

# External Review into CAGE'S handling of the Mohammed Emwazi Affair

11 October 2015

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# 1.0

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Review

- 1.1** The CAGE Board commissioned Communica to carry out a review of its handling of the Emwazi affair with the following terms of reference.
- a)** Analyse the background and issues to the Emwazi case.
  - b)** Analyse CAGE's handling of Emwazi case, and any lessons learnt for future handling of case and media work.
  - c)** Assess to what extent allegations of CAGE being "apologists for terrorism" have any foundation.
  - d)** Assess whether CAGE is fulfilling its mission and objectives.

## Methodology

- 1.2** The review methodology consisted of the following:-
- An analysis of key media coverage
  - An analysis of key documentation, including emails and planning.
  - Interviews with key staff, board members and advisers.
  - Comments and views of an independent focus group of external people.

## Background

- 1.3** CAGE is a relatively young advocacy organisation (established in 2003) that operates on a small budget with few staff.
- 1.4** As a Muslim organisation its key support base is from among the Muslim community, although it also has many supporters in the wider civil society sector. It brings different ideas, values and perspectives to rights and advocacy work, and adds to the diversity that exists already.
- 1.5** In any society, when new minority groups/ ideas emerge on the public scene, it is to be expected that there will be some mutual misunderstanding, and sometimes hostile reaction or resistance to them and their work from established interests.
- 1.6** The Muslim community, CAGE, and the reaction to them by the media and established interests is at a relatively early phase of development. This is despite the Muslim community having been settled here for some time.
- 1.7** It is only recently that a younger more articulate and assertive Muslim community that can stand its own ground has emerged. CAGE represents this new strand of positive Muslim assertiveness and reaches out to it in its messaging. This can, and is, at times viewed as a threat by wider established interests and society. Over time these reactions will find a more balanced and less polarised level. This has been the case with all minority groups that have settled in the UK.
- 1.8** The CAGE handling of the Emwazi affair and the reaction of wider society to it, is an example of that mutual suspicion, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. There are lessons for wider society in this episode, as well as for CAGE.
- 1.9** CAGE has excelled in some key areas of work in a short space of time. They have reached into the murkier areas of the “War on Terror” (WOT) in ways that others have not.
- 1.10** CAGE challenges WOT policies and their impacts. Therefore its work is bound to be controversial, subject to challenge, scrutiny, and even deliberate misrepresentation. Being labelled and smeared “extremist”, “Jihadi”, or “apologists for terrorism” comes as part of the territory that all Muslims currently inhabit. It is the language of the WOT. Having to deal with a hostile environment has to be factored into CAGE’s work.
- 1.11** CAGE has had many challenges and is still recovering from some of them. Since the arrest and subsequent release of its Outreach Director in 2014, it has operated without a bank account. This means it is forced to deal on a cash only transaction basis. This provides logistical challenges that would test the resolve and resources of any organisation.
- 1.12** The purpose of this review is not to help CAGE become less controversial, or change its values and objectives. It aims to review how CAGE handled the Emwazi affair in order to establish whether the organisation could have done things differently or performed better in a hostile climate.

## CAGE’s handling of Emwazi Affair

- 1.13** We have considered the evidence, in this instance confidential internal paperwork, interviews with key people, and analysis of media reporting. We have also obtained a detached perspective from an independent focus group.
- 1.14** Our conclusion is that CAGE were faced with a potentially huge media story of which they had no previous knowledge. They were also not aware of the extent of their own involvement in it. The unveiling of “Jihadi John” was always going to be huge global media interest story.

- 1.15** We were informed that the confirmation of Mohammed Emwazi as Jihadi John by the Washington Post had already taken place. CAGE confirmed he was one of their clients. The Washington Post then asked CAGE staff to watch a public beheading video to get their opinion. CAGE staff commented that it resembled him but they were not 100% certain. This served no purpose whatsoever and was in our opinion unnecessary and incidental to the story, given that Emwazi was masked and his voice disguised. However, it gave the impression to the general public that CAGE were involved in the identification of Emwazi.
- 1.16** Once CAGE became aware of the story they had 3.5 days to complete many high risk tasks which we detail in this report. The response and reaction to the media was one of those tasks. This was an organisation under extreme stress.
- 1.17** Getting any of these tasks wrong was bound to have serious consequences. The staff and Board were on the frontline and under severe pressure, in some instances putting in 20 hour day shifts of work over the week that followed.
- 1.18** Whilst they clearly had a plan of action, much of that planning was informal, and not well documented.
- 1.19** CAGE staff were stretched and were working outside their comfort zones. They also lacked experience in key areas such as handling the media and risk management. The Board needed to provide much more support and direction to staff than they did.
- 1.20** The risks identified were not in our assessment prioritised sufficiently. The media and planning for it should have been given a much higher priority. Planning for the media and especially the press conference should have commenced almost immediately.
- 1.21** It appears that CAGE had underestimated the level of media interest in this story. On the day the story broke they received over 300 enquires in under two hours. The only way the staff could deal with this volume of interest was through a press conference. Their press conference received live coverage for 51 minutes around the world. They had asked for assistance with it from other groups, but few people were willing to risk their own reputations with the Emwazi story. The story was simply too hot for some to handle. CAGE may have also underestimated the hostility they were to receive given their narrative on the story.
- 1.22** Planning for potential damage to CAGE public reputation should have also been higher on the agenda and given much more priority.
- 1.23** CAGE dealt with and managed all the non-public risks well. However media tasks and preparation took place far too late in the day, and the press conference was “last minute”, even though thinking around messaging and questions had commenced.
- 1.24** The presentation of the Emwazi storyline could have been made easier for members of the media to understand, such as in a presentation, a graphic or a handout with a timeline. This would have also allowed journalists to focus on the story, rather than on CAGE, for a headline.
- 1.25** The key arguments in relation to Emwazi and the role of the security services were well rehearsed and came across well in the media. This part of the CAGE messaging and objective was achieved (mainly from the press release and rehearsal of arguments from previous cases). Most media coverage did focus on the role of the security services as well as CAGE.
- 1.26** Without CAGE releasing all the information the public and media would have been denied an important part of the Emwazi story.
- 1.27** However, having identified security service harassment as a factor, CAGE appear not to have followed this up by seeking explanations from those with the duty to hold the security

services to account. Key questions went unanswered: What pressure was applied to him? When was the last time the security services had contact with him? How and when did he get to Syria? These are still questions of public importance.

**1.28** The condemnation of Emwazi's atrocities was always going to be an issue. When dealing with Muslim acts of violence or atrocities, the media are prone to ask any Muslim spokesperson to first condemn the action of their fellow Muslims, even though they are not responsible for those acts. This approach assumes that the default position of any Muslim appearing on TV is that unless they clearly condemn the act, they are in support of acts such as that of Emwazi. There is great offence and resentment in the Muslim community at this approach. This issue and how to deal with it, also divided our focus group.

**1.29** We found no evidence that CAGE endorsed or did not wish to condemn Emwazi's actions. It is evident from internal documentation that they had discussed this issue and anticipated the question.

**1.30** A conscious decision was made to dissociate CAGE from Emwazi but in their own way, according to their own values (that they do not support the unlawful or extra judicial killing of anyone anywhere). In doing so there was a calculated effort to empower the Muslim community to be able to deal with and stand up to aggressive interviewing techniques so they could be seen to be challenging Islamophobia. This effort to stand up to the media subsequently has been supported by many in the Muslim community.

**1.31** However, the position statement in relation to condemnation was not thought through or articulated very well. At the press conference it was a lengthy argument that was presented rather than a soundbite that could be clearly communicated to the public. The intention was there in the opening statement but the execution was poor. The message as it was

conveyed was not going to be heard.

**1.32** CAGE needed to clearly articulate their distance from Emwazi's actions to prevent any portrayal of them as "apologists for terrorism". This was always a line that was going to be taken by some media. In subsequent interviews, CAGE staff prevaricated on this issue, which detracted journalists from their main message.

**1.33** The press conference was not planned, structured, or thought through well. It was also not scripted and was too long. It did not work to any timings or agenda. It came across as a talk or lecture. There were too many people. It was not controlled. Our focus group discussed this at length and also reached these conclusions, which are reflected in their scoring of the press conference.

**1.34** Without proper planning or scripting, the risks of error and unwarranted comment were high. This is precisely what happened with the Emwazi "was a beautiful young man" comment, and the emotion that accompanied it. It was a personal observation that had not been at all planned. This handed the media and all of CAGE's detractors the soundbite and ammunition they needed to misrepresent them. Almost all the media subsequently deliberately misreported the comment as Emwazi "is a beautiful young man". The "was" became "is" and CAGE were portrayed as "apologists for terrorism".

**1.35** We decided to judge CAGE's messaging at the press conference and subsequent media interviews by their own standards. These are the Islamic standards of fairness and justice and impartiality from the parties involved. Our assessment of the presentation of the CAGE Emwazi case, aside from the condemnation issue, is that it lacked two elements.

