

Living apart together

British Muslims and
the paradox of multiculturalism



Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran
and Zein Ja'far

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Contents

	Executive summary	5
	Part 1	
1	Introduction	11
2	The emergence of Muslim consciousness in Britain	20
	Part 2	
3	Identification and belonging	37
4	Cultural attitudes	45
5	Foreign policy and the <i>ummah</i>	54
6	Victimhood	64
7	Who speaks for Muslims?	79
	Part 3	
8	Reflections on policy	87
	Bibliography	96

Terminology

There is sometimes disagreement and confusion over the use of terminology relating to Muslims and Islam. To clarify, this report makes a distinction between 'Islam' as a religion practiced by Muslims worldwide, and 'Islamism', 'radical Islam' or 'Islamic fundamentalism', which are terms that refer to a political

ideology that aims to create a state and society in strict conformity with religious doctrine. Most British Muslims – even those who are devout – are not Islamists. Likewise, we make a distinction between Islamists and Islamist terrorists. Many Islamists reject the use of terrorism to achieve their goals.

Executive Summary

This report explores the attitudes of Muslims in Britain today and the reasons why there has been a significant rise in Islamic fundamentalism amongst the younger generation. It argues that the growth of Islamism in the UK is not solely a foreign problem, but something that must be understood in relation to political and social trends that have emerged in *British* society over the past two decades. It also examines the impact of public policy on the Muslim population and suggests that the way the Government is responding to Islamism is making things worse not better.

Our research into the attitudes of Muslims in Britain showed that there is a growing religiosity amongst the younger generation of Muslims. They feel that they have less in common with non-Muslims than do their parents and they show a stronger preference for Islamic schools and *sharia* law. Religiosity amongst younger Muslims is not about following their parents' cultural traditions, but rather, their interest in religion is more politicised. There is a greater stress on asserting one's identity in the public space, for example, by wearing the *hijab*.

- 86% of Muslims feel that “my religion is the most important thing in my life”.
- 62% of 16-24 year olds feel they have as much in common with non-Muslims as Muslims, compared to 71% of 55+ year olds.
- 60% of Muslims would prefer to send their children to a mixed state school, compared to 35% who would prefer to send their child to an Islamic school. There is a clear age difference. 37% of 16-24 year olds preferred to send their children to Islamic state schools, compared to 25% of 45-54 year olds and 19% of 55+ year olds.
- 59% of Muslims would prefer to live under British law, compared to 28% who would prefer to live under *sharia* law. 37% of 16-24 year olds prefer *sharia* law compared to 17% of 55+ year olds.
- 36% of 16-24 year olds believe if a Muslim converts to another religion they should be punished by death, compared to 19% of 55+ year olds.
- 7% “admire organisations like Al-Qaeda that are prepared to fight the West”. 13% of 16-24 year olds agreed with this statement compared to 3% of 55+ year olds.
- 74% of 16-24 year olds would prefer Muslim women to choose to wear the veil, compared to only 28% of 55+ year olds.

“ The majority of Muslims feel they have as much, if not more, in common with non-Muslims in Britain as with Muslims abroad ”

However, there is also considerable diversity amongst Muslims, with many adopting a more secular approach to their religion. The majority of Muslims feel they have as much, if not more, in common with non-Muslims in Britain as with Muslims abroad. There is clearly a conflict within British Islam between a moderate majority that accepts the norms of Western democracy and a growing minority that does not. For these reasons, we should be wary of treating the entire Muslim population as a monolith with special needs that are different to the rest of the population.

- 21% of Muslims have consumed alcohol. 65% have paid interest on a normal mortgage. 19% have gambled. 9% have admitted to taking drugs.

- 59% of Muslims feel they have as much, if not more, in common with non-Muslims in the UK as with Muslims abroad.

Our research shows that the rise of Islamism is not only a security problem, but also a cultural problem. Islamism is strongly coloured by anti-Western ideas. Yet, these views are not exclusive to Muslims and can also be found in wider society. There has also been a weakening of older collective identities, notably the undermining of Britishness and the decline of working class politics, which has led to a feeling of disengagement amongst young people more generally. Some Muslims are therefore turning to religion as part of a search for meaning and community. They increasingly look to the abstract and global *ummah*.

“ The authorities and some Muslim groups have exaggerated the problem of Islamophobia, which has fuelled a sense of victimhood amongst some Muslims ”

- 41% named foreign policy as an important issue to Muslims but they are not necessarily more informed or engaged than the wider population. Only 18% of Muslims could name the president of the Palestinian National Authority and only 14% could name the Prime Minister of Israel.
- 58% believe that “many of the problems in the world today are a result of arrogant western attitudes” – 30% of the general population agrees.
- 37% believe that “One of the benefits of modern society is the freedom to criticise other people’s religious or political views, even when it causes offence”. 29% of the general population believes the same.

The emergence of a strong Muslim identity in Britain is, in part, a result of multicultural-

al policies implemented since the 1980s, which have emphasised difference at the expense of shared national identity and divided people along ethnic, religious and cultural lines. Islamist groups have gained influence at local and national level by playing the politics of identity and demanding for Muslims the ‘right to be different’. The authorities and some Muslim groups have exaggerated the problem of Islamophobia, which has fuelled a sense of victimhood amongst some Muslims.

- Despite widespread concerns about Islamophobia, 84% of Muslims believe they have been treated fairly in this society.
- 28% of Muslims believe that authorities in Britain go over the top in trying not to offend Muslims. We asked them to give their opinion about the actions of authorities in two different scenarios. 75% believe it was wrong for a local council to have banned an advertisement for a Christmas carol service in 2003 for fear it would cause tensions. 64% believed it was wrong for a council to have banned all images of pigs from its offices (on calendars, toys, etc) in 2005, for the reason that they might offend Muslims’ feelings.

Paradoxically, Government policies to improve engagement with Muslims makes things worse. By treating Muslims as a homogenous group, the Government fails to see the diversity of opinions amongst Muslims, so that they feel more ignored and excluded.

