



Muslims in the UK and Europe • VI

edited by

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CONTENTS

Dr Paul Anderson	
<i>Introduction: Living Islam in Europe</i>	1
1. Amina Shareef	
<i>Besieged Life in an Age of Terrorism</i>	13
2. Muhammed Babacan	
<i>“My Skin Colour is White...Islamophobia is Their Concern, Not Ours”: Strategies of Disassociating Turks from the Victimised Muslim Identity</i>	26
3. Marta Panighel	
<i>Facing Gendered Islamophobia through Social Media Activism: The Case of “Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat”</i>	41
4. Ugo Gaudino	
<i>Fractures on the French Left: “Islamism” as a Form of Securitization of Islam</i>	51
5. Sabah Khan	
<i>Identification and Transnational Connections of Muslim Diaspora Communities in Britain</i>	67
6. Laura Sani	
<i>Multicultural Perspectives in a Monocultural Environment: The Case of Female British Muslims Navigating their Religiosity in Bulgaria</i>	81
7. Iman Dawood	
<i>Beyond Conversion: Doubts, Contradictions, and Challenges in Salafi Circles in London</i>	93
8. Fabian Spengler	
<i>Who Knows the European Council for Fatwa and Research? On Uniform Religious Authority for Muslims in Europe</i>	107
<i>Endnotes</i>	124
<i>References</i>	135

INTRODUCTION – LIVING ISLAM IN EUROPE

THIS VOLUME presents the papers given at the sixth postgraduate conference, “Muslims in the UK and Europe” organised by the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge on 17 June 2021. The purpose of the conference, held online this year, is to provide a forum for emerging scholars on Islam and Muslims in the UK and Europe to present findings from their graduate research and offer critical reflection on each other’s work. The worked-up papers are presented here with minimal editorial intervention. Alongside the proceedings from earlier years, they offer a snapshot of emerging trends in scholarship in this growing field. The discussion of the papers was vibrant and fruitful – some elements are recorded here – thanks to the generous input of the participants, as well as the keynote speaker (Dr Hisham Hellyer), the chairs (Dr Julian Hargreaves and Dr Paul Anderson), discussants (Dr Taushif Kara and Dr Emanuelle Degli Esposti) and Neil Cunningham and Ludmila Applegate who managed the event expertly. The papers were organised into four panels: Social Exclusion and Identity; Islamophobia and Securitisation; Religious Authority and Subjectivity; and Diaspora and Mobility. The eight papers presented here range in geographical focus from Britain to Bulgaria, and Italy to Sweden, with a preponderance focusing on Britain.

Three papers address questions of exclusion and violence. Amina Shareef discusses connections between the so-called “War on Terror,” vigilante violence, fear, and female Muslim subjectivities in a post-industrial city in the north England. The research is based on 76 interviews with female respondents of Muslim background aged 12-18, many from working-class families, who attended a local youth club. Reflecting on anti-Muslim terror attacks, such as the terror attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand

and subsequent white nationalist terror attacks on Muslims in London, the girls and young women anticipated themselves becoming victims of racial violence, and expressed a sense of their assailability as Muslim women. In doing so, they articulated what Shareef calls besieged life, whose affective structures are the anticipation of unpredictable violence. One sentiment expressed was: “if it could happen to Muslims over there in Christchurch, it could happen here.” These were expressions of a Muslim subjectivity which was tied to being targetable, and expressed in fearful self-reflection – “what if it is me next?” – fostered in part by “relentless, mediatised hostility towards Islam and Muslims.” To understand this, Shareef proposes the notion of besieged life – in discussion with Agamben’s notion of bare life – which is a dehumanised life without protection of law. She argues that state actions in the so-called “War on Terror,” such as indefinite detention without charge, extradition and extra-judicial imprisonment and torture, have created a state of exception which authorises and opens up possibility of vigilante violence against those (i.e. visible Muslims) who are similarly racialised as less-than-human. Besieged life, thus, is ultimately “produced by the emergency discourses of the War on Terror.” This valuable research opened questions around the contextual nature of this subjectivity – whether the sense of assailability was more acute for women in public spaces, and how it articulated with class position and neighbourhood contexts in which families lived. It also raised valuable questions around modes of connection to a broader global Muslim community also identified as being under siege, the salience of co-responsibility and mutual vulnerability in constituting a sense of the ummah, and the histories that have informed these.

Muhammed Babacan analyses how racist discourses have been produced in part as a strategy of dealing with the prospect of

Islamophobia. He provides the first account of strategies of claiming whiteness among people of Turkish background in Britain. People of Turkish background in Britain have been exposed to Islamophobia, a form of racism which categorises people socially “by dividing and ranking them using embodied properties” as well as presumed cultural characteristics “in order to exclude, subordinate and exploit them.” While the experience and prospect of suffering Islamophobia leads some to experience a stronger sense of affiliation to a shared Muslim identity and global community, and leads others to emphasise ethnicity, the paper focuses on a third strategy adopted by some young Turks in UK to deflect and overcome the prospect of discrimination. Some articulate a sense of ethnic, racial and cultural boundaries that they see as distinguishing themselves from other Muslims, in order to avoid affiliation to a stigmatised group. Respondents sought to draw such boundaries in various ways: differentiating themselves from Muslims of other ethnicities on grounds of skin colour; making racist comments about Muslims of other ethnicities; and reifying cultural distinctions between themselves and other Muslims by reference to apparel, understandings of Islam, and attitudes towards integration. The tropes by which they sought to assert their whiteness drew both on “local British repertoires of racialised differences” and notions of a white Turkish racial identity fostered under Turkish republicanism since Ataturk. He observes that this strategy of claiming whiteness echoes attempts of previous groups seeking to avoid stigmatisation and minoritisation, such as Irish Americans in the 1850s, Jews in the United States, Mexicans in the United States, and Eastern European migrants in Britain.

By contrast, Marta Panighel discusses more positive forms of creativity and agency in response to xenophobic discourses about Islam. She describes an online platform called “Your Muslim

Sisters' Chitchat" set up by two young Italian Muslim women, including podcasts, Instagram images, and interviews on a Youtube channel. The content ranges from Ramadan tips, emotional and physical wellbeing, to discussion of what it is like to live as visibly Muslim in Italy, such as problems of exclusion from the job market and the bureaucratic obstacles to citizenship as children of immigrant parents. The platform also features success stories, including businesswomen who are visibly Muslim. Italy is a society that has been shaped by large-scale immigration since the late 1980s, and where some so-called mainstream media and politicians trade in xenophobic narrative, talking about an Islamic "invasion," and where surveys consistently show that citizens over-estimate percentage of Muslim population as 20% rather than the reality of around 4%. Panighel theorises this platform as form of self-representation independent of the discourses produced about them, and thus as a mode of resistance to those discourses. It subverts discourses which define a "good Muslim" as one which is not visibly Muslim, and which speak out only to distance the self from terrorism. Panighel's research provided a complex picture, of a platform that expresses plural identities, of nationality, ethnicity, religion, politics, and ethics. Was there then more than just a critique or refusal of stereotypes, or a picture of "Muslim resistance." Panighel argued that resistance was necessarily trapped by the logic of what it sought to oppose; resistance was precisely about refusing and working outside of unwelcome narratives, creating new opening and horizons.

One paper analysed anti-Muslim sentiment at a systemic level. Ugo Gaudino discusses the mainstreaming of Islamophobic discourse in French politics and the way it has fragmented the left in particular. He analyses the label of Islamo-leftism: a political slur in France since the mid 1990s, originating in parts

of political right, but used over past decade also by the centre-left and parts of the Socialist Party, to silence those critical of the securitising environment launched under socialist former President Francois Hollande (2012-2107). Deployed against those who raise awareness of Islamophobia, it is a form of accusation that they are undermining the values of French secularism: they do not sufficiently defend values of Republicanism, namely assertive secularism, gender equality, and civic nationalism. Gaudino describes its divisive effects of separating French society into “friends and enemies,” and even coming to threaten academic freedom. He also describes how the label of Islamo-leftism has spread from the right to the left. This is part of a broader mainstreaming of right-wing language: the French Socialist Party has shifted rightwards in its discourses about minorities, and left and liberal parts of political spectrum now also talk of Islam as a security threat, or a civilizational threat or a challenge to French multiculturalism. On the other hand, France has seen a left-wing populist party, France Unbowed, take vocal stances against Islamophobia and the securitisation of Islam. The left is conflicted and split in a way the right is not, having inherited a tradition of defending minorities and on the other hand one that sets itself against religious particularism. Left-wing parties have sought to resolve this conflict by emphasising socio-economic over religious factors, casting issues as socio-economic rather than religious and cultural ones. One question this opens up is whether this is pattern that is replicated in the left in other European countries. Is Islamo-leftism part of political language elsewhere in Europe? Is the left facing similar splits elsewhere?

Two papers address themes of mobility, diaspora and religious identity. Sabah Khan explores the question of diasporic identity among south Asian Muslims in London. She asks what kind of

diasporic identity if any do they maintain: whether one linked primarily to the south Asian territories of their parents or grandparents, or to wider a transnational Islamic community or ummah, and how these might intersect and cut across one another. Her paper noted the different iterations of diasporic identity: for those arriving in the 1960s-1980s, the emphasis was often on preserving cultural identity, whereas a younger generation tended to emphasise religion over ethnicity and culture, highlighting the need to be able to differentiate correctly between “religion” and “culture.” This trend has been seen as de-ethnicisation, involving a desire for a universal Islam that is “detached from any culture,” sometimes expressing itself in a refusal to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet, and a casting of this practice as unIslamic. Khan also describes a rejection among the younger generation of “sectarian” identifications of Sunni versus Shi‘i. At the same time, some emphasise their secular Bangladeshi heritage, which is tied to Bangla culture and Bangladeshi nationalism. Her work addressed the question of the ummah: the notion of a de-culturalised, or de-ethnicised Islam, can support identification with the ummah or universal body of Muslims, experienced as an emotional connection and, especially at times of crisis, as a shared sense of being under attack. At the same time, she noted, the ummah often depends on ethnic connections, being materialised in, for example, giving charity for the ancestral homeland. In relation to south Asian and even just Bangladeshi Muslims in London, it was difficult to talk of a single diaspora, as other identifications cut across this, and those identifying only with certain regions from the homeland are seen as leading insulated lives. Amidst this complexity, her paper highlighted a trend which speaks to issues raised by both Shareef, Panighel and Dawood; one in which “Muslim” can be a global socio-political identity of resistance – not primarily a religious category, but one constituted by the experience of and stance

against racism and Islamophobia. Khan points out that such an identity depends not on homeland, but on political mobilisation. Discussants also asked about the histories shaping such diasporic identities, highlighting the mutual constitution of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationalisms, and the significance of pan-Islamic movements in south Asia in the 20th century to current transnational Islamic identities.

Laura Sani discusses the impact of travel and ethnic and cultural context on the significance and development of religious identity. She asks whether the significance of religion changed for female British students of Muslim background studying medicine in Bulgaria when they moved from a multicultural British context to a monocultural Bulgarian environment. She discusses how they drew on religion as an existential resource when facing the academic challenges and unfamiliar context of living and studying abroad. Bulgaria was less ethnically diverse than the society they were used to; historically, this was a result of the (often forced) emigration of Muslims, and decades of socialist rule, which had sought to create a religiously and ethnically homogenous nation, even to the extent of renaming the Muslim dead with Bulgarian names. Students described encountering a monocultural environment as a mixture of friendliness and inquisitive staring; the latter emphasised ethnic and religious difference in a way which could lead to self-isolation. Yet the unfamiliar and monocultural context also afforded them the freedom to develop and define their religious identities away from family and structures of authority back home. Unlike many of their experiences of growing up in Britain, they did not feel the need to defy pre-existing assumptions about their values and loyalties. And while some were initially worried that the distance from home, with its role models and social pressure, would lead to a weakening of religious observance, in many cases it actually

led to the development of an independent religiosity, as they performed the role of “messengers of Islam,” embodying Islam in a setting from which it had been historically erased. Noting these earlier efforts to erase all remnants of the Muslim past, even through changing tombstones, discussants asked about post-socialist constructs of Bulgarian identity, and what the role of the state was in promoting and adjudicating these. Sani’s paper also highlights the significance of piety – and attendant conceptions of the religious functions of travel – as a form of agency in imagining and re-imagining minority status in this context.

The final two papers in this collection describe religious trends of spirituality and engaging with Islamic fiqh. Iman Dawood describes emerging trends of religiosity among Salafis in London. Much scholarly literature has focused on the appeal of Salafism for new adherents – its apparent simplicity of “just following the Quran and Sunna,” its “de-territorialised and decultured” nature, and its emphasis on knowledge and evidence. Less attention, however, has been paid to the experiences of Salafis after conversion. Drawing on 55 interviews with men and women who adopted Salafism between 1980s and 2000s, including a mix of ethnicities and class backgrounds, Dawood highlights the “doubts, challenges and contradictions” experienced by many. Some had adopted Salafism without however accepting the claim that Salafism was the only way of adopting Islam correctly, or followed its position on avoiding university because of its mixed-gender sociability without being persuaded that this was strictly necessary. Experience of sociability and travel also led to doubts about aspects of Salafism: mixing with Muslims from other theological backgrounds in Britain led some to question Salafi discourses about them; implementing the Salafi ideal of conducting *hijra* to Saudi Arabia was disillusioning for some because it exposed racism and hypocrisy in Saudi society. For

others, the pressures of parenting and providing for a family also made the ideal of *hijra* and always prioritising proselytization (*da'wah*) and Islamic study seem unrealistic. Islamophobia in Britain had caused some to prioritise Muslim unity and question the value of “divisive” intra-Islamic Salafi polemics; the constant duty to “correct” other Muslims could also be emotionally exhausting. For some, the Traditional Islam movement – which emphasised adhering to Sunni *madhhab*, learning classical theology (*‘aqidah*) and practising Sufism – presented an appealing alternative, promising emotional connection to God and a focus on spiritual excellence (*ihsān*). Yet rather than leading most to abandon Salafism, these experiences in fact led many to question elements of it – such as its apparent preference for ritual correctness over spirituality, and its stance towards other Islamic movements. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of Salafism as it is actually practiced and lived, and an appreciation of its layered nature.

Fabian Spengler discusses forms of engagement and non-engagement with fatwa-giving authorities among Muslims in Europe. The European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), established in 1997, sought to become the primary fatwa-giving authority for Muslims in Europe. Led by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, it promoted the notion of a “middle way” (*wasatīyyah*) which was “pragmatic” and inclined toward integration. Specifically, it espoused the principle of facilitating (*taysīr*) the lives of Muslims dwelling in Europe in the opinions which it issued, by suspending prohibitions, such as on interest-based mortgages, under certain conditions. Fatwas should “take varying individual hardships into account” and recognise that Muslims in Europe were living in a condition of weakness and that “the law for the strong is different to that for the weak.” However, the research indicated that the Council had not achieved its aim of becoming a primary

authority for European Muslims. Based on 83 interviews, alongside questionnaires, at eight mosques in five countries (Stockholm, Dortmund, Reykjavik, Birmingham and Marseille), it found that the Council enjoyed comparatively little name recognition (it was recognised by only 44% of respondents), and its journal had little reach. Interviews suggested comparatively little interest in a *fiqh* of minorities; most queries to imams were on family matters, and issues relating to life as a minority tended to be resolved other than through *fiqh* and “shariah-grounded arguments.” The interviews also revealed that the vision of the Council to become a leading single authority did not sit easily with established traditions of fatwa seeking which enabled petitioners to choose between muftis and fatwas, and the notion that there is no equivalent to the Papacy in Islam. In addition there was a widespread caution about online fatwas, and in some cases a preference for seeking advice from an expert of the same ethnicity (whereas the ECFR is Arab-dominated). Beyond the individual case study, the paper thus illuminates some of the processes of fatwa-seeking, and engagement and non-engagement with *fiqh*, among Muslims in Europe.

Overall, the papers in this collection attest to the vibrancy and sophistication of graduate work in this field. They illuminate issues of broad human and social scientific interest. The collection discusses the mainstreaming of anti-Muslim sentiment and discourse in public debate and politics in Europe; and the sometimes unexpected ways in which it can be reproduced through constructs of ethnicity, race and culture. It sheds light on structures of exclusion that continue disproportionately to affect persons of Muslim background, as well as the processes through which Muslim identities can be shaped through an intertwining relation between state power, media representations of Islam and the fear of violence. The collection shows that

religious traditions can be a resource in constructing resilient identities, both collective and individual, and highlights the different ways in which Muslim identities are constructed and connected to a sense of global community. It also adds nuance to our understanding of the ways in which different forms of Islam are lived. It takes us beyond official and scholarly representations of Salafism, showing how Salafi identities and practices are layered and constantly developing, and attends with sophistication to the question of where “shariah-grounded arguments” become salient and where they are bypassed.

Dr Paul Anderson

Besieged Life in an Age of Terrorism

AMINA SHAREEF

The growing concern about the increasing racial violence directed at Muslim people on the streets of western nations has prompted academic interest in understanding the scale (Kaplan, 2006), experience (Allen, 2015; Allen 2017; Awan & Zempi, 2020), targets (Allen, 2017; Perry, 2014; Hopkins, 2016; Friedrichs, 2021), perpetrators (Hopkins, 2016), impact (Mercier-Dalphonf & Helly, 2021) and the temporal and spatial dimensions of this violent racial animus. However, this corpus of inquiry has yet to consider the kind of life being produced in a context of heightened racial violence and the broader forms of power that create it. This study draws on the ethnographic data collected through interviews and focus group discussions with 76 young British Muslim women between the ages of 12-18 attending a youth club titled the Young Muslim Women’s Leadership Programme offered at three different sites of a northern, post-industrial city in England. Many of the participants wore the hijab (headscarf) and/or the abaya (long dresses) and hailed from working-class backgrounds. This study offers a description of the subjectivity activated by the promise of racial violence—what I call besieged life. Besieged life is life animated by the affective structures of anticipation, unpredictability, and assailability of, and in relation to, racial violence. Besieged life is life that lives in expectation of racial violence on the street. An exploration of this subjectivity allows us to describe the forms of life produced by the emergency discourses of the War on Terror.

Introduction

It’s the night of the Christchurch massacre. A gunman had open fired on a congregation of Muslim worshipers during Friday service in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 and wounding 40 others. That same night, I held my usual focus group discussion at one of my research sites. My research participants were emotionally reeling after the attack. Our discussion that night centred on the massacre. At some point in our conversation, I asked the group: “how did the attack make you feel?” Nadia replied, “If I am honest, I would be lying if I said I was shocked.” When asked to explain, she replied:

After everything that is going on in the media—all that Islamophobia—it

was bound to happen at some point. Honestly were we really going to think that it wasn't going to happen? It's already happened before. It's going to happen again. It's going to continue to happen unless action is going to be taken to stop Islamophobia, which it is not. And as long as it is not, it's going to continue to happen.

Nadia was not shocked by the Christchurch massacre because the relentless, mediatized hostility towards Islam and Muslims made a massacre of this scale, inevitable, "bound to happen." She rhetorically questions how anyone could have failed to anticipate the attack as a way of expressing incredulity at such political naivety. She gestures to a history of racial violence as the evidence that the massacre is but one in a long line of incidences targeting Muslims. This biography is for her a promise of continued violence so long as the terrain of mediatized Islamophobia is watered and nourished. Nadia is cynical that the ideational grounds will ever change and presages that atrocious acts of violence will remain part of the racial landscape of Muslim life.

What I see in Nadia's unfazed reaction is hardly callous indifference, but an affective state of anticipation of racial violence. To anticipate is to regard as probable, to expect. Believing an attack was "bound to happen," Nadia anticipated the attack. She anticipated it through knowledge of a context of vilification against Islam and a history of racial assault targeting Muslim peoples. Believing that racial violence will "continue to happen" as long as the enabling conditions of this violence persist, Nadia anticipates more violence. Nadia's views that it was "bound to happen" and will "continue to happen," represents a state of anticipation of racial violence.

Yet, Nadia was not alone in expressing this posture of anticipation. After hearing the girls at the mosque speak, I decided to discuss the Christchurch massacre at the other two research sites, with nearly 80 other participants. Over and over again, I heard the girls tell me they were "not shocked."

This paper is about life that lives in anticipation of racial violence—what I term besieged life. This paper draws from ethnographic work to offer a brief description of the subjectivity produced in relation to the promise of racial violence on the street against the backdrop of the War on Terror. My term for this psychic form is besieged life. In what follows, I consider some of the affective structures making up the subjectivity of besieged life, specifically anticipation, unpredictability, and assailability. What interests me analytically about besieged life is that it can tell us something about the forms of life and power produced by the discursive practices of the War on Terror.

Context

The conflicts of the 21st century have caused much academic ink to be spent tracking the identity (Mythen, 2012), immigration (Fekete, & Sivanandan, 2009), national (Sykes, 2016), racial (Najib & Teeple Hopkins, 2020), and security (Kundnani, 2014) formations that have emerged in their ongoing wake. Nested within this literature is an ever-burgeoning corpus of inquiry interested in the racial violence directed at Muslim peoples on the streets of Western nations. These intellectual pursuits have enormously contributed to the project of understanding the scale (Kaplan, 2006), experience (Allen, 2015; Allen 2017; Awan & Zempi, 2020), targets (Allen, 2017; Perry, 2014; Hopkins, 2016; Friedrichs, 2021), perpetrators (Hopkins, 2016), impact (Mercier-Dalphonf & Helly, 2021) and the temporal and spatial dimensions of this violent racial animus. However, there is no work to date that looks at the subjectivities produced in relation to street violence and the forms of power that animate them. Though many of these works have only given a symbolic nod to the War on Terror as the root cause of anti-Muslim injury, few scholars have actually attempted to trace its genealogies, citing electoral politics (Laverick & Joyce, 2019), gendered orientalism (Perry, 2014), visibility (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012),

mediatized representational schemas (Hargreaves, 2016), and terrorist attacks (Disha et al., 2011; Hanes & Machin, 2014) as its salient conditions. Yet only one paper (Poynting, 2006) to my knowledge, has attributed War on Terror's state violence— indefinite detention without charge (Ralph, 2013), torture (Pugliese), terror raids (Kapoor, 2013), anti-Terror laws (Kundnani, 2014)—as the official authorization condoning street violence against Muslim peoples. However, this study does not track the mechanics of this permission.

Methodology and Methods

The research for this project took place at youth program, Young Muslim Women's Leadership Program (YMWLP), that I founded. I delivered this program at three different sites in a northern, post-industrial city to participants who collaborated in this study and were between the ages of 12 and 18. YMWLP has a trifold objective of raising critically awareness, building capacity, and promoting transformation change. YMWLP delivers these objectives through a methodological apparatus that brings together youth participatory action research (yPAR) and sacred activism. yPAR challenges the assumptions embedded within western research epistemologies on the question of where knowledge resides (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). yPAR extends the category of who is allowed to undertake transformative inquiry to encompass young people (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Sacred activism is critical action and practice inspired and motivated by *tawhidic metaphysics* (Al-Faruqi, 2013). Tawhidic metaphysics refers to an ontological and epistemological paradigm centered on the core concept of *tawḥīd*, that there is 'no God but God.' In this view, human beings and all things created constitute the cosmos, an 'orderly creation, not a chaos,' which exists for and with a universal purpose (Al-Faruqi, 2013).

