

Reaching Out

The National Association of Muslim Police holds its first conference this month. Carol Jenkins reports on the organisation's aims.

A recent raid on the home of a Muslim family saw neighbours look on in horror as a woman who had worn a niqab or religious head-dress to conceal her face from even her closest relatives for the past 50 years was dragged out into the street by police wearing just her nightdress.

The lasting effects of that scene, not just on the woman and her family, but also the surrounding communities sets out to severely damage the reputation of the entire police service in the eyes of the public.

Recounting this story is Zaheer Ahmad, the vice president of the newly established National Association of Muslim Police. Set up in July last year, the organisation hopes to play a vital part in working with operational officers and communities to make sure incidents like this one never happen again.

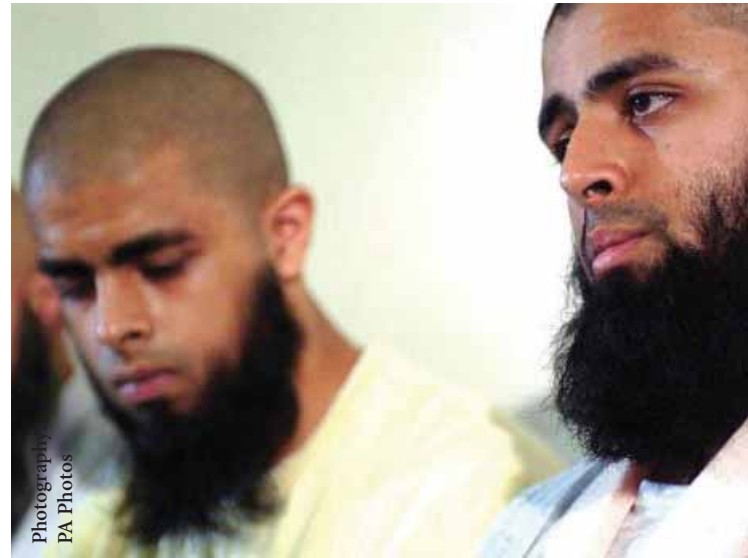
The organisation was set up to provide a national voice for Muslim officers and to ensure their thoughts and views are taken into account at a national level by ACPO and the Home Office during any decision making.

Mr Ahmad explains: "We recognised there was a need for a national organisation to work with, and in some instances put pressure on, the decision makers to ensure that the best interests of Muslim officers and staff are met."

Prior to the setting up of the national organisation, Muslim police associations existed in five forces including the Met, Hertfordshire, BTP, Cambridge and GMP. When it was announced that a further five forces were looking to set up their own associations, it was decided to merge these into one national organisation.

The Association held its first ever conference on January 29 at the NPIA Ryton. Entitled 'Building Trust and Confidence and Making Communities Feel Safer' the line-up of speakers reads like a 'who's who' of policing.

Addressing association members were Federation chairman Jan Berry; Met Commissioner Sir Ian Blair; NPIA chief executive Peter Neyroud; Chief HMI Sir



Mohammed Abdulkahar and Abdul Koyair were wrongly arrested in 2006

Ronnie Flanagan and the chief constable of West Midlands Police Sir Paul Scott-Lee.

One of the issues debated at the conference is ethnic minority recruitment. Despite the fact the Home Office has set forces tough recruitment targets and that progress has been made in this area, Mr Ahmad believes there is still a long way to go.

"We have come a long way since Scarman and Lawrence – there is no doubt about that – but I don't think we have learnt enough and translated this into action. One of the recommendations of Lawrence was to increase the number of BME officers in the service. I'm afraid to say that hasn't happened."

"The counter-terrorist operation at Forest Gate demonstrated to us all the fear and uncertainty that can be created in communities as a result of high profile operations."

Mr Ahmad believes some chief constables pay lip service to the issues and are "only interested in operational targets."

"If chief constables were as interested in BME recruitment targets as they were in operational targets then things would look a lot differently."