- When asked to name an organisation that represented their views as a Muslim, only 6% named the Muslim Council of Britain. 51% felt no Muslim organisation represented their views.
- 75% believe there is more diversity and disagreement within the Muslim population than other people realize.

We argue that the Government has to change its policy approach towards Muslims. It should stop emphasising difference and engage with Muslims as citizens, not through their religious identity. The ‘Muslim community’ is not homogenous, and attempts to give group rights or representation will only alienate sections of the population further. People should be entitled to equal treatment as citizens in the public sphere, with the freedom to also enjoy and pursue their identities in the private sphere. The authorities should also try to present a more realistic and balanced picture of disadvantage and discrimination in the UK, as ‘victim politics’ can contribute to a sense of alienation. We should also recognise that the negative effects of multiculturalism are particularly acute for Muslims, but are also experienced by many other minority groups.

More generally, we need to revive a sense of direction, shared purpose and

confidence in British society. Islamism is only one expression of a wider cultural problem of self-loathing and confusion in the West. One way to tackle this is to bring to an end the institutional attacks on national identity – the counterproductive cancellation of Christmas festivities, the neurotic bans on displays of national symbols, and the sometimes crude anti-Western bias of history lessons – which can create feelings of defensiveness and resentment. We should allow people to express their identity freely and in a climate of genuine tolerance. At the same time, we must also recognize that the Government and policy-makers cannot address this sense of disengagement alone. We need to work together, as a society, to develop a renewed sense of collectivity that asserts our shared British identity and Western values in a way that will inspire the younger generation.

Part 1

1

Introduction

“It’s a diverse group that you can’t put together and label as one thing. A lot of people think they know what young British Muslims think, but they don’t.” Male, Muslim, 21, London

“What do Muslims want?” is a question that has increasingly preoccupied Western policy-makers over the past five years. Since the attacks on the United States on September 11th 2001, Muslims and Muslim communities have been scrutinised to try and understand the mindset of terrorists who claim to act on their behalf. The public demand for answers has been intense and has fuelled a prodigious output of books, websites, lectures, pamphlets and television documentaries about Islam and its adherents. In late 2001, post 9/11, sales of the Qu’ran went up as people grappled with the concept of “*jihad*”.¹

Nowhere has this search for answers been more intense than in Britain. The London bombings of 7th July 2005 raised challenging questions about how radical Islamist terrorist acts could be planned and executed on British soil. The 30-year old ring-leader of the bombers, Mohammed Sidique Khan, was an apparently mild-mannered and respected classroom assistant from Yorkshire, who had lived a comfortable life with his young family. Speaking from his grave in his so-called ‘martyrdom video’, released two months after the attack, Khan wore a red and white checked *keffiyah* – an Arabic headscarf – but spoke in a startlingly familiar Yorkshire accent. Why would a man with such an apparently contented

life in Britain declare himself at war with his fellow citizens?

On one level it is obviously impossible to get inside the minds of the London bombers and pinpoint the exact motivations or life events that led them to carry out their atrocities. What we can do, however, is try to understand the ideas and values that were already forming in these young minds, and that eventually made them susceptible to radical Islamist propaganda. The aim of this report is to ask why some British-born Muslims have become attracted to Islamic fundamentalism and the different social and cultural factors that give credence to such ideas.

“ For many, the growth of radical Islamist terrorism has raised serious questions about the relationship between Islam and the modern Western world, and whether the two can co-exist.”

A homegrown problem

For many, the growth of radical Islamist terrorism has raised serious questions about the relationship between Islam and the modern Western world, and whether the two can co-exist. It was the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, who first coined the term ‘clash of civilisations’ in 1993 to describe the cultural and military threat posed by the Muslim world. He prophesied an era of global division – between the modern secular West, and the Muslim, religious East, each pulling in

1. ‘UK sales boost for Afghan books’, BBC Online, 28th September 2001 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/1568788.stm> (last accessed 13.01.07)

their own separate ways. The rise of Al-Qaeda dramatised an inherent clash between Islamic fundamentalism and the modern world. When the London bombings happened, this ‘clash of civilisations’ seemed even closer to home. Some observers pointed to the four British-born bombers as further proof that Muslims living in this country are simply unable to adapt their strict values to the British way of life.

“ But how accurate is this picture of ‘us and them’? ”

Many commentators have argued that the rise of Islamist terrorism is caused by a fundamental tussle between cultures and that more is needed to encourage Muslims to adopt British values. This was reinforced by comments made by the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, who warned in September 2005 that Britain was ‘sleepwalking into segregation’ and that cities were becoming increasingly divided along ethnic or religious lines. In recent years, the Government has introduced citizenship tests and citizenship ceremonies to ensure foreign nationals have a greater understanding of the culture, language and political requirements of being British.

But how accurate is this picture of ‘us and them’? The terrorists who bombed the London underground in 2005 were not shaped by a conservative Arabic education, or brought up in a rural South East Asian culture. They grew up in the streets of Britain, attending state schools and watching British television. It is true that some of them may have learnt the Qu’ran by rote from an early age, but these individuals also spoke fluent English, listened to pop music, watched football and shared many other cultural reference points with non-Muslims.

Of course, radical Islam has a global reach and any explanation for its rise must look at geo-political trends. A major factor in the increasing religiosity of Muslims in the UK has been the influence of Islamist groups operating from abroad and funded by the oil profits of countries like Saudi Arabia.² There is a proliferation of propaganda targeting young Muslims through literature, DVDs, the internet, student societies and charitable organisations. A Channel Four Dispatches documentary, aired on 15th January 2007, revealed how imams trained abroad in puritanical Wahabi ideology are now preaching in prominent British mosques, such as the Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham. An inevitable part of Britain’s counter-terrorism security strategy must be to track the influence of such organisations and individuals.

