



Key logo by *Lebanese Committee for Arts* (reproduced with permission).  
This logo was suggested by participants to symbolise a common theme for the network and to represent the struggle of Palestinian and more recently Iraqi and regional refugees created by occupation and intervention in their societies.

## REPORT FROM CONFLICTS FORUM MOBILISATION WORKSHOP London: 18 – 21st October 2007

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#### 1. Background and objectives of the project

The aim of this project is to explore the possibility of a link-up between activist groups and mobilisers of opinion in order to shift the debate on Islamism from a predominantly defensive posture to a positive assertion of Islamist values and thinking.

One aspect of this has been to develop ways to challenge the defamation and distortion of Islamist identity that has arisen as a result of framing the debate on Islamism in the West with the language of 'terrorism', 'hostility towards modernity', 'cultural backwardness' and 'hatred of Western values'. Language has been deployed in this way not to inform or communicate. It is language misused as a tool of power and domination in order to weaken Islamist identity and to present it as something repellent, irrational and threatening to the West.

The secondary purpose of the use of such language in the West is to erase the *intellectual* content of Islamist thinking in its challenges to modernism and contemporary Western society that has sought to provide another vision for the global future based on reason and the philosophical traditions of Islam.

Little of this Islamist intellectual challenge is heard in the West however as the public discourse suggests that there is *no* intellectual Islamist case to hear – Islamists are parodied as irrational luddites fighting against the inevitable march of progress and modernity, in a futile attempt to shape society in the mould of seventh century Arabia.

Secondly, the Islamist intellectual response is rarely heard in the West because its metaphors, its iconography and its category of reasoning, as presently formulated, find little resonance in secular societies. It simply does not generate the ‘oh, I get it now!’ response from audiences.

A principal aim of this project - in preparing for the first workshop - was perceived as being to explore the possibilities for addressing this Western denigratory use of language intended to close down any debate extending beyond the standard focus on ‘Islamist violence’. This project was envisaged as a joint Western-Muslim initiative with activist leaders and leaders of social movements working in tandem with Islamist movements based in the region that aimed to unpack and publicly expose language used to escalate a ‘war’ against an Islamist identity. The aim was to define and circulate a counter-vocabulary and rebuttal counter-sound bite formulations against hostile language, mainly for the use of those speaking to Western audiences, whether from a platform in the West or from a platform within Muslim societies.

Its methodology would be to examine ways to rebut ‘hostile’ Western language and precepts by thinking in terms of creating visual images in various formats - including DVD format - that expose escalatory language intended to pave the way toward conflict with Islamist movements or Islamic states. The project will consider the means to disseminate such visual representations into the public domain; and it will examine the merits of establishing a central depository of ‘response’ language and key arguments on a dedicated web site aimed at wider public mobilisation developed for this purpose.

But the more crucial and central objective envisaged, was to try to stimulate and encourage a critique in the West of the precepts – the political and intellectual premises - that underlay Western hostility, and which justified and sustained the projection of physical and linguistic power as tool against Islamism.

The importance of encouraging the internal critique within the Western élite was underlined in the South African experience of the ANC resistance being supplemented internally by the critique launched by activist leaders, leaders of social movements and ultimately leading white businessmen who recognised the limits of South African thinking - based on special rights for ‘white men’. Ultimately, the impact of this increasingly wide critique was sufficient to allow South Africans to transcend the earlier limitations to their thinking. Internal critique/‘resistance’ within the privileged élite was seen as critical to any society, or societies, being able to transcend the present limitations to thinking in which they had become frozen.

The aim of the project at the initial stage was to explore whether there was support amongst participants at the 1st workshop for attempting a core critique of the underlying precepts of Western hostility towards Islamists, and to begin framing the Islamist alternative vision and ‘ideology’, in terms of both a written, spoken and a visual imagery and using the metaphors appropriate to a Western secular society that can generate the ‘oh, I get it!’ response from

audiences. This will require investing Islamist concepts with a new significance and meaning that provokes recognition and a positive response from Western audiences.

