



# MCB Submission:

## USCIRF Hearing on Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe



## 1. About the Muslim Council of Britain

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), founded in 1997, is the UK's largest Muslim umbrella body with over 500 affiliated national, regional and local organisations, including mosques, charities and schools. It is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole.

The Muslim Council of Britain represents a wide cross-section of Muslims in Britain: its affiliate base reflects the diversity of Muslims in the UK, being made up of a range of ethnic, geographic and theological traditions.

## 2. Submission to US Commission on International Religious Freedom

This written submission is being made in advance of, and in addition to, the Muslim Council of Britain oral testimony to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) hearing on Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe – to be held on Wednesday, 9th February 2022.

After outlining its approach and detailing the experience of Muslims in the UK, the document will address directly the questions put by the Commission.

As requested by the USCIRF, this document seeks to shine a light on the prejudice and discrimination faced by Muslims in the United Kingdom today.

## 3. Islamophobia versus Anti-Muslim Bias (/Hatred)

*Islamophobia* is the term of choice to describe the prejudice and discrimination faced by Muslims in everyday life, be it at the work place, in our culture, at the hands of the media, or indeed in politics, within the UK.

Coined in the UK by the Runnymede Trust in 1998, the term was further defined by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims in 2019 as:

**“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”**

The term *Islamophobia* was used by the APPG in preference to other alternatives because it was a term that was already in common use, and broadly understood as a term that covered both institutional and individuals acts of discrimination against Muslims.

In its consultation, the APPG received “an overwhelming amount of evidence across governmental, community, academic and public and private sector organisations”<sup>1</sup> that attested to its desirability as a term, one that had become embedded in “political and policy lexicon”, and was deemed the “term of choice among British Muslims” to describe the hatred and prejudice targeted at them based on their faith and expressions of their Muslimness. Professor Tania

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<sup>1</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims ([‘Islamophobia Defined: The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia’](#)) pg. 11

Saeed, for example, contends that the term “is wide enough to capture a range of experiences, and narrow enough to inform implementable policies.”<sup>2</sup>

Both the term, and the APPG on British Muslims’ most preeminent definition of it, are widely recognised and utilised within British Muslim communities and across civil society.<sup>3</sup> The APPG definition has, in fact, been endorsed by local councils around the country and by the majority of mainstream political parties including the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru (Welsh nationalist party), SNP (Scottish Nationalist Party) and the Scottish Conservatives. In fact, the only major political party to not have endorsed this definition is the party of government – the Conservative Party.

Fundamental to this definition of *Islamophobia* is understanding it as a form of racism, anti-Muslim racism to be precise, and that although Islam is not a race, Muslims in the UK, across Europe and indeed the United States, have been subject to a process of racialisation. Moreover, it is important to recognise that this form of racism targets Muslims, or even those perceived to be Muslim.

We recognise the emotive debate around *Islamophobia* as a term, how this term has been defined and the existence of influential voices who nevertheless seek to misrepresent the term and what it sets out to do. The debate is addressed in ‘*Defining Islamophobia: A Contemporary Understanding of How Expressions of Muslimness are Targeted*,<sup>4</sup>’ a Muslim Council of Britain report which forensically dissects how Islamophobia has been defined by the APPG on British Muslims, what Islamophobia is, what it is not, and how we operationalise said definition to tackle Islamophobia across sectors of society.

For the purposes of this submission, we argue that *Islamophobia* is a problem that hinders equality of recognition, of participation, and of life outcomes to Muslims in the social, economic and cultural life of this country and beyond.

As such, the term *Islamophobia* will be used in lieu of anti-Muslim bias throughout the course of this submission.

#### **4. Islamophobia in the UK prior to 2001**

Even though there has been interaction with Muslims since the Elizabethan times, and the existence of Muslim communities from the Victorian period onwards, Muslim communities became more visible following the wave of immigration after the Second World War from the UK’s former colonies.

Immigrant communities faced an uphill struggle, encountering racism as soon as they arrived. Violence, prejudice and discrimination gradually rose and the problem became acute in the 1970s and led to the promulgation of the 1976 Race Relations Act which would make it illegal to

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<sup>2</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on British Muslims by Tania Saeed of Lahore University.

<sup>3</sup> Islamophobia (Definition) website: <https://www.islamophobia-definition.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Muslim Council of Britain - *Defining Islamophobia: A Contemporary Understanding of How Expressions of Muslimness are Targeted* - 2021

refuse housing, employment, or public services to a person on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins in Great Britain.

