Exposing MI5 blackmail
Report by David Mery of a public meeting, Stop MI5 blackmail!, held at Camden Town Hall, 30 September 2009
Campaign Against Criminalising Communities

Muslim community workers allegedly blackmailed and harassed by MI5 in an attempt to recruit them are exposing these threat tactics. When they refused to cooperate, MI5 acted on its threat and some were detained and interrogated on trips abroad. These six young men, working for the Kentish Town Community Organisation (KTCO) were first targeted by MI5 in 2008. In August last year, they started talking to the KTCO directors about the harassment.

Shar Habeel Lone, KTCO Director, explained at the recent Stop MI5 blackmail! public meeting that KTCO flagged up this harassment with the local borough commander of the Metropolitan Police Service and with Frank Dobson MP, who flagged it up to the Home Office. Mohamed Nur, one of the youth workers who had been approached by MI5, commented, ‘We had somewhere to go, we had people we can talk to, we had people we can trust. What about those that have no one to go to?’ KTCO also went to senior police officers at Scotland Yard, to the Muslim Safety Forum, and wrote to Lord justice Mummery, president of the Investigatory Powers Tribunal (oversight committee on what the intelligence services do in the UK). As a result MI5 initially backed off. However, eight months later they were harassing another KTCO youth worker.

On 21 May 2009, The Independent published an account on its front-page: ‘Five Muslim community workers have accused MI5 of waging a campaign of blackmail and harassment in an attempt to recruit them as informants. The men claim they were given a choice of working for the Security Service or face detention and harassment in the UK and overseas’. None of them ‘has ever been arrested for terrorism or a terrorism-related offence.’ They were asked to ‘Work for us or we will say you are a terrorist.’

This brings us to the public meeting. Lone suggested that the British Muslim communities across the UK today are under siege, finding very little support. ‘They feel tarred with the same brush of terrorism, of being communities that don’t fit in, even though some are third and fourth generation. Then you have a very powerful security service: that’s our security service, that’s the security service of British Muslims as much as that of anyone else in this country.’ The same people that are actually implementing the Prevent strategy to prevent violent extremism in the UK are being targeted by the security services, he added.

Nur recounted how this is perceived by the community they’re working with. ‘Most of the community workers that work for KTCO are from the street. We work with young people from the same streets. Some of us come from gangs and we try to get young people out of them. We’ve been running gang prevention team and drug rehabilitation workshops for years, telling young people of the importance of education and showing them ways other than crime, and mentoring young people to become self confident so they can see a positive future. Some of these youths come up to us and have now become
youth leaders themselves. They say to us how ironic it is that when we were in gangs we were being pressured by the police, and after we become straight we’re still being pressured by the police and MI5.’

‘The security services are there to protect all of us. We commend the work they do,’ says Lone. ‘Where they get it so wrong is where we have a real problem. The other problem we see as British Muslims and those of us who work with youth of all backgrounds is that there are very sane voices within the security services themselves which are not heard. In June 2008, a couple of months before we flagged up this incident the very first time, there was a report by the MI5’s behavioural science unit Understanding radicalisation and violent extremism which said: ‘Traditional law enforcement tactics could backfire if handled badly or used against people who are not seen as legitimate targets.’ There are good people who are not being heard. The people that seems to have sway over policy are either not the right people or not educated enough in this area.’

Saghir Hussain of Cage Prisoners, and Frances Webber, lawyer, both pointed out that MI5 used similar tactics 30 years ago with the Irish community. As an explanation for such targeting of communities, Hussain suggested that security services people may be rather desperate. If there’s no security threat, there can be no result, and hence no career advancement or further expansion of the so-called security agencies. There are plenty examples of harassment. Muslims attending Mosques taken into a car and threatened by a plainclothes officer. The North West 10 Pakistani students labelled as terrorists but not accused of anything. The Forest Gate shooting and arrest. A Kurdish newspaper publisher followed in Haringay when visiting newsagents. People so afraid that they’re not travelling abroad or without their family – to avoid the border interviews under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act.

Webber detailed the story of a young man brought up here in the UK, who moved to Syria in March 2007 and was tortured there. Deported back to the UK in June 2007, he went home after being interrogated. In his first month back in the UK, he was approached by MI5 and told to report on people in the Mosque. In July 2007 he was put under a control order and had to move 100 km out of London and stay indoor for 14 hours a day. After a month he was arrested in another town for breach of conditions and has been in Belmarsh since 2007. A judge revoked his control order as the Home Office refused to justify it. However the judge did not quash the control order so this man still has to face the consequences of the breach of the control order that has been revoked. The Home Office is using this to impose another control order. A few control orders are enough to create a climate of fear in the community: ‘This is what may happen to you if you don’t cooperate.’ The secrecy under which MI5 operates, supported by judges that will not put pressure on MI5 to disclose any information at all, forces speculation and guesswork. Weber comments, ‘When you can’t see what government officials are doing, who is to say they’re not doing wrong? The demand has to be accountability. It’s been said many times: sunlight is the strongest disinfectant. MI5 and the Security Services must be properly and publicly accountable. There must be an end to the punitive sanctions based on suspicions that are never explained because lives are being destroyed by that secrecy.’
Lone raised the wider concern, ‘This sort of situation is clearly something that every decent British citizen needs to think about and have something to say about.’ This was answered by many of the other speakers. Alex Goodman, Camden Councillor, Green Party, explained that his initial reaction when invited was that he was afraid to get involved with this issue. However when compared to those affected, those facing coercion of threat, he soon realised it would be pathetic to be afraid to come to this meeting. Goodman offered, as a Camden Councillor, to raise this issue in Chamber and his solidarity. He pointed out the courage of these young men in exposing the MI5 blackmail tactics stands out. Hussain expressed that this courage was necessary to make the threat stop, ‘Very few have the courage to expose such harassment. MI5 strives on secrecy. Being vocal is the best defence. By expressing this kind of abuse it stopped it.’

Les Levidow, CAMPACC, explained that their campaign usually deals with cases of people accused of terrorism. This case is different as these young men have not been accused of anything! Unusual, but the tip of an iceberg. Levidow reminded us one reason such widespread practices rarely gain publicity: refugees, who are often targeted, face higher stakes because of the threat of deportation, possibly to torture or worse. ‘In all the cases we know of people who have been asked to become informants for MI5, it’s been very clear, they have been asked to collect information on political activities and ideas.’ The Prevent strategy, short for Prevent Violent Extremism, defines ‘extremist ideology’ very broadly. ‘Anyone who opposes British foreign policy, which really should be called plunder and terrorism around the world, can be classified as an extremist or someone who has extremist ideas.’ This leads to systematic surveillance of all political activities and even political views among Muslims and migrant communities in this country.

Having the courage to go public was acclaimed by all speakers as essential to lift the veil of secrecy and help stop the threats from MI5. The courage to support those exposing these threats was considered key. Changes to the system were advocated by Lone, ‘There needs to be greater competent oversight of the security services and better governance; there needs to be real competent oversight. There needs to be greater accountability; and as part of that greater accountability there needs to be an easier process of redress. When you’re targeting disadvantaged communities and people who are already alienated, how many people, and a lot of them who are not as educated perhaps as others and who aren’t used to writing letters, how are you going to have a channel that’s fair for redress? Finally, we want more common sense. Targeting the very people that you need on side is not a particularly smart strategy.’