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The Home Office, RICU and Muslim civil society groups:
Briefing for the Home Affairs Select Committee Countering extremism inquiry

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**Introduction**
This briefing provides information on the activities of two organisations that have given evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee as part of its enquiry on Counter-extremism in the past few months: Inspire and Families Against Stress and Trauma (FAST).

The briefing draws on a hitherto unpublished internal document produced by the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) as well as the results of background research on the two organizations above.

Over the last decade we have, separately and jointly, been working on the issues of terrorism expertise, Islamophobia, Muslim civil society groups and government communications. There are details about some of our publications in the area in the biographical notes at the foot of this briefing.

In recent research on the Prevent duty we came across the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism *'Prevent strategy: Local delivery best practice catalogue'* appended at the end of this briefing. We noted that it seemed to contradict evidence given to the committee and felt it would be appropriate for the committee to consider the contents of the document in the light of its own enquiry on counter extremism. In particular, the document shows how several 'independent' organisations working in the area of counter-narratives have a close relationship with the Research Information and Communication Unit (RICU) (the strategic communication unit of the Home Office). The closeness of the relationship seems to undermine numerous public claims that these are independent, grass roots or voluntary organisations.

It appears to us that the committee might be interested in this material since it sheds new light on the connections between Inspire and FAST and the Home Office. The material in this briefing is also informed by revelations published in the *Guardian* in early May 2016, which revealed the role of the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) of the OSCT in covert communications activities in relation to counter extremism. In particular it revealed that RICU has been engaged in a wide range of activities with civil society groups. The defining characteristic of these relations appears to be that they are covert or, at least, opaque. In the next sections of the briefing we look in turn at RICU, Inspire and FAST, before concluding by noting the issues raised.

**RICU**
The Research, Information and Communication Unit (RICU) of the Home Office, created in 2007, has responsibility for counter terrorism communications. In the first few years of its existence it focused on the production of communications guides, audience research and efforts to understand how language used by government is received and understood by target audiences.1 RICU appears to have changed strategy from June 2011. According to the testimony of the Home Secretary to the Intelligence

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and Security Committee in January 2012, as a result of the review of Prevent, RICU ‘has a new focus’. According to the Committee’s report:

RICU has focused on engaging credible civil society organisations in order to encourage these organisations to challenge radical and extreme views in their local communities. The Home Secretary assured us that – particularly given previous concerns about the groups that were receiving funding – RICU had now recognised the importance of choosing credible groups with good leadership².

The Home Secretary was then cited saying:

Often it is more effective to be working through groups that are recognised as having a voice and having an impact with that voice, rather than it being seen to be government trying to give a message. Indeed, it’s always better to be using those people to whom people look naturally to hear the message, rather than simply doing it as RICU itself.³

This new orientation appears to be the reason for the particular involvements of RICU with civil society organisations.

Covert use of civil society groups
This would appear to include communications where apparently independent civil society organisations function as covert groups for the government. These organisations are distributing messages that appear to be from civil society organisations but are in fact paid for by, and possibly under the editorial control of, government.

However, amongst the revelations in the Guardian is the claim that 'RICU does not fund these groups [directly]', and that instead it funds the communication company Breakthrough:

   to produce these groups’ communications. Some of the groups with which Breakthrough works on RICU’s behalf insist they retain editorial control and that Ricu and Breakthrough’s help amplifies their messages. Privately, however, Breakthrough says it is providing 'Ricu with effective ways of communicating its own messages through credible civil society organisations'.⁴

We note below the implications of this report for the evidence given by Inspire to the committee.

⁴ Ian Cobain, Alice Ross, Rob Evans and Mona Mahmood, 'Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the cold war' The Guardian, 2 May 2016 16.30 BST http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war
Openness and transparency

We note that RICU was quoted in the Guardian as stating:

Our guiding principle has to be whether or not any organisation we work with is itself happy to talk publicly about what they do. At the same time we are as open as we can be and have referenced the role of RICU in publications and in parliament.  

It is true that RICU has been mentioned in front of the Home Affairs Select Committee (in 2008) and in front of the Intelligence and Security Committee (in 2011), though the committee may want to consider whether, it has been as open as necessary. We also note that the organisations that RICU works with and that are discussed in this submission have talked publicly about what they do. But the evidence in this briefing suggests they may not have been fully open and honest, including in their evidence before this committee, as we will now examine.

