

### **Hussein, D. The Impact of 9/11 and 7/7 on British Muslims**

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Prior to 9/11, one could identify a broad trend of integration or acculturation taking place among Muslims – they seemed to be moving from Muslims who happened to be living in Britain to becoming British Muslims, rooted in Britain. 9/11, and perhaps 7/7 more so, seem to have complicated our thinking around that process. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one can now find Muslims, who could be described as hailing from a middle-class background, investing in second homes abroad in case another terrorist attack brings on a backlash against Muslims in the UK. Others have decided that their investment needs to be in the UK, to do everything possible to prevent another attack happening (though of course these two positions are not mutually exclusive).

Identity is something that is constructed relationally, that is, it operates not in isolation but in a context and in this case the anti-terror discourse has radically influenced the context for British Muslims. British Muslims have been detained in Guantanamo Bay, British Muslims have been arrested on suspicion of terrorism, mosques and homes have been raided, and some have pointed to London as a 'hub of Islamic terrorism' – Londonistan<sup>1</sup>. There has been very negative media coverage<sup>2</sup> of Muslims and Islam while at the same time an openness from some sections of the media that would have been unimaginable prior to 9/11, such as the *Daily Telegraph's* special supplement on Islam<sup>3</sup> and a number of other opinion pieces, articles and programmes. At the level of politics, while the general climate crept towards a constriction of civil liberties and new counter terrorism laws were rushed in through Parliament, new opportunities were also created for engagement with Government. At the level of the general public, while there was well documented rise in Islamophobia, new opportunities for dialogue were also created between faith and cultural institutions, individuals and communities. According to the Interfaith Network UK, the number of interfaith organisations has grown considerably since 9/11. Partnerships between Muslims and non-Muslims have also been strengthened through campaigns such as the 'Stop the War' actions and now the greater involvement of Muslims, through many of those left-wing affiliations, in the anti-Globalisation movement.

But views have also moved in more 'radical' directions. In the process of observing the reactions to 9/11 – and in particular the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq – some Muslims, especially the young, feel more isolated and alienated. They become further distanced by observing that fellow Muslims want to deal with the establishment that has 'betrayed' them and thus turn to radical alternatives outside the 'systems' of both the state and of the traditional Muslim community. It is difficult to gauge what proportion of British Muslims hold these views but a MORI Poll (carried out on behalf of the British-Asian newspaper, *Eastern Eye*<sup>4</sup>) showed that there were only minor differences between British Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in expressions of loyalty. Other surveys conducted on British Muslims since have shown varying results, depending on the precise question asked and the political context at the time.

After what seemed like a slow start in which there was a state of denial or a defensive position, one of the significant effects of 9/11 was to break the taboo of Muslims speaking out against the extremists within. Prior to 9/11 most Muslims seemed to be very wary of 'washing their dirty linen in public'. The ensuing months and years have resulted in a heartfelt search among many for how to deal with extremism within the Muslim community with a frankness and honesty that was clearly not there before<sup>5</sup>. How to deal with the anger, frustration, hatred and radicalisation (of young men in particular) and stop the extremist tendencies attracting any more support? How have we allowed Islam, a beautiful spiritual melody, to be drowned by the din of such ugly and evil acts? If anything, 7/7 only made these questions more acute for British Muslims. But this climate has also had a deeply

political impact on the process of identity formation, with the 'Muslim' dimension now at risk of exaggeration. British Muslim identity is now at risk of becoming more of a political entity, as opposed to primarily being a religious–spiritual one. As a result, this identity is often forged in oppositional terms; it also seems to be growing into a more defiant, if not at times separatist, posture.

### **The context of radicalisation**

An important discussion remains regarding the terminology used in the anti-terror discourse. Words such as 'radical', even 'extreme', have usage outside this discourse that is less negatively charged. 'Radical' can even be seen as innovative and positive in some contexts. The usage of such terms alongside words such as 'Islam' or 'Muslim' has thus been of great concern to Muslims. Some Muslims have argued that terrorism is a political criminal act and religion is insignificant in the process, pointing to the IRA who were not known as 'Christian terrorists'. However, the continuous usage of an overtly 'Islamic' rhetoric in video and other messages recorded by terrorists in this context complicates the issue beyond this. And while the discussion on the terms used needs to continue, there have not been many practical offerings that could change the discourse.

