

PREVENTING ISLAMOPHOBIA AND RADICALISATION

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Understanding Jihadism

In October 2014, a *Guardian* newspaper headline referred to 23 British Muslim men killed in fighting on all sides of conflict in Iraq and Syria.¹ These men were either slain by pro-Assad fighters, Kurdish fighters on the Turkish border, or groups opposed to the Assad regime. In June 2015, Britain's youngest suicide bomber, Talha Asmal, aged-17, killed himself in a suicide bomb attack, slaughtering 11 Iraqis in the process.² Asmal originated from the town of Dewsbury, home of one of the July 2005 London bus and tube bombers, which killed 52 people.

Stories like this, however, largely leave out the multi-layered drivers, triggers, and pull factors that encourage British-born Muslim young men to enter into theatres of war far from their places of birth. Further still, these men are widely implicated in attacks, both abroad and in their home countries. At another level, radicalisation and Islamophobia create further conditions for extremism, for both minority and majority groups. In many senses, both reinforce each other; however, little is discussed on these matters.³ This concept paper explores the theory of their interlinkages, and the concerns this raises for community and policymaking thinking, with a focus on the Muslim experience.

It is believed that there are 25,000 foreign fighters from 100 nations in the Islamic State (IS).⁴ There are no accurate numbers on Western-European born foreign fighters, however. Recent EU estimates suggest that there are around 6,000 from Western European countries with large Muslim communities.⁵ This 'European jihadism', however, did not begin with the current crisis in Iraq and Syria. Rather, it began much earlier. To understand the wider dynamics affecting a wider European-born Muslim experience the British case is discussed.

The first wave of British jihadism began during the 1980s. A few young Muslim men were drawn to conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It was an indication that the experiences of young British Muslim men in relation integration were proving problematic. The second wave began during the first Gulf War in 1990. At the time, a handful of university campuses began to highlight activities relating to Muslims radicalised by what they viewed as an unjust and unfair war.⁶ Although the war ended quickly, British intelligence and security services were concerned about the activities of specific young Muslims.

¹ Guardian Newspaper (2014) 'One British jihadi killed in Syria and Iraq every three weeks, study finds'. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/24/british-jihadis-killed-syria-iraq>. Accessed 26 October 2014.

² Telegraph Newspaper (2015) 'Ordinary Yorkshire lad', 17, becomes Britain's youngest suicide bomber'. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11674324/Ordinary-Yorkshire-lad-17-becomes-Britains-youngest-suicide-bomber.html>. Accessed 17 June 2015.

³ Abbas, T. (2012) 'The symbiotic relationship between Islamophobia and radicalisation', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5(3): 345-358.

⁴ Guardian Newspaper (2015) 'Iraq and Syria are 'finishing schools' for foreign extremists, says UN report'. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/iraq-and-syria-are-finishing-schools-for-foreign-extremists-says-un-report>. Accessed 25 June 2015.

⁵ Middle East Monitor (2015) 'Thousands of Europeans have joined ISIS in Syria'. Available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/europe/18031-thousands-of-europeans-have-joined-isis-in-syria>. Accessed on 25 June 2015.

⁶ Mukherjee, K. (2011) 'British Universities and Islamism', *Comparative Strategy* 30(1): 60-78.

The third wave was because of the Bosnian war. As Bosnian refugees entered mosques and Islamic centres across the United Kingdom, young British Muslim worshippers were informed of the atrocities and horrors European Muslims had faced, and the extent of the brutality unleashed upon them. Some young British Muslims, who felt Bosnia to be part of Europe, were provoked into action. To the British Muslims, these Bosnians were as Western European as much as Bosnians were fellow Muslims of the *ummah*: the global Muslim community.

During this period, analysts and researchers documented this rise in jihadist activity⁷; however, because of a lack of appreciation or a detailed understanding of the phenomenon, British law did not penalise young men engaged in such action. British Muslims leaving the country joined volunteer trips and aid convoys, or engaged in actual fighting. They returned to face no punishment from the British state. After the events of 9/11, UK law drew parallels with US domestic law, which had begun to observe its own Muslim citizens with a far more critical eye. It led to extensive reductions in civil liberties and human freedoms in secular democracies across the Western world, ostensibly targeting Muslim groups.⁸ This latter development remains ongoing.