**1.36** Fairness and justice as well as human compassion and Islamic values, demanded that the suffering of the families of the victims of Emwazi be referred to, but they were not. The extrajudicial execution of innocent

civilians along with the glorification of that act are not within the Islamic framework of justice or values.

**1.37** Secondly there was no mention of ISIS in the press release/conference. A fair presentation should have also acknowledged the role of ISIS and Syria in Emwazi's trajectory to violent killing of innocent non-combatant civilians.

**1.38** These two shortcomings, along with a clear distancing from Emwazi's actions, and the "beautiful young man" comment allowed the media to easily portray CAGE as being on the side of Emwazi.

### CAGE as "apologists for terrorism"

**1.39** We have been asked to consider this question as part of the review. Our answer is restricted to this affair rather than other aspects of CAGE's work. We also recognise that however well CAGE performed, the media and others still may have labelled them as "apologists for terrorists".

**1.40** We did not find any evidence that CAGE endorsed or supported Emwazi or any other unlawful killing. It is well known from CAGE's work in the Muslim community that they instigated the call for the release of Alan Henning. It is also well known that Moazzam Begg, its Outreach Director, has been an outspoken critic of ISIS and their killings. In fact journalists also confirmed to us that privately CAGE staff had condemned such killings, including that of Lee Rigby by Michael Adebolajo.

**1.41** Unfortunately the shortcomings of CAGE in the areas identified in this review in relation to the media have allowed those who wish to portray them as "apologists for terrorism" to do so easily.

### Is CAGE fulfilling Its Mission and Objectives?

**1.42** CAGE mission is to highlight and campaign

against state policies developed as part of the WOT and to empower the communities affected by them.

**1.43** In our assessment, CAGE have been able to make some impact on its objectives despite the negative reporting.

**1.44** They have been able to highlight injustices caused as result of policies arising out of the WOT, in this particular case the behaviour of the security services. They have also been able to empower the Muslim community to organise and campaign, as well as articulate against and challenge injustices. As a young organisation they are also learning.

**1.45** There has been damage to CAGE in terms of its reputation, but it is not so extensive that they cannot recover from it. There have been positives. CAGE now has a global profile and has become a household name. Campaigns such as #WeAreCage show that CAGE has received widespread support from the Muslim community over the Emwazi issue. There were no voices of criticism from mainstream organisations in the Muslim community. Muslim communities in other countries now want to open branches of CAGE.

**1.46** The work of CAGE now has a wider appeal and receives support in civil society. The CAGE letter condemning PREVENT, which was signed by 360 academics and professionals demonstrates this ([www.protectingthought.com](http://www.protectingthought.com)). CAGE staff are now busier than ever with speaking engagements, especially in the academic sector, and with the media.

### Lessons for the Future

**1.47** CAGE needs to broaden its messaging to encompass the wider community and specific audiences such as civil society and media, but on their own terms and values. CAGE can no longer just appeal to Muslim communities if it wants wider acceptance.

**1.48** CAGE need to have prepared positions on key issues such as condemnations, Jihad, rights of

communities to self-defence, etc. These need to be formulated in media speak as well as in intellectual arguments.

- 1.49** Improvements need to be made in risk management, planning and performance and dealing with the media. This should be done through better policies, procedures and training.
- 1.50** The Board need to find ways to support staff in times of high stress and emergency work. An emergency planning structure should be put in place for occurrences such as this, which will take pressure off staff by helping to distribute priority tasks.
- 1.51** The Board need to be more assertive in protecting the public reputation of CAGE and ensuring control of external publicity.
- 1.52** Policies and procedures need to be put in place for the handling of casework.

## Conclusion

- 1.53** The Emwazi affair was unique. It presented CAGE with an extremely pressurised and hostile situation, while also opening opportunities to advance its objectives. Under these unique circumstances CAGE handled most things very well with the limited resources at their disposal.
- 1.54** The Emwazi affair has been a steep learning curve for this young civil society organisation. Mistakes were made but these were due to inexperience and poor planning and communication. This allowed a hostile media easily to label and misrepresent CAGE in the way they did.
- 1.55** With a greater development of their work and values, combined with better management and training, CAGE will become even better at dealing with the media, communicating their messages and achieving their objectives.

# 2.0

# BACKGROUND

- 2.1** CAGE formerly (known as Cageprisoners) is a not for profit advocacy/campaign group established in 2003.
- 2.2** It was one of the first groups to campaign against the detention of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Its reputation in the area of detainee rights was established primarily as a result of its work on Guantanamo and associated international policies arising from the “war on terror” (WOT).
- 2.3** CAGE has established one of the most comprehensive databases of detainees in Guantanamo, and has also established extensive contacts with their families and lawyers.
- 2.4** More recently CAGE has widened the scope of its work to include a focus on the UK in areas such as Schedule 7, security services, police harassment and PREVENT. This focus has emerged because of increased complaints of abuse from the Muslim community.
- 2.5** For an organisation with a handful of staff supported by a small Board this work is a huge task in itself, requiring individuals with a broad range of skills and competencies.
- 2.6** Most rights organisations operate on large budgets, and have been established for decades. They have acquired the capacity and skills to deal with the media and powerful states with established interests. They often have influential people on their boards. As a comparison, Reprieve, a human rights organisation that carries out similar work, had an annual expenditure of £1,193M for the year 2014.
- 2.7** CAGE operates on an annual budget of around £140,000. Yet it has taken on casework and areas of work that people have been deterred from touching.
- 2.8** The focus of CAGE’s work on state policies and the actions of its agencies, means that it will inevitably draw criticism, controversy and hostility.

- 2.9** It is often alleged in the media that the organisation was established or belongs to Moazzam Begg, a former Guantanamo inmate. This is incorrect. Begg joined CAGE in 2005 after his release from Guantanamo. The involvement of Begg with CAGE was however bound to make the organisation controversial, but also gave the organisation a higher profile.
- 2.10** CAGE's work has received widespread coverage and recognition by journalists in the UK, and overseas as well as amongst the Muslim community. This profile predates the media coverage of the Emwazi affair.
- 2.11** As well as receiving funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Roddick Foundation, the major funding sources for CAGE and its work are from the Muslim community from whom its clients come.
- 2.12** At the beginning of 2014, CAGE's Outreach Director Moazzam Begg was arrested and charged with offences under terrorism laws. He was held for eight months in Belmarsh before all charges were dropped, after it emerged the intelligence services had met with him prior to his visit to Syria.
- 2.13** As a consequence of that arrest CAGE suffered negative publicity and also had its bank accounts closed.
- 2.14** Since 2014 CAGE has failed to secure another bank account forcing it to work on a cash basis. This has produced its own logistical challenges. CAGE had not yet fully recovered from the after effects of Begg's arrest, before the Emwazi affair emerged.
- 2.15** In February of this year, the Washington Post revealed that Mohammed Emwazi was "Jihadi John", the British citizen known as for his horrific beheading videos of captured Western aid workers and journalists. Emwazi had been one of CAGE's clients who had alleged he had been harassed and threatened by British security services.
- 2.16** Given the notoriety which Emwazi had attained, the interest in the story was always going to be immense. The unveiling of "Jihadi John" was the moment the media had been waiting for.
- 2.17** The press conference that CAGE held to highlight their relationship with Emwazi and the role of the security services in pushing him to Syria, received the unprecedented live coverage of 51 minutes around the world.
- 2.18** The comments made by CAGE staff received global media coverage for the following two weeks, including negative attacks on CAGE and its staff. Research director Asim Qureshi was singled out for stating that "Emwazi was a beautiful young man". This statement was deliberately misreported in the media as "is a beautiful young man". Qureshi and his family suffered personal intrusion and hostility from the media, including from outside their family home.
- 2.19** The negative publicity that CAGE received had some serious consequences, but it also had some positive impacts in terms of support for the organisation from the Muslim community, wider civil society and academia.
- 2.20** The Emwazi affair was an exceptional event. It was bound to be a defining moment for whoever dealt with it. Many people who CAGE approached for assistance did not want to be tarnished by association with Emwazi, yet CAGE were part of the story and could not walk away from it. Few organisations and their staff will have the opportunity to experience such unique events.
- 2.21** The Board of CAGE have commissioned this review report to assess the lessons learnt and to assist with future strategy. However, they are also conscious that this was a historical event, and the internal challenges that CAGE and its staff faced needed to be placed on record so that all could learn from them.

# 3.0

# THE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

**3.1** The CAGE Board set the following terms of reference for this review:

## Terms of Reference for Review.

- e)** Analyse the background and issues to the Emwazi case.
- f)** Analyse CAGE's handling of Emwazi case, and any lessons learnt for future handling of case and media work.
- g)** Assess to what extent allegations of CAGE being "apologists for terrorism" have any foundation.
- h)** Assess whether CAGE is fulfilling its mission and objectives.

**3.2** The assessment of whether or not CAGE is fulfilling its mission and objectives is restricted in this review to the handling of issues arising around the Emwazi affair.