The document we mentioned above is titled Prevent Strategy: Local delivery best practice catalogue and is dated March 2015. It appears to have no security classification, though several pages of the document are marked 'not for public disclosure'. We attach a copy as an appendix to this document.

Inspire

Inspire gave evidence to the committee in November 2015. The organisation submitted two further memos in response to queries raised by committee members about the extent to which it is independent; about inconsistencies in its own account of its history; and about alleged conflicts of interest. We examine each issue in turn.

Is Inspire independent?

Inspire maintained that it was an ‘independent’ group, and that ‘all decisions in relation to Inspire’s remit and work are made solely by the directors; all projects and activities are led and carried out by the Inspire team.’

Furthermore, Inspire has given the following background about why it launched #makingastand.

We launched this campaign in 2014 because we wanted to stop the damage caused by extremists poisoning young minds in our communities… Listening to women as they told us of their suffering and unimaginable grief on discovering that their sons and daughters had turned their backs on the family

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5 Ian Cobain, Alice Ross, Rob Evans and Mona Mahmood, 'Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the cold war' The Guardian, 2 May 2016 16.30 BST http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war


to join ISIS made us realise that if we came together our voice would be stronger.9

The campaign was launched by the Home Secretary in September 2014 at the headquarters of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in Whitehall. Inspire then toured the country with their social media campaign aiming to ‘empower’ Muslim women to ‘make a stand’ against extremism.

But in OSCT’s Prevent strategy: local delivery best practice catalogue (Appendix 1), their flagship campaign is described differently. It is listed as one of four ‘RICU products’10. In a section of the OSCT document marked ‘not for public disclosure’, the campaign is described as creating a ‘network of British Muslim women across Prevent priority areas’ in order ‘to transmit HMG counter extremism messages into communities and hard to reach audiences’. The 'resources required' in the attempt to reach these audiences is 'access to women's civil society groups'.

Inspire stated in their supplementary written evidence to the committee that they received Home Office funding for 'Making A Stand', but they do not disclose the full details of their relationship to RICU. This is despite the fact that there were directly questioned on the nature of their relationship with the Home Office by the committee in November.

In fact their acknowledgement of Home Office funding creates further confusion. In supplementary evidence submitted to the committee, Inspire claim the 'funding we have received has been for project funding for our Making A Stand campaign which was launched in 2014 and ended in 2015 as is stated on the Inspire website.' In a blog post in May 2016 Inspire's Kalsoom Bashir stated that 'it is public knowledge of Inspire’s involvement with Prevent since its inception.' Neither of these statements is particularly clear about the relationship with the Home Office. Furthermore there is evidence that Inspire have only latterly admitted that their #Makingastand campaign was supported by the Home Office. Data from the Internet Archive shows that in previous versions of the relevant page on the Inspire website the link with the Home Office was not mentioned. Between 8 October 2014 and 21 July 2015 the Internet Archive captured the relevant page eight times. None mentioned the Home Office backing. Inspire directors gave evidence on 17 November 2016. We cannot tell when exactly the page changed, but we can say that the next time the page was captured by the Internet Archive on 23 November 2015, a passage had been added at the bottom of the page that stated:

We are thankful to the Home Office for supporting our Making A Stand campaign. The funding received to deliver projects into communities has helped provide women with an opportunity to better understand how they can protect their children from radicalisation and extremism.11

Inspire also claim that they have never received ‘direct’ or ‘core’ Home Office funding but only ‘project funding’ for their Making A Stand campaign. 12 This would

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9 Inspire 'Making a stand'. http://www.wewillinspire.com/making-a-stand/
10 The other three are: Families Matter; A Tale of Two Cities and Faith on the Frontline.
appear to suggest that the Inspire have had project funding from the Home Office as opposed to the claims of RICU that groups are not paid money directly. The committee might wish to explore this apparent anomaly.

Following further submissions of written evidence to the committee Inspire have now had three opportunities to disclose at least some details of their relationship with RICU over *Making A Stand*. The fact that they have not done so is notable. The committee may feel that this warrants further investigation.

