

Islam and Muslims in the UK

In March 2010, the British Academy hosted a conference on 'Islamic Studies in Europe'. One of the speakers, Dr Tahir Abbas, analyses the place of Islam and Muslims in British society.

THE SUBJECT of Islam in Britain has become one of genuine interest to academics and policy-makers in the light of recent events in the UK, and more generally in the light of wider developments to the nature of the lived experience of Muslims in Western Europe in the post-war period. While much recent attention has focused on terrorism, extremism and identity politics, broader discussions have concentrated on issues of integration, multiculturalism, equality, and the role of Islam in the public sphere. Though these debates are important and necessary in the current climate, they are also conflated and instrumentalised by different interest groups in society. This essay is an attempt to provide a profile of Islam and Muslims in the UK, presenting a broad overview of the essential historical, cultural, sociological and politico-philosophical developments in recent periods. The focus is less on Islam as theology, spirituality or political ideology; rather it is more a social-science analysis of Muslims in Britain, and of the nature of differences, commonalities, challenges and opportunities that face everyone in society.

Immigration

Historically, Muslims have arrived and settled in Britain for over a thousand years, entering the economy and society as traders, bankers, spice merchants, medical students, sailors and servants.¹

During the British Raj, Indians from upper-class backgrounds came to the UK for the specific purposes of education and enterprise. It could be argued that the current South Asian Muslim population possesses similar educational and entrepreneurial ambitions, but it is drawn from the more impoverished areas in the region of Azad Kashmir in north-west Pakistan, the Sylhet region of north-west Bangladesh, and the Punjab region of India. The principal aims of South Asian Muslims at the beginning of the 1960s were to create as much wealth as possible before returning to their countries of origin, supported by a 'myth of return'.² It did not happen – whether by chance (opportunity) or by design (legislation).

Muslim East African Asians arrived in the 1960s and the early 1970s, essentially because of the 'Africanisation' of former colonised lands by the British. Their economic characteristics were middle class and professional in the societies they left, and they sought to achieve those same aspirations in Britain. In 1973, Ugandan Asians were forced out of their country, and those accepted by Britain were encouraged to settle away from already densely populated South Asian pockets known as 'red areas'.³

Bangladeshis arrived when severe economic hardship and the desire for family reunification forced many to seek refuge in Britain during the late 1970s and early 1980s.



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Peter Macdiarmid/
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More recently, in the 1990s, there has been an intake of Muslim Eastern European and Middle Eastern refugees, emanating from such places as Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq.⁴ Indeed, for many Muslims, the most recent phase of immigration is largely because of political dislocation, with 'marriage migration' continuing to affect Pakistanis and Kashmiris in significant numbers to this day.

'Islamisation'

Presently, there is a certain desire among second- and third-generation British Muslims for a certain degree of 'Islamisation'. Today's British-born South Asian Muslims, which include all Bangladeshis and Pakistanis and approximately 15 per cent of all Indians, have been increasingly distinguishing their ethnic from their religious identities. The nature of Islam and 'Muslimness' among these groups is questioned and re-examined in the light of inter-generational change. A re-evaluation of individual, political, cultural, ethnic and religious identities has involved a return to a more literal Islam for some. This has led to tensions within communities, and broader social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are also affected by this internal malaise. While some of these issues are concentrated among a limited number of groups and communities, the dominant rhetoric in relation to Islam and Muslims conflates local area sociological issues into an attack on the religion of Islam itself.

Diverse profiles

Although it is true that South Asian Muslims reflect the greatest profile in relation to Islam in Britain, there is a risk of homogenising the religion by suggesting that South Asian traits are wholly typical of British Islam itself. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are nearly always Muslim, but there are B.h Muslims of Arab, Albanian, Bosnian, Iranian, Nigerian, Somali, Turkish and many other origins, whose cultural, social, economic and theological profiles directly contrast with the South Asian Muslim experience.

There are also within-group variations to consider. For example, there are huge differences between Sunni Barelwi Pakistanis and East African Ismailis, but they are both South Asian Muslims by definition.⁵

The experiences of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are not at all reflective of individuals and communities from other ethnic Muslim backgrounds in Britain, but as a combined group they continue to retain the dominant demographic profile.

Assimilation, multiculturalism, anti-racism

With the arrival of African-Caribbean and South Asian economic migrants from the late 1940s through to the 1970s, the assumption of various governments was that through the provision of English-language support in schools, ethnic minorities would learn 'to become like us'. That is, they would be 'assimilated'.⁶ The assimilationist model, however, was based upon an inadequate understanding of the social psychology of group identity and, in particular, the resilience of ethnic identities where the minority community is marginalised and faces hostility.

Responding in part to the failure of assimilation, multiculturalism emerged as an approach that gave space to the recognition of ethnic

diversity in Britain. Multiculturalism provided the framework within which ethnic diversity could be recognised by policy-makers, and respect for different cultures could be encouraged between individuals and groups. Thus, through multiculturalism, the identities and needs of ethnic minority communities were shaped, *but* in a political process where difference is the perceived problem.

