

# Muslim and Jewish responses to safeguarding refugees and asylum seekers in England before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

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## Introduction

In the British context of neoliberal governance, marked by state reliance on the third sector organisations to paper over the cracks in welfare provision (Williams *et al.*, 2012; Jawad, 2012), questions of faith-based social capital and activism (Baker, 2006) have become central to public discussions about refugee welcome and integration. The global climate of political uncertainties and austerity, coupled with the refugee crisis and the pandemic, provided a further impetus for faith-based organisations to play a more visible role in civil society initiatives to welcome and support refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup>

Academic studies examined the dynamics of Christian-based social action (Pathak & McGhee, 2015), including Christian participation in 'settling those seeking sanctuary and unsettling negative attitudes' towards them (Snyder, 2011). However, little research focused on the role of religious minorities in supporting asylum seekers and integrating refugees into British multicultural society. The chapter contributes to academic scholarship by critically examining

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' envisage different legal status and entitlements to benefits, employment or accommodation in relation to vulnerable migrants. Both terms will be used intermittently, echoing a similar way of referencing used by participants from different organisations that took part in my research.

similar practices and discourses from Muslim and Jewish organisations about refugee protection in response to safeguarding regulations.

Public debates about British multiculturalism, with its moderately secular state-religion connexions (Modood, 2019), recognise the importance of accommodating minority interests in the public sphere. In this chapter, I discuss the role of Muslim and Jewish organisations not in relation to seeking accommodation for their religious and cultural interests from the state, but rather in their intermediary capacity. Drawing on the dialogical and dynamic character of multicultural citizenship (Modood, 2007), I argue that minority faith groups act as agents of multicultural integration for newly arrived refugees on the level of organised civil society.<sup>2</sup>

Using examples of Muslim and Jewish-led welfare and social activities in the context of protecting vulnerable refugees from harm and social isolation before and during the Covid pandemic, I suggest that religious minorities mediate refugee experiences of integration by facilitating and contesting safeguarding regulations based on risk and vulnerability. This reveals complex linkages between the notions of risk and resource,<sup>3</sup> vulnerability and safeguarding in relation to religion and civil society. Considering a typically less privileged status of some members of minority faith groups and the growing risk of the pandemic to public health, the boundaries between these concepts become rather porous, resisting a simple binary differentiation between vulnerable refugees in need of protection and resourceful religious minorities ready to help.

## Regulatory approaches to safeguarding, vulnerability, and risk

Safeguarding is a key area of governance regulating the work of organisations supporting groups and individuals at risk, with refugees and asylum seekers deemed vulnerable migrants in the British policy context. The Care Act (2014, 14.7) defines safeguarding as:

<sup>2</sup> The chapter is based on the analysis of data from qualitative interviews with Muslim and Jewish organisations in England conducted in 2019-2020 and policy documents and reports. This work is part of research undertaken during my Leverhulme-funded early career fellowship, entitled 'Minority faith and civil society responses to refugee integration in Britain (2018-2021). The pre-Covid findings were complemented with a more recent study of policy and community reports written during the pandemic, including those from groups who were not part of my original sample.

<sup>3</sup> See Lundgren (2021) for a theoretically informed discussion of religious minorities as a risk to be managed vs. a useful resource for tackling societal problems.

protecting an adult's right to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect [...] while at the same time making sure that the adult's wellbeing is promoted including [...] having regard to their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs in deciding on any action.

Specific safeguarding discourses aimed at regulating charities and their trustees include the requirement to protect 'beneficiaries at risk' and 'charity staff and volunteers' that can be 'classed as adults at risk' (The Charity Commission, 2017), acknowledging the dual vulnerability of those seeking and offering protection.

