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TRANSCRIPT OF “FILE ON 4” – “*SUNNI AND SHIA SPLITS?*”

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PRODUCER: Sally Chesworth
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ACTUALITY OF PRAYERS IN SHIA MOSQUE

ASIM: Sectarianism between Sunnis and Shias is a cancer at the heart of Islam, because it has caused so much tension, and I was really hopeful that it wouldn't really slip over into the UK.

MAHMOOD: Tonight on File on 4, are the sectarian divisions raging in Syria and Iraq reaching the streets of Britain? It's a question that many are reluctant to talk about, but as a Muslim journalist I am increasingly hearing reports of tension and, in some cases, intimidation. It feels like an important time to lift the lid on what's really going on. Some of what I find shocks me.

MUSTAFA: For me anti Shia sectarianism is a bigger threat on my life, on my friends, than islamophobia.

NAKSHAWANI: Sometimes, when non-Muslims think that they are the victims of Islamic terrorism, I say, 'Listen; there are Muslims who are more victims than non-Muslims.'

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY AT LOVE MOHAMMED EVENT

WOMAN'S VOICE: This love is contagious and how could it not be? He is heartbeats away from ...

MAHMOOD: I've been invited to SOAS University in central London for the 'Love Mohammed' event. Now in its fourth year, the national campaign aims to bring Sunni and Shia Muslims together through the Prophet's message of peace. Around 300 people have packed the theatre hall to hear Islamic recitations, poetry and music.

HASSAM: Tonight's evening is entitled Love Mohammed – an evening of solidarity. Now ...

MAHMOOD: Dr Bilal Hassam is a presenter on British Muslim TV and one of the organisers of this event.

HASSAM: The prophet Mohammed - peace and blessings upon him - is perhaps history's greatest unifying force and brought people from all corners of the earth together. When times are difficult – and right now being a Muslim in Britain and beyond is tough, there's a lot of Islamophobia, there's a lot of demonisation of Muslims, and in the past, when Muslims have ever felt oppressed or felt they were going through difficult times, they've looked to the Prophet Mohammed and his example as a way to transform their states. So this event is remembering the Prophet Mohammed, it's bringing together Sunni and Shia community leaders.

ACTUALITY OF SINGING

MAHMOOD: Rifts between Sunnis and Shias have existed for a long time. The split between the two divisions took place 1,400 years ago following the death of Prophet Mohammed. Muslims who wanted to appoint his successor by following the traditional Arab custom - the Sunna - formed into a group known as Sunnis. Others who insisted the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali as the legitimate heir became known as Shia. Today there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world - around 85% are

MAHMOOD cont: Sunni. In Britain the Shia community makes up 5% of the total Muslim population of 2.8 million. Those gathered here tonight come from both backgrounds.

WOMAN: We don't want in the UK that international events to affect us. We should set an example of how we can work together.

MAN: A lot of the time the media, the people focus on what separates different communities, especially the Muslim community and the different sects. I think the crux of this event is to bring us what actually unites us.

HASSAM: We can see with the recent tensions in the Middle East, we can see some tension sort of being spilled out and sort of mirrored here in the UK and this event is pre-empting that and saying look, there are going to be differences and we are going to disagree, but right here in the UK we have a responsibility to build bridges with each other, to foster relationships of trust and ultimately foster relationships of love and this is what we're doing tonight.

MUSIC

MAHMOOD: It's impossible to talk about the state of Sunni/Shia relations in the UK or anywhere these days without factoring in the rhetoric from Daesh, or the so called Islamic State. The week we began our research, the group put an article in the January edition of its online magazine, calling for the mass killing of Shias.

ACTUALITY WITH COMPUTER

SHAHI: At home, I sometimes spend hours looking at the social media, primarily Twitter. Once you start searching for some key words in Arabic, you come up with thousands and thousands and thousands of tweets. Just for example, just try the search 'Shiite Islam', then it is interesting what kind of reactions you see.

MAHMOOD: Dr Afshin Shahi is a lecturer in Middle East Politics and International Relations at Bradford University. As part of his research, he is a keen observer of social media trends around sectarianism. He thinks the Syrian conflict, as well as the rise of the so-called Islamic State and its ability to communicate its message, are fuelling tensions.

SHAHI: Religious sectarianism has been rising and rising extremely fast, despite the fact that the Syrian civil war only started about five years ago, its impact has been profound on the Muslim consciousness in Britain. Basically, Muslim community in the UK have been reacting to what has been happening in Syria and that has paved the way to taking position. Of course I don't want to generalise here, I mean maybe a very large segment of the population have not reacted like that. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that a significant Muslim population see the battle in Syria as the battle between the Shiites and the Sunnis - good versus evil, black versus white - because those binary ideas which have been created in Syria is also having this dividing effect in Britain, so if you happen to be a Sunni Muslim living in Britain, now you have more sense of awareness about your sectarian identity and that sense of awareness is more politicised today than any other times before, at least in recent memory.