The ‘war on terror’ in the aftermath of 9/11 started the movement of fourth wave jihadists to Afghanistan and Iraq. Events in Iraq and Syria since the Arab Spring have generated the fifth wave of British jihadism abroad. As UK domestic policy ever tightens its grip through numerous counterterrorism, policing, intelligence and surveillance measures, it fails to isolate local issues as the essential drivers. Government policy focuses on ideology, which is regarded as afflicting wide swathes of the British Muslim population, not just the few.⁹

Remarkable parallels are found in all of these instances. In effect, they relate to the coming of age of second generation British-born Muslims. In earlier waves of jihadism, many British-born young Muslims were of Pakistani heritage. In recent instances, they are Bangladeshi of second-generation origin. Many other ethnic groups are involved, but the greater part emerge from South Asian communities. Noticeable consistencies materialise in local area factors affecting groups, pushing them towards what they would regard as worthy endeavours. Many young British Muslim jihadists originate from urban communities, from inner-city areas in post-industrial towns and cities. Groups here have experienced deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination in their local areas, which has put pressure on social mobility. It has reduced aspirations and expectations, and added to a sense of hopelessness and a lack of ambition characterising majority peer groups elsewhere in society.

This particular body of South Asian young men also experience a case of intergenerational disconnect, which leads to further alienation and isolation. As with the young men, British Muslim women also seek power, status, representation, and IS gives them what

⁷ Kohlman, E.F. (2004) *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network*, London: Bloomsbury.

⁸ Husband, C. (2011) *British Multiculturalism, Social Cohesion and Public Security*, Warsaw, Poland: Institute of Public Affairs.

⁹ Guardian Newspaper (2015) ‘By scapegoating Muslims, Cameron fuels radicalisation’. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/24/scapegoating-muslims-cameron-radicalisation-terror-wars-liberties-british-values>. Accessed 25 June 2015.

the British state has failed to do, combined with internal issues within communities that prevent reaching out and obtaining meaning in their lives.¹⁰ There is also a great deal of idealisation of the perfect society removed from division, inequality, and the competition for status and belonging that motivates young Muslims.

Comparisons between radical jihadis and far extremist can also be drawn. Issues resulting from deindustrialisation, post-industrialisation, and globalisation have also affected white working-class groups, whose futures are also insecure in the context of neoconservatism and neoliberalism; such is the spirit of English class structure, which perseveres intact. Lack of hope leads to psychological issues. It leaves many young people vulnerable, exposed, and pliable to external influences. With poor education and limited employability as a result of discrimination and disadvantage, the uncertain futures facing many young people inner-city areas, minority and majority, create challenges without any real opportunities. Bleak prospects and a competitive environment combine to suppress motivation and desire. What is witnessed in this so-called radicalisation of both British-born Muslims and far right youth is an aspect of their coming of age in the context of intergenerational change and development.

When exploring the factors determining minority and majority radicalisation and extremism, conflation transpires between structural and cultural issues thought to emanate from the religious and cultural characteristics of communities. Their motivations exist, however, at an interpersonal, sociological and psychological level, where these young men (and women) are in fact reconfiguring notions of how to be British, rather than denying it. Because of the mobilisation of technology and global communications, they are regarded as radicals, not because of rejecting of post-modern society altogether.¹¹ Thus, these radicals are *made in Britain*. They are a function of lived experiences within the British context, further emphasising a political and sociological understanding. Rarely is it rooted in religion or forms of cultural behaviour associated solely with ethnicity or religion.¹²

The Glocal Paradigm

In the last three decades, a discernible shift to the political right has emerged across a spectrum of Western European economies and societies, and no less so in the British context. It has led to anti-immigration, anti-welfare, and anti-Muslim sentiment as the dominant hegemonic discourse. It has also generated a mushrooming in Islamophobia and radicalisation industries, much of which are disingenuous. For Islamophobes, the opportunity emerges to implicate Muslims as the cause of their own problems. On the other hand, a ‘politically correct’

¹⁰ Guardian Newspaper (2015) ‘The secret world of Isis brides: ‘U dnt hav 2 pay 4 ANYTHING if u r wife of a martyr’. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/isis-brides-secret-world-jihad-western-women-syria>. Accessed 25 June 2015.