**Racial Violence as Backdrop: “It was bound to happen.
It’s going to happen again.”**

Racial violence is backdrop, “normal.” I was at the Muslim Wellbeing Centre, one of the sites hosting YMWLP. I was leading a conversation on the Christchurch massacre. Like Nora, Alif said “I was not shocked, because it’s going on everywhere. It’s kind of normal.”

What I see in Alif’s comments is that the anticipation of racial violence makes the experience of it “normal.” Normal can be likened to a backdrop that recedes out of our attention over time. A backdrop sets the stage. It is the setting against which a script is played. A backdrop helps narrate a story. Alif’s views of racial violence as “normal” can be interpreted as the experience of racial violence as backdrop. As backdrop, racial violence withdraws from attention as it stories violence as “normal” through its frequency (it is “going on everywhere”). Its frequency sets a stage that scripts the promise of more violence, for it is through frequency that racial violence becomes backdrop; that is, racial violence as “normal,” as backdrop, depends on more violence to sustain itself as “normal.” Alif’s experience of racial violence as “normal” is thus an anticipation of more violence. In this way, to anticipate violence is to see it as normal. And to see racial violence as normal is to anticipate more of it. Thus, through her words, Alif, like Nora, expresses an anticipation that racial violence will “continue to happen.”

Echoing Alif is Khadija. She said, “Because it happened so much, it has become normal.” “It is like ok this attack happened. When is the next one?”

I take Alif’s question “When is the next one?” as the perfect idiom that describes a politically produced subjectivity that animates what I call besieged life—life for whom violence is “common,” “bound to happen,” and will “continue to happen.” Besieged life attends

racial violence as a matter of *when* not *if*. Besieged life asks “when is the next one?”

An affective sense of anticipation, or “*When is the next one?*,” comes with a sense of unpredictability of racial violence and therefore fear. Firdaus from my y10 class told me she was “scared” because “you never know when it’s going to happen.” In this first section, I look closely at unpredictability as one of the affective structures of besieged life.

Unpredictability: “You never know when it’s going to happen.”

Awareness of a context of racial animus, anticipation of racial violence, and a view of racial violence as backdrop is threaded with an unpredictability that provokes fear for bodily safety. I had asked my y10 class how the attack made them feel as a Muslim. Ameerah shared that she was “scared.” In response, I asked, “Who else was scared?” Samina replied that she was. Samina was “not shocked” by Christchurch “because it happens quite often nowadays.” She said it “didn’t really faze me as much as it used to.” But, in spite of her lack of surprise, Samina nonetheless felt scared:

I’m scared because you never know when that kind of stuff can happen. You could just be walking casually and next minute anything can happen. That’s what makes it scary.

Samina did not feel shock because the normalcy of racial violence made her anticipate it. However, racial violence as backdrop means that she anticipates more of it. And this scares her, specifically because she cannot predict when the promise of violence will arrive. She imagines that it can visit anytime and in any description. For her, it is this capriciousness that is the most frightening.

I interpret Samina’s words as an account of fear of racial violence born out of its unpredictability. Unpredictability is unforeseeability and incalculability. Scared because “you can never know when this stuff can happen” and “next minute anything can happen,” Samina

feels fear because the violence she anticipates is incalculable, unpredictable. Unpredictable violence makes anticipated violence “scary.” Unpredictable, anticipated violence generates fear. “When is it going to happen?” is a “scary” prospect because of its unpredictability.

I heard young Muslim women express fear over and over again of anticipated violence on account of its unpredictability. For example, Fatima from my y10 class said just before Samina that she was “scared.” Fatima believed that the Christchurch gunman thought he was doing “people a favor” by killing Muslims. She believed that the livestream would encourage further attacks against Muslims, mentioning that “since he’s done that,” there have been “more attacks throughout the week” against Muslim people. Fatima explained why she feels “scared”:

I feel like, you never know when it’s going to happen. Because the New Zealand attack, they were just doing their daily worship. For them, he came in [the mosque]. The other day, the Tesco thing happened. The guy came in with a screwdriver. You don’t need to be doing anything and someone can come and target you.

Like Samina, Fatima feels scared because she cannot foresee when violence will come, only that it will come. She offers the Christchurch attack as an example of this unpredictability. It was unforeseeable to her that worshippers would meet their end during a mundane weekly ritual. She was not expecting that an attack could take place in a semi-private space. Fatima also offers the widely cited incident by many of my participants of a screwdriver attack that took place in the parking lot of a Tesco superstore against a Muslim father and his 14-year-old daughter in the days following Christchurch. She does so to express the unpredictability of an attack by screwdriver attack—who would have imagined that a screwdriver could be used for such a purpose? For her, the Christchurch and the screwdriver attack scare her because they were completely unprovoked and uninvited and therefore unpredictable.

“Next minute, anything can happen” and “you don’t need to be doing anything” illustrate that unpredictability makes the anticipation of racial violence fearsome. What is analytically useful about unpredictability is that it paints an experience of racial violence as ambush, striking when least expected, wherever, whenever, however, whoever it wants without provocation, without invitation, without prediction. For many young Muslim women, racial violence as backdrop is felt like an ambush. The image of an ambush helps me to describe the life surrounded by the possibility of a fickle violence as besieged life. Besieged life is fundamentally about a life awaiting an ambush. Ambush means that for besieged life, everyday activities—walking, praying in a mosque—portend harm. Objects like screwdrivers take on new violent potentials.

The unpredictability of racial violence produces fear precisely because it puts into question the security of the body. As Samina and Fatima allude to above, bodily safety is feared because the body is felt as assailable. Sameerah, one of my leadership participants, told me she was “scared” because she felt targetable. “What if it is me next?!?” she had passionately asked. In the next section, I look closely at assailability as another affective structure of besieged life.

Assailability: “Me next?!?”

“I think it was very sad because they are Muslims and it is my religion and I think I’m scared,” said Aruba. Aruba said this during our Christchurch discussion. I had asked my y8 class to share their thoughts on the event. When encouraged to explain why, Aruba replied, “Because it could happen here. Because there are Muslims here as well.” Aruba is scared because if it happened to Muslims over there, then it could happen to Muslims here.

Aruba anticipates violence. Her anticipation leaves her fearful because of its unpredictability (“it could happen here”). But she is also fearful on account of a sense of targetability. To be targetable

is to be able to become the aim, the direction, the target of racial violence. Thinking an attack is possible because “there are Muslims here,” Aruba feels like she could be a target at on the basis of her faith identity. As a hijab-wearing Muslim woman, Aruba’s sense of assailability is based on her visible religious identity. The fear of the unpredictability of violence comes with a sense of assailability.

Ada from my y10 class felt unpredictability as assailability, too. When I asked, “How does that attack make you feel as a Muslim?” Ada replied, “Scared.” Ada was black and Somali origin. “Why do you feel scared,” I probed. “Because if they attack them there, then what’s going to stop them from attacking us here as well?” she asked in return by way of answer. Amna believed that an attack in England could happen because of the Finsbury Park attack. A white nationalist had driven a van into a crowd of worshippers exiting a London mosque late at night after the *tarāwih* prayers observed during the month of Ramadan. She said that she feels like someone is going to attack her on the street. When I asked her if she or any of her family members had been previously attacked, she responded in the negative, “no.” “And yet you’re still quite scared,” I stated. Ada feels scared because of the unpredictability of racial violence. This unpredictability comes with a sense of being targetable as a Muslim woman.

Aruba, Ada, and many others all experienced the unpredictability of racial violence as assailability. They all imagined themselves as assailable. For some, assailability is felt on account of their hijabs and modestware. But for others, it would on account of their body in a certain geography—here, the mosque. Assailability references the idea of fungibility (Blee, 2005). Fungibility implies a certain arbitrariness in the targeting of victims that do not go beyond racialized inscriptions of the body, suggesting an interchangeability between racial victims (Blee, 2005). It is this unpredictability that communicates to those who racially identify with or are racialized by the same racial markers as the victim of “portending future

harm.” As assailable bodies, Aruba, Ada, and many others are fungible bodies, interchangeable targets. Assailability means that the question “When is the next one?” is also asked as, “what if it’s me next?!” “What if it’s me next” is an idiom that aptly captures how the unpredictability of racial violence is felt as assailability. As such, besieged life attends racial violence as a matter of *when* not *if* and possibly *to itself*. Besieged life asks, “what if it is me next?!?” “What if it is me next?!?” brings besieged life onto the register of race, racialization, and racialized spaces. If assailable bodies are targeted on the basis of racial markings of bodies and geographies (mosques), then targetable bodies reside on a racial hierarchy reinforced through racial violence.

Discussion

In this short paper, I have offered a glimpse into the affective structures of besieged life. In summary, besieged life perceives racial violence as backdrop. This backdrop, or the promise of violence, is felt as unpredictability. Unpredictability is experienced as assailability. Together, unpredictability and assailability are affective structures of besieged life produced through the experience of living life under the War on Terror.

I offer that besieged life can tell us something important about the forms of life animated by the War on Terror. Besieged life is fundamentally a life that is caught in the state of exception of the War on Terror. Here, I draw on the works of Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. In *State of Exception*, Agamben unpacks the mechanics by which the state of exception emerges: the declaration of an emergency, the subsequent expansion of executive and emergency powers, and the consequent suspension of normal judicial procedures. Here, the suspension of juridical norms and processes is what yields the suspension of the legal order or what Agamben designates as the state of exception. This historical expose is useful because it allows me to conceptualize the emergency

discourses of the War on Terror, specifically those that posit Muslim life as an existential and civilizational threat to the West, as those that enact a state of exception. This state of exception manifests in the expansion of the international and domestic counter-terrorism apparatuses, apparatuses which interrupt the legal norms. And since these discourses of emergency are those that racialize Muslim people, the state of exception of the war on terror allows us to make a statement about the localization of besieged life. Besieged life is caught with the state of exception of the War on Terror.

To develop besieged life's relation to the state of exception, I also turn to Agamben's theoretical meditations on the metaphysics of a life caught at the critical intersection of state violence, the law, and dehumanization in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Besieged life is a reformulation of bare life. Bare life is the living that exits from the protective remit of the law, or the living being that is abandoned to the law. For Agamben, Bare life's killing is "unsanctionable" "neither sacrifice nor homicide." However, bare life and besieged life designate similar but different ontologies. Bare life references the life that is homo sacerized, i.e. hovers somewhere between the animal and human as an effect of extra-judicial state violence. While besieged life is homo sacerized life, it is so not because it has received extra-judicial state violence, but because it occupies the same racial category as those who have. It is this racialized location with the homo sacerized that homo sacerizes besieged life and exposes besieged life to vigilante violence on the street. Besieged life is thus life that hovers between animal and man on account of state violence against those similarly racialized, and whose dehumanization sets besieged up for racial assault. By this formulation, besieged life has been made bare life before it has received state violence through racialization but lives in anticipation of racial assault.

In conclusion, besieged life can be said to be an effect of the War on Terror, the effect of its discourses and violence that reduce

Muslim people to bare life, life against whom violence and killing is unsanctioned, life whose death does not matter because it was never considered life in the first place. Besieged life sits at the nexus of state violence that gives permission to vigilante violence on the street. At its heart thus, besieged life is life that is exposed to racial injury through its racialization as less-than-human.

“My Skin Colour is White...Islamophobia is Their Concern, Not Ours”: Strategies of Dissociating Turks from the Victimised Muslim Identity

MUHAMMED BABACAN

This paper is part of a larger doctoral study on Young Turks in Britain and Islamophobia. This project is being completed at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Relations, University of Bristol.

Numerous studies suggest that British society is becoming more Islamophobic, and Muslims, especially youth, have been its victims. Especially right-wing political parties, politicians, and media elites have manufactured fear of Islam and Muslims and promoted the insurmountable cultural differences and focused on the idea that Muslims are inimical to Western modern and secular democracy, terrorists, enemies of the nation, threats to British society and British national identity, etc. The evidence of Islamophobia, however, is not necessarily the best predictor of actual ways in which the young Muslims in Britain themselves describe and valorise their perceptions and experiences of and further responses to Islamophobia. But while there is growing evidence of the roles of media and politicians on Islamophobia, its meaning and, in part, how Muslims have been targets of Islamophobia, less attention has been focused on how the supposed victims of Islamophobia themselves talk about and what kind of identity strategies that they develop to overcome its effects, reduce, and potentially reverse the status degradations. The purpose of this paper is to how and why the young Turks in Britain detach Islamophobia from themselves and further deflect it onto other Muslims. I argue that rather than developing a sense of belonging to a collective Muslim identity and a feeling of emotional affiliation towards other Muslims, the young Turks drew ethno-racial and cultural boundaries between Turks and other Muslims to change their position from being victims of Islamophobia to that of benefiting from the higher status of not belonging to the devalued group.

Introduction

Over the last decades, Muslims in the UK have had intense public and political scrutiny, Islamophobic hostility, hate crimes, and discrimination.¹ The evidence of Islamophobia, however, is not necessarily the best predictor of actual ways in which the young

Muslims in Britain themselves describe and valorise their perceptions and experiences of and further responses to Islamophobia. The scholarship on Islamophobia has focused heavily on its meaning,² the roles of media and politicians,³ and the experiences of Muslims.⁴ However, this does not tell us much about the effects of Islamophobia on the various identities of the supposed victims of Islamophobia and the identity strategies that they employ to overcome its effects, reduce, and potentially reverse the status degradations.

The fact is that individuals are not simply passive victims of discrimination, but, crucially, they become more dynamic once they feel, in some ways, threatened or not properly understood. There is a rich body of literature on various identity strategies employed by some minority groups and immigrants to manage discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nation, and religion.⁵ Some of these identity strategies invoke and reinforce ingroup identification amongst minority and immigrant members. Social psychologists suggest that once individuals' group identity is threatened, they may react to the perceived inferiority through claiming a strong identification with the devalued, rejected in-group in order to obtain a positive social identity.⁶ In the context of Islamophobia, the literature suggests that Muslims respond either in a religiously assertive way (meaning that they defend and underline their Muslim identity, reinforce Muslim in-group solidarity, and actively show that they belong to the global Muslim community)⁷ or along with ethnic terms (i.e. they demonstrate a high sense of belonging for their ethnic group and a low one for the majority group).⁸ My research, in contrast, has covered a third identity strategy that a great majority of young Turks have used to respond to Islamophobia. According to this strategy, they first expressed that Islamophobia has no effects on their lives and then argued that it is a question of other Muslim groups. They thus perceived group boundaries as relatively permeable the way in which they developed

discursive identity strategies to fend off the accusations by dissociating themselves from the victimised ingroup.⁹ Their discursive strategies sharpened ethnic-racial identity boundaries between young Turks and other Muslims and further reinforced their attempts to align themselves with the white European majority. They resisted the insecurity that is connected to the cultural, and religious proximity they share with other Muslims, thereby cultivating and communicating a positive social identity.¹⁰

Methods

This paper is based on my ongoing PhD research on the perceptions, experiences, and identity strategies of young Turks in Britain concerning Islamophobia. I conducted thirty-nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with first and second-generation young Turks aged between 18 and 35 in London. My guiding principle during the fieldwork was to acquire maximum variation. Therefore, I aimed to recruit individuals that were diverse enough to represent the variation known to exist in the Turkish community of London. To be more precise, Turks are not homogenous in terms of their social life and practices, their religious views, the level of their relationships with British society, etc. Thus, the way they experience Islamophobia and their responses to it may differ due to these differences. Brief questionnaires were also distributed to collect basic demographic information. I conducted the interviews in London from December 2018 to April 2019. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Lasting on average for about an hour, the 39 recorded interviews totalled approximately 39 hours of recording time. To facilitate the coding of the transcripts, I used NVivo. Identities are undoubtedly complex products of individuals' ongoing endeavours to understand, interpret and respond to the historical ethos, culture, political systems, social class, social environments, ethnic and religious affiliation, external threats, and so on. The coding scheme I developed thus cannot capture all dimensions of identity practices,

nor does it reflect the only valid way of organising the data that I collected. Nonetheless, I assert that it best represents the most striking identity practices to Islamophobia. I employed thematic analysis to identify and analyse patterns of meaning in the dataset.¹¹ Themes were generated through a data-driven inductive approach.¹²

Dissociation Identity Strategies

There is a relationship between being a member of a stigmatised group and its impacts on group social identity and social status.¹³ In social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner hypothesise that individuals belonging to a devalued group may show tendencies to disregard the group in order to join a higher status group so as to achieve a more positive social identity.¹⁴ Upward social mobility predicts that they will dissociate themselves from the stigmatised group¹⁵ and end up strongly identifying with the new, high-status group.¹⁶ In an attempt to understand why these individuals appeal to such strategies, Naomi Ellemers examined the case of high-achieving female faculty members. She argues that “in order to function well in this hostile work environment, female faculty members may feel compelled to disidentify with other women. That is, their pursuit of individual upward mobility may lead them to rate other women negatively.” She then suggests that socially mobile individuals may separate the self from the disadvantaged group and, effectually, label other group members.¹⁷ This identity strategy thus assumes that individuals see group boundaries as being relatively permeable given the way they employ identity strategies to obtain membership to dominant status hierarchies.¹⁸

Racism is one way of socially categorising people by dividing and ranking them using embodied properties in order to exclude, subordinate, and exploit them.¹⁹ It is not limited to phenotypical or biological traits; rather, racialised cultural characteristics can also be used as a basis of differentiation. Culture in this respect is as

effective as skin colour in racialising discourses. Research on racism has often focused on the perspective of the white majority. But there is mounting evidence to suggest that some minority groups have also judged other minorities racially through changing their position from being victims with disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances to benefiting from the privileges of being white. The Irish Americans in the mid-19th century,²⁰ the British working class in the 20th century,²¹ the Jews in the United States in the 20th century,²² and, more currently, the Mexicans in the USA,²³ the East European migrants in Britain,²⁴ and the young Russian-speakers in Finland²⁵ used their putative whiteness against other minority groups to benefit from the higher status of not being a racialised or victimised minority and, thus, to ensure both ‘socio-psychological and material rewards.’²⁶

Similar tendencies and practices can be found in the current case. Here I argue that many young Turks interviewed judge other Muslims racially, culturally, ethnically, and even religiously by marking and valorising differences in terms of physical appearances, views, and actions to justify their claim that they are not indeed victims of Islamophobia.

**“I am scared when I see them”:
Asserting differences in physical appearance**

The Turkish claim of whiteness identified in this study appears as a new identity category that has not been raised in the existing literature on Turkish people in Europe. The results of this research’s demographic surveys, which were filled out by the participants immediately before the interview stage of the research, provide evidence of Turkish people identifying themselves as being white Turks. Having to talk about other Muslims in the context of Islamophobia, however, may have played a key role in making this white identity assertion more explicit and thus triggered a sense of self-identity. Constructing a boundary between “us” and “them”

based on ethno-racial differences, these young Turks tended to both detach religious stigmatisation from themselves and deflect it onto other groups with whom the majority share a common religious identity.

Most of the respondents were keenly aware of their differences from the South Asian, Somalian, and Arab Muslims in terms of skin colour. Therefore, when the conversation came to why they thought that they are not targeted by Islamophobia, they sharpened the racial boundary by explicitly asserting the difference between others' dark skin and their white skin colour, thereby deflecting the effects of Islamophobia onto other Muslim groups. Arda, for instance, articulated that "By the term Muslim, the English refer to dark-skinned people, namely Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Arab people. I am not marginalised like them because my skin colour is white." Thanks to his white skin colour, he recounted that white British people considered him as a European and, therefore, that he had not encountered any such problems. Merve also emphasised this point, stating that, "due to the skin colour of Pakistani people, racist people easily categorise them as Muslim. Thus, they become victims of racism. I, on the other hand, am white and thus haven't experienced those types of problems." Similarly, Selda drew a difference between South Asian Muslims and herself (and other Turks in general) with the help of white privilege and visibility as racialised markers: "I am not easily identified as a Muslim like South Asians are. My skin colour is white... Their physical appearance and apparel are much more different from ours." She concluded that "Islamophobia is their concern, not ours." Cenk also highlighted the fact that being white in British society could be seen as being a privilege that allows them not to be targets of racism: "They cannot identify that you are a Muslim if you are white. In the worst-case scenario, they think that you are from Europe. Thus, they cannot be racist towards you. The skin colour of Turkish people is whiter when compared to other Muslims because they have dark skin."

Therefore, it can be suggested that while the skin colour of other Muslims is assumed to cause them to become the targets of Islamophobia, Turks' skin colour is seen as providing them with a more secure position which, in turn, protects them from those negative effects. The emphasis on skin colour stratification powerfully surfaced in their efforts to fence off any possible confusion between themselves and other Muslim groups in everyday interactions.

Most of the time, this whiteness was not explicitly claimed; their use of racism against other Muslims made them white. For Recep, Arabs were "dark-skinned" and "backward-minded." Nuket articulated that "I worked many hotels where, in business meetings, people preferred me to serve their dinners. This was because I am white. Blacks were also working with me, but customers did not want them to serve them." She did not only wield her putative whiteness but also related other Muslims' skin colour to her own. Hasan targeted Pakistani people. Skin colour, this time, was combined with their smell and clothes: "I do not like the smell and clothes of Pakistanis. I mean, they are quite different. Their skin colour is different." These young Turks took a hegemonic position of judging those they did not share anything in common with by drawing colour lines. This is a way of darkening others and lightening the self.²⁷

Participants did not only claim differences between themselves, and others based on colour but also somatic and cultural differences to further distinguish themselves from others. "He looked like a member of ISIS with his beard. He was probably a Pakistani or Bangladeshi" said Serap when she mentioned a dispute she had had with a janitor in her building when responding to a question regarding whether Muslims in Britain face any problems. She afterward recounted that "I live in a zone where there are many Bangladeshi people. When I look at them, I think that they are behaving in ways that ruin judgments made against Muslims. I am

scared when I see them.” One of the striking points in this description relates to what she means with her reference to the notion of “Muslims.” As a non-Muslim-Turkish woman, Serap created an association between the South Asian man in her story and Islamic extremism and terrorism through making a direct reference to his racial markers. Apart from the somatic analogy that she establishes between ISIS and the man’s beard, in her last sentences, she also refers to his entire physical appearance, including his cultural and religious clothes, as being a feared entity. This reflects not only a negative attitude towards the person in question but also an example of cultural racism which targets South Asian Muslims in general.

For other Turks as well, encounters with different religious clothes evoke fear. Bedir, for example, was “scared of people who wear the burqa.” He saw the burqa as a marker of difference and remarked that “there are no such clothes in our religion. They do not reflect Islam.” He thus justified Europeans’ reactions to such clothes because “it is very hard for people to communicate with those people since they cannot see their faces.” He thus looked at their clothes with a distinctly “Western” perspective. He not only shared the same feelings and anxieties as those of European society but also constructed a boundary between “us” (Turks) and “them” (Muslims wearing the burqa) on the grounds of a different understanding of Islam.