Religious, non-religious and mixed community groups which participate in the refugee resettlement programmes, such as the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme introduced in 2016 as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, are required to put in place 'a robust safeguarding policy' (Home Office, 2021). They must recognise that those they support 'should not experience distress, harm, or abuse [...] as a result of [their] actions', with their 'welfare and safety [being] paramount' (Home Office, 2020). The same safeguarding regulation mandates community groups to engage with the Prevent Duty to ensure that vulnerable refugees are not exposed to the risks of terrorism and radicalisation (Ibid). The inclusion of the Prevent statute was considered by some groups as an extra burden of responsibility placed on the sponsors, particularly from Muslim communities, as some recalled their own vulnerabilities as a minority at risk of securitisation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, narratives of safeguarding focused on public health risks and increased concerns for the clinically vulnerable. Safeguarding measures included national lockdowns under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations (Covid Act, 2020) (revoked in July 2021). Socio-economic inequalities created difficult conditions for refugees and asylum seekers worldwide, with the UNCHR classifying them as 'the most marginalised and vulnerable members of society [...] particularly at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic.' With a view of safeguarding British public, some restrictions had a disproportionate effect on religious minorities and their congregational approaches to religious worship and communal activities. These included the closure of places of worship 'during the emergency period' (Regulation 5) and restrictions on gatherings 'in a public place of more than two people' (Regulation 7). Collective concerns over safety and particular interpretations of vulnerability based on age over 70 and underlying health conditions (Covid Act, 2020) had a strong impact not only on religious services but also on minority faith groups providing continuous refugee support from their premises.

A brief outline of safeguarding narratives calls for a more contextualised interpretation of what constitutes vulnerability and how it is conceptualised in policy literature. Some academic scholars questioned narrow interpretations simply based on harms and risks. Not only do such accounts ‘have a profound effect on the lives of refugees interacting with service providers’ (Smith & Waite, 2019, p. 2296), but also they obscure the linkages between vulnerability and social control which undermine the agency of those who receive the services (Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014). To redress some of these gaps, some called for further empirical research to reflect experiences and perspectives from various stakeholders (Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 506). Although a more theoretical engagement with vulnerability and safeguarding is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will examine how Muslim and Jewish stakeholders engaged with some of these regulatory practices and discourses in relation to supporting refugees.

## Refugee support practices before and during the Covid-19 restrictions

Faith-based organisations in Britain support vulnerable members of society, including refugees and asylum seekers, in different ways: from running welfare and foodbank services in places of worship and community centres to offering hospitality, friendships, and social interaction – sometimes with co-religionists and sometimes together with other faiths and non-faith groups (O’Toole & Braginskaia, 2016). Whilst my research accounted for religious, ethnic, and social diversity within Muslim and Jewish communities in Britain, I found similar practices of support offered by Muslim and Jewish organisations to their service users (often referred to as clients or guests), namely in their efforts to address food poverty and social isolation.

Safeguarding practices are about protecting vulnerable groups from harm and looking after their emotional and physical wellbeing. A brief comparison of how Muslim and Jewish organisations engaged in offering food assistance and social activities before and during the pandemic demonstrates how they worked to comply with and facilitate these practices.

### (i) Supporting refugees and asylum seekers before the pandemic

The host-guest relationship is central to understanding different forms of hospitality, including religious, community and refugee-based practices and responses to displacement (Mavelli & Wilson, 2017; Berg & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018). Interview participants typically highlighted the importance of both religious and humanitarian values in informing their practices of welcoming

those in need. They spoke of religious obligation to help the stranger and framed their actions through humanitarian concerns for the vulnerable. In the Muslim tradition, offering food and hospitality is considered synonymous with 'the act of giving' (Siddiqui, 2015, p.31), and prescribes that a guest must be 'treated with kindness, dignity, and respect' (El-Aswad, 2015, p. 462). In the Torah, 'there are no commandments repeated more frequently [...] than the commandments regarding the kindness toward the stranger' (Patterson, 2018, p. 613). A notable finding was that Muslim and Jewish groups produced multicultural discourses of protection, rooted in both universality of humanitarian needs of their clients and specific religious teachings underpinning social action.

Research participants mentioned their personal, or family experiences of coming to Britain, and emphasised the value of their perspectives from the position of 'already settled' minorities. Drawing on their own struggles with integration and social isolation, some felt they could help new arrivals to engage with similar social and regulatory issues. A respondent from the Liberal Judaism synagogue, noted that as a 'another minority group [they] wanted to ensure that others had the same benefits and possibilities that some of the ancestors of the Jewish community.' (Interview with Rabbi, London, 29 January 2019). A Muslim respondent from the Shia community suggested that Muslims 'found a way to navigate through the spaces [of inequality] and [were] able to share of the best practices with refugee communities' (Interview with a Muslim activist, Islamic centre, London, 15 March 2019).

