SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM YOUTH IN BRITAIN: TRANSNATIONAL ISLAM AND CIVIC DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

Over the last five decades, the Muslim experience in Great Britain has undergone three distinct phases, revealing a strong element of progression from inception to consolidation within an increasingly multicultural Britain. While there are numerous ethnoregional groups among Britain's Muslims, the South Asian component has been the largest and most visible of all. The author argues that a cultural identity within an overarching British milieu, joined by a greater camaraderie with Muslims elsewhere, could allow women and youth groups a dual sharing with their fellow Britons as well as with people of their own faith.

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The attention currently being devoted to predominantly younger and highly politicized Muslim groups within the United Kingdom by academics, journalists and policy-makers is a nascent development, touching upon interlinked sociological, ideological and geopolitical domains. In addition to some of its alarmist and even exceptionalist undertones, this multidisciplinary discourse features an engaging debate on vital themes such as multiculturalism, integration, intragenerational relationship, political Islam and contestations over British foreign policies in West Asia. While most British sociologists may continue to debate over the respective role of two major variables – class and colour –, several of their colleagues, especially from amongst Muslims, have begun to focus on culture as another significant variable and are urging the British State to take it aboard as a major identity marker while reformulating policies on racism and discrimination. Until more recent times, sociological studies of the Muslim diaspora not only remained sparse, they didn't cover the ideological orientations and intra-Muslim positions on identity politics. In the process, predictable and often repetitive statistical tables mainly concentrated on areas like housing, jobs and education in reference to performance graphs of achievers/underachievers. And, here again, Muslims' were reduced to mute figures since they remained absent from the debate as active participants, nor was sufficient attention devoted to the ideological and demographic transformation happening within these communities.

The Salman Rushdie affair, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and, most of all, the terrorist events of 9/11, the Madrid bombings, and 7/7 have not only exposed these serious academic gaps, they have led to a call for the total redirection of academic research. Another important contemporary development corresponding with these crucial landmarks was the emergence of a significant number of Muslim sociologists, writers, journalists and activists who refused to be objectified within the *given* paradigms. Interestingly, a large proportion of this new generation is composed of young, articulate and self-confident women, whose own professional and ideological orientations began to challenge/refashion the entire debate on identity politics. Instead of the stereotyped victims of Islamist chauvinism, they, along with male graduates and professionals, took upon themselves the initiatives of institution building. Such a crucial trajectory has been mostly absent from the debate about Muslims, and accordingly clichéd views such as reluctance to integrate, acute gender imbalances and a presumed widespread propensity to a fundamentalist transregional Islam remain quite prevalent. Consequently, politicization and assertive articulation through an efficient use of IT have taken everybody by surprise and the challenge now is how to assess these newer societal configurations. The erstwhile patronizing analyses are as deficient as are the dictums of an "evil ideology," "home-grown terrorism" and "socio-economic marginalization." Whereas earlier, Muslims were being accused of not being political enough, their heightened political discourse is now making analysts nostalgically yearn for apolitical decades and docile groups. Many policy-makers, scholars, media specialists and even first-generation Muslim immigrants are faced with a complex and often dissatisfied generation of "home-grown" Muslims who, despite varying views on Islamic ethos, are immensely politicized, occasionally restive but mostly adoptive and deserving of

dispassionate comparative analyses. Whereas Muslims may be predominantly agitated over the British/EU foreign policies vis-à-vis the Muslim regions, it is the civil society and the democratic nomenclature within a middle-class milieu that are seen by the former as a creative arena to further their own communitarian and cultural ethos.

