



# STRASBOURG PAPERS OF THE EMU

## THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

AUTHORED BY THE EUROPEAN MUSLIM UNION (EMU)

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# THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

The United Kingdom's relationship with Islam is a fascinating and complex one, the roots of which can be dated as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century. An early example of Anglo-Islamic contact is the decision by Offa, the 8<sup>th</sup> century King of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, to have a gold coin minted with an Arabic inscription. One possible reason for this decision was to facilitate trade between Mercia and the expanding Caliphate of Cordoba. There are also references to Islamic scholars, ar-Razi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, in the prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386). The first documented English convert to Islam was John Nelson, who converted to Islam at some point in the sixteenth century.

Queen Elizabeth's excommunication by Pope Pius V in 1570 allowed her to act outside of papal edicts forbidding trade with Muslims and to establish her own trade and political alliances, sending envoys of diplomats and traders to various Islamic states, including the Ottoman Empire, the Moroccan Saadian dynasty and the Persian Empire. This in turn led to Muslims arriving in London. Surviving records show that Muslim Turkish diplomats were sent over in the 1580s. Elizabeth I's correspondence with Saadian ruler of Morocco Moulay Ahmed al-Mansur led to the creation of London's joint-stock Barbary Company in 1585, modelled on the Turkey Company, which was established in 1581. It was through the Barbary Company that hundreds of tonnes of goods, including refined sugar, molasses and almonds, were soon shipped between North Africa and England. The East India Company, established by royal charter in 1600, would follow a similar model.

In 1600, Moroccan ambassador, Abd al-Wahid bin Masoud bin Muhammad al-Annuri, arrived in

London with a 16-man delegation of merchants, translators, ulama and accompanied by London's Barbary merchants. While in London, al-Annuri met Elizabeth on two occasions, had his portrait painted and proposed a joint protestant-Islamic invasion of Spain and a naval attack on her American colonies. Alas, these plans came to nothing as Elizabeth feared upsetting the Ottomans, who at the time were al-Mansur's enemies. Two years later, both al-Mansur and Elizabeth I were dead. England's new king, James I, negotiated a peace treaty with Spain ending the need for an Anglo-Islamic alliance and relegating this fascinating episode to a footnote in the history of England's relationship with Islam.

The position of Laudian Professor of Arabic was established at the University of Oxford in 1636, with the requirement that lessons on Arabic grammar and literature be delivered weekly during university vacations and Lent. In 1645, Sir Thomas Adams donated money to Cambridge University to create the first professorship of Arabic. The professorship was in part created to propagate the Christian faith "to them who now sit in darkness". A document dated 1641 describes "a sect of Mohametens discovered here in London." During the same period there were also a number of conversions to Islam among the English upper classes, including Edward Montagu, son of the British ambassador to Turkey. In 1649, Scotsman Alexander Ross completed his translation of the Qur'an, the first in English. Ross knew no Arabic and thus his translation was in fact a translation of Du Ryer's *L'Alcoran de Mahomet*.

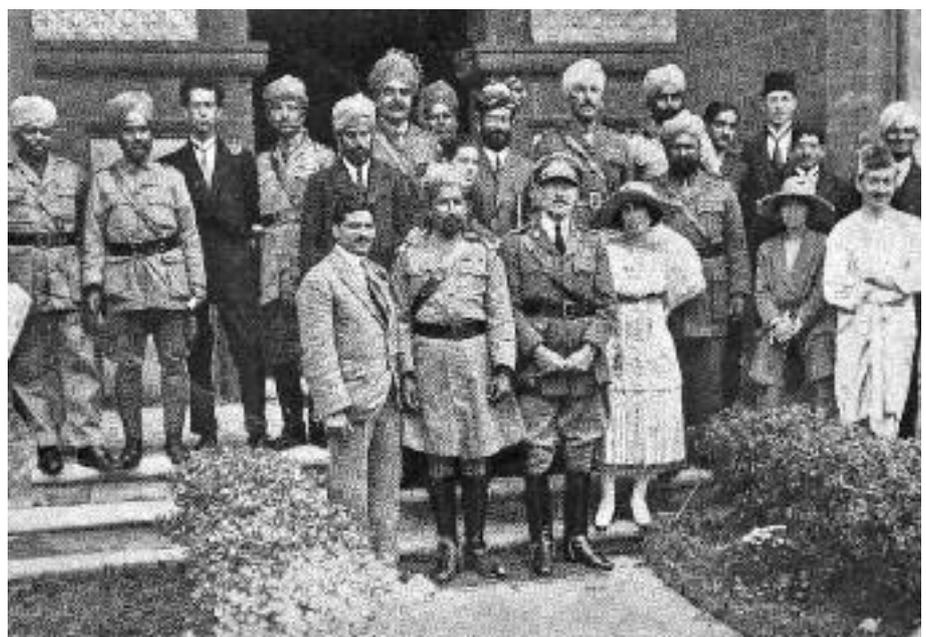
Around 1700, the first large groups of Muslims arrived in Britain from India. Sailors recruited by the East India formed the first Muslim communities in port towns. Others, often