Some went even further and argued that because those women wear it, they might have connections with extremist, terrorist groups. This point was clearly expressed by Cenk, who marked South Asian Muslims as potential terrorists in virtue of their clothes and somatic features and thus showed solidarity with the white majority:

They wear clothes like those of the terrorists. I saw people on the train – they had long beards and wore those clothes. I was concerned, for instance, whether they were carrying bombs that could blow up. I can understand English people very well because they witnessed terrorist attacks many times.

Indeed, I believe that the English are very tolerant of them. (Cenk)

These marked differences were intermingled with local contextual discourses on terrorism. The physical appearance of South Asian Muslims was interpreted as being a threat to national security. It is quite remarkable that someone who identified himself as a Muslim associates another Muslim group with terrorism and exhibits intolerant attitudes due to their clothes or appearance. Cenk and some others did not use positive tropes when they talked about other Muslim groups. It might be that they thought that it harms them to be associated with the others. Therefore, they may have tried to differentiate themselves from the largest and more visible Muslim group in Britain, marking the differences in physical and cultural traits.

**“They are very radical...completely brainwashed”:
Marking and valorising differences in viewpoint and action**

The emphasis on differences in physical appearance, including somatic features and clothes, was followed by their belief that the “other” had radical views and actions of other Muslim groups. Some respondents verbalised their discontent about associating with the other Muslim groups and blaming them for their negative image. For Halime, South Asian Muslims and Somalians were “so harsh on you. They are very radical. They are not attacking you physically but rather verbally. They are completely brainwashed.” Moreover, Recep distinguished Turks from Arabs in terms of skin colour and moral character: “I do not believe that we have much in common with the people from the Middle East. They are idiots. They make no sense. Firstly, we are whiter than them. Secondly, they are backward-minded. They have a lot of nonsensical views.” Furthermore, for Serap, Arabs constituted an uncivilised race:

When you look at the Arab race, they eat with their hands. They do not have to worry about being clean. We have nothing to do with them. They

constitute a parasitic race. They have made no contributions to humanity, not even to themselves. It is an undeveloped and uncivilised race. They behave badly toward women. I went to Dubai and was shocked when I saw how they behaved. They do not respect basic human rights in the least.
(Serap)

It might be argued that the historical Arab image in Turkey may have had an impact on the negative discourse of these young Turks towards Arabs. Today, there is a perception of “Arab betrayal” and “Arab revolt” in the minds of most of the citizens of Turkey. In the first years of the Turkish Republic (1920s), in the textbooks prepared in line with the new ideology adopted and in the books of authors adopting a strict Westernisation view, the image of Arab and the revolt of Sharif Hussein were evaluated as a legitimising element of the republican revolutions.²⁸ It is noted that the ideological approaches in question are also dominant in the history books taught in high schools today. In these books, traces of Turks being a superior nation than Arabs are seen in Turkish-Arab relations, and the Arab image is generally portrayed negatively.²⁹

Cenk, a first-generation taxi driver, claimed that there were no problems for himself before extreme Islamists came to the UK. For him, “they are from Pakistan and look like members of ISIS.” He racialised Pakistani Muslims through their physical appearance but, more importantly, their appearance also established several innate differences between Turks and Pakistanis for him. His assumption simply was that if one resembles an extremist group in physical appearance, then s/he is associated with that extremist group in such a way as to automatically translate into their sharing the same views and actions as those other groups. Following these racist discourses that he had towards Pakistani people, he felt like highlighting that Turks are different from them, propounding that “British people are never troubled with Turks.” He further portrayed the Pakistanis as those who interfere in the British way of life:

In areas such as Luton, Pakistani people do not allow British people to drink alcohol at night. They stand to watch at night and, when they see a Briton or someone else drinking alcohol, they force them to throw the bottle into a bin. This is so bad. When you go from your country to another, you are not supposed to be assimilated but are expected to adapt yourself to that country's social lifestyle, social rules, and ways of behaviour. But instead, I see those Pakistani Muslims expecting English people to keep up with their culture, religious beliefs, and so on. This is unacceptable. If you don't like this country, then you should leave. (Cenk)

Cenk depicted the South Asian Muslims as those who disrespected the socio-cultural differences of British society. This point was also articulated by Cuneyt and Hamit. Cuneyt criticised South Asian Muslims because of their behaviours towards non-Muslim Britons: "You cannot judge people here. You cannot tell them not to drink. That is their culture. Why do you try to interfere in their way of life? These sorts of things substantially increase Islamophobia here." Similarly, Hamit underlined the view that "South Asians are causing Islamophobia because of their actions. They resist integration. If they do not wish to integrate, then they deserve racism."

Their perceptions of these Muslims suggest that they failed to adapt and integrate to the norms, values, and practices of British society. They do not perceive them as being truly British. Their statements ("you should leave," "you cannot judge people here," and "they deserve racism") indicate that a "governing belonging" provides them with a basis for "determining who is to be included or excluded from [the] national space."³⁰ It seems that the young Turks positioned themselves nearer the white British majority vis-a-vis the Pakistanis. This represents a kind of integration on the part of the Turks. They regard social and cultural compatibilities as key determinants of successful integration into British society. Emphasising the differences in the moral character of the Pakistanis, they implicitly perceive themselves as respecting those social and cultural differences, thus allowing them to integrate better within British society.

The most powerful hostile attitude towards other Muslim groups, however, came from Nuket.

Nuket: What would you do if your son or wife were killed in the attack on Manchester? There is an evil called ISIS and a lot of girls here went and joined them. Look, in the last case, the British citizenship of one of them [referring to Shamima Begum] was revoked. She was not allowed to enter the UK after that. That is how it should be. Why would I let the terrorist come back in? If I were the president, I would throw all Muslims out of the country.

Muhammed: But most Muslims also do not see those people as being true Muslims. They condemn terrorism.

Nuket: Alright. Do you not think that they are potential terrorists? I am sure that they are because the Qur'an says kill. Okay, that is it. It is written in the Qur'an. I share my bread with you, feed your family and allow you to live in my land. But if you become strong, you will come and kill me? Is that so? If I were the president, I would ban Islam in this country. There is no Islamophobia in this country. If someone looks for trouble, I bring trouble on him. If someone sticks a knife in my son, I take his head off. Until a few years ago, I could not get my kid out. We were attacked by Pakistani Muslims because I am married to an English person. They attacked us with a knife. Our attackers were both young and adult people.

Nuket described herself as being a non-Muslim but also a Turk committed to the republican and secular values that Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, had established. At the same time, though, she saw herself as a conscious British citizen who respected and embraced British values. Her racist discourse was more concentrated on Pakistani Muslims due to her having had bad experiences with them and specifically referred to the case of Shamima Begum. Nuket's claim that the Qur'an advocates terrorism suggests that Islam is at the root of all terrorism. She thus valorises all Muslims as being potential murderers. She portrays Muslims as being a threat to the security of British society due to their "innate" moral characteristics which incline them to adopt radical views and actions. Moreover, as with the other informants, her articulations about Muslims in Britain overwhelmingly

associate them with negative connotations which bear a striking resemblance to the language, terminology, and ideas circulated in the public and political spaces throughout Western media.³¹

The data show that differentiation practices were not only directed against Muslims in the UK but also Arabs. In this respect, some of their tropes draw from local British repertoires of racialised differences that are prevalent in British society; others are home-grown variants transplanted from Turkey for local use.³² For instance, in a historical context, the claim of whiteness was an explicit policy of the new Turkey to distance Turkish people from other racial groups, especially Muslims in the Middle East, so as to better align themselves with the West.³³ The new modern Turkish identity was defined by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, who believed that the new Turkey should cut all its Islamic and Eastern origins and define its identity as a part of “white/Western” civilisation.³⁴ He tried to prove this claim in many ways. In 1932, for instance, the first Turkish Historical Congress in Ankara was tasked with proving the theory that “all white Aryan races originated in Central Asia (ancient Turkish heartland)” and further that the Turks were indeed the real basis of all “Western civilisation.” At the second Turkish Historical Congress in Ankara, it was accepted that the Turks were an integral white European race. To sum up, during these two congresses, a view on the essential purity and supremacy of Turkish blood was reached. Besides the discussion on whiteness and European races, many reforms were promulgated to convert the new Turkey into a secular, modern nation-state through a series of political, religious, social, cultural, and educational policy changes. The discourse of whiteness was used to allege that Turkey is a part of the western project of modernity. Turkishness was inscribed into whiteness and thus acquired a racial character that took the form of Western civilisation and modernity.³⁵ Therefore, some young Turks may have been influenced by the historical understanding of Turkishness which was strongly based on the idea that Turks belong to the white

race. Ozlem's claim that Turks are historically a part of the supposedly civilised, modern, and secular Western world strengthens this possibility. She stated:

Ataturk politically got closer to Europe and moved away from the Muslim world. Therefore, we have historically had values such as secularism, democracy, and modernism. I am very happy that he changed how Europe perceives us. I was brought up with these values and am glad to defend them because they distinguish us from other Muslims in the UK. (Ozlem)

To be sure, not all young Turks used racism and further the data does not allow us to generalise that the racist young Turks have a certain background (non-Muslim, secular, or first-generation, for instance). Indeed, some of my participants (including non-Muslims) expressed their empathy for other Muslims, particularly those in war zones; some reported Islamophobic experiences maintained and reproduced without overtly targeting its victims; others marked or valorised the differences between themselves and other Muslims but not in racialised terms. My intention, however, has been to demonstrate how some young Turks are employing differentiation and racialisation practices to avoid any implication that the effects of Islamophobia apply to them and thus put a psychological distance between themselves and the "other" Muslim groups.³⁶

Conclusion

Turks in the UK have indeed been the targets of Islamophobia in recent years. At the same time, however, I have presented evidence of different sorts of identity strategies, not whereby young Turks claimed that they are its targets, but where through differentiation and racialisation strategies, they intended to change their position from being victims to perpetrators. They claimed their putative whiteness to assign other Muslims as being less white. The effort to create a positive social identity on skin colour was not limited by this, but also being or claiming to be white became a base for

racialising other Muslims. This time, whiteness was not explicitly claimed; their use of racism against other Muslims made them white. The main motivation for these racist practices was that of changing their position from being victims of Islamophobia to that of benefiting from the higher status of not belonging to the devalued group. In that sense, racism for the Turks was an effective tool for 1) deflecting Islamophobia onto others; 2) dissociating themselves from these victimised groups; and 3) aligning themselves with the majority group.

Rather than showing solidarity with the other ingroup members, they drew ethno-racial and cultural boundaries between themselves and the others. But why did the young Turks engage in boundary and racializing practices against Muslims with whom the great majority shares a common religious identity? When individuals experience discrimination, threat, and exclusion, they seek to draw boundaries between themselves and other groups. These boundaries may reinforce the construction of defensive identities and common solidarities among members of stigmatised groups, distancing themselves from majority groups. This strategy thus acknowledges the existence of discrimination and its impacts on individuals and attempts to overcome its negative consequences to achieve a more positive social identity. In that sense, claiming discrimination is seen and appealed to as a useful strategy for strengthening the psychological well-being of the devalued group members. This was not, however, the case for most of the young Turks. They were aware that the West has characterised Muslims as radically Islamist, culturalist, conservative, and threatening the Western, secular, liberal democratic, and European way of life and thus not part of Western civilisation. They were further aware that the increasing racialisation and marginalisation of Muslims in Western countries has exacerbated the segregation of “the us” versus “the others.” While “others” are negatively and stereotypically imagined as inferior or threatening and, therefore, to be excluded, “the us” is portrayed as being in a privileged, superior status and

not associated with terror and terrorising. Therefore, they drew upon internal and external resources in order to maintain their boundaries. This motivation to acquire a positive social identity and to increase their collective self-esteem led them to perceive their ethnic group as being superior to other Muslim groups while distancing themselves from these groups.

Facing Gendered Islamophobia through Social Media Activism: The Case of “Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat”

MARTA PANIGHEL

Drawing on my doctoral thesis exploring gendered Islamophobia in Italy and the depictions of Italian Muslim women, this paper focuses on the strategies of resistance of Italian Muslim women to counter Islamophobia through a case study: the “Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat” podcast, run by two young Italian Muslims.

In the epistemological intention of considering Muslim women as autonomous subjects, acting independently from the discourses produced about them, this paper analyses the ways in which Muslim women resist, organize themselves and seek alternative horizons. The case of “Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat” is particularly interesting because it originates from the need of two young women to create and share content by building a network through social media. Drawing inspiration from other similar podcasts in Europe, Kawtar and Aicha have meticulously created a multi-media product: a podcast, an Instagram page, a website, and a YouTube channel. The topics they cover are also varied: from the pillars of Islam to the question of citizenship; from the experiences of converts to support during the month of Ramadan; from sexuality in the Islamic context, to terrorism in Europe.

From an intersectional and postcolonial feminist perspective, the paper will first present the work of “Your Muslim Sisters”; then, it will outline the context of Italian Islam, with a focus on the gendered dimension; and finally, it will analyse the role played by counter-narratives of concerned subjects about spreading Islamophobia in Italy.

Introduction

The debate on Islamophobia in Italy is quite recent,³⁷ partially as a result of the relatively recent history of immigration in the country.³⁸ Although the first groups of immigrants coming from former colonies and countries in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe have settled in the country since the 1960s, large-scale migration to Italy only began in the late 1980s. In the Italian peninsula, the more widespread forms of Islamophobia show

various particular traits, resulting into a structural interpretation of the phenomenon:³⁹ for example, Islam is the only major religion to not have signed an agreement with the Italian State. The Italian constitution envisages, in fact, that religions other than Catholic should sign forms of mutual recognition.⁴⁰

While it is essential to study Islamophobic rhetoric and its practical consequences in the daily lives of Italian Muslims, it is equally important to highlight the growing awareness and voices of individuals affected by this form of racism.

In this contribution, we will analyse the case of *Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat* (YMSC), a podcast created and managed by Aicha e Kawtar, two young Italian Muslim women with an immigrant background. As we will see, YMSC is a good example of bottom-up counter-narratives: extremely catchy and pop, but at the same time, full of interesting insights and well-developed content. Through in-depth interviews with Aicha and Kawtar and through discourse analysis of the content they produce, this paper aims to study the resistance strategies of Italian Muslim women to counter gendered Islamophobia.

Your Muslim Sisters

“Two sisters share their conversations about second generations, religion, Ummah personalities to watch out for, travel and much more.” With these few lines, YMSC presents itself on the platforms Spotify and Anchor.⁴¹ Kawtar explains a bit more about the idea behind the project in her interview:

Since high school, when Aicha and I would talk about serious matters, we would always say “it would be so cool to have a community!” We dreamed of doing something that would be useful for everyone, we always talked about it. [...] Our idea was not to only address Muslims, in what we produce, but everyone. Our key was always simplicity so that everyone could understand what we were saying. Then, one time we were talking and Aicha said to me “you know, I listened to a very interesting podcast!”

The decision to use this format,⁴² a web-based audio broadcasting tool, dawned on the two authors after listening to podcasts created by young Muslims in other European countries, particularly from the Muslim community in London. “Discovering these podcasts,” says Aicha in the first episode of the series, “was interesting because it is not every day, here in Italy, that you see a representation of this kind, such as seeing guys like you, sharing experiences and similar life paths as you. [...] So, we thought, it would be interesting to have something like that in Italy too!”⁴³

The almost thirty podcast episodes published in over a year and a half can be grouped into three categories: episodes in which the two authors discuss a certain theme together (eight); episodes in which one or more guests are invited to share their experience or expertise (eleven); and “Flash Podcast,” short episodes of 5/10 minutes (nine). The covered topics are extremely varied and could be classified into five subgroups, although many of the topics run through almost all the podcasts. The first and most extensive group concerns issues more directly linked to Islam in social terms, such as the experience of being Muslim in the West, the differences and influences between Islam and culture, the experience of converts in Italy. A second group of topics concerns gender issues, such as Islamic feminism, the use of hijab, modest fashion, and the role of masculinity in the ummah. The third group concerns various forms of activism: Islamic, anti-racist, criticism of patriarchy and colonialism. The fourth group concerns self-care, with interventions on personal fulfilment, emotional and mental wellbeing, physical activity, and healthy eating. Finally, the fifth and somewhat separate group contains the “Flash Podcasts”: short episodes explaining the pillars of Islam and short psalm recitations from the Qur’an.

A lot of study and preparation goes into these episodes, as Kawtar tells us:

I’ve done a lot of research. I’ve tried to improve my knowledge from a religious point of view, because I want to live my religion to the full, not

only from a cultural point of view. I want to understand it, to study it from a historical, political, and mainly religious perspective because... if you do not know something well, you cannot claim to practice it, that's it. And it's the same for Aicha, I can assure you. You must be well informed to speak, which is also a basic aspect of religion: actually, the first word that was revealed [by Allah to the prophet Muhammad] was 'read.' Because knowledge [in Islam] is the basis of everything.

Indeed, *Your Muslim Sister* is more than just “chitchat”: apart from the podcast, Aicha and Kawtar also manage a very dynamic Instagram page with a modern and captivating style;⁴⁴ a website containing articles by various authors;⁴⁵ and a YouTube channel, activated for Ramadan 2021, with videos of many young Italian Muslims.⁴⁶

This year's Ramadan, the second since the start of the COVID pandemic, has seen *YMSC* working to help rethink the sacred month at a safe distance, but still together, thanks to digital technology. Every morning, a verse from the Qur'an, and a video with daily reflections were shared on Instagram stories. On Instagram, a column of posts has also been activated, with tips to organise one's month in the best way possible. The YouTube channel, as mentioned before, hosted eleven testimonials of young Italian Muslims – living in Italy or abroad – who described their typical Ramadan day. Several Flash Podcasts were dedicated to Ramadan tips and the psalmody recitation of the Qur'an, a closed number support group was set up on WhatsApp and a collective reading of the Qur'an was held once a week (on Zoom or Skype). Finally, a fundraising campaign was launched, and the money raised, donated to a Palestinian association.

“At the moment, we are mainly talking about topics related to religion in order to challenge clichés about Islam,” explains Aicha in her interview,

[...] but we would also like to talk about anything that is happening or going through our minds, in order to give a more nuanced representation of Muslim girls who are not defined only by their belonging to a certain

religion, but as girls with many other interests and individual traits, as the media should also do. For example, if you have a Caucasian protagonist, they are defined by their goals, by their dreams, [...] but their homosexual friend, is defined only by their homosexuality, the black friend is defined only by their race... So, showing the fact that we are human beings with different nuances too, and therefore giving us a voice [is important]... also because... minorities are always being talked about, but they are hardly ever allowed to talk for themselves.

Self-representation of Italian Islam

There are about 2.6 million Muslims regularly residing in Italy, most of whom have Italian citizenship. They represent about 4.3% of the total population, in accordance with the European average.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the image provided by the media and politicians, is that of an “Islamic invasion,” so much so that, according to a survey by the IPSOS MORI Institute, Italians grossly overestimate that percentage, at approximately 20% (which is five times their actual number).⁴⁸ On the one hand, this fear is linked to the consistent migratory flows in recent years, exploited by right-wing parties with harshly xenophobic and nationalist tones and political measures;⁴⁹ and on the other, to the common neo-orientalist trope according to which Islam equals terrorism.⁵⁰

This stereotypical image of Islam was one of the reasons that urged Kawtar and Aicha to speak out. Aicha recounts that at the time of the 2015 Paris attacks both she and Kawtar were in their final year of high school, when the “terrorism” topic was raised in class. Their classmates were split into two groups: those who did not say anything and those who expressed “extremist” ideas. “So we were a little bit required to... we didn’t mind telling our point of view, then at the same time you know you have to do it because there are not many people doing it. [...] We had to talk, me and Kawtar, we had to express our point of view.” In the first episode of the podcast, Aicha gives an overview of the widespread misconceptions about Islam that she would be deconstructing: “not all Arabs are Muslims

and not all Muslims are Arabs, let your black Muslim sister tell you that! The veiled woman is not necessarily submissive. [...] Not all Muslims are terrorists.”⁵¹ In one of the two episodes dedicated to the question of terrorism, one of the guests, Fatima Lafram, describes how this stigma towards Islam influences her daily life: “You must be a sociable person, otherwise you are seen negatively. You always have to prove something, and you have to do it in the most positive way, it’s like you’re always afraid to mess up.”⁵²

YMSC aims not only to deconstruct those myths about Islam and Muslim people, but also to create a real space for counter-narratives:⁵³ “the podcast started from the desire to create a space for second-generation Muslim girls where they would be represented” argues Aicha. In Kawtar’s interview, self-representation is a central issue as well:

We always say “yes, people don’t know. Yes, people should inform themselves more.” So why can’t the generations who live in Italy, who were born and raised in Italy, who speak Italian, understand the culture, and know their religion well, why can’t they create some means of knowledge, so they introduce themselves, make themselves known... So, we introduce ourselves, let ourselves be known, trying to change people’s mentality about Muslims.

In this regard, one of the podcast’s guests is Sumaya Abdel Qader, which – in addition to being an activist, a writer, the first Muslim and veiled city councillor in Italy – was also the consultant for the fourth season of the Netflix series “SKAM Italy.” The series started in Norway and was then adapted in various national contexts, and it was the first occasion to see a veiled Muslim girl, Sana, co-starring in an Italian series for teenagers.⁵⁴ When asked about the issue of self-representation of Muslim women, Abdel Qader stressed its importance “not only for [the] Muslim woman herself, but also to understand the role of the Muslim woman within the community and the importance of women also participating in the interpretation of Islamic legal sources.”⁵⁵ Accepting their own invitation to “start with oneself to generate real change,”⁵⁶ *YMSC* sometimes

also addresses notes and criticism toward the Italian Muslim community. In Kawtar’s words, “ignorance is not only coming from others, but also from within the community. [...] We want to improve the Muslim community in Italy, even virtually.”

YMSC’s activism is undoubtedly well established on the web, but it also projects itself offline, overturning the apparent dichotomy with which Generation Z is often accused of doing only performance activism on social media and not getting their hands dirty with “real” collective politics. In fact, while in the early 2000s, at the centre of the debate on Muslim youth activism there was the Young Italian Muslims’ association (GMI),⁵⁷ today, the political contents seem to be mainly conveyed by Muslim girls from their social media profiles to a large audience. YMSC demonstrates that this dichotomy is largely instrumental: associationism continues to this day but, in the individualising and neoliberal present, emphasis is placed on isolated figures.⁵⁸ Apart from their ample awareness raising through their online profiles, Kawtar and Aicha are also doing activism outside social networks. They take part in *Islamic relief* activities;⁵⁹ participate in GMI meetings⁶⁰ and they pay close attention to activism in a broad sense (from *Black Lives Matter* in the US and across the globe, to the situation of the Uighurs in China, from the Palestinian cause, to violence against women). This complexity is reflected in the content of the podcast, showing how Muslim women’s political engagement⁶¹ acts quite often independently from the discourses produced *about* them.⁶²

Being Italian Muslim Women: Material Conditions of Existence

Up to this point, our analysis focused on discourse stereotypes and how YMSC tries to subvert them. It is noteworthy to remember, however, that such discourses – on Islam *and* on migrants – produce performative and material effects⁶³ such as the criminalization of migration, the denial of documents, social

marginalization, institutional violence, exclusion from (or exploitation at) work. Such material conditions of existence do emerge both in the podcast and in the interviews.