**3.3** In order to consider the CAGE mission and objectives we need to understand its work. This is highlighted below and referred to within the report.

## CAGE Mission, Objectives and Work

**3.4** CAGE has set itself ambitious goals and objectives that are set out in various strategic documents which are set out below.

**3.5** **Vision** - "Our vision is to see a world free from oppression and injustice".

**3.6** **Mission** - "Our mission is to highlight and campaign against state policies developed as part of the War on Terror".

**3.7** CAGE objectives as identified from various documents can be summed up as:

- a) To highlight injustices caused by policies/laws adopted as a result of the WOT.
- b) To call for due process and the rule of law, equal treatment for communities and individuals impacted by the policies/laws arising out of the WOT.
- c) To provide advice, support and assistance to individuals and their families/communities who have been impacted by those policies and laws.
- d) To empower communities who have been impacted by the WOT.

**3.8** CAGE has also set itself some core values to guide its work. These include:

- **Witness**  
To document abuses of the War on Terror.
- **Empower**  
To remove fear and enable survivors to take action.  
Engage cycles of violence by engaging all parties.
- **Justice**  
To stand for the principles of the rule of law and due process.
- **Accountability**  
We believe in speaking truth to power.
- **Independence**  
Independence from all political and financial interests.  
To assist, regardless of ideology.
- **Empathy**  
Empathy with survivors of abuse and mistreatment.

**3.9** CAGE is a relatively young organisation in terms of campaigning for people's rights.

However, with limited resources and in a short space of time, it has conducted research and engaged in a variety of areas of work which include:

- Guantanamo Bay
- Torture
- Arbitrary detention
- Enforced disappearance
- Arrests
- Schedule 7 stops
- Raids
- Mi5 harassment
- Prevent
- Syria

**3.10** There are three main target groups at whom the research, casework and campaigning of CAGE is aimed:

- Survivors - CAGE works with survivors of the WOT providing support to them and representing them.
- The Public - CAGE empowers and mobilises communities to campaign against the WOT. It challenges the dominant narrative and perceived exaggerated threat of terrorism.
- Policy Makers – It applies popular and political pressure on States challenging the WOT and its policies.

**3.11** The work of CAGE by its nature makes it controversial. It challenges States and their policies where they abuse the rights of individuals and communities. Therefore the group is bound to be targeted by powerful and established interests and their allies in the media.

**3.12** This is not just the case in the UK, but extends overseas as well. Some CAGE staff are also prohibited from travelling to Middle Eastern countries because they have criticised their policies.

**3.13** At a time in the UK where people opposed to the mainstream political narrative, especially

Muslims, are being labelled “extremist”, smear campaigns, hostility and controversy are part of the territory in which CAGE operates. It is not the purpose of this review to assist the group to become less controversial.

**3.14** The starting point for this review is that CAGE will always be a controversial group. Indeed if they were not, their work might not be considered to be having an impact.

**3.15** CAGE will always attract controversy because of its mission and client base. It will always attract hostility from the Government, its agencies and those policy and pressure groups that develop and frame the dominant policy and debate around the WOT.

**3.16** Being controversial, however, does not mean that the work CAGE carries out is less important. The fact that CAGE also draws a lot of support from communities and civil society organisations, shows that its work is seen as important in some key sections of society, including by many journalists.

**3.17** Our aim in this review is to highlight how CAGE can improve their approach and planning for future incidents like the Emwazi affair, and how to better respond to the media. We accept though that in this case the hostility was exceptional. Any Muslim associated with “Jihadi John” was likely to receive hostility and negativity no matter how good the planning or preparation.

**3.19** The focus group was advertised externally via social media and other avenues. All those that responded were invited to attend. The views of the focus group are incorporated as part of the assessment.

**3.20** After assessing all the evidence we have arrived at an entirely independent judgment on the performance of CAGE during the Emwazi affair. We also ask and provide some answers to questions that members of the general public have raised in relation to this affair.

**3.21** It should be noted here that Communicas have previously been commissioned to carry out management work for CAGE, to write reports and provide advice. However, we had not been asked, nor had we any advisory or other role in the Emwazi affair. All the internal information has been viewed by us for the first time.

**3.22** Communicas carry out management and consultancy work across the third sector including independent audits, reviews and investigations as well as media work.

## Methodology

**3.18** The review consisted of the following:

- An analysis of key media coverage
- An analysis of key documentation, including emails and planning.
- Interviews with key staff and board members and advisers.
- Comments and views of a focus group of external people.

# 4.0

# THE REVIEW

## General Observations

- 4.1** The Emwazi affair was unique. It was one of the biggest media and public interest stories involving Muslims in the last decade. It was bound to receive unprecedented coverage. The unveiling of “Jihadi John” was the story the media had been waiting for.
- 4.2** Even without the CAGE link, the media coverage would have focused on who radicalised Emwazi in the UK, and those who had been in contact with him.
- 4.3** CAGE’s involvement with Jihadi John was entirely coincidental. The group deals with many cases of abuse across all areas of its remit. Emwazi was one of those individuals who had been in contact and wanted help. However, nobody at CAGE could have realised that the masked “Jihadi John” would end up being one of their former clients.
- 4.4** However this would not be the first time that CAGE had contact with a controversial client. The family of Michael Adebolajo, Lee Rigby’s brutal killer, had also been a CAGE client. He had also made allegations of harassment against British security services.
- 4.5** It was inevitable therefore that CAGE would become part of the story even if they did not respond at all to the media. Given that Research Director Asim Qureshi had been the caseworker dealing with Adebolajo and Emwazi, it was inevitable that he was also part of the story.
- 4.6** Therefore CAGE found themselves at short notice in an emergency situation, which they had not expected and for which they had not planned. The story presented a historic opportunity as well as a threat to the organisation.

**4.7** Within a short space of time, staff and Board had to make a number of extremely serious judgments and complete many high risk tasks.

**4.8** In order to be balanced to CAGE, we have looked at the tasks involved, the timescale available, and the challenges faced, so we could assess their performance against the pressures of work.

**4.9** It is worth reiterating here that CAGE is a small organisation with few staff. Its Press Officer at the time was already moving on and was serving out his notice period. He was therefore not going to play a major role in this campaign which by association would affect his career.

**4.10** It is also worth mentioning here that an external review like this can only capture some of the challenges faced by staff in particular, and it is easy to be critical with hindsight. However, only those who have lived through this experience can truly appreciate the immense pressures under which they had to work.

**4.11** Nevertheless we have made an assessment of performance based on the information provided and through interviews with people.

## Background to Story and Planning

**4.12** Responding to an event like the Emwazi affair in our assessment would have challenged the capacity of organisations with a much larger budget, more resources and deeper experience than CAGE.

**4.13** It is worth pointing out that CAGE staff have not had any formal media training, although they do from time to time appear in the media and have developed a good working relationship with journalists.

**4.14** Some of the challenges highlighted here also apply generally to Muslim organisations and charities in this country who are under pressure from the media and other interests.

**4.15** The background to the incident is that a journalist from the Washington Post contacted CAGE about a possible story in the Middle East, which may have been one of their cases. Eventually the journalist revealed that Mohammed Emwazi had been confirmed to her as "Jihadi John". From then on events unfolded quickly. The table below is a timeline of events leading up to the press release and conference.

## Timeline

**4.16** From table 1.0 we can see that up until Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> this was just another of the many media enquires that CAGE receives on a daily basis. On that day CAGE became aware that they had a major story on their hands and many serious issues to address in a short space of time.

**4.17** CAGE did not know when exactly the story would break. However they maintained their relationship with the journalist and decided to provide information so they could influence the story and limit any damage to CAGE. It was also an opportunity to achieve their own objectives, in this case highlighting the excesses of the security services and the radicalising effect these excesses had on individuals.

**4.18** It was a race against time before the story broke. We now know that CAGE effectively had 3.5 days between the time they were informed of the story, and the time the story appeared. They had to complete many high level tasks within this timeframe. The next two weeks were also to be of high pressure and stress for all staff and the Board.

**4.19** Table 2.0 highlights in more detail the key tasks that had to be dealt with in the 3 days leading up to the press conference, in the anticipation that the media would have high interest levels in the story as well as the security services. All these actions were completed.

