noting that "over 2000 cases of Islamophobic hate crime occurred in the last 4 months" (Middle East Eye, 2024).

Braverman's published comments in the Telegraph were what Dame Sara Khan warned against when indicating that "promoting dangerous

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[1] The linguistic origins of 'Islamist' referred an 'adherent of Islam' or an 'expert in Islam'. It was not until the 1970s with the likes of the British-American Zionist, Bernard Lewis and his famous 1976 essay entitled "The Return of Islam" that ideas began to be propagated linking 'Islamists', 'pan-Islamism' or simply put 'Muslims' to extremism and violence (Miller, D. 2022). See Deepa Kumar and the Jerusalem Conference on International Terrorism for further reading.

narratives" are utilised to evoke "hatred against a racial and religious group" and rhetoric like Johnson's and Braverman's in recent times has "given a green light" to those who subscribe to "racist views" (Boffey, D. 2024). This green light, I argue, impacts the permissive space for anti-Muslim hate and those who act within it, such as Tommy Robinson, which can lead to a dangerous ripple-effect and be a contributing factor in radicalised anti-Muslim views.

Anti-Muslim themes that run throughout this permissive public space and are echoed by Conservative and subsequently far-right political actors which encapsulate tropes, such as Muslims being 'a threat to everyone but themselves' only exacerbates grievances and 'others' Muslims from British society. This 'othering' will be explored further in chapter two by drawing upon the works of Edward Said, and the analysis that there is a link between Orientalism as a concept and Islamophobia. The work by Edward Said and others such as, John Esposito and Muhammad Rashid, will form an important basis of discussion in this research thesis, as it will help us to provide context, showcase early ideological anti-Muslim thinking, and showcase how understanding Islamophobia in its various forms, in particular from political elites, has become an element for not holding accountable high-ranking Conservative politicians and thus perpetuating a permissive space for AMH.

Muslim individuals and organisations make up the most targeted faith group, and the threat of danger from within this permissive space for anti-Muslim hate, particularly from extreme right-wing terrorism (ERWT) is on the rise in the UK with attacks primarily against Muslims having intensified (Crown Prosecution Service. 2023). Since 2017, British security authorities have thwarted several plots driven by extreme right-wing ideologies and individuals, such as Joe Metcalfe who was given a 10-year prison sentence after planning to shoot and kill Muslims at various Mosques in Keighley in 2022 whilst disguising himself as a British armed police officer (Crown Prosecution Service. 2023).

Since 2017, the UK has also experienced three executed ERWT attacks, namely, the attack on Finsbury Park Mosque in 2017 killing one male, a stabbing by a white supremacist in Stanwell, Surrey in 2019, and an arson attack on an immigration centre in Dover in 2022 (ProtectUK, 2023). While the focus of this paper is not directly centred around the far-right, highlighting these events are important to the discussion because it denotes the extent of the threat anti-Muslim sentiments, ideologies and beliefs can pose to British Muslims and wider civil society. In my argument, I will not be discussing acts and plots of terror as a focal-point, nor far right-wing terrorism, but rather I will discuss some of the anti-Muslim hate speech incidents that have occurred within circles of the Conservative party, the lack of accountability, and the impact of how such hate speech has given a 'green light' to external actors, such as right-wing groups.

With physical and verbal violence towards Muslims emanating from those who adhere to anti-Muslim ideology, this raises the questions: is the Conservative party taking AMH seriously, and has such behaviour encouraged individuals and groups to operate and circulate anti-Muslim discrimination, stereotypes and bigotry with a perceived sense of freedom? There is also another overlooked element to this equation, which is the impact of Islamist fundamentalism[2] upon mainstream political circles and external actors, and whether it contributes to a reciprocal cycle of radicalisation and agitated hatred. This is one of the limitations I acknowledge for this research, as Ebner (2021) highlights that reciprocal radicalisation is a "vastly unexplored phenomenon" (Ebner, J. 2021, p.10), however that would be beyond the scope of this paper and would require further investigatory research. Instead, this research attempts to contribute to the focus on the British case of interconnected relationships between anti-Muslim speech by some Conservative politicians and the impact upon a public space which permits circulating Islamophobic discourse and ideology.

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[2] The words 'Islamist' and 'fundamentalist' are joined together here to denote that the term 'Islamist' should not be conflated with extremism. As its linguistic origins referred an a 'adherent of Islam' or an 'expert in Islam'. It was not until the 1970s with the likes of the British-American Zionist, Bernard Lewis and his famous 1976 essay entitled "The Return of Islam" that ideas were propagated that linked 'Islamists', 'pan-Islamism' or simply put 'Muslims', to extremism and violence (Miller, D. 2022). Lewis (1976) also stated about Muslims that in admitting "an entire civilization can have religion as its primary loyalty is too much" (Lewis, B. 1976). I therefore add the suffix 'fundamentalist' or 'extremist' after the term 'Islamist' to avoid an acceptance of a term initiated by Zionist Islamophobes. See Deepa Kumar and the Jerusalem Conference on International Terrorism for further reading.

The Conservative's Islamophobia Definitional Dilemma

The Conservative party's rejection of the APPG definition of Islamophobia that was put forward by the All-Parliamentary Party Group for British Muslims may also be considered an overlooked factor in understanding anti-Muslim hate expressed by some Conservative politicians, as it demonstrates how the dismissal of a formal framework for identifying and addressing anti-Muslim prejudice can enable and normalise discriminatory attitudes and rhetoric within political discourse. Understanding the history of the term 'Islamophobia' and its contested framing provides important context for analysing how some Conservative politicians' positions and sentiments towards British Muslims may be shaped by this institutional resistance to acknowledging and defining anti-Muslim prejudice.

Despite negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims existing throughout history (Pervaz, B., & Asad, T. 2022, p.58), the exact term *Islamophobia* only grew in popularity in the 1990s in the field of social sciences with the Runnymede Trust's study 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All' (Cesari, 2017, cited in Rashid, Iqbal and Tanvir, 2023, p.610), and has gained notable traction in political discourse since. This increase of usage of the term is important because it gives a normalised named label to an age-old hostility towards Islam and Muslims in a time when general racism and prejudice are on the decline, discrimination and hatred against Muslims are on the rise (Rashid, Iqbal and Tanvir, 2023, p.611), and terming this rise of hatred gives clarity to the phenomenon we are discussing.

With the rising Islamophobic tide, the APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group) for British Muslims, an informal cross-party group that has no official status within Parliament but are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords (UK Parliament, 2024), put forward a working definition of Islamophobia in their 2018 report to investigate prejudice, discrimination and hatred against Muslims in the UK (APPG, 2018). They proposed the following definition: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" (Muslim Council of Britain, 2021).

The Conservative party, whilst in government, outright rejected this definition, even before the debate whether to adopt it was held in Parliament, due to claims it needed "further careful consideration" (Siddique, H. 2024). Despite the term Islamophobia growing in usage, a consensus on its definition remains elusive, representing a significant challenge (Bleich, E. 2012, p.180). A challenge in combatting what the APPG describes as a "social evil" (O'Grady, S. 2019). Critics of the APPG's definition proposal, like the Conservative Westminster government, stated various problematic elements needed to be reconsidered, such as the *racism* element and that any definition is required to be clear and capable of practical interpretation across time, without running the risk of harming Muslims (Jenkins, J and Phillips, T, 2018, p.5).

The Conservative MP and recent former leadership contender Robert Jenrick in 2020 firmly opposed adopting the APPG for British Muslims' working definition of Islamophobia. Labour MP Neil Coyle asked the former Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and local Government, Robert Jenrick, in January 2020 what progress had been made in adopting the APPG for British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia. The Secretary responded by stating: "The definition proposed by the APPG is problematic as it is not in line with the Equality Act of 2010 and could also have consequences for freedom of speech." (Parliament. House of Commons, 2021, p.21).

While I acknowledge the concerns for freedom of speech, particularly that the UK possesses freedom of expression rights, such as the Human Rights Act, which outlines the "freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority [Government]" (Human Rights Act 1998). This freedom to express must not contradict British hate crime laws, which recognises five types of hate crime, including religion. If the offender demonstrates hostility based upon religion, or was motivated by hostility based upon religion, then the offender can be prosecuted as committing a hate crime (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024).

Given the advantages of the hate crime law in prosecuting expressions geared towards religious hostility, it does not come without its criticisms,

such as the Law Commission highlighting the lack of clarity in complex or vague instances (Law Commission, 2023). Which I acknowledge there are arguments to be had about the proposed definition, the lack of engaging and offering an alternative, pinpoints to an indication of the Conservatives maintaining a permissive space for anti-Muslim hate. While current hate laws address general incitement based upon religion (and other elements such as race and ethnicity), they do not directly target and address the nuanced and multi-varied nature of anti-Muslim hate, such as the case of Boris Johnson and his "letterbox" comment describing Muslim women who wear the Burqa (BBC, 2018).

Subsequently, one might question the necessity, relevance and importance of adopting a definition of anti-Muslim hate by the Conservative government, given that I have documented that AMH has been recorded according to a framework and the continuous AMH incidents recorded year upon year previously in this paper, see Figure 2. Non-governmental recorded AMH incidents have come from NGOs like Tell MAMA (MAMA an abbreviation for 'Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks'), which operate according to their respective operational definitions of anti-Muslim incidents.

Figure 2: Number of police recorded hate crime offences committed against Muslims in England and Wales 2017/18 to 2023/24
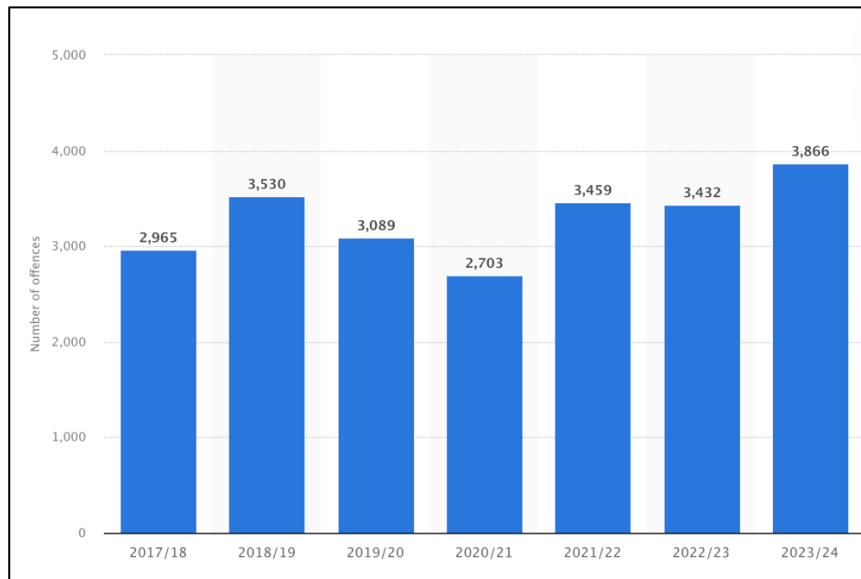
(Source: Statista, 2025).

Tell MAMA consider an AMH incident as: "*any malicious act aimed at Muslims, their material property or Islamic organisations and where there is evidence that the act has anti-Muslim motivation or content, or that the victim was targeted because of their Muslim identity.*" (Tell MAMA). There appears then to be an inconsistency in how Islamophobia/AMH is defined, as it is left to different bodies and organisations to interpret and respond to AMH in differing approaches. Which is why it is important to highlight that the Conservative party is not the only organisation which finds defining Islamophobia problematic.

Despite this, it is striking that the British Conservative party, an elected political party to govern, in this regard has still has not taken any significant action towards developing an alternative definition since they announced they will establish their own process in 2019 (Muslim Council of Britain.

2021, p.7). Refusal to adopt a particular definition, such as the APPG for British Muslims' definition may in discussion become plausible, but the unwillingness to execute action on providing an alternative suggests their lack of desire to take AMH seriously both within Government and across British society. Notwithstanding the previously highlighted anti-Muslim comments by some Conservative politicians.

British politicians opposed to the position of Jenrick, like his fellow Conservative Party member Baroness Warsi emphasised that Islamophobia is "very widespread" across the Conservative party (Kentish, B. 2018), which will be explored further in chapter four regarding specific cases from Conservative politicians. Warsi also emphasised that the first step to tackling anti-Muslim hate, is defining what type of hate British Muslims experience (Muslim Council of Britain. 2021, p.7). For this reason, clarifying the type of hate, tackling the type of hate, and supporting the current hate law legislation, under a unified and adopted definition of Islamophobia by the Conservative government would form a crucial component in addressing and mitigating anti-Muslim hate, sending a signal that they do not give a 'green light' to such discrimination and bigotry.

The absence of a definition of Islamophobia/AMH by the Conservative government matters, because the UK currently operates within the hate crime and hate speech laws, specifically in our case, hostility based on religion, which is the criminal activity part of the act. While defining the

specifics of the hostility towards a Muslim based upon his religion remains a grey area open to contention without a unified and adopted definition of anti-Muslim hate. Undoubtedly, with the presence of contention in understanding what anti-Muslim hate is, this allows proponents of Islamophobia, including Conservative politicians, to utilise it as a loophole in defending their anti-Muslim hate speech. Therefore, supporting my argument of the Conservative's failing to take Islamophobia seriously.

Had the Conservative government attempted to adopt a working definition of anti-Muslim hate, it would contribute to sending a strong politically symbolic message that despite the allegations of anti-Muslim hate speech within the Conservative party, the Tories are serious in working towards closing the space for permissive anti-Muslim hate speech and aiding in better comprehending the many forms and manifestations of discrimination and bigotry targeted towards Muslims. Just like the definition of antisemitism, which has contributed to awareness and educating administrations, politicians, judges, police, teachers, media, and civil society (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2025) on what anti-Jewish discrimination looks like.

This is why an absence of an adopted working definition of anti-Muslim hate, or an attempt for one, by the Conservatives matters in the broader context of the Conservative's contribution to Islamophobia. Because not only does it give an indicator of widespread anti-Muslim bias, but it also

overlooks one of the ways we are able to tackle the many forms and manifestations of AMH. This also includes the opportunity for education, awareness and accurately and consistently track the type of discrimination that is so deeply rooted in British society.

Research Clarification & Concluding Roadmap

For the benefit of this research, I argue that there exists a correlational link between a lack of holding Conservative politicians fully accountable for cases of anti-Muslim hate speech, particularly during the governmental tenure, which produces a symbolic green light for a permissive environment that external actors feel emboldened and effectively sanctioned to perpetrate further instances of anti-Muslim hostility, causes a rise in AMH hate cases reported. Due to the scope constraints of this paper, the analysis will highlight far-right external actors and groups to examine a particular dimension of how Conservative politicians' anti-Muslim rhetoric influences broader societal and political discourse.

I posit throughout my argument that the government of the day sets the political tone and culture across the nation, as the now deputy British Prime Minister, Angel Rayner said in an interview with ITV that "we've got to have standards in public life" (Peston, 2025), and politicians who hold positions of power and influence "have a responsibility to set the culture" (Timan, J. 2025). This follows as in chapter three, I discuss that the Conservative's lack of action and poor upholding of the Nolan Principles in Public Life, sends a broad political signal to anti-Muslim groups and individuals, in particular

of the far-right, that AMH may go undercounted for because the political elites have endorsed the discriminatory speech by allowing it to become mainstream by setting the culture. It is important to acknowledge that those who adhere to certain anti-Muslim or Islamophobic sentiments may never become far-right political entrepreneurs, and to make the claim far-right political activity is a guaranteed result of anti-Muslim hate would be beyond the scope of this research thesis and would require further investigatory exploration.

In summary, this dissertation investigates the relationship between Islamophobic speech uttered by some Conservative politicians (and members of the party) with the impact upon a space whereby anti-Muslim speech is encouraged, promulgated and perpetuated. I examine how this speech has contributed to the rise in recorded anti-Muslim hate cases, and contributed to, and allowed far-right anti-Muslim rhetoric become mainstream through the permissive space of Islamophobia.

I will conduct this investigative research through considering the interplay between Islamophobia, Conservative and parliamentary codes of conduct, far-right anti-Muslim analytical theories and the theoretical framework of Orientalism, which is explored further in chapter two. Thereafter, in chapter three, I will conduct an analysis of current political events which involved Conservative politicians with respect to political standards and the Nolan Principles. I will conclude in chapter four with an analysis of recent political

events which involved Conservative politicians with respect to their comments about Muslims, the interconnected relationships and impact with far-right anti-Muslim individuals.

2   Methodology & Approach

2.1 Orientalism: Understanding Islamophobia & Its Roots

The aim of this research is to investigate two primary themes: i) anti-Muslim speech and accountability by Conservative politicians, and ii) the implications of this speech within a wider permissive space for anti-Muslim hate (AMH), specifically referencing right-wing individuals and groups as examples. The study will address how anti-Muslim speech by Government ministers and Conservative party MPs contributes to the broader landscape of Islamophobia.