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A report by Adil  
Morrison

ships' cooks, came from Sylhet in what is now Bangladesh. In 1869, a further wave of Muslim immigration was prompted by opening of the Suez Canal. The increase in trade brought Yemeni and Somali labourers to work in the ports of Cardiff, Liverpool, Pollokshields and London. One of the most famous early converts to Islam, Liverpool solicitor, William Henry Quilliam, converted in 1869 while in Morocco. On his return, he began to promote Islam under the name Abdullah Quilliam. In 1889, Quilliam established Liverpool Muslim Institute, the first mosque in the UK, which would grow to incorporate an orphanage, college, madrassa, hotel, museum and library. His example would lead to the conversion of 150 Englishmen to Islam. In 1894, he was appointed Sheikh-ul-Islam of the British Isles by Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, the first and only Briton to be afforded this distinction. In 1889, the first purpose-built mosque in the British Isles, the Shah Jahan mosque, was opened in Woking. The first mosque in London, the Fazl Mosque, was established in 1924.

The 1950s saw significant numbers of Muslims arrive in the UK from the Subcontinent, driven mainly by post-war labour shortages. Many of these would go on to settle in areas where manufacturing and textiles provided the main source of employment, with large communities in London, the west-Midlands, north-west England and Yorkshire, with smaller settlements in Scotland and Wales. In 1951, the Muslim population was estimated at 23,000. The next wave of Muslim immigration came in the late 1960s and early 1970s from Africa, mainly Kenya and Uganda, where many Asians suffered from discrimination. By 1961, the Muslim population was estimated at around 82,000, boosted in part by people rushing to beat the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) which removed the right of automatic entry for citizens of the Commonwealth. By 1971, the Muslim population had risen to 369,000; this was further increased by Idi Amin's decision to expel 60,000 Muslims from Uganda the following year. Many of them went on to settle in Britain.





## THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

For the most part, the current Muslim community in the UK are the descendants Asian Muslims who came over from the Subcontinent in the 1950s and 60s. Two thirds of British Muslims are of Asian origin. Of the approximately three million Muslims living in the UK, approximately half of them were born there and almost three-quarters view themselves as British. Of the Muslims born outside of the UK, the majority are from Pakistan. The vast majority of British Muslims are Sunni – just one in ten are shi'a. There are also an increasing number of converts to Islam. There are estimated to be around 100,000 living in the UK, increasing annually by an estimated 5,000.

The most recent research suggests that the majority British Muslims are keen to integrate into wider society, although Muslims, on average, face significantly higher levels of unemployment and educational underachievement. It should be noted that Muslims are not a homogenous group – levels of attainment differ widely, for example, British Muslims of Indian descent are among the top educational performers, far outperforming those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent, as well as their white British peers.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the status and situation of Muslim women. The British government estimate that 190,000 Muslim women living in Britain speak no English, which in turn serves as a hindrance to their ability to integrate. A possible reason for poor English language skills within the Muslim community is that a significant proportion of British Muslims marry partners from abroad. A study by Bristol University estimated that 50 per cent of British Pakistanis married back in Pakistan. The recent Casey report, published in December 2016,

suggests a focus on English language learning as a means by which to promote integration.

It should be noted that British Muslim women now significantly outperform their male counterparts in terms of educational attainment – 25 per cent of British Muslims women aged 21-24 now have degrees, compared with 22 per cent of Muslim men of the same age. This is a significant development given that in 1990 and 1991 Pakistani and Bangladeshi men admitted to higher education outnumbered their female peers by more than two to one and more than three to one respectively.

The majority of mosques remain orientated towards Muslim-majority countries, for example, Bengali mosques, Somali mosques, Turkish mosques, etc. In spite of this, mosques, particularly in metropolitan areas, have increasingly diverse congregations and khutbas are, more often than not, either delivered exclusively in English and Arabic, or at very least, translated into English. This is a significant step. Furthermore, there are a steadily increasing number of classes and courses aimed at new Muslims, something that has long been needed within the British Muslim community. There has in the past been a tendency for new Muslims to feel isolated and abandoned once the initial wave of goodwill subsides. It is important that their particular needs are addressed if they are to remain practicing Muslims.