As shown in Table 1, Muslims in Britain make up 2.7% of the nation's population and account for 1.7 million in the aggregate total of about 59 million. It is important to note that in 2001 census respondents were asked for the first time to identify themselves in reference to their creed. In London's population of 7.6 million, Muslims account for 1 million, while there are 150,000 Muslims in Birmingham. Wales and Northern Ireland account for 50,000 and 4,000 Muslims, respectively, while there are 60,000 Muslims in Scotland, 33,000 of them living in Glasgow. Thus, compared to the estimates of Muslims totalling 21,000 in 1951, there are now many more, of whom one-third are under 15 years of age, and 18% fall within the 16-24 age group. In other words, 51% of these 1.7 million Muslims are local-born and, interestingly, their third generation is slowly making its presence felt. Most of these Muslims are of South Asian origin with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis making the majority, followed by Indians, Arabs, Turks, Africans and other Eurasian groups. Interestingly, 77% of Pakistanis are, in fact, of Azad Kashmiri origin rendering the proportion of Pakistanis within the Muslim community comparatively smaller. However, Kashmiris and even post-1979 Afghan immigrants and refugees are all collectively identified as Pakistanis. Among the younger generation, one notices the emphasis on cultural (Muslim) identity though the issues of region, class, colour, politics and foreign policy also remain crucial. The younger groups, until recently, felt a greater sense of ease and mobility. However, 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and now Lebanon have rekindled the debate on Muslimness and its interface with the US-UK foreign policies. In the entire EU, the Punjabi Muslims outnumber all other South Asian groups whereas the Afghan diaspora all across Western Europe is identified as South Asian.

The UK-Muslim interface has a long history that is still largely unknown, as the focus remains on more recent and current phases. Other than their Near Eastern roots, both Christianity and Islam (and Judaism as well) have interacted in several ways within the United Kingdom and elsewhere long before South Asia became the hub of the British empire. The inscription of Quranic verse on King Offa's gold coins, commercial and intellectual relations with Muslim Spain and Sicily, the Crusades, links with the Ottomans and North Africans, import of Turkish coffee ,and literary and clerical interest in Islam and Muslims surely predated the Raj and the subsequent arrival of Muslim students, *lascars*, *ayas* and visitors to the United Kingdom. The pre-War relationship certainly was uneven within the context of imperial hegemony, yet it provided the context for migrations from the former colonies soon after the hostilities came to an end. Over the last five decades, the Muslim experience has undergone three distinct phases that reveal a strong element of progression from inception to consolidation within an increasingly

Table 1
Who and how many?

Britain: Population by religion in 2001.

Creed/Community	Thousands	%
Christians	42,079	71.6
Muslims	1,591	2.7
Hindus	559	1.0
Sikhs	336	0.6
Jews	267	0,5
Buddhists	152	0,3
Others	179	0.3
No religion	9,104	15.5
Not stated	4,289	7.3
Total	58,789	100

Source: Census 2001, London: Office of National Statistics, 2004.

multicultural Britain. While there are numerous diverse ethnoregional groups among Britain's Muslims, the South Asian component has been the largest and most visible of all. Even among groups such as atheists, agnostics, political exiles, litterateurs, Ismailis and Ahmadis, there is a large South Asian presence. During the 1960s and 1970s, Muslims in Britain undertook steps to establish mosques, Sufi centres and *ibaadat khanas* as single immigrants were joined by their families and the community expanded horizontally. The early mosques had been smaller, isolated rooms whereas new mosques were purpose-built buildings, which during the second phase in the 1980s and early 1990s gradually began to assume the role of community centres. This phase was quite crucial as in the post-Cold War era, islamophobia was on the increase along with ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and mayhems in Chechnya and Kashmir. In post-Rushdie years, the younger Muslim Britons were witnessing these traumatic developments fully cognizant of the IT revolution in the form of Internet, mobile phones and rolling news channels.

During the current and third phase, several of those hundreds of centres and mosques have begun to adopt IT resources along with providing advice on health and education, whereas the Muslim graduates began joining professions. A sizeable proportion of them are women who, in several cases, began to make independent decisions on their Muslimness, *hijab* and linkages with other like-minded university graduates. These British Muslims, after leaving colleges and universities, started to form study circles and think tanks expanding the remit of hitherto *biradari*- (clan) and mosque-based circles where mostly influential men used to make all the decisions. Instead of Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati and Punjabi, now English with some sprinkling of Arabic/Quranic terms emerged as the lingua franca. The discourse was in English and a flurry of emails, letters and petitions began to reach the offices of the BBC, Sky and various tabloids and broadsheets. The emergence of inclusive and confident bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPACUK), the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the Al-Khoei Foundation, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, the Association of Muslim

