

Born in the UK: Young Muslims in Britain

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July 2006

First published in 2006 by
The Foreign Policy Centre
49 Chalton Street
London NW1 1HY
UNITED KINGDOM

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ISBN-13: 978-1-905833-02-3
ISBN-10: 1-905833-02-04

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Diane Fisher, Josephine Osikena, Rawan Maayeh, Philip Fiske de Gouveia and Shiv Malik for their help in researching this pamphlet.

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1. Introduction

A year ago, on a summer morning, three young Muslim men blew themselves up on the London Underground, and a fourth immolated himself on a double-decker bus. Fifty-two people died and more than 700 suffered injuries. They were old and young, Britons and non-Britons, Christians, Muslims and Jews as well as those of other religions and those of no religion at all. It was an act of indiscriminate terror. Yet over the past twelve months, the debate about the events of 7 July 2005 has focused on the question of “Islamic terrorism”. The term itself is questionable since the discovery of bombers, born and raised in Britain, and ready to kill in the name of their faith, also came as a shock to Muslims on the streets of London, Birmingham and Manchester.

In the aftershock the British government went to some lengths to find out what happened and why, inviting a hundred influential Muslims to join an advisory group called Preventing Extremism Together (PET), and publishing the “Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005”, with its oddly redundant title. Think-tanks and academics have begun to attack the problem with scientific rigour. Now the Foreign Policy Centre is publishing *Born in the UK* on the first anniversary of 7/7 in a bid to re-assess the exclusion and alienation of young British Muslims, the temptation of radicalism and the impact of foreign policy issues (especially Iraq) on an already disaffected group. Our emphasis is unapologetically a generational one. If angry youth is seen as a *genus* of “Islamic terrorism” in this country, the anger has deep roots in the lives of many second-generation Pakistanis who find themselves stranded between Britain’s imperial past and its multicultural future.

midlands (for example, Birmingham and Leicester) and north (for example, Bradford and Blackburn). The Tory government's policy at the time was "integration while maintaining identity" but, in practice, segregation continued to grow in the big cities, and the soothing talk of diversity and dialogue, of respect and reason, no longer worked. Salman Rushdie's novel caricaturing the Prophet Muhammad inflamed British Muslims. Tens of thousands united in a nationwide campaign to ban the book, and at the heart of the protest seemed to be a desire to assert Muslim identity or, at any rate, to highlight problems with the British model of multiculturalism. The rise of al-Qaeda and the violations of Guantanamo, Abu Ghreib and Forest Gate have only made those problems worse.

This pamphlet will outline the history of Islamism in the UK, covering most of the major figures and groups and their activities from the mid-1980s to the present day, including their connections to the global Islamist context. But it will also show why Muslim youths, boys and girls, have become attracted to these groups. Undoubtedly there is anger among Muslim youths in Britain. It is hard to find a young Pakistani on the streets of Beeston or Whitechapel who is not angry about UK foreign policy in the Middle East or the assault on Islam across the world. The world is amply populated with angry young Muslims. It is a question of some interest why a small number choose to become suicide bombers. The Prime Minister Tony Blair addresses the matter in starkly philosophical language, consigning it to an eternal contest between good and evil. "This is not a clash between civilisations," he said in a speech to the Foreign Policy Centre in March this year. "It is a clash about civilisation. It is the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace and see opportunity in the modern world and those who reject its existence; between optimism and hope on the one hand; and pessimism and fear

marriage. On the morning of 7 July, he met the other three, who had driven down from Leeds overnight, in the car park of Luton station, from where they all caught a train to King's Cross.

The four men described in the government's report are in some respects unfathomable. When Shehzad Tanweer, a talented athlete who was twenty-two years old, bought snacks at the Woodall services on the M1, four hours before his death, he quibbled with the cashier over his change. Hasib Hussain, who was eighteen, strode into a McDonald's just half an hour before he killed himself and thirteen others. When the four men took leave of one another at King's Cross station, they hugged, and appeared to be the "happy, even euphoric" members of a death cult.