## Current Developments



## Current Situation in the UK

The Muslim community in the UK has a long and established history and has gone through several important phases in its development. There are an estimated 1,750 mosques in the United Kingdom.

The majority of mosques provide the following:

- The establishment of regular salat
- The Jumua, as well as Eid salat
- Funeral salat
- Religious instruction for visitors and members
- Qur'an, fiqh, aqeeda and language classes for children

Larger mosques also provide the following:

- Match-making services for Muslims looking for marriage
- Marriage counselling services
- Circumcision services

Approximately 45 per cent of mosques are run by the Deobandi movement – a revivalist movement within Sunni (primarily Hanafi) Islam, centred in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, and approximately 80 per cent of UK-trained imams have been educated at Deobandi Islamic seminaries.

There is a tendency for mosques in the UK to be male-dominated spaces with limited, where available, access for women. Around a quarter of mosques do not allow access for women. The majority of mosque management committees are also either exclusively male or male-dominated. There have been recent calls for a women-only mosque in the northern city of Bradford, where a quarter of the population identify as Muslim.

As well as mosques, Muslims have also established their own social spaces, with the aim of providing an arena for engagement and socialising. Examples include creative arts venues,

The Hubb in Birmingham and Rumi's Cave in London. There is an increasing need for these neutral spaces for young Muslims to gather – an alternative both to mosques and venues where alcohol is served.

As well as mosques and other Muslim social spaces, there are, among others, the following Islamic spheres of operation:

**News media** – Both print and digital e.g. *The Muslim News*. Established in 1989, the monthly publication has a print circulation of circa 140,000 and its website receives around 1.5 m hits per month.

**Television and radio** – There are a significant number Muslim television channels and radio stations, many of which broadcast in English. A good example is British Muslim TV. Founded in 2013, its slogan is “Confidently Muslim, Comfortably British”. The channel broadcasts a range of programming exclusively in English.

**An extensive network** of humanitarian and charitable associations working both locally and abroad. These charities often collect and distribute zakat.

**Schools and colleges** – There are approximately 100,000 children at madrasas in the UK. As well as madrasas providing supplementary education, there are at present 28 Muslim state schools (out of a total of 6,800 state-maintained religious schools). The vast majority of Muslim schools are low-cost privately-run institutions. In the wake of terrorist attacks in the UK, as well as not insignificant numbers of young British Muslims heading abroad to fight with groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), Muslim schools and madrasas have come under increasing scrutiny.

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**Halal enterprise** – The halal industry in the UK is estimated to be worth £700m per annum and there are now 88 halal abattoirs, accounting for a quarter of the country's 352 slaughterhouses. Most of the major supermarket chains now offer halal meat. In fact, approximately 70 per cent of the New Zealand lamb sold in British supermarkets is halal.

There are also many halal restaurants, although a significant proportion of these do still serve alcohol, particularly in areas with a large non-Muslim population. These restaurants are increasingly diversifying away from just the traditional curry house. Muslims are increasingly opening, for example, desert parlours and halal bars and pubs, serving non-alcoholic beverages.

**Sharia Councils** – There are approximately 80 Sharia councils or 'courts', some of which offer exclusively reli-

gious rulings, whereas others also provide legally binding marital arbitration. Most of these councils are attached to mosques. They serve to offer advice on religious matters, as well as family mediation. Although the rulings of these courts are generally not legally binding, one exception might be where they are used for arbitration – two parties involved in a commercial dispute could choose a sharia council to be their arbiter and can agree to abide by the council's decision. They can even choose to apply rules other than English laws to the case, so long as there's no conflict between the two. Sharia councils have been the subject of controversy, as they have at times been mistaken for a sign of a parallel legal system.





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# THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

According to the latest census data (2011), Muslims form 4.8 per cent of the population in England and Wales. The population has increased from 1.55 million in 2001 to 2.71 million in 2011. There are an additional 77,000 Muslims in Scotland and 3,800 in Northern Ireland. The number of Muslims in the UK is expected to double when the next census is carried out in 2021. 47 per cent of the UK's Muslim population were born there (39 per cent were born in the Middle East and Asia). In total, the Muslim population of the UK is larger than all other non-Christian religious groups combined.