Social Scientists, the Khayyal Theatre, the City Circle and magazines such as *Emel* joined the existing local and regional bodies. Even erstwhile bodies such as the Muslim Parliament, the Islamic Foundation in Leicester and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies – previously more concerned with the cooption of like-minded individuals – had to open up to some younger elements. The issues of the Muslim world and the rising tide of islamophobia politicized these youth in Britain who felt uneasy with the official policies and the abrasive media campaign on political Islam. The Runnemede Trust's report, *islamophobia*, had certainly substantiated many of the Muslim grievances, redirecting academic and policy research towards the issues of culture and politics. Other than this ongoing and expansive institutionalization which has been crucially affected by 9/11, 7/7 and the subsequent legislation on terror, one notices the evolution of various socio-psychological phases in the career of British Muslims over the past several decades. The initial phase was characterized by the round-the-clock work ethics pursued by mostly single men who viewed themselves as visitors, reflecting a "myth of return." This was replaced by a second phase of settlement during the 1970s and 1980s. It was in the 1990s that Muslims began to challenge the existing models of identification, which was solely based on ethnicity, and started to flag their cultural identification as Muslims. This demand eventually led to the inclusion of religious identity in the census of 2001, which was certainly a major development of far-reaching consequences. The fourth phase, again led by younger Muslims, is less inward-looking and refuses to accept media denigration and partisan objectification and here, one notices a number of stratagems at work.

As is clear from the following opinion charts – further augmented by participant observation – the younger Muslims in Britain are predominantly against violence though they are deeply concerned with foreign policy issues. In Britain they see a home and have no grudge against the society at large, yet remain weary of objectification and exceptionalization. For instance, a major survey conducted a few weeks after 7/7 and reproduced here reveals a broad and often positive consensus on several areas dealing with the British society. The Federation of Societies of Islamic Students (FOSIS-UK) conducted a survey among dozens of British academic institutions; 49% of respondents were female students, and 43% were male students. Concurrently, the findings of the ICM opinion poll conducted in early 2006 and published in *The Sunday Telegraph* were not that different from the other polls in the same league. These surveys challenge several prevalent views about Muslim youth being extremist and irrational clusters who are using campuses, sport arenas and IT channels to organize themselves into potential terrorist groups. These surveys reveal a strong critique of the official policies in West Asia yet are not celebratory of groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Muhaijroon and Hizb-ul-Tehreer. They also offer a strong negation of a report by professor Anthony Glees of Brunel University, which is a largely media-based dissertation by one of his students which somehow identifies almost 30 universities as being hotbeds of potential terrorists. Tables 2 to 5, from the aforementioned FOSIS survey, reveal very interesting Muslim positions on several crucial issues.

Unlike the common misperceptions about *Londonistan* or *British Jihadism*, the situation is rather complex and different thoughout the different political scenarios, such as more bloodshed in West Asia or invasion of Iran, and may only add to a pervasive dismay among all, agitating some more than others. Intra-Muslim pluralism is a reality that is often overlooked when positing Muslims as a monolithic community. It is true that there is a greater pull towards Muslimness, and an unease with divisions, yet national and sectarian diversity may eventually give way to a greater professional and ideological pluralism among the new generation British Muslims. A high rate of literacy, a higher level of middle class professionalism, and greater socio-economic mobility may usher role models as well as fresher perspectives on Islam, which may positively lead to a British Islam with its own distinct personality. It is not to suggest that radical sections will totally disappear nor will the transnational sentiments wither away; instead they would keep on intensifying the nature of debate on Muslimness, British foreign policies and the role of media. More and more Muslims will undertake lobbying to bring about change from within, though such an optimistic scenario may require concerted efforts over a sustained period of time. Like the anti-war rainbow alliance, Muslims, owing to their youthfulness and politicization, will remain proactive – often more than other similar communities. Such a democratic and civic activism within the strict domain of British citizenship may have its own dividends and costs but is not impossible. If these polls are the indications of the trends to come,

Table 2
Students on terror

Attitudes toward extremism

Do you condemn the London attacks?

Yes	85%
No	4%
No response	11%

Would you tell the police if you found that a fellow Muslim was planning an attack?

