

Phillips, M. (2006) *Londonistan*, London: Gibson House (p.33–9)

London, Britain's capital city, has become the human entrepôt of the world. Walk its streets, travel on its buses or Underground trains or sit in a hospital casualty department and you will hear dozens of languages being spoken, testimony to the waves of immigration that have transformed the face of London and much of the southeast of England as people from around the world have arrived in search of work. But you will also notice something else. The urban landscape is punctuated by women wearing not just the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, but burkas and niqabs, garments that cover their entire bodies from head to toe—with the exception, in the case of the niqab, of a slit for the eyes—in conformity with strict Islamic codes of female modesty. In general, religious dress, even of an outlandish kind, makes a welcome contribution to the variety of the nation. But in this case, one wonders whether such attire really is a religious requirement commanding respect, or a political statement of antagonism towards the British state. The effect is to create a niggling sense of insecurity and unease, as the open nature of London's society is vitiated by such public acts of deliberate concealment, with faces and expressions—not to mention the rest of the body—hidden from sight. In the wake of the London bombings in July 2005, such concealment appears to be a security issue too.

Moreover, as you travel across London you notice that district after district seems to have become a distinctive Muslim neighbourhood. Nor is this particular to London. Travel further afield, to rundown northern cities such as Bradford, Burnley or Oldham: in some districts the concentration of mosques, Islamic bookshops and other Muslim-run stores, the Islamic dress on the streets, the voices talking not in English but in the dialects of the Indian subcontinent make you feel that you have stepped into a village in the Punjab that has somehow been transported into the gray, drizzly setting of an English mill town. What becomes even clearer here than it is in London is that these Muslim enclaves are just that: areas of separate development which are not integrated with the rest of the town or city.¹ More than that, this separatism is a cause of communal tension that all too frequently simmers just below the surface in a low-level susurration of aggression between Muslims and their neighbours—and which occasionally explodes in rioting and violence. Except that, in Britain, people don't refer to them as Muslim areas; they are 'Asian' areas, and the cause of such communal tension is said to be racism or discrimination. The issue of religion is carefully avoided.

Yet one of the most striking features of Britain today is the significant and increasing role being played by religion—not Christianity, the established religion of the British state, but Islam. It is Islam that is Britain's fastest-growing religion. With the Muslim minority officially estimated to number 1.6 million people out of a population of 60 million—although the true figure, as a result of illegal immigration, is likely to be significantly higher—Muslims are now Britain's second-largest community of faith after Christianity. More people go to the mosque each week than now attend an Anglican church. Over the past two decades, London has become the most important centre for Islamic thought outside the Middle East. It is home to some of the most influential Muslim and Arab research institutions, lobby groups and doctrinal groups—Sunni, Shia, Ismaili and Ahmadi—and is a world centre for the Arab press, home to the newspapers *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, the Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC) and a long list of specialist Islamic publications.²

These publications are merely the tip of an iceberg. For London has become a major global centre of Islamist extremism—the economic and spiritual European hub of a production and distribution network for the most radicalised form of Islamic thinking, which not only pumps out an unremitting ideology of hatred for the West but actively recruits soldiers and raises funds for the worldwide terrorist jihad.

London is home to the largest collection of Islamist activists since the terrorist production line was established in Afghanistan. Indeed, one could say that it was in Britain that al Qaeda was actually formed as a movement. It was in Britain that disparate radical and subversive agendas, which until then had largely been focused upon individual countries, became forged into the global Islamist movement that was al Qaeda. Many of Osama bin Laden's fatwas were first published in London. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of important conferences took place in Britain bringing together radical Islamists from all over the world, ranging from violent groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah to nonviolent groups running for parliament in Jordan or Malaysia. These conferences were where the global Islamist project came together.³

Yet the bizarre fact is that the British authorities allowed all this extremist activity to continue with impunity for more than a decade—even after the ostensible 'wake-up call' of 9/11. Moreover, although the London bombings in 2005 revealed the devastating fact that British-born Muslims had somehow been radicalised so that they were prepared to turn themselves into human bombs to murder as many of their fellow citizens as possible, Britain is even now displaying an extreme reluctance to identify—let alone confront—the fact that a religious ideology connected these young bombers from the northern mill towns with the astonishing procession of terrorists fanning out from London across the globe. Even to talk in such terms, Britain tells itself, is 'Islamophobic.' Welcome to the alternative political and intellectual universe of Londonistan.