The Muslim population is ethnically diverse:

- 68 per cent of Muslims (1.83 million) are Asian.
- 8 per cent of Muslims are white.
- The most recent significant community of Muslims to arrive in the UK is the Somali community. There are approximately 100,000 Somalis in the UK, making them the country's largest refugee community.
- The Turkish Muslim community numbers around 66,500, two-thirds of which is made up of Cypriots.
- Nigerian Muslims are believed to make up around 10 per cent of the total Nigerian population (app. 16,000). The majority are Yoruba from southern Nigeria, along with some Hausas from the north.

There are an increasing number of converts to Islam in the UK: Estimates vary in terms of precise numbers, but one study published in 2011 concluded that the total number of converts in the United Kingdom could well exceed 100,000 and that 5,000 people had become Muslim in the previous year. These figures are comparable with other European countries such as Germany and France.

According to a survey conducted by the inter-faith group, Faith Matters revealed that nearly two thirds of converts were women, over 70 per cent were white and the average age of conversion was 27. An increasing number of inmates in British prisons are converting to Islam. For example, a third of inmates in the country's most notorious youth prisons are Muslim. Converts to Islam tend to come from a variety of educational backgrounds.

In terms of the geographical distribution of Muslims in the UK:

- 76 per cent of Muslims live in the inner city conurbations of Greater London, the West Midlands, the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside.
- Muslims account for 12.4 per cent of the population of London. Around 40 per cent of England's Muslims live in the capital.
- There are 35 Local Authority Districts with a Muslim population of 10 per cent or more.
- There are approximately 70 wards with a Muslim population of 40 per cent or more.
- There are 26 Parliamentary constituencies with a Muslim population of 20 per cent or more.
- 33 per cent of Muslims in the UK was aged 15 or under in 2011, compared to 19 per cent of the overall population.
- Just 4 per cent of the Muslim population is aged 65 or older, compared to 16 per cent of the overall population.
- In under a decade, there will be approximately 190,000 Muslims in the 65 to 84 age range. This will pose a new set of challenges for the Muslim community.

## The structure of the UK's Muslim Population



## Outside perceptions of Muslims and Islam

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the perception of Islam and Muslims in the UK has become increasingly negative. In spite of this, positive attitudes towards Muslim in the UK remain the highest in Europe – according to Pew’s 2016 Global Attitudes survey just 28 per cent of respondents in the UK viewed Muslims unfavourably, compared with 69 per cent in Italy and 50 per cent in Spain. Attitudes were broadly similar in Germany and France (29 per cent). In the UK, the biggest divide in attitudes towards Muslims is political, with those on the ideological right far more likely to hold unfavourable views about Muslims than those on the left (33 per cent to 18 per cent).

Islam is often discussed in the media within the context of terrorism and extremism. For example, a survey carried out by charity Islamic Relief found that the word most commonly associated with Islam was terrorism. However, according to Pew’s Global Attitudes Survey, 48 per cent of those questioned believed that very few Muslims actually supported extremist groups such as Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda.

Negative media representations of Muslims and of Islam have led to a decline in public sympathy for refugees, in particular refugees from Syria and the Middle East – only 29 per cent of people agree that the UK should welcome refugees from Syria and the Middle East compared to 34 per cent who would welcome refugees in general.

In the UK, it is not just terrorism and extremism that have contributed to increasingly negative attitudes. In recent years, stories such as the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, where it was discovered that gangs of mainly British-Pakistani men had been involved in the systematic widespread abuse of up to as many as 1,400 mainly white girls over a period

of sixteen years, drew further negative attention towards British Muslims. There is also a huge misconception when it comes to number of British Muslims – a poll by Ipsos Mori found that British people think that 21 per cent of the population is Muslim, when the figure is about 5 per cent.

The way in which Muslims are depicted in the media is certainly a contributing factor. The press regulator IPSO has described some tabloid reporting on Muslims and Islam as grossly misleading, for example, “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” (The Sun) and “UK mosques fundraising for terror” (Daily Star). Misleading reporting is not just restricted to the tabloid press, however. The Times, for example, reported that Muslims were supposedly “silent on terror”, a claim dismissed by now-Prime Minister Theresa May, as well as senior counter-terrorism officials.

It is not just misleading headlines that are damaging the perception of Muslims and Islam in the UK: there is a growing tendency to conflate Islam with criminality, as well as to sensationalise the apparent threat posed by Muslims. This is not just leading to increasingly negative attitudes, but also to increased incidents of islamophobia. According to the Metropolitan Police, incidents of hate crime against Muslims have risen by 70 per cent in the past year.