Three of the bombers came from the same unexceptional background. Dreary rather than menacing, more shabby than poor, the neighbourhood of terraced houses and grey concrete nineteen-fifties tenements has changed drastically in the last thirty years. Once a suburb for young British families, Beeston is now inhabited almost entirely by immigrants, mainly people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. The men came first, as migrant workers in the late nineteen-sixties, to do jobs that the British no longer wished to do: hard and dirty jobs in industry, or cleaning buildings and streets. Women followed about a decade later, often as brides, usually illiterate, dispatched straight from their villages to strange men in an even stranger land. Most of the workers are now worn out, unemployed, living on welfare. Their wives still inhabit a strange country, whose language and customs they never mastered.

Their children attended secular state schools and received government and family support throughout their short lives.

3. Youth of Today

Nearly 40 years ago, in one of the most infamous speeches in all of British political history, the front-bench Conservative Party politician Enoch Powell prophesied the future of immigration from the Commonwealth into Britain. "Like the Roman," he declared, alluding to Virgil's *Aeneid*, "I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'." Delivered in opposition to the introduction of housing anti-discrimination laws, the speech was rightly criticised at the time as racist fear-mongering. But Powell's comments have loomed over British immigration and assimilation debates ever since.

According to the 2001 census, there are now at least 1.6 million Muslims in Britain. By most estimates, that figure today is probably closer to two million. Half of them are of Pakistani origin, and the other half from a huge diversity of national, sectarian, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Most Muslims in Britain belong to Islam's majority Sunni branch, though accurate figures are not available for the proportion of Sunnis and Shias. Of the Muslims from Pakistan, the overwhelming majority of first-generation of migrants came from rural parts of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (particularly a district called Mirpur, near the capital Islamabad.) Britain's Muslims are predominantly young, with half aged under 25. Their families are also more likely than non-Muslim families to have dependent children. And in some local authorities, up to one-third of children are Muslims. Moreover, their age profile is distinctive: just over 30% of all Muslims are under 15, while 92% are under 50. This suggests that there is a huge population bulge of young Muslims compared with an ageing indigenous population. Any policy needs to take into consideration this particular demographic fact. One social consequence is that most white groups will simply not come into contact with Muslims, especially with the youngsters

Afghanistan and Iraq – and the only way they know how to express their feelings is to shout.”

It was wrong, he concluded, to put too much pressure on minority children. “We used to encourage them to work harder than other children, to go that extra length,” he said. “And many of them did, especially the girls, because education is one way of gaining independence from their fathers. But we put too much pressure on them. Even when they have done everything we asked of them, they will have disappointments. It is often harder for Muslim children to find jobs, for example. And when that happens they can get very angry indeed.”

A social-studies class I visited included Africans, Indians, Turks, Moroccans, an Egyptian, and a few whites. We had a discussion about van Gogh and Hirsi Ali, and the only girl in class who wore a veil spoke more often and more passionately than the others. The girl, who was born in Tower Hamlets to Pakistani parents, didn’t condone the murder but could “understand why Khan, Tanweer and Hussain had sought comfort in Islam.” She said that people had insulted her in the streets after the bombings, spitting at her feet or telling her to take off her veil. “When I hear people talk about ‘those fucking Pakis’, I feel defensive and really want to be Pakistani, but when I visit Pakistan I know I don’t belong there, either.” A Moroccan boy said that it was because of her English accent.

I noticed that some of the Muslim boys, who were described to me later as “quite fundamentalist”, snickered every time the veiled girl spoke, even when she argued, to loud protests from the other girls, that Muslim women were not oppressed. The whites in the class remained silent, as though afraid to enter this treacherous terrain. One of the black students made fun of the Muslims’ preoccupation with “identity” and said, “Pakistani,

Established religion is irrelevant to their day-to-day lives in modern Britain, Maher argues:

One anecdotal example of this comes from my time as a student at Leeds University. It was in the days immediately after 9/11 when there was clearly a lot of tension and debate within the Muslim community. Young people needed clear advice and a sense of direction at this critical moment in their relationship with the West. That week, at Leeds University, the imam's Friday sermon was about *wudu* [the Muslim act of ritual washing before prayers]. It was a ludicrous topic to address when the congregation was composed of over 100 university students, a prime audience of thinkers and critical minds who were looking for answers but were instead fed this mind-numbing drivel. It was typical of the way many imams in the UK simply cannot engage with the youth or address their issues in a meaningful way. And the same is true when imams have to deal with all the other problems facing young Muslims today – crime, drugs and unemployment.