This, for example, might include, inter alia:

- (i) Challenging the Western 'narrative' that suggests a linear progress from historical 'backwardness' to Western 'modernity', accomplished via the achievement of the secular liberal nation-state – a narrative that implies that the West is advanced; and that others are backward along this continuum of history.
- (ii) Critiquing the projection of the nation-state conceived as an expression of power that does not see mediation or listening to be consistent with a view that other identities are no more than a signal of competitive power challenging the status quo that must be crushed.
- (iii) Challenging the philosophy and economic doctrines that dehumanise men and women as creatures motivated primarily by their personal and material welfare aspirations, and which elevates this as the mark of human 'rationality' and 'civilisation';
- (iv) Challenging the Western allegation of Islamist 'irrationality' - that is asserted on the premise of the West's own category of reasoning being unassailable by virtue of its empirical nature and 'facticity'.

Specifically, the objective of the workshop was to begin a consideration of the means to disarticulate – visually and by other means - formulations of identity, philosophy and language, mounted by the West in order to justify and validate the use of state power against Islamists. It sought also to consider how to mobilize more widely against the presumption that a global identity that is set to a single template - that of Western modernity - is adequate for Muslim societies; or that such an outcome can be either democratic or equitable.

A subsidiary, but equally important, objective in seeking to invest Islamist concepts with a new significance and meaning was seen to be the shifting of Muslim discourse in the West from the defensive – arguing the right to wear hijab; or countering Islamophobia - to a positive assertion of values – albeit values expressed in words that will evoke recognition and a positive response from Western audiences.

Just as Sinn Fein in Ireland dropped the language of nationalist victim-hood in favour of formulations such as "Sinn Fein is in favour of peace ... what's wrong with that? And if you are in favour of peace too ... what are you going to do about this?"; so, why not ... "Islamists are in favour of reinstating the complete human being at the centre of society ... what's wrong with that? If you agree, what are you going to do about this?"; or... "Islamism seeks to place justice back on the political agenda ... what's wrong with that?", etc.

In subsequent stages, the project will aim – subject to input from participants and others - to explore developing Islamist trends and ideas; seek ways to find suitable language and metaphors that will provoke 'recognition response' and make presentation of Islamist thinking more accessible to westerners. More generally, the project's purpose was viewed at the outset to be an effort to demystify Islamist thinking and to correct misapprehensions.

Workshop participants also saw a key need to feed back language and Western activist and social movement leaders' assessments of what will work and what will not work in terms of mobilising in the West to the Islamist thinkers and movements in the region – who unfortunately were prevented from attending the workshop due to visas not being granted. The project was conceived as a transcultural exercise from the outset, but this aspect has had to be postponed

to a second stage to enable feedback and discussion with regional participants unable to attend the first workshop in London.

Ultimately, new and more positive formulations were seen to be the catalyst for stimulating Western self-criticism; and ultimately for the emergence of a fresh alliance of those critiquing special rights for 'white men' – in this case, not in South Africa, but in Muslim societies and in the emerging global order.

*Conflicts Forum*, as a small organisation, does not possess the resources to act itself as a mobiliser; but can contribute towards developing links between activist leaders and leaders of social movements and Islamist movements, and co-ordinating the initial stages of the project - in partnership with a core group of activist leaders - in order to build the critical mass required to shift public perceptions.

## **2. Summary of immediate actions/outcomes from the workshop:**

- (i) A summary report (i.e. this document) would be written that would summarise the principal themes raised in the workshop discussions. This would be circulated to all participants - and to those who were unable to attend.
- (ii) The circulation of the report would be intended not simply as a record of the workshop, but as a catalyst to prompt participants to respond to the ideas contained in it, and to stimulate contacts between participants on the means to promote the project.
- (iii) Participants might wish to consider reflecting back some of their ideas within their own constituencies and circles, in order to create a multiplier effect in diffusing the concept and to collect and feedback responses to other participants in the project.
- (iv) *Conflicts Forum* would assume responsibility for passing-back the outcomes and ideas of the workshop to movements and individuals who were unable to participate. CF would post any ideas and input either directly onto the 'network notice board/website' (see below) or circulate by email as appropriate.
- (v) Adel Samara was asked to feed back to the Palestinian refugee constituency and join with *Conflicts Forum* at a political level in discussions on the outcome with any refugee leaders who might wish to express views and participate in the project
- (vi) Adam Hanieh suggested that where possible we should take the lead from the movements in the region and adapt the ideas to the environment of the West.
- (vii) Promoting mutuality - It had been suggested that it would be useful to link between each others' websites – where appropriate.
- (viii) Consider use of the symbol of the key to denote the project's common agenda and goals; CF will pursue and circulate a design/ designs developed and used in the region.
- (ix) Participants were invited to recommend to CF or others anyone of national credibility or of political significance that might wish to talk to Islamists with a view to their meeting with relevant people in the region.
- (x) Paul Woodward agreed to create a website that would act as a website resource for any rebuttal formulations and defensive 'speaking lines' and sound-bites that participants had found useful in 'unpacking' and disarticulating hostile language. The website would