Already facing discrimination and prejudice on account of race, there were three big factors that led to the realisation that Muslims were being targeted through Islamophobia.

Firstly, the saga over the publication of the Satanic Verses in 1989 brought into sharp relief the way in which Islam and Muslims were viewed in the Western public sphere. The ensuing debate re-enforced tropes of Muslims being violent, illiberal and backward.

The ongoing civil war in the Balkans and the subsequent genocide of Bosnian Muslims was the second big marker of Islamophobia prior to 2001. The systematic ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Europe's own backyard brought home the fact that the lessons of the Holocaust 50 years on were still not learnt. For many, the existential threat to Muslims in the rest of Europe was palpable.

Finally, as Muslim communities evolved to second and third generation, it became apparent that Muslims were not afforded the same rights as other faith communities and were not treated equally in the provision of goods and services.

These issues were captured in the 1998 seminal report 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All' published by the race equality think tank, the Runnymede Trust. It pointed out government discrimination for example in the state funding of Muslim faith schools (there were none at the time). It also highlighted the systematic discrimination faced by Muslims in the public, social and economic life of this country.

The report also underscored the securitisation of Islamophobia, where tropes against Muslims forced policymakers and opinion makers to see Muslims through the prism of security. This was exemplified by a former NATO Secretary General, Willy Claes, who declared in 1995 that 'Islamic fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as communism was.'

## **5. The 'War on Terror', UK laws and their impact on British Muslims**

*The USCIRF has posed the following questions for the purposes of this submission:*

- *How did the War on Terror and terrorist attacks affect anti-Muslim bias?*
- *How do the laws throughout the UK (Britain, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), knowingly or unknowingly, harm the Muslim population?*

*A combined response to both questions is detailed in Sections 5 and 6, respectively.*

While Islamophobia was recognised as a phenomenon and a problem in the 1990s, this form of racism dramatically escalated after the terrible attacks of 9/11. Ever since then, Muslim communities have struggled to step out of the dark shadow of terrorism and the resulting Islamophobia.

Muslims have been viewed through the prism of the War on Terror. It starts with the framing of Muslims in the media as suspect communities and it manifests itself with Muslims marginalised and engaged primarily through the lens of security policy.

### **a. UK Counter-Terrorism Policy: A Brief Overview**

- i. In the past 20+ years, there has been a range of new legislation passed. The UK's overarching counter-terrorism and anti-extremism strategy (CONTEST) is comprised of four key elements:
  - *Pursue: detect and investigate threats to disrupt and prevent terrorist attacks;*
  - *Prevent: challenge extremist ideas to stop people from becoming terrorists or from supporting terrorism;*
  - *Protect: strengthen the UK's protection against a terrorist attack; and*
  - *Prepare: mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack when it cannot be prevented.*
- ii. The strategy employed under Prevent has undergone radical change since its inception initially under the Labour government, with the Prevent Duty now a statutory requirement for all public bodies as part of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.
  - The Prevent Duty places a general requirement on specified authorities to “have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.”
  - The “specified authorities”, in turn, include local authorities, the National Health Service (NHS), schools, further and higher education bodies, probation service providers and police forces across England, Wales and Scotland (the duty does not apply to Northern Ireland).
- iii. Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act is supported by statutory guidance that defines ‘extremism’ and ‘radicalisation’.
- iv. In practice, the Prevent duty requires schools and colleges, for example, to identify children and young people who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, and be aware of the steps they should take when such children and young people have been identified as vulnerable to radicalisation - e.g. escalate, reporting them to the relevant authorities through dedicated channels.

### **b) The Prevent Duty: Concerns and Impact on British Muslim Communities**

- i. Prevent has lost the trust of communities across the United Kingdom despite the title of the government's action plan to isolate, prevent and defeat violent extremism in 2007 being “Winning hearts and minds”<sup>5</sup>:
  - The former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Max Hill QC, stated: “Prevent remains a source of grievance for many in the community as what some still believe to be a programme aimed at ‘spying’ or specifically targeting British Muslims”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Preventing violent extremism - winning hearts and minds”, Department for Communities and Local Government: London, 2007

<sup>6</sup> UK ‘Building Bridges’ Programme Community Roundtables: A report on the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, July 2017, Forward Thinking