ACTUALITY WITH COMPUTER

MAHMOOD: I've spent the afternoon looking at some of the online content with preachers who are sending out these sectarian messages, both with anti-Sunni and anti-Shia rhetoric. Like here we've got one cleric telling people, 'We will slaughter the Shia like sheep.' That is really bad, and it's really nasty stuff and it's not difficult to see how that might cause tensions. And I've been watching another preacher who has been investigated by the authorities for his anti-Sunni messages. I'm not going to play any more of that, because what he goes on to say would be too offensive.

Almost all the people we speak to put some of the blame at the door of the many TV channels beaming either anti-Shia or anti-Sunni rhetoric into people's homes. Although Ofcom tell us there are strict rules and regulations, many feel that some of the fiery sermons could change mindsets.

LUBNA [VIA INTERPRETER]: My son goes to the local mosque. Some think he is from the Shia community because of his name and therefore don't like him to attend. Sometimes he is told not to read prayers there. One day my son asked them why and they said it's because Shias are non-believers. I think we should question the teachers in the mosque why they said what they did.

SAMINA [VIA INTERPRETER]: She is lucky her child shared his experience with her so she could guide him. But there are many who are quiet children who perhaps don't come home and share their experience. So there is a danger that kind of prejudice would grow inside them and get bigger and perhaps they believe that Daesh are right and it is a jihad to fight non-believers.

SHAGUFTA: I totally agree with my sister that the mosque shouldn't be becoming a source of hate and what goes on inside mosque, as Muslim community, we have a right to know.

ACTUALITY IN HIGH WYCOMBE SHOPPING CENTRE

MAHMOOD: I've come to High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. Muslims here say relations are generally good, but I have been told of an incident in a mosque that has shaken the confidence of some people who live here. Mohammed Khaliel has spent much of his life in the town. He advises the police on community issues. As a Sunni, he was shocked by what happened.

KHALIEL: We had the death of a Shia lady in the area and the burial was scheduled for later that day, so there was a bit of a time constraint. And the body needs to be washed before burial, and of course the families are grieving and are in shock. The Shia members wanted a Shia imam to lead the prayers and the funeral in a Sunni mosque, and it was felt by the committee then or the official dealing with this at the time that they could not allow a Shia imam to come and lead the prayers in a Sunni mosque, so there were these genuine differences.

ACTUALITY OF PRAYERS IN SHIA MOSQUE

KHALIEL cont: I was surprised that some people I questioned, senior people, they tried to portray me as somebody who had betrayed them by going out, to be cohesive with the "other side" inverted commas.

MAHMOOD: That shows me that there is inherent sectarianism.

KHALIEL: Well, I think that illustrates the point that I am trying to convey, which is on the horizon, unless we deal with these problems now, we could have much bigger problems in the future.

MAHMOOD: The committee at the mosque in question has now changed. We contacted them for an interview, but we didn't receive a reply.

ACTUALITY OUTSIDE TELL MAMA OFFICE

MAHMOOD: In order to find out more about the sectarian rifts that exist within the communities here in the UK, I've come to the offices of Tell Mama. It's an organisation that monitors hate crimes against Muslims. The location of the offices, I'm told, is secret, and indeed there's no outward signs on this building here showing who works inside. I'm here to meet director, Fiyaz Mughal, who has spent the last few years analysing the trends in sectarian hate crimes.

This leaflet here, it's like it's been printed on some kind of A4 sheet of paper.

MUGHAL: Yes, that's right. It's a picture of a leaflet that was distributed in the Bradford area. Members of the Shia community started to show us leaflets and material that had been circulated in a coordinated fashion, suggesting very clearly that Shias were not Muslims, they were unbelievers. People were actually circulating leaflets - people were making this material and promoting it, the anti-Shia rhetoric. So I'm just opening the laptop at the moment. There's an example here which has come through Twitter. Who copied us into this was a young lady who lives in Bradford and she's Shia herself. The material says here, "Shias are kuffars, their blood is halal." There's an implication there to murder Shias - in other words you spread their blood and it's perfectly acceptable. "It's also encouraged ..." the text says in the tweet, "in Islam to be anti-Shia so I hope you realise and agree." So this is a tweet that's actually been put out there in the public space. Somebody

HAMILTON cont: the next couple of years and one which we have to probably work a little bit harder to understand the scale and the volume of it.