**Table 1.0 - Timeline**

DATE	COMMENTS
THURSDAY 19th FEBRUARY 2015	Washington Post (WP) journalist contacts CAGE saying she wants to discuss a case. Asim Qureshi (AQ) is on leave and is not available to discuss. He is due to return the next day. At this stage CAGE have no knowledge of the identity or the potential story. CAGE are often approached by journalists and treat this just another story and enquiry.
FRIDAY 20th FEBRUARY 2015	AQ is due back from overseas but is unable to meet the journalist.
SATURDAY 21st FEBRUARY 2015	Meeting takes place between AQ and WP. Journalist enquires about name Mohammed Emwazi. AQ takes information and checks CAGE's files.
SUNDAY 22ND FEBRUARY 2015	AQ Confirms It was one of their cases involving security services harassment complaint. Journalist confirms for first time she knows from her own sources that Emwazi is the same person as Jihadi John. AQ is shown a video to get his opinion. He says that "while there was some striking similarities, that due to the hood, there was no way he could be 100% certain".  This triggers CAGE risk management response. The family of Emwazi were contacted to warn them of media harassment and provide them with legal contacts in case they are falsely maligned in media etc. and need legal representation.
MONDAY 23RD FEBRUARY 2015	CAGE Scenario planning completed Community impact assessment completed Risk assessment completed Legal advice obtained Family updated about meeting with journalist Advice sought from advisors Board requested to provide advice on press statement, media FAQs, community briefing. Because of own work commitments Board response slow.
TUESDAY 24TH FEBRUARY 2015	CAGE planning and actions continue.
WEDNESDAY 25TH FEBRUARY 2015	Journalist working up story, CAGE involved in trying to complete own tasks and manage outcome. Risk assessment included risk of allegations against CAGE. They decided to publish ALL material in possession connected to Emwazi, in public interest. BBC editor contacts CAGE saying they are aware WP will be breaking Emwazi story and asking for information. No comment provided but action plan accelerated as a result as they become certain a story will appear.  PM - CAGE hold a community briefing meeting. Press release being prepared.
THURSDAY 26th FEBRUARY 2015	11am Story breaks in WP and then BBC. Media Frenzy begins. CAGE send out press release. CAGE organise and hold a press conference. CAGE publish a full profile of Emwazi citing primary source evidence that they collected four years ago. They also publish a lengthy narrative of his case and dealings with him.
FRIDAY 26TH FEBRUARY 2015	Media publicity continues and CAGE interviews continue.
SATURDAY 28TH FEBRUARY 2015	CAGE release Emwazi emails – media publicity continues.
TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 2015	CAGE release audio recording of Mohammed Emwazi – media coverage continues.

**Table 2.0 - CAGE Action List**

ACTION	OBSTACLES/COMMENT
Brief Emwazi Family - obtain consent to release information about their sons case, arrange lawyer for family, recommend alternative accommodation.	The family also needed some counselling as they were traumatised by this revelation and feared harassment, being suspected or prosecuted themselves. CAGE referred them to others for support.  Not easy to get lawyers in a short spell of time on a Sunday.
Brief Board, plan responses and delegate tasks. Keep Board updated throughout.	Work and planning commenced. This continued throughout the period but time and other immediate action were constraints.
Go through Emwazi emails and put together picture/narrative and information to be published.	AQ mainly working on this task as he is best placed to do so. Emails checked by lawyer for publication.
AQ to arrange alternative accommodation for his own family.	This was in anticipation that the media would hound him in his private life and at home, which is what happened.
Inform Charitable funders of story.	JRCT and Roddick informed.
CAGE office to re-locate temporarily to protect staff.	In anticipation of media turning up and harassing staff. This also happened. Had to find/ arrange another office and relocate so work could continue.
Obtain legal advice in relation to CAGE itself.	Difficulty in finding a lawyer in a short space of time. Could not use the same one as the Emwazi family.
Brief some Journalists	Journalist of major newspaper briefed.
Develop media narrative and strategy	After studying all correspondence, the narrative and storyline developed with some key objectives. Anticipation and planned response to some of the accusations that would be made against CAGE in a FAQ list.
Prepare Press Release	Press Release prepared
Plan Press Conference	Some thinking before but done mainly on the day. Difficulty in booking venue and paying for it by cash. Difficulty in finding independent chair.
Briefing the community	Anticipate that the media would be focused on the community. Key figures were invited to a meeting and briefed and their suggestions taken on board. CAGE also produced two YouTube clips the night before to explain their position and inform the community of why transparency was needed and why they would be publishing all data. These videos have had thousands of hits each:  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_r7JjdRZPc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_r7JjdRZPc</a>  <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1Mabul66M">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1Mabul66M</a>

**4.20** Having interviewed different members of staff we have been able to get a picture of the challenges and the way in which tasks were managed over the next few crucial days. We make some judgments on gaps, and issues that could have been dealt with better. The handling of the press conferences and media performances is dealt with separately.

**4.21** It has to be noted that staff were working extremely long hours under intense stress. The stakes were not only high for them as an organisation but also personally. Any association with Emwazi would inevitably be seen as negative and stay with them throughout their careers.

**4.22** There were huge risks for anyone involved with CAGE in the Emwazi story. For some people the story was too big for them to be linked to it. A number of individuals were approached to chair the press conference but they refused.

**4.23** This was however a huge opportunity to explain to the global public about CAGE, its work, and its narrative on the serious consequences of security service harassment.

**4.24** It was also in the public interest to release all the information CAGE had on Emwazi.

**4.25** A further complication was that the story was highly sensitive and it was not possible for it to be discussed outside CAGE for fear of the story leaking and taking a direction all of its own. All meetings, conversations were in person and not on the phone.

**4.26** CAGE had entered into a negotiation with the Washington Post journalist to arrive at a story in which they had a managed role. This ensured they had a head start on the story.

**4.27** Although they had limited time to prepare a response, it was better than the story breaking, the media coming to them directly and having no time to prepare.

**4.28** From the interviews and the evidence we

have seen, the following appear to be a list of CAGE's objectives over the Emwazi affair:

- a)** Support the family.
- b)** Limit damage to CAGE and its staff.
- c)** Put out all information CAGE had in public interest.
- d)** Manage the direction of the story.
- e)** Present the Emwazi story they had accurately.
- f)** Get the message across about the role played by security services in the "radicalisation" of individuals.
- g)** Empower the Muslim community.

## Management Observations

**4.29** There have been criticisms of CAGE in public and private. We address some of these as well as make our own observations.

**4.30** There have been some public criticisms that CAGE courted media publicity on this issue and were enjoying the limelight. However, we found no evidence of that. The evidence indicates that this was an organisation under great pressure and stress, which did not want this publicity. This issue was thrust onto CAGE, and the story was going to run in the media regardless of what they did.

**4.31** By and large CAGE did an extraordinary job with limited resources. They managed an exceptional situation which posed high risks. Without CAGE's input and released information, the public would have been denied a key part of Emwazi's story.

**4.32** As to the question of whether CAGE was inadvertently responsible for this story by confirming Emwazi identity, it is worth mentioning that CAGE did not confirm his identity. The identification had been made earlier by a source to the Washington Post and was incidental to the story. Regardless of AQ's comments on identity, the story was going to break.

**4.33** However, we did find the comments made by

AQ on the identity of Emwazi problematic and contradictory. The CAGE statement by AQ to the journalist, says: "There was a resemblance. This is making me feel confident that this could be the same person, but I cannot say for certain." We do not think there was any need for CAGE to engage in this kind of opinion on an indemnity to a journalist.

**4.34** We found that CAGE were not working to any written formal policy or procedure on how to deal with or behave in relation to casework. Having built up experience amongst staff, CAGE need to ensure that this experience is documented in procedures.

**4.35** CAGE provided the necessary support to the family.

**4.36** No written consent form was signed by the Emwazi family agreeing to release information, although verbal consent was given.

**4.37** CAGE correctly anticipated most high risks that needed to be managed, albeit in an informal way, and followed through on mitigating those risks. Most planning seems to have been done via email and in face-to-face meetings with Board or operations teams.

**4.38** Some risks, such as those in relation to the media, whilst considered high, we believe were underestimated. This was partly due to limited experience of risk management and how the media works and how to deal with them, as well as perhaps due to too much comfort with journalists, which provided a false sense of security.

**4.39** There have been some suggestions that some tasks provided to some individuals within CAGE were not responded to quickly enough.

**4.40** There was no formal risk management plan in relation to the Emwazi affair. Had a documented risk plan been available, even within the short time span, this would have been an invaluable tool. A formal risk

planning exercise would have made it clear what needed to be done, by whom, and when. The priority of risks and how they should be mitigated could have been documented and acted upon.

**4.41** The staff at CAGE were under great pressure both because of the event itself, and due to their already heavy workload. The Board needed to provide more direction and also provide support to staff.

**4.42** Staff handling the messaging and the media were also carrying out day to day tasks. This meant that clear thinking in relation to media strategy was not possible. It would have been helpful to bring in additional voluntary support to assist planning and workload.

**4.43** The thinking and planning functions, especially in relation to the casework and the media strategy, needed to be detached from those carrying out on-the-ground tasks.

**4.44** There was no evidence that CAGE has a developed media strategy or policy in relation to the risks associated with its work, or that it has carried out contingency planning for high risk incidents.

**4.45** CAGE staff have had no formal media training and their limited experience at the press conference was clearly visible, mentioned in interviews and commented on by the focus group.

**4.46** There were differences between Board members and staff when it came to the presentation of the Emwazi case. This is inevitable in any organisation. In the end, the staff view, because of their closeness to the case, was the one that was projected in the media.