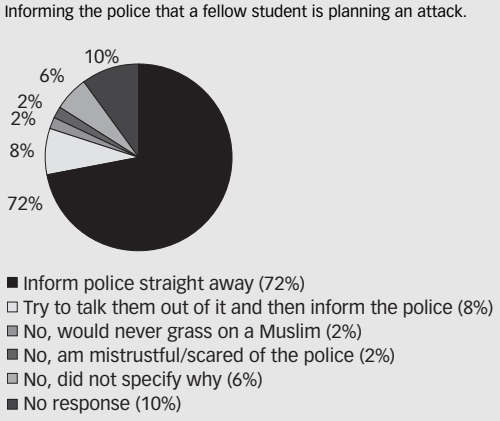
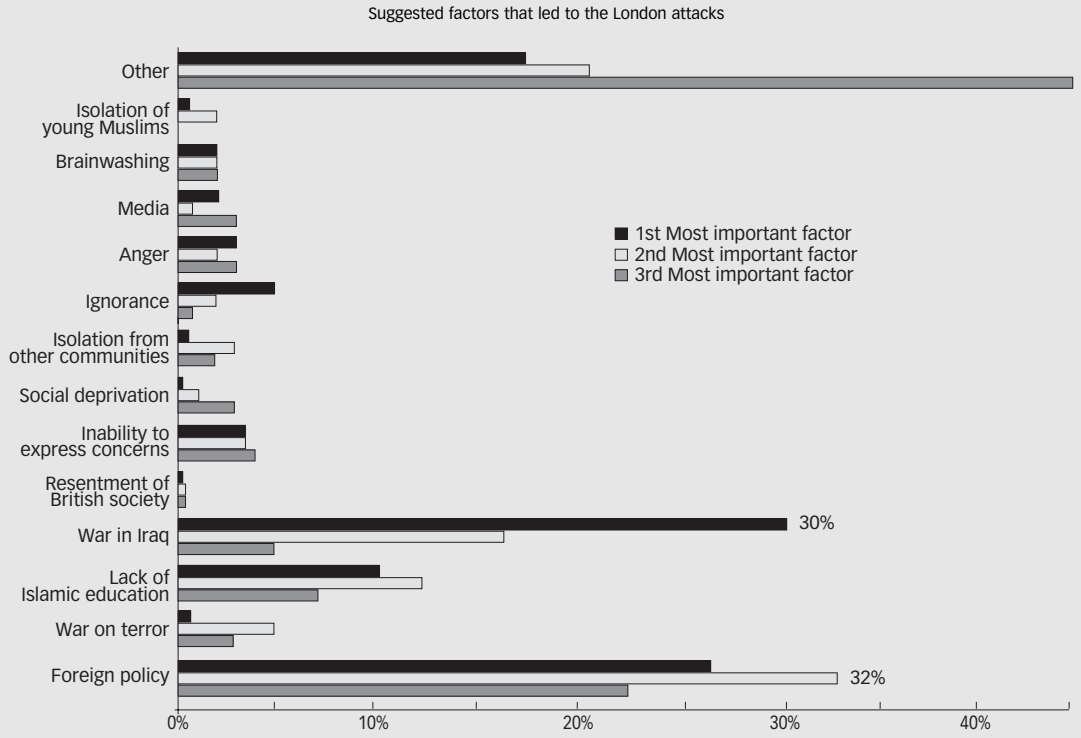


Table 3
On foreign policy

Tackling the causes

In order of importance, what factors do you think led to the attacks?



Note

402 students suggested one factor, 301 gave a second factor and 148 gave a third. ata on further factors was not captured. "Other factors" refers to answers that listed something that did not fall into the named categories, that did not specify causes, or that said the cause is unknown.

What do you think are the root causes of religious extremism?

Most (287) of the answers to this question could be grouped under the following seven categories. The percentage values relate to the number of respondents who mentioned that answer.

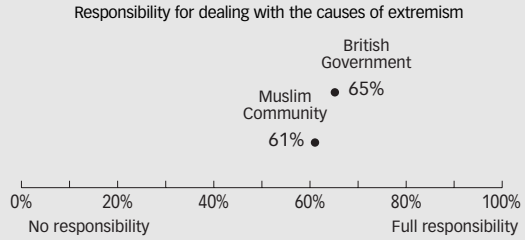
Misunderstanding of religion	38%
Foreign policy	11%
Ignorance	10%
Hopelessness/desperation	7%
Hatred	2%
Media	2%
Failure of scholars	0%

then there is a reason to be hopeful. As shown in the above polls, respondents are overwhelmingly against violence – both at the State and societal levels and decry events such as the London bombings. A vast majority of them are willing to inform the authorities of any potential militants within the community, yet midnight raids and arrests of hundreds of younger people all across the North Atlantic regions only exacerbate their disenchantment with the politicians and police. In the same vein, they are critical of British foreign policy in Muslim regions and share wider grievances on the invasion of Iraq and bloodshed in Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere. Two-thirds of these respondents are happy with the British academic institutions for being sensitive to their communal needs. Only 2% have been influenced by imams, while a vast majority have learned about Islam on their own or through friends, and 20% of them have been taught about their religious and cultural heritage by their parents. In other words, the exaggerated views about the role of religious seminaries and travels to West Asian countries underwriting political activism among some of these Muslim youth do not hold water.