¹¹ Lynch, O. (2013) ‘British Muslim youth: radicalisation, terrorism and the construction of the “other”’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6(2): 241-261.

¹² Abbas, T. (2010) *Islamic Radicalism and Multicultural Politics: the British Experience*, London and New York: Routledge.

liberalism seeks to evade the label of Islamophobe by challenging Muslim cultural practices.¹³ Apart from the rhetoric around the notion, Islamophobia is real, damaging, and persistent. It lingers in spite of efforts to curb it in media, political, and academic circles. More pertinently, Islamophobia, as measured in online and physical attacks, spikes after incidents of terrorism or political violence. The murder of Lee Rigby in 2013 and the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015 both led to an increase in reported cases of violence against Muslims.¹⁴

Between the urban-local and the global, there is the national. At this level, over the last three decades or so, increasing economic and social inequalities have emerged, facing all groups in society, but minorities in particular.¹⁵ There is also a stress on multiculturalism, which has reflected nervousness towards immigration and social cohesion. It is projected at a national level for political ends. When the economy is robust, multiculturalism is seen as a national asset. When pressures on the nation's wealth surface, combined with greater social cleavages, multiculturalism is seen as a liability, and portrayed as such. Further, integration and multiculturalism are thought to be of consequence to security, amplifying the sense that these minorities are not simply undesirable but they are also be a threat to the nation.¹⁶

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, espoused by the late Samuel Huntington, became reality, largely due to the authority of a dominant framework that propounded a sense of enduring conflict.¹⁷ These local, national and global connectivities reinforce a model in which a young Muslim man can metamorphose from inhibited localised individual to 'global jihadist'. For Muslims without a precise understanding of Islam, and because of incessant media sources on the Internet in particular, theirs is a reaction to several aspects of Western European and American foreign policy deemed to be aimed at Islam itself. The information age has accelerated and deepened the ways young men are drawn to an endeavour regarded greater than their individual pursuits. It also acts as redemption. It provides individuals with a conception of empowerment through acts they believe are justifiable in a global context. It delivers self-actualisation otherwise unattainable in their countries of birth.

The complexion of globalisation and the acceptance of capitalism across swathes of Middle Eastern and Asian Muslim nations leads to social divisions and political polarities in these territories, too. It destabilises nations and enhances the conditions for social conflict and problematic ethnic relations. This dilemma is a function of wider global historical trepidation about the nature of relations between groups based on colour and power, but a substantial element is because of inability of global Muslims to always act professionally, ethnically or morally. Islamophobia is not a given, nor an absolute. It is an experience dependent on context

¹³ Malik, K. (2005) 'Islamophobia myth', Prospect. Available at <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/islamophobiamyth>. Accessed on 16 December 2014 [paywall].

¹⁴ Littler, M. and M. Feldman (2015) *Tell MAMA Reporting 2014/2015: Annual Monitoring, Cumulative Extremism, and Policy Implications*, Teesside University Centre for Fascist, Anti-fascist and Post-fascist Studies.

¹⁵ Dorling, D. (2014) *Inequality and the 1%*, London and New York: Verso.

¹⁶ Brown, K.E. (2010) 'Contesting the Securitization of British Muslims', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 12(2): 171-182; Kundnani, A. (2012) 'Multiculturalism and its discontents: Left, Right and liberal', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(2) 155-166.

¹⁷ Ali, T. (2003) *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, London and New York: Verso.

as well as opportunity. For the last few decades, Muslims across the world have been projected on the global political map as victim communities suffering from patterns of oppression and underdevelopment due to the West. Extensive real and historical circumstance exist in appreciating the dynamics operating in many nations, and among different Muslim minority communities, but the occasion for change from within is too often discounted.