**4.47** Whilst this may have been the correct approach, the Board needed to assert itself more in terms of protecting the reputation of CAGE. CAGE reputational damage should have been higher on the risk management agenda.

# 5.0

# CAGE HANDLING OF THE MEDIA

## The Options

**5.1** Once CAGE became aware of the media interest and story they had a number of options.

- Do nothing and let the story and media come to them.
- Simply wait for the right time and issue a press release with their story and offer no further comments.
- Try to control the events and story and use the media to further CAGE objectives by working with the journalist to break the story.

**5.2** It is apparent that CAGE chose the final option, and the one that carried the most risks. After studying the evidence and assessing the likely risks, we believe CAGE took the right option. Had they followed the other two options the end outcome would also have been adverse publicity but with loss of control of the agenda and storyline.

**5.3** CAGE had thought about a press conference but this was not planned for. It appears CAGE had not fully foreseen the huge global interest in this story and felt that working with the journalist, producing their own information, a press release and dealing with the follow up would have been sufficient. They had not foreseen the sheer number of enquiries they would receive and their lack of resources to deal with them.

**5.4** The CAGE Press Officer reports that when the story broke, and after sending out their press release, his fully charged mobile phone had died within two hours despite not answering, due to the sheer number of calls. There were over 300 plus media queries in under two hours.

**5.5** The press conference was therefore planned on the day. It was more a practical response to media queries rather than a planned event during which CAGE could control and manage the storyline and agenda. This put CAGE at a disadvantage.

**5.6** On the day, organising the conference proved a major logistical task in itself. CAGE struggled to book any public or private venue due to the impact of the PREVENT policy. Finding a venue to host CAGE is always a problem. Equally, payment for bookings was a problem as a CAGE representative had to go personally to the venue and pay cash.

**5.7** The failure to anticipate and plan earlier for the press conference meant a missed opportunity. CAGE had an open global audience in which to convey and maximize their message. Whilst accepting mitigating factors, this lack of foresight and formal planning in the area of the media was, we believe, a major cause of the shortcomings in the press conference.

**5.8** The key messages were thought about during the week and put together. The press release was finalised and sent out on the day the story first broke in the Washington Post. It was picked up by the BBC, who were already aware of it the night before and who had contacted CAGE.

## The Storyline

**5.9** CAGE staff had limited time to look back and study the Emwazi case, develop the story and decide how it could be communicated.

**5.10** The story was not recent and it was complex, with a number of key events in the life of Mohammed Emwazi. Mohammed Emwazi had been in touch with CAGE for a period nearly year from June 2010 to April 2011, according to released emails.

**5.11** The presentation of the facts was going to be crucial. Communicating those facts to journalists was also important.

**5.12** It is interesting to note that one of the articles that covered the Emwazi affair and showed a deeper understanding of the issues around his case, was one in which the Press Officer had personally briefed the journalist.

**5.13** CAGE relied on a verbal and written narrative presentation of the facts in this case, both internally and externally. They had also relied on the member of staff most connected to the case to present it. This made a more detached presentation more difficult.

**5.14** This mainly verbal method was also used at the press conference, and this meant

journalists struggled to grasp the facts. There was not even a handout of facts or a timeline on which to focus. In the absence of these other methods of communication, it was more likely that the focus would be on CAGE and the things being said.

**5.15** A much better method would have been to present the facts on a summarised presentation format or graphic timeline so that they were clear. This would have allowed both a detached assessment and the dissemination of more information on which the media could focus.

**5.16** This should have included age, origin, and other personal information as well as the key stages in his journey to becoming Jihadi John. Although all the email correspondence was published and presented as a narrative, the presentation lacked easily identifiable factual information. We believe this is a task that is still worth doing and needs to be made public. It should include those stages of his life spent in Syria.

**5.17** A timeline would clearly highlight key events that could have led to Emwazi's "radicalisation", including the period in Syria. This would have allowed CAGE staff and the media to make better judgments about the storyline and more closely pinpoint factors in Emwazi's "radicalisation".

**5.18** The key part of the CAGE storyline was the harassment of Emwazi by the security services and the "radicalising" effect this had on him. A legitimate question would be, was this the correct storyline? In other words was there any basis to the argument?

**5.19** The storyline had to be based on facts. Emwazi's allegations centred on harassment by British security services, his attempts to marry and start a new life in Kuwait and impediments to it, so these aspects of the case had to be made in public. This also happens to be a story angle that many journalists are interested in, and is newsworthy.

**5.20** A further question that could be raised is whether the press release headline was the right one, i.e. "Jihadi John "radicalised" by Britain". Press release headlines need to be relevant and catch the eyes of editors. In this case any mention of Jihadi John was going to get attention.

**5.21** CAGE also needed to get their message across. They could have used alternative words instead of "radicalised", such as "harassed", but this would not have conveyed their message nor had the desired impact. The media were always going to focus on who radicalised Emwazi, therefore CAGE injected their perspective into the headline. This seemed to work well with most media picking up on this aspect of the story, as well as writing about CAGE.

## Media Preparedness and Organisation.

**5.22** Whilst CAGE were aware of the media impact and some of the lines of attack, the negative publicity that they received requires an assessment of their preparedness. Had they been better prepared perhaps such negative publicity could have been avoided.

**5.23** It would be unrealistic to think that CAGE would not get any negative publicity. The very fact they had been linked to the most notorious character of the civil war in Syria and ISIS, meant it was inevitable that negative coverage would occur.

**5.24** Furthermore, the CAGE storyline questioned the behaviour of the security services, which was bound to bring with it a response from the establishment, in this case the media and State.

**5.25** A more realistic question is, could CAGE have been better prepared and delivered the message better to obtain a better outcome and dampen the likely negative publicity?

**5.26** From a preparedness point of view there were a number of lessons to be learnt:-

- There was a misjudgement about the expected scale of response to the story from the media and a failure to adequately prepare for it early enough. Given the level of interest, a press conference was always the most logical option. It should have been planned from the outset, not on the day.

- Whilst there was anticipation of media attacks on CAGE credibility and what that might entail, there was not a planned approach to mitigate the likely attacks.

- There was too much emphasis on detailed story and arguments and responding to them rather than short media messaging.

- The planning for media took place later than it should have.

- Whilst there were discussions and a Frequently Asked Questions document, the messaging was not scripted for media use. This meant there was too much license for speakers to move off script and message, thus making mistakes.

- CAGE held a community briefing event the night before to inform the community which worked well. However, as well as talking to the Muslim community, their main supporters, it was important for CAGE to also factor in how its story and messaging would play out in wider society.

**5.27** Both the press release and the press conference were in our view "last minute" even though it was a near certainty that this story would break soon, and, that this would be a huge global story.

**5.28** The press conference was organised on the day with all the associated difficulties, venue, how to pay, who would chair, security, informing the media. The fact that it took place was in itself an achievement. This added to the pressure and stress on staff to perform in an already difficult situation.

**5.29** The result of concentrating on logistics rather than messaging was a loss of emphasis on organisation, structure, timing and agenda control.

**5.30** Post conference, CAGE continued to release information and carry out media interviews. Some of the same issues of messaging that occurred in the press conference came across in the media. The effect of so many interviews on just a few staff was physical exhaustion, so much so that when Qureshi appeared on the Andrew Neil show he could not even recall his prepared answers. This interview and some others undoubtedly should have been declined. There was nothing but damage to CAGE's reputation to be achieved through them.

## Handling Media and Messaging

**5.31** CAGE have developed extensive relationships with the media in the last few years. They work well with journalists and provide good case studies. Two senior journalists volunteered to assist with the CAGE focus group for this review, as well as other external individuals. The fact that they spent their own time on a Saturday to assist with this task shows that CAGE have plenty of well-wishers.

**5.32** However, press conferences and live media interviews are different to working with journalists to develop and convey a story. Complex cases and storylines don't make easy media headlines. The tabloid and TV media will therefore always search for the easiest headlines. The audience is also the general public, not just intellectuals and activists.

**5.33** The media can be, and is at times very hostile to some Muslims issues. CAGE were fully aware of that and had to some extent planned for that. They had predicted a response to most of the likely questions.

**5.34** CAGE had also thought about their objectives with the story and its messaging. The key messages they wanted to get across were:-

- The role of WOT policies (lack of access to due process and rule of law) in pushing people towards extreme and violent actions i.e. "radicalisation".
- The harassment of Emwazi that led him to find a way out of his situation.
- Attempts to recruit Emwazi
- CAGE's position that everyone, no matter how heinous their crimes, should be subject to due process and the rule of law.
- There is an alternative narrative to the Government's on "radicalisation".

**5.35** CAGE's messaging in these areas was highly effective. Some tabloids picked up on the "Britain radicalised Jihadi John" story, even using that as a headline. Many journalists also reported the Emwazi experience with security services. This part of the messaging effectively reached an international audience.