This will be done by examining anti-Muslim comments published by Tory MPs, and the response by the Conservative party in holding the alleged offender to account. I will also conduct this research thesis by discussing the wider impact on those who engage in anti-Muslim hate by analysing levels of Islamophobia and reported hate crime with relation to the incident. While acknowledging that anti-Muslim hatred exists across the political spectrum, due to the word constraints of this research paper, I will specifically draw upon examples of how Conservative politicians' rhetoric can potentially legitimise and give a 'green light' to amplifying far-right anti-Muslim narratives. The study will explore how such political discourse

perpetuates a permissive environment where politicians and far-right groups and actors, such as Tommy Robinson and Paul Golding, can exploit and build upon anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by mainstream Conservative politicians such as Boris Johnson, Robert Jenrick and Suella Braverman.

This analysis will be conducted with the aim of demonstrating how addressing problematic anti-Muslim speech from Conservative politicians and implementing the Nolan Principles of public life across the board could serve as a practical step in limiting the growth and influence of anti-Muslim hate and far-right anti-Muslim narratives. Thus, by enriching the academic comprehension of Islamophobia and Conservative political discourse, this chapter aims to elucidate the concept of Orientalism, underscoring its critical role in deciphering some of the background context and backdrop associated with Islamophobia and the promulgation of its speech.

Orientalism in Islamophobia Discourse

In understanding the core roots of Islamophobia, Orientalism as a methodological framework serves as a critical lens to delineate the schism between those antagonistic towards Islam and Muslims, and those who practice Islam. This perspective enriches the study by providing a comprehensive historical and psychological context, which in theory allows us to understand why some may be lenient in challenging Islamophobia from the onset with a broader bias against Muslims. Edward Said defines

Orientalism as a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident", and a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". He suggests that in Western thought, the Orient is often depicted, in contrast to the Occident, as monolithic, backward, and despotic (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.131-132).

The Occident is privileged, whilst the Orient is negated. By way of example in contemporary times, we may consider a white non-Muslim man successfully being invited for a job interview by the hiring company based upon his English-sounding name, while a Muslim being outright rejected before interview, based upon his Muslim-sounding name. Which according to a BBC test study, found that English-sounding names were offered three times as many interviews than an applicant with a Muslim name, despite having the exact same skillset (Adesina, Z., and Marocico, O. 2017).

Said also illustrates Orientalism as a pervasive discourse that is seldom challenged but instead acquires the status of a fixed truth akin to a "historical chronology or geographical location" (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.132). This divide between the Orient and Occident is helpful within the context of this research to describe the divide between the Muslim and the Islamophobe or anti-Muslimist. I use this distinction to understand how the Islamophobe forms opinions and ideas of the Muslim, and whether those opinions formulate and contribute to grievances, in

particular within some non-Muslim communities, solidified by blaming the 'other', which potentially correlates to growing into a far-right anti-Muslim ideological process contributed to by the permissive environment of anti-Muslim hate.

From the angle of the Occident or 'anti-Muslimist', Abbas (2020) begins to explain this 'othering' in the context of Islamophobia and Orientalism by stating that there has been a historical evolution of 'othering' minority groups from the dominant group within a given culture (Abbas, T. 2020, p.4). For example, Muslims and non-Muslims communities in the UK, have many times found themselves in an amplified dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. This social divide and the other aspects of Orientalism as a concept, originates from the famous Palestinian Christian academic, Edward Said, in 1978 (Moxon, K. 2019). It may be argued that the whole concept of Orientalism is outdated and belongs in a time of post-colonialism and breaking ties from former colonising countries. However, Allen (2010), an expert on the topic of contemporary Islamophobia, shows that Orientalism and its discourse remains imperative in the holistic context and study of understanding Islam and Muslims.

Allen (2010) suggests that while traditional Orientalist thinking was very much associated with attributing the orient as "sensual, despotic, backward, promiscuous, irrational and mysterious", it is with the change of geopolitical events, such as the "war on terror" and other conflicts in the

Middle East, that understanding Islam and Muslims are now explained in far more politicised and militarised arenas and contexts (Allen, C. 2010, p.36). Such examples include the anti-Muslim trope of *all Muslims are terrorists*. Which can be seen when news outlets fail to make distinctions between mainstream Muslims and Islam and heretical terrorists, which subsequently may result in non-Muslims perceiving all Muslims, including terrorists which self-identify as Muslim, as one homogenous group (Kaskeleviciute, R., Knupfer, H., & Matthes, J. 2023, p.106).

In this way, we can understand Orientalism as still vitally important as a framework, yet with a much more nuanced and modern approach in contemporary times. Kumar (2017) confirms this and the continued link with anti-Muslim bias and 'othering' by stating that if Orientalism was an element of European colonialism, then Islamophobia is the ideology of 21st Century US-led imperialism. Kumar (2017), like Allen (2010) also confirms that great emphasis should be placed on the link between Islamophobia and Orientalism, and Edward Said's work remains a crucial framework in comprehending anti-Muslim discrimination (Kumar, D. 2017, p.49-50).

In attempts to comprehend this study, the evolution of 'othering' has further intensified the segregation between minority groups from what is perceived as the dominant or mainstream culture, particularly in parts of 'Old Europe' within various Western European nations (Abbas, T. 2020, p.4). The framework by Abbas (2020), Allen (2010) and Kumar (2017)

provides an insight into the new patterns of behaviour formed between the dominant ingroup in the West such as white non-Muslim communities, and minority outgroups such as Muslim communities, and the ever-changing challenges that it brings along with it. Upon further inspection regarding this framework of Orientalism squared with Islamophobia as a theoretical basis for this research study, both concepts share key features.

A conspicuous, albeit general similarity, is the fact that both theories address the non-Western, non-Christian as 'other', such examples can be seen when Britain First, a far-right political party led by Paul Golding, published a video on X (Twitter) of Muslim hikers walking and enjoying the British countryside taking a break to pray. Britain First captioned the video with: "they have to take over the British countryside too. They won't rest until British people can't escape from Islamism" (Britain First, 2025). This anti-Muslim rhetoric from Britain First directly targets Muslims as 'other' by creating a distinction between Muslims and the "British people", which subsequently entails, according to Britain First, that Muslims are not British.

According to Western perceptions, the Orient, or our case the Muslim 'other', is an imagined construct seldom aligning with reality, and heavily influenced by specific geopolitical interests (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137). More recently these geopolitical interests have also been understood as Islam being a threat to Western "civilisation", its "people" and its "values" (Allen, C. 2010, p.36). The foundational premise for these interpretations of the 'other' stem from the presupposition and assumption

of a deep, irreconcilable disparity between the West and the East, often leading to an assertion of Western cultural superiority (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137). For example, as previously discussed the notion that the Orient, and subsequently the Eastern world, is inherently backward and irrational, while the Occident, and at large the Western world, is advanced and rational.

Having considered how the Muslim is referred to as the orient and other, it is also reasonable to look at how non-Muslims may also be included in this othering categorisation, often by mere ignorance. That is to say, can a non-Muslim, who is often a member of the dominant ingroup, be mistaken or depicted as a Muslim and a member of the minority outer group? Subsequently, in these discussions, we often deal not with concrete forms of Islam, but rather with perceptions or representations of Islam, sometimes considered "culturally Islamic" which contribute to the construction of the "self" and the "other" (Sian, K. 2017, p.43). Examples of this include members of the Sikh community who are often mistaken for being Muslims, whether that be due to their biological skin pigmentation, dress, or language. By extension of this misidentification, they are sometimes labelled with sweeping anti-Muslim generalisations such as being labelled a terrorist. Further examples of this include turbaned Sikhs.

Sian (2017) describes Sikh individuals facing this kind of mistaken identity as "Muslim-looking, "apparently Muslim" or the "crypto-Muslim" which has

led to increased numbers of hate crimes against Sikhs by individuals of the far-right white community in so-called revenge attacks in attempts to physically or verbally harm Muslims (Sian, K. 2017, p.43). Therefore, with "Muslim-looking" individuals, like turbaned Sikhs, also being at the receiving end of anti-Muslim attacks, I emphasise the importance of the "culturally Islamic" factor when considering not only the debates about Islamophobic speech from Conservative politicians, but also countering the impact on non-Muslim communities that are harmfully affected by anti-Muslim hate speech.

This understanding by Sian (2017) is similar to the position of Hafez (2018) who suggests that the Muslim other, including those apparently Muslim, are utilised in Islamophobic narratives as a vessel for projecting the deficiencies of the self, which are cast in a negative light (Hafez, F. 2018, pp.215-216). This means that when discussing AMH and the Islamophobic rhetoric that is uttered by some Conservative politicians and far-right political actors, it is not Islam per se that they are discussing, but rather images of Islam that have been conjured up to represent the other. An example of this is the frequently uttered anti-Muslim statement: *not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims*.

Hafez (2018) explains that these utterances inform us more about the representation and images of Muslims, which is circulated by the media, than the actual reality of Islam and Muslims (Hafez, F. 2018, p216). This is

where I would agree in parallel with Hafez and disagree with proponents of traditional Orientalism in understanding AMH. Combining an analysis of Orientalism through the lens of Islamophobia produces a new theoretical approach, a type of neo-Oriental Islamophobia. Unlike the traditional concept of Orientalism, which primarily focuses on historical subjects and includes bigotry and erroneous images of Jewish people, Islamophobia pertains to contemporary issues, consistently stimulates extensive public discourse (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.134) and gives attention more so to the Muslim or the perceived Muslim.

This concept of neo-Orientalism otherwise considered a type of 'contemporary Islamophobia' incorporates various orientalist stereotypes. One prominent example, as highlighted by Heffernan (2016), is the image of the "oppressed Muslim woman," which is used to portray Islamic societies as uncivilised (Heffernan, T. 2016, p.18). Kumar (2012) elaborates on this theme, noting how the narrative of Western intervention to "save" Muslim women from perceived oppression served colonial interests. Kumar (2012) identifies this as part of a broader set of persistent orientalist myths about Islam and Muslims (Kumar, D. 2012, p. 44), which ultimately aided in preserving the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' both on a militaristic and cultural level. This continuous effort to enforce imagery that dehumanises, degrades or perpetuates an inferior culture, continues to shape contemporary anti-Muslim discourse (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.138).

This reinvigoration and modern reinterpretation of Orientalism, in conjunction with Islamophobia, could be examined within the remit of neo-orientalism, as briefly discussed in the previous paragraph. Islamophobia might significantly influence the overarching themes within neo-Orientalism, functioning as a form of cultural racism that aims to *other* Muslims by categorising them based on not just racial but also cultural distinctions such as turbans, headscarves or other visual components. Modood (2019) posits that this kind of racial and cultural alienation, here understood considering Islamophobia, carries elements related to physical appearance or ancestral constituents.

Modood (2019) concedes that while Muslims do not constitute a biological category in and of themselves, it is plausible for an ethno-religious community to become racialised due to *shared language*, such as Arabic, *culture*, such as Islamic traditions, and *religion*, such as Islam. This phenomenon can be evidenced in historical events such as the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims, who were identified as a racial group owing to their shared demarcations (Modood, T. 2019, pp. 76-77). While Arabic was not their shared language, they did share the Bosnian language exclusively, and the cultural and religious aspects, such as men's Islamic hats and women's hijabs, were indeed unique to their identity within their society. These elements used for the process of racialisation and the domination of one cultural people over another underscores the significance of incorporating Orientalism into this study.

In analysing the above discussion, there is an intricate relationship between Orientalism and Islamophobia, and I do accept that adversaries, such as Skenderovic and Späti (2019) assert that the history of Orientalism does not "converge" with Islamophobia, as Orientalism emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century, while Islamophobia emerged more broadly as a concept post 1990s in a new geopolitical context by which is linked to questions surrounding security and mobilisation (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.136).

In the face of such criticism, proponents of the relationship have responded in several ways, and I outline my argument below for why there is an overlap and how the relevance of Orientalism, however small, contributes to our understanding of modern-day Islamophobia, as was confirmed by Allen (2010). In this regard, Orientalism refers to the West's traditional depiction of Eastern cultures as being inherently different and often inferior. Islamophobia, on the other hand, has been described by Abbas (2004) and Zuquete (2008) as a widespread mindset and fear-laden discourse in which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the 'other,' as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners (Bleich, E. 2012, p.181).

While there is a connection between anti-Muslim hate and Orientalism, it is important to consider, and I concede that scholars have pointed out, that it is not a direct or simplistic one. As evidenced above, I contend in parallel

with Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C (2019) there is no absolute consensus amongst academics regarding the precise linkage between the concept of Orientalism, as originally developed by Edward Said, and the modern understanding of Islamophobia, but I do however argue that is has its place, overlaps and connections, albeit not in absolute terms.

Understanding the limitations of this link, was also highlighted by Kalmar (2019), who states that the contribution is useful in so much as it highlights two key elements that are generally found in traditional Orientalist narratives but are largely absent from current Islamophobic discourses. The first of these elements is the portrayal of Jews as 'Oriental' figures, like Muslims.

This kind of categorisation, which groups together and homogenises diverse cultures and religions, is a hallmark of Orientalist thinking but is not typically present in modern Islamophobic narratives, as I also previously conceded. Although, I argue that a modern neo-Orientalist approach, inclusive of Islamophobia, has replaced the initial incorporation of Jews and Muslims as the 'orient' with Muslims and those of mistaken Muslim identity, otherwise described by Sian (2017), as "crypto-Muslims". Such is the case of turbaned Sikhs as previously discussed. The second element of Orientalism which is absent from Islamophobia is the use of the *harem* as a metaphorical symbol of male dominance that is steeped in eroticism (Kalmar, I. 2019, p.181).

This image, which played into Western fantasies and misconceptions about Eastern cultures, is a recurring trope in Orientalist depictions but is not commonly found in Islamophobic narratives, which tend to focus more on perceived threats to the West from Islamic religious beliefs and practices. Such like the perceived threat by some far-right anti-Muslim actors like Tommy Robinson who described Islam as a "disease" and a "threat to our way of life" (Hill, 2013). However, I do accept there are elements and remnants from traditional Orientalist thinking, which may be considered to have transformed from the *harem* into depictions of Muslim women being oppressed by their male relatives and the perceived homogony of men in the Muslim community.

In conclusion, while Orientalism and Islamophobia share some similarities in how they construct and perpetuate an image of the 'other', their relationship is dissimilar and multi-faceted. I do not agree in entirety that Orientalism can be used as an absolute base for constructing an understanding of anti-Muslim hate but do concede its contributions and modern interpretations in the form of neo-orientalism. Perhaps it could be argued that a definition of anti-Orientalism would have covered many of these themes in combatting anti-Muslim hate, but that is a separate discussion.

The anti-Muslim tropes and stereotypes previously discussed which are still present and, in some ways growing in British society (Islamophobia

Response Unit, 2024), in addition to the added complex of the Conservative party's inability to take Islamophobia seriously by not thoroughly applying the Nolan Principles, underscores the importance of continuing scholarly exploration and nuanced understanding of these concepts and their impacts, particularly with reference to Islamophobic hate speech and politicians. In this context, it is crucial to examine how these notions of othering and cultural racialisation exacerbate grievances in the political Islamophobia space and evolve into processes of far-right anti-Muslim hate, that is, to measure somewhat the impact of anti-Muslim speech. It is then also imperative to understand the backdrop of ideas and ideology that anti-Muslim actors and far-right participants withhold to thoroughly understand this impact.

Theorising Radical Anti-Muslim Beliefs

Whilst radical beliefs do not constitute the primary focus of this analysis, it is nonetheless prudent to briefly examine its theoretical framework and approach as an auxiliary consideration. Such examination proves valuable in elucidating how the deployment of Islamophobic speech by certain Conservative politicians and external far-right actors may facilitate and encourage the adoption of radical anti-Muslim prejudices. Whilst manifestations of anti-Muslim hatred can be observed across the political scale, this study specifically provides examples from the far right and their ideology due to two crucial factors.

Firstly, as established in chapter one, far-right movements represent a growing threat to Muslim communities in Britain, with documented increases in both organised activities and incidents of harassment. Secondly, given the Conservative party's position on the centre-right of the political spectrum, any intensification or amplification of ideological positions within the party inherently risks a rightward shift toward more extreme positions, rather than toward leftist or far-left ideological orientations. Therefore, this investigation of potential ideological and rhetorical remarks overlaps between the discourse of some mainstream Conservative party politicians and far-right narratives, which will be thoroughly examined in chapter four.