Much of the current discussion around the motives behind the vicious 7/7 attacks has become rather repetitive and is often generalised and at times quite simplistic. Without a thorough and accurate understanding of the ideas and sentiments behind the attacks, we cannot effectively deal with such problems. It is of course impossible to know what was going in the minds of those who committed this act, but it is possible to trace such inclinations and tendencies to a broader ideological backdrop, a complex interplay of theological, social and political factors. By arguing that 'they are against our values' or that 'British multiculturalism has failed', we do not get to the bottom of the complexity behind such attacks. Nor can Muslims simply say that 'they were not (true) Muslims' and disown the individuals.

The simplicity of the arguments doesn't just stop there. Some have dichotomised between the 'good Muslim' and the 'bad Muslim', and this is often cast in terms of Sufi and Salafi trends respectively. Others have seen the problem area as 'political Islam' or 'Islamism'. In contrast, it is presumed that a more traditionally spiritual practice would automatically lead to a more passive community. There is much to learn from the positive values of Sufism, but this displays an ignorance of the fact that the major Muslim anti-colonial movements of the nineteenth century – in Daghestan, Nigeria, Sudan, Libya and elsewhere – were inspired by Sufi leaders. It also ignores the fact that some of the movements in the UK hailing from the Sufi trends are deeply political in other geographical areas. Indeed, many of the leaders of 'Islamist' movements had Sufi backgrounds, including Ayatullah Khomeini (leader of the Iranian Revolution) and Hasan al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun)). 'Islamism' has, in my view, become too vague a term to be of much analytical use. It can be, and often is, used to refer to anyone from Osama bin Laden to someone who vaguely believes that religion has some political relevance.

A number of authors and their views, e.g. Sayyid Qutb, have come under particular fire in the anti-Islamist drive. After the death of al-Banna, Qutb (a controversial and prolific writer) rose to prominence and while in prison developed what some of the then Muslim Brotherhood leadership considered to be a flawed analysis of society. In his book *Milestones*<sup>6</sup>, he advanced the notion of a pure society based on Islam in contradistinction to a society steeped in *Jahiliyah* (ignorance). The inference was that Egypt under Nasser was the latter. This move split opinion within the Brotherhood. Its leader, Hasan Hidaybi later published a book *Duat la Qudat*<sup>7</sup> (*We are Preachers not Judges*) as a critique of Qutb's *Jahiliyah* thesis. However, Qutb's flair, literary style, and eventual execution meant that he captured the sympathy of the Muslim public. Jihadi thinkers have used Qutb's thesis as part of the justification for their violent attacks. Indeed, some of the disillusioned members of the Brotherhood turned to the alternative Jihadi movement that ridiculed the Brotherhood for not criticising the Egyptian status quo enough, and for paying too much emphasis on reform through the ballot box. The literature of such groups probably deserves more attention, but the question is what does one do in a liberal society with such texts, texts that we may not agree with, or may even see as dangerous? It seems that such writers are read by countless Muslims across the globe and that usually people are able to contextualise such views and realise that they represent a moment in history, just as when people read liberation theology, or the writings of Marxist revolutionaries. The best and most consistent policy may be to debate, challenge and argue for change, rather than talk of censorship.

The process of radicalisation of young Muslims may be facilitated by the five factors mentioned below. I present this not as an exhaustive list, but a set of factors that when taken together help our understanding of some of the context that lends to radicalisation.