The language through which a set of real-world observations are examined and presented heightens the realities affecting young people, acting as recruiting sergeants for those at the centre of violence creation. A concentration on the religion by western elites adds weight to the Islamist argument that the West is reductive, essentialist, short-termist, and narrow-minded towards Islam and the Middle East. For many, the West is understood as perpetuating neo-colonialism, protecting regional interests for economic and political gain. Meanwhile, many Muslim countries are mired in underdevelopment, corruption, tribalism, militarism and elitism, unable to confront their own internal democracies, plutocracies, autocracies, or monarchies.

IS is able to target vulnerable and exposed groups through symbolism, media messages and propaganda content which stems from the needs and anxieties facing young Muslims in the West, in the Near East and the Middle East. The latter is also captured by alluding to empowerment. In the early years of Islam, the followers of Islam closest to the Prophet, known as the Salaf, had immense power to define a religion and the course of history. The ideology behind a particular dogmatic Salafism is an attempt emulate a certain period of antiquity and the impact of that past on the rest of time. The ideology gives young radicals the power to *become someone*, and then to sustain their motivations, legitimised within a religio-political framework. The experience also reflects on the lack of leadership among Muslims in the EU, and across the Muslim world, which is a vacuum too easily exploited by outside interests. IS reconstructs these narratives, enhancing the idea that Western values are directed against Muslims living in Western societies. The latter is evidenced through various studies that continue to highlight patterns of marginalisation, disfranchisement and discrimination facing Western European Muslims.¹⁸

The Policy Questions

Despite the fact great emphasis is placed upon young European-born Muslim jihadis engaged in extremist violence far away from home, frequent misrepresentation and disinformation regarding European Muslims also occurs. It adds to the confusion facing all groups in society, and it does so at the expense of positive accounts of Muslims in Europe. A relentless spotlight on terrorism and extremism takes attention away from the fact that many young Muslims are moving ahead with their lives, however many obstacles they find in reality. In education, music, art, fashion, food, theatre, literature, film, the academy, and in the formal political process. They are average citizens living in the streets of towns and cities across the EU. However, there is tendency among hegemonic elites to characterise Muslims as a single

¹⁸ Open Society Institute (2010) *Muslims in Europe A Report on 11 EU Cities*, Hungary: Open Society Institute.

entity, undifferentiated, and lacking nuance. It misrecognises internal challenges existing within the Muslim community, which shape it in a multitude of directions. And while some opportunities are realised, many remain unchallenged. The issues facing European Muslims remain prevalent in popular discourses, but patterns of racial disadvantage on the basis of colour persist. Islamophobia has become a recognised phenomenon for Muslim minorities, combined with direct and indirect racism and discrimination. Material needs and wants are on top of the list of anxieties facing young Muslims. Wider questions relating to the national identities of various EU countries, diversity, and multiculturalism, however, are far removed from the everyday realities facing young people in inner-city areas. It leads to dualism and binary opposites that are, in reality, non-existent.¹⁹ Many shades of grey exist when determining concepts of Europeanness, Muslimness, and how Islamophobia is articulated in practice.

That there are local issues which have global imports is a cliché. The importance of context cannot be understated, however. Extremism is a result of marginal voices unable to find expression in the social world. It applies as much to Muslims as it does to other disaffected groups in societies. Therefore, the solution is to provide opportunities for participation and engagement, and for those voices to be heard and understood. These expressions need to be empowered so they have a legitimate role in political and social development, of all. Radicalisation in of itself is not a predicament; however, it becomes so when violence is instrumentalised as a means to an end. Radicalisation, if channelled effectively, is an advantageous social and political development. Both radicalisation and extremism are neutral. It is their operationalisation which is of interest to social scientists. Violence solves nothing, and terrorism at the hands of marginal groups, as all the evidence demonstrates, makes matters worse as states respond disproportionately. Extremism and radicalism are not the same as violence and terrorism. These are weighty matters to reflect on.