To comprehend the convergence of anti-Muslim sentiments with far-right ideologies during rightward shifts in Conservative centre-right thinking, it is imperative to examine the far-right's modus operandi and the mechanisms through which anti-Muslim sentiments are assimilated. Moreover, it behoves us to scrutinise the complex variables that facilitate an individual's or collective's trajectory towards the adoption of reductionist anti-Muslim prejudices and stereotypical Islamophobic constructs. With this in mind, the increasing prevalence of Islamophobia in the United Kingdom has coincided with a marked rise in far-right extremism (Crown Prosecution Service. 2023).

Radicalisation in general typically pertains to both the procedures and results of violent extremism, but the definition varies across countries, and it is the procedure and impact towards anti-Muslim far-right ideology that we are concerned with here, not the results of violent extremism as that is beyond the scope available. I refer to 'procedure' here as the process of a VPFR (vulnerable person to the far-right) being exposed to the permissive space of anti-Muslim hate, which I argue has been partially maintained and promulgated by examples of anti-Muslim speech by some Conservative political elites.

I posit that once the VPFR enters this space, they may become vulnerable to internally adopting anti-Muslim biases, stereotypes and tropes. Bailey, G., et al. (2017) sets out that some countries such as the UK, take the "Anglo-Saxon" approach to radicalisation by applying a focus on violence as the main issue of radicalisation, while European counterparts take the "European approach" which concentrates on a radical ideology that could potentially lead to violence, and it is the anti-Muslim radical ideology expressed through speech that concerns this paper. With the evolution in defining radicalisation and extremism in the UK, it is the European approach which has become more dominant and accepted in recent times (Bailey, G., and Edwards, P. 2017, p.258). This aligns with much of the scholarly work post 9/11, which emphasises the "pull" of ideology as the primary factor in adopting radical beliefs (Abbas, T. 2019, pp.98-99). For this reason, academics in the fields of strategic security and social science theory have

referred the process of radicalisation as a procedure by which an individual may come to embed beliefs that justify violence and compel it (Borum, R. 2011, p.8).

These ideologies primarily include Cultural Nationalism, White Nationalism, and White Supremacism. It's common for individuals and groups of the far-right to align with ideas spanning multiple ideological categories (Home Office, 2024). Important to this discussion, however, is to also understand that for some, such as Hedges (2017), radicalisation, whether extreme right-wing terrorism (ERWT) or other, does not possess a "linear pathway" and individuals subscribing to radicalisation follow a trajectory that is "evolving" and "fluid" (Hedges, P. 2017, p.12).

Correspondingly, my argument falls into this line of analysis by suggesting that upholding anti-Muslim sentiments by some Conservative politicians, particularly whilst in government, sets a political tone and contributes to a permissive public space for encouraging anti-Muslim hate speech, which ultimately emboldens groups such as the those on the far-right. This hate speech does not however always provide a pathway to becoming actively engaged as a political actor or becoming radicalised. It is therefore my argument that some Conservative politicians have a track record of anti-Muslim sentiments and bias, and the sentiments expressed have enabled a continuous symbolic green light to a bloated permissive public space for anti-Muslim hate where external actors, such as Tommy Robinson, are also

engaged and contribute to its preservation through political discourse, culture and climate.

Within this space for Islamophobia, we find themes and ideologies such as Cultural Nationalism, White Nationalism, and White Supremacism. Obaidi et al. (2022) have examined in great detail some of the theories underpinning the reasons for anti-Muslim anti-immigrant hate, in particular the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy which has led far-right extremists to propel rhetoric such as a "deliberate attempt" to replace whites with non-white, non-Western immigrants and evidence correlated with case studies by Obaidi et al. (2022) suggest that this perception of replacement is fuelled by discrimination of Muslims, violent desires, and Islamophobia (Obaidi et al. 2022, p.1675).

Advocates of the contentious 'Great Replacement' theory posit that white European populations are undergoing a deliberate process of ethnic and cultural substitution through migration and the expansion of minority communities. Within this discourse, Muslims are frequently identified as particularly incompatible with the cultural norms of majority groups in Western nations, thus being perceived as a significant threat (Davey and Ebner. 2019, p.7). It wasn't until recently that the electoral achievements of right-wing parties had been largely inconsequential, engendering a sense of political disillusionment. This paradigm shifted with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the outcome of which was partially

influenced by adverse narratives surrounding immigration, asylum seekers, and questions pertaining to national political identity (Abbas, 2020, p.5).

The far right's approach to identity politics manifests through a distinct 'us versus them' paradigm, where the process of 'othering' by dominant social ingroups manifests a form of objectification and imagery built upon structural and cultural racism, ethnic nationalism, exclusivity and exceptionalism (Abbas, T. 2020, pp.4-5). This phenomenon intersects notably with parts of anti-Muslim ideology, which Touihri-Mebarek (2023) categorises into three groups defined by their "opposing visions and attitudes towards demographic and social change" (Touihri-Mebarek, D. 2023, pp.2-3). Among the three categories are "white school leavers" or "identity conservatives" who demonstrate an ethnocentric worldview. This perspective consistently frames issues and events of a social and political nature as group identity conflicts, maintaining a strict 'us versus them' separation. Such far-right or 'identity conservative' individuals view increasing demographic social change, particularly on the basis of race, as threats requiring resistance or reversal (Touihri-Mebarek, D. 2023, pp.2-3).

The severity of this perceived 'threat' to Western whites, embodied in the 'great replacement' theory, has had devastating consequences for Muslim communities and broader Western societies. An illustration of this manifested in the Christchurch Mosque attacks, where Brenton Tarrant

murdered over 50 people. Significantly, his pre-attack manifesto, entitled "The Great Replacement", claimed that liberal politicians were deliberately harnessing the extinction of white Westerners through rapid non-white immigration policies. This conspiracy theory, which scholars have traced to Nazi-era literature, promotes the inevitability of a "race war" (Obaidi et al. 2022, p.1676). Some far-right individuals and groups in Britain have recycled this ideology (Serwer, B. 2019), such as Britain First, which will be discussed in chapter four, using it to legitimise anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia in their online and offline activities.

Subsequently to further explain and provide relevant research-backed evidence to support the us v. them divide with reference to Muslims, according to Obaidi et al. (2022) the rise in immigration and ethnic diversity has 'triggered' a feeling of cultural loss and this is manifest by sentiments of a perceived real threat to whites (Obaidi et al. 2022, p.1677). At which point do those susceptible to anti-Muslim hate perceive the 'other' i.e. Muslim to be a threat?

Strabac (2011) demonstrates that throughout the research it is the size of the outgroup which can predict negativity towards the outgroup and at the individual level, research indicates that individuals occupying vulnerable positions within the social stratification system (e.g., those with limited education, low income, or unemployment) exhibit a higher propensity for prejudice towards the outer group, which the identification of whom can be misconstrued as Muslims. Scholars typically attribute these findings to two

primary factors: firstly, apprehension regarding potential competition from minority groups, and secondly, psychological mechanisms such as the projection of personal insecurities and anxieties onto perceived out-groups (Strabac, Z. 2011, p.560-562).

It then may be plausible to assume via comparative analysis that the uneducated, economically deprived, and or the unemployed demographic of the white ingroup are at far greater risk of prejudice towards Muslims, and thus susceptible to radical anti-Muslim hate. Lowe (2020) strongly suggests that identity and belonging, disenfranchisement from political processes, and inequality in employment, education, and society are primary drivers for adopting radical ideas (Lowe, P. 2020, p.31).

Building upon this, we observed the anti-white ideas along with disenfranchisement and marginalisation from the political sphere manifest with white unemployed or lower working-class individuals with the rise of the right-wing political party Reform UK. The party which has been led by Nigel Farage who released a poster with the slogan 'Breaking Point' printed next to a picture of a long line of non-white, non-European-looking refugees. This poster was released only hours before Thomas Mair killed his own constituency MP (Member of Parliament) Jo Cox (Ebner, J. 2021, p.100). With the rise of Reform UK, over 4 million people voted for the party in the 2024 General Election and took 14.3% of the vote share (Francis, S. 2024). The drivers behind this political shift are incredibly

important to be examined, however detailing Reform UK's political rise is beyond the remit of this research.

To make the link however between political marginalisation, economic inequality and anti-Muslim hatred, it is relevant to consider the work of Chris Allen (2010) who helps break down the impact of Islamophobia, and to our discussion the result of not challenging Islamophobia thoroughly in the political sphere into four areas; social, economic, political and cultural. It is the terms 'Muslim' and 'Islam' that have had a colossal, and as Allen (2010) puts it, "possibly irreversible" impact across these multi-varied strata (Allen, C. 2010, p.83).

If we then begin to map out how these terms 'Muslim' and 'Islam' are utilised in a derogatory, discriminatory, and violent practice, Massoumi et al. (2017) helps us to align Allen's (2010) social sectors with social players in the Islamophobia industry. Massoumi et al. (2017) refers to these social players as the 'five pillars of Islamophobia' which are namely; the State, the neoconservative movement, (parts of) the Zionist movement, the counterjihad movement (which includes the far-right), and "elements" of the liberal secular left in tune with feminist movements (Massoumi, N., Mills, T., and Miller, D. 2017, p.4). Therefore, these social players, or pillars of Islamophobia can operate within any of the given social strata, be it political, economic, social, or cultural, and their Islamophobia discourse is dependent upon their role. For example, naturally the State would be a

pillar of Islamophobia within the political sector, but that is not needless to say that their Islamophobic activities could become a cross-section and overlapping within other sectors, such as the cultural or social arenas.

To summarise, this chapter has presented an introduction to the intricate relationship between Orientalism, Islamophobia, and the scholarly works and minor processes of far-right anti-Muslim ideology. By incorporating the framework of Orientalism, and its more modern approaches, we can further analyse the historical and psychological contexts of Islamophobia as a phenomenon, social observation and the 'othering' that is employed by right-wing actors. The theoretical frameworks elucidated in this chapter have underscored the intricate interplay of racial, cultural, socio-economic, and political factors that may contribute to the production of anti-Muslim hate and far-right ideas.

This chapter has also highlighted the critical role of ideological beliefs in this process, providing a counterpoint to the assertion that such beliefs are not necessarily precursors to radicalisation. Through an analysis of the ways in which socio-economic conditions and political culture can serve as catalysts for Islamophobic narratives, this chapter posits that the responsibility and speech of those who set this political culture i.e. Conservative politicians, play a significant role in the permissive space for perpetuating Islamophobic speech. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the urgent need for a more nuanced understanding of Islamophobia, its causes,

and implications for social cohesion and harmony in the UK. As we move forward, the following chapters will delve further into these complexities, offering an analysis of how Islamophobia, the Conservative party and far-right thinking correlate through a permissive space of anti-Muslim hate.

2.2 Data Collection Methods, Research Gaps & Case Selection

The data collection for this study will primarily involve a comprehensive review of the existing literature, including academic articles, books, and reputable online sources. This approach will provide a rich understanding of the complex discourses surrounding the Conservative party, Islamophobia, and its implications on external actors in a permissive space. The research paper will encompass an examination of theoretical perspectives and studies on the subject matter. This will involve an exhaustive exploration of key concepts, theories, and debates in the field of Islamophobia, the roles and responsibilities of politicians, and refences to anti-Muslim far-right actors. In addition, the study will also employ discourse analysis of media reports, public speeches, and report documents to understand the public and political narratives around Islamophobia. The study will also employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) by which focusses on narrative analysis with its social impact upon Islamophobia and British Muslims. The benefit of this approach helps identify social problems and political issues, as opposed to discourse structures that are absent of political context. In addition to this, by using the approach of CDA, it will

help understand how the specific discourse mentioned in this research paper affect confirmation, legitimisation, reproduction and the lack of challenging relations of power dominance within British society (Van Dijk, T. 2015, p.467). While there have been cases of alleged Islamophobic comments from within the Conservative party, this paper does not have the scope to be able to provide a detailed analysis in the form of case studies. However, I have selected examples of key anti-Muslim statements published by Tory MPs to provide context to my discourse analysis.

It's worth noting that the study will also use secondary data analysis. This method involves analysing data that was collected by someone else for a different purpose. The sources of secondary data for this research will include governmental and non-governmental reports, news reports, and statistical data. Whilst the study examines how anti-Muslim speech by some Conservative politicians may correlate to a contribution to promulgating a permissive environment for Islamophobia, I utilise various far-right political actors as examples to demonstrate my argument. Examples of these political entrepreneurs include Tommy Robinson and Paul Golding. I harness their activities to give weight to my research due to their high levels of engagement in anti-Muslim spaces and to understand their impact upon others exposed to such spaces. Similarly, I also utilise political actors that may not be considered far-right radicals in the conventional sense, but played an essential role whilst holding high-ranking office of political power, such as Borris Johnson, Robert Jenrick and Suella Braverman. Primarily

because they held ministerial positions whilst in Government and it is the focus of this research to determine how the British Conservative party has members that utter or publish speech that has impacted and facilitated a political culture which maintains anti-Muslim hate.
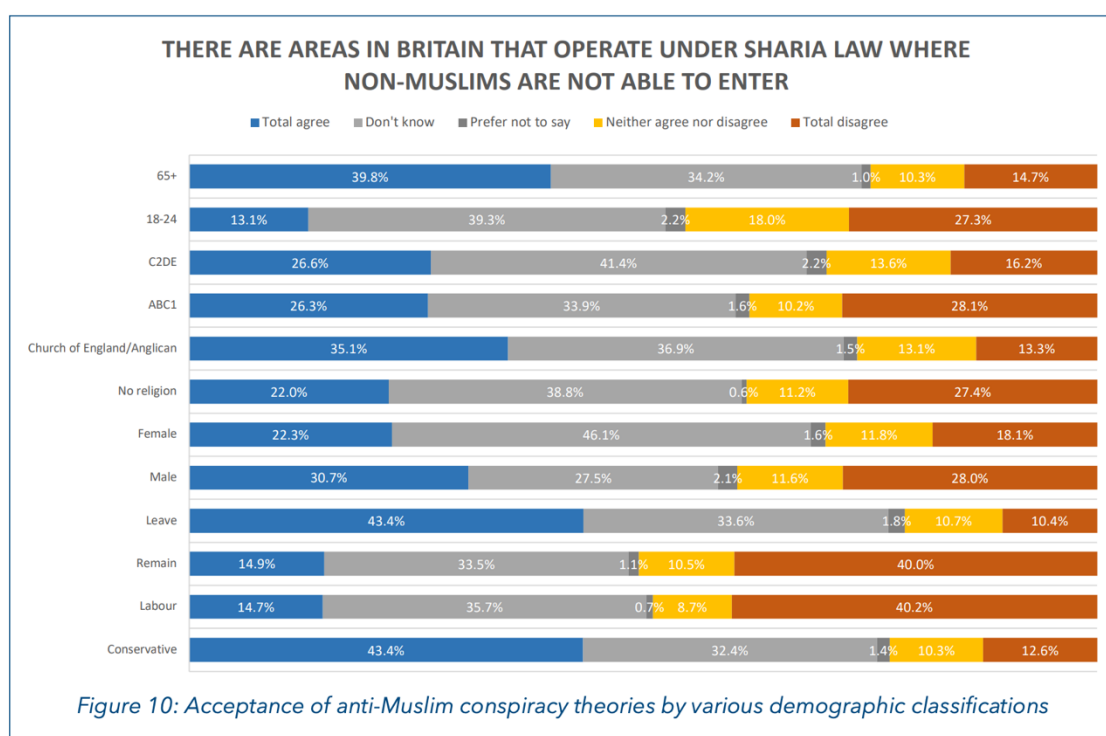
3   Islamophobia, Accountability and the Nolan Principles in Tory Politics

Britain is under threat, the British judicial system is under threat, and British law-making is under threat from a foreign legal system, or so many Conservative Party members believe. A poll conducted by YouGov for the anti-racism anti-fascist group Hope Not Hate, found in 2019 that 43.4% of Conservative members firmly believe that "there are areas in Britain that operate under Sharia law" (Hope Not Hate, 2019), see Figure 3. Whilst these anti-Muslim views were found with Conservative party members and not necessarily Tory politicians, these patterns of fearmongering and the idea of the Islamisation of Britain continue to be present amongst individuals that have held the highest offices of state.

Suella Braverman, the former Conservative British Home Secretary in January 2025 gave a speech to the right-wing Heritage Foundation think-tank in Washington in which she said it would be possible that the UK could "fall into the hands of Muslim fundamentalism" and the British legal system could be "substituted for Sharia Law" (Schofield, K., and Nicholson, K. 2025). Such inflammatory views and speech from members and senior Conservative figures raise crucial questions about the mechanisms of

accountability within the party and how the tolerance of these views create an environment where Islamophobic discourse can flourish unchecked. This pattern of behaviour demands a closer examination of the ethical principles and standards that should govern those who hold public office and engage in British political discourse.

