

Questions raised about the running of the BBC's religious affairs department

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The latest *Private Eye* carries the following piece:

These are trying times for Aaqil Ahmed, head of religion and ethics at the BBC.

As we revealed in the last *Eye*, some of his department's commissions for *Songs of Praise* are now being scrutinised by the Beeb's investigation unit, which has been told by Lord Patten that "if on investigation there is any suggestion that a criminal offence has been committed, the matter should be referred to the police." Ahmed's reaction to the story was to announce that he is launching a "witch hunt" (*sic*) to find our source.

Meanwhile, he has another hefty headache. *The Ottomans*, a three-part series in which Rageh Omar wanders through the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, is beset by problems and falling even further behind schedule. Although 18 weeks had been allotted for editing all three one-hour programmes, the first two have already taken 30 weeks, including delays for an expensive re-shoot in the Middle East. The main problem is Ahmed's ignorance arrogance, which have resulted in hours wasted trying to persuade the contributors to give interviews backing his eccentric interpretations of religious history. At the last count he even omitted reference to the Crimean War.

As is his custom, Ahmed assigned the production not to experts in his department but to an old freelance chum, Faris Kermani, who made many programmes about Islam for C4 when Ahmed was head of religion at the channel and later followed him to the BBC to make *The Life of Muhammad*. The justification for engaging Kermani was that he could gain exclusive access to middle-eastern locations and contacts that were somehow out of the reach of the BBC. In the end, however, this was handled by department staff using a local fixer in the usual way.

As costs spiral out of control, the job of rescuing the production has gone back in-house, too, with the department's main development executive – helped by a producer on attachment from BBC Bristol – striving to bring some order and intellectual rigour to the chaos.

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