To start with, one of the most problematic outcomes of Islamophobia is the difficulty to find a job.⁶⁴ Both Kawtar and Aicha report in their interviews either having had problems at work or having been rejected after a job interview because of their headscarves. “Veil is not a limitation you impose on yourself, but one that others impose on you!” claims Aicha. “In Italy I have only seen a veiled girl working in contact with the public once – she adds. She was a waitress in a bar, and I definitely remember looking at her and thinking ‘did they hire you?’”⁶⁵ Faced with this situation, YMSC’s (counter-)narrative choice is, as with other issues, to provide a well-rounded representation of the phenomenon: in order to undermine the idea of the submissive Muslim woman, they host a number of successful Muslim women, without censoring their difficult experiences.

This is the case of Hind Lafram, the first *modest fashion* stylist in Italy and founder of the first Italian brand: for Muslim women, and not only. “40% of my customers are not Muslims, they just like my line” she says.⁶⁶ Aya Mohamed, also known as Milanpyramid, also works in the fashion world: Instagram influencer and political science student, Aya is a model for high fashion brands such as Valentino, Gucci, and Prada. Despite her success, she has also had unpleasant experiences, when she was rejected in some jobs because of her headscarf, or when she was used as a token by brands more interested in profits than inclusivity:

I am the veiled girl, but I am not just that veil because, first, I have a name, okay? I have a personality; I have an identity that extends beyond the veil and therefore you must be able to represent my veil correctly and not make me fit into the usual veil stereotypes just because you want to tokenise me.⁶⁷

The issues of veil and discrimination at work leads directly to the broader issue of gendered Islamophobia.⁶⁸ According to several

observers, the wearing of visible symbols is one of the main factors in determining possible acts of aggression. In 2016 the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) carried out a study across various European nations, finding that between 54 and 90% of Islamophobic acts were committed against women.⁶⁹ In addition, there are femonationalist rhetoric⁷⁰ that exploits feminist issues (violence against women, forms of emancipation, etc.) to stigmatise Islam and Muslim men, and pursue xenophobic policies in the name of gender equality. To describe this process, Farris refers to a convergence of different actors: nationalist parties, neo-liberalists, but also some feminists and femocrats. The critique of (white, middle-class) feminism returns in Aicha's words:

Islamophobia is also the hypocrisy of certain feminist positions, [...] I think it is called white feminism. They only see feminism from the point of view of white women, without understanding that there is a spectrum of problems, and that all are important. As it is correct that we fight against the tax on tampons here [in Italy], it is correct that in other countries a woman wants to fight for the right to keep herself covered. As you can expose yourself, I can cover myself. [...] I don't understand how you can be free only if you stick to standards decreed by someone else.

The othering process towards Italian Muslim is reinforced by the law on citizenship, based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood).⁷¹ Foreign citizens wanting to apply for Italian citizenship can obtain the so-called "naturalization" after ten years of legal residence in Italy. And the children of immigrants and long-term residents in the country can only apply at the age of 18, with a "slow process with an unpredictable outcome. The procedure is subject to a highly discretionary decision by the authorities and because the bureaucratic process alone usually takes 3-4 years."⁷² If on the one hand Italian Muslim women claim a plurality of identities, on the other hand they reflect on how national identity is defined and structured; Aicha for instance in her interview states:

I was born and grew up in Vicenza, I consider myself Afro-Italian, [...] I mean, it's been a few years that I say, "I am Afro-Italian," since before this term even existed [here], because the Italian second generation community

was smaller [...]. We knew we were Italians, but we were not recognised by the State, your friends would say “yes you are Italian,” but it was different [...], even if you grow up and you feel part of it, the system often reminds you [that you are not really part of it].

Talking about diversity and multiculturalism, Sara Lahdili, a guest on the podcast mentioned that she is “very allergic to the word integration. I’ve never liked it because it gives me a negative connotation of being Italian *and* Muslim [...]: when I have to integrate in something, I feel obliged to give up something else. [...] I don’t need to integrate in my country, [...] I’ve been here since I was a child, my whole life is here.”⁷³

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of *Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat* painted a multifaceted and kaleidoscopic picture of the situation of Italian Islam. Through their awareness, knowledge and communication skills, these young women create a powerful counter-narrative to systematically deconstruct the stereotypes about Islam, Muslim women, and the Italian Muslim community.

The point, to turn Spivak’s famous question⁷⁴ on its head, seems to be not so much the impossibility for subaltern subjects to speak, as that of being heard. Despite the presence of activists who have given a voice to the Italian Muslim community in various forms over the past two decades, it seems that the depictions of that community have remained unchanged. Young Italian Muslims are caught up in the good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy:⁷⁵ good Muslims are integrated, or rather *assimilated*,⁷⁶ do not show or claim their faith in public and, above all, do not speak out except to distance themselves from Islamic terrorism.

The case of *Your Muslim Sisters Chitchat*, the stories of Kawtar, Aicha and those of all their guests, demonstrate that reality is not only very different from how it is represented in the mainstream debate, but it is also constantly evolving.

Fractures on the French Left: “Islamism-leftism” as a Form of Securitization of Islam

UGO GAUDINO

Despite public awareness of Islamophobia is increasing, anti-Muslim discrimination largely circulates across both the Right and the centre-Left European political parties. Muslims are often portrayed as a threat to national security and to Western way of life because of their alleged vulnerability to radical ideologies. Consequently, politicians and academics who highlight anti-Muslim racism are often accused of insufficient efforts to vituperate Islamism, let alone of open connivance with Islamist groups. Although this trend is visible in all Western Europe, the paper focuses on French political parties. France is a textbook example of how anti-Muslim narratives gained momentum after the last wave of jihadist terrorist attacks, started in 2012. I reflect on the expression “Islamism-leftism,” which refers to the political alliance between some Far-Left and Muslim groups. Rather than an evident historico-political fact, I argue that Islamism-leftism is a rhetorical artifact that the French Socialist Party borrowed from a nationalist right-wing vocabulary to silence the denunciations of Islamophobia coming from more progressive voices and securitize them as a threat to French Republican principles such as French secularism (laïcité). The first section explains the origins of the word Islamism-leftism. The second shows the contemporary fractures in the French Left and the right-ward shift of the Socialist Party in the governance of minorities. The third one demystifies the accusations of Islamism-leftism dropped on the radical left party La France Insoumise and academics working on Islamophobia and postcolonial studies.

Introduction

According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, discrimination against Muslims is still widespread in the EU.⁷⁷ An increasing number of political parties, both on the Right and the Left, bought into Islamophobic narratives and expressed doubts about Muslims’ loyalty and cultural affinity with Western values. The increasing suspect about Muslim radicalization sparked a widespread academic interest in Islamophobia (defined hereby as “anti-Muslim racism”⁷⁸) and in its intersection with studies on security, terrorism

and radicalization.⁷⁹ Yet, there is still a gap regarding contemporary left-wing security responses to the integration of European Muslims. Indeed, both sides tend to securitize Muslim minorities, that is to construct Muslims as a security threat for specific values and to govern Muslims as though they were a source of unease and danger.⁸⁰ When conservative and progressive parties evoke the “Muslim otherness,” they have in mind different ideological standpoints. Schematically: white and Christian Europe for the Right; liberal-progressive Europe for the centre-left.

This paper chooses France as a typical case study of the “vicious circle” between Islamophobia and radicalization.⁸¹ Since 2012, France has been overwhelmingly hit by jihadist terrorism. From 2015 to 2018, 249 people were killed and 928 wounded in a total of 22 terrorist attacks.⁸² In 2019-2020, we can count 9 deaths and 23 blessings in a total of 7 incidents. Before 2015, the attack committed by Mohammad Merah provoked killed 7 people and wounded 2. Such critical juncture weighed in the governmental elaboration of a knee-jerk counterterrorism agenda. Yet, Islamophobic tones are not new in French political history, as an overview of French colonial past shows.⁸³ Moreover, France is a country where multicultural discourses and identity politics are usually berated and considered as Trojan horses of foreign models (especially Anglo-American ones) deemed as centrifugal and disruptive of national cohesion. These elements make it a suitable case to investigate how the Left framed the response to jihadism.

I aim to reflect on how the French Left is divided when it comes to governing Muslim minorities. The political parties on the French Left belong to different political ideologies (ex. social-democracy, communism, Trotskyism, radical populism) and are all significant as they harbour a historical ambivalent attitude toward Islam, especially due to their anti-clericalism and attachment to French-style secularism (*laïcité*).⁸⁴ Particularly, the biggest French centre-Left party (the *Socialist Party*, PS) is a relevant case study that

instantiates a phenomenon occurring on a larger scale: namely, the discursive and conceptual travel of securitization of Islam from the Right (mostly the *National Rally* and *The Republicans*) to the centre-left. Aside from France, citizenship, integration, and immigration policies proposed by centre-left governments in several European countries (UK, Italy, Denmark) are becoming progressively entrenched with a logic of securitization.⁸⁵ They also represent a right-ward movement in the discursive articulation of security, less tied to socio-economic connotation and more to a strictly juridical and cultural sphere.

This process emerged strongly during the Presidency of François Hollande (2012-17), but it started beforehand, harking back at least to the intra-party debates on security – epitomized by the congress of Villepinte in 1997.⁸⁶ In the Hollande years, the PS adopted a narrative that depicts Muslims as potentially inclined to embrace radical ideologies incompatible with some values cherished by the party, such as secularism (*laïcité*), civic nationalism, respect for liberal-democratic norms like freedom of speech, and protection of gender minorities. This narrative is partly explained as a reaction to jihadism, which dramatically spiked the perception of insecurity raised by Islamism. In stoking the fear about radicalization and communalism, the PS appropriated from the Right an interpretive lens that divides the French socio-political field between nationalist defenders of French Republican values, on one side, and supporters of multicultural and “woke” ideas coming from abroad, on the other.⁸⁷ In this zero-sum game, whoever tries to express sympathy towards Muslims’ daily travails and to raise awareness about Islamophobia is portrayed as an “Islamogauchiste” (*Islamogauchiste*), in cahoots with the enemy of French way of life. Several currents and former Socialist politicians deployed the label to smear the left-wing of their party and radical left parties such as La France Insoumise (LFI, *Unbowed France*).

The argument that I want to defend here is that Islamo-leftism is

not an evident historico-political fact, but a rhetorical artifact that the PS borrowed from a nationalist right-wing vocabulary. It aims silence the denounces of Islamophobia coming from more progressive voices and securitize them as a threat to French Republican principles, first and foremost to *laïcité*. In what follows, I firstly retrace the origins of the word “Islamism.” Then, I contextualize its use in the recent securitarian momentum ushered in by the PS. The third section explains why LFI and its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon became a polemical target of the centre-Left for what was considered as an underestimation of the Islamist threat. The conclusions reiterate that the French centre-Left opts for an essentialist and Islamophobic prism to interpret Muslims’ requests rather than dwelling on the root causes of their resentment.

Islamism-leftism: What Do You Mean?

It is rather difficult to retrace the exact genealogy of the word Islamism-leftism. According to Torrekens,⁸⁸ the label Islamism-Leftism is associated with the publication by Chris Harman in 1994 of a text about the relationship between the far-Left and the plethora of Islamist groups that was active between the Eighties and the Nineties (ex. in Iran, Sudan, Egypt). Harman (leader of the British Trotskyist *Socialist Workers Party*) explained that the Left had given contrasting answers to the rise of political Islam. Some groups kept on looking at Islam as another “opium of the Muslim masses” and as a reactionary ideology. Others harboured a more tactical attitude, as they considered political Islamists to be relevant allies in the fight against Western imperialism. Such a polemical anti-imperialist vein has gradually disappeared among contemporary centre-Left parties, bar the discourse put forward by the Labour Left, that gained renewed traction during the secretary of Jeremy Corbyn (as showed by the “*Race and Faith Manifesto*” published by Labour in 2019).⁸⁹

This fracture between sympathizers and critics of Islamism splintered the French Left since 1979, the year that is considered a

milestone in the international rise of political Islam and that heavily contributed to shaping the rapport between the constellation of communist and Trotskyist parties, on one side, and Islamist groups, on the other. Ferhat recalls that the *Socialist Unified Party* (PSU) is the political force that goes further in solidarizing with Muslims and considering the Iranian revolution as a catalyst event “*capable of harnessing the vitality of third-world masses, who built on their experience and their autochthonous culture, to upend established tyrannies.*”⁹⁰ Likewise, the *Revolutionary Communist League* took a hard posture against the *French Communist Party*. The latter – which obtained 16.1% in 1981 and 10% in 1986 legislative elections – had adopted quite a concerned attitude against immigration at the beginning of the Eighties. Raymond argues that the PCF was not immune to xenophobic and veiled Islamophobic tones, as some infamous episodes witness. On December 24, 1980, some PCF activists and councillors in Vitry (led by the communist mayor) used a bulldozer to destroy a hostel for immigrant workers. Although the securitizing gesture recalls what current Far-Right parties preach, it can be said that it was carried out within an alternative referent object to secure: the persuasion that foreign low-skilled workers would lower the standards of French job market, namely reference more in line with the socio-economic connotation of security that was still spread on the Far-Left.

Hence, some factions on the far-left certainly bent towards Islamist movements as the most credible successors of anti-imperialist and pan-Arabist fights. Regarding domestic politics, radical left parties considered Muslim associations and local candidates as possible electoral partners. Besides, it is a fact that Muslims in France (and in other Western countries) have overwhelmingly voted for the Left.⁹¹ Whether it was a marriage of convenience or a genuine fruit of ideological congruence, the proximity between the left and Muslims does not imply that there is such a thing as an Islamo-leftist front. Nowhere did Harman’s booklet (that likely earned little consideration outside of academic and militant circles) theorize a

putative world-scale alliance between the left and Islam, whose effects against French integration universal model are feared by French conservative intelligentsia.

Islamism soon turned into a polemical slur that blurred the political boundaries. Picturing the political Left as a cosmopolitan liberal elite closer to ethnic minorities and detached from native people's needs is a strategic ploy well-grounded in right-wing narratives.⁹² Who tries to lament the discrimination of Muslims today is blamed as a sort of traitor of France, as the Far-Right revue *Valeurs Actuelles* defined the academic Philippe Marlière.⁹³ A short overview of French historical background reveals that such tones against intellectuals were already widely circulating against Jews, as it happened during the affair Dreyfus. The anti-Semitic slurs and policies spiked during the Vichy period when the conspiracy about the links between Jews, masonry and communists gained traction.

Beyond the Right, several intellectuals with a liberal-progressive and Left-wing political pedigree (Pierre-André Taguieff, Caroline Fourest, Alain Finkielkraut) alerted about the convergence between decolonial and anti-racist networks and the advocates of Muslims' religious rights (ex. eating *halal* food, wearing the hijab etc). Such convergence was also visible during the second Intifada. Based on this, Fourest defines Islamism as the position of radical left groups who are "pro-Islamism."⁹⁴ In his book on "Judeophobia," Taguieff reckons that the anti-Islamophobic battles are "*a sort of Trojan horse that allowed Islamist cultural strategists to subvert, corrupt or instrumentalize anti-racist militancy.*"⁹⁵ After the tragic murder of Samuel Paty in Conflans-Saint-Honorine (October 16, 2020),⁹⁶ a group of 100 academics signed an open letter in the centre-left newspaper *Le Monde* to condemn the too much laxist attitude showed on campus regarding Islamism and other theories translated from the Anglo-American vocabulary ("*indigenist, racist and decolonial ideologies*"⁹⁷).

Nonetheless, even Taguieff, who wrote extensively about the topic and who is not certainly a supporter of multiculturalism, denies the existence of a somewhat Islamo-leftist homogeneous entity, let alone of an inner enemy poised to upend French constitutional values. However, the mediatic panic about leftists supposedly enamoured of Islam stoked public fears for the supposed threats they pose to French universal race-blind model, to national security (for the insufficient condemn of jihadism) and to the French relationship with Israel.⁹⁸ It contributed to creating a hostile discursive setting when progressive and radical thinkers are quickly disqualified from the Republican camp because of their call to emancipate Muslims from socio-economic disparities.

The Socialist Party and its Right-ward Movement

There is no evidence to claim that the anti-Islamophobic posture adopted by some far-left parties and civil society movements means turning a blind eye to jihadism. Nonetheless, the accuses of Islamo-leftism recently gained traction within the centre-left to silence critics of the Cabinet agenda and label them as accomplices with the jihadist enemy. This aligns with a general drift of the Socialist Party towards the right edge of the political spectrum, as powerfully argued by Éric Fassin.⁹⁹

The label Islamo-Leftism points to the Socialist appropriation of national-populist refrains under the mounting pressure of Marine Le Pen. I reckon this semantic option not only as a tactical move to woo back voters attracted by the *National Rally* (NR) but also as the product of a sedimented anti-Muslim feeling that the PS (and many among its most anti-clerical electors) has nurtured at least since the Creil Affair. Hence, it mirrors a longstanding fracture across the French Left. What this brief excursus tells us is that the construction of Islamo-leftist as a dangerous category raises concerns about the right-ward direction taken by the former largest left-wing party in French Parliament (in 2012-2017). As Marlière

explains, the word belongs to far-right semantics, “*verbalizes racism and anti-intellectualism*” and conveys the impression of a spectral alliance between “*Islam and middle-class intelligentsia detached from the people.*”¹⁰⁰

This attitude perfectly aligns with the securitarian policies adopted by the Hollande administration (ex. the state of emergency from 2015 to 2017, the project to strip dual-national terrorists of citizenship) that drew sharp criticism within the PS. After the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo (7 January 2015) and in the 10th and 11th districts of Paris (13 November 2015), Hollande signed a Project of Constitutional Law that proposed to modify the art.34 of the Constitution by inserting the possibility to remove the citizenship from binationals convicted for “*serious attempts against the life of the Nation.*”¹⁰¹ Although eventually it was not voted, the denaturalization represented an exclusionary policy that earned momentum within some Socialist factions while raising concerns in others. Tellingly, the former Socialist secretary, Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, warned that the “*idea was not born on the Left, but on the Right, and then appropriated by the National Front.*”¹⁰² While Hollande’s discourse was less exclusive than the one mobilized by the Right, it anyway targeted French binationals, who mostly share a North African background. Hence, it is reasonable to think that the PS nurtured vivid concerns about their radicalization and disavowal of the French Republican pact.¹⁰³

Amid the mainstreaming of right-wing motives, an aspect that deserves attention is the prioritization of security as a socio-cultural rather than socio-economic issue. The former Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Manuel Valls appropriated right-wing calls for securitization and surveillance of Muslim communities but adjusted them into a left-wing vocabulary. This is unsurprising, considering that Valls has for long argued that the Left should elaborate a more coherent doctrine on security.¹⁰⁴ In his vision, the Left should pay more attention to establishing law-and-order in the

“banlieues,” namely the urban peripheries of large French cities (like Paris and Marseille) sadly associated with crime, poverty and now with Islamist radicalization. Valls peddled the narrative that Muslim practices like wearing the headscarf are a worrying signal of Islamist political affirmation and communal detachment from the Republi-can unity.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, after the jihadist attacks in Brussels (22 March 2016), the Minister of the City Patrick Kanner warned to monitor the “*hundreds of French Molenbeek*.” Molenbeek, namely the Brussels’ district where the authors of the attack came from, is mentioned as a synecdoche of “*territory lost to Islamism*” – an expression recently popularised by the academic Bernard Rougier.¹⁰⁶

It can be argued that two loose factions were created regarding the best response to articulate against jihadism. The feud did not split the party but created some fissures. Other Socialist MPs and members of the Cabinet close to Valls (located on the party right-wing) often warned that Muslims might be seduced by radical versions of Islam that jar with Western values. In so doing, this faction blames the Socialist left-wing, along with other radical leftist groups, for legitimizing political Islam¹⁰⁷ and being naive towards associations who cover their communal message under the veneer of anti-racist agendas (ex. “*The Indigenous of Republic*”¹⁰⁸). Tellingly, in the 2017 Socialist primary elections, Valls accused the other candidate Benoît Hamon – considered as positioned on the intra-party left – of substantial ambiguity and inaction about *laïcité*, as though Hamon was in cahoots with Islamic “communalism.”¹⁰⁹ Valls already showed its inclination to embrace tougher security measures compared to what he judged as a laxist approach promoted by his party – another leitmotiv borrowed by the Right. Similarly, Malek Boutih (close to the Vallsian wing) argued that Hamon condoned Islamic communalism because of the discrimination French Muslims suffered, whereas an anonymous member of the government even defined Hamon as the “*candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood*.”¹¹⁰ In response, Hamon tried to stake

out his distinctive position by saying that the defense of secularism should not be used as a vehicle for stigmatization of Muslims.

Despite the iron-fist approach on security, the Vallsian positions cost him the criticism of some party cadres, who deplored the government's passive imitation of Right-wing policies. Eventually, Hamon defeated Valls in the PS' primary elections in 2017, but the daunting results at the Presidential Elections (6.3%) reduced the political weight bore by the PS. In those elections, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the most voted candidate (19.5%) on the Left, despite having fewer parliamentary seats than the Socialist group. Accordingly, Mélenchon and LFI turned into the first target of the institutional Left's securitization through the label Islamo-Leftism, along with other academics and pundits who raised more awareness about French structural racism and Islamophobia.¹¹¹

The Targets of Securitization

Let me now look at how Mélenchon and LFI were hit by mounting accuses of Islamo-leftism. LFI currently represents the most credible political agent of de-securitization of Islam, at least if we consider the parties sitting in the National Assembly. For such commitment, the party earned the unfair accuse of being an accomplice with Muslim extremists. Mélenchon seems to align with other European left-wing populists (Podemos, Syriza, Corbyn) in articulating a more inclusive narrative about ethnic minorities, whose grievances are pitted more as socio-economic than cultural and religious. This notwithstanding, it should be recalled that the very same Mélenchon has bought into harsh comments against Muslims in the name of Republican criticism of religion and never put into question the belief that Muslims should respect the French secular framework, as witnessed by his endorsement of the headscarf ban in schools in 2004 and of the *niqab* ban in 2010.¹¹²

That said, considering the critical moment that France lived after

the jihadist attacks in 2015, it is very significant that Mélenchon avoided the martial tones against Islam spread instead across the PS. His arguments pointed to two purposes. At first, to avoid the stigmatisation of all Muslims. Describing Muslims as a “suspect community” is a mistake that only plays out in the hands of jihadist preachers who exploit their resentment.¹¹³ Secondly, decoupling the link between Islamic practices, radicalization, and terrorism, that the right-edge of the PS had barely called into question. Mélenchon recalled that 90% of foreign fighters leave for personal reasons rather than religious ones, according to the data gathered by French anti-terrorism magistrates.¹¹⁴ The emphasis on individual factors does not deny the existence of jihadist ideologues but equips electors with a wider contextualisation of the multiple reasons that compel terrorists to commit an attack – which cannot be framed only as if it was barely a mechanical outcome of religious radicalization. This aligns with the de-securitizing approach to Islam that his party is bolstering.