Figure 3: Areas in Britain That Operate Under Shariah Law Survey

Figure 10: Acceptance of anti-Muslim conspiracy theories by various demographic classifications

(Source: Jones, S., and Unsworth, A. 2022, p.29)

The governance of parliamentary democracy rests upon established frameworks of ethical conduct that transcend mere statutory legal requirements. Those who occupy positions of public office, such as Members of Parliament are bound by the Seven Principles of Public Life established by Lord Nolan. The Nolan Principles, also known as the 'Seven Principles of Public Life' codified in 1995 by the Committee on Standards in

Public Life, set out key fundamental policies: 1) selflessness, 2) integrity, 3) objectivity, 4) accountability, 5) openness, 6) honesty, and 7) leadership (UK Government, 2016). The principle of *honesty* insists that politicians should always remain "truthful" and the principle of *leadership* entails "treating others with respect" and challenging "poor behaviour wherever it occurs" (Conservatives, 2023). These values of truth, respect and challenging unacceptable behaviour I argue have failed to be upheld with a number of incidents involving Conservative politicians in recent years, in particular those accused of anti-Muslim hate. The impact of such discriminatory, stereotypical and bigoted speech also calls into question the influence upon wider political discourse and the British public.

It was not until 2011, for the first time ever, a speech was given by a Conservative Cabinet minister on anti-Muslim prejudice. It was given by Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the former co-chairwoman of the Conservative party. Warsi had famously said in her speech that Islamophobia had "passed the dinner table test" (Warsi, S. 2024, p.49). Warsi meant by this, that there are people in the UK who express their bigotry and anti-Muslim hatred openly, but there are also people who express their anti-Muslim biases in a more subtle environment, the middle-class dinner table, whereby Islamophobia has become socially acceptable (Runnymede Trust, 2017). Thirteen years later, anti-Muslim hate still accounts for 39% of all religious hate crimes (Muslim Council of Britain, 2023). That hatred or

discrimination towards Muslims was not only felt across British society, but also at the top levels of Government.

Further inside the Conservative government, individuals had asked Warsi why she made such a public speech about anti-Muslim hate, particularly risking her high-profile position within the party. Warsi had responded with a firm justification that communities are being divided by the "silencing, stigmatising and stereotyping" of British Muslims and this has a "corrosive" impact upon public discourse and opinion, that if not put to an end, could have disastrous results (Warsi, S. 2024, p.52).

Examples of disastrous results include the case of Darren Osbourne, who carried out an anti-Muslim attack in June 2017 when he drove a van into a crowd of Muslims outside Finsbury Park Mosque in north London during Ramadan. The judge at the time, Justice Cheema-Grubb said Osbourne had quickly become radicalised by individuals persistent on spreading anti-Muslim hatred (BBC, 2018). But if we reverse the steps which lead to such horrific incidents, we may be able to understand better how anti-Muslim hate speech initiates and develops from a top-down approach, concluding with, as Warsi puts it an "end point" that will be "catastrophic" (Warsi, S. 2024, p.52).

In 2020, the Conservative MP for Sussex Weald, Nusrat Ghani, also the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department of

Transport, was sacked during a cabinet reshuffle. According to Ghani, she had been told her "Muslimness" was the reason for her dismissal (Open Access Government, 2022) and that her expressions of faith were "raised as an issue" (BBC, 2022). The Conservative chief whip at the time, Mark Spencer, was the individual that identified himself as the one claimed to have said this but rejected the accusations. The Prime Minister and leader of the Party at the time, Boris Johnson, did invite Ghani to make a complaint but Ghani had said Johnson told her that he could "not get involved" (Walker, P. 2023).

This was an initial outright failure for Johnson and by extension the Conservative party, to take seriously claims of anti-Muslim hate and reflects a lack of consideration to upholding the standards of the Nolan Principles, in particular "challenging poor behaviour wherever it occurs" (Conservatives, 2023). Considering Johnson's previous track record with anti-Muslim comments discussed earlier in this paper, in addition to when he said fear of Islam "seems a natural reaction" to any non-Muslim reading the Qur'an (Choudhury, R. 2021), it is no surprise Johnson would not involve himself with serious allegations of Islamophobia.

By way of balance, Johnson did write to Ghani, albeit nine days after Ghani raised the incident with the Prime Minister, expressing his "serious concern" and invited her to submit a formal internal complaint to the Conservative Party (Culbertson, A. 2022). Upon the incident being made public, Baroness

Warsi said that Ghani should have "never been asked" to submit her complaint to the Conservative Party, as the allegations occurred in Downing Street, whilst working for the Government, and not in Conservative headquarters (BBC, 2022). Ghani also echoed similar sentiments to Warsi, by stating that she had already "pointed out", that it was not appropriate for an incident that occurred whilst on government business to be dealt with as an internal complaint (Culbertson, A. 2022).

Johnson's prompting of Ghani to submit a simple complaint, rather than Johnson taking it upon himself as leader of the Conservative party to instigate an inquiry, was never taken up by Ghani as previously stated, as she felt it was not appropriate for such a severe matter (Walker, P. 2023). It is questionable as to why Nusrat Ghani, who became the first-ever Muslim woman to speak as a minister from the despatch box in the House of Commons (Powell, R. 2022), something the Conservatives should take pride in, would not be afforded the decency and respect to lodge an inquiry in line with the Nolan Principles governing politicians to adhere to challenging unacceptable behaviour. It would not only have assured Ghani that she was taken seriously with her claims but also serve as politically symbolic action that the Conservatives are finally taking Islamophobia within the party seriously. Despite these criticisms of Johnson for not taking lead, refusing to "get involved" (Walker, P. 2023) and not ordering an inquiry, one may question why Ghani did not submit a complaint regardless in the case that an inquiry was not going to be conducted? Ghani's claims

that a simple complaint would "not be appropriate" (Culbertson, A. 2022), and refusing to submit a complaint may have raised further doubt about her initial claims of Islamophobic hate speech. The answer to this may be found in a lack of trust and assurance with the Conservative party's complaint procedures.

In December 2019, a year prior to Ghani's sacking, the Conservative Party faced several high-profile allegations of discrimination, including allegations of Islamophobia. This led to the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) submitting a formal complaint to the European Human Rights Council (EHRC) in May of that year (Muslim Council of Britain, 2019. The allegations also included wider instances such as former Conservative Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport Karl McCartney, a government post ironically also held by Nusrat Ghani. McCartney had shared posts containing anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic material from supporters of the former far-right English Defence League leader Tommy Robinson (BBC, 2019). Incidents such as these, MCB states, contributed to a "toxic culture" within the Party which made Muslims feel unwelcome (Forsyth, A. 2020). This unwelcoming sentiment was expressed further with Ghani who claims that she had been warned that if she raised the incident of Islamophobia she alleges to have occurred, she would be "ostracised" by her Conservative colleagues and received threats that her career would be "destroyed" (Middle East Eye, 2024).

One could argue that this threat to Ghani to marginalise her if she were to expose and raise her experience of anti-Muslim hate feeds into the theoretical literature approach to Orientalism and Islamophobia. Ghani's experience for expressions of Muslimness alludes into what Skenderovic and Späti (2019) describe as a form of cultural superiority, whereby anything which perceptually is seen as Islamic must be removed as it is inferior and 'other' (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137). Particularly as Ghani was told by the Conservative whip that her status as a Muslim woman minister was "making colleagues feel uncomfortable" (Cullbertson, A. 2022).

In focussing on accountability and influence in this chapter, Johnson's initial advise to Ghani to submit a complaint to the Conservative Party (Culbertson, A. 2022) had appeared to have changed course, after it was not until two years later when Ghani was initially dismissed for her alleged expression of Muslimness, Boris Johnson was facing political pressure to resign as Prime Minister with key investigative reports set to be released, including the renowned Sue Gray report, assessing gatherings on government premises during the 2019 coronavirus lockdown restrictions. It was only then in 2022, in attempts to claw back credibility, Johnson ordered an inquiry into Islamophobia within the Conservative party (Kuenssberg, L. 2022). This may explain why Johnson waited two years to take authoritative and efficient action on a serious claim of discrimination

against a British Muslim cabinet minister and other alleged claims of anti-Muslim hate within the party.

The matter at hand is not only the lack of decisive and effective action of a Prime Minister within Government, but the imagery, symbolic nature and setting of a political tone it produces. To a further extent this symbolic nature could produce individuals within private and public sectors, companies and organisations replicating Johnson's behaviour and considering it acceptable to act out such dismissal of anti-Muslim hate claims. As Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. (2024) highlight that forming social norms serve as key determinants in shaping people's mindsets and actions. When individuals are exposed to collective values, their biased perspectives tend to align with those of the group. Furthermore, the endorsement of shared values and community disapproval work together to diminish discriminatory conduct (Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. 2024, p.1165).

In line with this, sanctioning such anti-Muslim behaviour with effective and decisive action by Johnson may have served as a precursor to the contribution of closing a permissive environment for Islamophobia, whether politically, symbolically or other, as opposed to inaction and an illustrative green light for such behaviour. Boris Johnson's lack of taking Islamophobia seriously within the Conservative party and failing to challenge those who engage in AMH immediately, especially whilst being at the very top of the political hierarchy, in addition to his own comments about Islam and

Muslims, as discussed in the Introduction, such as claiming reading the Qur'an would generate a fear of Islam which "seems a natural reaction" (Choudhury, R. 2021) can be encapsulated and summarised by a wider comment by Baroness Warsi who said, "those in power have failed British Muslims because I have seen it first-hand" (Warsi, S. 2024, p.52).

In further evidencing my argument, I turn to the wake of yet another alleged Islamophobic incident and a lack in accountable and decisive action involving Johnson's second successor Rishi Sunak and ex-Conservative MP Lee Anderson. Anderson, during an interview with GB News in February 2024, claimed that "Islamists have got control of Khan" and that Khan had "given away" London to his "mates" (Courea, E. 2024). In referencing the Nolan Principles, I argue Anderson's claims in this incident have i) no truth, ii) lacked respect for London's first Muslim mayor in the form of political leadership, and iii) lacked a thorough challenge from the elite members of the Conservative party i.e. Rishi Sunak towards Anderson and his comments. This ultimately contributed to this permissive arena for anti-Muslim hate. In effect, I will demonstrate how Lee Anderson, a Conservative Member of Parliament, publicly accusing Sadiq Khan of being controlled by Islamists was a breach of the Nolan Principles, and the action taken by his superior Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister fell short in in this incident to avoid becoming what I previously mentioned in the words of Baroness Warsi as "those in power" who have "failed British Muslims" (Warsi, S. 2024, p.52).

It is important to note that as this point in the discussion, I will not be concerned with whether Anderson's comments should be judged and concluded as anti-Muslim hate, as this will be analysed in the following chapter. At this point in the thesis, the focus is solely on the accountability and action taken against those accused of anti-Muslim speech. With this in consideration, the leadership response from the Conservative party in relation to Anderson followed a familiar pattern as previously mentioned with Boris Johnson vis-à-vis Nusrat Ghani MP: initial silence, followed by carefully worded statements about 'reviewing the matter', concluding in a vague ending without any anti-Muslim hate charge. This cycle of controversy and contained response exemplifies the permissive space within which anti-Muslim sentiment has operated in Conservative party politics - a space shaped by complex interactions between parliamentary influence, public accountability, and institutional tolerance.

Thereafter, in reviewing Lee Anderson's comments about London Mayor Sadiq Khan, accusing him of being controlled by "Islamists" and giving away London to his "mates" (Courea, E. 2024), we first need to analyse whether Anderson abided by the Nolan principle of *honesty* which emphasises that politicians should always remain "truthful" (Conservatives, 2023).What truth, if any, was there to the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, being controlled by Islamists? In addition to this, we must consider what impact his comments had on the public space in relation to AMH, including his constituents for whom he was elected to represent.

In the interest of accuracy and transparency, it is necessary to cite Lee Anderson's precise remarks concerning Sir Sadiq Khan, which were as follows: "He's given our capital city away to his mates," and "I don't actually believe that the Islamists have got control of our country, but what I do believe is they've got control of Khan, and they've got control of London" (Courea, E. 2024). These assertions, specifically the allegation that "Islamists" exert control over Mr. Khan, were made without the presentation of any substantiating evidence or even a minimally credible basis in fact. Anderson's claims are particularly naïve as Sadiq Khan receives special protection from up to fifteen police officers due to death threats *from* Islamist extremists. Sir Khan's established history of publicly denouncing Islamist extremist terrorism (Dodd, V. 2024) serves to further undermine the credibility of Lee Anderson's assertions, demonstrating that such claims are not only factually unsupported but also wholly devoid of merit.

In light of the previously mentioned Nolan principles, which serve as the ethical foundation for conduct in public office and are particularly pertinent when evaluating potentially harmful or discriminatory public statements, and in this case an allegation of anti-Muslim hate, it is necessary to assess whether Lee Anderson's comments conform with these standards. To do so, we must first consider the explanation and justification he has offered in response to widespread criticism. In an interview with GB News, Anderson asserted: "I didn't attack him because he's a Muslim or because

of his religion" followed by "the protesters last week, the Islamists, they're out controlling the streets" referring to pro-Palestine protesters (The Guardian, 2024). This declaration constitutes his primary defence and must be weighed against both the content and context of his original statements.

Although the primary subject of this discussion does not pertain directly to the remarks made by Lee Anderson with regard to his characterisation of protestors in London as "Islamists" (The Guardian, 2024), a term frequently employed in the media to denote to individuals advocating for establishing socio-political Islamic fundamentalism (NPR, 2025), such commentary nonetheless exemplifies a pattern of rhetoric by Anderson that may reasonably be construed as misleading, uninformed, and demonstrably inconsistent public expressions. As was widely reported by both reputable media outlets and the Metropolitan Police Service of London that the protests in question drew an attendance of "up to 100,000" individuals (Jill Lawless, 2023). Considering this, one must question, in line with the assertion made by Anderson—that if these individuals are to be collectively characterised as "Islamists" (The Guardian, 2024), is it then his contention that approximately 100,000 individuals present on the streets of London were active proponents of Islamic fundamentalism? Such a proposition appears both implausible and contributes to Anderson's pattern of uninformed and misleading public speech.

Following Anderson's assertion in a February 2024 interview with GB News, claiming that Sadiq Khan, the London Mayor is "controlled by Islamists" (The Guardian, 2024), appears not only to lack evidential support with reference to the Nolan principle of *honesty* (UK Government, 2016), but also significantly breaches the principle of *objectivity*. Which entails holders of public office to "act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias" (UK Government, 2016). Anderson's unsupported claims appear to promote unfair stereotypes that associate a democratically elected Muslim official, Sadiq Khan, with extremist links. Particularly when Labour's Shadow Exports Minister Tan Dhesi described Sadiq Khan as having "done so much to foster community cohesion and tackle hate crime" (Courea, E. 2024)

Furthermore, Lee Anderson's comments linking Sadiq Khan, who identifies as a Muslim, with Islamist extremism without any evidence, invokes an Orientalist framework which conflates and perceives all Muslims, including terrorists which self-identify as Muslim as one homogenous group (Kaskeleviciute, R., Knupfer, H., & Matthes, J. 2023, p.106). It also contributes to perpetuating dangerous and discriminatory tropes linking Muslims with violence. Similar tropes include 'not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims'. Hafez (2018) explains that such tropes construct, perpetuate and contribute to certain representations of Muslim communities more than the authentic experiences, beliefs, and practices of Muslims and Islam.

These representations frequently align with predetermined narratives and biases rather than offering an authentic portrayal of the diverse realities of Muslim experiences and religious practices (Hafez, 2018, p. 216). Furthermore, the remarks by Lee Anderson directed towards the London Mayor exemplify Kumar's (2012) assertion regarding the Islamic-Orientalist framework, wherein Muslims are characterised as inherently violent and "predisposed" to violence (Kumar, 2012, p. 26). Additionally, questioning Muslims' commitment to democratic principles (Skenderovic & Späti, 2019, p. 138) is reflected in Anderson's implication that Khan, as an elected official, is influenced by directives from Islamist extremists. Consequently, Anderson's rhetoric demonstrates not only a deviation from the Nolan principle of *objectivity* but also contributed directly to a social and political climate where Islamophobic attitudes have become increasingly normalised. Which was highlighted by Sadiq Khan himself, who said in an interview after the incident with LBC's James O'Brien, what Anderson did was "articulate in a few sentences all those tropes" (LBC, 2024).

Having established the orientalist undertones and breaches of Nolan Principles in Lee Anderson's original remarks, it is now essential to further examine his subsequent defence offered during an interview with Channel 4 News, as well as the institutional response from Conservative leader and the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. Anderson's justification of his comments provides further insight into the broader patterns of

accountability, leadership, and the political permissibility of anti-Muslim rhetoric within the Conservative party.