Appropriate policy responses need to encourage suitable political action to minimise social conflict, and to improve the conditions for cohesion and stability. However, a particular dilemma states face is that they react to events, ratcheting up existing counterterrorism, policing, and surveillance policy when, arguably, there is little need. There seems to be the desire to placate dominant societal perspectives on the ‘Muslim other’ as a way in which to demonstrate authority and control in situations of anxiety and stress. While a great deal of policy involves behind-the-scenes operations, considerable pressure to deliver results leads to extensive politicisation of radicalisation, fuelling existing misunderstandings, and giving licence to gross generalisations. In recent periods, those involved in acts of terrorism from a Muslim background were on the radar of intelligence, security, and policing services. The fact that they slipped through the net suggests more about ineffective existing policy rather than the necessity to introduce tougher measures that will have yet further impact on civil liberties and freedoms, for all. Current attempts by the UK government to enhance existing counterterrorism

¹⁹ Mac an Ghaill, M. and C. Haywood (2014) ‘British-Born Pakistani and Bangladeshi Young Men: Exploring Unstable Concepts of Muslim, Islamophobia and Racialization’, *Critical Sociology*, Epub ahead of print, 15 November, DOI: 10.1177/0896920513518947.

legislation has led to accusations of a pre-crime agenda.²⁰ Vast generalisations about the apparent conveyor belt approach to understanding the so-called paths to radicalisation lead to further stigmatisation of an already much beleaguered community.

The problems facing European-born Muslims involved in violent jihadism are important to understand, but only small number are involved in violent extremism. In June 2015, Charles Farr, head of Britain's Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, stated that barely 100 or so British-born jihadis were in the IS.²¹ However, Muslims in Western Europe have grown to around 5-10 per cent of populations of EU countries such as the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. In this regard a concentration on deprivation, social mobility, and equality is significant for social cohesion and integration, rather than attempts to emphasise national identity.²² To not reduce the discussion on European Muslims to structural matters is also crucial. Indeed, certain cultural outcomes are in the hands of Muslims to formulate themselves. In certain settings, these groups are described as 'cultural Muslims'.²³ Theorisation of Muslims is Western dominated, where religion is considered problematic for many on the left-liberal spectrum of influential opinion; however, not all radicalism is detrimental, by definition. Negative associations between Islamism and violence are to do with the political and sociological context, rather than a religious condition of Islam or Muslims.²⁴ The general dominant rhetoric suggests the latter, whereas the positive is misrecognised, or disregarded altogether. In reality, both reactive *and* active engagement on the part of Muslims in the formation and development of Islamism and radicalisation occurs, which is both positive *and* negative. Therefore, a great deal still remains to be established. Policymakers as well as academics and community leaders all have a part to play in the future development of ideas, at a theoretical and conceptual level, but also in terms of praxis and consequence.

Western European societies have transformed since the advent of monetarism in the 1980s. During this period, Salafism and radicalism have emerged. Hence, the five waves of jihadism in Britain that began in the 1980s. This social transformation has also led to the reconfiguration of former working classes into various protest resistance movements, ever focusing on the so-called purity of racialised identities, and where class identities have all but failed groups. For disaffected Muslims, where the local has proved futile, in the West and in the East, the search for the global enters the frame. All the while, nations modify with no obvious future direction in a post-normal world. The solutions are about common human values.

²⁰ McCulloch, J. and S. Pickering (2009) 'Pre-Crime and Counter-Terrorism: Imaging Future Crime in the War on Terror', *British Journal of Criminology* 49(5): 628-645.

²¹ Telegraph Newspaper (2015) 'Top security chief warns against portraying Muslims as 'intrinsicly extremist''. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11692385/Top-security-chief-warns-against-portraying-Muslims-as-intrinsicly-extremist.html>. Accessed 25 June 2015.

²² Thomas, P. and P. Sanderson (2011) 'Unwilling Citizens? Muslim Young People and National Identity', *Sociology* 45(6): 1028-1044; Saggar, S., W. Somerville, R. Ford and M. Sobolewska (2012) *The Impacts of Migration on Social Cohesion and Integration*, London: Migration Advisory Committee.

²³ Hopkins, L. and C. McAuliffe (2010) 'Split Allegiances: Cultural Muslims and the Tension between Religious and National Identity in Multicultural Societies', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10(1): 38-58.

²⁴ Bhattacharyya, G. (2008) *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence and Feminism in the 'War on Terror'*, London and New York: Zed.