But the absorption of ideas cannot be explained simply by their profusion. Why should the reactionary ideology of Wahabism appeal to modern, secularised Muslims in Britain? Contrary to expectations, the rising interest in religion amongst second and third generation British Muslims is not an outcome of parental or community influence. In particular, if one looks at young Islamists in the UK, they are not responding to familial or broader community pressure. They are returning to the Qu’ran and reading about religion of their own volition, often having experienced the modern, secular lifestyles available to most people of their age. To suggest that imams or Muslim elders are exerting an undue influence on youngsters is perhaps missing the fundamental point – today’s religious extremists in Britain are largely the products of *British* society.

The starting point of this report is recognition that the rise of radical Islam in Britain is not simply a ‘foreign problem’ which we can shut out; rather, it is partly fuelled by cultural and political

2. GLEES, A. (2005) *When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses*, London, Social Affairs Unit.

trends that have their origins in the West. The homegrown terrorists we have seen in the UK are not alien to the British way of life, but are, at least in part, derivative from it. Why does Islamism appeal to some young people who are mainly, but not exclusively, of Muslim origin? What need does it answer within them, and what social, political and institutional factors may have encouraged this? How has this new form of Muslim consciousness emerged, what drives it and to what extent does broader British society need to engage with it?

The more one looks at today's self-proclaimed *jihadists*, both in Britain and elsewhere, the harder it becomes to see them principally as products of traditional Muslim society. Marc Sageman's study of 172 Al-Qaeda operatives around the world indicates that most Islamic extremists have not been brought up with a strong religious influence. Nor are they the products of economic deprivation. In fact, many come from relatively wealthy homes. Only 9.4% had a religious education, whilst 90.6% had a secular education. 17.6% were upper class, 54.9% were middle class and only 27.5% were lower class. 9% had a postgraduate degree and another 33.3% had a college degree. Significantly, 70% joined the *jihad* while away from home, many after being sent to study in foreign universities, often in the West.³

Sageman was able to identify three major consistencies, all of which appear counter-intuitive: the *jihadists* were usually radicalised in Western countries; they were likely to have had a relatively secular upbringing; and the majority were not recruited 'top down' but actively sought out terrorist networks. Such findings suggest that we cannot isolate the factors that create a *jihadist* to a single country, lifestyle or religious denomination. Even where the radicalisation process is assisted by Islamist propaganda and networks, the contempo-

rary *jihadist* is also a product of wider cultural forces.

These findings gain credibility when we look at the backgrounds of some of the terrorists who have emerged in Britain:

- The four London bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, Jermaine Lindsay and Hasib Hussain were all British-born Muslims. Lindsay was a convert.
- Omar Khan Sharif and Asif Mohammed Hanif who carried out a suicide bombing in Israel, killing people at a Tel Aviv pizza parlour in April 2003, were from Derby. Sharif went to King's College, London
- Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, arrested in 2002 in connection with the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, was educated at a fee-paying school in Essex and at the London School of Economics.
- Saajid Badat, the would-be second 'shoe-bomber' who changed his mind, attended a Church of England school in Gloucester.

A Muslim upbringing is a common factor in almost all cases, but even that is not a prerequisite for becoming a *jihadist*. A small number of converts have become radicalised in western countries.⁴ In Britain, for instance:

- Andrew Rowe, who was convicted in London after being caught with dangerous materials to be used for terrorist attacks and was also suspected of trafficking arms to Chechen militants, was born to Jamaican parents and had dabbled in petty crime before converting to Islam in the 1990s.
- Richard Reid, the so-called 'shoe-bomber' who tried to blow up a plane, had a Jamaican father and English mother and grew up in a middle class suburb, later joining the Brixton mosque.

3. SAGEMAN, M. (2004) *Understanding Terrorist Networks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

4. TOBIAS, M. D. (2006) *The Falcon and the Falconer*. *Policy*, 22. For detailed discussion about American converts who have joined the *jihad*, see KHATCHADOURIAN, R. (2007) Azzam the American. *The New Yorker*. 15th January 2007. The most striking example of this phenomenon is Adam Gadhan, the first American in fifty years to be charged with treason. Gadhan grew up in Oregon, rural California, converted to Islam at the age of 17, and is now one of Osama Bin Laden's senior operatives, acting as a key member of Al-Qaeda's 'media committee'.

5. HOME OFFICE (2006) Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005. London, Home Office. p 26

6. Ibid.

7. We know from numerous surveys commissioned that the terrorists do not enjoy widespread support amongst Muslims in the UK. In a YouGov poll carried out in the immediate aftermath of the 7/7 attacks, only 6% thought they were justifiable, YOUGOV (2005) YouGov survey results. A year later, in a Populus survey in June 2006, only 7% believed that suicide attacks on civilians in the UK were ever justified, although this figure rises to 16% if the target is military. Whilst this is still cause for concern, it shows that terrorists had no right to claim they were acting on behalf of the majority of Muslims. Nearly two thirds of Muslims believed that no more than a tiny minority of their community sympathised with the 7/7 bombers, POPULUS (2006) Muslim 7/7 Poll. A more recent survey conducted for Channel Four's programme, Dispatches, found that 22% of respondents felt the London bombings were justified, but it was young Muslims who were most likely to take this view (31% of 18-24 year olds, compared to 14% of those over 45) GFK (2006) 'Attitudes to Living in Britain - A Survey of Muslim Opinion', A Survey for Channel 4 Dispatches.

Surveys often ask whether there may be some sympathy for the suicide bombers, which can be a confusing question. Some polls have shown that sympathy for their motives can be as high as 20-30% YOUGOV (2005) YouGov survey results. It is possible that respondents express sympathy with some of the views of the bombers (or even human sympathy towards people so deranged as to kill themselves) but still condemn their actions. The people who express sympathy for the bombers are not necessarily future terrorists. Nevertheless, it does indicate a degree of social validation, albeit limited, for the bombers actions in Muslim society at large. Interestingly, very few surveys ever ask non-Muslims whether they sympathise with the bombers or their motives.