During an interview with Channel 4 News on the 27th of February 2024, two days after Anderson made his initial attack on Sadiq Khan on GB News, Lee Anderson refused to apologise for his words. When questioned about his statements, he replied "it's the media that are trying to paint this picture that I'm some sort of Islamophobe or racist, and I'm not", he then followed up with admitting that his language "might have been a little bit clumsy". But when pressed on who is controlling Sadiq Khan, he replied with the point that he was trying to make that "Mayor Khan has not control of the streets of London" (Channel 4 News, 2024). That is a very different statement to the accusation he initially made effectively linking Sadiq Khan with being an agent of Islamist extremists. This line of defence ignored the broader context and implications of his language. It was a transparent attempt to sidestep accountability, and his words echoed a pattern of scapegoating that's become too familiar in British politics.

In an effort to substantiate his remarks, Lee Anderson asserted that "dozens" of Conservative Members of Parliament had contacted him to affirm that he had "done nothing wrong" (Channel 4 News). However, despite Anderson's further attempts at justification, several prominent Conservative figures, including Oliver Dowden, former Deputy Prime Minister; Mark Harper, former Transport Secretary; Rachel Maclean, former

Conservative Deputy Chair; Michael Tomlinson, former Minister for Illegal Immigration (LBC, 2024); and former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, publicly declared that Anderson's comments "were wrong" (The Independent, 2024). The contradictory nature of these responses within the Conservative party reflects a deeper ideological and ethical division concerning accountability and the standards governing public discourse. While Anderson's insistence that "dozens" of Conservative MPs privately supported him (Channel 4 News, 2024) remains unverifiable, the public condemnation from senior figures—including former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak highlights that Lee Anderson's rhetoric towards Sadiq Khan was recognised internally as ethically problematic.

With the Nolan principle of *leadership* in mind, which encompasses: "challenging poor behaviour wherever it occurs" (UK Government, 2016), it is also important to the discussion to consider the response by the Conservative party, including the then Conservative leader and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. In the interests of providing a balanced account and analysis, it should be acknowledged that the Conservative party did not remain passive in their response to the incident involving Lee Anderson. After Lee Anderson made his initial comments, twenty-four hours later, Sadiq Khan had responded by describing Anderson's comments as "pouring fuel on the fire of anti-Muslim hatred" (Mackintosh, T. 2024). Shortly after Khan's response, Anderson was requested to apologise by the Conservative party but refused. Thereafter Simon Hart, spokesperson for the

Conservative Chief Whip had announced that due to Anderson's "refusal to apologise", the Conservative whip had "been suspended" from Lee Anderson MP (Mackintosh, T. 2024).

While credit must be given to Rishi Sunak for removing the whip and suspending Lee Anderson from the Conservative party, it is imperative to highlight that this disciplinary decision was not taken as a direct consequence of Anderson's comments linking London's democratically-elected Muslim Mayor, Sadiq Khan, with "Islamists" (GB News, 2024), but rather as a reactionary response for Anderson refusing to apologise when requested (BBC News, 2024). This action appears to have been more about enforcing party rules and procedures in order to show preservation of authority and demonstrate consequences for stepping out of line than taking a real stand against AMH. Rather than addressing anti-Muslim tropes and speech within their ranks head-on, the Conservative leadership, in this instance under Rishi Sunak, appears to reveal a deeper reluctance and avoided the issue, focusing instead on maintaining party discipline.

After Anderson's public comments and growing criticism, Sunak released a statement acknowledging and describing the criticism of Sadiq Khan as "wrong" (The Independent, 2024). However, as discussed previously, the failure to specify what precisely was wrong raises significant concerns about what Sunak believes, and a wider discussion about what is acceptable speech by Conservative politicians, and politicians on a broader level in the

public sphere. Sunak, in an interview with Sky News in February 2024, failed to clarify, when questioned twice in the same interview, whether Anderson's comments were Islamophobic. Rather, Sunak insisted the comments were simply "wrong" and "unacceptable" (Sky News, 2024).

Sunak's failure in clarifying whether Anderson's comments were factually inaccurate, morally reprehensible, or politically inappropriate permitted considerable ambiguity to remain. Sunak, in the same interview, also contradicted his Chief Whip's spokesperson who said that Anderson had the whip withdrawn due to his "refusal to apologise" (Mackintosh, T. 2024), while Sunak insisted the whip was suspended from Anderson because his comments "were unacceptable" (Sky News, 2024). Not only was Lee Anderson's criticism of Sadiq Khan left ambiguous as to whether they constituted anti-Muslim hate, but another example of ambiguity within the Tory party as to why Anderson was suspended. A pattern of ambiguity, contradiction and a concerning environment for British Muslims.

This rhetorical vagueness permits multiple interpretations: for some, it may imply a rejection of Anderson's factual assertion; for others, it may suggest a mild critique of tone or political judgement. What it definitively does not do, is publicly and unequivocally denounce the comments as Islamophobic or as constituting anti-Muslim hate. Just as Sunak was also interviewed by Radio York, whereby when asked if the Conservative party has a problem with Muslims, he responded with "no, of course it doesn't" (Soussi, A.

2024). However, Sunak's dealing with Anderson demonstrates that the disciplinary outcome, suspension for refusing to apologise, rather than for the actual comments against Sadiq Khan, exemplifies behaviour that prioritises party order over moral clarity and manifests shortcomings of leadership. It neglects to prioritise offering reassurance to British Muslims, including Sadiq Khan, who constitute the most frequently targeted faith group in the United Kingdom (Muslim Council of Britain, 2023), and who are increasingly subjected to a growing climate of anti-Muslim hostility (Islamophobia Response Unit, 2024).

When assessed against the Nolan Principles of Public Life, the shortcomings of this response become even more apparent. When assessed against the fourth Nolan Principle- *accountability*, which entails public officials "must be accountable" and answerable "for their decisions" and willing to justify their actions through submitting "themselves to the scrutiny necessary" (UK Government, 2016). Sunak's rejection to name and condemn Lee Anderson's comments also undermine this essential principle for public office. Sunak's unwillingness to take a clear moral stance on Anderson's comments left the public without a proper understanding of why disciplinary action was taken, making it harder to hold him and his party accountable.

This view was emboldened by leader of the opposition, Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, who at the time described Anderson's comments as "Islamophobia" and Rishi Sunak should "call it out for what it is" (The

Independent, 2024). This critique from Sir Keir Starmer highlighted the further perpetuated sentiments of weakness in terms of leadership from Rishi Sunak. Sir Sadiq Khan also affirmed this in his own words, in an interview with LBC, who described the response from Rishi Sunak as "weak" (LBC, 2024). This principle of *leadership* was clearly lacking from the former Prime Minister, which ultimately sits as the seventh principle, from the Nolan Principles (UK Government, 2016).

While Sunak and senior figures from the Conservative party publicly denounced Lee Anderson's comments, they refused to call it out as Islamophobic or anti-Muslim hatred. Many of them avoided and deflected the question. This pattern of approach, refusing to name Lee Anderson's comments as Islamophobic, offer an alternative description, or even failing to provide an explanation as to why the comments were what many described as "wrong" were seen to be replicated across the board with other ministers. Examples include one incident involving former Illegal Immigration minister, Michael Tomlinson. During an interview with Nick Ferrari on LBC, Tomlinson refused to acknowledge why Anderson's comments were wrong *nine times*. The presenter of the show, Nick Ferrari, eventually curtailed the interview due to the former Illegal Immigration minister's inability to answer the question (LBC, 2024). Sunak's weak stance was not only inadequate enough for the Nolan principles of leadership, but his behaviour and approach also influenced his ministers, which was described by Sadiq Khan as "like they are complicit in this

racism" (Sky News, 2024) and thus reflected in a continued weak and unacceptable approach to tackling anti-Muslim sentiments throughout the Conservative party.

This influence continued from Anderson himself with his constituents. Especially after residents in Anderson's constituency were interviewed by various media outlets at the time, including Talk TV, which when quizzed on Anderson's comments about Sadiq Khan, one resident replied, "He's telling the truth, and that's all you can do in this world" and another constituent said, "he only says what a lot of people think" (Talk TV, 2024). Such views from Lee Anderson's own constituents further shed light on a complex and troubling combination of political representation, far-right anti-Muslim rhetoric and the normalisation and green signalling of Islamophobic speech in the permissive public space. Although it is commonly understood that Members of Parliament are to reflect the views of their constituency, there is also a responsibility, set out within the Nolan Principles, to withhold responsibility, leadership, truth and objectivity. In particular when harmful and divisive anti-Muslim tropes and stereotypes are echoed within the public space.

This is particularly true when Patrik Hermansson, a senior researcher at Hope Not Hate, observed that Sadiq Khan's Muslim identity "makes him a target that people project their Islamophobic conspiracy theories on". He further remarked that "there is a wider anti-migrant and Islamophobic

narrative and conspiracy theory that London is becoming a Muslim majority city and that this is intentionally accelerated by Khan". These Islamophobic narratives also come after new data by the Greater London Authority shows Sir Sadiq Khan had faced double the amount of Islamophobic social media posts in the past year, from 12,000 posts in 2024, up to 25,000 posts in 2025 (Savage, M. 2025).

In summary, this shows a troubling pattern. Instead of taking a strong stand against anti-Muslim sentiment within its own ranks, Sunak's Conservative Party seems more focused on damage control than addressing the real problem. While suspending Anderson might have ticked the box for party discipline, it fell short of the basic ethical standards expected in Parliament. This doesn't just affect the party internally – it damages public faith in how Parliament handles ethical issues and contributes harmful and dangerous stereotypes within anti-Muslim discourse towards a wider space of Islamophobic speech.

This failure is not isolated. As previously discussed, it follows a continued precedent set under Boris Johnson's premiership as Prime Minister, where allegations of anti-Muslim hate involving the MP, Nusrat Ghani, were initially met with a simple complaint and only later addressed through a vague and protracted inquiry process. Johnson's own record is further tarnished by his continued use of Islamophobic language, most infamously

describing Muslim women wearing the niqab as "letterboxes" and "bank robbers" (BBC, 2018).

Collectively taken, the above cases demonstrate a systemic reluctance within the party to take seriously anti-Muslim hate. When high-profile figures are permitted to make or tolerate discriminatory statements without sustained challenge or moral accountability, it contributes to a permissive public space in which Islamophobic speech becomes normalised. Which reflects a deeper failing to recognise and respond to anti-Muslim prejudice. Ultimately, it can be summed up by the words of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who stated that the lack of condemnation from the Conservative Party suggests that "anti-Muslim racism" is tolerated "by the party" (Cheng-Morris, 2024).

4   Conservative Anti-Muslim Speech: Analysis and Impact

Anti-Muslim hate continues to spread throughout different sections of British society with thousands of reports recorded of abusive offences targeting British Muslims (Home Office, 2023). Anti-Muslim speech is not only found on the streets of Britain, or adhered to by periphery groups and individuals but has been found to have entered mainstream politics and echoed by politicians (Ebner, J. 2024, p. 16). Against this backdrop the Conservative party's commissioning of the Singh Investigation, led by Professor Swaran Singh in 2021, was prompted by a need to address the

growing allegations of AMH within its own ranks (The Conservative Party, 2021), particularly after the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in 2018, publicly called for an independent inquiry of Islamophobia within the Conservative party (Este, J. 2021).

The investigation aimed to examine allegations of discriminatory behaviour, with a specific focus on anti-Muslim sentiments from local and national Conservatives and evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation's internal procedures for addressing complaints, such like the previously discussed case of Nusrat Ghani MP. It is within this premise that I discuss in this chapter cases of alleged anti-Muslim hate speech from Conservative politicians and the impact their words have on a permissive public space for Islamophobia.

The investigative report by Professor Singh found that 68% of all recorded complaints in CCHQ (Conservative Campaign Headquarters) were directly in relation to anti-Muslim discrimination (The Conservative Party. 2021, p.14), resulting in Islamophobic incidents making up the majority of all complaints within the party. Drawing on Professor Singh's report, this chapter analyses specific instances of alleged anti-Muslim hate speech by Conservative politicians and examines its societal impact through the theoretical lenses of neo-Orientalism and Islamophobia discourse. The discussion will demonstrate how political rhetoric embedded with prejudicial

remarks and Islamophobic sentiments can give a symbolic green light and amplify anti-Muslim hostility in the broader public sphere.

I have already discussed several high-profile cases earlier in this paper, including the widely publicised case of Boris Johnson and his remarks about some Muslim women referring them to "letter boxes" and "bank robbers" (BBC, 2018). In addition to the case of Nusrat Ghani and her alleged dismissal for her "Muslimness" (Open Access Government, 2022). These instances of anti-Muslim hate by Conservative politicians, and the subsequent lack of swift and decisive action, highlights the lasting impact and consequences for inciteful anti-Muslim speech within the public space, which was briefly discussed in the introductory chapter. It also leads to a perception that the Conservative party has a problem with tolerating anti-Muslim language within mainstream politics.
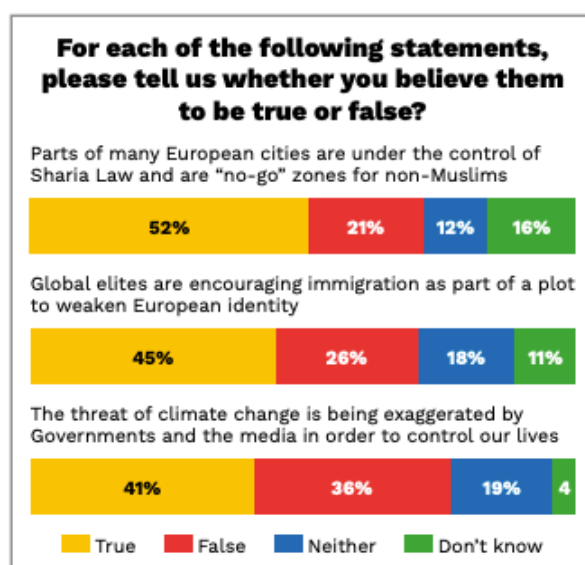
In August 2024, Robert Jenrick MP, the former Immigration Minister, Home Office Minister and Tory leadership candidate in an interview with Sky News criticised the police by making accusations that they have been treating far-right marches and violence more harshly than other protests, i.e. pro-Palestine marches (Elgot, J. 2024). Jenrick said that it was "quite wrong" that someone could "shout Allahu akbar" on the streets of London and "not be immediately arrested" (Sky News, 2024). The phrase "Allahu akbar" meaning 'God is the greatest' in Arabic, can be found to be one of the most widely used phrases by Muslims. Said during various positions of prayer,

mentioned when leaving the home, uttered during times of joy or sorrow, proclaimed during the *athan* (call to prayer) and many more instances for Muslims to praise God and remind themselves that God is greater than everything in existence (Yaqeen, 2024).

Jenrick continued to criticise the attitude of the police for not arresting people who say 'Allahu akbar' as "wrong" and he will "always call out the police for it" (Elgot, J. 2024). Proclaiming 'God is great', whether in English, Arabic or any other language can never be in a liberal democracy 'wrong', whether in the home or in public society. Jenrick's comments highlight a textbook case of anti-Muslim hate speech which overlaps with orientalist frameworks. This is so, because Jenrick's remarks on mainstream television allude to, and symbolically transform an everyday common phrase uttered by billions of Muslims across the world into a stigmatised marker of criminality and extremist behaviour.

Robert Jenrick's comments came against a backdrop when already 52% of Conservative members when polled, believed that many European cities were "under the control" of Sharia Law with "no-go zones" for those who are not Muslim, while 16% polled, 'did not know' (Hope Not Hate, 2024), see Figure 4. This indicates the anti-Muslim sentiments and contempt for British Muslims, that firmly believe Muslims are in control of specific cities within the UK and self-govern according to other than UK law.

Figure 4: Nick Lowles surveys Conservative Party Members

For each of the following statements, please tell us whether you believe them to be true or false?

Parts of many European cities are under the control of Sharia Law and are "no-go" zones for non-Muslims

| True 52% | False 21% | Neither 12% | Don't know 16% |

Global elites are encouraging immigration as part of a plot to weaken European identity

| True 45% | False 26% | Neither 18% | Don't know 11% |

The threat of climate change is being exaggerated by Governments and the media in order to control our lives

| True 41% | False 36% | Neither 19% | 4 |

Legend: True (yellow) False (red) Neither (blue) Don't know (green)

(Source: Hope Not Hate. 2024, p.36).

Robert Jenrick's comments are an extension of this. Jenrick's suggestion that using common Arabic religious expressions praising God should be grounds for arrest unfairly criminalises the entire Muslim community. This rhetoric is especially harmful as it not only makes sweeping generalisations about British Muslims but also promotes the narrative that Islam itself poses a threat to British society. This perspective endangers both Muslims and those mistakenly perceived as Muslim, (otherwise known as crypto-Muslims, see chapter one) treating them all as inherently suspicious (Jackson, L. p.99). This rhetoric from Jenrick perpetuates Islamophobic attitudes and further advances political influence of anti-Muslim politics. By shifting the narrative to considering normative religious practices as arrestable offences opens the doors to legislation and security measures that impact the safety, security and civil liberties of mainstream British Muslims (Esposito, J. 2019, p.29).