- The former security official and Prevent strategy's architect, Sir David Omand, observed: "The key issue is, do most people in the community accept [Prevent] as protective of their rights? If the community sees it as a problem, then you have a problem."<sup>7</sup>
  - The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, Conservative MP Maria Miller, said that Prevent has become "a significant source of tension" in Muslim communities"<sup>8</sup>
- ii. Prevent has had a number of serious failings (or perceived failings according to proponents of the Prevent) and is renowned for a lack of transparency:
- A perception that Prevent is targeting Muslims and treats Muslims differently and in a discriminatory way e.g. the BMA stated: "We believe that the Prevent programme leads to racial profiling"<sup>9</sup>
  - Prevent is "clearly not working," according to the former head of MI5, Baroness Eliza Manningham Buller<sup>10</sup>
  - Conservative MP Lucy Allan stated: "Prevent is not working, and it undermines trust between teachers and pupils"<sup>11</sup> and the National Union of Teachers have said that the Prevent Strategy causes "suspicion in the classroom and confusion in the staffroom".<sup>12</sup>
- iii. As a result, a number of senior figures and committees called for an independent review of Prevent:
- The former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Anderson of Ipswich KBE QC called Prevent "controversial to British Muslims", "The lack of transparency in the operation of Prevent encourages rumour and mistrust to spread and to fester" and "the Prevent strategy as a whole should be the subject of review by an independent panel with the relevant range of expertise (for example in schools and prisons), and with direct input from the internet generation"<sup>13</sup>
  - The equalities think tank, the Runnymede Trust has stated: "There should be a full independent and fully transparent inquiry into the government's counter-terrorism strategy."<sup>14</sup>
  - The Joint Committee on Human Rights, stated: "An independent review of the Prevent Strategy and Duty should be published as part of the consultation on the Bill"<sup>15</sup>
  - The independent UN special rapporteur called as follows: "Allow an independent review of the Prevent strategy to determine its impact upon the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms, including freedoms of association and peaceful assembly, with a view to amending/repealing it; this review should seek inputs from all relevant stakeholders"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eroding Trust: The UK's PREVENT Counter-Extremism Strategy in Health and Education, Open Society Justice Initiative

<sup>8</sup> "Counter-terrorism initiative is fuelling inequality, MPs say", Financial Times, August 2016

<sup>9</sup> Anti-radicalisation strategy: confidentiality and doctors' responsibilities, September 2018

<sup>10</sup> Tony Blair's anti-jihadist programme has failed, says ex-MI5 chief, Telegraph, January 2015

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Allan MP: Prevent is not working, and it undermines trust between teachers and pupils, Politics Home, January 2017

<sup>12</sup> Teachers back motion calling for Prevent strategy to be scrapped, Guardian, March 2016

<sup>13</sup> Supplementary written evidence submitted by David Anderson Q.C. to the Home Affairs Select Committee

<sup>14</sup> Islamophobia: still a challenge for us all, Runnymede Trust, November 2017

<sup>15</sup> Counter-Extremism: Second Report of Session 2016-17, Joint Committee on Human Rights

<sup>16</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association on his follow-up mission to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland\*, 2017

- iv. Independent review secured, the UK government has since appointed William Shawcross as Chair of the review, a decision that has been highly contested, with the MCB describing Shawcross as being “singularly unfit” for the role given his hostile views of Muslims and Islam, and resulted in hundreds of Muslim organisations boycotting the review altogether.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a persistent disconnect between government and British Muslim communities remains as it pertains to matters related to UK Counter-Terrorism policy.

## 6. Islamophobia in the UK in a post ‘War on Terror’ World

Islamophobia has long-since been established as a pervasive form of bigotry, with Baroness Sayeeda Warsi stating it had “passed the dinner table test” and become widely social acceptable in Britain, as far back as 2011<sup>18</sup>. Racism, in whatever form it may manifest, is unacceptable and should have no place in society. Some key statistics outlining the significant scale and scope of Islamophobia in Britain post 2001 are as follows:

### a) Islamophobic Views in Society

- i) Conspiracy theories about Muslims are well established within a section of British society, which often play into Islamophobic tropes propagated by the far-right. Polling on the opinions of Britons on Muslims and Islam has found:
  - 18% believe “Muslim immigration to this country is part of a bigger plan to make Muslims a majority of this country’s population”<sup>19</sup>
  - 32% believe there are “no-go areas in Britain where Sharia law dominates and non-Muslims cannot enter”<sup>20</sup>
  - 31% of young children believe that Muslims are taking over England<sup>21</sup>
  - The average Briton believes 15% of the population are Muslim (actually it is 0.5%), and that Muslims will make up 22% of the population by 2020 (forecast at 0.6%)<sup>22</sup>
- ii) There are a series of worrying social attitudes about Muslims:
  - 33% believe that equal opportunities have gone too far when it comes to Muslims<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Independent (“[Review of counter-extremism scheme boycotted over chair’s Islamophobic comments](#)”) February 2021