However, throughout the late 1970s and into the mid-1980s, multiculturalism was critiqued by certain ethnic minority communities who deeply resented its implied paternalism. At the beginning of the 1980s, anti-racist strategies emerged as an alternative to multiculturalism. This model recognised the conflicts of interest within multi-ethnic Britain and the importance of addressing systematic processes of inequality within British institutions. It developed its insights from the concept of institutional racism which informed the Race Relation Act 1976, and exposed the idea that perfectly ordinary (nice!) people can be involved in generating discriminatory outcomes through their everyday professional practices. In responding to inequalities and discrimination within a multi-ethnic society, anti-racism was a direct challenge to dominant white Britons who felt comfortable with Britain's 'tolerant credentials'. It provoked considerable debate in political and governmental circles. It also, however, attracted a range of critiques from many on the left and from ethnic minority communities who found it strong on rhetoric but weak on delivery.⁷

Education

Numbering 2.2 million in the current period, Muslims form a significant group whose educational needs are of particular interest to government. Muslims in Britain are young, with one in three under the age of 15.⁸ This adds considerable importance to debates surrounding the educational achievements of Muslim groups who will potentially constitute a large segment of the workforce population. The Open Society Institute (OSI) asserts that 'with Muslims ... [comprising] ... almost a quarter of the growth in the working age population in Britain between 1999 and 2009, integrating British Muslims into the mainstream labour market must now be a priority for the government'.⁹ Statistics for educational performance show young Bangladeshi and Pakistani men have some of the lowest average levels of attainment at GCSE level, marginally ahead of Caribbean groups. Official statistics showed that in 2003-04, 31 per cent of Muslims of working age in Britain had no qualifications, exceeding all other religious groups. Similarly, Muslims are the least likely of all groups to have higher education degrees.¹⁰

Compared with other South Asian groups, Muslims consistently under-perform in education (particularly outside of London). The most rudimentary reasons seem to be social class and the educational levels of parents (as is the case with all groups in society); how majority society views and acts in relation to Muslim minorities; and the negative general outcomes that emanate from various social and institutional encounters and modes of cultural and political exchange. Ultimately, the study of Muslims in relation to their potential to engage and participate successfully in everyday life has the effect of focusing on individual and group differences rather than structures and opportunities – as suggested by Ash Amin in responding to the

'community cohesion' reports, and by Tariq Modood in his analysis of the various 'capitals' (cultural, social and economic) that impact upon the experiences of ethnic minorities entering higher-education institutions in Britain.¹¹

Employment

Analysis of first-generation economic migrants and their labour market experiences found that, generally, all ethnic minorities experienced an 'ethnic penalty', including East African Asians, who were better qualified compared with other ethnic minorities. It is African-Caribbeans, Pakistanis and the Irish, however, who suffered greatest. Indians, Pakistanis and African-Caribbeans all underwent substantial 'ethnic penalties', even after controlling for their age and education.¹² A 'racial division of labour' ensured African-Caribbean and South Asian workers, including Muslims, were kept apart and therefore prevented from organising together as part of a wider collective struggle. This process de-skilled workers, kept wages down, and segregated ethnic minorities in the low paid jobs that majority-society workers did not want.¹³ Analysis of 1991 UK Census data revealed that the 'ethnic penalty' or 'ethnic disadvantage' experienced by first generations was largely transmitted onto second generations. Some elimination of the 'ethnic penalty', as second generations are British-born and have received their education in Britain, was expected. But both direct discrimination and cultural differences, therefore, must play a part as the range and magnitude suggest complex explanations, as Anthony Heath *et al.* have argued.¹⁴

Without doubt, Muslims in Britain (along with some Sikhs) have lower economic activity rates, and are more likely to be unemployed and less well paid than average. There is an observable distinction between Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims. It is possible to conclude that Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are under-represented in the top income bands and certain employment sectors as opposed to Indian Muslims. Interestingly, there is also data pointing to religious discrimination, as those who classify themselves as white Muslim graduates have a lower than average employment rate after graduation; 'it's even the case that a white Muslim faces a higher employment penalty than a Pakistani of no religion'.¹⁵ Clearly, there are certain patterns in the education and employment experiences of various Muslim minorities that demonstrate acute fragmentation. Educational achievement is conspicuously low for Muslims, but there are strong ethnic variations within particular patterns of underachievement found among the sons and daughters of rural-urban first-generation Muslim economic migrants. The experience of marginalisation in education is often translated into problems of limited higher-educational outcomes, followed by higher than average graduate unemployment, but it is noticeable that the role of community cultural values are important to consider when exploring the education of young Muslim women.¹⁶ Statistical analyses confirm that

Muslims suffer a 'Muslim penalty' in the labour market over and above that of an 'ethnic penalty'.