It is believed that British policies towards Muslim regions along with a continued media-led distrust of the Muslims may keep most of the younger groups, including women, agitated. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Muslims have no problem defining themselves as British citizens of the Muslim faith. Their citizenship remains non-

Table 4
Sources of instruction and influence

On the following scale, where would you place the responsibility for dealing with the causes of extremism?



This represents the following:

28%	feel the Muslim community should take more responsibility than the Government
32%	feel the Government should take more responsibility than the Muslim community
24%	feel they should take equal responsibility
5%	gave no response

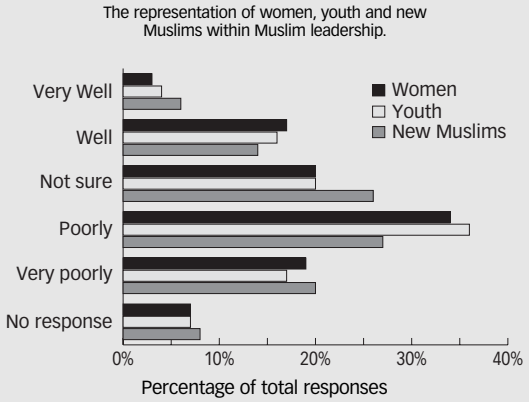
Who else should carry the responsibility?
This answer is indicative rather than exhaustive

British society as a whole	20%
Individuals within the terrorist groups	14%
Parents/family	12%
Media	11%
Imams	7%
America	6%
Arab leaders	3%
Schools	2%
Peers	0.5%

The discussion on all of the above findings will assume that extremism is defined as violent actions such as those behind the London attacks.

Table 5
On women and youth

How well do you think the following groups are represented within the leadership of the Muslim community?



controversial and their Islamicity does not push them to trivialize this civic identity. Many of them are eager to benefit from the British academic, professional and democratic institutions. As seen during the Danish cartoons controversy, they are uneasy with a few firebrands from within trying to speak for the entire community, in the same way that they are wary of several establishments intent upon denigrating and agitating Muslims in the West.

This is a situation where authorities can help by adopting more even-handed policies, distancing themselves from the ongoing legacy of discretionary adventurism and midnight raids whisking away European Muslims to interrogation centres while exposing them to a grave level of social and psychological humiliation. It is safe to suggest that a higher rate of mobility, adequate grooming within the British education system, exposure to media and study groups, and developments in Muslim regions will holistically continue to fashion the attitudes of British Muslims. Some might even surrender their Muslimness while a few may continue to opt for more extreme views by seeking likeminded colleagues across the United Kingdom. The vast majority of them, however, will likely enter professions and, conscious of their own identification as British citizens of Muslim background, continue debating and agitating over the issues of foreign policy.

Certainly, the Israeli invasion of Gaza and the debilitation of Lebanon has, once again, exacerbated anger among younger Muslims who feel that Britain has been abetting Israeli policies by stalling a ceasefire without any regard to human rights or Muslim public opinion. It is feared that a bottled-up anger over such issues may radicalize some younger British Muslims, whose daredevil acts could once again set back inter-community relationships by decades. Concurrently, a cultural identity within an overarching British milieu joined by a greater camaraderie with Muslims elsewhere could allow women and youth groups a dual sharing with fellow Britons as well as with people of their own faith. Such a role may have its own dividends on all sides, just as it could engender suspicions in some quarters, but this is where greater debate and dialogue will be needed to allay reservations, or even inclination towards extremism. A greater sense of acceptance and mutual tolerance within a multicultural and democratic environment, and proactive official efforts geared towards a just global order can certainly augur a new phase in the career of Muslims, where European Islam could evolve as a positive reality.

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