There are two separate but intimately related strands of extremism in Britain. One has arisen from the influx of foreign radicals from North Africa and the Middle East, who arrived in large numbers during the 1980s and 1990s. The other—along with some converts to Islam from the wider British community—has developed from the radicalisation of Britain's own Muslims, who first started arriving during the 1970s and 1980s from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir. As a result of these twin developments, London has become, over the past two decades, the world's principal centre for Islamism outside the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Islamism is the term given to the extreme form of politicised Islam that has become dominant in much of the Muslim world and is the ideological source of global Islamic terrorism. It derives from a number of radical organisations that were founded in the early part of the last century, which all believe that Islam is in a state of war with both the West and the insufficiently pious Muslims around the world.

The first was the Tablighi Jamaat in India/Pakistan, secessionists who believed that Muslims must return to the basics of Islam and separate themselves from non-Muslims. The second was the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna with Sayed Qutb its leading ideologue. Its creed is known as Salafism and is deeply anti-Semitic; this creed is virtually indistinguishable from Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. The third was the Jamaat al-Islami, founded by Sayed Abu'l Ala Maududi in India/Pakistan, which had similar ideas to the Muslim Brotherhood, and with Maududi providing a major influence over Qutb.

When the Muslim Brotherhood was thrown out of Egypt, its leaders fled to Saudi Arabia, which became the world's major exponent of Wahhabism and which in turn contributed to the radicalisation of Pakistan. Thus a fateful line of extremism was drawn which in due course would lead from the rural villages of Mirpur and Sylhet straight to Bradford and Dewsbury, Luton and London.

It must be said at the outset that there are hundreds of thousands of British Muslims who have no truck whatsoever with terrorism, nor with extremist ideology. They simply want what everyone else wants: to make a living, bring up their children and live peaceful and law-abiding lives that threaten nobody. They are as horrified by the terrorism that has disfigured their community as is anyone else. Nevertheless, it remains the case that not only is such terrorism being carried out in the name of Islam, but the British Muslim establishment has itself been hijacked by extremist elements funded and promoted by the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and elsewhere. While many imams doubtless promote only messages of peace, there has been no suppression by British Muslims of the ideology of holy war. This shifting of the centre of gravity towards extremism in Islamic discourse in Britain has created the sea in which terrorism can swim.

And the number of terrorists who have come roaring out of these polluted British waters is startling. UK-based terrorists have carried out operations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel, Morocco, Russia, Spain and the United States. The roll call includes Ahmed Omar

Saeed Sheikh, killer of the journalist Daniel Pearl and who was the disaffected, brilliant son of Pakistani immigrants; Dhiren Barot, Nadeem Tarmohammed and Qaisar Shaffi, British citizens and al Qaeda members who plotted to attack major financial centres in the United States; Mohammad Bilal from Birmingham, who drove a truck loaded with explosives into a police barracks in Kashmir; the 'shoe-bomber' Richard Reid, who was converted to Islam at Brixton Mosque in south London; Sajid Badat from Gloucester, a putative second shoe-bomber who also was caught and is now in jail; and Omar Khan Sharif and Asif Mohammed Hanif, the British boys who helped bomb a Tel Aviv bar in 2003 and killed three Israeli civilians.⁴ And let's not forget Azahari Husin or the 'Demolition Man', the Malaysian engineer who belonged to the al Qaeda-linked terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). He had studied at Reading University in the 1980s, honed his bomb-making skills in Afghanistan in the 1990s, helped mastermind the terrorist attacks in Bali (twice) and finally blew himself up in a gun battle with Indonesian police in November 2005.

Notes

¹ Trevor Phillips, speech to Manchester Council for Community Relations, 22 September 2005.

² Stephen Ulph, 'Londonistan', *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Center), vol. 2, no.4 (26 February 2004).

³ Reda Hussaine, interview with author, 2005.

⁴ Jonathan Spyer, *Ha'aretz*, 15 July 2005