Islamophobia

The cultural and social identification of the 'Muslim other' emerges from the experience of imperialism and colonialism, and this 'fear or dread of Islam or Muslims' is described as Islamophobia. In the post-9/11 and post-7/7 period, there has been a sharp focus on the identities of Muslim minorities, but with little or no appreciation of the structural constraints often facing many communities. A negative politicisation of the debate can impact on the perceptions of both the individual or group of interest and those who form the majority society. 'Islamophobia' is an observable cultural phenomenon, and it invariably compounds an existing and highly problematic situation for many Muslim minorities. Over the centuries, there have been periods of learning and understanding on the part of the British and the Europeans, but there has also been ignorance, conflict and the demonisation of Islam.¹⁷ Periodically, Muslims have been portrayed as 'barbaric', 'ignorant', 'narrow-minded' or 'intolerant religious zealots'. This characterisation is still present today in the sometimes damaging representation and treatment of the 'Muslim other', which exists as part of an effort to aggrandise established powers and, in the process, to legitimise existing modes of domination and sub-ordination.



As part of the 'Islamic Studies in Europe' conference, Dr Dalia Mogahed (Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, Washington DC) gave a lecture on 'Who Speaks for Islam?'. (An audio recording of this can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/) Photo: Matt Crossick.

Although it is important not to treat Muslims as an undifferentiated mass, as there are very many ethnic, cultural, social, economic and political differences between individuals and groups, this characterisation of Islamophobia nevertheless remains relevant. While racism on the basis of 'race' continues, the anti-

Muslim shift suggests markers of difference of a social and religio-culture nature. The social and religious foundations of Islam, as well as of Muslims in general, have attained such a degree of notoriety that their 'visibility' is immediately associated with entirely negative and detrimental frames of reference. Since 9/11 and 7/7, the situation has both deteriorated and intensified. Islamophobia has gained a greater discursive prevalence, to the extent that much of Western European society has become uncritically receptive to an array of negative images, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in relation to Islam and Muslims.¹⁸

The charge of media bias needs to be taken seriously as the coverage of 'extremist Muslims' and 'Islamic terrorism' has dramatically increased in recent periods, and especially since the events of 9/11 and 7/7. The language used to describe Muslims is often violent, thereby implying that Islam is also hostile. Arabic words have been appropriated into universal journalistic vocabulary and invested with new meaning, which is generally exaggerated and aggressive. 'Jihad', for example, has been used to signify a military war waged by 'Islamists' against the West. The deeper Arabic meaning of the term is, in fact, far broader and refers more to the idea of a 'struggle' (where the struggle against the

'false ego' – *nafs* – is the highest of all jihads). Words such as 'fundamentalist', 'extremist', 'radical' and 'Islamist' are regularly used in apocalyptic headlines across all sectors of the British press. In the post-9/11 era, politicians have used the fears people have of Islam for their own ends. By focusing on the 'War on Terror', the existing anti-Muslim frame of reference is replaced with the idea of 'terror'. The reporting is compounded by a concentration on the 'enemy within' or the loyalty of Muslims to Britain.¹⁹

Policy development

It is in the inner cities where most British Muslims are physically concentrated. Invariably, neglect will remain on the part of the state and the political establishment – until, of course, something tragic happens. It is precisely where the multiculturalism model in Britain works least well. While difference and cultural sensitivity to minority interests are celebrated, the notion of a universal national identity has not been sufficiently determined to permit the range of different ethno-cultural characteristics of British ethnic minorities and majorities to coalesce around it. Meanwhile, in the inner cities, where British Muslim minorities are largely to be found, different poor minority and majority groups effectively compete directly with each other for what are often the crumbs of society. At a policy level, in the current era, notions of cultural identity politics supersede those relating to the need to eliminate deep-seated socio-economic inequalities. Perhaps the recent return to integration and the development of the notion of the 'Big Society' on the part of the Con-Dem coalition may well help a return to genuine structural concerns.

As I write in late 2010, the study of Islam and Muslims is clearly on the increase in the UK, and with a genuine shift away from the more immediate concerns around terrorism and extremism. There are a whole host of debates that draw on a wide variety of social science and humanities fields, as well as those that have a specific policy application to them, and there needs to be greater investment in these academic studies. There is now a genuine opportunity to take a lead and to provide the intellectual stimulus to affect social change and public policy developments, in this highly significant area of research and scholarship.

Notes

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- 10 National Statistics Online, *Education: One in Three Muslims Has No Qualifications* (London: National Statistics, 2004). Available at www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=963. Accessed 13 August 2010.
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The symposium on 'Islamic Studies in Europe', held at the British Academy on 23–24 March 2010, was jointly organised with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It was convened in response to a request to HEFCE from Prime Minister Gordon Brown to investigate the idea of setting up in Britain a 'European Centre for Excellence for Islamic Studies'. Further information on the symposium, including a short report by the convenors (Professor Clive Holes FBA and Professor Carole Hillenbrand FBA) can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/islamic_studies.cfm