also serve as a noticeboard for communication amongst participants, and separately, a store of references – such as links to Mazen Qumsiyeh's maps, photographs and cartoons as well as seminal articles, resources developed by other groups, etc. (This website has been created - see: <http://thekeynetwork.org/>. Participants are encouraged to send material for the website to Paul to ensure it is kept updated for wider use (Paul's e-mail: [editor@conflictsforum.org](mailto:editor@conflictsforum.org)).

- (xi) Mark Perry agreed to draft and post some defensive 'speaking lines' that he has found to be of use on the keynetwork site.
- (xii) Sukant Chandan agreed to help co-ordinate production of a magazine with *Conflicts Forum* on the lines of his earlier magazine project – copies of which were circulated amongst participants at the workshop. The idea of this initial magazine (to be both printed and circulated by internet) is to commission a series of articles based on changing the significance of language to a more positive and more assertive content. The aim is to give a conceptual basis to some of the key ideas from the workshop and the overall objectives of this project.
- (xiii) Ali Abunimah suggested that those who write for websites or articles should confer from time to time to think of the possibility of tackling certain themes communally – such as the language associated with the 'peace process industry', the emptiness of European policy, etc. - in order to have more of an impact through the websites and various publications run by workshop participants and other activists and groups people are linked to. Ali and Paul agreed to disseminate these.
- (xiv) The suggestion of periodic conference calls between participants to discuss particular themes or topics for co-ordinated action was raised. Suggested that *Conflicts Forum* could co-ordinate this, at least initially.

### **3. Other thoughts and ideas that arose from the various sessions:**

- (i) ***Moving from the margins to the centre ground -- presenting Islamist movements' Ideas in ways understandable in the West:***
  - The added value of this group of participants and how it can contribute to the wider aims of the project is essentially the same as the focus of *Conflict Forum's* work - listening to political Islam, recognising resistance and developing a common discourse and 'ideology' between Islamist movements and activist and social movement leaders and others in the West -- essentially the beginning of an attempt to understand the phenomena that is emerging, and the importance of explaining and articulating this in the West. This group's aim is essentially to contribute ideas, critical thinking, tools and resources for activist groups and social movements to use in their wider mobilisation and activism.
  - The challenge is how to bring the language of mainstream Islamist movements like *Hizbullah* and *Hamas* to a new context in the West where, even amongst the Left, they do not have legitimacy because they are viewed as hostile to secularism. The principle underlying this approach should be one of democracy - people need to recognise *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* in the same way as the PLO was recognised in the past.
  - Participants underlined the importance of attempting to reposition Islamists in the 'centre ground' of politics. Additionally, Islam in Europe should be viewed as an integral part of European and Western culture – as much as of the region - and should be heard as voices promoting a new vision for society.

- How can we explain the wider Islamist revolution to Western secular audiences? We need to clarify and explain that Islamist movements are political and social movements working on social and political justice and are leading the resistance to the US/Western recolonisation project with its network of client states and so-called 'moderates'.
- We need to identify what 'victory' would look like - have been too timid about putting forward about a vision of society.

#### **SUGGESTED ACTION POINTS**

- (i) Suggestions for people with political significance in the West who would be willing to come and talk to the movements - people with real credibility in their societies.
- (ii) Arrange for a preliminary small group of participants to come to the region to meet the movements and meet with regional activists.