Mr Ahmad, who is a constable with British Transport Police, believes forces are starting from the wrong point in terms of recruitment and gaining the trust of communities. And that before they can even attempt to build bridges with communities and make policing an attractive career to communities they must first concentrate on treating their own staff with decency and respect.

"Some forces fail to recognise that Muslim officers and staff are also members of the community. So it makes

sense by firstly engaging with all your employees because they live in the community.

“The police service needs to take a step back and look at its own organisation before it can even attempt to win over communities and increase recruitment.”

Mr Ahmad sees it as being a key role of his organisation to work with forces to improve ethnic minority recruitment and build community confidence. One of the ways he hopes his organisation can help is by advising on which areas of a community the police should target in terms of recruitment.

“Any efforts need to be carefully thought out and should go beyond us just turning up in a bus station and handing out leaflets. What we need to be doing is engaging with communities face-to-face and showing them that a job in the police is a worthwhile career.”

Past Home Office research has shown that in some ethnic minority communities there are still negative views about the organisation and how it treats its staff. One research document said that “respondents talked about a prevailing police culture that was predominantly white and male and excluding of those who were different.”

A key role of the new association will be to advise operational officers who might be engaged in anti-terrorist operations to ensure that community confidence is maintained.

opportunities open to them to join specialist squads and departments as other officers.

Evidence suggests some Muslim officers are still experiencing discrimination when applying for specialist posts. Mr Ahmad uses the current example of a Muslim officer who is taking his force to a tribunal after he was turned down for a role guarding Prime Minister Gordon Brown at Downing Street. This was allegedly because it was discovered that the Mosque where he worshipped had links with an organisation that was linked to Al Qaeda.

Anecdotal evidence by Muslim officers has also revealed that they feel they are the subject of what they describe as ‘covert’ racism that makes them feel uncomfortable. But because it is ‘covert’ it is difficult to prove and so often it goes by unchallenged.

“I’ve seen this happen many times,” says Mr Ahmad.

“But the question often is ‘how do you prove it?’ I think it’s the responsibility of police managers to look out for this sort of behaviour very carefully and to challenge it if it occurs.”

Another important role of the new association will be to work with the Federation to make sure they properly represent the interests of Muslim officers. Mr Ahmad has praised Federation chairman Jan Berry for her help and support in setting up the national association.

“We see it is vital for us to work alongside the Federation to ensure the interests of our officers are represented. At present it is the Federation’s job to represent Muslim officers at disciplinary hearings and as far as we are concerned this should continue because they are doing a brilliant job.”

There are currently 1,500 members of the association which is quite unique in that it has two levels of members – Muslim members and associate members. Interestingly, it has seen a rise in applications from associate members. The most common reasons associate members have given for joining is that they work with Muslim colleagues or have Muslim friends and want to gain a better understanding of the cultures. Others join because they believe Muslims get a raw deal in society and want to contribute to changing this.

At the moment in BPT, Mr Ahmad’s force, 70 per cent of the membership is made up of non-Muslim associate members.

Looking to the future, the association wants to work with the service to increase the number of Muslim officers in senior positions and to recruit more Muslim females.

Even though the organisation puts great emphasis on working in partnership with the service, Mr Ahmad recognises that it will be a difficult task and that feathers will be ruffled along the way.

“We have to accept that we can’t be friends with everybody all of the time and naturally we are going to upset people, but that is a fact of life.

“We also recognise that we have a difficult task ahead of us but it is one we must embrace as it is too important not to get right.”



Abdulkahar and Koyair give evidence to a Home Affairs Select Committee

“We want to make ourselves available to operational officers and to be brought in during the initial stages of any policing activity to provide any advice we can on minimising the impact of that activity on community confidence.

“The counter-terrorist operation at Forest Gate demonstrated to us all the fear and uncertainty that can be created in communities as a result of high profile operations.”

Mr Ahmad has also called on forces to make better use of Muslim officers in counter-terrorist units, believing their knowledge of the language, culture and religion can be better utilised than it is at present. The association also hopes to ensure that Muslim officers have the same