



Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

29th January 2018

Dear Ms. Rudd,

Re: Appointment of Sara Khan as New Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism

We are astonished and disappointed to discover that the government has appointed Sara Khan as the new Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, which is a highly important role. From her appointment and the high standard of the other candidates shortlisted, it would appear that the recruitment process was only transparent and fair until the panel interview stage at the end of November 2017. We understand that after this point the decision was a Ministerial one and may have also involved the Prime Minister. Given the importance of this role and the high levels of criticism this decision has received, the government has a duty to go beyond media sound bites, such as stating Ms. Khan is 'expertly qualified', and set out a detailed explanation of how Ms. Khan met the criteria, especially over and above the other candidates.

The Commission's work will be crucial as there are issues of extremism, which cut across all communities. Muslims are particularly anxious to challenge extremism in all its forms because it is not Islamic, it has been damaging to the reputation of Muslims, it is damaging to community relations and most importantly because we must protect more people from being hurt and killed. Muslims are also regularly subjected to anti-Muslim hate crimes fueled by far-right extremism. Muslims in particular understand the importance of this Commission and would wish to see it succeed.

The Chair of the Commission on Countering Extremism should therefore be required to fulfill two important criteria:

- c) Having credibility and trust across all communities
- d) Being able to galvanise all stakeholders whose work is relevant to the Commission's work

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Unfortunately, the appointment of Ms. Khan does not indicate that either of those criteria are being met. We cannot recall the last time that an appointment in this field of work has created such fierce debate and concern. What is most interesting is that Muslims from across the religious spectrum are unhappy with this appointment. The common complaint is that Ms. Khan does not appear to meet the necessary criteria. Given the divergences in the thinking and views of Muslim groups on how this agenda should be tackled, it was imperative that whoever was appointed Chair would, first and foremost, have the ability to engage with these varying standpoints and even bring them together in constructive discussion. It is clear that this will not happen after the reaction of Muslims from across the religious spectrum to this appointment. Ms. Khan's knowledge of and engagement with far right extremism also appears at best limited and there is little evidence of her engagement with other religious minorities.

Our concern does not arise because a woman is chairing the Commission as has been suggested by some individuals in the media, nor is it fair to dismiss or align all complainants as Islamists/extremists as appears to be suggested by Zac Goldsmith's social media comments and an article on the National Secular Society website - absolutely not! Our fundamental concern is that if she fails to galvanise Muslim communities, the levels of extremism in the name of Islam, and therefore the threat of terrorism, will not decrease. This, in turn, puts all of us at risk.

If progressive thinking individuals and organisations such as Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) - the leading, national Muslim women's charity in Britain which also engages with the government - has no confidence in this appointment, then what is the likelihood of others, who already mistrust government policies, speaking to the Commission? We certainly cannot be accused of being extremist or of being a fringe group; in fact, many of the same groups and individuals who usually condemn Ms. Khan also often demonise us. For example, we have been criticised for raising concerns about why primary school age Muslim girls are wearing the hijab, as well as opposing segregation of young children in schools. Our lack of confidence in Ms. Khan should therefore be taken as a serious concern by others, including her supporters.

We have noticed wide support for Ms. Khan amongst commentators who have no religious affiliations. If these commentators are serious about reducing the threat of extremism, they should not ignore the legitimate concerns raised by Muslims to this appointment, as the involvement of Muslims is necessary for the Commission's success. We feel the current tone of the commentary in the media and demonisation of all those Muslims who are against Ms. Khan's appointment shows yet again that Muslim voices are not considered important and are therefore unlikely to be heard.

History tells us that challenging and defeating extremism, whatever form it takes, requires engagement with those who have knowledge and experience of it and the contacts through which wider audiences are reached. How then will extremism be addressed in the UK today if individuals and organisations willing to tackle it head on, by working with government and other stakeholders, are unable to trust the Chair of the Commission?