Jenrick was not short of criticism for his remarks, as Afzal Khan, a Labour MP, criticised Jenrick's comments by stating "another day, another senior Tory being Islamophobic" (Francis, S. 2024) and the Muslim Council of Britain concluded that the former Immigration minister's speech "only goes to show institutional Islamophobia is alive and well in the Conservative party" (Muslim Council of Britain, 2024). In Jenrick's defence, he later posted on Twitter (X) that the phrase *Allahu akbar* is "spoken peacefully and spiritually by millions of British Muslims in their daily lives", however went on to write that "aggressive chanting" is an "offence under Section 4 and 5 of the Public Order Act." (Jenrick, R. 2024).

I then argue, if Jenrick was so concerned about current public order legislation across the board, he would have said aggressive chanting by anybody in public could be considered an offence, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Jenrick rather decided to single-out British Muslims, and weaponise a phrase that is used by billions of Muslims across the globe (Yaqeen, 2024) to peddle his anti-Muslim political speech. Robert Jenrick's intervention, however, relies on an old Orientalist idea that treats Islam and Muslims as one fixed entity. The danger in this is that any suspicion is subsequently placed upon the entire Muslim population. This view nurtures public perceptions of Muslims as inherently undesirable, untrustworthy and hostile to the public (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.130). This anti-Muslim speech by Jenrick also has a profound impact upon the public space and those susceptible to Islamophobic rhetoric.

The inflammatory remarks by Jenrick should not be viewed in isolation as mere divisive political rhetoric during an interview. What makes these statements particularly concerning is his previous declaration in Parliament that "we have allowed our streets to be dominated by Islamist extremists" (Oborne, P. 2024). This assertion stands in stark contrast to reality. The ex-Immigration minister's controversial statements, which MP Naz Shah characterised as "textbook Islamophobia" (Bagdi, A. 2024), came in the aftermath of the UK summer riots. When huge groups of white non-Muslim men dominated British streets shouting anti-Muslim intimidating speech, such as "Allah, Allah, who the f*** is Allah!" (Tatran, M. 2024) and applauded when young non-pubescent children joined in with the anti-Muslim slur (RadioGenoa. 2024). In describing such events, the Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer described the riots as "far-right thuggery" (Winterbotham, E., Wallner, C., and White J. 2024).

When examining how these 'far-right thugs' chant "Allah, Allah, who the f* is Allah!" (Tatran, M. 2024) and a senior Conservative politician advocating for the immediate arrest of anyone who utters 'Allahu akbar' in Britain's streets (Sky News, 2024), we can observe a common thread: an antagonism towards British Muslims' public expression of their faith and an overlooked biased towards expressions of anti-Muslim sentiments.

This demeaning of Muslim religiosity being expressed in the public space was also felt when Boris Johnson made his remarks about some Muslim

women. Boris Johnson was discussed in the previous chapter, however that was with a focus on Johnson in keeping with the Nolan Principles from the perspective of *leadership* in the case of Nusrat Ghani MP. I now turn attention to the former Prime Minister himself and the anti-Muslim remarks he made about Muslim women, and his claims about having read the Qur'an.

Shortly before becoming Britain's Conservative Prime Minister, Johnson published a column in the Daily Telegraph on the 5th of August 2018 (Tell MAMA, 2018). Johnson was accused of Islamophobia after writing in his column that Muslim women wearing the *burqa*[3] look "ridiculous" and like "letterboxes" and "bank robbers" (BBC, 2018). The *burqa* (otherwise spelt *burka*) is a loose-fitting outer garment that covers the body and face worn in public by some Muslim women (Britannica, 2024). With the *burqa* perceived by some Muslim women as a 'religious practice' (Piela, A. 2018), Johnson did not mention nor critique the inability to see a women's face as a communication issue, nor even a security issue when attending his surgery meetings. Rather he attacked Muslim women, their appearance, how they dress, and publicly degraded them by liking their appearance to inanimate objects and criminals.

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[3] According to some Islamic interpretations, the burqa it is an expression of piety and a physical manifestation of dedication to the faith. However, the majority of scholars agree that it is not an obligation upon Muslim women, but rather optional. The majority of Muslim women do not wear burqa, and it is usually only found to be worn in southern central Asia (Britannica, 2024).

The APPG for British Muslims' definition on Islamophobia states: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" (Muslim Council of Britain, 2021). Utilising the above definition as a benchmark for judging Johnson's comments, the element of the definition "targets expressions of Muslimness" (Muslim Council of Britain, 2021) could place Johnson under consideration for Islamophobia. This is not to argue that his words *were* Islamophobic per se, but rather his likening of some Muslim women's appearance with bank robbers questions his comments as an attack on "expressions of Muslimness".

Boris Johnson's comments caused an uproar from various public figures including Labour MP Jess Phillips and the Imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque (which was the place of an anti-Muslim far-right terrorist attack by Darren Osbourne). The Labour politician, Jess Phillips MP took Johnson's comments with the upmost severity by stating she would report Johnson to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (BBC, 2018). The Imam of Finsbury Park Mosque also stated that Johnson's comments highlight that the government is "failing to show meaningful engagement" with the Muslim community (BBC, 2018). For such comments to be considered a hate crime, it should be manifest with substantial evidence that the offender "demonstrates hostility based upon religion" (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024).

In the context of Muslims and Islam, how can we judge if Johnson's comments were based upon hostility to Muslims while he was making fun of, what is considered by some, a religious garment? Was this hostility directed towards Muslim individuals or was Johnson practicing freedom of expression within the laws to critique a religion in the United Kingdom? While how we define what *is* and *is not* anti-Muslim hate is an important discussion, it falls outside the remit of this research paper. What is more pressing to this discussion is the impact of speech by some Conservative politicians that appears to be anti-Muslim and the correlating evidence of that impact in wider society on British Muslims.

While considering Johnson's comments about Muslim women, and the potential charging accusation of Islamophobia, it is important to clarify that Johnson was cleared of breaking the Conservative party's code of conduct. In attempts to defend Johnson, a friend of the former Prime Minister stated that his article did "foster respect and tolerance" for women who wear the burqa (Press Association, 2018). While his words may have been cleared from punishment from his own party, it is important to not underestimate the impact his words as a politician have had on wider society, and the continuation of negative perceptions, tropes, opinions and stereotypes of Muslim women. This is what I argue in this research paper: the impact of such anti-Muslim speech on a public space of Islamophobia, not the analysis of whether such comments were Islamophobic or not, as that would be beyond the scope of this research.

Johnson's comments, despite an attempted defence from his former colleagues, did not escape criticism, such as the comments from Iman Atta, the director of Tell Mama, an NGO which records anti-Muslim attacks, who criticised Boris Johnson's privileged background and his controversial comments comparing Muslim women wearing burkas to 'letterboxes' and 'bank robbers'. Atta continued to state that despite Johnson's privileged position, he chose to use dehumanising language against marginalised Muslim women who already face employment barriers and limited choices. Atta also suggested that such dehumanising rhetoric from influential figures encourages anti-Muslim hate crimes (Saner, E. 2018).

Atta's comments reflect the real-life impact of the circulation and publishing of such anti-Muslim bigotry by political elites on law-abiding innocent Muslim women. Atta's statements were further reflected and backed by Tell Mama reporting a significant increase in recorded anti-Muslim incidents following the publication of Johnson's article, see Figure 5. Specifically, the organisation documented a 375% rise in anti-Muslim incident reports within a week, and of the thirty-eight known incidents, twenty-two involved women who wore a face veil (Parveen, N. 2019). In this early analysis, we begin to understand the impact political elites in public positions have with reference to a permissive space for anti-Muslim hate.

Figure 5: Anti-Muslim Incidents Reported to Tell MAMA between 30th July – 25th August 2018 – Boris Johnson's Column
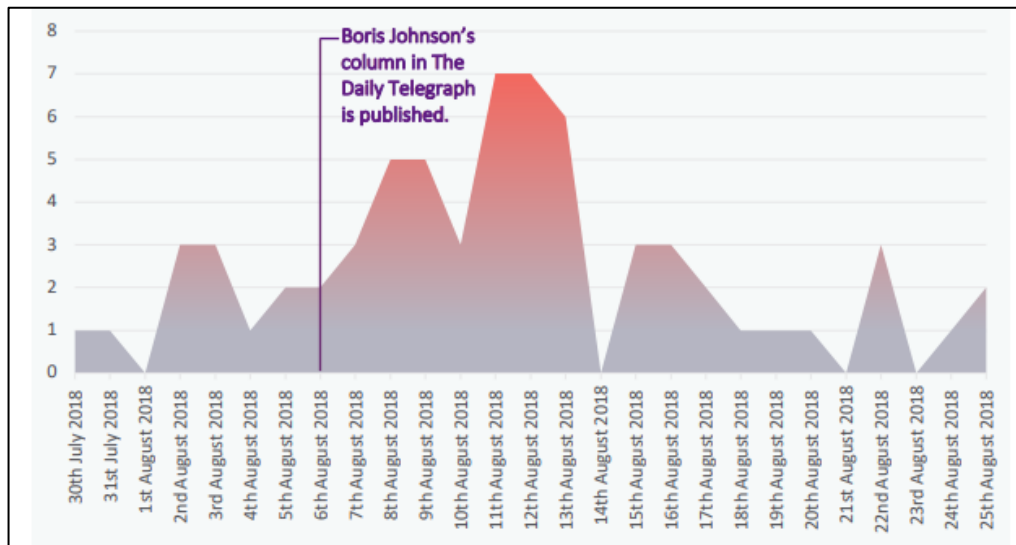
(Source: Tell Mama. 2018, p.47).

After becoming Prime Minister, Johnson apologised for causing offence and vowed to not to use such language again (Heffer, G. 2021). Although Johnson's political colleague and former cabinet minister Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who has been a long-standing critic of Islamophobia in the Conservative party, described Johnson's apology as "mealy-mouthed" (BBC, 2021). It is important to note that Johnson did not apologise for his words, but rather for causing offence, which highlights his apology being a flippant statement without any serious regret. Johnson's comment about Muslim women was not merely a simple mistake or an ill-judged comment about Islam and Muslims. In an article Johnson wrote for the Spectator in 2005, he stated: "to any non-Muslim reader of the Quran, Islamophobia – fear of Islam – seems a natural reaction" (Choudhury, R. 2021) and that the Qur'an was "particularly vicious" (Allen, C. 2021). With multiple public

comments published in national newspapers, such as the above, negatively targeting and vilifying British Muslims, the question is raised: do the Conservatives have an Islamophobia problem?

After continuous accusations from other political parties, such as Labour, NGOs and social change advocates, Johnson whilst Prime Minister in 2019, fell to political pressure and ordered an inquiry to report and assess anti-Muslim discrimination within his own party, which was led by psychology Professor Swaran Singh, a former member of the equalities watchdog (Al Jazeera, 2019). The report found that anti-Muslim sentiments remain a problem within the Conservative party and make up two-thirds of all reported inside incidents. Upon the publishing of the report, the then Labour Shadow Equalities Secretary, Marsha de Cordova, stated that the findings in the report reveal deep-rooted discrimination within the Conservative party, and it "goes all the way up to the prime minister" (BBC, 2021).

The sentiments expressed in the remarks by the former Shadow Secretary, embodies the view that the Conservative party as an organisation distinctively contains politicians and members who hold anti-Muslim views and act according to those views. The report itself, despite identifying anti-Muslim invidious behaviour, was not left uncriticised by supporters of combatting Islamophobia. Conservative Baroness Sayeeda Warsi even criticised the appointment of Professor Singh to lead the report, who she

says that Singh believes that racism is a "contested term". Baroness Warsi also highlighted how Singh had written an article for a far-right supporting magazine, Spiked, which its CEO believes Islamophobia is an "invented term mainly designed to shut down critical discussion about Islam" (Al Jazeera, 2019). These issues surrounding Singh raise further concerns that I argue would have brought the report into disrepute and only highlight the deeper problems surrounding anti-Muslim sentiments and the internal workings of the Conservative party.

Despite the report, and despite Johnson being found not to have broken the Conservative's code of conduct, despite publicly apologising for "offence caused", despite vowing to not use similar language again, Johnson's comments about Muslim women, comparing Muslims with criminals, stating that a fear of Islam "seems a natural reaction" to reading the Qur'an and other anti-Muslim comments, Johnson as a politician, as a government minister, as the Prime Minister, sets the political tone. A political tone that has impacted the safety, security and perpetuated harmful speech, stereotypes, tropes that cause further dividing lines within contemporary British society.

Referencing back to the example of Boris Johnson's published column in the Daily Telegraph likening niqab-wearing Muslim women to "letterboxes" and "bank robbers" (BBC, 2018), we see similar examples of the ripple effect from the anti-Muslim negative comments uttered in the public space.

Nadine Dorries, the former Conservative MP publicly added to Johnson's burqa comments on the 8th of August 2018, just three days after Johnson's column, by saying that Johnson "did not go far enough" and should have "called for a ban on niqabs and burqas" (Tell Mama, 2018). These words by Dorries were a mechanism for another spike in reported offline anti-Muslim incidents. As on the day Dorries published her comments, all anti-Muslim recorded incidents specifically referenced Johnson's original comments, see Figure 6. Making Dorries' anti-Muslim speech and endorsement of Johnson's comments a continued shift towards, as Kim and Ogawa (2024) describe as "a change in social norms and behaviour" by political figures towards further acceptance of prejudiced behaviour (Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. 2024, p.1162).

Figure 6: Timeline of Incidents Reported to Tell MAMA between 30th July – 28th August 2018 – Key Events
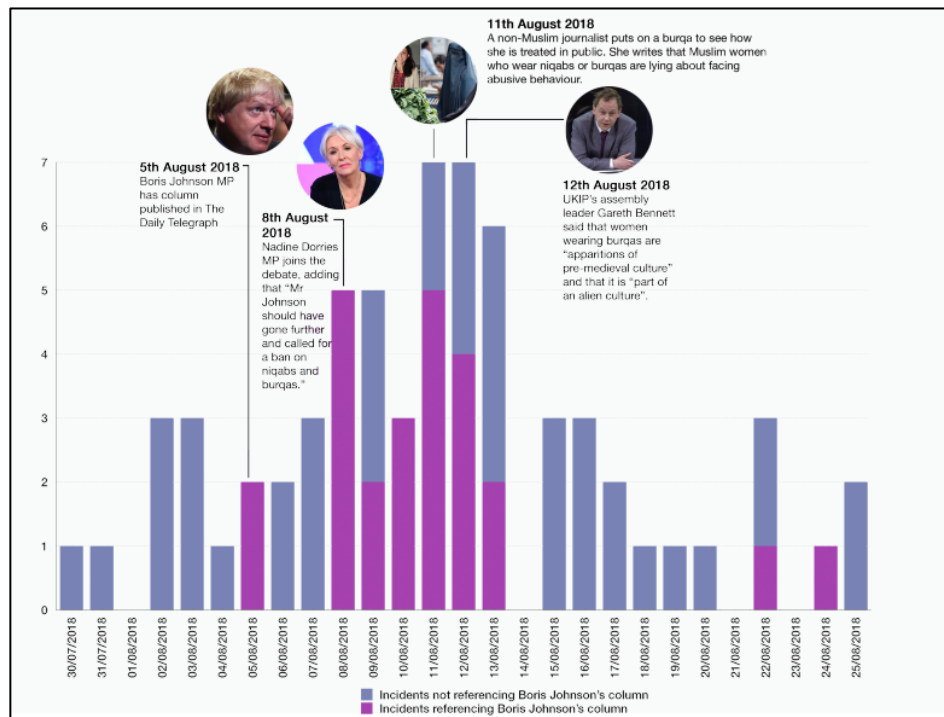
(Source: Tell Mama. 2018, p.49).

The prejudiced behaviour and shifts in socially acceptable attitudes towards Muslims, I argue, has a significant impact on not only the permissive space for anti-Muslim hate, but also political actors outside of the Conservative party, who play a key role in the circulation and perpetuation of anti-Muslim hate speech. Particularly far-right actors such as Tommy Robinson, who publicly supported Boris Johnson in the 2019 UK general election by calling on his followers to back Johnson by stating "everyone should vote for Boris Johnson" (Wearmouth, R. 2019).