<sup>18</sup> The Guardian (“[Lady Warsi claims Islamophobia is now socially acceptable in Britain](#)”)

<sup>19</sup> [YouGov](#) - Conspiracy Theories (GB), August 2018

<sup>20</sup> YouGov - Hope Not Hate exclusive survey of more than 10,300 people, reported in Independent (“[Third of British people wrongly believe there are Muslim ‘no-go areas’ in UK governed by sharia law](#)”) October 2018

<sup>21</sup> Show Racism The Red Card - based on 6000 school children responding to questionnaires sent to more than 60 schools as reported in Guardian (“[Racist and anti-immigration views held by children revealed in schools study](#)”), May 2015

<sup>22</sup> [Ipsos Mori](#) - Perils of Perception survey, December 2016

<sup>23</sup> [Equalities and Human Rights Commission](#) - Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, October 2018

- 43% concerned if mosque built near them<sup>24</sup>
- 47% would not be willing to accept Muslims as members of their family (the worst figure in Western Europe after Italy (57%)<sup>25</sup>)
- For more data, read the MCB's submission to the Home Affairs Committee on Islamophobia, [here](#).

## b) Islamophobia in the Media

- i) The MCB's Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM), set up to improve the reporting of Islam and Muslims through evidence-based analysis and constructive engagement of the media, analysed over 10,000 articles and broadcast clips between October and December 2018, finding:
  - 59% of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour<sup>26</sup>
  - 43% of all broadcast clips associated Muslims with negative behaviour<sup>27</sup>
  - Over a third of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Muslims, with terrorism proving the most recurring theme in coverage of Muslims and Islam<sup>28</sup>
  - For more findings, read CfMM's report 'State of Media Reporting on Islam and Muslims' [here](#).
- ii) The MCB's CfMM has recently released a follow-up report: 'British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)', which analyses over 45,000 online articles and 5,500 broadcast clips to find:
  - 60% of online media articles associate Muslims and/or Islam with negative aspects or behaviour<sup>29</sup>
  - 47% of television clips associate Muslims and/or Islam with negative aspects or behaviour<sup>30</sup>
  - Over 1 in 5 articles had a primary focus on terrorism/extremism<sup>31</sup>
  - National broadcasters had a higher percentage of bias against Muslims and/or Islam as opposed to regional broadcasters
  - For more findings, read CfMM's report: '*British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)*'.

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<sup>24</sup> [Comres](#) - MEND Islamophobia poll October 2018: A survey of British adults on Islamophobia in British society, October 2018

<sup>25</sup> [Pew Research Center](#) - Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues, October 2018

<sup>26</sup> MCB Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) Report '[State of Media Reporting on Islam and Muslims](#)'

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> MCB Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) Report British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



**c) Examples of institutional, or structural, Islamophobia faced by British Muslims in everyday life:**

- A job seeker with an English-sounding name was offered three times the number of interviews than an applicant with a Muslim name<sup>32</sup>
- One in five Muslim adults in full-time work, compared with 35% of the overall population, with Muslim men and women being held back in the workplace by widespread Islamophobia, racism and discrimination<sup>33</sup>
- Muslim men were up to 76% less likely to have a job of any kind compared to white, male British Christians of the same age and with the same qualifications; Muslim women were up to 65% less likely to be employed than white Christian counterparts<sup>34</sup>
- A study by the National Union of Students (NUS) revealed 40% of the surveyed Muslim students (in higher education in the UK) would refrain from “engaging in a high profile position in their students’ union” because of the “negative portrayal of Muslims<sup>35</sup>.”
- Those seeking a flat with a Muslim name get fewer replies<sup>36</sup>
- Motorists pay more to insure their cars if their name is Mohammed<sup>37</sup>

**7. Islamophobia and Hate Crime Trends in the UK**

- a) Official statistics from the UK Home Office documenting hate crime in England and Wales confirm that Muslims have remained consistently, and especially, vulnerable to religiously motivated hate crime offenses.