Over the last years, LFI has attempted to promote a counter-narrative to the securitarian one established by the Socialist Cabinet before and by the centre-Right Cabinets led by Édouard Philippe (2017-2020) and Jean Castex (2020-ongoing), under the Presidency of Emmanuel Macron. In this respect, one illustrative example that the feud across the political Left is well and alive emerged after Mélenchon participated in the march against Islamophobia, organized in November 2019 by the *New Anti-capitalist Party* and by the *Collective Against Islamophobia in France* (CCIF). The latter was dissolved in 2020 after the murder of Samuel Paty because, according to the Minister of Interior Gérard Darmanin, its activity and positions eased the transmission of radical Islamist ideas.¹¹⁵ The march brought together the Right, the Cabinet, and other parties on the Left into a Republican field battling against Islamo-leftism. Not only did the PS refuse to join it,¹¹⁶ but also the PCF and the Green.¹¹⁷

Mélenchon justified his endorsement to express solidarity with Muslims after the shooting against a mosque in Bayonne. He affirmed that “*We are the only guarantor of civic peace and of the Republic. What would be the situation if our people tore apart for religious reasons?*.”¹¹⁸ Additionally, Mélenchon emphasized the need to overcome religious differences (not to include them) and coalesce around French Republican norms. While this was not a call for multiculturalism, it remained a genuine way to soften the stigmatizing tones coming from the centre-left. Never did Mélenchon flaunt the specter of an Islamist penetration in France,¹¹⁹ even after the attack in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, which brought to new internecine feuds within Left-wing parties. For such reasons, Valls put Mélenchon and the Radical Left on the pillory as they were “*largely guilty*” and “*reluctant to condemn political Islam.*”¹²⁰ The accuse of Islamo-leftism is ungenerous and polemical because what LFI did was to denounce French structural racism, as well as the lingering anti-Muslim hate crimes.

Suspects against Islamism grew strongly when Macron decided to tackle the alleged Islamist communal aspirations by proposing the “*Law to strengthen the principles of the Republic,*” initially and significantly called “*Law against separatism.*” According to Castex, the law was not meant to target any religion and should not be interpreted as such. Instead, its purpose was to eradicate the “*dangerous ideology of radical Islamism.*”¹²¹ This move recalls a more general trend in counter-radicalization strategies, where the target shifted from neutralizing the violent terrorist attack to preventing the spread of extremist ideas albeit they are not translated into violent acts. Formalized by the British Prevent strategy, the emphasis on non-violent extremist narratives might lead to the securitization of the private and personal life and to preventive interventions launched before the crime is even committed.¹²²

While debating the Law in the National Assembly, Mélenchon admitted that “*there is a will of political Islamism to subvert*

institutions” but reiterated that France should not treat jihadists as the representatives of all French Muslims, which would further alienate them.¹²³ In another chunk of the discussion about the law, Mélenchon denounced the double standard attitudes towards terrorism that Western media and political elites usually adopt:

“When a notorious drug addict, who did not observe Ramadan (...) gets behind the wheel of a truck and murders nearly ninety people in Nice, there is immediate talk of radicalization, of Islamism (...) On the other hand, when a man takes a gun to shoot members of the Muslim community who are leaving the Bayonne mosque, everyone says that the perpetrator is a madman – which is undeniable – and although this man was a candidate of the National Rally in the 2015 departmental elections, no one thinks of imputing this act to the National Rally!”¹²⁴

From this excerpt, it is possible to notice the stress on the distinct coverage that terrorist attacks usually receive by mainstream media and politicians. Men of Muslim background are pitched as acting in name of a radicalized version of Islam, while white supremacists are described as lone wolves. As he shields religion from the accuses of radicalization, Mélenchon sets another boundary with the mainstream narrative espoused by the PS, more inclined to shift the onus of radicalization on Islam than on other possible factors – as largely acknowledged by recent studies.¹²⁵

What these speeches disclose is that LFI does not treat Muslims as threats to national security, albeit condemning the atrocious jihadist attacks. The securitization of Islam does not belong to LFI’s discursive repertoire. Contrary to the allegations moved by the Right and the PS, security occupies an important spot in the party agenda, in line with a broader interest nurtured by European left-wing parties. What changes is the articulation of security in objects to protect and threats to counter, that diverge from the centre-left.

Mélenchon insists that Muslims are not security threats because the

first source of insecurity and separatism is economic, rather than religious and cultural. In contrast with the slogan “*security is the first freedom*” (that former PS candidate to presidential elections Lionel Jospin borrowed from the Right), Mélenchon believes that freedom is the first security, as the latter means protection from State coercion.¹²⁶ To protect some of its central ideals – social justice, economic redistribution, climate justice –, LFI securitizes its enemies, identified according to a socialist and populist repertoire as the rich transnational oligarchy. This is in line with his opposition to the racialization of security procedures,¹²⁷ which emerged in the discursive asymmetric emphasis on Muslims and in practices like police identity checks.

Another category targeted by allegations of Islamo-Leftism comprises the social scientists working on Islamophobia and post-colonial studies, as though they promoted a sort of infiltration of destabilizing “foreign” notions into French universities. Much has been written on how schools represent a keystone for the pedagogy of French Republican order.¹²⁸ Schools gained renewed centrality in the efforts to counter extremist ideas and win Muslims’ “hearts and minds,” as suggested by mainstream Counter Violent Extremism strategies. In this respect, it is important to recall that the current Minister of Higher Education and Research and Innovation Frédérique Vidal argued that Islamo-leftism is “corroding” French academia and suggested launching an enquiry to distinguish between “scientific research” and “politicized militant research,” the target being to berate radical ideas and especially postcolonial and intersectional studies.¹²⁹ This agenda caused much uproar among researchers since more than 600 academics signed a letter to ask for Vidal’s resignation.¹³⁰ So did Vidal attract loud criticism amid Left-wing opposition (LFI’s MP Bénédicte Taurine talked about a “*witch-hunt*”) and even among the Macronist parliamentary majority.¹³¹ In a similar vein, the Minister of National Education, Youth and Sport Jean-Michel Blanquer kickstarted a think-tank (“The Laboratory of the Republic”) whose mission is to counter

so-called wokeism and other divisive identitarian narratives coming from the US.¹³²

Conclusion

This paper tried to make sense of why the French Left cannot find a common stance on Islam. Being sympathetic to the routinised discrimination of Muslims, as radical and progressive leftists are, does not mean to condone jihadism, let alone to belong to an imaginary Islamo-leftist network. Nonetheless, the abuse of this label mirrors the widespread circulation of hostile takes against whoever tries to understand the root causes of the resentment put forward by those who happen to share a Muslim background. I illustrated that Islamo-leftism is weaponized by both the Right and the centre-Left to silence the voices critical of the securitarian movement triggered by Hollande. Denouncing the fissiparous presence of Islamo-leftist in French politics and academia is a form of securitization as it divides French society into friends and enemies, the latter being considered as a threat to the stability of French way of life and values, chief among them *laïcité*. This securitizing rhetoric has not yet been translated into concrete policy measures, that would breach academic freedom and bring back the memory of past authoritarian regimes.

Yet, what Vidal proposed is an alarming reminder of how the socio-political interpretations of radicalization and jihadism are increasingly met with scepticism by political elites. The French Left illustrates this fatigue, since a first faction analyses jihadism without prejudices against Muslims, while the second one (ex. Valls) blames the first for “excusing” terrorism by interpreting it through social motivations. Jihadism, as this second category believes, should be considered both an ideology to eradicate and as a rational choice to maximize the fight against French Republican values.

The second interpretation, historically tied to conservative and

neoliberal ideologies, gained momentum in the PS at least since Lionel Jospin condemned the frequent recourse to sociological excuses to explain criminality.¹³³ Following this wave, Valls warned that “*trying to explain radicalization sounds a bit like excusing it.*”¹³⁴ This swing to the Right in interpreting crime, social unrest and integration of ethnic minorities signals that part of the political left increasingly buys into an anti-intellectual discourse. The Socialist secretary Olivier Faure condemned the fearmongering about Islamo-leftism (that he disparaged as “*a word invented by the far-right*”¹³⁵). However, the direction taken by the centre-left over the last years suggests a normalization of ambiguous, if not utterly Islamophobic tones that jars with the emancipatory mission believed by its most progressive and radical factions.

Identification and Transnational Connections of Muslim Diaspora Communities in Britain

SABAH KHAN

Introduction

There are processes of de-traditionalization, trans-ethnicisation among Muslim communities across Europe. This implies attempts of purification from cultural, ethnic practices towards a universal Islam. There is prioritization of religious identities specifically Islamic identities among younger generations of Muslims (Peek, 2005; Eade, 1997; Glynn, 2002; Jacobson, 1997; Modood, 2003). The roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to anti-imperial pan-Islamism (Aydin, 2017). The discourse of ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington, 1993), ‘war on terror’ as well as the geo-political scenario have acted as ‘curiosity trigger’ (Warren, 2018) for many young Muslims to explore religion and comprehend their Muslim identity. The British Muslim identity discourse is contextualized in reference to Rushdie Affair, Gulf war, securitization of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, 7/7, Manchester bombing, London Bridge attack, Danish cartoon affair, etc. All these have led British Muslims to urge unity and the need for transnational Muslim civil society based on the notion of de-territorialized ummah, as a response to international conflicts and the geo-political scenario (Elshayyal, 2018; McLoughlin, 2013; Werbner, 2000).

Adamson (2008) adopted a social movement perspective and argued that diasporas can be seen as a product or an outcome of diaspora politics. In other words, how diaspora is constructed by political entrepreneurs. The use of ‘Muslim’ as a political category is often to make symbolic links between situation of Muslims worldwide. The different organizations in the UK draw on the

category of Muslim as a means of constructing a political constituency or a supranational identity.

In this paper, we study diaspora in relation to religious diaspora with particular reference to Muslim community. The debate on religion and diaspora can be divided into two blocks, wherein some scholars have argued that religion can be cognate to diasporas but do not constitute diasporas in and of themselves (Cohen 1997), while others argue a case for diaspora religion (Hinnells 1997, Smart 1999). When we talk of diaspora as Muslim diaspora, it becomes complicated since Muslim communities do not define their identity by a mythicised territorial origin. However, in recent years there is much discussion of ‘de-territorialized diasporas’ (Cohen 2008). It is in relation to this notion of de-territorialised diaspora that some scholars (McLoughlin 2013; Moghissi 2006; Sayyid 2010) argue that there can be seen emerging a Muslim diaspora, united by feelings of Islamic co-responsibility. It is here that the notion of ummah is evoked. In fact, Brubaker (2005) says it is more useful to discuss diaspora as ‘stances, claims, practices rather than a diaspora.’ Similarly, Sokefeld (2016) argued that the formation of diaspora communities as an instance of mobilization process. The term Muslim diaspora may have at its core more of a political impulse than a cultural impulse. It is based less on historical commonalities and more on the contemporary and common concerns and grievances that diasporic communities experience in relation to the host countries in which they now live. This study tests the legitimacy of claims made by some scholars that transnational Muslims constitute a diaspora rooted in a collective consciousness and thereby intends to engage critically with the notion of ummah.

There is a plethora of literature on Muslims in Britain (Abbas, 2005; Ansari, 2004; Ahmed and Sardar, 2012; Ansari, 2004; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Hellyer, 2009; Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Malik, 2004 et al.). Within this there is a large set of literature on South Asian Muslims

(Akhtar, 2011; Brown, 2006; Franceschelli, 2016; Werbner, 2000 et al.). This includes micro as well as macro studies. Some have looked at local communities in Bradford, Yorkshire and East London. Others have done research on Muslims in Leeds, Leicester, London, etc. which offer a broad perspective. Of these there is further subdivision whereby a large section of the research deals with Muslim women. Most studies deal with one particular ethnic group and try to understand their dynamics of identity within their social environment or try to understand the inter-generational differences in identification process. Jacobson (1998) studied British Pakistanis in Waltham Forest; Eade (1989) and Hoque (2009) studied British Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets. The novelty of this research is that it focuses not only on a particular ethnic group, rather, it takes up Muslims from South Asian background in London city i.e., Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian Muslims. In the United Kingdom, the South Asian population is larger than that in any other European country, and indeed of any other country in the world except Malaysia (Brown, 2006). The three South Asian groups together (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) account for 3.6 per cent of the total population and 45 per cent of the ethnic minority population (ibid.). By looking at three ethnic groups of Muslims in London, it tries to comprehend the differences/similarities in the identification process of Muslims in diaspora. In addition to this it tries to grasp the inter as well as intra group dynamics i.e., inter-relations between these communities. How these Muslims of different ethnic background settled in the same geo-political context engage with the notion of ummah. In addition to this, reflect on the notion of a South Asian Muslim diaspora.

Drawing insights from social identity perspective, this study reflects upon the complexities of participants recognising themselves as a collective group. This concept of identity salience can be used to understand the assertion of one's religious identity over other forms of identity. This study would particularly look at the identity salience for Muslims. For instance how being a Muslim assumes

greater importance in the hierarchy of multiple identities that comprise a sense of self. The salience of religious identity can be seen in terms of preserving cultural and ethnic traditions for immigrants or as a way of overcoming social isolation, etc.

The focus is on religious identity particularly how and why it becomes the most salient form of identification. In relation to this, the other questions asked were, when Muslims mobilize politically, do they mobilize as ethnic groups or as a religious group. In other words, how does identification with religion play out in activism and public articulation. Linked to this is the most pertinent question of Muslim ummah. When there is increasing identification as a Muslim by majority of people and mobilization on the basis of religion, then are we witnessing a transcendence from ethnic identity and existence of a Muslim ummah.

It would examine whether there exists a South Asian Muslim diaspora or not. In other words, whether ummah solidarity plays out into a Muslim diaspora? The main objective of this research is to study the formation of diasporic identities, particularly, of South Asian Muslims in London city. It focuses on the aspect how this identification is influenced by religious identity, religious institutions and transnational connections.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach. In order to get a nuanced understanding of complex issues of identity and transnationalism and role of religion, ethnographic methods are used for this study. This research employed participant observation along with interviews. The researcher recruited interviewees using several strategies. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling. The name of respondents has been changed so as to maintain anonymity. This study is based on fieldwork done in London, United Kingdom during October 2018 to January 2020. This research was carried out in two boroughs of East London –

Tower Hamlets and Newham and two prominent mosques in London – London Central Mosque and Islamic cultural Centre in Regent’s Park, the other was the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre in Aldgate, Tower Hamlets. The data was collected through interviews and observation of South Asian Muslims in London. Over the period the researcher collected data with the help of sixty-seven Muslims (both men and women) of South Asian background – Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians who live in London. This included Sunni, Shia and Ahmaddiya Muslims. The researcher also conducted some interviews with Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds like Somalia, Morocco, Algeria, Iraq and Turkey, so as to get a sound understanding of the issue under study.

Identity Discourse

There are various perspectives offered on identity. Identity can be seen as a product of individual processes (Erikson 1968), or as a social being and is a dynamic product of interaction with significant others (Goffman 1959; Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Others like Tajfel (1974) and Turner (1982) put forward social identity theory. Social identity theory is a social psychological theory which links individuals and groups. While social psychological theories have focused on the ‘individual in the group,’ social identity theory draws attention to ‘the group in the individual’ (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 3). Identity can only be understood as a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming.’ One’s identity – one’s identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular and plural – is never a final or settled matter. Jenkins (2008) defined ‘identification is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference’ (ibid., 18). This study deals with religious identity and how it assumes importance in contrast to other markers. In order to understand identification among Muslim diaspora in Britain, it is essential to reflect upon how British Muslim identity crystallised.

The period between the 1960s and 1980s was characterised by a drive towards identity preservation in various quarters of Britain's Muslim communities. This was manifested on a local level by broadening of community interests from more functional issues such as the establishment of mosques, prayer congregations and the provision of halal meat, to concerns around the preservation and promotion of religious identity among the younger generation. If we look at how the category of Muslim came to prominence, it was with the 1988 Act which precipitated the first legally required bodies to provide a forum for Muslims as Muslims, rather than disguised as Pakistanis or Asians (Mcloughlin 2002, 48). The government policies played an important role in Muslim assertiveness going from local to national. As the 'local government withdrew support for various multicultural and voluntary sector organisations, Muslim organisations were started to deliver key community services themselves. It was then that some mosques partnered with local authorities for provisions such as elderly day care, education and retraining' (Mcloughlin 2002, 48). The 2001 census was the first in which the government questioned about religion through census. What became known as the Rushdie affair politicised a generation of Muslims in Britain (Peace 2015, 41). When we talk about the identification of British Muslims, it is understood to have crystallized in the context of The Honeyford Affair 1984; The Rushdie Affair 1988; Gulf War 1990-1991; Attacks of 9/11; London bombing in July 2005. All these factors cumulatively laid more emphasis on 'Muslim' or religious identity.

Religious Identity and Diaspora

Religion has played a significant role in the history of diaspora. This is apparent from its reference to exile of the Jews, Christian missionaries, Sufi orders etc. Various perspectives have been offered to look at religion and diaspora (Baumann, 2000; Hinnells, 2005; Knott 1992; Vertovec, 2000). There are discussions of increased global interconnections leading to greater ties with sacred centres

of faith (Smart, 1987). Diasporas often “emphasise ‘universalising’ religious tendencies such as ‘ecumenism,’ ‘orthodoxy’ or ‘fundamentalism’ rather than assimilate under pluralising conditions” (McLoughlin, 2005, p. 536-537).

Religion can play an important role in forming people’s social identities. For example, Ysseldyk et. al. (2010, p. 61) argued that the moral authority of religious social identities makes it distinctively important. Schreiter (2009) highlighted the significance of religion for migrants, in terms of how religion sustains people in times of difficulty, religion can serve as an identity marker in a new context. Religion can also aid a person in giving meaning to migration experiences or function as a resource in resolving adjustment issues. Duderija (2007, p. 146) argues that “that religious identification serves as an ‘anchor’ amidst the contradictions and disjuncture faced by youth belonging to minority religions as they negotiate their identities within a multi-ethnic/multiracial society.” Similarly, Knott and Khokher (1993) have argued that Islam offers a way forward in an apparent ‘clash’ between the ‘traditional’ culture of their parents and the secular culture of the British mainstream.

Religious identity has become increasingly important in the backdrop of racialized identities (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2015). Birt (2009) argued a case for ‘community of suffering.’ Here we can bring in the category of political Muslims. Religion can be seen as a reaction and resolution to the external rejection by the White majority (Ballard, 1996; Gardner & Shukur, 1994; Haw, 2009). Several scholars like Saeed (1999), Samad (1996) and Stratham (2003) have tried to explain Muslim mobilisation as a reaction to discrimination, deprivation, public devaluation and disparagement of Muslims and Islam that has led to increased in-group solidarity. Meer (2008) argued a case for Muslim identity to be understood as ‘quasi-ethnic’ sociological formation in so far as British Muslims are concerned. In other words, it refers to the mobilizations undertaken by Muslims qua Muslims.

It is important to note, identity is not confined to territorial borders rather configured across and between spaces. It is important to highlight that supra-national connections shared by Muslims in different Western countries become both means and motives for certain formations of identity. The situation of third generation Muslims in Britain is not very different from Muslims in Germany or France. They do not have any strong relationship with their parent's homeland, at the same time, they are not really part of German society. The religious identities of young devout Muslims can be de-territorialized, i.e. their religious identity can be totally cut off from the traditional and ethnical background of their parents and grandparents. Gerlach (2006) and Mushaben (2008) argue that these people are living in a more trans-local space of identity constituting, i.e. they share similar ideas about Islam and follow trends in the Islamic world, but act more according to local issues.

Young Muslims' Identification

Identity is not something 'there' it must be established and as seen in this study, Muslims find multiple ways of establishing their identity. Identity is actively constituted in discourse. Identity can only be understood as a process of 'becoming.' There are several ways in which Muslims identify themselves. Identity should not be seen as inherited – Muslim, Buddhist, or British rather actively created and produced depending upon the situation. Youth self-identifications are hybrid, situational, and should not be essentialized as fixed choices. The fluidity of identity leads to the conjunction of British and ethnic or religious identity i.e. British-Bangladesh or British-Pakistani, British Muslim etc. One can have a strong sense of identification with being Indian and yet entirely British in their preferences. Young Muslims do not see British and Muslim as exclusive categories. One of the participants of this research was of the opinion that there is no conflict in being British and Muslim.

Sakina: But it is not about Britain being accommodating. My faith comes first. My faith teaches me how to...my faith is comprehensive enough to teach me how to live in whichever country I want to go to. My faith teaches me how to be a good citizen, to serve my country and to abide by the law of the land.

The third-generation Muslims in Britain do not see 'British' and 'Muslim' as binary categories. The younger British born generation find themselves in a process of negotiating their identities, they often try to navigate and negotiate their identity through religion.

Ethnic identity for them is something that has to do with their parents' homeland, language spoken at home or cuisine. 'British' is their legal identity or on paper identity. This vacuum led many to identify as 'Muslim first' which provides them with a sense of belonging. This category of *Muslim first* emerged in discussion with both young men and women, irrespective of their ethnic (Pakistani, Bangladeshi) and sectarian identity i.e. Shia, Sunni, Ahmadiyya. Respondents of other ethnic backgrounds other than South Asian, such as Turkish, Iraqi, Arab, Somali, Morocco all gave importance to religion and identified as Muslim first. This only contextualises the salience of religious identity among Muslims in diaspora. But the reasons vary, some have been brought up in a family of pious parents, some have become more religious after they did their *umrah/hajj* or got involved in *ijtema* (an Islamic congregation). People are motivated by a number of different reasons which triggers greater religious observance, for some it may be through the influence of a sibling or a close friend who decides to take their faith seriously, going on the pilgrimage, etc. The renewed importance of religion can be seen from the perspective of failure of socialism to offer a way out of oppression, exploitation has led to working class to turn to other movements (Glynn 2002, 977). Another explanation could be that young Muslims were attracted to new Islam, which offers motivation to take control of their lives and improve their position in society (Glynn 2002, 979).

There were few participants who said they identified as ‘British-Bangladeshi.’ Here one cannot ignore a particular section within the Bangladeshi community who can be called the ‘Secular Bangladeshi’ associated with Bangladesh nationalist movement and prefer to identify as Bangladeshi first and preserve the Bangla culture. There are organisations like Brick Lane Circle, Swadhinata Trust in the East End which work towards keeping the Bangladeshi culture and history among the younger generation. People of third generation associated with these organisations maintain close links with Bangladesh and Bengali culture. Young British South Asians find meaning in the concomitant interactions with their ethnic heritage as well as with their nationality and country of abode (Dey et al. 2017). They are part of what may be called the diaspora identity phenomenon.