**5.36** A SKY news survey in April seemed to confirm some CAGE perspectives. It found there was a fair degree of support for the notion that the security services was radicalising people. This was reported in the Daily Telegraph. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11526430/MI5-and-police-partly-to-blame-for-radicalisation-say-four-in-10-British-Muslims.html>

*"Earlier this year, the pressure group CAGE claimed that harassment by the security services had contributed to the radicalisation of Mohammed Emwazi, the London student identified as "Jihadi John", the killer from the so-called Islamic State.*

*Downing Street, condemned the claims as "completely reprehensible".*

*But the polling found that 39 per cent of British Muslims agreed with the idea that the actions of police and MI5 are contributing to radicalisation and only 28 per cent disagreed. The finding was similar when the results were broken down by age*

and gender. Meanwhile 16 per cent of non-Muslims polled also agreed with the idea and only half disagreed”.

**5.37** There were three main negatives that media focused on.

- a) The Emwazi “was a beautiful young man” comment which provided the headline in an otherwise heavy story.
- b) CAGE’s perceived lack of condemnation of Jihadi John’s heinous crimes.
- c) CAGE were labelled as “apologists for terror” for allegedly blaming the security services for creating Jihadi John.

**5.38** Apart from the first negative, the others may have been raised no matter how well CAGE planned the press conference and delivered the messages. Lessons however can still be learnt.

**5.39** CAGE’s refusal to condemn Emwazi’s actions on media’s terms occupied much time in interviews, and in one instance a member of staff walked off air in the middle of an interview.

**5.40** CAGE had discussed this issue and decided they would “condemn” in their own way. The reason given for this is that CAGE feel it is one of their values to empower Muslims to be resilient in the face of hostility and discrimination. Muslim representatives in the media that are always condemning other Muslims for actions they are not responsible for, tend to lose credibility. Many in the Muslim community certainly feel that whenever a Muslim spokesperson appears on TV they are asked to condemn actions, as if they somehow they are sympathetic or support them.

**5.41** CAGE staff have condemned the actions and crimes of people privately. This has been confirmed to me by journalists at the focus group. CAGE insist they in no way support ISIS or Jihadi John. They point to the fact they were primarily responsible for the Muslim community’s campaign to release Alan

Henning, who was subsequently executed by Jihadi John.

**5.42** On this occasion they decided to make the point that they are against all those who commit war crimes or international crimes whether states or individuals.

**5.43** Whilst they have developed an approach on this matter, we found that this was not articulated very well, nor was it conveyed in a media soundbites. Their position is summed up in the FAQ’S that were developed as below:

#### **Do you condemn ISIS and Jihadi John?**

- *CAGE condemns unlawful killings, arbitrary detention and torture, regardless of who the perpetrators or victims are: <http://www.cageuk.org/article/cage-calls-release-british-aid-worker-alan-henning>*
- *It is inherent in our humanity to detest and oppose crimes, so that is default position. Why do you assume we don’t condemn?*
- *Suspicion inherent in the question. There should be no collective guilt or responsibility.*
- *CAGE will condemn and has condemned crimes, in its own space and time. There should be no obligation to condemn or condone based on others’ agenda’s*
- *CAGE has worked on cases of victims of ISIS including Alan Henning, arguably expending more effort than the government attempting to negotiate his freedom: <http://www.cageuk.org/press-release/cage-reveals-governments-squandered-opportunities-efforts-secure-alan-henning-release> And <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-idea-that-i-endorse-isis-is-unbelievably-ignorant-cage-fought-to-save-alan-henning--in-the-face-of-the-governments-failings-10089091.html>*

## The Press Conference

**5.44** At the beginning of the press conference Qureshi starts by articulating this position. However, it is neither clear or concise, nor likely to be understood by the media or public. The media are not going to spend time searching for good intentions, but they will when needed amplify mistakes and omissions.

**5.45** The following is the transcript of the CAGE condemnation position at the beginning of the press conference:

*"Hi there everybody, my apologies for being a little late. We want to start this press conference really by first of all mentioning that when it comes to arbitrary detention, torture, unlawful killing, that it is important that we as a society condemn that. And that really is what CAGE is about. We started off pretty much on the basis that we saw Guantanamo, we saw arbitrary detention, we saw torture and we couldn't accept that as being the reality of the way that our societies work. And that follows through to whoever carries out those arbitrary detentions, whoever carries out that torture or those executions. It doesn't matter who they are, we have to live in a world and a society that is free of these things. So we wanted to put that out there. And we also wanted to put out there that this story in many ways is about human beings, human lives. You know, we can't forget that because when I think about why I am here today, I can't forget the efforts that we as CAGE made to try and secure the release of Alan Henning. We can't forget people like him and others, you know, people who have been killed in the war in Iraq who were subjected to all forms of torture and arbitrary detention. So this is where we want to start this press conference: Yes, that while we are here to talk about a very very important subject matter, that there is an underlying humanity that we shouldn't forget as we speak about these things. Because often*

*we can become too confused about what this is really about. So you know, we do want to remember Alan, we do want to remember what happened to him and what happened to so many others as well, and we do want to remember all those other lives that have been lost. Sorry it's taken so long to introduce but we think it's important we put that out there."*

**5.46** Any ordinary member of the public would not relate this to the beheadings carried out by Jihadi John.

**5.47** Having seen some background notes, it can be seen clearly that this relates to internal discussions on the matter. The good intention was there but the execution was poor.

**5.48** This is partly due to CAGE not having a clear and easily comprehensible written position statement on this matter and also due to not having a written script for the press conference.

**5.49** The press conference lasted exactly 51 minutes. This was an extremely long time. The entirety of it was being broadcast live across the world although CAGE staff were not aware of this. This amount of live media time is seldom afforded small civil society groups like CAGE. It was a fantastic opportunity for CAGE to raise their profile in a positive way.

**5.50** Nobody at the press conference appeared to be reading from any notes. There were no handouts of information to look at. It came across as more of a lecture than a press conference. Organisationally the press conference came across as unplanned. Given the length of time and the unscripted nature of the event, this allowed for unwarranted comments to emerge. This is exactly what happened with the "was a beautiful young man" comment.

**5.51** This one comment was the only real media soundbite in a 51 minute conference. It was inevitable that all the media would use that even though they changed the context by

replacing the “was” with “is”. This comment was entirely spontaneous and accompanied by emotion, giving the impression that the only empathy of CAGE and Qureshi was with Jihadi John. The failure to mention Jihadi John by name in any condemnation and interview was a mistake throughout the episode. In other interviews, whilst Bush and Blair are mentioned, Emwazi is not, which gave the impression that CAGE were not impartial.

**5.52** Whilst CAGE and their supporters including many journalists do not believe they are apologists for terrorism, a failure to make an outright statement at the outset about Jihadi John’s executions; along with the “beautiful young man” remark allowed the media to easily portray them as apologists.

**5.53** CAGE staff and Board informed us that being fair and just in their work and statements and being seen to be independent are part of their core values. They were asked if they felt they lived up to these values in terms of the Emwazi story and the press conference. They said they believed they had.

**5.54** Our view is that two elements were missing in the CAGE messaging which otherwise had hit the mark. These elements were necessary for them to be seen to be fair and just.

**5.55** Firstly, there was no empathy or recognition of the suffering this press conference would undoubtedly cause the families of those executed by Jihadi John. A clear statement at the beginning should have been the starting point. Emwazi’s own family were also going to suffer. This would not only have been fair but Islamic. The Prophet Muhammed (SAW) was said to have felt sorrow and grief even when he took the life of an enemy in battle. The extra judicial execution of innocent civilians along with the glorification of that execution are not within the Islamic framework of justice or values.

**5.56** The failure to recognise the grief of families, and a clear statement in soundbite that CAGE does not support unlawful execution or killing

by Jihadi John; or the glorifying of such acts, allowed the media to easily portray CAGE as “apologists for terrorism.”

**5.57** Secondly, in the entire press conference the word ISIS does not appear to be mentioned. The CAGE narrative misses a part of Emwazi’s life that led to him being who he is today. There needed to be some reference to the responsibility of ISIS for his actions. He did not go from being a beautiful young man to executioner in the UK. This happened in Syria. A fair and just presentation should have incorporated at least a mention of this part of his life and transition.

**5.58** The conference went on far too long and there was far too much information, heavy arguments and unnecessary emphasis on CAGE work. Again a simple one page handout of CAGE work and values/objectives would have been a useful and better approach.

**5.59** These issues re-occur in other interviews, with CAGE staff getting bogged down on the issue of condemnation, detracting from their main message.