8. KEPEL, G. (2004) *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam*, London, I.B.Taurus & Co Ltd.

- Don Stewart-Whyte who was charged, together with co-conspirators, with plotting to blow up airplanes on transatlantic routes is the son of a Conservative Party agent, now deceased, and converted to Islam after being a drug and alcohol abuser.
- Dhiren Barot, who was convicted for planning a variety of attacks using chemicals and explosives and had travelled to Pakistan to meet senior Al-Qaeda operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, was born a Hindu and converted to Islam at the age of 20.

Most, if not all, of these individuals would have seen propaganda videos, attended lectures and visited websites that nurtured their interest. A number of them would have made links to terrorist cells operating abroad and received encouragement from more experienced figures. However, we cannot assume they were all personally 'brainwashed' by senior Al-Qaeda operatives. According to the Government's official report, 'The Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005', there is little evidence to prove that the bombers had links to an Al-Qaeda 'fixer' and the authors stated that "their indoctrination appears to have taken place away from places with known links to extremism".⁵ In other words, they may have become attracted to radical ideas without any direct influence from abroad. Although planning a terrorist act would probably require a degree of training, support and assistance from other experienced and connected individuals, the first crucial steps of radicalisation – reading books, surfing the net, talking with like-minded friends – do not have to be masterminded by a terrorist network. Individuals can start the journey alone, or within a small group of friends, say at a local sports club, youth centre, or in a student society at university.

It is almost impossible, therefore, to develop a robust profile of the kind of indi-

vidual who will become a terrorist. They come from a range of religious and ethnic backgrounds, and vary from university students to high school drop outs. Some have clean records, while others have been in and out of jail. They do not have to be poor or have experienced racism. Like the London bombers, they can be "well integrated into British society".⁶ Although almost all radical Islamist terrorists to date have been men and there may be a 'macho' or sexualised element to the psyche of the *jihadist*, women are not excluded. Muriel Degauque was a Belgian female convert who married a Moroccan Muslim and then carried out a suicide mission in Iraq in 2005.

The attempt to understand the contemporary terrorist threat through the study of theological writings or "the Muslim mindset" therefore tends to overlook another important factor – the cultural and political influence of living in the West.

A cultural problem, not just a security threat

Only a minority of people described as 'radicalised' or 'extremist' Muslims is likely to commit or plan terrorist attacks. This group is extremely small and there is little evidence to show that radical Islamist terrorist groups constitute a *mass* social movement in Western society. In surveys conducted in Britain after the London bombings, the majority of Muslims fully denounced the attacks and disputed the religious legitimacy of *jihadist* groups.⁷ Gilles Kepel, a renowned authority on political Islam, points out that today's Islamism is qualitatively different to former incarnations of political Islam, which tended to be less ideologically rigid and once formed the basis for popular social movements in the Middle East. The vast majority of Muslims are not going to become terrorists or support them.⁸

However, there has been a rise in what the French scholar, Olivier Roy, calls 'reli-

giosity' amongst younger Muslims in the UK, of second and third generation immigrant origin.⁹ Whilst the number of actual or potential terrorists remains small, it can be construed as an extremely acute expression of a broader shift towards the 'Islamicisation' of identity throughout Europe, and a growing interest in neo-religious ideas. Various indicators demonstrate this: increased wearing of headscarves amongst Muslim women; greater cultural identification with transnational Muslim identity – the *ummah*; growing membership of Islamist political groups and youth associations; an increase in anti-Western and anti-Semitic attitudes in Muslim literature and websites; and greater demands by Muslim groups for *sharia*-compliant education, and financial and legal frameworks. Many more young Muslims are said by Muslim leaders to be going on pilgrimage to Mecca, which is considered to be a duty for all Muslims before they die.¹⁰ Numerical estimates of Muslims going to fight abroad in conflicts such as Afghanistan or Bosnia have been as high as two thousand a year.¹¹

While such indicators of religiosity rise and fall in different European countries according to the social and political context, they do suggest a cultural shift is taking place among second and third generation Muslims. This is particularly important when taking into account the key fact of demography: Britain's Muslims are much younger than the UK population as a whole. Approximately one third of Muslims in Britain is under the age of sixteen. Unlike their parents, they are more likely to identify with their religion than with an ethnic or national label.

Although many younger Muslims will not ever support terrorism or express radical views, in general the rise of radical Islam points to a growing disillusionment with what is perceived to be the problems of 'the West'. In this sense, the influence

of Islamism is not just a security problem, but also a cultural problem. In Britain, the aggressive, anti-Western strain of Islamism seems to be stronger even than other European countries. A study by the Pew Center, based in America, noted in 2005:

*"While publics in largely Muslim countries generally view Westerners as violent and immoral, this view is not nearly as prevalent among Muslims in France, Spain and Germany. British Muslims, however, are the most critical of the four minority publics studied – and they come closer to the views of Muslims around the world in their opinions of Westerners".*¹²

It has been argued that this negative perception of the West is a straightforward response to grievances over Western foreign policy, and the way that Muslim feel about the suffering of the *ummah* – the worldwide Muslim community. Numerous authors have linked the London bombings with the war in Iraq, using as evidence the testimonies of two of the London bombers in their valedictory 'martyrdom' videos. In summer 2006, key Muslim public figures sent an open letter to the government in which they argued that Britain's foreign policy was fuelling extremist ideas and pushing people towards terrorism.

However, this supposed causal link between terrorism and foreign policy does not fully explain the *jihadists'* motivations. The Madrid attacks on March 11 2004 were already being prepared in 2000-2001 – long before the coalition forces invaded Iraq or Afghanistan. And, of course, the September 11th attacks were a cause of the Iraq war, not a consequence of it. France and Belgium refused to support the war in Iraq but have both been targeted in subsequent terrorist planning.¹³

The appeal of radical Islam is more than an angry response to Western foreign policy. It appears to reflect a more fundamental shift in cultural attitudes. For instance,

9. ROY, O. (2004) *Globalised Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*, New York, Columbia University Press.

10. AKBAR, A. (2006) 'Young Muslims alienated at home find solace on haj', *The Independent*, 29th December 2006

11. MCROY, A. (2006) *From Rushdie to 7/7*, London, The Social Affairs Unit, p 40.

12. THE PEW GLOBAL ATTITUDES PROJECT (2006) 'Europe's Muslims More Moderate', *The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other*, Washington, The Pew Research Center, (5-6).