MAHMOOD: But it won't be easy. Fiyaz Mughal at Tell Mama says there are good reasons why people are reluctant to come forward.

MUGHAL: People don't see that as something they can report in and they may just see that as very nasty comments that are made towards them, but actually they could easily report that in, so there is a lack of awareness that these things can be reported in. The second thing is that they feel they don't really want to bring out these issues to further be used against the Muslim community. There is a sense by people who say, look, Muslim communities are under the spotlight in a great deal of areas - the media, political life, etc, and they say to us, well look, why should we then add to this by bringing up these issues. The third thing that we come across is that people just generally don't want to get involved in it. They suffer it, they may hear it, they may be targeted by it, but they just don't want to get involved in it because they don't need the headache, they think it's too inflammatory, it'll cause tensions and so they leave it. And so there are a variety of complex reasons which actually tell us that this issue is potentially underreported.

ACTUALITY OF CLASS AT HUSSAINIA ISLAMIC MISSION

MAHMOOD: One case that Tell Mama has recorded happened here - at the Hussainia Islamic Mission in the heart of Bradford. This lofty, chilly building was previously a church, then a furniture factory before it became a mosque 35 years ago. It's where these children study and worship alongside other members of the local community. It never had any problems until one day last summer.

HUSSAIN: Me and a friend of mine that were working here went off to the DIY shop and as we were coming back from the DIY shop we started getting telephone calls, have we seen the graffiti on the wall of Hussainia? Every phone call that we were getting we were just saying, look, remain calm, we are coming, let's go have a look and see what the situation is.

MAHMOOD: Just show me whereabouts it was.

HUSSAIN: That sort of area, underneath the window, next to the main door. And the graffiti said Shia Kaffir, meaning that this sect is a non-believer of the Almighty. So for someone to put that on is quite upsetting for any group to read that, to say that you are outside the boundaries of Islam totally as a non-believer. It was quite shocking to see in quite big black writing, and you could tell it had been done by a spray can, the way it was written on the wall, you know, right across. Probably say a foot and a half by about five foot.

MAHMOOD: Graffiti on a mosque, it's not targeting one individual, it is targeting the whole community, isn't it?

HUSSAIN: It is, it is. It is targeting the whole community. Written in a sense that would stir up tensions between different schools of thought within Islam, but not the actions but the reactions that make a difference.

ACTUALITY INSIDE MOSQUE

HUSSAIN: It's an old building so we'll work our way to the heaters, keep you warm.

MAHMOOD: The elders at Hussainia worked hard to make sure there was no retaliation. Fiaz Hussain told me there was an overwhelming response from different communities and sects offering their support to Hussainia. It led to an event here at the centre during Ramadan. The Unity Iftar saw people from all different faiths, including Sunnis, gather under one roof to break their fast and pray together.

HUSSAIN: It was just lovely to see loads of people from different sects and different mosques – brothers that made an effort to come and show, look, we're united in this. This is wrong, what's happened, and our thoughts are not this. This is one person that's done this act and only that person alone is to blame to that. We as a community are not to blame for this. And it was just so lovely to see that from something so negative, so much positive can come from it. I mean, I wouldn't wish it upon anybody and I would not

HUSSAIN cont: wish it to happen again, but it brought communities closer together. So if somebody was wanting an effect where it was dividing communities, it didn't work, it didn't work.

MAHMOOD: The police did investigate, but didn't find enough evidence to take it further. But here in Bradford the question remains - is there something simmering below the surface?

ACTUALITY IN CAR

KHAN: So we're driving around the inner city of Bradford. There's a lot of people, big population round here. There's restaurants, businesses, takeaways, clothes shops, universities here. There's a vibrant sort of lifestyle round here.

MAHMOOD: It's very busy.

KHAN: Very busy, yeah, as you'd expect

MAHMOOD: Omar Farook Khan has just graduated from Bradford University, where he was President of Al Ulbayt - the Shia Society. He says there was a small minority at the university who were responsible for stirring up sectarian hatred. He's now seeing a similar pattern in his working life.

KHAN: This business, for example, we are driving past, and the one we just passed a couple of minutes ago, targeted. There was a text message sent out saying that Business X, for example, and Business Y are owned by Shias and they support the Government and the regime of Syria and are killing our Sunni brothers and sisters and raping our women and therefore do not buy food from them, do not help their businesses, boycott them and spread this message around. Completely false things, statements without evidence being produced, and yet this was spread around Bradford and these businesses suffered. And I remember speaking to some of the owners of these places where they were getting phone calls and abuse. It's sad because, you know, by and large the Muslim community, whether Sunni or Shia, are peaceful people and it upsets you to see these things happen, and then perhaps the blame being shifted on one group or another, whereas we

KHAN cont: don't blame our Sunni brothers, for example. It's not their fault. We know that 99% of them are peaceful people, but what we do know is where the problem lies and it's with this violent, extremist, puritanical form of Islam that does not want to accept anybody else, that wants to convert the whole world into its own sort of world view. And if you don't belong to that, they'll, you know, in the extreme case of ISIS, they'll kill you even for that, or in this case persecute people, as we've seen. But the problem is, for how long will this minority remain a minority if we just sit here and don't do anything about this?

