

Why are journalists dancing to the Islamists' tune over Sara Khan?

Posted: Thu, 25 Jan 2018 by [Chris Sloggett](#)

Islamists and their apologists have dominated coverage of the Government's appointment of Sara Khan, says Chris Sloggett. Journalists should stop indulging them just because they shout loudly.

'Controversial' is a word that means almost nothing while revealing a great deal. Pretty much anything worth saying is controversial. If something is newsworthy, it's either controversial or very likely to become so.

But when something means so little, the fact someone has chosen to use it usually tells you something.

So let us consider the case against Sara Khan, the Government's new Commissioner for Countering Extremism. Today the BBC's headline about her appointment is: 'Controversy over new counter-extremism tsar Sara Khan'.

Many of those who claim to speak for Muslims do not like Khan because she promotes a positive message. She encourages a degree of integration into British society. She says Muslims should obey the same laws as everyone else and cooperate with the British state. She has called for honesty among Muslims about hateful ideologies and intolerant practices which are specific to, or particularly prominent among, those who share their religion.

Her organisation Inspire encourages girls and women from Muslim backgrounds to be aspirational. It has done important work countering the narrative of grievance and resentment peddled by so many. And Khan wrote a book, [The Battle for British Islam](#), in which she tackled many of those peddlers, as well as their counterparts on the white far right, head-on.

Is this really work that we should explicitly describe as 'controversial'? Anyone interested in the future of British society should support the general thrust of what Khan has tried to do.

That doesn't mean there shouldn't be reasonable analysis and criticism of her work. But if such a thing exists it has been drowned out today amid a hurricane of apologism. Advocacy groups such as 5PillarsUK, the Muslim Council of Britain and the Muslim Public Affairs Committee have berated Khan. Politicians such as Sayeeda Warsi, Naz Shah and Diane Abbott have cravenly jumped on the bandwagon.

And meanwhile press reports have danced to the Islamists' tune. The BBC's initial report on Khan's appointment was particularly egregious. It described what had happened, included one sentence from Khan in reported speech, and then handed over the stage to a succession of Islamist apologists.

In the fourth and fifth paragraphs we were treated to Warsi's view that Khan was "simply a mouthpiece and creation of" the Home Office (you can say 'Uncle Tom' if you like, Sayeeda). Then there was a picture of two of Warsi's tweets – without the one which bridged them, defending Khan, from Amina Lone.

Next Martin Bashir was reported as saying the appointment would "anger many Muslims". It was unclear how he'd drawn this conclusion. There was a paragraph criticising the Prevent strategy, with no defence of it offered in response. Harun Khan of the Muslim Council of Britain got two paragraphs to say the Government had sent an "alarming" signal to "Muslim communities". Sara Khan's work with Inspire was given a passing mention – in the 14th paragraph.

The BBC later [updated](#) its piece, adding some detail near the bottom about who Khan was and giving her the right of reply. But it also added in criticism from Shah and changed its headline to say the real story was the 'controversy' around the appointment. The criticism was still given far too much weight.

The *Guardian* initially ran a reasonable, descriptive piece. Its headline declared Khan a "leading Muslim campaigner". Then it decided to [change](#) it.

'Choice of new UK anti-extremism chief criticised as "alarming"' was its new headline. 'Sara Khan is seen as mouthpiece for the Home Office, says former Tory chair Sayeeda Warsi' was the new standfirst. "The government has been criticised for appointing a divisive counter-extremism campaigner", read the first line of the article.

Khan was "seen as being supportive of the government's controversial Prevent programme" (ah yes, the Prevent victim-mongers getting their chance to say their piece without reply again). Warsi, Shah and Harun Khan of the Muslim Council of Britain were quoted before any description of Khan's work and before anyone mounted a substantial defence of her.

The *Independent's* headline [read](#): 'Government's appointment of new anti-extremism chief branded "alarming" amid widespread criticism'. The first paragraph said the decision had been "widely criticised and described as 'deeply disturbing' by leading figures in the British Muslim community". Soon we were being told that "Ms Khan has been a strong advocate for the government's controversial Prevent policy, which has been described as 'demonising' Muslims." (Of course it has also "been described" as many other things). Once again Shah, Warsi and Harun Khan were given the chance to spout their nonsense before the only defence came from Sara Khan herself and the Government.

The press should hold Khan to account, and Islamist apologists have the right to wallow and wail if they wish. They are allowed to be sad at the sight of a successful woman from a Muslim background integrating into British society. They are allowed to feel a threat to their sense of victimhood and their control over British Muslims. But why on earth have their views been allowed to dominate the coverage of her appointment?

Who even gives the Muslim 'community' a special right to care more than anyone else about extremism policy? Why do journalists insist on rushing to Muslim 'leaders' or their mouthpieces in the halls of power for quotes? The Government's response to extremism affects all of us. Have any of the journalists writing their pieces today even considered, for example, canvassing views from the families of terror attack victims?

And journalists should not think that just because someone makes a lot of noise their views deserve a fair hearing. The smears against and misrepresentations of Sara Khan are not reasonable. Someone please point that out to the editorial staff in our nation's newsrooms.

Image of Sara Khan from Wikimedia Commons, user Mramoeba, shared under [Creative Commons Licence 4.0](#).

Chris Sloggett

Chris Sloggett is a former head of communications at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS. Follow Chris on Twitter: [@ChrisSloggett](#)

While you're here

Our news and opinion content is an important part of our campaigns work. Many articles involve a lot of research by our campaigns team. If you value this output, please consider supporting us today.

P.S. make sure to check out the related campaigns below.

- [Support us from just £1 a month](#)

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Extremism](#), [Islamism](#)