

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE
QUEEN'S BENCH DIVISION
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS LIST
BEFORE THE HONORABLE MR JUSTICE WARBY
BETWEEN:

LORD SHEIKH

Claimant

-and-

ASSOCIATED NEWSPAPERS LIMITED

Defendant

STATEMENT IN OPEN COURT

Callum Galbraith, Claimant's Representative (Hamlins LLP)

1. My Lord, in this action for libel, I appear on behalf of the Claimant, Lord Mohamed Sheikh. My learned friend, Gervase de Wilde, appears on behalf of the Defendant, Associated Newspapers Limited.
2. Both before and since his appointment in 2006 as a life peer, the Claimant has been actively engaged in the promotion of inter-racial and inter-faith understanding, tolerance and respect, subjects on which he is a regular speaker both in Parliament and outside. He has repeatedly spoken out against anti-Semitism and radicalisation and has produced papers on the latter. The Claimant supports a wide range of charitable and humanitarian causes, both Muslim and non-Muslim, of several of which he is a patron. He founded the Conservative Muslim Forum in 2005 and in 2006 was invited by David Cameron, then leader of the Conservative Party, to act as the Chairman of the Conservative Ethnic Diversity Council. He is also a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Anti-Semitism and is Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community.

3. On 15 August 2018 the Defendant published a MailOnline article under the by-line of its Associate Global Editor, Jake Wallis Simons, headed “*EXCLUSIVE: Top Tory peer’s appearance at Corbyn’s ‘hate conference’ in Tunisia comes after YEARS of rubbing shoulders with Islamists, hate preachers and Holocaust deniers*”. The article focussed on the Claimant’s attendance at a conference in Tunisia in 2014, where it had earlier been widely reported in the media that Jeremy Corbyn MP had participated in a wreath-laying ceremony. The article categorised the Tunisian conference as a “*conference of hate*” and went on to accuse the Claimant of “*rubbing shoulders with Islamists, hate preachers and Holocaust deniers for years*”. It reported that two Conservative MPs, Robert Halfon and Zac Goldsmith, had demanded an investigation into the Claimant’s presence at the “*hate-filled*” event. Photographs accompanying the article included the notorious image of “Jihadi John” wearing a balaclava, pointing a knife towards the camera.

4. Particularly in view of his campaign for inter-faith understanding, tolerance and respect, the Claimant found the article deeply distressing. He had been invited to speak at the 2014 Tunisian conference, held a short time after hostilities between Israel and Gaza had resulted in over 2,000 deaths. In his speech the Claimant had advocated, consistent with UK government policy, that to achieve a lasting peace, a two-state solution should provide for security for the state of Israel and respect for the rights of the Palestinian people. The Claimant played no part in the wreath-laying ceremony, which was not part of the conference agenda, and he was not even aware of it until media reports surfaced in 2018.

5. Through his solicitors in December 2018, the Claimant set out a detailed response to the highly defamatory allegations made against him in the article, stressing both their falsity and the distress they had caused him. The Defendant was informed in the letter that a complaint made to the Conservative Party by the two MPs named in the article had been considered and unequivocally dismissed in November 2018, by the party’s independent Code of Conduct panel. The Defendant neither removed the article from its website nor reported to its readers that the Claimant had been cleared. The Claimant concluded that he was left with no alternative but to bring these libel proceedings.

6. Mr Justice Warby in a judgment dated 4 November 2019 ruled that the article would be understood by readers to allege that *“the Claimant has a long history of support for, or close association with, people and organisations that express or hold anti-Semitic and other extremist views and attitudes which, despite his attempts to explain it, i) provides strong grounds for suspecting that he is secretly an anti-Semite who approves of and sympathises with Holocaust denial, Islamist jihad and hate-preaching, which he is prepared knowingly and actively to support; ii) is shocking and disturbing.”*
7. By letter dated 29 November 2019, the Defendant, through its solicitors, notified the Claimant that the article which is the subject of these proceedings had finally been taken offline, and put forward an offer of amends to publish a correction and apology and to pay the Claimant compensation. That offer has been accepted by the Claimant on the basis that the Defendant join in the making of this statement in open court and agrees to publish a fair and accurate report of it.
8. I am pleased to report that the Defendant now accepts the very serious allegations which it published of the Claimant are untrue, and has undertaken not to repeat them. The Defendant, through its representative today, tenders its sincere apologies to the Claimant, and has agreed to pay a substantial sum of damages to the Claimant and his legal costs. In the circumstances, the Claimant is content to let the matter rest and considers his reputation fully vindicated.

Gervase de Wilde, Defendant’s Representative (Counsel, instructed by RPC LLP)

9. My Lord, on behalf of the Defendant, I confirm everything my learned Friend has said.
10. The Defendant through me offers its sincere apologies to the Claimant for the distress, embarrassment and upset caused to him by the publication of the Article. The Defendant accepts there was and is no truth in the allegations advanced in the Article and is happy to set the record straight and apologise to the Claimant.

Callum Galbraith, Claimant’s Representative (Hamblins LLP)

11. My Lord, in these circumstances I ask for leave to withdraw the record.