# 6.0

## THE FOCUS GROUP

- 6.1** As well our review, we felt it important to incorporate a further external perspective, to test whether a small sample of people would arrive at similar conclusions about CAGE's handling of the media.
- 6.2** An open advert was placed on the CAGE website and social media to invite people to a focus group. All those who responded were invited to attend the focus group. Out of those volunteering only six could attend the meeting date. Those that did not attend were invited to send their comments and score the press conference.
- 6.3** The six included an academic, two senior journalists (one who had covered the whole press conference originally), a member of a Muslim community, a worker for another non-Muslim rights organisation and a researcher/activist.
- 6.4** The group were asked to give their impressions of CAGE's performance and what they had read about them in the media, both prior to watching some media clips and after.
- 6.5** They were asked to watch the full press conference, a clip from Channel Four and a clip from SKY.
- Full press conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2bIXCenmt8>  
Cerie Buillevant Sky interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fqENQfjc2c>  
Asim Qureshi on C4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X7Cwl8QIUU&feature=youtu.be&a>
- 6.6** They were asked to reassess their views after watching, add or amend comments, and score the press conference out of 10 in three areas, messaging, preparedness and structure.
- 6.7** As it was a critical review the comments included from the focus group are constructively critical. We have not included repeat points made by different people.

**Table 3.0 - Group Comments**

NO.	COMMENTS
1.	Event (PC) was chaotic, stressful, organisers and speakers same people
2.	CAGE Asim had condemned in Lee Rigby case expecting condemnation but none
3.	So when it came to beautiful young man comment no bracketing
4.	Shorter, more scripted, advising, no space for misrepresentation.
5.	Addressing mainstream audience, attention span limited
6.	Too heavy, too long not focused, simplified messaging
7.	I was not informed by CAGE received calls from media (journalist)
8.	Beautiful comment was a problem – not a good choice of words- own goal
9.	Same issue as Boston bomber empathise with him? Life trajectory
10.	AQ exhausted understand he condemned it
11.	Today programme and Channel Four subsequent interviews better
12.	It was an open goal but missed – defining image will always be of beautiful young man
13.	Good not to condemn, Muslim community always asked to, shouldn't need to
14.	Style issue Cerie was better
15.	Get professional media advice from other allies or groups
16.	Lack of media training apparent, rushed
17.	Understand the audience
18.	Don't need to open with condemnation wait till your asked
19.	Choice of John Rees as chair questioned
20.	Underlying humanity put that out there
21.	Cerie not relevant
22.	Too many people
23.	Presentation this is what we know- something to hold physically
24.	Stick to facts not his sympathies opinions – dealt with questions better
25.	Jokes emotions not appropriate
26.	Conveyor belt? Lots of detail not well articulated
27.	Full room had time for particular messaging
28.	Needed a graphic
29.	Too personal didn't handle it properly
30.	Prevent was too much, heavy
31.	Cerie interview constant refusal to condemn makes you look evasive
32.	Channel Four John Snow same issue again
33.	Overly defensive
34.	Need more media experience
35.	Decide where to position themselves
36.	Prepared in the wrong way
37.	Know your audience
38.	Message got across but for this organisation needed to be 8/9

- 6.8** Although the group was small, the discussion was very healthy and productive. It is worth noting that although the comments were critical, that being the nature of the review, all participants were supportive of the work of CAGE. That they had all voluntarily taken their own time and spent the best part of a Saturday morning out, highlights that CAGE and its work does have strong support.
- 6.9** It was surprising given the critical comments that scores were fairly high for messaging. This does in part reflect that CAGE despite its shortcomings, had conveyed the key message about the radicalising effect of the security services.
- 6.10** It was also surprising that the focus group came to the same conclusions as our own review entirely independently, despite not having seen the internal evidence that we had seen.
- 6.11** Therefore we conclude that the focus group message was that CAGE did well, but they could have done much better, and indeed people were expecting them too. They needed to be around 9 out of 10 for messaging and 8/9 in other areas. There was a fair bit of disappointment amongst this group that they had not done so, and that the “beautiful young man” comment and lack

of clear condemnation of Emwazi had been allowed to detract from the storyline CAGE had presented. It was felt this was a missed opportunity and an “own goal”.

- 6.12** The lack of condemnation issue was understood, but the group was divided along ethnic lines on the issue. It was also pointed out that a white school teacher had made similar comments to Asim Qureshi on C4 but had not been labelled in the same way.

<http://www.channel4.com/news/cage-human-rights-advocates-or-apologists-for-terror>

*“One of Emwazi’s former teachers spoke anonymously to **Channel 4 News**.*

*She remembered a “diligent, hardworking, lovely young man” who was responsible, polite and quiet.*

*Expressing her shock at the path his life had taken, she recalled: “he was somebody who would always seek the correct way of handling something and when there were any issues, he would come and speak to teachers like me and ask to help him sort things out, he did things in the right way.*

*“There was never any indication of any kind of violence at all.”*

**Table 4.0 - Score Table**

AREA	MEMBER 1	MEMBER 2	MEMBER 3	MEMBER 4	MEMBER 5	MEMBER 6
Messaging	5	8	8.5	2/3	5	4
Preparedness	7	7/8	4.5	5	5	0
Structure	5	5	6	7	3/4	2

# 7.0

# CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1** CAGE is a relatively young rights advocacy organisation (it was established 2003) that operates on a small budget with few staff.
- 7.2** As a Muslim organisation its key support base is from among the Muslim community, although it also has many supporters in the wider civil society sector. It brings different ideas, values and perspectives to rights and advocacy work, and adds to the diversity that exists already.
- 7.3** In any society, when new minority groups/ideas emerge on the public scene, there is always mutual misunderstanding and sometimes hostile reaction and even resistance to them and their work from established interests.
- 7.4** The Muslim community, CAGE, and the reaction to them by the media and established interests is at a relatively early phase of development. This is despite the Muslim community having been settled here for some time.
- 7.5** It is only recently that a younger more articulate and assertive Muslim community that can stand its own ground has emerged. CAGE very much represents that new strand of positive Muslim assertiveness and reaches out to it in its messaging. This can, and is, sometimes viewed as a threat by wider established interests and society. Over time these reactions will find a more balanced and less polarised level. This has been the case with all minority groups that have settled in the UK.
- 7.6** The CAGE handling of the Emwazi affair and the reaction of wider society to it, is an example of that mutual suspicion, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. There are lessons for wider society in this episode, as well for CAGE.
- 7.7** CAGE has excelled in some key areas of work in a short space of time. They have reached into the

murkier areas of the “War on Terror” (WOT) that others have not been able to.

- 7.8** CAGE challenges WOT policies and their impacts on individuals and communities. Its work is bound to be controversial, subject to challenge, scrutiny, and even deliberate misrepresentation. Being labelled and smeared “extremist”, “Jihadi”, or “apologists for terrorism” is part of the territory that all Muslims currently inhabit. It is the language of the WOT. Dealing with a hostile environment has to be factored into the work of CAGE.
- 7.9** CAGE has had many challenges and is still recovering from some of them. Since the arrest and subsequent release of its Outreach Director in 2014, it has operated without a bank account. This means it is forced to deal on a cash only transaction basis. This provides logistical challenges that would test the resolve and resources of any organisation.
- 7.10** The purpose of this review was not to help CAGE become less controversial, or change its values and objectives. It was to review the handling of the Emwazi affair by CAGE to see if they could have done things differently or performed better in a hostile climate.

## CAGE Handling of Emwazi Affair

- 7.11** We have considered the evidence, in this instance confidential internal paperwork, interviews with key people, and analysis of media reporting. We have also obtained a detached perspective from an independent focus group.
- 7.12** Our conclusion is that CAGE were faced with a potentially huge media story of which they had no previous knowledge. They did not know the extent of their own involvement in it. The unveiling of “Jihadi John” was always going to be huge global media interest story.
- 7.13** CAGE were informed that the confirmation of Mohammed Emwazi as Jihadi John by the Washington Post had already taken place. CAGE confirmed he was one of their clients.

The Washington Post then asked CAGE staff to watch a public beheading video to get their opinion. CAGE staff commented that it resembled him but they were not 100% certain. This served no purpose whatsoever and was in our opinion unnecessary and incidental to the story, given that Emwazi was masked and his voice disguised. However, it gave the impression to the public that CAGE had been involved in the identification of Emwazi.

- 7.14** Once CAGE became aware of the story they had 3.5 days to complete many high risk tasks which we detail in this report. The response and reaction to the media was one of those tasks. This was an organisation under extreme stress.
- 7.15** Getting any of these tasks wrong was bound to have serious consequences. The staff and Board were on the frontline and under severe pressure, in some instances putting in 20 hour day shifts of work over the week that followed.
- 7.16** Whilst they clearly had a plan of action, much of that planning was informal, and not well documented.
- 7.17** CAGE staff were stretched and were working outside their comfort zones. They also lacked experience in key areas such as handling the media and risk management. The Board needed to provide much more support and direction to staff than they did.
- 7.18** The risks identified were not in our assessment prioritised sufficiently. The media and planning for it should have been given a much higher priority. Planning for the media and especially the press conference should have commenced almost immediately.
- 7.19** It appears that CAGE had underestimated the level of media interest in this story. On the day the story broke they received over 300 enquires in under two hours. Their staff could only have dealt with that volume of interest through a press conference. Their press conference received live coverage for 51

minutes around the world. They had asked for assistance with it elsewhere, but few people were willing to risk their own reputations with the Emwazi story. The story was too hot for some to handle. CAGE may have also underestimated the hostility that they would receive given their own narrative on the story.