A clear issue is the massive underrepresentation of Muslims in the media – less than 0.5 per cent of UK journalists are Muslim, compared with 5 per cent of the national population. Muslims are even more unrepresented in more senior positions. Another issue is a distinct lack of religious literacy among newspaper journalists and editors. It is vital that Muslims play a more active role within the media, in order to provide more balanced reporting.

It goes without saying that Muslim individuals in the UK are afforded the same legal status as non-Muslim British citizens. There is also legal recognition for Muslim organisations such as charities and schools. There are currently 28 Muslim state schools. In recent years, Muslim schools (or schools with a high percentage of Muslims) and other educational establishments have come under increased scrutiny from government bodies, such as Ofsted (the schools' inspectorate) and the Education Funding Authority. A highly publicised case was Operation Trojan Horse, where a number of associated individuals were accused of attempting to introduce a Salafist ethos into several schools in Birmingham.

Another issue is an increased level of distrust between the state security services and the Muslim community. Critics of counter-terrorism initiatives, such as the government's Prevent strategy, have long argued that a lack of transparency in government policy pertaining to counter-terrorism is eroding trust between the Muslim community and the British state. The Joint committee on Human Rights (JCHR) criticised the government's strategy for tackling extremism, describing it as "too opaque" and arguing that it did not "engender confidence." Many Muslims have argued that Prevent encourages spying on the Muslim community.

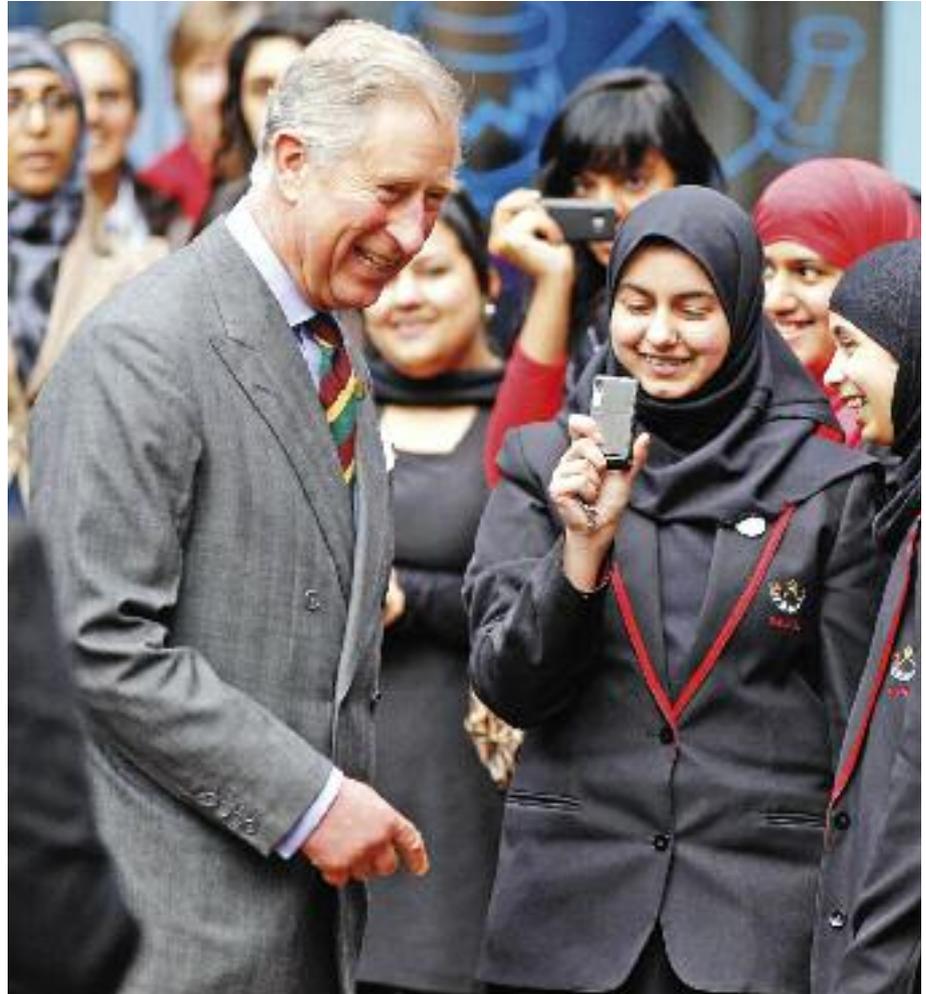
Critics have also argued that there is little transparency in terms of the actual effectiveness of the government's anti-radicalisation programme and it is unclear whether there is even a definition of successful deradicalisation, let alone any attempt to actually measure it. The JCHR also criticised the government's 'escalator' theory argu-

ing that "It is by no means proven or agreed that religious conservatism in itself correlates with support for violent jihadism. The aim should be to tackle extremism that leads to violence, not suppress views with which the government disagrees". The Prevent programme has also been criticised by international human rights groups, as well as the opposition Labour Party. Rights Watch (UK) criticised the programme arguing that it was having a "chilling" effect on open discussion and debates in classrooms.