When the idea of a Commission was announced immediately after the Manchester attacks, we welcomed the news for two reasons:

- a) Such a commission would look at extremism across all communities and not focus on extremism amongst Muslim communities alone, in turn ensuring that all forms of hate are tackled.
- b) Such a commission would be independent and would therefore listen to diverse Muslim groups and communities including those which are usually not included or heard in current debates.

We consider there to be valid concerns about Ms. Khan's independence from the government and especially the Home Office. For example, her book on extremism has been co-authored by Tony McMahon, who was a Home Office funded consultant. When MWNUK worked with Breakthrough Media in 2015 to produce the Muslim female role model 'And Muslim' videos, he contacted us with a press release about the videos that the Home Office wanted to send out in our name but which we rejected. We complained about this press release in writing, pointing out that the reference to extremism did not include right wing extremism, that Islamophobia was downplayed and the language used in it was similar to Ms. Khan's 'Making a Stand' campaign. At the time we did not know that Tony McMahon was in fact also working with Ms. Khan. We therefore rewrote the press release to explain the purpose of the campaign videos and asked for it to be forwarded to the Home Office. However, the Home Office did not end up launching our campaign videos and we subsequently launched them at our Annual General Meeting on 11th October 2016.

Given our experience, it is reasonable to be concerned that the Home Office may have influenced the contents of Ms. Khan's book and her 'Making a Stand' campaign via Mr. McMahon. This 'Making a Stand' roadshow in 2014, to engage with Muslim women, was in fact a RICU, Home Office supported project, a fact that she concealed at the time. It is important to note that her sister is a Director within RICU who has been working on extremism since she joined the Home Office in 2008 and that her role has also included engagement with local authority Prevent Officers. It is noteworthy the Muslim women who attended the roadshow events were mostly gathered via the local authority Prevent Officers. We contend that Ms. Khan is therefore not as independent from the government as she so often claims.

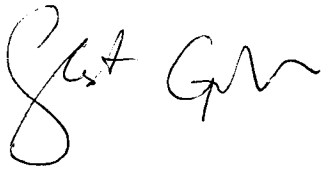
Sara Khan regularly portrays herself as a women's rights campaigner, therefore it is of concern that her limited engagement with Muslim women only appears to be undertaken through 'preventing extremism' work. This is problematic because she seems to view Muslim women through the lens of extremism only and we feel this calls into question her commitment to women's rights activism. This approach of hers will deter many Muslim women from engaging with the Commission.

MWNUK works with the government because we believe that two way dialogue is important and do so openly, and also do not limit ourselves to working with the Home Office alone. For example, our work has included delivering the Helpline, forced marriage and FGM events, which have been partly funded by the Cabinet Office, DCMS, DCLG, FCO and DoE. Although we work with the government, we are fiercely protective of our independence (as demonstrated above) and we publicly object to and challenge any and all ideas and policies with which we disagree and which we feel hinders our aims of achieving an equal, inclusive and tolerant society. Even though many

organisations and individuals like us work with the government and doing so should not necessarily raise automatic concerns over conflict of interest, it is crucial the Chair of the Commission, which is supposed to be independent and impartial, is not so closely linked to the Home Office.

We fear that if Sara Khan continues to lead the Commission, it will turn out to be an ineffective body. Therefore, if the government is serious about eradicating extremism and protecting the public, it must reconsider the appointment of the Chair of this important Commission. MWNUK will work with the government to tackle extremism and build community cohesion but it must be through a genuine conversation between equal partners. MWNUK will refuse to engage with the Commission if Sara Khan continues to lead it.

Yours sincerely,



Muslim Women's Network UK

Shaista Gohir OBE (Chair)

Nazmin Akthar Sheikh (Vice Chair)

Dr. Iram Sattar (Trustee)

Dr. Khursheed Wadia (Trustee)

Sophie Garner (Trustee)

Faeza Vaid (Executive Director)