#### **(ii) *Resistance through articulation of a new political analysis and of language contesting the Western paradigm as the only valid template for future.***

- We need to construct a different dialogue, reframe language, political philosophy and concepts – new language as starting place? We need to think critically how the West can learn from the values and the notion of society that *Hezbollah* and *Hamas* have at the centre of their philosophy - how can we re-formulate Islamist thoughts and ideas in a way that will resonate with people in the West who see shortcomings in their own society?
- With the collapse of Western progressive and liberal parties and their failure to achieve social change, people in the West no longer believe in them and are questioning their power to achieve change - hence the progressive space of social movements is empty - a void now being challenged by the neo-liberals (see: <http://www.irr.org.uk/2007/october/ha000008.html>). How can we counter this new thinking as it relates to Islamists and Islam?
- The erosion of conventional politics however, also serves to open the opportunity for a new form of politics that can be both transnational and co-ordinated largely through the internet. A good example of this was the Howard Dean presidential campaign in the US that was mounted with virtually no more than a few staff members through internet mobilising by **EchoDitto** (see: <http://www.echoditto.com/about>)
- We need to think not just about changing words used, but to think critically about the significance and meaning of words and concepts - need to develop appropriate metaphors for Islamism that will work in the West and then focus on coming up with new terminology and an alternative narrative and language.
- Resistance movements need solidarity movements to put the message across - therefore we need to build links between the different movements and groups. The weakness and failure to do this leads to the focus being predominantly on these movements' armed resistance capacities whilst ignoring or having a complete lack of awareness of mainstream Islamist movements' wider social, political and cultural agendas.
- Examine how and why Western violence is made invisible whereas violence practiced by others is labelled as terrorists and criminal - and to develop slogans and statements to rebut current terminology on this in the West. For example:

“We are against terrorism but we are also against state terrorism”
- Islamist movements question much of the West's policies and thinking; but they do not claim to have all the answers.



- Need to make visible, articulation of *Hamas'* and *Hezbollah's* values, philosophy and wider political and social programmes - for example, being more proactive in statements and re-phrasing discourse to focus on the positive aspects of Islamist ideology.  
 "Muslims now view Islam as the principal element defining their futures - what is wrong with this?"  
 "Islamists are in favour of putting justice at the centre of politics - what is wrong with this?"  
 "Islamists are in favour of global democracy and reject 'special rights' claimed by some states".  
 "Islamists want to shape their own future; they are breaking past patterns of subservience and domination, and developing a new vision for their societies and communities"  
 "Islamists believe that economic progress and economic markets should not be at the expense of family, country and social structure - what is wrong with this?"
- We need to develop language and slogans that we *pro-* XXX and not always *anti-* XXX.
- Need to make this project transcultural - and the need to work with mainstream Islamist movements to feed ideas for a new discourse and language into their language and media as well as taking a lead from their ideas.
- Suggested use of the concept of **apartheid** more explicitly - and linked to this, the concept of racism and institutionalised racism – with a focus on deploying this in a more aggressive fashion.



Source: [http://psc.za.org/declarations\\_pscsa.htm](http://psc.za.org/declarations_pscsa.htm)

### USING THE DISCOURSE OF APARTHEID

1 - The South African **Palestine Solidarity Campaign** has adopted a *Declaration on Apartheid Israel* - see [http://psc.za.org/declarations\\_pscsa.htm](http://psc.za.org/declarations_pscsa.htm) which illustrates parallels between the South Africa and Palestinian struggles:

"We South Africans faced apartheid and exploitation, bullets and prison, not with bouquets of flowers, but with resistance. We are proud of this, our history. This is the history of all oppressed people. Why should it be different for Palestinians? ...".

2 - The **Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid** in Canada (CAIA) made a strategic decision to use the term 'apartheid' as it encapsulates all aspects and components of the Palestinian situation and struggle. Branding Israel with the word 'apartheid' sticks in people's consciousness - whenever the group is mentioned in the media, the media have to use their language - thereby setting the terms of the debate. Their experience is that this has been an amazingly clarifying experience for people (<http://www.caiaweb.org/>).