Sara Khan told the Home Affairs Select Committee she is operating in a ‘climate of intimidation’:

> People have called us Islamophobes, native informants and Government stooges, and for what? Because we stand up for women’s rights and we are trying to help Muslim mothers who come to us and say, “Can you please give us the counter-narrative? Tell us, how can we stop our children from being radicalised?” It is a very toxic environment.\(^\text{13}\)

But when Inspire fail to be clear about the precise nature of their relationship to government, questions will inevitably be asked.

**Formation of Inspire**

Inspire have been inconsistent in their account of their own history and have been inaccurate with dates in the evidence they have so far submitted to the Home Affairs Select Committee. The Inspire website states that Inspire was created in 2009.\(^\text{14}\) This appears to be incorrect. In additional evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee Inspire corrected the account noting the organisation was created in 2008 but 'formally launched' in 2009.\(^\text{15}\) This also appears to be incorrect.

In fact, Inspire seems to have been in existence since 2007. Inspire's website states that the organisation was involved in training in partnership with Hounslow Council in December 2007.\(^\text{16}\) There is further confirmation in a long deleted profile on the Inspire website, of the co-founder, Tahmina Saleem. This notes that 'in 2008 Tahmina received an award on behalf of the Inspire team for the design and delivery of the Hounslow Leadership Training for Muslim Women. The award was the Government Office for London Conference Award for Innovation for the best Women's Project 2008.\(^\text{17}\) The award was for work done in December 2007 in

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\(^{12}\) Sara Khan and Kalsoom Bashir, 'Supplementary written evidence submitted by Inspire' 5th January 2016


\(^{14}\) Inspire 'About us' http://www.wewillinspire.com/about-us/

\(^{15}\) Sara Khan and Kalsoom Bashir 'Further written evidence to Home Affairs Select Committee on Countering Extremism' 9 February 2016.

\(^{16}\) Inspire, 'Advanced Leadership and Muslim Women Course', 3 October 2008.
http://www.wewillinspire.com/advanced-leadership-and-muslim-women-course/'
collaboration with Hounslow council, undertaken with funding from the Preventing Extremism Pathfinder Fund, a pot of money that was the responsibility of the Principal Community Cohesion Officer for Hounslow - a person called Sabin Malik. Malik (now known as Sabin Khan) is Sara Khan's sister and the current deputy head of RICU at the OSCT.

On the question of the 'formal launch' of Inspire, it is certainly true that the organization held a conference in January 2009 in conjunction with the Metropolitan Police. It is noteworthy that amongst the speakers at that event was Sara Khan's sister Sabin. The involvement of Sabin Khan in this event adds to the impression of a close relationship between RICU and Inspire.

Conflicts of interest?
We note the questions raised by a member of the committee about conflicts of interest in relation to Inspire. In response to these Sara Khan and Kalsoom Bashir noted:

Ms Bashir took on the role of co-director for Inspire in 2014. Her employers at the time, Avon and Somerset Constabulary were informed as demanded by policy and procedures.

This statement appears inaccurate. It is certainly true that documents at Companies House show that Kalsoom Bashir was appointed as a director of Inspire Women CIC (company number 08275916) on 31 January 2014. However, the Inspire statement neglects to mention that documents at Companies House show she was appointed secretary of Inspire Women CIC on its formation in October 2012. Furthermore, Kalsoom Bashir herself states on her LinkedIn page that she joined Inspire in January 2011.

Immediately after the statement above Khan and Bashir go on to state that: 'Ms Bashir did not receive any payment from Inspire while employed by the police.' Given that Bashir appears to have been with Inspire for considerably longer than has been claimed, there is a question about whether she was paid at any stage for work she did while at the council, with or for Inspire, (between January 2011 and January 2014). The Inspire statement does not specifically confirm or deny that. If she was paid by Inspire at the same time as working full time for the council this potentially raises significant issues, which the committee might want to explore.

Evidence base
In her appearance before the committee Sara Khan stated that:

I am happy to provide all the evaluation reports for our programmes that we have delivered, and information on how that has impacted on women and how women’s understanding of this issue has travelled in terms of their knowledge. We have all that information available to share with you.