Muslims in the UK have also been accused of a lack of willingness to integrate. The recent government-commissioned report conducted by integration tsar Dame Louise Casey found that Muslims felt particularly segregated from wider British society. Casey notes that she observed a "vicious cycle" where Muslims feel they are being blamed for terrorism and extremism, which in turn leads them to feel a sense of suspicion, mistrust, and even hostility. Casey's proposed solution to combat segregation and negative feeling among British Muslims towards the British State is contained in a so-called "integration oath" which inspires immigrants to embrace British values, encourages more focus on English language education and actions to encourage mixing among young people, and "women's emancipation in communities where they are being held back by regressive cultural practices."

Muslim groups have raised concern about the report, arguing that it confuses race, religion and immigration and focuses too heavily on the Muslim community. For example, the report often conflates Muslim with Asian communities, giving the misleading impression that what it deems

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regressive cultural practices are based on the Islamic faith. It also makes 249 references to Muslims, while it only mentions Polish communities 14 times and offers no solutions for other communities, such as the Roma and Traveller communities. The report has also been criticised on the basis that it fails to look into why members of the white indigenous community don't want to integrate – the issue of so-called 'white flight', where white people leave an area when Muslim families move in.

Muslims have increasingly been the victims of islamophobic attacks. For example, hate crimes against Muslims in London increased from 557 in 2013

to 878 in 2015. These incidents involve physical attacks, damage to property and verbal attacks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, incidents tend to increase in the wake of terror attacks. For example, reported assaults against Muslims in Britain more than trebled following the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attacks in Paris. There was also a spike in islamophobic incidents following the Brexit vote in June 2016. The Muslim Council of Britain said that it had compiled a dossier of 100 hate crimes against Muslims committed over the subsequent weekend. Muslim women, in particular those wearing Islamic clothing, are most likely to be the victims.

# THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

There are approximately 1,750 mosques in Britain today. Of these around 200 are purpose built - the rest are either converted houses or other non-residential conversions. Britain's first purpose-built mosque was built in 1889. This mosque, the Shah Jahan mosque in Woking, Surrey was built in a late-18<sup>th</sup> century in the Mughal style. The second purpose built mosque in Britain, the Fazl, or London mosque, in south-west London was built 36 years later and retains some of the Mughal elements of the Shah Jahan, but incorporates these into a more contemporary 1920's Art Deco style. There was a rapid growth in the number of purpose-built mosques in the 30 years following around 1970. The mosques built in this period were often characterised by their combination of apparently incongruous architectural styles, built over extended periods. This was partly due to limited funds, which meant that mosques could only be assembled over time.

More recent mosques, both completed and in progress have been designed and built in a more coherent way, with secured funding and professional design, signalling the maturing of the Muslim community in the UK. For example, the Jameah mosque in Leicester, built in 2010, represents a move away from simply borrowing Islamic styles from various sources. The mosque, designed by architects from the UAE, presents a single historic language, expressed fully and logically.

Mosques in Britain are dominated by the Deobandi, Barelvi and Salafi Muslim denominations. Approximately 45 per cent of Britain's mosques are controlled by the Deobandi movement and around 30 per cent of mosques are affiliated with Barelvism, a traditional interpretation of Islam that incorporates aspects of Sufism. Britain's Shi'a community control

around four per cent of all mosques.

Congregations in the UK tend to be organised along ethnic, national and denominational lines, although in ethnically diverse, metropolitan areas, congregations tend to be far more mixed. Increasingly, khutbas are being delivered in either a combination of English and Arabic, or an interpreter will provide a summary of the sermon in English.

Britain's mosques tend to follow a fairly uniform management and administrative structure. Mosques tend to be led by a board of trustees. These are almost always men and are often the founding members of the mosque and remain members until they either move away from the area or are too infirm to carry out their duties. The average size of the trustee board is around 12 members. Below the board of trustees is the management committee, with responsibility for the day-to-day running and management of the mosque. Although the vast majority of management committees are made up exclusively of men, some mosques such as Hounslow Central Mosque, have established women's sub-committees, responsible for women's activities in the mosque, funds for which are then requested from the management committee.