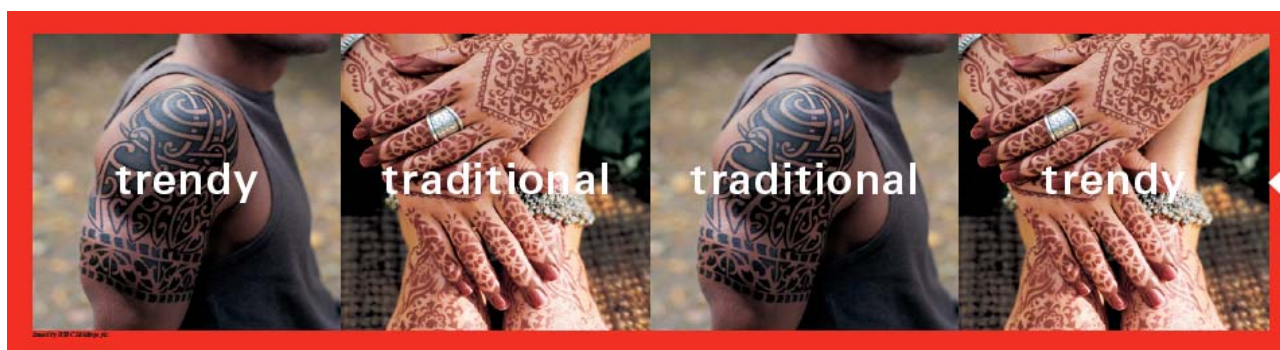
3 - See also the **US Campaign to End the Occupation's Anti-Apartheid Framework**:

**APARTHEID: wrong for South Africans, wrong for Palestinians**  
 (<http://www.endtheoccupation.org/article.php?list=type&type=167>)

- Encourage the media to allow Palestinians to speak for themselves and to challenge the invisibility of western violence, whereas Palestinian violence is portrayed only as criminal, counterproductive and illegitimate.
- The “peace process industry” and its associated discourse has caused major problems for activist movements - We need to expose the terminology and discourse of the ‘peace process industry’ - to expose its inherent racism, neo-colonialism and the fact that it seeks to camouflage underlying Western domination.
- Need to legitimise the concept of ‘resistance’ and an occupied people’s right to resist - as is enshrined in international law. We need to expose the discourse against resistance for what it is - **resistance is always delegitimised**.
- Linked to this is the concept of the one state solution - need to expose the institutionalised racism of the two-state solution concept and that the notion of partition in Palestine means accepting special rights for one people. This protection of privilege - protecting one group’s rights against another - is camouflaged in the language, policies and perspectives of the proponents of the ‘peace process’ and the two-state solution for Palestine/Israel (see declaration from recent conference in London: <http://www.counterpunch.org/onestate.html>)
- And linked to this, a suggestion to focus on the Palestinian refugee issue as this issue more than any other undercuts the fundamental issues of the Palestinian struggle.
- Contrast how resistance movements are categorised differently by the West; e.g. the response to Buddhist Monks in Burma compared to Islamist resistance. Use models e.g. Mandela and others. For example, the preconditions for the ANC and Sinn Fein to enter into the political process were that they should engage in good faith in a ceasefire (both organisations), and for Sinn Fein, that they should demonstrate a significant mandate from the electorate, and for the ANC, that they should show preparedness to participate in elections.
- Need to challenge values - as one participant said: “Our problem is the cheapness of life. Nobody counts our dead or counts how many people are political prisoners”.
- Need to share ideas of how to contest and critique language, the use of words (for example, the word “*blitz*”, a European word, which is seen as a technical means of warfare rather than the intentional destruction and mass bombing of civilians in an urban context). We need to develop methods, approaches, learn from each other, and to learn from the past. Everyone/ both sides use the language of justice, freedom, tolerance and peace and liberation to the extent that meaning has become eroded. Similarly, the term “*jihad*”, which to Muslims means a struggle for these values; but which in the West has become a term of terror, insult and irrationality.
- Suggestion to use rights to deconstruct terminology and to communicate complicated issues. For example, much of the discourse and terminology associated with the West’s “**war on terror**” renders invisible basic human rights protection and hitherto acceptable standards under international law. Moazzam Begg, a former detainee at Guantanamo, outlined some potent examples: what is a “*ghost detainee*?” What does it mean to “*render*” someone? The word ‘*rendered*’ was last used when escaped slaves were ‘rendered’ back to their slave owners. People are labelled by using terminology to describe them - “*enemy aliens*”, “*enemy combatants*”.
- We need to highlight and expose the differences on how collective responsibility is placed; Muslims/Arabs are identified collectively as responsible for ‘terrorist’ acts perpetrated by individual Muslims, whereas Americans are not held collectively responsible for the e.g. ‘terrorist’ acts of individuals such as Timothy McVeigh



