

BRITAIN'S TROJAN HORSE

In recent months there have been growing concerns that the UK faces Islamisation by stealth.

Scaremongering by the British press had led to fears that Sharia law is to be enshrined in British law and that state schools are becoming madrassas. Just to be clear, it was Pakistani madrassas or Islamic religious schools that gave birth to the Taliban. In the meantime, semi-official Sharia courts are adjudicating Muslim disputes through the principles of Islamic doctrine, which is often in defiance of Britain's equality laws. On top of this there is a fear that, following the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's fall from power, there may be a backlash in the UK. The Brotherhood's presence in Britain has long been tolerated and the organisation is not proscribed by the British government.

Since earlier in 2014, a number of Birmingham state schools found themselves at the centre of a media firestorm after allegations of a so-called "Trojan Horse" plot that was seeking to instigate an overtly Islamist hard-line agenda. The latter was reportedly driven by the "Educational Activists", a coalition of Muslim school governors, teachers and education consultants.

Central to the Trojan Horse plot was the removal of secular head teachers and the imposition of Islamic practices. The Park View Education Trust was also accused of praising the late al-Qaeda firebrand Anwar al-Awlaki, using school facilities to copy Osama Bin Laden DVDs and using public funds to sponsor trips to Mecca. These are all allegations that the Trust has strenuously denied.

Even so, no one should be complacent over the threat emanating from Birmingham. West Midlands Police have stated that, outside London, the biggest threat from al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism comes from this area. Over the past decade a series of terror plots has been organised in the city involving a number of militants with known links to al-Qaeda. In particular, a recent spate of homegrown jihadists have come from the Sparkhill and Sparkbrook districts of Birmingham. Last year, following a high profile terror trial, Assistant Chief Constable Marcus Beale of West Midlands Police said the community needed to "work collectively to ensure that today's ten-year-olds aren't tomorrow's suspects in terrorism trials." Now Birmingham City Council stands accused of being complacent over this very threat.

Controversially, the man appointed by the Department of Education to head up a review of what has happened in the city's schools, Peter Clarke, is a former counter-terrorism officer. Understandably some in Birmingham's 250,000-strong Muslim community are offended that conservative Islam is being seen as one step from Islamist extremism.

The anonymous letter setting out the Trojan Horse plot has widely been dismissed as a vindictive hoax. But

Russell Hobby, Head of the National Association of Head Teachers, commented that while he felt the letter was fake there were elements of truth in it. Although the schools concerned have denied the allegations, and the claims of what was going on were perhaps exaggerated, what is evident is that there is some substance to fears over how state-funded secular schools are being converted into faith schools. The Park View Educational Trust vehemently denies that Park View is being run as a faith school.

Although the letter became public in March, West Midlands Police Counter Terrorism Unit, the Department of Education's Extremist Unit, Birmingham City Council and the National Association of Head Teachers were apparently already aware of it. Ofsted Chief Sir Michael Wilshaw has been very critical of this inertia stating "There's been a lack of urgency in the council's response to persistent complaints from head teachers about the conduct of certain governors."

The furore caused by the leaked letter resulted in the schools inspector, Ofsted, carrying out full inspections at five schools, which were rated inadequate (these included Park View, Golden Hillock and Nansen Primary all run by the Park View Educational Trust) and monitoring visits at another 16. Oldknow Academy and Sattley were put into special measures.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, alongside Park View Educational Trust, noted Birmingham City Council's "failure to support schools in their efforts to keep pupils safe from risk of extremism". Sir Albert Bore, Head of Birmingham City Council said he was "reassured that no evidence of a plot or conspiracy have been found by Ofsted." A statement issued by the Trust said, "The Ofsted reports find absolutely no evidence of extremism or an imposition of strict Islamic practices in our schools. We reject the judgment that students are not being prepared to play an integrated role in modern society.



©Getty Images

“The fear of hard-line Islamic indoctrination in our schools fuels a sense of the enemy within working to undermine the UK's democratic institutions”

OLDKNOW WAR



Eye of the storm:
Ofsted accused a small group of governors at Oldknow Academy in Birmingham of seeking to promote faith-based ideology

The idea of a Trojan Horse plot has created a perfect storm for individuals and organisations with agendas around education, immigration, faith securitisation and straightforward party politics.”