The empirical data suggested that Muslim and Jewish groups considered their religious and communal premises as 'spaces of care' (Cloke *et al.*, 2017, p. 704), safe and welcoming to newcomers. A foodbank supported by Muslim donors, encouraged refugees resettled in the area to talk to people from different backgrounds and participate in their events and projects, such as growing fruit and vegetables with other refugees and volunteers (Interview with a foodbank volunteer, London, 26 February 2019). Jewish volunteers from a Reform synagogue invited refugees who used their drop-in centre to visit together museums and art galleries in London, as well as encouraged everyone to sing together in the choir. Emphasising the social value of visiting places, one respondent noted that refugees 'know that in the winter, they don't have to be at home – they can sit somewhere else nice and warm and look at nice pictures' (Interview with a Jewish volunteer, Reform synagogue, London, 7 March 2019).

The importance of building friendships between volunteers and asylum seekers was emphasised by a member of Orthodox Jewish community synagogue (Interview with representative from United Synagogues, London, 13 February 2019) as they described the work of one of their drop-in centres that supports asylum seekers. A play area full of toys offered a safe space where children of volunteers and asylum seekers could play together and facilitate

adult interaction with 'the parents [being] happy because they had their kids integrating [...] in a controlled environment' (*ibid.*).

Multicultural narratives of facilitating welfare support and creating safe spaces may have been based on a more nuanced understanding of specific challenges of minority integration by some of the respondents. However, they were not always free from power imbalances between those offering and those seeking protection. Although I found some evidence of patronising narratives towards those in need, some of the more critical, decolonial approaches, included not only looking after their clients' wellbeing but also empowering them by inviting to give something back – for example by preforming or cooking together.

### (ii) Supporting refugees and asylum seekers during the Covid-19 restrictions

Covid disrupted support provisions available to refugees and asylum seekers, with welfare and food services scaled down and risks of social isolation increased (Beck & Gwilym, 2022). During the lockdown, the interruption of services included a pause on refugee resettlement programmes, the lack of available accommodation, face-to-face support services, and access to digital services. Regional surveys of refugee and migration organisations in England found 'isolation and loneliness, deteriorating mental health and homelessness' to be the most pressing issues. (Refugee Action Data Hub, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, 65% of respondents said they had to adapt their safeguarding procedures during the pandemic, not least because of the increased safeguarding risks arising with remote service delivery' (*ibid.*, p.12).

The Covid Act (2020) forced faith and community organisations to close their premises and stop in-person gatherings to ensure safety and wellbeing of both volunteers and service users, although with some exceptions for 'urgent public support service (including the provision of foodbanks [...] or support in an emergency).' Community sponsorship groups supporting refugee families showed 'resilience and adaptability' in negotiating new hurdles of staying connected across the digital divide during the pandemic (Reyes, 2021). The following analysis of online reports and official statements from several Muslim and Jewish groups – including examples from the groups I had previously interviewed as well as new ones – demonstrates that increased health risks and safeguarding restrictions called for more resourcefulness and innovation during the pandemic.

The closure of premises and foodbanks forced organisations to adapt their food deliveries and social activities. For example, Sufra started 'a new community kitchen delivery service that operated 7 days a week', and 'scaled up [...] food growing project in St. Raphael's Edible Garden.' (Sufra, 2020). They expanded their advice and refugee services by moving them online and operating remotely

(*Ibid.*). Green Lane Masjid in Birmingham, which had welcomed a Syrian refugee family before the first lockdown, contemplated a more flexible engagement with Islamic faith (Hamill-Stewart, 2021) as they transferred their group prayers and social events online.

With many synagogues moving their services online, some transformed their face-to-face provisions of refugee support to a phone drop-in service to continue supporting their clients who did not have access to internet. Volunteers from Alyth Synagogue would ‘telephone guests regularly to ensure that no-one felt neglected or forgotten’ and get signposted to the right services (Grossman, 2022). They developed collaborations with other organisations, including Barnet Refugee Service and Muslim Aid to deliver emergency food parcels and foodbank services.

Some drop-in centres sought to protect vulnerable clients as well as volunteers by moving their services outside. For example, United Synagogues had to scale down their work and operate their drop-in services out of one synagogue, but on a more regular basis (Frazer, 2020). With social distancing in place, regular users could no longer visit the centre to enjoy a cooked meal or find essential items, so volunteers decided to ‘pack up bags of clothing in the right sizes, shirts and trousers according to age groups, and hand them over’ (*Ibid.*). By taking some of their work outside, the group continued offering welfare support in line with safeguarding restrictions. However, they were no longer able to offer legal or medical advice to their clients as any efforts to discuss sensitive information at close range ‘would require a breach of social distancing regulations’ (*Ibid.*).