- Suggestion to use pictures and visual imagery to break down stereotypes - see below example from HSBC adverts on stereotypes - suggestion to subvert mainstream advertising like this to confound mindsets and prejudices:



Iraq	Gaza	Israel	Lebanon
Freedom fighter ?	Terrorist ?	Terrorist?	Freedom fighter?

### ACTION POINTS

- (i) **Develop legal action campaigns** in the West to challenge the proscribing and listing of mainstream Islamist movements like *Hamas* and *Hizbullah*. See for example a campaign developed in Canada by *TADAMON* (<http://tadamon.resist.ca/>) which is challenging the listing of Hizbullah as a terrorist organisation (<http://tadamon.resist.ca/index.php/campaigns/de-listing-hezbollah>). Canada is one of only three countries world-wide to designate Hezbollah as a 'terrorist' organization. The other two are Israel and the United States.
- (ii) **Production of magazine** with a series of commissioner articles to give a conceptual basis to some of the key ideas from the workshop and the overall objectives of this project. See 2 (vii) above.

### 3. Learning lessons from other political and social movements on resistance:

- Draw from experience of other social movements and campaigns, for example, the anti-racism movement. For example, the model and approach adopted by the *Institute of Race Relations* in UK: they started with individual cases and people's experiences of racial harassment and violence (families whose children had been murdered in racist attacks, cases of deportation, the effects of increasingly restrictive immigration laws, etc.), and from

these cases, they focused on issues and themes, and from this built a wider social movement. They didn't start with ideology, but started with people's experiences and individual cases. Ideology came later.

- Use of history to confound stereotypes – research history of location – e.g. Moazzem Begg giving talks in York or Liverpool (sites of slave commerce) – redefine language, link past history and acts to reduce gap between self [good] and other [bad] and stereotypes

#### **4. Gaining power and authority**

- Power – need to explain the processes of power (belittling others' identities, demonisation, etc) – and to reframe the meaning of power (by re-casting Islamists as having power, i.e. legitimacy) in order to move movements from the margins to the centre of the political spectrum; need to move from negative victim identity; make visible positive values and contest language that entrenches the idea of power – and therefore authority – residing only with one party, the West. Need for the group to acquire 'power and authority' also in order to contest other discourses and also to create a critical mass of support.
- Work with and across different levels – adopt a multi-layered approach of engaging with the grassroots through to policy/political levels.

#### **5. Widening the circle of influence and creating a critical mass:**

- Use independent base of media, academics to articulate and disseminate a new narrative/discourse – and identify how to co-ordinate/create links between people who are currently working alone on similar issues by effecting introductions and connections
- Take lead from organisations in Palestine, the refugee camps and movements in the region – a lot is happening now.
- Look at how the West uses means to reach the masses – Hollywood – think of means of doing this
- Use influential individuals – key Muslim personalities e.g. Djab Abu Jajah; Salma Yacoub – use the internet, dvd, interviews, podcasts; get people like Professor John Gray involved
- Link with mass organisations in western countries – social movements, trade unions – to challenge hegemonic discourse.