### **i) Theological factors**

There are major concerns about the way in which Islamic theology has been interpreted in regards to the notion of the 'Other'. While there is no shortage of those who interpret Islam to be a force for dialogue and cooperation, some interpret Islam to be about 'us and them'. This has been exacerbated by notions such as the concept of *Dar al-Harb* (the abode of war) and also the concept of *takfir* (akin to excommunication). The Jihadist mindset seems to view the world to be in a state of war, or at least a war against key Western nations such as the US and UK. In a morose and ironic twist to the Islamic worldview, warfare has become normalised and peace exceptionalised. Jihad is taken to be an offensive, pre-emptive act that can be used to change society and replace its leadership. This is initially targeted against the *kuffar* (disbelievers) but even Muslims are not spared: a narrowly defined notion of purity, the consequence of sin, and the concept of *takfir* are deployed to push people outside of the boundaries of Islam. For Jihadists, this then legitimises violence upon such people who may be deemed as supporters of the *kuffar*.

### **ii) Identity/citizenship based factors**

Given the defensive posture of British Muslims as a diasporic community, debates among religious authorities around the contextualisation of the faith to a European environment have not yet covered sufficient ground. If one considers that the bulk of inherited Islamic thought developed in a pre-modern context in which Muslims were a dominant political force, then the challenges of understanding a more plural way of life – in which Muslims are a minority and not the majority – become clearer. Nevertheless, many have now come to terms with the notion of being British as well as Muslim and a number of *fatwas* have been generated regarding citizenship, voting, civic participation, etc. This could create a good building block from which to continue. Muslims have, for example begun to explore the notion of social contract with the state, such that Muslims who live in Britain (or indeed any state) are considered to live under a social contract with the state just as any other citizens. This means that on a political level there is a clear allegiance to the state, and the observance of English law could be seen as an Islamic duty. It is for such reasons that the Leeds-based scholar Abdullah al-Judai said in a *fatwa* after 9/11 that it was *haram* (prohibited) for Muslims to go to Afghanistan and fight against British forces there. This *fatwa* was based on a precedence mentioned in the Qur'an (8: 72). Such views need to be debated more thoroughly in the Muslim community and wider support won over.

### **iii) Social exclusion**

Much has been written about this, and the data emerging from the UK 2001 Census shows that on most levels of socio-economic performance – employment, education, housing, income, health, etc – Muslims are performing very badly. While this may not be a personal factor in all cases of radicalisation – in fact, the data shows that most of those involved in terrorist attacks are from well-adjusted backgrounds – it is probably a general factor related to perception. This lends to a climate of alienation, which in turn feeds radicalisation. Hence an individual may come from a fairly wealthy family but is connected to a shared narrative of deprivation, disadvantage and exclusion that is felt in common with other Muslims. Such a sense of disconnection may be made more acute by perceptions of discrimination against Muslims.

### **iv) Government policies**

Over the last 20 years or so, due to globalisation and mass communication we have been able to witness world events as they unfold in an unprecedented manner. We cannot afford to ignore the impact that foreign-policy decisions, – such as intervention in the Middle East, the bombing of Iraq, etc – may be having in radicalising young Muslims. In fact, this is one of the first issues of grievance referred to by those who commit acts of terror. It is true that 9/11 occurred before the attacks on Afghanistan or Iraq, but 9/11 itself seemed to be connected with US involvement in the Gulf. Furthermore, the narrative goes beyond this and extends back to the colonial era, which had a tremendous impact in shaping the major Muslim movements and networks of the last century (and

today). It seems that Muslims have not yet been able to complete the shift to a post-colonial discourse of Islamic praxis. This again shows that personal and individual experience is not always crucial, for there can be a shared and collective memory at work that creates a climate of shared experience. Along with such comments on policy decisions, 'inconsistencies' and 'double standards' are often cited as grievances – for example, the form of support for dictatorships in the Middle East, sale of weapons to leaders such as Saddam Hussein, and the support for Afghan jihad movements when it suited Western interests in the Cold War.

#### **v) Community infrastructure, role models and leadership**

It has been widely acknowledged that the demographics of the Muslim community, and the fact that 52% are below the age of 25, are a serious cause of concern for issues such as crime, delinquency and radicalisation. Adequate positive role models are either lacking or are not having the impact they should in expanding the horizons and aspirations of some young people. Leadership has also been a sore point, with widespread disaffection in community representation and leadership. This is perhaps a structural problem of arranging the mechanisms through which the community endorses leaders, for example. There is also a remarkable lack of a middle class, which is only now beginning to grow. The Scarman Report<sup>8</sup> into the Brixton riots in the UK called for the middle class to be strengthened in African-Caribbean communities. This may well be part of the solution in the Muslim community too, which has a natural lag behind the African-Caribbean communities in terms of migration, settlement, and now integration.