Young British Muslims are attracted towards universalism of their religion (Jacobson 1997). Religion is seen as the ‘sacralizer of identity’ (Mol 1979). There has been a shift among the young generation, away from the oral traditions that continue to regulate the lives of the older generation (Samad 1998 and Jacobson 1998). There is less emphasis on *biraderi* and sectarianism (Samad 1988; Meer 2008). This was reiterated in the response of one of the interviewees, a young journalism student who refused to identify with any sects.

“My mum is from India, dad from Pakistan. I have a British passport. I have never lived in India or Pakistan. Both my parents were born in the UK...I don’t know about the Indian culture, I relate more to my dad’s.... I don’t believe in the whole segregation in a religion. I don’t think it should be. My family is sunni, but I am not any. I don’t believe in any” – Mohsin, 20.

Young Muslims in Britain today refuse to identify with sectarian allegiance of their parents, rather negotiate their religious identity in their own way. One very prominent trend noted both during this

research as well as by other scholars (Dudreija 2008; Hoque 2010; Roy 2004) is amongst the young British Muslims there was the ability to differentiate between religion and culture. These young Muslims are constantly engaged in separating core Islamic values from problematic ethnic cultural practices. A process of de-ethnicisation is at work, which reflects Islam detached from any culture. An example par excellence is the whole issue of celebration of *Milad un-Nabi* which many families celebrated, are now being told by their young ones to stop it because its ‘un-Islamic.’

Mohammed, 24 year old biotechnology student whose parents were from Lahore in Pakistan, claimed to be *“I am a Sunni Salafi. My mom’s side are Barelwi so they celebrate Milad un Nabi. But my dad’s side they are Wahabbis. But living here I learnt we should not celebrate it. I follow Salafi people, watch videos and all.”*

The third-generation is trying to connect with Muslims from other backgrounds like Somalian Muslims, Arabs, etc. Earlier transnationalism was understood by people in diaspora as links to homeland or more about ethnicity, now transnational young Muslims in Britain are oriented towards a transnational Islam which is not about one particular region. This is also apparent in the current diaspora philanthropy (Peterson 2015). Here we can discuss the notion of ummah prevalent among the Muslims in Britain, in order to comprehend the intersection of identity and transnationalism.

In the next section we look at one aspect of religious transnationalism i.e. ummah solidarity. Do transnational networks, mobilization around the category of ‘Muslim’ point to a globalized Muslim community?

Notions of Ummah

The ideal of ummah refers to the universal community of believers or a global community of Muslims. Many participants expressed

the belief in ummah and the fact that it exists. They argued their case on the basis that one need not see it as based on nation-state.

“Muslim ummah is based on community. It is not based on nation-state. It does exist, because the notion of solidarity is still present...It manifests, like I went to Djibouti to rescue Yemeni citizens” – Mustafa, 32.

“Ummah exists it only needs to be worked on, people need to develop a consciousness. You can have disagreements, but they are still part of the ummah. He may belong to one sect in Islam but does not disrespect others” – Shamim, 24.

Others pointed to congregations and cited interaction with Muslims as providing a sense of togetherness. Most people acknowledged the cultural differences but at the same time felt a connection with Muslims from any background. It is not appropriate to equate the religious notion of ummah to the different Muslims residing in different countries. Often people describe ummah as a sharing of empathy and emotions. The ummah becomes visible and ‘activated’ in its ‘trans-ethnic’ and ‘transnational’ ethos during particular emotional events (Marranci 2008, 112). This leads to a paradox: Muslims acknowledge the divisions, but do not see them as a factual denial of the ummah beyond a general religious rhetoric. Social scientists also have evidence that a certain collectivity and sense of belonging is visible among Muslims, in particular during times of crisis, such as the Rushdie Affair or the Danish Cartoons Affair.

Considering South Asian diaspora, South Asian Muslims in Britain can qualify as a group in so far as they have a shared history, similar migration pattern, face similar issues and problems of acculturation and assimilation in the host society. The racial, cultural characteristics serve as a common point. Despite this, the inter-relationships between the three ethnic groups reveals an insulated character.

British-Gujarati respondent believed Sylhetis to be an insulated group:

“They only associate with other Sylhetis because when they go to school, all their classmates are Bangladeshi, they come back home, neighbourhood is like that, and in the evening, the father probably hangs out with his brothers or relatives from the same village, so there is zero exposure to the British. They are living the same way they were living in Bangladesh. When these people go to university they face problems, because they feel they don’t fit in. They lack aspirations” – Syed, British-Gujarati.

This was reiterated by other Bangladeshis from Dhaka (both men and women) who felt excluded by the Sylhetis. The phenomenon of groupism did not confine to Sylhetis alone but can be seen amongst the Pakistanis as well. The different migration trajectories, differences of religion, region, culture make it difficult to speak of a single South Asian diaspora or for that matter a single Indian diaspora. There are however attempts to show unified Muslim community by organisations, essentialised image portrayed by the media. This can be seen in the various protests carried out, which on closer look would show that these are only a means to an end association by certain organisations and groups and does not translate to a common group consciousness.

Conclusion

The discussion in the preceding pages points towards an increasing identification with religious identity over other forms of identification. This identification with religion does not necessarily translate into a community feeling rather it is hampered by the power dynamics, cultural clashes, Islamism. Despite this there is no negation of ummah which does not depend on the idea of nation-state, culture. This concept is most definitely being used for political benefits, agendas by the Islamists and other groups. Yet it lives in

the concept of *tawḥīd*, spirit of charity and in young Muslims increasing interest in de-ethnicised Islam. Most South Asians still engage with the notion of ummah through ethnicity – giving charity in homeland, lobbying for Muslims back home, etc. There can be seen sub communities within the ummah of Somalians, Arabs, Moroccans, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Indians. There is a sense of Islamic co-responsibility and Muslim consciousness but that is best contextualised in terms of reactive religiosity in face of media bias, the backlash, etc. rather than pure commonality and connectedness based on religious principles.

There can be witnessed the rise of Muslims as a global socio-political identity of resistance (Hoque 2015). The identification as a Muslim in Britain is not only about religiosity or being a cultural Muslim. ‘Muslim’ has become a category outside the religious realm, it is more about socio-political identification which serves as a purpose of resistance or articulation in the public realm. It has become a third space above or merging characteristics of religious and secular. Muslims in Britain are in no way a unit, they are a unit in so far as racism, Islamophobia is concerned but not within themselves. It is important to note that diasporas do not emerge as a direct consequence of migration but develop through mobilisation and can be understood from a social movement perspective (Adamson 2012; Sökefeld 2006). It is in this context that Muslim diaspora can said to exist. Political motives on the part of Muslim groups and organisations, tend to portray a public image where all Muslims come together for a certain cause or demand but the grassroot reality is often different. The transnational links inspired by religious identity, identity networks, activism, religious notions of ummah are only different aspects whereby one can begin to discuss the idea of a Muslim diaspora.

Multicultural Perspectives in a Monocultural Environment: The Case of Female British Muslims Navigating their Religiosity in Bulgaria

LAURA SANI

The present paper discusses the ways in which female British Muslims employ religion as a tool to create a realm of familiarity and cope with a different reality to which they are exposed. It examines the complexity of their temporal transition to a relatively monocultural society through in-depth semi-structural interviews with thirteen ethnic British students from third-year and above. The thesis demonstrates that the lack of contestation in the new environment allows for the religious identity of the sample to develop through their definition of it. It then shows how devotion and practice is moulded part from the family structure, childhood peers and local Muslim community and within new loci of familiarity in the face of Islamic and other support groups. This creates a revised personal understanding of the religion. It further argues that religious identity is reinforced when confronted by academic challenges during the process of maturation. Overall, religious identity is consolidated through negotiation with and response to processes pertaining to the immediate social and geographical setting.

Keywords: religious identity, British Muslims, women, religiosity, Bulgaria, multiculturalism, monoculture, mobility, studies.

Historical Background

“2,381 British students are there in Bulgaria – most of them study medicine.”¹³⁶

This was the title of a recently published article which sheds light on the impact of globalization on Bulgaria, a small European country. Since its inauguration as an EU member back in 2007, Bulgaria has been given the ability to revive its geopolitical position as a bridge between the East and the West. Historically, the country’s cultural, ethnic and religious characteristics were constructed under sporadic migrations and two significant foreign invasions, one of which resulted in 500 years of Ottoman presence. Contrary to these processes of diversification of the local population, the totalitarian

regime, which was introduced in 1946, assented to nearly fifty decades of systemic assimilation of ethnic and religious minorities and censored the inward as well as outward migration. Due to these two measures the local population had limited exposure to people of different race and “visibly apparent” ethnicity.

The Bulgarian Communist Party has exerted great efforts to consolidate the nation, making it one homogeneous unit. This political strategy ultimately made the Turkish and Pomak¹³⁷ communities their main targets. The Turkish had specific traditions and language which they were inclined to preserve, whereas the Pomaks were religious devotees. Both groups impeded the realisation of the vision of the Communist party,¹³⁸ which was to abolish the cultural and religious differences that existed within the nation. All citizens were to speak one language and pledge allegiance only to the common socialist ideals.¹³⁹ To achieve their objectives, the state forbade public and private religious practices, the use of the Turkish language and the wearing of traditional clothing. State officials were not satisfied with the results, so they adopted a new approach having no precedent in European history – change the Muslim names into Bulgarian names, including both the living and the dead.¹⁴⁰ These dynamics forced many Muslims from the ethnic minorities (Turks, Pomaks, Tatars and Roma) to flee towards the Turkish borders seeking asylum. It has to be clarified that the migration stated began as a “voluntary” process because of political pressure, but escalated to what was known as *the Big Excursion*.¹⁴¹

The stigma these events bore negatively impacted the cultural and ethnic dynamics in the Bulgarian society, even after the collapse of socialism in 1989. The multi-ethnic diversity that was present before the socialist regime gave way to homogeneity. While this is said, the idea of a monocultural environment should not be mistaken with the hegemonic dominance of a pre-existing majority as in the case of Ireland.¹⁴² Neither should the concept be equalized with the utter impossibility of minority groups to belong to the

larger community because they are rendered incompetent as in the case of Norway.¹⁴³ Rather in the context of Bulgaria monoculturalism is employed to signify a socio-political ideology of forced assimilation and a manipulated reality of demographics.

Referring back to the cited article title, the study is interested in how the British youth who decided to continue their studies in Bulgaria adjusted to a context which was more or less divorced from the cultural and religious pluralism the United Kingdom is so known for. Quite a few of those students were Muslims as well. Despite the fact that both the UK and Bulgaria share European heritage, those two countries have relatively different historical trajectories. This difference influenced their respective populations in fostering alternative perspectives on social pluralism.

Modern Britain in the aftermath of Imperialism strove to “remove barriers and stigmas”¹⁴⁴ under the forces of immigration. Ashcroft and Bevir explained the new make-up of the society as a shift from being “overwhelming white, ethnically British and Christian” to being one which was “constituted by creeds, cultures and communities from all over the globe.”¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, multi-culturalism was not analogous to accommodating for all minorities as it was a mechanism to replace “racist, assimilationist approaches to managing forms of ethnic and racial hierarchy.”¹⁴⁶ The situation of Muslims who resided in Britain was far from satisfactory. In different periods in correspondence with domestic and world affairs, “the evil Orientals”¹⁴⁷ were seen as far too *distinctive* to claim British identity. The increase in policies of securitization ultimately defined the Muslim minority as the “other” and led to a more pronounced distinctiveness, especially in the younger generations.¹⁴⁸ The alienation from the majority and other minority communities as well as the political agenda “to keep them in their own [Muslim] minority spaces”¹⁴⁹ prompted the accentuation of their religious identity, while they neglected their cultural and ethnic one.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the multicultural polity ensured that

minority groups are guaranteed some distinctive rights, such as language protection and relative political representation.¹⁵¹

The topic of British Muslim identity in regard to the social and political sphere was of interest to many researchers, especially after the 9/11 attacks and the declared War on Terror. This paper, however, has an objective to explore the topic from a slightly different angle. It particularly focuses on women because they are vulnerable and often suffer from a “gender-blind multicultural discourse.”¹⁵² The two main research questions I pose are:

1. In terms of religious identity formation, did the importance of religion change for female British Muslims when they settled in Bulgaria for studying?
2. Has the transition from a multicultural to a more homogeneous environment impacted their Muslim-consciousness and practice?

On the whole, this article argues that cross-cultural mobility to a setting void of “visible” diversity contributes to the conscious reinforcement of religious identity and an overall increase in ritual observance in the face of academic challenges, detachment from loci of familiarity (e.g. family, peers, local Muslim community) and transition to adulthood.

Prior Knowledge on the Topic

The studies on religious identity have employed the different variations of the social identity theory. Some treated religion as being incorporated in the cultural/ethnic identity,¹⁵³ while others asserted that religion constituted a specific group membership in itself.¹⁵⁴ Similar to the social identity theory in which there is an emphasis on the social interactions and group affiliations of each individual for their identity formation, the theoretical framework on the religious identity is structured on the basis of socio-religious

activities between persons within a spatial communal context.¹⁵⁵ The idea that the religious identity is determined based on the social relations one establishes makes it fluid, flexible and negotiable. This contradicts a popular misconception that religion offers constant time and space-bound identities.

Religious identity is neither fixed, nor uniform in manifestation. Sandwell argues that “religious identity is something that can be suppressed or expressed, depending on whether it is stigmatized, useful, or meaningful to do so in a particular time.”¹⁵⁶ This claim corresponds to the notion that multiple identities exist within a person, and, depending on the role which one assumes, one or more identities are activated.¹⁵⁷ Religious identity can be “suppressed” when another identity of higher prominence is to be displayed under definite circumstances and it can be “expressed” if the individual has given it precedence. The second part of the above-mentioned statement – “depending on whether it is stigmatized, useful, or meaningful” – builds on the theory of Barth¹⁵⁸ who contested that the identity performance is determined by personal interests.

As the social identity is influenced by certain external factors (group affiliation and interactions), it is also manipulated by internal ones, such as beliefs and values. This is applicable to religious identity as well. Mustafa, in her research about young British Muslims, outlines four types of socioreligious identities which result from the different degree of incorporation of religion in the personal belief system and the consistency of the religious practice.¹⁵⁹ The author suggests that youngsters who view religion as the most important element of their life see themselves as unable to claim British identity and thus have a strong religious practice. The established causal relationship is somehow problematic on the grounds that it implies a detachment of the individual from the local context completely and looks at it as if the processes happening in the subject’s immediate environment are not constructing variables.

The placement in the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of existence, in addition to the processes taking place therein, not only shape the identity but are also the real and imagined spaces in which it is manifested.¹⁶⁰ Expanding on the matter, the prospective study attempts to explore the importance of religion for young British Muslim women who change their geographical and social environment from a multicultural to a more uniform one. Far too little attention has been paid to the topic of religiosity in cross-national mobility in academia. The temporal transition will be looked at coupled with several other factors (maturation, perceived challenges, peer pressure and detachment from the family), which might have had an impact on the sample, to derive a more holistic image of the phenomenon.

Previous research has tried to include both men and women.¹⁶¹ However, the focus in the current one is on women because they are usually the victims of the British ethnic patriarchal structure.¹⁶² The paper will discuss how their religious identity is moulded under contextual mobility and away from the local communities' influence. Due to practical constraints, a possible limitation of this paper will be the failure to examine a larger sample to generate more reliable data. Another probable weakness can be the measurement of religiosity. The importance of religion is evaluated based on the personal experience, private devotion and the desire to obtain religious knowledge as temple visits are not obligatory for female devotees in Islam.

Research Methods

The qualitative method of semi-structured interviewing is best suited for this case study because it can capture the complexities of the religious identity formation during transition. For the purpose of the research, the primary inclusion criterion for the respondents was their place of residence. Although, as a whole, Britain is considered multicultural, the residents of some cities and neigh-

bourhoods are more exposed to diversity than others. The desired objective of the paper is to be accomplished if sampling is taken from individuals in the metropolitan areas. The interviewees, who are twelve in number, are third-year students and above. They have had time to familiarize themselves with the host environment (Bulgaria). The majority of the students study in the Medical University in Sofia. They are female British Muslims (hijabis and non-hijabs), from various ethnic backgrounds and come from families with different levels of religious engagement. The interviews, which lasted around one hour, were conducted online owing to the current situation with the pandemic. To protect the identity of the interviewees, the first letter of their real name was used. If the names began with the same letter a number is used to denote that the words pertain to a different individual.

Emerging Themes

Beyond the Monocultural

A rather surprising outcome of the interviews was that most of the participants thought they were more well-received by the local Bulgarian population than by the ‘white’ British. One respondent (S) relates, “Everyone is quite friendly here. I don’t think I had any negative experiences so far. They make more of an effort to talk to you, but in the United Kingdom they would not be up for conversation.” When asked to reflect on the situation back in Britain, several respondents who have darker skin and/or wear hijab and traditional clothes stated that although in their diverse neighbourhoods they felt safe, going to other part of the city or the country they felt vulnerable.

It is worthy of mentioning that in these parts, the interviewees were often miscategorised as “foreign” or “radicalized” by the local Caucasian population. The remarks on the ground of nativism highlighted the failure of multiculturalism. Although the multi-

cultural polity is said to protect and embrace ethnic differences, it fell short on instilling tolerance and inter-cultural understanding between the separate groups.¹⁶³

Bulgaria was deemed more welcoming because back home, these young British females, when in contact with the “real Brit,” had to routinely validate their values and loyalties. A second generation British-Pakistani student (A1) explained, “They [British people] would give you everything just so you look like them, they want you to sin.” This concern gives an insight into the somehow narrow definition of Britishness, that it is not as inclusive as to advance an “anything goes” type of cultural and religious relativism.¹⁶⁴

Despite their “inability” to fully belong to the wider British population, the respondents indicated that they felt comfortable in the localities of their ethnic culture – areas with significant diversity and ones inhabited with large number of Muslims. However, when they came to Bulgaria, they were surprised that there was no “visible” diversity in the local population. One participant (Y) commented, “People here are the same... I heard there were around 10% of Muslims. But where are they?” The view was echoed by another (D) who stated, “So when we [foreign students] used to go out together we would get stares quite a lot. Someone even asked my Nigerian friend for a picture because they just haven’t seen different shades of skin colour before... and it was so new to them.” Nevertheless, this monocultural society countered the generalization usually made about monolithic cultures, such as suspicion of foreigners.¹⁶⁵

A common thread in all interviews was the concept of “inquisitive” staring. All respondents experienced it on several occasions. They were acknowledged because of their skin colour, wearing hijab, traditional clothing or speaking in English. As one interviewee (L) put it, “People would stare, of course, because probably they are not used to having hijab people.” The stare is a sort of non-verbal

communication which establishes between the starrer and the staree a personal relationship, but it also stresses the fact that between those two people there is a “visible” disparity.¹⁶⁶ Studies suggest that as the time progresses the repeated patterns of stares a person receives can partially be responsible for the development of a negative self-perception.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, the constant reminder of being “the other” could eventually lead to voluntary social isolation.¹⁶⁸ Contrary to that, number of participants mentioned that because they would stand out, they were more motivated to portray themselves as “good” Muslims and, thus, engage more with the community. One informant (A2) reported, “I really wanted to be a good tenant because I wear the hijab. It was really, really important for me to show my landlord, like, ... I am trustworthy. I wanted to represent Muslims... and because I was asked a few times where I come from.” The visibility of being a “foreign” Muslim led to a needed sense of being mindful of their behaviour in the public sphere.

Overall, these results indicate that the respondents found themselves in an environment which was quite interested in them as being different. In Bulgaria their social and religious identity was not contested. They did not have to defy a pre-existing assumption of whom they were as in the UK but had the chance to create their own “fresh” image. Most of them chose to define themselves as British Muslims, positioned as “messengers of Islam.” This sense of responsibility made them conscious of their religious performance in terms of social relations and behaviour displayed in public spaces.

A New Locus of Familiarity

Throughout the interview sessions a common concern surfaced in relation to preserving religiosity and being observant of the practice. The majority of respondents mentioned that they were worried that the distance from family, friends and the local Muslim

community in their neighbourhoods would negatively affect their connection with the religion. Talking about the issue, an interviewee (L) said, “When I came here [Bulgaria] I realized how much harder I had to hold onto it [Islam] as I was away from family... My parents would always remind us to pray, to read Quran or mum would say some hadiths... There is not a moment when I am home; I am not reminded of religion. Same is with my friends.” Another (H) explained, “If I forgot to pray, I would see my mum pray. And that will inevitably encourage me to get up and pray. But here [Bulgaria] is easy to forget to do these things that are actually so important in life.”

Previous research has shown that peers and family act as religious exemplars who influence religious attitudes and behaviors.¹⁶⁹ However, from the two above-mentioned excerpts one can deduce that parents and friends not only modelled the religiosity of the sample through a direct example, but their religiosity developed indirectly through hearing about or discussing religious issues.

Moving away from such a “familiar” environment, it is logical to assume that the participants would feel more distant from the religion as there was no immediate spiritual model to prompt religious performance. Nevertheless, a large number of them stated that because of the lack of such “reminders,” they were their own motivators in terms of ritual observance. Without the sense of external pressure, the respondents were able to construe a more personal meaning of religiosity and tried to connect with other people both Muslim and non-Muslim to articulate it. For example, one interviewee (D) said, “Sisters in Sofia [Muslim student club in the university], there I found my safe space to learn about the religion ...I think religion is a very personal journey. It is something you don’t want to share with just anyone.” Another (H) mentioned, “Although we [she and her friend] are from different faiths ...we would discuss similarities about our religions. Having someone who understands you has made more of a homelike environment.”

Taken together, these results reveal a rather peculiar aspect in the adjustment pattern to the new social and religious reality. As religious consciousness is constructed through the transmission of values from the parents to the children and the influence of a close circle of comrades, a transition to a less “homelike” place would have given impetus to a drastic change of religiosity due to the lack of stable religious support. Regardless, the respondents managed to set up a community (Muslim student club) within the larger non-Muslim Bulgarian community to revive their beliefs through group discussions. Being away from their parents and childhood peers allowed them to engage with the religion using their own interpretation of it – a new meaning unaltered by others.

Reinforcing Religious Identity

Even though the interviewees managed to cope with some of the challenges associated with living abroad by bridging the distance between “back home” and “here,” they faced difficulty in adjusting to the university life. A great number of the participants felt that they turned to religion when confronted with the demanding nature of a higher academic institution. One informant (D) commented, “I don’t believe religion was as embedded in my identity before I came as it is now. I felt that I usually turn to religion more when I have been facing challenges... And challenges tend to be things like exams for me and just getting through medical school.” Commenting on the same topic, another (M) mentioned, “... when I started uni, I didn’t wear hijab. So religion to me I can say now is the most important thing to me. My life has to be motivated around Islam. But before that it was a lot different.” The theme of increased religiosity surfaced along the discussion of adapting to the new educational setting. Religion was used as a source of resilience. Turning to God and adhering to the religious practice, gave the respondents the needed encouragement to cope with stressful situations during their studies.