This is the same Robinson who targeted British Muslims by standing outside their homes and calling them "enemy combatants", describing the 2015 refugee crisis as an "invasion of Europe by military age Muslim men", accused the London mayor Sadiq Khan of being part of "an invasion into our country" (Bloomfield, S. 2019), tweeted on social media platform 'X' numerous times that Islam is a "mental health issue" (White, N. 2024), and said in an interview on national television that "Islam is an idea, a bad idea" (Good Morning Britain, 2017). The same dangerous anti-Muslims views that Dame Sara Khan had tried to previously warn the Conservative government about (Boffey, D. 2024). In addition to all of this, Robinson informed his followers in 2019 on Telegram, an encrypted messaging service, that he has become a paid-up member of the Conservative party (Townsend, M. 2019), solidifying his support for Johnson and his political views.

These dangerous views about Muslims and the ripple effect it can have in the form of a top-down approach, I posit, can sometimes result in dangerous and occasionally fatal outcomes. Such was the case of Darren Osbourne. Osbourne, who carried out an anti-Muslim attack in June 2017 when he attempted to drive a van into a crowd of Muslims outside Finsbury Park Mosque in north London. This attack resulted in the murder of a 51-year-old Muslim man and seriously injuring nine other Muslims. The judge at the time, Justice Cheema-Grubb had told Darren Osbourne that he was guilty of a "terrorist murder", and that he quickly became radicalised by those fixated on spreading anti-Muslim hatred and she told him directly "your use of Twitter exposed you to racists and anti-Islamic ideology" (BBC, 2018).

Osbourne's partner, Sarah Andrews, was also quoted as saying in court: "Darren has been watching a lot of Tommy Robinson stuff on the internet" as she claimed she had "pleaded" with him to stop watching "this sort of thing". Police had also found evidence after confiscating Osbourne's phone, that he had been reading online posts by Robinson (L, Dearden. 2018). While this example I provide of Darren Osbourne is an extreme case to which the lengths some individuals are willing to go to, based upon anti-Muslim ideology and the far-right, I should assert that I do not argue that Tommy Robinson is solely responsible for the terror attack by Osbourne, but rather to indicate and shed light on the influence Tommy Robinson and those who promulgate anti-Muslim speech can possibly have on the

permissive space for Islamophobia. Particularly in this top-down approach framework, whereby Johnson says derogatory anti-Muslim comments, far-right actors such as Robinson praise Johnson and encourage his followers to back Johnson in a general election (Wearmouth, R. 2019), and some followers of Robinson end up committing murder against British Muslims, as was the case of Darren Osbourne (BBC, 2018).

To signal this further, and evidence the impact Robinson had on Osbourne, Ms Andrews said during the court hearing that her partner (Darren Osbourne) became a "ticking time-bomb" as he was "brainwashed" by material including posts by Robinson, whose real name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (L, Dearden. 2018). This illustrative example gives us an insight into some of the potential contributing factors by which Osborne was inspired. I reiterate that the focus here is not on the actual terrorist crime itself, but rather the patterns by which political Conservative elites such as Johnson engage in anti-Muslim speech, which then sets the political tone by a "change in social norms and behaviour" towards further acceptance of prejudice (Kim, T., and Ogawa, Y. 2024, p.1162), which then gives a continued 'green light' to far-right political actors (Boffey, D. 2024), such as Robinson, to engage in this permissive space and ultimately influence susceptible people, like Osbourne, to racist anti-Muslim bias and hate. In my postulation, the causal link is not a guarantee of outcomes, but a hypothesis of potential linked behaviour that represents a top-down approach of anti-Muslim invective, which Labour Shadow Equalities

Secretary, Marsha de Cordova alluded to "goes all the way up to the prime minister" (BBC, 2021) by which the potential outcomes pose a danger to British society at large.

Understanding this top-down approach and the modus operandi of far-right thinking and their actors, such as Tommy Robinson, helps us understand not only how anti-Muslim speech by Conservative political elites and politicians impacts this permissive space, but how the anti-Muslim speech is also received by anti-Muslim actors. Actors like Robinson demonstrate their organised Islamophobia against a backdrop of factors, such as the economic crisis, a distrust in mainstream political parties, and firm hostility towards multiculturalism (Aked, H. 2017, p.166). In addition to this, the issues around identity and belonging, which Abbas (2019) highlighted also act as important factors in far-right thinking (Abbas, T. 2019, p.73) and subsequently contribute to the promulgation of AMH by suggesting that British identity has been lost, and Muslims are to blame.

Ironically similar comments were made by Conservative MP and former Minister of State for Immigration, Robert Jenrick. Jenrick claimed in an article written for the Daily Mail during the 2024 Conservative leadership contest that English identity is under threat and immigration has put England "at risk" (Denham, J. 2024). An aggressive rejection of multiculturalism and immigration also is embedded within numerous tropes, stereotypes and anti-Muslim discourse with far-right actors. As

Tommy Robinson said "We're losing our culture. We're losing our identity" (The Week UK, 2024). There is an overlapping parallel here between some Conservative politicians and the relationship with far-right actors amalgamating anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant speech and views.

This overlap and erroneous fusion of Muslims and immigrants has also been explicitly expressed by Robinson himself who posted on Twitter ('X') "Close our borders. End all immigration from Muslim nations" (Robinson, T. 2024). Making this link between British culture and identity being "lost" and Islam being the "threat" is incredibly provocative and dangerous rhetoric that impacts the safety of British Muslims. The danger comes in the form of inadvertently claiming that Muslims are the enemy, and feeds into the 'us vs. them' dividing narrative, by which marks out British Muslims as 'different' and subsequently places Muslims at the centre of suspicion, harassment, abuse and violence (Jackson, L. 2018, p.2).

Zuquete (2008) also indicated that when describing AMH, it follows by which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the "other", as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners (Bleich, E. 2012, p.181). Abbas (2019) also provides examples such as, a "lack of hope" surrounded in a lack of economic opportunities, which creates "psychological problems" which result in individuals, particularly men, vulnerable and "exposed" to far-right radicalisation (Abbas, T. 2019, p.100). They possess a perceived

feeling of being "under attack" in relation to their identity and dignity, along with a sense of need to call for action against "idle, corrupt or incompetent" politicians (Ebner, J. 2021, p.10).

These socioeconomic and identity factors, such as perceived cultural loss and a lack of economic opportunities, produce a correlation with far-right thinking and anti-Muslim hate. Political entrepreneurs like Robinson and Paul Golding utilise and operate within this permissive space for AMH by exacerbating these grievances. Paul Golding, the leader of the far-right political group, Britain First, also subscribes and promulgates anti-Muslim hate speech whilst operating in this permissive space of Islamophobia. His party, Britain First, has an openly anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda (Booth, R. 2017). Golding and Britain First's anti-Muslim views are explicit, to the extent that they had stated on their website that they oppose "…all alien and destructive political or religious doctrines, including Marxism, liberalism, fascism, national socialism, political correctness, Euro federalism and Islam" (Booth, R. 2017).

Britain First also posted a photo on their now banned Facebook page with the caption, "Islamophobic and Proud", and another photo which compared Muslim immigrants to animals (Cellan-Jones, R. 2018). Political entrepreneurs like Golding outwardly partake in radical and dangerous rhetoric about Muslims, but more importantly to our discussion are the links between Conservative politicians' anti-Muslim speech and the influence

upon external actors within the permissive space for AMH, notwithstanding the effects upon other individuals that may be susceptible to adopting anti-Muslim tropes within this public space.

Like Robinson, Golding also has connections with the Conservative party and Boris Johnson. The leader of Britain First mirrored Robinson by attempting to become a paid member of the Conservatives in 2019. Golding joined the Bexleyheath and Crayford Conservative Association. Upon paying for membership, Golding had issued a statement in which he said he intended to "help solidify Boris Johnson's control on the leadership, so we can achieve Brexit and hopefully cut immigration and confront radical Islam" (Sharman, J. 2019). Golding's comments did not fall on deaf ears, as his far-right anti-Islam party had announced that up to 5,000 of its members had also taken action like Golding and joined the Conservatives to "support Boris Johnson's stance on radical Islam" (Townsend, M. 2019).

Golding's comments, in particular highlighting the themes of Brexit, immigration and radical Islam are founded in his belief that immigrants (those that are not white) and Muslims are the fundamental problem in British society. Supporting Boris Johnson, in his view by removing or reducing Muslims and immigrants, will be paramount to opposing "radical Islam", the "increasing colonisation" of "our homeland" and "maintaining and strengthening Christianity as the foundation of our society and culture" (Britain First, 2023). Golding's admiration for Johnson was not limited to

reducing radical Islam and executing Brexit, in fact, Golding supported Johnson's controversial comments about niqab-wearing Muslim women and had a deep conviction that Johnson represented a type of patriotism that reflects Britain First. Golding had said in a statement that "Boris referred to Muslim women wearing the burqa and niqab as letterboxes, so he is obviously a populist nationalist under the surface, like the type of patriotism as promoted by Britain First" (Sharman, J. 2019).

While a spokesperson for the Conservative Party had said that Paul Golding's application for Conservative Party membership had "not been approved" (Sharman, J. 2019), Ashlea Simon, former spokesperson for Britain First, now co-leader, had publicly said that Britain First members wanted to "form a movement of far-right activists within the Conservative Party" with the aim to "back Johnson" (Townsend, M. 2019). Despite the Conservative Party attempting to shake off links with far-right groups like Britain First, it appears far-right groups are desperately attempting to link themselves with the Conservatives.

Golding, Simons and Tommy Robinson have appeared to find a second home, a mainstream home whereby their anti-Muslim views and beliefs can be echoed by conventional and established political means through the likes of Boris Johnson, no matter how much Johnson may dislike it. Both the speech of some Conservative politicians and far-right individuals and groups with relation to Islam and Muslims appears to be growing ever

closer. This was further claimed by the Britain First spokesperson Simons who stated that they support a party that will take a "firm stance against radical Islam" and it "looks like the Tories" would do that. Simons also acknowledged the supporters of Britain First "admire" Johnson and the then Home Secretary Priti Patel (Kartal, A.G. 2019).

Is it radical Islam that Britain First and their supporters are against? Paul Golding, although promoting that his party oppose 'radical Islam', Golding's claim contradicts the facts of his broad and sweeping hatred for Muslims. Golding has been jailed for hate crimes and hostility towards Muslims and the Muslim faith (BBC, 2018), physically turned his back on stage against British-Pakistani Muslim Sadiq Khan as Khan was elected the first Muslim London Mayor (Waterson, J. 2016), and Golding has even called for a total UK-wide ban on Halal meat (Britain First, 2023).

Ironically, Golding's anti-Muslim position against the London Mayor Sadiq Khan, was also replicated by the former Conservative MP Lee Anderson who claimed that "Islamists" have got "control of Khan" and that Khan had "given away" London to his "mates" (Courea, E. 2024). Golding is against the Muslim faith, against Muslim Labour politicians and even against the Muslim diet. His claims to be only against radical Islam could not be further from the truth, and the fact that him and his party supported, admired and in some ways replicated anti-Muslim speech from Conservative politicians

such as Johnson, Priti Patel and Lee Anderson, evidences a worrying connection that impacts the permissive space for anti-Muslim hate.

Thereafter, in the final case for this thesis, I turn to a salient exemplification of Islamophobia manifested by the former Conservative Home Secretary, Suella Braverman. In September 2023, Braverman made the assertion at the American Enterprise Institute, an American right-wing think tank based in Washington, that "multiculturalism has failed" whilst characterising migration, with a particular focus on Muslim migration, with the "aim" of "threatening the security" of the UK (Wingate, S. 2023). Braverman whilst giving her keynote speech also claimed that multiculturalism "makes no demands of the incomer to integrate" (Quinn,B. 2023) and that the failure of multiculturalism results in people entering British society who "live parallel lives in it" (American Enterprise Institute, 2023). This on the face of it, may seem like generalised xenophobia, but her remarks run deeper.

In a Mail on Sunday article, Braverman wrote that those involved in child sexual abuse gangs, otherwise named by right-wing media and some political elites as 'grooming gangs' (Cockbain, E., and Tufail, W. 2020, p.4), were "almost all British-Pakistani" men (Waterson, J. 2023). This may still appear as xenophobia, as explicit as it is, but according to the 2021 census, approximately 93% of British Pakistanis living in England and Wales identify as Muslim (Office for National Statistics, 2023), and her anti-Muslim bigotry was further evidenced when she then went on to claim that it is men that

"hold cultural attitudes" that are "incompatible with British values", which according to Braverman have been "unchallenged" by "wider society" (Waterson, J. 2023). However, it is Braverman's public claims and generalised sweeping stereotypes of immigrants and Muslims that should be challenged, particularly as a high-ranking member of the cabinet playing a role in the British government.

Braverman's first claim describes migrants, and by extension Muslims, as living "parallel lives" (American Enterprise Institute, 2023) in many British "towns and cities" (Hughes, D. 2023). Although not all migrants are Muslims, the migrant 'crisis' is often compounded in growing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate, which was evidenced by a Chatham House report that found 55% of people across the 10 countries surveyed, wanted an end to all immigration from predominantly Muslim countries (Mcilwraith, A. 2021). The immigration debate often overlaps with a debate on Muslims and Islam (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137).

This anti-Muslim hate was further expressed through an anti-immigration lens during the Brexit campaign. In a Channel 4 News piece interviewing residents' views on Brexit in Barnsley, one resident described the purpose of leaving the European Union was to "stop the Muslims coming into this country" and followed up with "simple as that" (D Mc, 2016). Anti-Muslim speech in fusion with anti-immigration rhetoric was incredibly rampant online also, examples include a post targeting Muslims that "cannot respect

our culture and history and traditions, then they should get the f*ck out of OUR country!!!…It is especially the Muhammadans who are such an exception and huge danger" (Mcilwraith, A. 2021).

These views in parallel with Braverman's "parallel lives" (American Enterprise Institute, 2023) remark, causes her comments to reflect the concept developed by Edward Said known as the 'internal' Orient. This descends from a time when Muslims were considered the Muslim 'others' that were "fantasised" over at long distance. However, with the emergence of globalisation and travel, the increasing Muslim population in Europe has meant that those who are victims of anti-Muslim hate experience discriminatory attitudes on a daily basis (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137), and are perceived as an internal enemy (Pervaz, B., & Asad, T. 2022, p.58). As the 'internal other', they are perceived as a "threatening and "inferior" minority (Modood, T. 2019, p.78). Braverman's 'parallel lives' remarks render British Muslims as de facto foreigners within British society.

The Muslim community by extension are perceived as, indirectly in Braverman's words, a "threat" to UK security (Wingate, S. 2023), with "incompatible values" which resemble "stereotypes and fantasies" which provide a basis for hostility, exclusion and continued bigotry, which also saw Jews subjected to in previous periods of time (Skenderovic, D., & Späti, C. 2019, p.137), and utilising community scapegoats did not previously spare the Irish. As the construction of the Irish people as a "suspect

community" also contributed to alienation and language that harassed Irish people on a day-to-day basis through stigmatisation and sweeping stereotypes (Pantazis, C., and Pemberton, S. 2009, pp.661-662).

In Braverman's article that was published in the Mail on Sunday, claiming that child sex-abuse gangs were "almost all British-Pakistani" men (Waterson, J. 2023), was not only considered a racialised target of crime on an entire community, but was found to be factually inaccurate. The former Home Secretary, the most senior member of the department, publishing in the mainstream media an attack on British Pakistanis ironically contradicts Home Office statistics. While offenders in the high-profile case of Rochdale were found to mainly have been men of Pakistani ethnicity, according to Home Office research, child sex offenders are most commonly white (Home Office, 2021). How could a former Home Secretary get the easily accessible data so wrong? Braverman's comments were so misleading that the Mail on Sunday had to offer a correction on her opinion piece, and the press regulator IPSO found her comments to be "false" and rejected the Mail on Sunday's correction, and thus the article was retracted (Waterson, J. 2023).

The repercussions of Suella Braverman's article and anti-Muslim generalisations were not just confined to public discourse and factual errors, but rather quantifiable hate report data. Tell MAMA reflects this data, see Figure 7, wherein a report released in February 2025, showcased

the highest anti-Muslim cases in the history of the organisation since its founding in 2012. Since 2022, verified cases of anti-Muslim hate reported to the organisation rose 165% in just two years. The report also highlights that among the main factors contributing to this rise in online and street-based anti-Muslim hate were grooming gang concerns (Tell MAMA, 2025) perpetuated through stigmatisation and anti-Muslim tropes.