The problem of leadership is further exacerbated when agencies such as government desire to 'speak to Muslims'. How does a community that is fragmented, has very poor infrastructure, and is without the religious institutions such as a hierarchy of bishops convey a message internally? Naturally leadership will evolve and develop over time, but currently Muslims seem to lack the visionary leadership that can coax angry young men into a mode of political engagement that offers hope and is a positive way out of disenfranchisement.

#### **Conclusion**

In this article we have considered how Muslim identity is adapting to a British context and the impact of 9/11 and 7/7 on this, as well as some of factors behind the radicalisation process. What is often forgotten in the anti-terror discourse is how much Muslims themselves have lost and stand to lose further from acts of terror committed against the UK. Given what has happened, public opinion has been remarkably resilient but there has been a backlash of sorts: more people feel suspicious of Muslims; media reporting has hardened; it has become commonplace to critically discuss Muslim issues as problematic issues; legislation has hardened, impacting on civil rights; stop and search measures affect Muslims disproportionately; and there are now calls for longer terms of detention without charge. The irony is that the very measures designed to protect society could be making it more dangerous by stigmatising and alienated a whole new cohort of Muslims who are growing up in a climate of fear and mistrust. An important report by the think-tank Demos argued that a community-based approach is essential for the long-term fight against terrorism<sup>9</sup>. Government is beginning to realise that the fight is a long-term one that involves 'winning hearts and minds', but also bringing real change to the way in which policies are made and thought out. Is this all about 'our values'? Are the terrorists just envious of our way of life? Although these issues may feature somewhere in the narrative, the primary motivators for anti-Western movements seem to be political and territorial concerns.

Muslim communities have also realised that standing against terrorism is just the beginning of the challenge. There are a whole host of issues to confront if an honest discussion is to take place. Issues such as dealing with traditionalist misogynistic attitudes, the need for a more pluralistic approach towards 'the other,' and stemming the rise of a crippling sense of victimhood are long standing.. They have nothing to do with terrorism, but if they cannot be dealt with constructively then there is a danger that the very resources needed to defeat extremism – a genuine discourse from within – will be seen by upcoming generations as irrelevant. Arguably, that is partly what has happened already leaving young Muslims susceptible to the simplistic, black and white, dangerous solutions offered by hotheads on a road to nihilism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Phillips, M. (2007) *Londonistan* London, Gibson Square

<sup>2</sup> See Poole, E (2002) *Reporting Islam*, London, IB Tauris

<sup>3</sup> 'Understanding Islam' *The Independent* 16 November 2001

<sup>4</sup> *Eastern Eye*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2001. The poll was conducted by MORI during 10–14<sup>th</sup> November 2001. The question asked was: 'How loyal, if at all, would you say you are to Britain?' Of those answering 'very loyal' or 'fairly loyal', Hindus responded with 92%, Muslims: 87% and Sikhs: 95%.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Kamali, H.M. (2003) 'Fanaticism and its Manifestation in Muslim Societies' in Malik, A. A. (ed.), *The Empire and the Crescent: Global Implications for a New American Century*, Bristol, Amal Press p 175–207.

<sup>6</sup> Qutb, S (2006 [1964]) *Milestones*, Delhi, Islamic Book Service

<sup>7</sup> Al-Hudaybi, H. I. (1978) *Duat la qudat: abhath fi al-aqidah al-islamiyyah wa manhaj al-dawah ila Allah*, Beirut

<sup>8</sup> Lord Scarman, (1982) *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders, 10-12 April. 1981* London, Penguin

<sup>9</sup> See Briggs, R., Fieschi, C. and Lownsborough, H. (2006) *Bringing it Home: Community-Based Approaches to Counter-Terrorism*. London, Demos