13. MONIQUET, C. (2005) *The radicalisation of Muslim youth in Europe: The reality and the scale of the threat*, Testimony of Claude Moniquet, Director General of European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center at the Hearing of the Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats, United States House of Representatives.

in the 'supergrass trial' in 2006 (in which the Al-Qaeda operative Mohammed Babar was a key witness) seven British defendants were accused of planning attacks on 'binge drinkers' and 'football hooligans'. Their targets included nightclubs, pubs and bars, including London's Ministry of Sound. One of the defendants allegedly stated, "no one can even turn round and say 'oh they are innocent' – those slags dancing around".¹⁴ Such targets reflect a deep hatred of the supposed 'decadence' of Western society, which goes far beyond concerns about foreign policy.

If the motivations are partly cultural, perhaps we can find an explanation in the religion of Islam? It has been argued by some that the scriptural tenets of Islam pose an essential conflict with modernity in the West. These analysts have adopted the 'cultural essentialism' approach, which seeks to explain Islamism as an outcome of a static, durable culture that is inherently prone to violence. But Islam is not a fixed monolith. While readers can search the Qu'ran and find several lines that will legitimise the use of violence, others will find several more that will condemn it. The interpretation of religion is never constant, but always subject to social and cultural change. There are clearly strands of Islam that are more literalist and revivalist such as Wahabism, whereas others are far more rooted in folk cultural tradition and in keeping with 'popular Islam', e.g. Sufism. Indeed, counter to the claims of Islamists, many Muslims seek to practice their religion and culture in co-existence with modern, democratic forms of governance and lifestyle, in countries such as Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia. Most importantly, the interplay between religion and changing political circumstances is crucial. At the height of pan-Arab secularism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Muslim women throughout parts of the Middle East removed the headscarf in a spirit of feminist liberation. Today, their daughters

may wear it as a statement of identification with their religion.¹⁵

In this sense, a distinction should be made between Islam and Islamism. The former refers to a world religion with diverse and changing cultural practices and customs, many of which can and do co-exist with western lifestyles. The latter refers to the politicisation of religion; an ideology which draws upon religion but pursues a particular political programme and set of goals.¹⁶ It is much more productive to explore the origins of Islamism in relation to a specific historical and cultural context, rather than simply as an interpretation of religious texts written almost fourteen centuries ago.

More crucially, although Islamism appears otherworldly to our modern sensibilities, we should consider the way in which its animosity towards the West chimes with certain ideological trends that have long been fashionable amongst the Western intelligentsia. For instance, prominent members of the anti-globalisation movement attack the 'greedy' consumerism and materialism of capitalist society; culturally relativist social theory bemoans the dominance of 'euro-centric' scientific and cultural knowledge; environmentalist groups celebrate the spiritual richness of pre-industrial, rural life; and certain strands of radical feminism condemn the sexualisation of women in the West, leading to the bizarre claim by one Muslim feminist that "just about everything that Western feminists fought for in the 1970s was available to Muslim women 1,400 years ago".¹⁷ To understand the appeal of Islamism, we should think about how it feeds off a number of broader cultural trends in our modern age.

The politics of identity

Muslim consciousness in Britain has grown steadily with the arrival of new migrants from countries such as Pakistan,

14. 'London club bombing plan taped' BBC Online. 25th May 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/5016274.stm> (last accessed 21.01.07)

15. For an illuminating description of the current fashion for headscarves in the Middle East, see STRATTON, A. (2006) *Muhajababes*, London, Constable & Robinson.

16. TIBI, B. (2005) *Islam Between Culture and Politics*, Hampshire and New York, Palgrave Macmillan..

17. RIDLEY, Y. (2006) How I came to love the veil. *WashingtonPost.com*. 22nd October 2006. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/20/AR2006102001259_2.html (last accessed 21.01.07)

India, Bangladesh, East Africa, and latterly, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Africa, and parts of Eastern Europe. According to the Census 2001 there are approximately 1.6m Muslims living in the UK today – 2.7% of the total population.¹⁸ Many cities now boast a sizeable number of mosques, around which Muslim communities live, work and pray.

However, the increased prominence of Muslim lobby groups and the nature of their demands have also been shaped by wider political trends in Britain. In the era of multiculturalism diversity policies at local and national levels have encouraged different ethnic and religious groups to organise politically and fight their corner for extra resources. The competition emerging between groups – a sort of tribal thinking – has reinforced a wider feeling of social fragmentation, in which each group is encouraged to look after ‘their own’. More generally, in the past few decades, there has been a weakening of older, collective forms of identity, such as nationalism, political parties, or trades unions. Younger Muslims are more likely than their parents to feel connection to their religious community as opposed to their country, ethnic group or a political movement.

The kind of demands made by minority groups has also changed. In the 1970s, anti-racist groups campaigned largely around issues of material and political equality. In recent years, this has given way to the demand for ‘difference’, and cultural issues such as clothing, halal meat and blasphemy have come to dominate Muslim politics. In this context, younger Muslims are much more conscious of their difference to the mainstream and more aggressive in asserting their identity in the public space.

In light of these shifts, it is important to consider the response of Government policy, and the impact it has made on the feelings and attitudes of Muslims. For the past decade, and particularly after the London

bombings, Government policy towards Muslims has been to engage with them as a distinct community whose special needs qualify them for particular policies and privileges. In 2005, the Government assembled a group of Muslim representatives and leaders, entitled the ‘Preventing Extremism Together’ taskforce, which recommended increased funding of religious groups and projects to bolster Muslim community needs.

“ The emphasis on difference has been a long-standing tenet of multiculturalism, but despite concerted efforts to make Muslims feel included and protected in British society, the opposite has occurred ”

However, despite good intentions, this approach has often seemed inadequate and muddled. Trying to do ‘community engagement’ with Muslims has proved difficult because they are not really a coherent and unified community. The Muslim population is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse;¹⁹ and while some younger Muslims are growing more religious than their parents, others are becoming more secular or ‘Westernised’. Therefore, what ‘community strategy’ would fit all the diverse needs and expectations of this group?