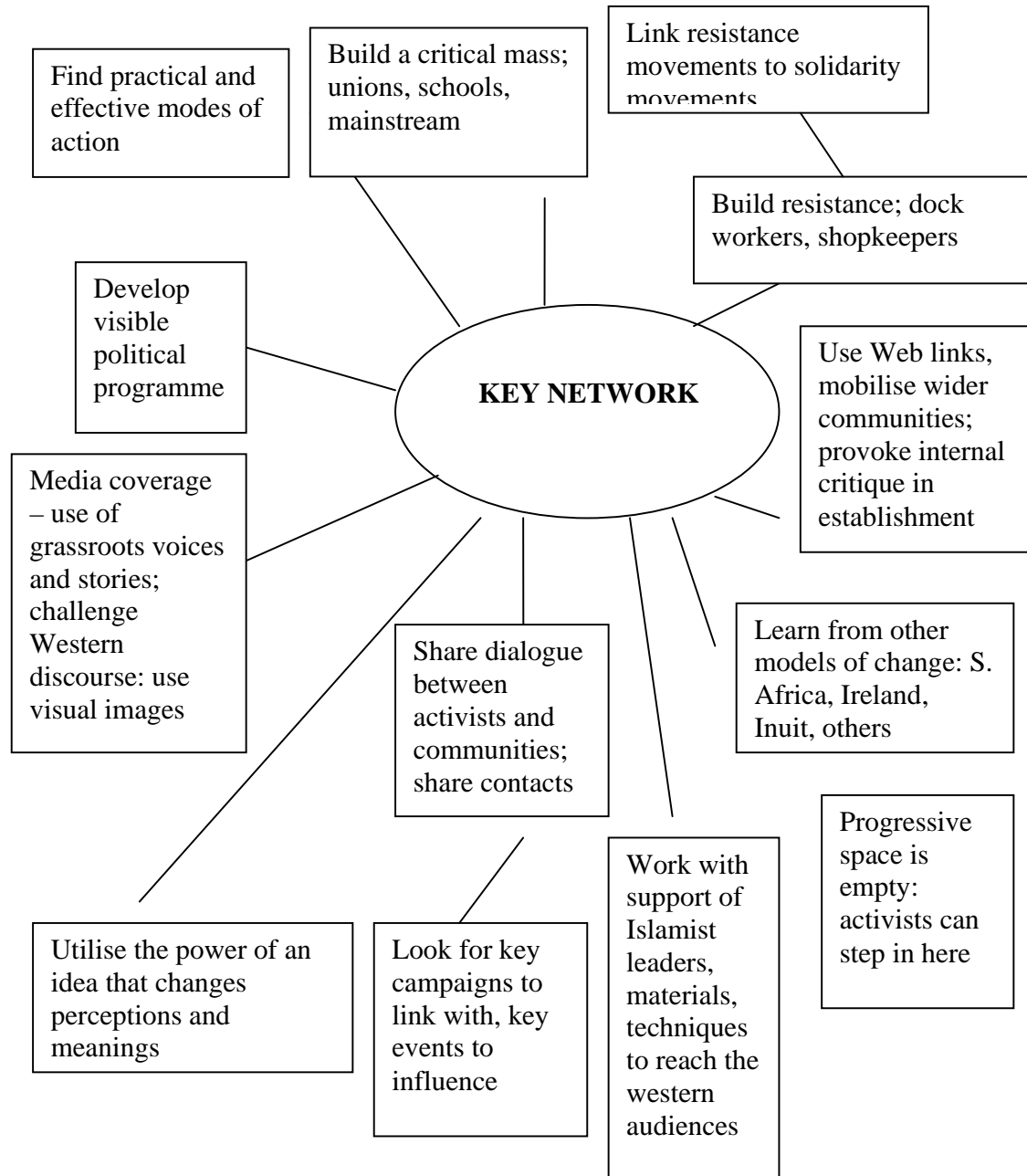
#### **6. Tools/specific ideas:**

- Subvert mainstream advertising; confound mindsets and prejudices
- Approach editors of established journals - e.g. Race and Class, Granta, New Statesman - with a view to the possibility of them doing a special issue on Islamist thinking or on particular issues.
- Think about utilising visual messages e.g. posters, video conferencing, DVDs, you tube etc.
- Campaign using key symbol – stencil graffiti campaign.

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Appendix 1: Diagram - building/mobilising a movement for change



Appendix 2: Diagram - Modes of influence and methods of change