Those who reject Islam's orthodoxy are forced into a double life in which they must often hide their behaviour from parents and community. Having rejected the traditional values of Pakistan leaves them more isolated than ever since "Britishness" is only a nominal aspect of their identity. At last

and breeds a clandestine subculture of anger towards the West.

Hizb ut Tahrir does not carry out acts of violence but the idea that it may serve as a conveyor belt for manufacturing terrorists was first suggested by Zeyno Baran, director of international security and energy at the Nixon Center in Washington. Her hypothesis was developed in the UK by the journalist Shiv Malik who has investigated the links between non-violent Islamist groups and the worldwide *jihad* movement. So, for example, British citizen Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh was arrested, in 2002, in connection with the murder of Daniel Pearl, the journalist, in Pakistan. Radicalised while attending the London School of Economics, he had hoped to fight in Bosnia in the 1990s but ended up instead joining a Kashmiri militant group. He was charged with organising Pearl's kidnapping, though it was allegedly al-Qaeda's operational chief, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who killed the American journalist. British-born Saajid Badat was another worshiper at Abu Hamza's Finsbury Park mosque who went through the Afghan camps. A would-be shoe bomber, he meant to blow himself up at the same time as Reid but apparently changed his mind and dismantled the bomb. Badat, who reportedly got his orders from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, too, was convicted last year but, as the US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff observed recently, it is "very, very hard to detect" a *jihadi* terrorist who is "purely domestic, self-motivated, self-initiating."

might want to behave in this way.

The responses indicate that Muslim men are more likely than Muslim women to be alienated from the mainstream. However, there are few signs in the FPC's findings that Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are any more disaffected than their co-religionists from elsewhere. Nevertheless the sheer scale of Muslim alienation from British society that our survey reveals is remarkable. It appears that, although a large majority of British Muslims are more than content to make their home in this country, a significant minority are not. For example, the FPC asked respondents how loyal they feel towards Britain. As the figures in the appendix show, the great majority say they feel "very loyal" (46%) or "fairly loyal" (33%) but nearly one British Muslim in five, 18%, feels little loyalty towards this country or none at all. If these findings are accurate, and they probably are, well over 100,000 British Muslims feel no loyalty whatsoever towards this country.

We asked the students how they feel about Western society and how, if at all, they feel Muslims should adapt to it. A majority, 56%, said they believed Western society may not be perfect but Muslims should live with it and not seek to bring it to an end. However, nearly a third of British Muslims, 32%, are far more censorious, believing that Western society is decadent and immoral and that Muslims should seek to bring it to an end. Among those who hold this view, almost all go on to say that Muslims should only seek to bring about change by non-violent means but one per cent, about 16,000 individuals, declare themselves willing, possibly even eager, to embrace violence.

group is and your literary tastes are, all that interferes with people's freedom to make their own choices.

The argument goes back to the Rushdie affair which led to the formation of the Muslim Council of Britain, since what begins as an opportunity for people to express themselves may ultimately force other (or the same) people into an identity chosen by the authorities. That is what is happening now, in Blair's Britain, and the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has called it "a real tyranny". At first glance it doesn't look like tyranny – it looks like giving freedom and tolerance – but it can end up being a denial of individual freedom since the individual belongs to many different groups and it is up to him or her to decide which of those groups he or she would like to give priority. The move towards faith schools and census questions magnifies the power and authority of religious leaders at the expense of a healthy democratic debate. Suddenly the Jewish, Hindu and Muslim organisations are in charge of all Jews, Hindus and Muslims. Whether you are an extremist mullah or a moderate mullah, whether you are Blair's friend or Blair's enemy, you might relish the idea of being able to speak for all people with a Muslim background – no matter how religious they are – but this may be in direct competition with the role of Muslims in British civil society.

When it comes to a deeply political problem such as terrorism, for the authorities to advise "action within the community" is a great mistake. In the aftermath of the 7 July bombings, for example, Britain's political class appealed to "the Muslim community" to get its act together. This was just an attempt to bring even more religion into politics. To classify Bangladeshis, for example, only as Muslims and overlook their Bangladeshi identity is seriously misleading.

the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions that multiculturalism raises.