Mosques in Britain are more than just places of worship, although, naturally, their main focus is the establishment of the daily salat of the jama'a, as well as salat al-jumu'a. Mosques also provide Qur'an and language classes, and advice and counsel for families. Many larger mosques also provide marriage registration, funeral services and even shops and sports facilities. Many mosques also operate adjoining restaurants and soup kitchens.

Britain's largest mosque by dedicated capacity for worshippers is the Al-Jamia Suffa-Tul-Islam Grand Mos-

## Mosques and Musallas

que in Bradford. The mosque can hold up to 8000 male and female worshippers at any one time. Other large mosques, such as Regent's Park Mosque in London, have substantial concourses and basement areas, which are used for the Jumu'ah and Eid prayers, increasing their capacity for worshippers to over 10,000.

The Baitul Futuh Mosque (also known as the Morden Mosque), in the south west London suburb of Morden, is often cited as the largest mosque in Western Europe – the mosque's own website claims that it hold up to 10,000 people, but it only has a dedicated capacity for 4,000 worshippers.

The location of mosques in the UK broadly corresponds to the Muslim population. Around a third of mosques in the UK are located in London. Although there are mosques all over the city, many are concentrated in the east of the city, where the majority of the city's Muslim community lives. There are also many mosques in northern industrial towns and cities, such as Bradford,

Dewsbury and Blackburn, as well as in the West Midlands (Birmingham alone has around 160 mosques), again reflecting the areas' Muslim populations.

As in other countries across Europe, Britain's mosques have not been without their controversy. Plans to build new mosques are frequently met with significant objection from different quarters. For example, in 2015, the British government blocked plans by the Tablighi Jamaat group to build a 27,000 square meter mosque with sixty metre minarets in the East London borough of Newham. The campaign against the mosque was led by a former member of the local council. It was determined that the mosque conflicted with the local council's plans for the area.

Mosques have also been subjected to vandalism, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks. In 2015, there were 35 reported attacks on Muslim property or institutions. These acts include arson and other forms of damage to property, as well as the desecration of Muslims graves.



# THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK



## Muslim Organisations & Associations

The largest Muslim organisation in the UK is the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The MCB is a registered charity and umbrella group which claims over 500 affiliates, including mosques, schools and associations. Its purpose is to increase education about Islam, and to “work for the eradication of disadvantages and forms of discrimination faced by Muslims”. The MCB is made up of a number of working committees, including Working Group Education, Food Standard and Chaplaincy, Finance and General Purpose, Health and Medical Issues, Interfaith Relations, Legal Affairs, Media, Membership, Research and Documentation.

Since its founding in 1997, the MCB has sought to position itself as the main voice of British Muslims. However, according to a recent survey carried out by think-tank Policy Exchange, less than 2 per cent of British

Muslims think that the MCB represents them. Many of the leaders and founders of the MCB were formally affiliated with Islamist parties in Pakistan, such as Jamaat-e-Islami.

The Secretary General from 1997-2006, Iqbal Sacranie, received a knighthood in 2005, for his longstanding service to the community and interfaith dialogue. Since 2006, the MCB has fallen from favour with the British government, who have instead sought other Muslim partners, particularly among more moderate Pakistani Sufi groups. However, they have maintained relations with governments to a varying extent, most recently with the Labour government in 2010.

Another significant Muslim organisation is the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). Founded in 1997, the MAB is a grassroots community organisation with eleven branches across the UK. The MAB is dedicated to



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serving society by promoting Islam, in particular, its spiritual teachings, ideological and civilising concepts, and moral and human values.

The MAB works closely with other Muslim organisations, civil society institutions, and political bodies to promote the integration of Muslims into wider British society through its work with youth and student organisations, women's groups, as well as media, public relations, education and da'wa initiatives. MAB membership is largely made up of those of Arab extraction. It was principally established to address the concerns of Arab Muslim families in the UK, hence its approach is largely Arab orientated and directed.

Along with the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, it co-sponsored various demonstrations against the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. In 2005, the MAB was responsible for ousting the controversial imam Abu Hamza from Finsbury Park mosque. Abu Hamza was later extradited to the US and sentenced to life in prison. The MAB encourages its members to vote for certain parties and individual candidates in elections – it supported Labour's Ken Livingstone for London Mayor, Respect in London, and the Green Party in South East England. The group was previously led by Anas Altikriti, who now heads the Cordoba Foundation, a group that has been described by former Prime Minister David Cameron as a “political front for the Muslim Brotherhood.” In 2007, Anas Altikriti split with the MAB, and along with other former members, formed the British Muslim Initiative.