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18 DCLG Empowering Muslim Women – Case studies. P. 44. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7422/7/669801_Redacted.pdf

19 LinkedIn, 'Kalsoom Bashir'. https://www.linkedin.com/in/kalsoom-bashir-486a722a

In the subsequent evidence submitted to the committee by Inspire it was stated that:

   The Home Affairs Select Committee asked us to provide information from our evaluation reports. The following bullet points are taken from the Leeds evaluation report highlighting the training programme and its impact on women who participated. The impact of the Wandsworth training is also included.21

As is apparent from this remark, the evidence submitted was not 'all the evaluation reports' but selected bullet points from two reports. It is not possible to analyse this material properly unless it is given in toto. The committee might like to ask for this material to be supplied.

FAST

FAST (Families Against Stress and Terror) describes itself as an organisation that offers ‘support to vulnerable families and individuals’. It is not entirely clear what specific activities FAST do to offer this support, although they do produce a number of videos with Home Office support. It claims to be: 'an independent organisation'.22 Though, according to Saleha Jaffer, FAST has been in existence from 2007, it has only been registered at Companies House since May 2009.23 It currently has four directors, one of which is Jaffer. In Lambeth council register of interests declarations made by Jaffer, there is no mention of her involvement with FAST as there should be.

Furthermore in her 2015 register of interest declaration, it is noted under employment that this is 'sensitive information, not published at Councillor's request'. In the previous year's register, however, Jaffer was stated to be a 'vocational employee' at the 'OSCT'.

Both of these anomalies raise questions about the precise relationship between the OSCT and FAST and about the extent to which FAST is in reality an 'independent' organisation.

Connection to RICU

According to Jaffer's statement before the Committee, FAST used to be funded by the Home Office between 2007-10 but that it no longer receives funding from the Home Office. Instead, in a passage that has some significance, Jaffer said:

   From 2007 for three years, we got funding from Home Office, OSCT funding but now we don't get it. But we do work very closely with Home Office, producing lots of campaign films.

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 November 2015, p. 23.
21 Sara Khan and Kalsoom Bashir, 'Supplementary written evidence submitted by Inspire' 5th January 2016, p. 4.
22 FAST 'About FAST'. http://familiesmatter.org.uk/about-fast/
23 Companies House 'Fast London UK Ltd Company number 06906866'
https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/06906866
This would seem to tally with the revelations in the *Guardian* to the effect that RICU does not pay the civil society groups it works with directly but gives the money to Breakthrough Media to undertake the work.

In the internal OSCT document (Appendix 1) it is indicated that FAST's 'Families matter' campaign was a 'RICU product' which has been 'led and developed' by FAST but 'supported by… PR and online activity'. This information also raises questions about the independence of FAST.

**Popularity of FAST activities**

The OSCT document (which is dated March 2015) notes that the 'main campaign film' produced for FAST had been 'viewed over 162,000 on YouTube'. This figure contrasts with that given to the Committee by Saleha Jaffer who said 'there are millions of hits on our DVDs on YouTube'. 24 As of Sunday 22 May 2016 the FAST Youtube Channel, which hosts all of the groups videos records that the channel has 185 subscribers and a total of 386,040 views, or just over one third of a million. 25

**Confidentiality**

On its website FAST gives a 'guarantee that everything that is discussed in groups, or individual sessions is 100% confidential.' Given its connection with the OSCT, legitimate questions might be raised about the reliability of the claims that everything is confidential. Its connection to RICU's covert campaigns might also be troubling to those who have worked with FAST if they were not made aware of these connections.

**Credibility**

We note the statement of the Home Secretary before the Intelligence and Security Committee in January 2012. The Home Secretary herself stated that:

> Often it is more effective to be working through groups that are recognised as having a voice and having an impact with that voice, rather than it being seen to be government trying to give a message. Indeed, it’s always better to be using those people to whom people look naturally to hear the message, rather than simply doing it as RICU itself. 26

The Committee reported that:

> Since June 2011, RICU has focused on engaging credible civil society organisations in order to encourage these organisations to challenge radical and extreme views in their local communities. The Home Secretary assured us that – particularly given previous concerns about the groups that were