In other words, multiculturalism is a social fact – which means that, strictly speaking, it's impossible to be against multiculturalism, just as it's impossible to return to a monoculture in many immigrant societies. The only question is how we deal with it. Supporting “faith schools” pre-dates the London bombings of 2005 as part of the Blair government's communitarian agenda. Yet it implies the same de facto communal separation as the 7/7 attacks. In contrast to multiculturalism, having two styles or traditions of education co-existing side by side, without the twain meeting must really be seen as a kind plural monoculturalism. Our primary concern should lie with the freedom of choice for individuals to live as they wish, and this is perversely threatened by the conservatism embedded within the new monoculturalism. The people of Britain cannot be seen merely in terms of their religious affiliations – as a national federation of religions. For much the same reasons, a multi-ethnic Britain can hardly be seen as a collection of ethnic communities. Yet the “federalational” view has won support in contemporary Britain. Indeed, despite the tyrannical implications of putting persons into rigid boxes of given “communities”, that view is frequently interpreted, rather bafflingly, as an ally of individual freedom. There is even a much-vaunted “vision” of “the future of multi-ethnic Britain” that sees it as “a looser federation of cultures” held together by common bonds of interest and affection and a collective sense of being.

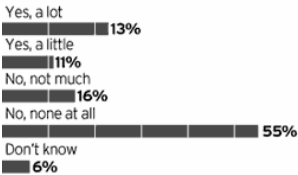
Nevertheless a person's relation to Britain cannot be mediated through the culture of the family in which he or she was born. A person may decide to seek closeness with more than one of these pre-defined cultures or, just as plausibly, with none.

Appendix

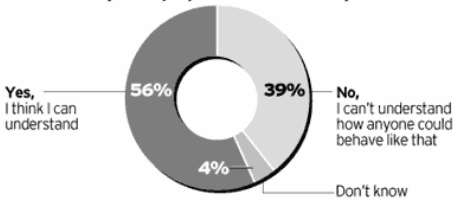
Do you think the bombing attacks in London on July 7 were justified or not?



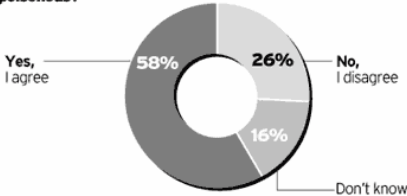
Whether or not you think the attacks were justified, do you personally have any sympathy with the feelings and motives of those who carried out the attacks?



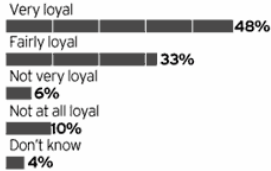
Whether or not you have any sympathy with the feelings of those who carried out the attacks, do you think you understand why some people behave in that way?



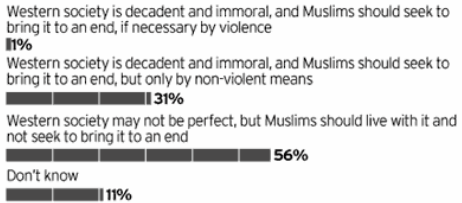
The Prime Minister has described as 'perverted and poisonous' the ideas that led the London suicide bombers to carry out their attacks. Do you agree or disagree with him that their ideas must have been perverted and poisonous?



How loyal would you say you personally feel towards Britain?



Which of these views comes closest to your own?



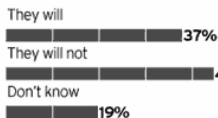
Do you agree or disagree with this statement? 'British political leaders don't mean it when they talk about equality. They regard the lives of white British people as more valuable than the lives of British Muslims.'



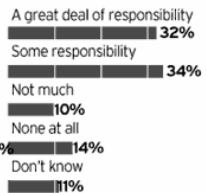
The leaders of Britain's main political parties have said that they respect Islam and want to co-operate with Britain's Muslim communities. In general, do you think Britain's political leaders are sincere or not sincere when they say these things?



If anyone is charged and put on trial in Britain in connection with the bombings on July 7, do you think they will or will not receive a fair trial?



How much responsibility do you think Muslims should now take on for preventing such crimes and bringing to justice those who commit them?



genocide education programs in Rwanda, the campaign to 'Protect Darfur' and development assistance work in Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana. It is also a major funder of Human Rights Watch.

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