The vast majority of universities in the UK offer student led Islamic societies (ISOCs). These societies aim to cater to the social, educational and religious needs of Muslim students.

They usually offer regular classes, where members can discuss relevant issues, as well as the Friday Jumu'a salat on campus. They also often organise lectures featuring recognised scholars, as well as social events. In recent year university Islamic societies have attracted negative attention, due to links with radical individuals. Several ISOCs have been heavily criticised for organising events featuring what the government deemed to be radical ulama. Moreover, at least four former ISOC presidents have gone on to be arrested for involvement in terrorist attacks. Islamic societies in the UK are organised under the banner of national umbrella organisations, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS).

FOSIS was established in 1963 and is one of the oldest Islamic student organisations in the UK. Over the years, FOSIS has hosted a number of high-profile Muslim speakers and scholars – in 1964, they were one of the first groups in Britain to host Malcolm X. Through its Islamic Societies Committee (ISCC), FOSIS works to strengthen and support ISOCs. FOSIS also operates a campaigns department, which works with both student affairs and the wider public in order to provide a response to current affairs, and also a media department. As a national body representing Muslim students, FOSIS is regularly asked to speak on behalf of Muslim students in the national press. FOSIS has seven regional divisions (Scotland, North, Midlands, Wales & West, South, London and Ireland), which aim to serve and represent the Islamic societies within their geographical regions. Each regional committee helps coordinate activities and professional development workshops in their locality.

## British Converts to Islam

There are an estimated 100,000 converts to Islam in the UK with an additional 5,000 new converts per year - around 50 per cent of converts are white British. British people have been converting to Islam for centuries. The first reported convert to Islam was the sailor John Nelson, who reportedly embraced Islam in the 1500s. More recent examples include Lauren Booth, sister-in-law of former Prime Minister Tony Blair and British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Simon Collins. Mr Collins is believed to be the first senior British diplomat to perform the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

According to a report by think-tank Faith Matters, the average convert is a 27 year old white woman, fed up with “immorality and consumerism”. In fact, research suggests that the ratio of female to male converts in Britain could be as high as 2:1. In 2013, Cambridge University produced a study of British women who embraced Islam. In February 2016, the University’s Centre for Islamic Studies reported in the second part of the study, which in-

involved an 18-month investigation of the experiences of 50 male converts.

Based on anecdotal evidence, young converts to Islam have sometimes been impressed by the brotherhood and camaraderie they experience in Muslim student groups. Older converts often said that their interest in Islam was sparked by an encounter with some aspect of Islamic culture, for example art, architecture, music and food. Contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of converts do so for love. Many of those who were interviewed as part of the Cambridge study experienced negativity from family and friends as a result of their decision to become Muslim. This was felt particularly acutely among those of Asian descent who had to previously been Hindu or Sikh; their families often viewed their conversion as a betrayal. Overtime, most converts tend to find that family attitudes become more positive. The participants were united in the view that prejudice against Muslims had



## THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UK

increased in recent years, due at least in part to the media. Due to media representation, converts to Islam are often viewed as a greater threat to national security than other British Muslims. When conversions attract public attention it is either because the people involved are celebrities, or closely connected to celebrities, or they have been accused of involvement in extremist activities.

British converts have not tended to form distinct groups or communities, but have rather attempted to assimilate into the communities of born Muslims. Some exceptions, however, do exist. For example, the Muslim community in Norwich, based around the Ihsan Mosque, is predominantly made up of converts and their descendants.

British converts to Islam have tended to face the following problems:

- Lack of support networks for converts;
- Feelings of rejection and isolation by born Muslims;

- The way in which converts are portrayed in the media;
- Pressure to conform to cultural norms of born Muslims

The Muslim community has attempted to respond to some of these concerns, for example, through the establishment of initiatives such as the New Muslims Project. Founded in 1993, the New Muslims Project provides educational and social help and support to those interested in and new to Islam. The organisation has an advisory board made up of converts in order to successfully address their most pressing needs. Converts have tended to find that the support offered by mosques is either limited or non-existent.

British converts to Islam are ideally positioned to act as a bridge within local areas between Muslims and non-Muslims. They are likely to play an increasingly important role with respect to the integration of communities.





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