ACTUALITY AT COUNCIL OF MOSQUES

MAHMOOD: Further down the road are the offices for the Council of Mosques - an umbrella organisation for around 120 religious establishments in the city.

AHMED: This is ... centre, the managers.

MAHMOOD: How many people sort of like come and go in this centre?

AHMED: Just over a hundred people using the centre daily. They see this as their centre. It's a community centre, it's a neighbourhood centre. It belongs to everybody.

MAHMOOD: It's a purpose built centre, which is used by the local community as well as the local school. It has no visible religious signs and both Sunni and Shia representatives are on its board. Its spokesman is Isthiaq Ahmed.

AHMED: The relationship between different denominations, school of thoughts in Bradford are extremely, extremely good. Council for Mosques being an umbrella organisation, we are very fortunate that we have affiliation and involvement and participation from all school of thoughts. So that suggests to me that the relationship in the city are very good. We haven't experienced any serious incident of sectarianism.

MAHMOOD: We saw an example here in Bradford where the Hussainia Centre had the graffiti daubed on their wall.

AHMED: We are very sensitive but we are not over-alarmed. There are always individuals who will, for whatever reasons, will make sectarianism an issue. These are usually isolated incidents and whenever these incidences have occurred, communities have come together. We are very mindful of the fact that there are international political developments which could have an impact on our relationships here. We have worked very hard to make sure that sectarianism stays out of our city and our district.

MAHMOOD: Now we've spoken to a few people from the Shia community here in Bradford who've said that they have experienced tensions in the city, some businesses have been boycotted. What's your response to that then?

AHMED: We are not aware of it and certainly the Shia leaders have not communicated that to us, so it is very difficult for me to comment on what people out there may feel or not feel. But if that is happening, then I think that's very sad and unfortunate and something that we would like to discourage. The Muslim community is working together, is pulling together. Often we don't get that credit and acknowledgement. Unity does not make good news.

MAHMOOD: But even those who share the desire for unity say they are worried.

ACTUALITY OF BUZZER

MAHMOOD: Salam Alaikum.

FIELD: Salam. Welcome to Collaboration House.

MAHMOOD: Thank you.
This is Mustafa Field - a Shia. He is the Director at the Faiths Forum in London where he promotes intra-faith relations. He says sectarianism has led to friends turning against him,

MAHMOOD: Dr Sayed Ammar Nakshawani, a British Iraqi Islamic lecturer, is regarded by many as one of the most powerful speakers in the Muslim world. In his early thirties, he's the youngest on the list of 500 most influential Muslims. He tells me he's been forced to leave the UK because he feared for his life.

NAKSHAWANI: There was a Sunni/Shia unity event in a mosque not far from my house in north west London. It was a wonderful event, you know. The community had gathered together. Now I had finished my talk and I was leaving and I did notice thuggish looking characters who had sat at the back of the hall. And when I had my question and answer session you could tell that some of their questions were questions not seeking answers, they were questions seeking to incite an argument or a debate - which I don't mind, but that wasn't really the atmosphere for it. There's a time and place for everything. This was a unity event.

MAHMOOD: Sensing something was wrong, he asked his friend, who'd organised the event, to walk out with him.

NAKSHAWANI: There they were, five or six of them standing outside and they started saying certain things which you don't want to bring up on air. And I said to them, I am not scared, do whatever you want to do, this is my own back yard as well. But there's no doubt that you feel that moment, however strong you are, however much you know the streets and there was only two of us and we were outnumbered three times our number, but that was a lucky escape. That was an experience that I will never forget, because you have begun to realise that, you know, lads who a few years earlier probably were guys you'd play a five a side football game with or guys who you'd probably chill with at a café were now guys who are ready to literally physically attack you without thinking about the repercussions whatsoever.

MAHMOOD: But it wasn't just him they were targeting.

NAKSHAWANI: I think there was hatred because of the fact that the lectures on YouTube were influencing not just so many Shia but so many non-Shia as well, and this got to some people, and the phone calls firstly were mainly towards me. Towards the end there was a few indicating that there was going to be an attack on my parents or