**7.20** Damage to CAGE public reputation should have also been higher on the agenda and given much more priority.

**7.21** CAGE dealt with and managed all the non-public risks well. However media tasks and preparation took place far too late in the day, and the press conference was “last minute”, even though thinking around messaging and questions had commenced.

**7.22** The presentation of the Emwazi storyline could have been made easier for media to understand, through the use of a presentation, graphic or handout with a timeline. This would have also allowed journalists to focus on the story, rather than on CAGE.

**7.23** The key arguments in relation to Emwazi and the role of the security services were well rehearsed and came across well in the media. This part of the CAGE messaging and objective was achieved (mainly from the press release and rehearsal of arguments from previous cases). Most media coverage did focus on the role of the security services as well as CAGE.

**7.24** Without CAGE releasing all the information the public and media would have been denied an important part of the Emwazi story.

**7.25** However, having identified security service harassment as a factor, CAGE appear not to have followed this up by seeking explanations from those with the duty to hold the security services to account. Key questions still remain: What pressure was applied to him? When was the last time the security services had contact with him? How and when did he get to Syria? These are still questions of public importance.

**7.26** The condemnation of Emwazi’s atrocities was always going to be an issue. When dealing with Muslim acts of violence or atrocities, the media are prone to ask any Muslim spokesperson to first condemn the action of their fellow Muslims, even though they are not responsible for those acts. This approach assumes that the default position of any Muslim appearing on TV is that unless they clearly condemn the violent act, they are in support of it. There is great offence and resentment in the Muslim community at this approach. This issue and how to deal with it, also divided our focus group.

**7.27** We found no evidence that CAGE endorsed or did not wish to condemn Emwazi’s actions. It is evident from internal documentation that they had discussed this issue and anticipated the question.

**7.28** A conscious decision was made to dissociate CAGE from Emwazi but in their own way, according to their own values (that they do not support the unlawful or extra judicial killing of anyone anywhere). In doing so there was a calculated effort to empower the Muslim community to be able to deal with and stand up to aggressive interviewing techniques, while also be seen to be challenging Islamophobia. This effort to stand up to the media subsequently has been supported by many in the Muslim community.

**7.29** However, the position statement in relation to condemnation was not thought through or articulated very well. At the press conference it was a lengthy argument rather than a soundbite that could be clearly communicated to the public. The intention was there in the opening statement but the execution was poor. The message as it was conveyed was not going to be heard.

**7.30** CAGE needed to clearly articulate their distance from Emwazi’s actions to prevent any portrayal of them as “apologists for terrorism”. This was always a line that was going to be taken by some media. In subsequent interviews, CAGE staff prevaricated on this

issue, which detracted from their main message.

**7.31** The press conference was not planned, structured, or thought through well. It was also not scripted and was too long. It did not work to any timings or agenda. It came across as a talk or lecture. There were too many people. It was not controlled. Our focus group discussed this at length and also reached these conclusions which are reflected in their scoring of the press conference.

**7.32** Without proper planning or scripting, the risks of error and unwarranted comment were high. This is precisely what happened with the Emwazi “was a beautiful young man” comment, and the emotion that accompanied it. It was a personal observation that had not been at all planned. This handed the media and all of CAGE’s detractors the soundbite and ammunition they needed to misrepresent them. Almost all the media subsequently deliberately misreported the comment as Emwazi “is a beautiful young man”. The “was” became “is” and CAGE were portrayed as “apologists for terrorism”.

**7.33** We decided to judge CAGE’s messaging at the press conference and subsequent media interviews by their own standards. These are the Islamic standards of fairness and justice and impartiality from the parties involved. Our assessment of the presentation of the CAGE Emwazi case, aside from the condemnation issue, is that it lacked two elements.

**7.34** Fairness and justice as well as human compassion and Islamic values, demand that the suffering of the families of the victims of Emwazi should have been referred to but were not. The extra judicial execution of innocent civilians along with the glorification of that act are not within the Islamic framework of justice or values.

**7.35** Secondly there was no mention of ISIS in the press release/conference. A fair presentation should have also acknowledged the role of ISIS and Syria in Emwazi’s trajectory to violent

killing of innocent non-combatant civilians.

**7.36** These two shortcomings, along with a clear distancing from Emwazi’s actions, and the “beautiful young man” comment allowed the media to easily portray CAGE as being on the side of Emwazi.

## CAGE as “apologists for terrorism”

**7.37** We have been asked to consider this question as part of the review. Our answer is restricted to this affair rather than other aspects of CAGE’s work. We also recognise that however well CAGE performed, the media and others still may have labelled them as “apologists for terrorists”.

**7.38** We did not find any evidence that CAGE endorsed or supported Emwazi or any other unlawful killing. It is well known from CAGE’s work in the Muslim community that they instigated the call for the release of Alan Henning. It is also well known that Moazzam Begg its Outreach Director has been an outspoken critic of ISIS and their killings. In fact journalists also confirmed to us, that privately CAGE staff had condemned such killings, including that of Lee Rigby by Michael Adebolajo.

**7.39** Unfortunately the shortcomings of CAGE in the areas identified in this review in relation to the media have allowed those who wish to portray them as “apologists for terrorism” to do so easily.

## Is CAGE fulfilling Its Mission and Objectives?

**7.40** CAGE mission is to highlight and campaign against state policies developed as part of the WOT and empower the communities affected by them.

**7.41** In our assessment, CAGE have been able to make some impact on its objectives despite the negative reporting.

**7.42** They have been able to highlight injustices caused as result of polices arising out of the

WOT, in this case the behaviour of the security services. They have also been able to empower the Muslim community to organise and campaign, as well as articulate against and challenge injustices. As a young organisation they are also learning themselves.

**7.43** There has been damage to CAGE in terms of its reputation, but it is not so extensive that they cannot recover from it. There have been positives. CAGE now has a global profile and has become a household name. It has received widespread support from the Muslim community over the Emwazi issue with campaigns such as “#WeAreCage”. There were no voices of criticism from mainstream organisations in the Muslim community. Muslim communities in other countries now want to open branches of CAGE.

**7.44** The work of CAGE now has a wider appeal and receives support in civil society. The CAGE letter condemning PREVENT and signed by 360 academics and professionals demonstrates this. CAGE staff are now busier than ever with speaking engagements especially in academic sector, and with the media.

<http://www.protectingthought.com>

## Lessons for Future

**7.45** CAGE needs to broaden its messaging to encompass the wider community and specific audiences such as civil society and media, but on their own terms and values. It can no longer just appeal to Muslim communities if it wants wider acceptance.

**7.46** CAGE need to have prepared positions on key issues such as condemnations, Jihad, rights of communities to self-defence, etc. These need to be in media speak as well as intellectual arguments.

**7.47** Improvements need to be made in risk management, planning and performance and dealing with the media. This should be done through better policies, procedures and training.

**7.48** The Board need to find ways to support staff in times of high stress and emergency work. An emergency planning structure should be put in place for events such as this, which will take pressure of staff by helping to distribute priority tasks.

**7.49** The Board need to be more assertive in protecting the public reputation of CAGE and control of external publicity.

**7.50** Policies and procedures need to be put in place for handling of casework.

## Conclusion

**7.51** The Emwazi affair was unique. It presented CAGE with an extreme pressure and hostile situation, but also opened opportunities to advance its objectives. Under the unique circumstances, CAGE handled most things very well with the limited resources at their disposal.

**7.52** The Emwazi affair has been a steep learning curve for this young civil society organisation. Mistakes were made but these were due to inexperience and poor planning and communication. This allowed a hostile media easily to label and misrepresent CAGE in the way they did.

**7.53** With a greater development of their work and values, combined with better management and training, CAGE will become even better at dealing with the media, communicating their messages and achieving their objectives.

# 8.0

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1** CAGE needs to broaden its messaging to encompass the wider community and specific audiences, such as civil society and media, but on its own terms and values. It can no longer just appeal to Muslim communities if it wants wider acceptance.
- 8.2** CAGE needs to present its casework and the issues raised by them in much simpler media speak and style with more use of graphic information and timelines. This is something which can still be done.
- 8.3** CAGE needs to have readymade positions on key issues such as condemnations, Jihad, rights of communities to self-defence etc. These need to be in media speak as well as intellectual arguments.
- 8.4** Improvements need to be made in risk management, planning and performance in the media. This should be done through better policies and staff training.
- 8.5** The CAGE Board need to find better ways to support staff in times of high stress and emergency work. An emergency planning structure should be put in place for events such as this, which will take pressure of staff and help to delegate priority tasks.
- 8.6** The Board need to be more assertive in protecting the public reputation of CAGE and control of external publicity.
- 8.7** Policies and procedures need to be put in place for handling of casework and permissions sought from the Board for key decisions.
- 8.8** CAGE need to follow up the issue of security services harassment in the Emwazi case.



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