Lee Donaghy, assistant principal at Park View School, was also swift to denounce Ofsted’s findings saying, “It is simply not true that the school does not do enough to protect our pupils from the risks of extremism.” Dave Hughes, vice chair of the Trust was in an equally combative mood stating, “The problem here is not extremism, or segregation, or religious indoctrination – all the things Ofsted looked for but failed to find in our schools. The problem here is that the knee-jerk actions of some politicians have undermined the great work we do here, and undermined community cohesion every where... We will now be challenging these reports

through appropriate legal channels.”

Nonetheless, Ofsted concluded that a number of governors had been acting inappropriately and had interfered in the day-to-day running of certain schools. This included unprofessional recruiting practices and nepotism. In light of Ofsted’s findings it begs the question why did the local authorities not act sooner.

The finger has been pointed at Tahir Alam, chairman of the Park View Educational Trust. He is also an Ofsted inspector and is employed by Birmingham City Council as a specialist in school governance. As a result of his expertise, Mr Alam was involved in drafting the 2007 guide “Meeting the needs of Muslim Students”, though this was published by the respected Muslim Council of Britain. On the face of it there would seem a clash of interest. Mr Alam has denied the allegations, saying the

BRITAIN'S TROJAN WAR



© Getty Images

plot is made up. Nevertheless, there are questions to be answered regarding his relationship with Nansen deputy head, Razwan Faraz, who is also the administrator of the Educational Activists.

The fear of hard-line Islamic indoctrination in our schools is only one of a number of strands that fuel a sense of the enemy within working to undermine the UK's democratic institutions. While Sharia law has no legal basis in the UK, there are those who are alarmed at the prospect of it becoming so. In an unprecedented move The Law Society has started to recognise the legitimacy of Sharia principles. Many, mostly unofficial, Sharia courts exist in Muslim communities to help resolve civil and family disputes using Islamic law instead of local authorities or the formal court system. An estimated 85 courts operate across the country.

Allegations of "Trojan horse" radicalisation sparked a strong backlash against the inspectors

Anthony Tucker-Jones is intersec's terrorism and security correspondent. He is a former defence intelligence officer and is now a widely published defence commentator specialising in regional conflicts and counter terrorism.

A few Sharia courts are recognised as tribunals under the Arbitration Act and provide a form of alternative dispute resolution. They have the power to set commercial contracts, settle inheritance battles and marital disputes, but only offer mediation rather than adjudication. These courts, often based in local mosques, do however rule on legal matters such as inheritance, divorce and child custody in a manner that is in some cases seen as discriminatory and incompatible with secular human rights legislation. Some Muslim critics argue it is hard for the British government to claim secular credentials when Christian bishops sit in the House of Lords.

In March 2014, The Law Society caused an almighty rumpus when it issued guidelines for drawing up Sharia-compliant wills. After cuts to legal aid, some saw this as a way of drumming up business. The Society's President, Nicholas Fluck, stated the guidance would promote "good practice" in applying Islamic principles in the British legal system. Instead, this is seen as the thin edge of the wedge by some, that would create a parallel legal system in the UK.

Fluck was swift to attack "inaccurate and ill-informed" press reports that the Society is promoting Sharia law. He responded saying: "We live in a diverse multi-faith, multi-cultural society. The Law Society responded to requests from its members for guidance on how to help clients asking for wills that distribute their assets in accordance with Sharia practice. Our practice note focuses on how to do that, where it is allowed under English law". He said that the law of England and Wales will give effect to wishes clearly expressed in a valid will, in so far as those wishes are compliant with the law of England. The Ministry of justice has clarified "Sharia law has no jurisdiction in England and Wales and the government has no intention to change this position."

British tolerance may also about to be tested by the Muslim Brotherhood. Following the coup in Egypt that brought an end to the Brotherhood's democratic success and the imprisoning of former President Morsi, elements of the Brotherhood feel they have been given no option but to resort to violence. To many Egyptians, the election of former general Sisi simply offers a continuation of Mubarak's type of autocratic regime where the military continue to pull the strings behind the scenes.

Britain's domestic intelligence agency, MI5, has been tasked with assessing the number of Muslim Brotherhood members in UK and their intentions. While the Brotherhood is dedicated to the non-violent democratic promotion of Islam, it has served as the inspiration for just about every single militant Sunni Islamist group. Now that the Brotherhood has lost its chance to rule Egypt, there is no saying where it will lash out.

Meanwhile, back in Birmingham, the extent of the problem – and indeed the damage to community relations – is still unclear; the council is now investigating 25 of the city's 400 schools. In addition, it says it is liaising with the local authorities in Bradford and Manchester. It remains to be seen if Birmingham's experiences were just a misunderstanding or part of an alarming trend that could give rise to a whole new generation of jihadists.