The emphasis on difference has been a long-standing tenet of multiculturalism, but despite concerted efforts to make Muslims feel included and protected in British society, the opposite has occurred. Muslims, particularly amongst the younger generation, continue to feel vulnerable, isolated and anxious about experiencing Islamophobia. The Government has set up numerous schemes to ‘listen’ to younger Muslims but they feel no less alienated and disengaged. The experience of British Muslims suggests that the multicultural experiment – in some ways at least – has failed to deliver the kind of

18. According to the 2001 Census, Muslims are a relatively young population - a third are under the age of sixteen compared to a fifth of the general population. The majority live in cities and towns; London, Birmingham, Manchester, Blackburn and Bradford. A significant number also live in Dewsbury, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Oldham. The Muslim population is relatively disadvantaged in terms of employment, educational attainment, housing and health. Half of Pakistanis and Bangladeshi households live in the 10% most deprived wards in England. 28% of Muslims live in social rented accommodation, the largest proportion of any religious group and only 52% of them are homeowners, the lowest proportion of any religious group.

19. According to the 2001 census, two thirds are of South Asian origin, whilst about 8% are African and 12% are white.

unity that many expected. So where do we go from here?

“ This issue cannot be dealt with through one-off schemes or projects run by the Home Office ”

The aims of this report

This report aims to explore the attitudes of Muslims in Britain today and to analyse the growing religiosity amongst the younger generation. It outlines the emergence of a Muslim consciousness in Britain, and explores some of the key cultural and political themes that preoccupy Muslims. It also examines the impact of public policy in the rise of Islamism and suggests that the way the Government is responding to radical Islam risks making things worse. We argue a number of points:

- The growth of Islamism amongst some young Muslims cannot be understood solely as a foreign or religious problem, but also needs to be understood in relation to political and social trends that have emerged in *British society* over the past two decades.
 - There are certain foreign influences shaping Muslim consciousness in the UK but the growth of Muslim politics has also been strongly nurtured by multicultural policies at local and national level since the 1980s.
 - More generally, many younger Muslims are turning to religion as part of a search for meaning and community which also exists in wider society. The weakening of older political identities in Britain means they increasingly look to the abstract and global *ummah*.
 - Religiosity amongst younger Muslims tends to be more politicised and there is a greater stress on asserting one's identity in the public space.
- Muslim consciousness is dominated by a 'culture of victimhood', which has bred feelings of resentment and defensiveness. Paradoxically, this has been fuelled by Government policies to improve engagement with Muslims.
 - Contemporary Islamism is strongly coloured by anti-Western ideas but some of these sentiments can be discerned in the political and cultural climate of the West itself.

We do not offer any quick fix solutions or a handy list of policy recommendations to deal with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This issue cannot be dealt with through one-off schemes or projects run by the Home Office. Rather, we hope to widen discussion about the experience of Muslims in Britain today, how Government policy might change direction overall, and the broader cultural and political battle that all of us need to fight. We make a number of suggestions:

- Stop emphasising difference and engage with Muslims as citizens, not through their religious identity. We should recognise that the Muslim 'community' is not homogenous, and attempts to give group rights or representation will only alienate sections of the population further.
- Stop treating Muslims as a vulnerable group. The exaggeration of Islamophobia does not make Muslims feel protected but instead reinforces feelings of victimisation and alienation.
- Encourage a broader intellectual debate in order to challenge the crude anti-Western, anti-British ideas that dominate cultural and intellectual life. This means allowing free speech and debate, even when it causes offence to some minority groups.
- Keep a sense of perspective. The obsession of politicians and the media with scrutinising the wider Muslim popula-

tion, either as victims or potential terrorists, means that Muslims are regarded as outsiders, rather than as members of society like everyone else.

Structure of the report

The first part of this report outlines the historical development of the Muslim consciousness in Britain, drawing on secondary and primary sources. It highlights the drivers leading to a more visible Muslim political identity since the late 1980s.

The second part of the report outlines findings from original research conducted between July 2006 – January 2007. The polling company, Populus, conducted a quantitative survey of 1,003 Muslims in the UK, through telephone and internet questionnaires. Telephone interviews were generally conducted in English but in a minority of cases the interview was conducted in a different language if requested by the respondent. The answers were weighted to represent the demographic of the Muslim population in the UK. Some further questions were asked to 1,025 people from the general population in an omnibus survey for points of comparison.

We also conducted 40 semi-structured, hour-long interviews with younger

British-born Muslims, exploring their attitudes towards religion, British society and values. The respondents were either university students or recent graduates, were of either Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, and came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. This smaller sample was not intended to be demographically representative of the entire Muslim population, but it provided useful data about the complex attitudes of younger Muslims. The interviews took place in London, Birmingham, Rochdale, and Manchester. 17 of the respondents were female, 23 were male. The respondents demonstrated varying degrees of religiosity; 13 stated they 'prayed rarely or not at all' and 27 'prayed regularly or quite often'. 12 interviews were also conducted with non-Muslims of similar age to provide points of possible comparison. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using computer assisted data analysis software. We also consulted a range of experts, academics and practitioners about the experiences of Muslims living in Britain and the effects of policies.

The third and final section of the report reflects on the research findings and their implications for policy development.

2

The emergence of Muslim consciousness in the UK

Islam plays a significant role in the political and cultural life of large parts of the Middle East, South and Central Asia, the Balkans and parts of Eastern Europe, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and now increasingly in the UK, where approximately 1.6m Muslims reside.²⁰

Great efforts have been made in recent years to improve the public understanding of Islam and how it shapes the lives of the Muslim population. A large number of books, television documentaries and public events have helped the British public become reasonably knowledgeable about the second largest religion in the UK. However, along with this understanding there has been a tendency from some quarters to make untested assumptions about the ‘Muslim community’ and what it believes. In particular, policy-makers sometimes take for granted the view that the *ummah* is automatically the most important concern for Muslims in Britain. As a result, the Government’s engagement with the Muslim population in recent years has ended up privileging religious and cultural issues that mark them apart from the rest of the population.