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25 FAST Families Against Stress and Trauma ‘About’, *YouTube*. [https://www.youtube.com/user/FASTFamiliesMatter/about](https://www.youtube.com/user/FASTFamiliesMatter/about)

receiving funding – RICU had now recognised the importance of choosing credible groups with good leadership. 27 (authors emphasis)

Given this, we considered that it might be relevant for the committee to have information about Jaffer's background, which has extended to her acting as an 'Ambassador for Peace' for an organisation called the Universal Peace Foundation UK. Jaffer was also formally registered at Companies House as a director of the latter organisation from 2008-2013. 28 The Universal Peace Foundation was set up by the Rev Sung Moon's Unification Church – otherwise known as the Moonies. 29 Jaffer resigned as director of the UPF in June 2013, 30 the year before it appears that RICU starting channelling funds into the organisation by paying for Breakthrough Media to produce its videos. Some of FAST's other directors have also been associated with the Unification Church. For example Cecilie Fortune (August 2009-September 2011) helps to run the South London Unification community 31; and Fouzia Razvi (July 2009-September 2015) has spoken at a UPF event on 'countering secularism'. 32

We raise this issue not in relation to the activities of Saleha Jaffer or FAST, but specifically in relation to the activities of RICU, the OSCT and the Home Office. We note that RICU have not given evidence before the Committee and that the evidence given by the Home Office did not mention these issues. In the light of the significant disclosures by the Guardian recently, we invite the Committee to consider exploring these issues.

Issues to be explored
The information in this briefing suggests that the following issues need further exploration:

Home Office/RICU
1. What is the role of RICU in hidden or covert communications as part of work on 'counter-narratives'?
2. Is there adequate oversight of this work to ensure ethical standards are met and that harm to those participants who unknowingly engage in the work is minimized or avoided?
3. Is there adequate evaluation of the work to ensure value for money and efficacy?

28 Companies House, 'Saleha-Begum Jaffer', https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/officers/H7dQ6cV87aJNm3OrNbpblax984/appointments
30 Companies House, 'Saleha-Begum Jaffer', https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/officers/H7dQ6cV87aJNm3OrNbpblax984/appointments
31 Unification Movement, 'Communities: South London'. http://communities.um-uk.org/about/southlondon/
**Inspire**

1. When exactly was Inspire created? Why has Inspire given contradictory statements about the date of its creation?
2. What resources has Inspire received from public funding sources including the Home Office, other government department and local government?
3. Accounts filed by Inspire (in both its formal iterations) at Companies House do not give a full list or even a total amount for income in the relevant year, nor the sources of such income. The Committee might want to seek such financial records from Inspire.
4. Have ethical standards in relation to conflict of interest been adhered to? What evidence is there that conflicts of interest have been effectively managed?
5. What exactly is the relationship between the Home Office, OSCT and RICU and Inspire?
6. According to revelations in the *Guardian*, RICU does not directly fund groups like Inspire, but instead pays Breakthrough Media to produce materials. This version of events seems to contradict the account given by Inspire in its supplementary evidence.
   a. How much money exactly has Inspire received from the Home Office, directly and indirectly and when?
   b. Did the Home office pay money directly to Inspire for its Making a Stand campaign, and if so how much; If not why has Sara Khan given misleading information to the committee on the relationship between Inspire and the Home Office?
   c. What is the relationship between Breakthrough and Inspire? Has Inspire received advice, news media training, social media advice or other help from Breakthrough?

**FAST**

1. Is FAST an independent body as claimed?
2. Was Saleha Jaffer an 'employee' of the OSCT at the same time as running an 'independent' company which worked closely with the OSCT?
3. Why has Saleha Jaffer apparently mis-reported her connection with FAST in her Lambeth register of interests?
4. What steps were taken to ensure that conflicts of interest were declared and/or managed in this case?
5. What steps have been taken to inform those who work with FAST (including those who appear in their videos) of the link with Breakthrough and RICU/OSCT?
6. Have such participants given fully informed consent for participation?
7. What steps have been taken to ensure that such participants do not suffer negative reputational damage on revelation of covert links between FAST and the government?
8. What has been the relationship between Breakthrough and FAST? What help and advice has been provided?
9. What was the budget of the activities undertaken for FAST by Breakthrough?
10. Was the Home Office/RICU aware of the connections between FAST and the Universal Peace Foundation?
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