A considerable number of the participants considered the relationship they had with the faith to have strengthened as they became more independent and mature. As one interviewee (Y) put it, “Well, you start to get older and you start doing all the things you saw your mum doing...that has influenced me [in terms of religious observance].” However, previous research suggests that adolescents undergo a decrease in religiosity as they grow up.¹⁷⁰ The difference in regard to the outcome of other studies and the current one may be sought in the aspect of transition. The geographical mobility coupled with maturation allowed the sample to imagine themselves in another way. Along with having additional responsibilities as young adults, they had to navigate their religiosity when confronted with the “unfamiliar” environment. That added layer of mental struggle motivated spiritual growth.

Conclusion

The current research is designed to fill in the gaps and expand on previous studies. The unique feature is that it explores the significance of religion in relation to undergoing a geographic mobility from a country where individuals are more open to consider alternative perspectives because of their exposure to various cultures, to a country with a modern history of ethnic cleansing and assimilation of religious minorities. This study has identified four major factors (projecting a positive image about Islam, deprivation of familiarity, academic challenges and maturation) that along with the transition to a monocultural environment contribute to the overall increase in religiosity of female British Muslims studying in Bulgaria.

Beyond Conversion: Doubts, Contradictions, and Challenges in Salafi Circles in London

IMAN DAWOOD

The rise of Salafism in various localities around the world has captured the attention of researchers, policy makers, and the media. Much of this attention has been focused on trying to uncover the reasons behind Salafism's success within Muslim communities. Less discussed, however, are the lived experiences of Muslims in Salafi communities – particularly those beyond their initial “conversion.” This paper thus sheds light on the experiences of Muslims in Salafi communities by exploring the experiences of British Muslims in Salafi circles in London. It is based on life-history interviews with 55 men and women that came to Salafism in the 1980s-2000s. It argues that contrary to accounts of Salafism that present Salafi “conversion” experiences as straightforward, many British Muslims have experienced doubts, challenges, and contradictions in the process of “becoming” Salafi. Indeed, as they worked to apply Salafi discourses, many of my participants began to experience a gap between the way that Salafism was meant to operate in theory, and their lived realities. Experiencing this gap, I argue, has led some British Muslims to critically engage with Salafism. These experiences have not, however, in the vast majority of cases, led to a complete refusal of Salafism or of all Salafi discourses. They have, however, led to the contestation of particular elements of Salafism – altering the way that Salafism has come to be understood and practiced by some British Muslims in London.

Introduction

Salafism, a transnational movement seeking to restore Islam to its most pristine and pure form, has captured the attention of researchers, the media, and policy makers around the world. Much of this attention has been focused on trying to uncover the reasons behind Salafism's success within communities in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries. Speaking about the appeal of Salafism, some researchers have pointed to its apparent simplicity. Schielke has argued, for example, “Much of the attraction of the revivalist turn to textual knowledge and moral perfection in general, and Salafi Islam in particular, lies in its apparent

straightforwardness, typically expressed in ritual and moral rigour, a quest to leave no gray areas in a world neatly divided into the permitted and prohibited.”¹⁷¹ This straightforwardness, as Haykel has argued, is undoubtedly connected to Salafism’s “claims to religious certainty” and “its seemingly limitless ability to cite scripture to back these up.”¹⁷² Salafism is also appealing to young Muslims, particularly those in Muslim-minority settings in Europe, because it is presented to them as a globalized, de-territorialised, and decultured Islamic identity.¹⁷³ Indeed, within the British context, Hamid has argued that British Muslims “tired of what they saw as ‘cultural Islam’ found in the Salafi perspective an approach to religious commitment which seemed to be intellectually rigorous, evidence-based, and stripped of the perceived corruptions of other approaches to Islam.”¹⁷⁴

Less discussed, and certainly less understood, however, are the lived experiences of Muslims within Salafi communities. Indeed, by mainly focusing on the reasons young Muslims are drawn to Salafism, the literature leaves many questions unanswered about Salafi experiences beyond conversion. These lived experiences are essential to our understanding of the movement and its participants. This paper thus sheds light on the lived experiences of Salafis by exploring the experiences of British Muslims in London, one of the oldest and most prominent hubs of Salafism in the UK and Europe at large. It begins by laying out some brief background information on Salafism in London, before introducing the participants whose experiences form the basis of this paper. It argues that contrary to accounts of Salafism that present Salafi “conversion” experiences as straightforward, many British Muslims have experienced doubts, challenges, and contradictions in the process of “becoming” Salafi. Indeed, as they worked to apply Salafi discourses, many of my participants began to experience a gap between the way that Salafism was meant to operate in theory, and their lived realities. Experiencing this gap, I argue, has led some British Muslims to critically engage with Salafism and to contest

particular elements of Salafi discourses – altering the way that Salafism has come to be understood and practiced by some British Muslims in London.

Salafism in London

Since the 1960s, Salafism has been present in the UK in the form of the South Asian Ahl-e-Hadith movement. Salafism really began to gain traction, however, in the 1980s thanks to the increased *da'wah* efforts of a diverse group of transnational actors connected to Salafi communities based mainly (but not exclusively) in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. In 1984 Jamiat Ihyaa Minhaaj al-Sunnah (JIMAS), a local Salafi organization was also founded by young British Muslims seeking to disseminate the Salafi message. JIMAS played a major role in spreading Salafism within London and other parts of the UK during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The 1990s thus continued to see the growth of the movement, with many British Muslims being attracted to the Salafi message of “Qur‘an and Sunnah.” Dominant during this time was the approach of Shaykh al-Albani, one of the key Salafi scholars of the 20th century who condemned “blind following” of the *madhāhib* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence) for example. Salafis during this period were also engaged in sectarianism, seeking to eschew *shirk* (polytheism) and purge Islam of *bid‘ah*. This sectarianism was directed against other Islamic movements in the UK and their associated theological schools such as the Asharite and Maturidi theological schools. This does not mean, however, that the Salafi movement in the UK had a collective understanding. In fact, during the mid-1990s many transnational disputes over what Salafism “actually” was began to erupt within local Salafi circles. Intra-Salafi conflicts and refutations aimed at discrediting Salafi leaders and their associated communities became commonplace within London. Refutations were originally targeted at individuals and groups affiliated with an activist approach to Islam by those who

had adopted a quietist approach. By the 2000s, however, intra-Salafi disputes were rampant within quietist Salafi circles as well.

Salafism's Social Base

Within the UK, Salafism has not been confined to British Muslims of a particular background. During the early days of the movement, for example, British Muslims from a South-Asian background were dominant within the movement. This shifted, however, as the composition of London's Muslim community also shifted. Afro-Caribbean converts as well as Black British Muslims from a Somali and Nigerian background, for example, also joined the movement. The gender make-up of the movement has also shifted over the years. When the movement first took off, for example, it was composed mainly of young British males, but has since grown to encompass at least comparable numbers of females. In terms of socio-economic background, though no data exists, anecdotal accounts suggest that some participants of the movement have come from a "rough" background, while others are university graduates and professionals.

This paper is thus also based on life-history interviews with a diverse group of British Muslims who joined Salafi circles between 1980s-2000s. About half of my participants were from a South Asian background, a quarter from Afro-Caribbean and African backgrounds, and the remainder from other backgrounds (e.g. White, Mixed, Arab). About two thirds of my participants were born into Muslim families, while a third converted to Islam (usually between the ages of 18-25). The socio-economic background of my participants also varied with a few having attended private schools growing up for example and others growing up on a council estate. I also interviewed both men and women; about 60% of my participants were men, and 40% were women.

Doubts, Challenges, and Contradictions

During my interviews, many of my participants often alluded to the reasons they were originally attracted to Salafism. In line with literature on Salafism, I too found that my participants were drawn to the apparent simplicity of Salafism. Haniya, from a South Asian background, spoke, for example, of how the “simplicity of the message” attracted her to Salafism. She explained “Islam was not complicated, you just follow the Qur’an, you just follow the Sunnah.” My participants also spoke about how the Salafis were “coming with proofs” and “focusing on knowledge in Islam” which “made absolute sense.”

Yet, although originally drawn to Salafism because of its apparent simplicity, my participants’ experiences with Salafism were far from straightforward. I was surprised to find, for example, that several of my participants experienced doubts as they were going through seemingly straightforward conversion processes. I found that Nusayba, a convert to Islam, for instance, had concerns that “something’s not right” with Salafism while she was attending Salafi circles during her university years. Some of my participants were also not wholly persuaded by Salafism – doubting certain Salafi discourses. For example, Akhtar, from a South Asian background, although believed at the time that he was practicing the “right version of Islam,” “never believed really deeply inside” that the Salafis were the only people who were practicing Islam correctly. Yosra, also from a South Asian background, decided to quit university more than twenty years ago because she “believed” members of JIMAS who told her that free-mixing at universities was impermissible. Yet, she admitted to me that this was not a straightforward decision for her, as she was not “100% sure” at the time that to go to university would have really been *ḥarām* (impermissible).

Indeed, many of my participants spoke to me about the challenges

and contradictions they experienced as they began to apply Salafism. Some British Muslims who had travelled to study at the Islamic University in Madina (IUM), for example, began to face challenges after returning to the UK and attempting to put the “Salafi project” into action. This was the case with Imam Begg of Lewisham Mosque, who studied at the IUM during the Gulf War. Upon his return to the UK, Begg came to question the validity of the anti-Asharite element of Salafism. He began to wonder if this sort of sectarianism was suitable for the Western context, particularly within a large mosque that engages with “lots of youngsters” and “many many new Muslims.” This was also the case with Haitham al-Haddad who moved to the UK after growing up, and studying, in Saudi Arabia. He explained that although he had doubts about certain aspects of his studies back in Saudi, after coming to the UK and “mix[ing] with many so called *Ash‘arīs* [Asharites] and Sufis,” he began to more fiercely question Salafi discourses about the Ash‘arites and Sufis.

Other British Muslims who travelled to Saudi Arabia, not necessarily to study, but to make *hijra* (religious migration) also faced several challenges. This was the case with Rabiya, from an Afghan background who regularly attended SP mosques during the 2000s. Rabiya embarked on *hijra* to Saudi Arabia in 2007 with her husband in an effort to fulfil her Islamic obligation and live in line with her “true identity.” Yet, after two and a half years in the Gulf, she began to question her approach to Islam. Sharing this deeply unsettling experience with me, she explained:

I had this expectation from Saudi Arabia as a child where my mother and father were like, “Mecca, Medina, *umrah*, the Prophet.” Saudi was the place where the people all follow Islam, people all pray their *ṣalāh* [prayers], people don’t drink alcohol and speak to women and this is the land of *tawḥīd*. [...] What I was exposed to, I was just shocked. I was like what is this? I had this expectation and it didn’t meet my expectation and it was just like what’s going on? And it really upset me.

Rabiya was quite shocked to discover that many people in Saudi Arabia, while may dress in modest attire and appear to be devout Muslims, do not themselves adhere to Salafi ideals but instead engage in sinful behaviours like drinking alcohol. Some of my participants from African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds were also shocked when they experienced racism in Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries, wondering how this could be given discourses that romanticize *hijra* to Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In other cases, discourses about *hijra* to Saudi Arabia proved impractical following my participants' discovery that Saudi Arabia does not grant citizenship to migrants and continues to operate a *kafāla* (sponsorship) system.

Yet, even those who never travelled to make *hijra* or study, also began to question certain elements of Salafism when living out their day to day lives in London. Maliha, from a South Asian background, began to re-consider Salafi discourses about the impermissibility of completing the Qur'an on behalf of the deceased, when mourning the death of a member of her community for example. She recalled: "Somebody recently died, and we went back to their house, and nobody was reading [the Qur'an], and everybody was chatting. So I'm like I can actually see how the reading of Qur'an came about." The everyday, mundane life-activities associated with growing up and becoming parents also led my participants to question the practicality of Salafi discourses. One of my participants, a White convert to Islam, when reflecting about his own experiences as a Salafi, laughed as he said, "I tell you what, what's changed me is having eight daughters!" In fact, many of my participants found that Salafi discourses were no longer able to fully speak to their day to day lived experiences – particularly after becoming parents.

Similarly, although my participants came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, as mentioned earlier in this paper, neighbourhood deprivation, educational and health disadvantages,

unemployment, and housing challenges have been realities for many British Muslims. Yet, Salafi *da'wah* seems to have been largely removed from these realities. As one of my participants argued, for example, Salafi *da'wah* had “no real practical connection with the life of the community,” after being so focused only on giving *da'wah*, the realities of “having to pay the bills” and “needing a job,” “sort of slapped them [many Salafis] in the face.” Abdul-Karim, a convert from an Afro-Caribbean background, likewise spoke to me about the challenges that young men in Brixton face in providing for their families. He argued that there probably aren't as many young men in Brixton interested in attending the IUM now (as was the case back in the 2000s), because young men have concerns about meeting the financial needs of their families. He said: “I think a lot of people look at it like, I can be a student of knowledge and come back to this place here, or I can work and make money, and get my family out of this place.” Similarly, Yasmin, from a Nigerian background, once dreamed of travelling to Saudi Arabia to seek knowledge, but is now considering travelling to the Gulf for financial and career reasons. She explained: “a lot of my friends are abroad at the moment, and they're mainly in the UAE, and from what they say, it's a better quality of life, better pay, so sometimes I think, why am I here? Struggling to make ends meet most of the time. And you're in an Islamic environment.”

British Muslims have also faced challenges adopting Salafism in such a securitized environment. My participants have found themselves subject to policies seeking to control, and silence them, through PREVENT for example. Speaking about these politics, Haitham al-Haddad has argued:

It is apparent that by limiting the freedom of active Muslims and posing threats to them, the policy makers of today are sending a strong message to the whole Muslim community, that they have only one opportunity to live in the UK: assimilation. In other words, if Muslims want to live in the UK, they must adopt a version of Islam that will never dare defy the “British values” of whoever happens to be in power to define or interpret them.¹⁷⁵

Yet, quietist Salafi networks in the UK have not actively contested the policies governing British Muslims – instead encouraging British Muslims to make *hijra* to Muslim countries to escape these realities. In addition, Salafis, who are usually very visibly “Muslim,” have also had to deal with increasing levels of Islamophobia.¹⁷⁶ These realities have caused some British Muslims to reconsider the usefulness of Salafi polemics against other Muslims. For example, one of my participants, for example, who used to associate with SP, began to question Salafi sectarian discourses after coming to feel “that when the non-Muslims are dealing with Muslims, they’re not really looking at the different groups, they just see Muslims, they don’t see Salafis, and Sufis, and Tablighis, they see Muslims.” He thus began to think that British Muslims should be more concerned with government policies affecting Muslims, and not with intra-Muslim debates.

Intra-Salafi conflicts have also been troubling for some British Muslims. Abu Tayib, for example, began to question the purpose of refutations after realizing that they were even being heralded against senior Salafi scholars. He passionately argued:

It sounds good. In practice, it was like, OK, you’re refuting my teacher Bilal Philips who I learnt my *Salafiyya* from. You’re refuting Abu Usamah. You’re refuting Shaykh Suhaib Hassan, who was here while you were in your nappies teaching *Salafiyya* who was sent by Shaykh Bin Baz himself, right? You’re refuting all these giants in the *da’wah* [religious mission], and you’re like a kid compared to them, and this doesn’t make sense.

Indeed, after experiencing the negative impact of refutations on relationships within the community, Samar began to believe that “there are bigger issues: people’s *imān* [faith] is decreasing, people are actually not practicing anymore, people’s hijabs are coming off.” Samar explained that this was a largely collective realization, with at least half of her community coming to question these discourses. Haniya, who had originally played a large role in the *da’wah*, likewise took a step back from the Salafi movement when she found

that it “all became about individuals within the movement, and one person refuting the other on really miniscule points.” She then began to feel like the movement “no longer served a purpose.”

Many of my interviewees also found the “intensity” of Salafism to be problematic. Hafiz, for example, spoke of how tiring it was to act as “some mini police force” concerned with other Muslims and whether or not they were properly practicing Islam. He explains: “It was endless, it was so tiring even thinking about it now makes me exhausted.” Yasmin, who now only occasionally attends Brixton Mosque, similarly compared her attempts at applying Salafism to “running a marathon.” She explained: “I think sometimes you’re doing things so much, you get overwhelmed. It’s like running a marathon, and then you just crash.” This “crashing” out of Salafism is what has come to be known as “Salafi burnout” where some Salafis experience a sharp fall in faith and practice.¹⁷⁷ Umm Ibrahim, also spoke of how the “*da‘wah* ultimately failed” because of its unrealistic expectations about how much of “Salafism” could be applied in such a short time and with such intensity. She now believes that:

Islam cannot be taken all in one go, it can’t be digested like that, if it was like that, Allah would have given us the Qur’an all in one night you know, and this is what people fail to understand. You cannot take all the laws of *sharī‘ah* [Islamic law] and put them on yourself, completely.

Perhaps this is why the rise of the Traditional Islam (TI) movement, that centers around the discursive fields of *fiqh* (adhering to one of the four schools of Sunni law), *‘aqīdah* (classical theology), and *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), had such an unsettling impact within Salafi circles. The TI movement was also built on knowledge, had claims to traditional authority, and promised a spiritual reawakening for hearts which had been supposedly left hardened due to Salafism’s lack of focus on *iḥsān* or spiritual excellence. Indeed, many British Muslims within Salafi circles began to explore the TI movement after many years within Salafi circles.

This was the case with Abu Aaliyah, one of the movement's key historical leaders, who began to feel spiritually unsatisfied with Salafism. So desperate to find spiritual fulfilment within Salafism, he travelled to Saudi Arabia to see if it was only the UK's Salafi *da'wah* that was failing to address spiritual matters. Excited to be finally attending a class about Ibn Qayyim's book on *dhikr* taught by Shaykh Saleh al-Fawzan, Abu Aaliyah recalls: "The commentary he gave, was literally no different than if he was giving commentary on any other 'aqidah book or *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, no difference at all." After coming to feel that this was a limitation of Salafism more generally, Abu Aaliyah began to gravitate more towards the TI movement.

Uzma, who also played a leading role in Salafi *da'wah*, likewise started to feel dissatisfied after almost two decades trying to live her life according to Salafism. She recalls: "At one point, I realized I'm doing all of this, but my heart feels absolutely dead, there is no emotion, no feeling, no connection with Allah in my heart." Yet her experiences alone were not enough to make her wonder if this was a failure on Salafism's part. She recalls: "I didn't immediately think: 'oh it must be the way I'm following.' I just kept thinking: 'it's me, there's something wrong with me.'" It was upon listening to Hamza Yusuf, one of the main actors within the TI movement, that Uzma began to feel that the problem lay within Salafism. Recalling the first time she listened to Yusuf's tapes, she says "once I'd tasted that, I said I want more of this."

Similarly, Akhtar who had resisted listening to Yusuf for so long because he was worried he'd "become *Ash'arī* overnight," shared with me how unsettling listening to Yusuf for the first time was for him. He recalls: "I was crying, and I said this can't be good, how can I be listening to this man? And he having such an effect on me? And *wallāhi* [I swear] I had never cried as a Salafi. Something touched me, because he was very emotional with his lecture." Nabil, from a Yemeni background, also began to ponder if Salafism had all the

tools required to find spiritual fulfilment. He recalled:

The way you practice anything is very, very intense, especially if you weren't practicing before, you go from not praying to suddenly praying all five and the *sunnan* [sunnah], and I swear, I feel, especially a lot of the focus is on the worship rather than spirituality...so fine, fair enough, I started to practice more, but then you still want that little thing that the movement hasn't really got, it's got one or two [shaykhs or scholars] that focus on that.

Several of my interviewees thus found that Salafism, although had promised to provide believers with all the tools needed for redemption, did not live up to this promise.

Jamila, another one of my interviewees, started to question Salafism's approach to Sufism, not because she was lacking or seeking spiritual fulfilment, but because of the discrepancy between her experiences being married to someone affiliated with the TI movement and Salafi discourses about Sufism. She recalls: "What I did see when I got married was that the actual differences were very little. [...] There was no major conflict, there was no thunderbolt or lightening. We prayed together, fasted together. *Al-hamdu li-llah* [thank God] there was nothing." This was also the case the first time she listened to Yusuf with her husband. Although she was expecting Yusuf to commit "some sort of *bid'ah*" or say something that's "contravening the Qur'an or the Sunnah," she was surprised to find that, at least in the talks she listened to, this was not the case. Another one of my participants, Umm Sarah, also decided to explore Sufism after doing her own research about Ibn Taymiyyah's views on Sufism. She recalls:

Ibn Taymiyyah is somebody that is always quoted by the Salafis, so I thought, OK let me look at what Ibn Taymiyyah says about Sufism. There, he deals with it. He's clearly been misquoted! I wonder how many other things have been mistranslated and published? I wonder what else is missing from the story?

This was the case with a couple of my other participants who also found a discrepancy between Ibn Taymiyyah's original writings on

Sufism and contemporary Salafi discourses.

Some “Salafis” thus seem to have gravitated towards a more devotional and mystical approach to Islam after years of being so focused on strictly adhering to correct ritual practice. Yet, this is not to say that all Salafis have lacked spiritual connections within the movement. One of my participants, who had experienced difficulties in her marriage, stressed that perhaps unlike other Salafis she’s always had an “emotional connection with God.” She explained: “I had that even though I was Salafi, and I think it was because when I got married, what I went through I had to have a spiritual connection.” This is a reminder that there is of course room for varied experiences within Salafi communities.

A Critical Approach to Salafism

Accounts of Salafism, as mentioned above, have mostly focused on the reasons young Muslims are drawn to Salafism – assuming that conversion to Salafism is a largely straightforward process. Yet, as we have seen in this account of British Muslims, this has been far from the case. Indeed, this account paints quite a different picture of Salafi communities than is commonly presented in the literature.

This account of Salafism in London suggests, for example, that certain qualities of Salafism may make it difficult for young Muslims to conform to. We have seen, for example, how some British Muslims found Salafi attentiveness to ritual practice to be too “intense” or “exhausting.” Other young Muslims have also, despite their best efforts, failed to establish a spiritual connection within Salafism. We have also seen how several British Muslims have come to doubt the purpose of Salafi sectarianism and intra-Salafi disputes. Salafi discourses about the need to make *hijra*, as well as about prioritizing the *da‘wah* and knowledge seeking (often at the expense of family life), have also been impractical for many young British Muslims who are “struggling to make ends meet.”