After the London bombings in 2005, the Government called together a taskforce of Muslim representatives and community leaders up and down the country to talk about Muslim youth. The premise of its report, ‘Preventing Extremism Together’ was that the Government needed to adopt

special measures to help the Muslim community integrate, and which also recognised their sense of connection with other Muslims around the world. Among its 37 recommendations, it suggested more Muslim ‘youth MPs’ to help young Muslims express themselves politically, more information about Islam translated into English, and a moderate Islamic scholars’ roadshow, to teach about the ‘true’ version of Islam. The report also recommended the funding of specific Muslim-led organisations, such as the Federation of Society of Islamic Students (FOSIS), and the Waqf al-Birr Educational Trust, as well as increased monitoring of public services in order to “analyse how much of these resources benefit and advance the Muslim community, Muslim organisations and Muslim women”. There were also recommendations to empower Muslims through greater awareness of their culture, such as teaching young Muslim women Arabic, and establishing a unit at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to encourage a more balanced representation of Islam in media, popular culture and sports sectors. What these report recommendations implied are that young Muslims in Britain should primarily be engaged with through their religious identity. The taskforce assumed that the Muslim identity is a historically constant monolith, and that the ‘Muslim community’ has always been conscious of itself as such.

20. According to the 2001 census there are 1.6m Muslims in Great Britain, accounting for 2.8% of the total population. Some estimates are slightly higher, around 1.8m-2m. This makes Islam the second largest religion in the country, but still vastly outnumbered by Christians who are 41m. Around 50% of Muslims are born in the UK. 50% are under the age of 30, compared to a quarter of Sikhs, 21% of Hindus, and 18% of Christians. 34% of Muslims are under 16.

Muslims are ethnically diverse, especially compared to Sikhs and Hindus. 74% of Muslims are from an Asian ethnic background. 686,000 Muslims are of Pakistani origin (43%), 261,000 of Bangladeshi origin (16%), 137,000 of Indian origin (8%).

Muslims are mainly concentrated in the main cities of the UK, London (where 38% reside), the West Midlands (14%), the North West (13%) and Yorkshire and Humber (12%). 7% are from another white background including Turkish, Cypriot, Arab and Eastern European, and 6% are from black African origin, including Somalia.

Outside the realm of policy-making, many academics and commentators have also discussed the importance of Muslim identity, and point out that younger Muslims are angry about British foreign policy because they perceive it to be harmful to the *ummah* to which they feel strongly attached.²¹ Some authors argue that the tensions between the Muslim world and West today stem partly from the Muslim mindset, which, they claim, has been humiliated over the centuries by economic and military defeat by the West.²² This interpretation of the current wave of political Islam views it as part of a long tradition of Muslim grievance dating back to the end of the Caliphate under the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and possibly even further back to the holy crusades in the Middle Ages.

It is undeniable that the Muslim identity in Britain is strong and it draws upon the reservoir of historical memory. But at the same time, we should also remind ourselves of how relatively novel this identity is, at least in the political space in Britain. Although Muslims have lived in Britain since the nineteenth century, it is only in the last two decades that we have seen the development of a strong Muslim identity in the public sphere.²³ Until the 1970s, it was ethnicity, not religion, which dominated the way Muslims perceived themselves.²⁴ Older migrants are much more likely to identify with their ethnic or national identity, whilst identification with Islam is much more prevalent amongst the younger generation. Arguably, the strong identification with the trans-national *ummah* is relatively new. While there is irrefutable anger today about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, by contrast the Bosnian war of 1992-1995 had a less noticeable impact on mainstream Muslim opinion, as did the 1999 Kosovo conflict. Foreign policy has been a motor for radicalisation since the mid-1990s, but usually first amongst a smaller group of politicised

Muslims who have worked actively over time to politicise mainstream Muslim opinion.

The 'Muslim identity' is therefore not an unchanging, monolithic entity, but something that has developed through a sequence of historical events and processes. This section will give a brief outline of some of the factors and events that have contributed to this development.

Secularism to religious politics

The history of Muslims in Britain goes back at least two hundred years, when small numbers of Bengali and Yemeni sailors entered the port cities of London, Glasgow and Cardiff, taking work in local garment factories and restaurants. Following the Second World War, the Muslim population grew steadily as young men from South Asia migrated to Britain to seek work as part of the post-war rebuilding effort. They settled in London, in towns and cities surrounding the capital and in specific towns in the Midlands and the North, where the main industries had a large demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labour. Often living in concentrated areas within these towns, Muslims took poorly paid, night-shift work that the local white population did not want to do. Chain migration in the 1950s and 1960s meant that friends and relatives followed from South Asia and began to settle in neighbourhoods, forming tight-knit ethnic and cultural communities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, other factors helped expand the settlement of new Muslim migrants. Growing restrictions on immigration encouraged many migrants to settle permanently and bring their families from abroad. The 'Africanisation' policies of some East African countries also led to the forced migration of many thousands of Indian families to the UK.²⁵

As families gradually settled and grew more prosperous, the Muslim population

21. See MCROY, A. (2006) *From Rushdie to 7/7*, London, The Social Affairs Unit..

22. LEWIS, B. (2004) *The Crisis of Islam. Holy War and Unholy Terror*, London, Orion Books Ltd.

23. VERTOVEC, S. (2002) Islamophobia and Muslim Recognition in Britain. IN HADDAD, Y. (Ed.) *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*. New York, Oxford University Press.