Religious minorities continued to mitigate against food insecurity, digital poverty, and social isolation by adapting and innovating their activities in compliance with health safeguarding restrictions. This correlates with similar findings from research about support provisions for refugees and asylum seekers during the pandemic (Finlay *et al.*, 2021). It also exemplifies potential tensions between collective and individual forms of vulnerability, with organisations facing increased responsibility to safeguard and protect during and from the pandemic not only their clients but also their volunteers.

## Multicultural challenges of safeguarding, equality, and accommodation

A brief look at the narratives used by Muslim and Jewish groups to discuss practices of refugee protection and health-related vulnerabilities, reveals that rather than playing a role of resourceful but uncritical partners of the state, some groups voiced opposition to hidden inequalities within these practices. The first issue of contestation related to concerns about securitised aspects of safeguarding provisions used in the community sponsorship documentation

that could potentially stigmatise Muslim organisations interested in participating in sponsoring refugees. The second issue concerned more differentiated approaches to easing Covid-19 restrictions in places of worship, based on recognising health vulnerabilities of Muslim and Jewish communities.

#### (i) Safeguarding as an extra burden of responsibility

The Home Office guidance regarding community applications to sponsor refugees includes a specific provision for safeguarding policy to be put in place and approved by local authority. The group must confirm they will 'provide a safe and supportive environment for a vulnerable resettled family', including safeguarding from the risks of terrorism and radicalisation in line with the Prevent statutory duty (Home Office, 2021). The Prevent Duty was introduced in 2015 as a requirement of public-sector personnel, including charities working with vulnerable members of society, to undergo extremism awareness training to monitor and report signs of radicalisation. In the context of community sponsorship, the lead sponsor or the designated safeguarding officer is responsible to undertake online or in person training provided by the Home Office. The group must also state on their application that they will 'report to the respective local authority any concerns they have about a person's potential radicalisation' (Home Office, 2020).

Academic studies about regulatory practices of monitoring religious minorities found comprehensive evidence of Muslim communities in Britain being subject to increased scrutiny by government counterterrorist agenda (O'Toole, 2021; Qurashi, 2018). Muslim participants emphasised their commitment to work with the Home Office in engaging with vulnerable individuals. However, some found the inclusion of the Prevent stipulations and discourses in the Community Sponsorship documentation problematic, not least because of their moral objection to the already controversial role of the Prevent agenda in stigmatising British Muslims.

A Muslim group involved in promoting community sponsorship among Muslim organisations noted that some were wary of the negative brand of the Home Office. For example, some voiced fears that 'mosques will be viewed unfavourably when they put themselves forward to be a community sponsor, due to great scrutiny on Muslim communities when it comes to things like extremism' (Interview with Muslim community development organisation, London, 21 February 2019). Another volunteer noted that mosques were concerned about an additional burden of responsibility and worried that wrong actions of the ones they sponsor might negatively impact them (Interview with an activist, Islamic centre, London, 15 March 2019).



Some respondents questioned the securitised dimension of the programme supposedly designed to create a welcoming rather than discriminating environment, while others reported anecdotal evidence of Muslim members in an interfaith community group feeling reluctant to become a lead sponsor to avoid endorsing the Prevent agenda. However, not all Muslim organisations were critical of the need to engage with the Prevent duty as part of community sponsorship and saw it as just another bureaucratic hurdle to tick off the list and focus on creating more equal opportunities for newcomers. For example, a Muslim school did not find any difficulties in engaging with this element of safeguarding as they had already incorporated it into their policy of safeguarding school children (Interview with senior representative, Muslim Faith School, London, 7 October 2019).

Although inclusion of the Prevent Duty was not mentioned as an issue of concern by Jewish respondents, several organisations reflected on difficulties of working with the Home Office, with reference to its problematic treatment of some refugees as deserving/underserving of support. Some respondents were critical of the ways in which the two-tier system of hostile environment disadvantaged asylum seekers in comparison to government resettled refugees and did not respect their equal right for protection (Interview with a Jewish activist, 15 February, London, 2019).