Year-on-year, from 2015 to the year ending in March 2021, British Muslims have remained the primary targets of religiously motivated hate crimes in the UK by a significant margin:

- 2015/16 to 2017/18 Crime Statistics for England and Wales (CSEW) showed that Muslim adults were the most likely to be a victim of religiously motivated hate crime.<sup>38</sup>
- 47% of all recorded religious hate crime offenses in England & Wales were targeted against those perceived to be Muslim, (2018-2019).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> BBC (“[Is it easier to get a job if you're Adam or Mohamed?](#)”), February 2017

<sup>33</sup> Social Mobility Commission, as cited in Guardian (“[Islamophobia holding back UK Muslims in workplace, study finds](#)”), September 2017

<sup>34</sup> Bristol University, as cited in Independent (“[British Muslims face worst job discrimination of any minority group, according to research](#)”), November 2014

<sup>35</sup> Written evidence submitted to the APPG on British Muslims by Ilyas Nagdee, Hareem Ghani, and Ayesha Ahmed, of the National Union of Students (NUS), Islamophobia Defined report, pg. 30

<sup>36</sup> Guardian (“[Flatshare bias: room-seekers with Muslim name get fewer replies](#)”), December 2018

<sup>37</sup> The Sun, (“[MO COMPARE Motorists fork out £1,000 more to insure their cars if their name is Mohammed](#)”), January 2018

<sup>38</sup> [Home Office](#) - Hate Crime England & Wales (2017/2018)

<sup>39</sup> [Home Office](#) - Hate Crime England & Wales (2018/2019)

- 45% of all recorded religious hate crime offenses in England & Wales were targeted against those perceived to be Muslim (2020- 2021).<sup>40</sup>
- For context, the Jewish community was the second most targeted by hate crimes in 2020- 2021, with 22% of all recorded religious hate crime offenses in England & Wales targeting those perceived to be Jewish.<sup>41</sup>

## b) Gendered Islamophobia and Hate Crime

- According to Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) UK, attacks of Muslim women accounted for 58% of all incidents reported to them, of which over 80% were committed against visibly Muslim women - i.e. those likely wearing hijab (headscarf), niqab (face covering) and/or jilbab (loose, robe-like garments).<sup>42</sup>
- This, in turn, brings the highly gendered intersectionality of Islamophobia into sharp focus, and reveals how visibly Muslim women remain particularly vulnerable to harm in the face of pervasive Islamophobia.
- Islamophobic abuse incidents and attacks targeting Muslims increased by a staggering 375% in the week after of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's comments referring to veiled Muslim women as "letterboxes" and "bank robbers." Of the 38 Islamophobic hate incidents recorded in that week, 22 targeted Muslim women who wore the niqab, or face veil.<sup>43</sup>
- This, in turn, reinforces the significant impact of Islamophobic rhetoric on the lived experience of Muslims, particularly when emanating from within government itself, and how Muslim women remain especially vulnerable to the consequences of pervasive and normalised Islamophobia.
- For more information on Islamophobic hate crime and its consequences, see '*Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences: the Muslim Council of Britain's Supplementary Submission to the Home Affairs Committee*'<sup>44</sup>.

## Conclusion

In an increasingly globalised world, we cannot aim to effectively tackle Islamophobia - or anti-Muslim racism - without being mindful of the interconnected nature of our lived experiences as Muslim communities in countries across Europe and indeed the United States of America. As such, although we are a UK-based Muslim representative body, we remain acutely aware of the sheer pervasiveness of Islamophobia, and deeply concerned about its impact on Muslim communities globally.

Islamophobia remains a pervasive societal ill in the UK; it is pervasive within our politics, media and sections of wider society. It has real-world consequences for the security and well-being of British Muslims, and negatively impacts inter-community cohesion. The MCB continues to advocate on behalf of British Muslim communities; calling upon the government to endorse the

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<sup>40</sup> [Home Office](#) - Hate Crime England & Wales (2020/2021)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/maybewearehated.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/02/boris-johnsons-burqa-comments-led-to-surge-in-anti-muslim-attacks>

<sup>44</sup> <http://archive.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/MCB-Supplementary-Evidence-to-HASC-on-Hate-Crime-and-its-Violent-Consequences.pdf>

APPG on British Muslims definition of Islamophobia, and addressing the institutional nature of Islamophobia. In addition, the MCB Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM), seeks to tackle Islamophobia in the media by working with the British media so as to achieve fair and balanced fair coverage of Islam and Muslims. The MCB is, ultimately, working with partners across wider society in pursuit of a more inclusive Britain, for the common good.

As such, the MCB stands ready and willing to engage fully with USCIRF officials, international partners, friends and allies, with the hopes that we can work together to tackle Islamophobia, in whichever way it may manifest, within our respective countries.