Figure 7: Total Number of Cases Reported to Tell MAMA (2012 – 2024).
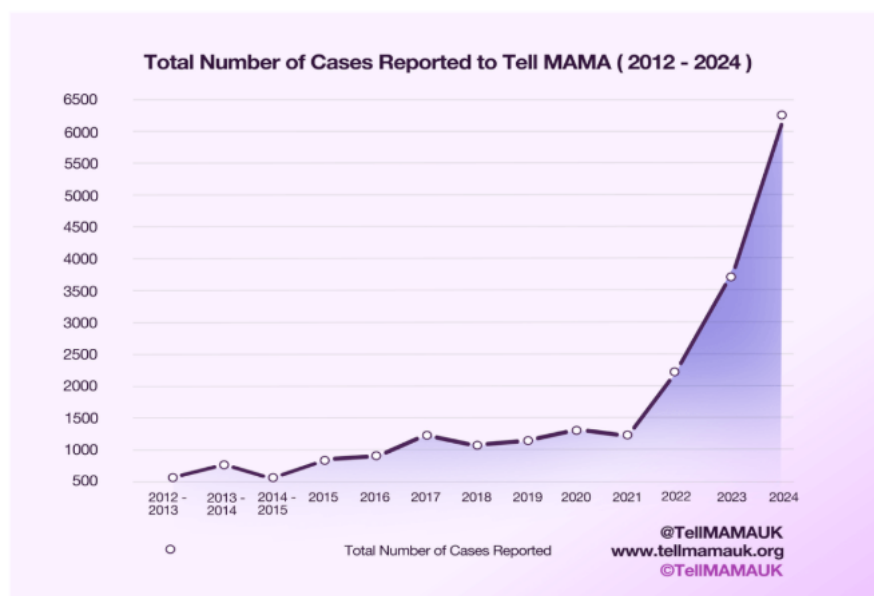
Source: Tell MAMA (2025)

As the evidence suggests, Suella Braverman singling-out British Pakistani Muslim men as playing a lead role as child sex offenders, particularly as a high-ranking Conservative politician, has contributed to the anti-Muslim space by perpetuating bigoted stereotypes, such as the Muslim culture and faith promote sexual abuse, and ultimately demonising British Muslim communities, particularly men. Similar tropes have also been made by men from other minority communities, otherwise the 'internal' foreigner, such

as in the 1970s when black men were broadly described as "muggers" (Cockbain, E., and Tufail, W. 2020, p.4-5). Muslim men have joined that long list of minority communities, like the Irish previously discussed, as being a threat and danger to British society. Suella Braverman's words have been exposed to be empirically unfounded, academically discredited, and censored and retracted by the media. Despite this, her position as a high-ranking elite Conservative politician serves to still have profoundly impacted the space for anti-Muslim hate and contributed through case reports inflated Islamophobic attacks.

The final claim in this thesis from Suella Braverman, is that immigrants "hold cultural attitudes" that are "incompatible with British values" (Waterson, J. 2023). Despite immigrants specifically referred to by Braverman in this claim, many people too often conflate immigrants with Muslims. According to a report by the charity Hope Not Hate, anti-Muslim prejudice in the media has replaced immigration (Hope Not Hate, 2019, p.3). This discourse does not only demonise Muslims as the foreign, internal 'other', but has echoed far-right rhetoric that was once considered peripheral extreme views. Particularly within the Conservative party, which according to Baroness Warsi, have now become mainstream, whereby in previous Conservative parties would have been "outright rejected" (Channel 4 News, 2024). These anti-immigration and inadvertently anti-Muslim views projected by Suella Braverman, which have now become

"mainstream", were also praised by far-right figures, such as the leader of the Patriotic Alternative group, Mark Collett (Savage, M. 2023).

Patriotic Alternative is a group that split from the BNP, presenting themselves as "white pride" (Quinn, B. 2023), and like the BNP, their leader was a protégé of former BNP leader Nick Griffin (Savage, M. 2023). Mark Collett had said in a Facebook post in response to Suella Braverman's speech at the American Enterprise Institute that Braverman had "basically admitted that multiculturalism had failed" and that the surge in immigration "is a threat to the west". He concluded his post by stating "this is a good thing for nationalism" (Savage, M. 2023). Patriotic Alternative was not the only far-right group to endorse and heap praise on the former Home Secretary's words. Britain First had also publicly stated in a post on X (Twitter), that it "fully endorses Suella Braverman 'multiculturalism' remarks" (Savage, M. 2023).

Both statements, by Suella Braverman and the far-right groups, lean into and deploy the core premise of the 'Great Replacement' theory. The Hope Not Hate anti-fascist group also claimed that Braverman's words echo the above theory, which perpetuates the idea that white Westerners are being "replaced" by non-white immigrants. Such ideas were also expressed by Suella Braverman who added "more than one in five births are to foreign-born mothers" (Savage, M. 2023) in attempts to fearmonger immigrants

and subsequently Muslims. Despite this, Braverman herself is a "child of immigrants" (American Enterprise Institute, 2023).

It is these ideas of a 'threat' and 'replacement' that Braverman peddles which were once fringe ideas, now have reached a broad church of conservatives, and the premises of what is acceptable language of debate have been shifted (Ebner, J. 2024, p.84). While from an academic perspective, scholars have discussed how these ideas have become mainstream in many political circles, Georgie Laming, the director of campaigns at Hope Not Hate, also publicly stated that in reference to Braverman's anti-Muslim speech, it has "taken far-right tropes and conspiracy theories" such as the 'Great Replacement' theory and Braverman has "introduced them into the mainstream" (Savage, M. 2023).

However, Islamophobes prefer to focus on viewing themselves as 'defending democracy', just like Braverman made in her American Enterprise speech that her argument is a "democratic case" and without public consent for immigration, immigration itself is "illegitimate" (American Enterprise Institute, 2023). Braverman utilises democracy as opposed to issues related to socio-economic grievances caused by the government because people who perpetuate anti-Muslim ideas believe in their view it is Islam's fault as it is a "religion which is incompatible with society" (Raj, A. 2016, p.7). Since it suggests that Muslims are inherently

violent and inclined to choose conflict over negotiation as a means of settling their differences (Rashid, Iqbal and Tanvir, 2023).

This 'us' verses 'them' narrative, and this process of 'othering' from dominant social groups (in our case white British nationals), constitutes a form of objectification predicated upon concepts of structural and cultural racism, ethnic nationalism, exclusivity and exceptionalism (Abbas, T. 2020, pp.4-5). This has been particularly amalgamated with anti-Muslim rhetoric that Touihri-Mebarek (2023) identifies three distinct groups characterised by 'opposing visions and attitudes towards demographic and social change'. Amongst those are the "white school leavers", often termed 'identity conservatives', who hold a perspective rooted in 'ethnocentrism'. This term refers to a consistent inclination to view the social and political landscape as a conflict between groups, with a clear dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' (Touihri-Mebarek, D. 2023, pp.2-3).

These ethno-focussed far-right groups perceive demographic, and diversity increases, along with social changes, as "threats" that they are inclined to slow down or reverse (Touihri-Mebarek, D. 2023, pp.2-3). Braverman peddling anti-Muslim tropes and fearmongering about a replacement by those who hold values that are "incompatible with British values" (Waterson, J. 2023), poses a significant danger to those susceptible to such ideas and the gravity of this perceived 'threat' to Western whites and how

the 'great replacement' theory has been so dangerous to the safety of Muslims and wider Western populations of recent times.

This dangerous conspiracy theory has been said to be embedded in writings and works from the Nazi-era, which perpetuates the idea that a "race war" is inevitable (Obaidi et al. 2022, p.1676) and it is this kind of thinking has been "repurposed" by the far-right (Serwer, B. 2019) and has been utilised in giving justification for the narratives of cementing anti-Muslim hatred. These repurposed ideas that have now been echoed by mainstream politicians, like Suella Braverman, to "perpetuate divisive language and tactics" within the heat of the Conservative party which corresponds to a "huge rise in far-right anti-migrant activism" (Savage, M. 2023).

Braverman's portrayals of threats, opposing values, and racially-targeted caricatures of child sex offenders whilst opposing the official Home Office statistics, along with the rise in immigration and ethnic diversity has according to Obaidi et al. (2022) "triggered" a feeling of cultural loss and this is manifest by sentiments of a perceived real threat to whites (Obaidi et al. 2022, p.1677). And whilst these anti-Muslim sentiments contribute significantly to the broader radicalisation process of the far-right (Abbas, T. 2020, p.6), they have garnered enough attention and coverage in far-right alternative media outlets, such as Britain First's X (Twitter) page, to be "repeated, endorsed and popularised" until they have finally entered the mainstream (Ebner, J. 2024, p.84). Examples include when Britain First

posted video of Pakistanis walking through the streets of Leicester and wrote the caption "Indigenous white british are less than 30% of the city. This is #TheGreatReplacement happening in front of our eyes. This is not a 'conspiracy theory'" (Britain First, 2024). The same Britain First party that endorsed and heaped praise on Suella Braverman for her speech about the failure of multiculturalism.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated that anti-Muslim speech sits at the centre of Conservative politics, spouted by Conservative elites, all the way up to the Prime Minister, as opposed to being held on the periphery with junior politician backbenchers. As previously discussed, the Singh Inquiry found that two-thirds of complaints handled by CCHQ concerned anti-Muslim prejudice (The Conservative Party 2021, p. 14). Comments such as Boris Johnson's portrayal of Muslim women who wear the *niqab* as "letterboxes" (BBC, 2018), and Robert Jenrick's demand that chanting 'Allahu akbar' warrants arrest (Sky News, 2024) reveal a consistent dynamic: Islam is presented by some Conservative elites as a single, menacing monolithic bloc and everyone who *is* or *appears* Muslim (crypto-Muslim) is treated as a suspect who poses an inherent potential threat to Britain.

Such rhetoric does not occur without consequences. Tell MAMA recorded a 375% surge in anti-Muslim incidents in the week after Johnson's 2018 column (Parveen, N. 2019), most aimed at visibly Muslim women.

Darren Osborne's journey to the Finsbury Park attack illustrates how conspiratorial anti-Muslim tropes perpetuated by far-right influencers, such as Tommy Robinson, can translate elite political discourse into street-level violence and high-ranking Conservative politicians play a role in a surge in reported anti-Muslim cases. When Tommy Robinson and Britain First publicly celebrate Conservative political statements and proposed policies, the divide that *should* separate parliamentary mainstream speech from extremist mobilisation collapses. Viewed through a neo-Orientalist lens, the mechanism is clear. By essentialising Islam and grouping its adherents as one entity, politicians project devotional words, religious dress and ethnicity as markers of political disloyalty, distrust and sexual violence.

Therefore, three conclusions follow this chapter. First, anti-Muslim rhetoric within the political space, particularly the Conservative party is routine, unquestioned, and wholly "normal", (Allen, C. 2021 p.112). Second, Conservative speech contributes and gives a symbolic green light to the permissive space for anti-Muslim hate speech, which leaves some, like the far-right, feeling emboldened by the lack of discipline to be used as a pretext for acting on underlying prejudiced anti-Muslim hate (Tell Mama, 2018, p.19). Third, half-hearted apologies and unofficial internal inquiries are inadequate, manifesting the lack of desire to take anti-Muslim hate seriously within the party as a whole.

While this paper has discussed anti-Muslim speech said by a number of Tory politicians, along with the lack of accountability and impact upon British society, there are also extended elements to consider beyond the scope of this paper. Including the paradox of Conservative-supporting Muslims in the form of both members and elected senior officials. Particularly as ethnic minorities represented within the Conservative party has grown in recent years making up 35% of all elected ethnic-minority MPs (Saini, R., Bankole, M. and Begum, N. 2023).

5   Conclusion

This research has critically examined the role of the Conservative party in fostering and perpetuating a permissive environment for anti-Muslim hate (AMH) in the United Kingdom. Central to this study are three key findings: first, the Conservative party's failure to hold its politicians accountable for anti-Muslim rhetoric; second, the harmful language used by some Conservative figures, which perpetuates damaging stereotypes of Muslims; and third, the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim rhetoric that once belonged to the far-right, has emboldened extremist groups and contributed to a significant rise in Islamophobic incidents. The implications of these findings are profound, as they not only demonstrate the political power of speech in shaping public opinion but also highlight the urgent need for political leadership that rejects such divisive discourse.

The first significant finding of this research is that the Conservative party has failed to hold its politicians accountable for anti-Muslim hate speech. While individual remarks made by high-profile figures such as Boris Johnson and Suella Braverman have attracted public controversy, there has been no substantive action taken within the party to address these comments or to set clear boundaries on acceptable language. Johnson's infamous "letterbox" comment about Muslim women wearing the burqa (BBC, 2018) and Braverman's comments on "Islamism" (Middle East Eye, 2024) are examples of rhetoric that not only misrepresents Muslim communities but also reinforces harmful stereotypes that contribute to societal divisions. Despite the significant public backlash these comments received, the Conservative party did not take meaningful action against these politicians, thereby tacitly endorsing their rhetoric.

This lack of accountability sends a dangerous message: it suggests that anti-Muslim rhetoric is acceptable within the political mainstream. When political elites fail to condemn such speech, they inadvertently legitimise it, making it easier for Islamophobia to persist in the public sphere. The absence of internal party sanctions for such behaviour undermines the integrity of political discourse and fails to set an example for broader society. Instead, it normalises Islamophobic sentiments, which, as this research has shown, are then reflected in the wider political climate.

The second key argument is that the language used by Conservative figures often reflects and reinforces harmful stereotypes and tropes that demonise Muslims. These tropes portray Muslims as a threat to national security, incompatible with Western values, and resistant to integration. Such rhetoric is not just a reflection of individual bias; it contributes to a broader political narrative that paints Muslims as the 'enemy within' (Pervaz, B., & Asad, T. 2022, p.58). This research has shown that, through their words, Conservative politicians not only misrepresent Muslims but also amplify a narrative that undermines their place within British society.

For example, the framing of Muslims as inherently dangerous or as a monolithic group that poses a threat to national security feeds into a long history of 'othering' Muslims. This kind of rhetoric not only distorts public understanding of Islam and Muslims but also fuels hostility. As illustrated in the work of Edward Said (1978), such depictions are part of a larger Orientalist discourse that paints the Muslim world as backward and dangerous, positioning Muslims as fundamentally different from the West. By continuing to use language that feeds into these stereotypes, Conservative politicians contribute to the perpetuation of these harmful narratives, making it more difficult for Muslims to integrate and be accepted in British society.

The third argument presented in this thesis is that anti-Muslim speech, once confined to the far-right, has now entered the political mainstream, largely

due to the rhetoric of certain Conservative politicians. This mainstreaming of anti-Muslim hate speech has had a profound effect on the far-right, emboldening extremist groups and individuals increasingly through parallel tropes and language used by mainstream political figures. Figures like Tommy Robinson and Paul Golding have openly acknowledged the influence of mainstream political rhetoric on their views and actions. The rise of far-right extremism, fuelled in part by the normalisation of anti-Muslim speech, is a direct consequence of this political environment.

The empirical evidence presented in this thesis, including statistics from the Home Office (2023) and Tell MAMA (2024), clearly indicates a rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents. This uptick in Islamophobic behaviour aligns with the increase in public figures, particularly politicians, who have used anti-Muslim rhetoric. As far-right extremists feel emboldened by the language of mainstream political figures, they become more vocal and visible, spreading their hatred through protests, social media, and public demonstrations. This study highlights how the failure of Conservative political leaders to combat anti-Muslim rhetoric allows far-right ideologies to gain traction, perpetuate a public space for Islamophobia, and contribute to the marginalisation of Muslim communities.

In addition to this, the aspect of increased influence of AMH speech, and in broader terms far-right rhetoric employed by mainstream politicians, particularly with the rise of Reform UK, is something to consider in research

with further scope beyond this paper. As has been seen in recent years in the UK, particularly since 2014, the lines between far-right populist speech and mainstream political rhetoric have merged after the influence of far-right discourse (Newth, G.H, Brown, K., and Mondon, A. 2025. pp.1-3).

In conclusion, this research underscores the critical need for political leaders to take a firm stand against anti-Muslim hate speech and to hold their colleagues accountable when they make discriminatory remarks. The Conservative party's failure to thoroughly address the anti-Muslim rhetoric of its members has allowed a culture of Islamophobia to permeate British politics and society. This study has shown that political speech, particularly when it comes from figures in positions of power, is a powerful tool in shaping public opinion. When such speech is not condemned, it not only normalises discrimination but also empowers those who seek to spread hate.

The mainstreaming of anti-Muslim rhetoric, combined with the failure to hold politicians accountable for their actions, has contributed to the emboldening of far-right extremist ideas. This research highlights the urgent need for political leadership that actively rejects Islamophobia, upholds the values of equality and respect, and works to foster a more inclusive society. Political leaders must set the tone for acceptable discourse, ensuring that harmful stereotypes and prejudices are not allowed to thrive in public life.

The continued prevalence of anti-Muslim hate speech in British politics has serious consequences. Not only does it undermine social cohesion and integration, but it also incites violence and discrimination against Muslims. The Conservative party's lack of action on this issue, combined with the damaging rhetoric used by some of its members, has directly contributed to a climate in which Muslims are increasingly vulnerable to abuse and marginalisation. It is only through political accountability, the rejection of harmful speech, and the promotion of inclusive policies that this cycle of hate can be broken.

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