#### (ii) Multicultural approaches to the proposed easing of the Covid-19 restrictions

The two lockdowns in 2020 (26 March – 4 June, 5 November – 2 December), and subsequent easing of restrictions, were met with different levels of acceptance and criticism by British Muslims and Jews, particularly in relation to congregational aspects of religious and community practices. Both communities mobilised grassroots resources to actively contribute to the local and national efforts to mitigate against public health risks of the pandemic, whilst also considering the toll on their own members and communal vulnerabilities. Emerging research suggests that the pandemic affected different parts of Muslim and Jewish communities differently, which helps account for complex and sometimes diverging responses from different groups to the pandemic restrictions (Staetsky, 2021; Al-Astewani, 2021). A report from Public Health England (2020) found that ethnic minorities experienced some of the worst impacts. The Muslim Council of Britain (2020) and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (Boyd 2020) found that members of their communities were disproportionately affected by the highest mortality rates.

In June 2020, the UK government announced a gradual reopening of places of worship for individual prayer and ‘for limited permitted activities, in a manner that is safe and in line with national lockdown restrictions’ (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2020). However, government guidance about restrictions and their gradual easing ‘lacked clarity’ and resulted in faith communities ‘making their own risk assessments and imposing their own limits on numbers’ (Cranmer & Pocklington, 2020; p. 29). Whilst Church leaders welcomed the move to reopen places of worship in England, Jewish and Muslim representatives criticised the government’s hasty announcement on the grounds that it was not ‘appropriate for the way they practise their faith’ (Sherwood, 2020). Chief Rabbi Mirvis (2020) wrote that ‘different religious communities must apply the government’s advice in a suitable manner at their own pace, so that it is safe in their own context’. He urged Jewish community to ‘proceed with extreme caution’, considering ‘the intensely social atmosphere [...], age profile and availability of space, as well as the evolving national picture’. Harun Khan, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, urged the government to ‘give clear and unambiguous guidance’ for Muslim communities about opening for private worship so that ‘mosque trustees, staff, volunteers [...] [would] plan effectively to ensure the safety and wellbeing of everyone’ (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020).

These debates reflect wider issues of multicultural accommodation of congregational aspects of religious worship by religious minorities at a time of increased public health risks to all. The ways in which safeguarding guidelines were narrated and negotiated by Muslim and Jewish groups indicated a degree of multicultural agency exercised by religious minorities. Muslim and Jewish communities not only adapted their services, including community worship and welfare support of refugees and asylum seekers, but also critically engaged with safeguarding guidelines as they attempted to reconcile vulnerability of service users and their volunteers, in line with regulatory precautions regarding social distances, cleaning, and further restrictions on indoor activities.

## Conclusion

The chapter examined how religious minorities, exemplified by Muslim and Jewish organisations in England, supported refugees and asylum seekers before and during the Covid pandemic in the regulatory context of safeguarding vulnerable individuals. Safeguarding guidelines created opportunities for minority faith groups to develop safe environments to assist with welfare provision and promote refugee emotional wellbeing by drawing on their humanitarian and religious capital, resourcefulness, and organisational capacities. The same safeguarding measures equally restricted support and integration activities by

introducing additional bureaucratic procedures for developing safeguarding policies, while the Covid-19 legislation significantly limited availability of safe spaces, with places of worship forced to close and social interactions curtailed. Whilst these opportunities and constraints were not that different for Christian or other faith and secular groups, I found that some Muslim and Jewish groups felt exposed to additional risks of government scrutiny and were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Muslim and Jewish groups navigated the regulatory landscape of safeguarding by facilitating provisions of welfare and wellbeing or adapting their services to comply with health regulations. They also contested safeguarding practices, criticising their inequalities and lack of recognition for minority-based differences. Although some multicultural aspects of their campaigning about health risks involved seeking accommodation from the state, most of the activities discussed in this chapter emphasised the importance of conceptualising their multicultural agency in relation to protecting vulnerabilities of new 'others'. The multicultural dimension of their engagement with safeguarding highlighted tensions between collective and individual risks and vulnerabilities. The pandemic may have posed health risks to the public, but its regulatory safeguards exacerbated inequalities and restricted modes of support, ultimately calling for greater resourcefulness from religious minorities.

The discussed complexities of how Muslim and Jewish groups mediated not only the vulnerabilities and risks of their clients but also their own, as well as their multiple ways of engaging with safeguarding regulations, suggests the need to develop a more flexible framework to conceptualise risks and resources/resourcefulness, vulnerabilities and safeguarding in relation to religious minorities and social action.

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