24. ANSARI, H. (2002) Muslims in Britain. Minority Rights Group International. p18 cited in THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY (2005) *The British Muslim Community in 2005*, Wiltshire, The Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity. p.39

25. For a more detailed account of Muslim immigration, see VERTOVEC, S. (2002) Islamophobia and Muslim Recognition in Britain. IN HADDAD, Y. (Ed.) *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*. New York, Oxford University Press, ABBAS, T. (2005) 'British South Asian Muslims Before and After September 11th' in ABBAS, T. (Ed.) *Muslim Britain. Communities Under Pressure*, London/New York, Zed Books/Room 400. p3-17.

became a more visible presence in Britain. In the late 1960s, some Muslim communities were able to move from their makeshift mosques in private rooms, to purpose-built mosques, thereby making a mark on the landscape of some British towns and cities. New Muslim voluntary and welfare organisations also sprung up to provide services and support to first generation and second generation migrants in the major cities.

Certainly, religion was an important aspect of life for first and second generation immigrants, acting as a comforting social glue in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile world. Muslims almost invariably settled closely together in areas and set up local organisations, mosques and services to cater to their needs, as well as provide familial and communal support. In the 1960s, for instance, Haji Taslim Ali, the imam at the East London Mosque, provided a variety of useful services for his 7,000 worshippers: he and his wife taught Arabic classes to local children, collected and distributed old clothes, looked after children if the mothers had to go to hospital and he was an interpreter in the local police station and courts. This vital support was replicated all over Britain's cities wherever a sizeable Muslim population existed. Similarly, successful businessmen would donate generously to local mosques in order to give something back to their community.²⁶

Yet politically, the role of Islam was not prominent in the public domain. In the 1960s, Muslim immigrants were largely involved in secular political movements that spoke to their ethnic and national concerns (mostly related to developments 'back home' in Pakistan, Kashmir or Bangladesh) or specific problems encountered by immigrants in the UK. A number of self-help organisations flourished such as the Pakistani or Bangladeshi Workers Associations, which were primarily concerned with providing local welfare services – filling out forms, legal assistance,

immigration advice and offering social and cultural amenities. The common problem of racism, encountered by most ethnic and religious minorities, also led to occasional cross-ethnic alliances, such as the Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination in Birmingham and the Black People's Alliance which campaigned against discrimination for all minority groups.

In the 1970s this secular politics shifted to new territory as the younger generation confronted racism head-on. They struggled against racial attacks, instances of police brutality, housing discrimination and increasingly tight immigration laws. This new wave of secular, anti-racist politics had a radical edge and sought to challenge the domination of older, more traditional elites. Organisations like the Asian Youth Movement, set up in 1977, made no distinction between religious communities and were created by younger leaders who had been born and educated in Britain. They often defied conservative attitudes in their own ethnic communities and tackled issues such as domestic violence. They chose to focus on problems relating to their particular communities in the UK, rather than in their homelands. While many of this generation of activists were probably Muslim, they did not tend to define themselves by their religion but instead by their political allegiance.

The shift to religiously oriented politics took place over the 1980s and 1990s for a number of reasons. The first was a shift in the intellectual climate on the political left, away from the traditional emphasis on class struggle and economic equality and towards a new politics of identity and group rights. Inevitably, this fed through into the activism of radical groups and led to new kinds of political demands being made. Parts of the anti-racist movement began to reframe their political demands from equality of provision and treatment, to diversity, which entailed greater recogni-

26. HIRO, D. (1992) *Black British, White British*, London, Paladin, p.134

tion of cultural issues. Whereas in the 1970s these organisations had campaigned largely around cross-cultural issues – police treatment, immigration laws, housing – by the mid 1980s, they had moved to new issues, such as the provision of halal meat in schools, faith education, positive images of ethnic groups and Islamic clothing.²⁷ Many activists in the anti-racist movement also began to work in the local authorities and services around which they campaigned.

At the same time, more strident Islamist groups emerged and started to exert an influence on the younger generation. They capitalised on the perceived failures and shortcomings of secular groups; many of which were seen to be increasingly irrelevant or tied to the local state and political parties. Picking up on the shift in anti-racist discourse since the early 1980s, the newer Muslim activists framed their lobbying in terms of recognition for their cultural rights. They were often more dynamic at the grassroots level and attracted disillusioned youngsters whose future seemed otherwise overshadowed by local crime and drugs problems. Thus Islam emerged as a new vehicle of political identity.

Multiculturalism

Importantly, this shift towards cultural issues from the 1980s onwards was facilitated by the state, through the introduction of multicultural policies at local and national level. Urban riots and unrest during the 1970s and 1980s provoked concern about how to engage ethnic minority communities in the political process and give them some direct political involvement in their areas. As a bastion of the new left, the Greater London Council under the leadership of Ken Livingstone was among the first institutions to give concrete expression to the importance of identity and diversity in its policies. It pioneered numerous multicultural initiatives

to appeal to a new ‘rainbow coalition’ of groups such as ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and the disabled. Even less obviously radical organisations such as the Home Office began to reflect the new intellectual fashion. The Scarman Report following the 1981 Brixton Riots called for a multi-racial, multi-cultural approach, which would recognise the different needs and ethnic communities in society.

“ The privileging of diverse identities in race relations discourse meant that people were gradually demarcated into visible cultural and religious ‘communities’ ”

The policies that followed emphasised the importance of different cultural backgrounds in determining people’s identity, and the need to engage with community groups on this basis. This entailed a shift from the liberal tradition of dealing with people in a ‘colour-blind’ way in the public space, towards differential treatment according to their cultural identities. The privileging of diverse identities in race relations discourse meant that people were gradually demarcated into visible cultural and religious ‘communities’. In particular, the idea of cultural assimilation was attacked by certain parts of the political left because it was considered likely to marginalise ethnic minorities. In its place, ‘cultural diversity’ and the recognition of difference was welcomed as an alternative way of including people in society. For the political left, an additional driver behind this effort was a desire to connect with new constituencies of people beyond the white working class, which had traditionally formed the basis of left-wing politics.

Since the 1980s, official support for ‘diversity’ has moved from being a marginal preoccupation of activists to being a central concern of all institutions. The idea of diversity has spawned a massive infrastruc-

27. MALIK, K. (2005a) Born in Bradford. *Prospect*. October 2005