It is important to note here, however, that these experiences have not, in the vast majority of cases, led to a complete refusal of Salafism or of all Salafi discourses. For example, although I found that one of my participants, Abu Tayib, has changed his perspective on the importance of refutations vis à vis other Salafis, he proudly shared with me that he is still very much an “Albanist” referring to al-Albani’s approach to *fiqh*. Indeed, what has developed here, is a critical approach to Salafism within Salafi circles. One where British Muslims critically engage with Salafi discourses, taking issue with the elements of Salafism that they have found to be at odds with their lived realities for example, while continuing to conform to others. This has meant that particular elements of Salafism, such as its focus on ritual practice often at the expense of spirituality and its attitude towards other Islamic movements and theological schools, have become the subject of much contestation within some Salafi circles in London. These processes have certainly contributed to the evolution of Salafism – altering the way that Salafism has come to be understood and practiced in London.

Who Knows the European Council for Fatwa and Research? On Uniform Religious Authority for Muslims in Europe

FABIAN SPENGLER

Twenty-five years ago, the then newly established European Council for Fatwa and Research set out to become the leading religio-legal authority for Muslims on the continent. The Council, headed by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, introduced wasaṭī, i.e., pragmatic and integration-inclined, iftā' to the religious law of Muslim minorities (fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah). The underlying assumptions were that Muslims living in minority environments face hardship, that promoting wasaṭīyyah could alleviate that hardship, and that this approach would gain the Council the attention and loyalty of a majority of believers. So far, the Council has utterly failed to become the, or even a primary religio-legal authority for European Muslims. Field studies in eight mosques in five European countries have discovered that only a minority of mosque attendees have heard of the Council and that those who have do not necessarily hold favourable opinions of it. The study revealed, through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, several reasons for the failure. These include marketing shortcomings, lack of interest in fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah, rejection of uniform religious authority, and rejection of al-Qaradawi and the Council's sometimes audacious iftā'. Analyzing the Council's failure is instructive not only for understanding the case of an ambitious project led by one of the world's most prominent muftis. Rather, some of the insight contributes to understanding processes governing iftā' for Muslim minorities in general.

Introduction

When millions of Muslims migrated to central European countries in the second half of the 20th century, this created unprecedented challenges for Muslim scholars. The migrants found employment, registered their children to schools, and joined leisure facilities. This raised questions about the applicability of shariah in each of the realms.

Muslim scholars responded by developing a field of religious jurisprudence known as *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah* (the religious law of Muslim minorities). By the 1990s, *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah* had turned into a polemic religio-legal discourse,

gaining considerable scholarly attention.¹⁷⁸ Within the discourse, a spectrum of approaches arose, ranging from dogmatic ones that rejected the accommodation of shariah to European environments, to pragmatic ones that mitigated shar i restrictions and produced fatwas aimed at enabling Muslim integration into European societies.¹⁷⁹

Among the voices echoing a pragmatic approach is a panel of muftis called the European Council for Fatwa and Research (*al-Majlis al-'Urubbi lil-Ifta' wa al-Buhuth*; hereafter: the Council), founded in 1997 in London. The panel consists of around 30 members – numbers fluctuate slightly – whose membership is contingent on recommendation by an existing member.

The muftis promote *wasatī*, i.e., pragmatic and integration inclined *iftā'* (issuing of fatwas). Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), the Council's co-founder and chairman until 2018, declared that the panel's objective is to bring ease “rather than difficulty and hardship”¹⁸⁰ to Muslims in Europe.

The notion of *wasatīyyah* derives from Q. 2:143: “We have made you a temperate people that you act as witnesses over man, and the Prophet as witness over you.”¹⁸¹ *Wasat* can mean temperate, median, middle-way, balanced, just, and good. Promoters of *wasatīyyah* claim that Islam must undergo a process of *tajdīd* (renewal), including the advancement of two ideological objectives: *taysīr*, facilitation, and *tabshīr*, spreading Islam (*da'wah*) through pleasant and gradualist means.¹⁸²

Al-Qaradawi argues that facilitation is not a response to the pressures of modernity but a religious duty: Islam is fundamentally a religion that makes things easier rather than harder, one that spreads pleasantly and gradually rather than by engendering animosity and negative responses. He supports this with Q. 5:6, 2:185, 4:28, which, according to him, prove that the basis of God's laws is making things easier; Q. 22:78 and Q. 21:107, proving that

God's laws aim to relieve believers of hardship; and several hadiths reporting that the Prophet Muhammad commanded that the easier of two or more paths of action be taken.

Applying *taysīr* means that when more than one decision is permissible, the easiest option should be preferred; necessity permits the prohibited only to the extent needed to address it; prohibitions must draw on Qur'anic verses, credible Prophetic traditions, or sound analogies; religio-juristic decisions must take varying individual hardships into account: the law for the strong is different to that for the weak, and the law for the young is different to that for the old; and, finally, change of places, times, habits, and circumstances must be considered when issuing decisions.¹⁸³

The use of *tabshīr* aims at helping people who are struggling not to find Islam objectionable. It implores that Islam be presented to non-Muslims and Muslims who are weak in faith or are still learning about it in a way that is compassionate and loving rather than threatening, that teaches them about God's mercifulness rather than about His punishments, and that allows them to abide by His laws in a gradualist manner.¹⁸⁴

Wasatīs broadly apply two mechanisms of *fiqh* to promote *taysīr* and *tabshīr*. One is searching for the most suitable answer among all four Sunni legal schools (*madhhab*) and beyond them. The other is the generous application of *maṣlaḥa* (safeguarding the primary objectives of the Lawgiver). The notions that there are more than five primary objectives to shariah and that needs may qualify as necessities in legitimizing the suspension of prohibitions are part of decisions issued by the Council.

The Council seeks to apply *taysīr* and *tabshīr* to European Muslims because it considers them as living in an inherent condition of weakness. Thus, they are entitled to special pragmatic concessions. Further, the Council tasked Muslims in Europe with spreading the word of Islam and the most innovative aspect of some of its

decisions was the elevation of proselytizing to a primary objective that justifies suspensions of the prohibited.¹⁸⁵ This established cyclical reasoning, according to which a triumphal conceptualization of Muslim migration to spread Islam in the West legitimizes pragmatism and integration into Western societies.

Fatwas by al-Qaradawi and other Council members have promoted pragmatic solutions to questions arising in the daily lives of Muslims in Europe and other Western countries. They allowed, for example, interest-based mortgages under certain conditions, even when a Muslim could rent a home instead; working in a job that requires dealing with *haram* until one finds an alternative; and congratulating Christians on their holidays.¹⁸⁶

Thus, the Council offers European Muslims an approach to *fiqh* that allows them to integrate into majority non-Muslim societies and suspend shariah-based prohibitions while also tasking them with the sacred mission of Islamizing the West.

Council members thought that the facilitating approach would gain them a substantial following among European Muslims. Within a polarized *iftā'* universe, the Council sought to promote “uniform fatwa” and “prevent controversy and intellectual conflicts.”¹⁸⁷ It aspired to become more than a voice of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah* – it sought to become the exclusive or at least primary authority on all issues resulting from minority situations, recognized by European Muslims from different countries and holding different convictions. Hussein Halawa, secretary-general of the Council, said in 2013 that he believed the Council had succeeded in becoming a *marja'iyya* (authoritative reference) for Muslim minorities at large, even those of Turkish descent.¹⁸⁸

Alas, the results of field studies in eight European mosques revealed that it has not. They show that the Council is neither familiar to most mosque attendees nor highly appreciated by those who know it. Some reasons for this failure stem from marketing shortcomings

and the rejection of al-Qaradawi and the Council's sometimes audacious *iftā'*.

Other reasons would have frustrated similar ambitions by any other panel. They include a lack of interest in *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah* and rejection of uniform religious authority. The study's results are therefore not only instructive with regards to the fate of the Council. Rather, they hold insights for European *iftā'* in general.

Methodology

Field studies were conducted between 2016 and 2019 in eight European mosques, among them the Stockholm Mosque (also: Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan's Mosque), whose leadership affiliates with the Council and commits to its decisions. The other mosques were Stockholm's Husby Mosque, the 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque and Markaz Imam Malik in Dortmund, the Grand Mosque and al-Nur Mosque in Reykjavik, Birmingham's Salafi Mosque, and Hasan Blidi Mosque in Marseille.

The Muslim populations studied do not represent European Muslims at large. First, not all Muslims in Europe attend mosques, but all participants in the study were approached in mosques, implying some deference for religious identity and practice. Second, the study focused on mosque leaderships and populations likely to engage with *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah*, as those are more likely to know the Council.

Not all mosques in Europe are predominantly attended by Muslims originating from Arabic-speaking countries or are led by Arab imams or by imams affiliated with authorities in the Arabic-speaking world, whereas at least one of these criteria applies to each of the mosques surveyed. Given that *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah* has primarily developed in the Arabic-speaking world, and the native tongue of most Council members is Arabic, the sample involved believers with a greater potential to be knowledgeable

about the Council. Visits to several ethnically Turkish mosques, for example, revealed that their leadership was wholly unfamiliar with the Council.

The study involved semi-structured interviews and written questionnaires. The 83 interviewees at the eight mosques included imams, administrative leaders, and mosque attendees. Interviews were conducted in prayer halls, in front of the mosque, or in attached bookstores and cafés.

The written questionnaires in various languages were distributed randomly among mosque attendees outside the entrances of the mosques before and after a Friday congregational prayer.¹⁸⁹ Their primary purpose was to provide a control for the semi-structured interviews and to allow some statistical inferences about the Council among each mosque population.

Results

The study shows that among attendees surveyed in the mosques, most had no idea that the European Council for Fatwa and Research exists. An aggregate of 43.8 percent in all mosques claimed that they knew the Council. The highest name recognition occurred among attendees of Reykjavik's al-Nur Mosque (62.5%) and Husby Mosque in Stockholm (62.1%). Among attendees of the Salafi Mosque in Birmingham, only 19.5 percent claimed to know the Council.¹⁹⁰

The Council was unknown even to a majority of respondents at the Stockholm Mosque, where imam Khaled al-Dib officially affiliates with it and is committed to its decisions. Only 41.7 percent of respondents there claimed knowledge of the Council.

Most of the interviewees, too, said that they had never heard about the Council. Some had a vague idea about a pan-European *iftā'* panel in one or another city in Europe, but they could not recall its

name or say anything meaningful about it. Few knew the Council and its objectives, but not one was familiar with the contours of the *wasatī* approach.

More than two decades after it was established with one of the most prominent contemporary muftis as its leader, making front-page news, and publishing ground-breaking decisions, the Council's modest name recognition could be called a failure. There are several reasons for this failure.

Some of the reasons are tied to the character of the Council; others are rooted in the nature of *iftā'*. They include marketing shortcomings, limited interest in *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslimah*, mosques and imams serving diverse functions, rejection of uniform authority, prevalence of ethnic affiliations, distrust in online *iftā'*, dislike of al-Qaradawi, and lack of acceptance for the audacity of the decisions the Council promulgated.

If the name of an institution that sought to dominate Islamic life in Europe has not come to the attention of so many mosque attendees after more than 20 years of existence, then something has gone wrong in the marketing process. The Council publicizes its views and fatwas digitally and through printed media. Each method has proved modestly efficient at attracting attention.

It is difficult to locate the council's fatwas online, including the ground-breaking ones, let alone come across them when searching for a religious decision through Google. Its poorly designed website is in Arabic and, according to traffic-ranking companies, attracts far fewer visitors than competing websites.¹⁹¹

Al-Qaradawi's retirement from his call-in television show on al-Jazeera, *al-Shari'ah wa al-Hayāt*, has denied the Council the most effective means of diffusing its theory. Even if claims that *al-Shari'ah wa al-Hayāt* reached 40 to 60 million viewers were exaggerated,¹⁹² the program, airing on Sunday afternoons to make it easier for

Muslims living in the West to watch, had a loyal viewership in Europe.¹⁹³ However, this study and previous studies suggested that, while popular at first, interest in the show waned even before al-Qaradawi left it.¹⁹⁴

The reach of the Council's flagship journal *al-Majallah al-'Ilmiyyah* and its other publications has been even more modest than that of its electronic media operations. On the bookshelves of the eight mosques studied, as well as on those of dozens of other mosques and Islamic-interest bookstores visited, there were no copies of the journal and, in total, only a handful of copies of books published by the Council.

The only place with copies of *al-Majallah al-'Ilmiyyah* was the private office of imam al-Dib at the Stockholm Mosque. However, even his mosque's large bookstore did not offer a single copy of the journal. There is no greater sign of the failure of the Council to publicize itself than that in one of the largest mosques in Europe, where the imam is a committed loyalist, its primary publication is not available to the public.

Additionally, Laurence and Vaisse pointed to language as a primary problem for European Muslims' lack of knowledge of the Council. Muslims who do not have a good command of Arabic cannot read, let alone understand, any of the Council's publications that have not been translated.¹⁹⁵ The implication is that the Council's output has been incomprehensible not only for most non-Arab Muslims but also for some second- and third-generation European Muslims of Arab descent.

Another reason why mosque attendees surveyed either did not know the Council, or knew only little about it, was limited interest in what it offers – solutions for hardships they – allegedly – face while living in Western countries.

The interviews suggested that a majority of interviewees do not

distinguish between shariah-related issues resulting from their living in a non-Muslim country and universal shariah-related issues and, consequently, do not hold that the former deserves special treatment. The specific issues that dominate *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah* discourse and the debates within it do not preoccupy the *istiftā'* (religious inquiry) of interviewees.

Imams at the mosques surveyed supported this point, stating that they rarely received queries on *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah*. Indeed, they pointed to family matters as the primary concern of *mustaftīs* (religious inquirers) who approached them.

Imam al-Dib is not frequently approached with queries relating to *fiqh al-aqalliyāt al-Muslimah*. The implication is that when advising *mustaftīs*, he does not usually have the opportunity to share fatwas issued by the Council with them. That is, if he has the opportunity to advise them at all. As a rule, the larger a mosque is, and the more impressive the academic credentials of an imam are, the less likely it is that he will be able to respond to all those who seek his advice. Sometimes, after Friday congregational prayer, people wait for over an hour outside al-Dib's office. It is possible that some attendees who wished to consult with him never had a chance to do so.

Even when faced with religio-legal challenges related to their minority situation, some interviewees resort to means other than *istiftā'* and shariah-grounded arguments to legitimize a practice or at least make peace with choosing pragmatism over shariah norms. Some said that there was no alternative halal practice available to them; others said that even in Muslim countries, abiding by religious norms is not possible to the fullest extent; still others said that they are trying to minimize the injury to shariah; and finally, some provided no justification and said they accepted God's punishment for their sins.¹⁹⁶

Some attendees of the Stockholm mosque pay little or no attention

to al-Dib. That is because some Muslims choose their mosque based on what it stands for, its ethnic composition, or ideological tendency, while others choose it merely because it is conveniently located. For some, their mosque of choice is their main hub for socializing: they attend lectures, buy groceries and religious items at the affiliated store, participate in leisure activities, and engage in small talk with friends. For others, the mosque is only a house for prayer.

The Council's project failed also because it assumed that Muslims in Europe are discouraged by the existence of conflicting and polarizing fatwas and are eager to see the emergence of a unifying, binding panel on *iftā'* in Europe. This assumption did not accord with the majority of interviewees' understanding of *iftā'* and authority, or with their practices of *istiftā'*.

Several interviewees across the spectrum of mosques who were aware of the Council's existence spoke favorably of its approach, agenda, leadership, and pragmatic fatwas. However, none of them said he was committed to its decisions, regarded it as an exclusive authority, or even privileged it. Broaching the notion of uniform *iftā'* with the interviewees, it turned out that, with few exceptions, the idea that they should commit to the advice of a specific mufti or panel of muftis seemed peculiar to them.

Regardless of its ideology, methodology, and resources, any panel attempting to dominate the European Muslim religio-legal discourse would likely fail. In the Council's vision, a Papal-like structure would have governed *iftā'* in Europe. Yet, there has never been a "Vatican" in Islam. The role the Council sought has no precedent in the religio-juristic tradition from which it evolved.

Muftis are not part of a religious hierarchy whose recognition by the believer is, in and of itself, a foundation of faith. Abou El Fadl noted that "growing up in an Islamic religious culture, one is frequently reminded by his teachers that there is no church in Islam

and that no one embodies God's Divine authority. The picture conveyed and repeated is one of egalitarianism and the accessibility of God's truth to all."¹⁹⁷

There is not even a uniform notion of how *mustaftīs* should choose muftis and engage with fatwas. Diverse views allow inquirers to do pretty much as they deem fit. Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi (d. 1285), the Cairo-based Maliki mufti, compared the duty of a mufti to that of a translator. The mufti should loyally convey the intentions of God to make it possible for the *mustaftī* to understand and apply them. If the *mustaftī* believes the 'translation' of the mufti to be accurate, he should accept it. If he does not, then he should consult another mufti.¹⁹⁸

Al-Nawawi (d. 1277), the Damascus-based hadith scholar and mufti, emphasized that a Muslim who does not have the qualifications of a mufti and is uncertain about a practice should consult a mufti and follow his advice. A *mustaftī* may approach more than one mufti, and there are two opinions as to what the *mustaftī* should do in this situation, al-Nawawi noted. According to one, he is not obligated to examine which mufti is more knowledgeable because a modestly educated Muslim is not expected to engage in *ijtihād*. According to the other, it is the responsibility of the *mustaftī* to choose consciously between two muftis because even a modestly educated Muslim can recognize who is more qualified. Al-Nawawi himself was inclined toward the former opinion.¹⁹⁹

With a handful of exceptions, and across the spectrum of mosques studied, the views expressed by interviewees revealed that they cherish the tradition that positions them, individuals without any substantial education in *fiqh*, as the ultimate arbiters. They emphasized that a *mustaftī* cannot accept a fatwa even if it was issued by a person with distinguished credentials or because it seems to make sense. The inquirer must examine each decision to the best of their ability.

Non-committed *istiftā'* is advantageous for *mustaftīs*: It legitimizes rejecting advice that does not suit one's expectations and needs and allows one to access muftis based on their availability and responsiveness. This is useful considering that the more qualified and distinguished experts tend to be less easy to approach. Accepting the Council – or any other panel – as an exclusive authority on *iftā'* would entail giving up on an empowering position despite the absence of a normative tradition requiring doing so.

In their quest to become the primary religious authority for European Muslims, the Council's founders underestimated the role of ethnicity. While the Council aimed to achieve ethnic neutrality, it has been dominated by Arab members, with modest representation for Turks, Pakistanis, Bosnians, and other ethnicities that have a substantial presence in Europe.

Yet even with a more faithful representation of ethnic realities, it is unlikely that its message would have diminished the dominance of ethnic affiliations. Ethnic-oriented mosques are the norm rather than the exception in Europe. The persistence of this phenomenon owes to the inclination of migrants to socialize and establish communal institutions together with people who speak their language and share their culture. It also owes to the direct involvement and investment of governments that seek to exert influence on expatriate communities.

Across the spectrum of mosques studied, interviewees agreed that the ethnicity of a mufti or anyone else consulted on a matter pertaining to shariah was not a criterion for the correctness of the advice given. Neither was a mufti's adherence to a specific *madhhab*. However, several interviewees explained that for reasons of custom, familiarity, trust, language, and patriotism, the experts they typically consulted were always, or almost always, from their own ethnicity.

Even Islamic electronic media, on the rise since the 1990s, has not been able to tear down long-established networks and traditions of religio-legal authority. In theory, the internet as a means of Islamic instruction was useful for creating a transnational *iftā'* monopoly. It created the potential for Muslims scattered across dozens of countries to transcend local and national authorities, if they so desired, and make a panel or a mufti situated in a distant location their exclusive, or at least primary, authority on shariah.²⁰⁰

It was hardly a coincidence that the Council – along with al-Qaradawi's grander monopolist ambitions – surfaced at the turn of the century, when the internet and satellite television broke through and became widespread. Al-Qaradawi was one of the first in the Muslim world to recognize the potential of the internet to disseminate information on a global scale and establish transnational communities.²⁰¹

However, the combination of an existing dense and contentious field of *iftā'*, the pluralistic tradition of shariah, the low costs of establishing a global presence, and the diverse linguistic and ideological milieu that is the Muslim world created a largely democratic market of websites and social media. In this market for fatwas, *iftā'*, and Islamic instruction, no single organization is hegemonic on a national, let alone global, level. This would make it difficult for any institution to emerge as a primary authority for European Muslims.

Asked about the websites they used to explore fatwas in the previous twelve months, respondents to the written questionnaires presented dozens of names, with no single one emerging as the most popular. Interviewees replied that they either searched through Google or different, randomly selected websites, or noted preferred platforms, which nevertheless do not serve as a primary authority.

None of the interviewees regularly examined shariah-related issues online. Several opposed the internet as means of learning about

such questions. They supported their rejection with various arguments: Users risk being tempted to “fish” for a convenient rather than a correct answer; unlike when receiving instruction from imams or books, one cannot verify the origins of a *fatwa* published online; experts need to be familiar with the precise circumstances of the *mustaftī*, which is not the case with generic online advice; one may risk landing unintentionally on extremist websites without recognizing their true character.

Finally, the lack of knowledge about the Council that the study attested to was accompanied by largely unfavorable views of the Council from mosque attendees who were aware of its existence and message, including from pragmatic-leaning ones. Its lack of favor among respondents owes specifically to the Council’s leadership and ideology.

The Council received its highest approval rating among attendees of the ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque in Dortmund (6.4 out of 10) and of the Stockholm Mosque (6.3). It received the lowest approval at the Salafi Mosque in Birmingham (3.8) and the Hasan Blidi Mosque in Marseille (3.7).²⁰²

Perhaps a less controversial figure at the helm would have led to more appreciation for the Council. Al-Qaradawi launched the ambitious project of the Council at the height of his fame, but without the institutional power of a single state behind him, with few widely reputable contemporary muftis at his side, and with his past relations and continuous ideological affinity with a divisive revolutionary mass movement – the Muslim Brothers – as part of his credentials.

Shortly after the ousting of Husni Mubarak and the start of what came to be known as the Arab Spring, al-Qaradawi returned to Cairo to a welcome reminiscent of Khomeini’s return to Iran. He gave a Friday congregational sermon in front of thousands of supporters at Tahrir Square, where the revolution began.²⁰³

That reception was the end, rather than the beginning, of his journey to transform Egypt. In the months that followed, he found himself embroiled in disputes among the Brothers concerning their choice of a presidential nominee. When a military coup ended the movement's short spell in power, he turned into a declared rival of the new regime, losing whatever influence he had on his homeland's politics.²⁰⁴

The interviews informed that al-Qaradawi has not lost his popularity with some, who praised him as a distinguished scholar or a political reformist. Others spoke about him with contempt. One wondered why, if al-Qaradawi supported suicide bombings, he did not blow himself up.²⁰⁵ Another criticized al-Qaradawi for calling to engage in jihad against the American military in Iraq, whereas the focus of Muslims should be the jihad in Palestine.²⁰⁶ And yet another disliked al-Qaradawi's opportunism: The Egyptian scholar was in the habit of fiercely attacking everyone, except the Qatari regime that hosts him.²⁰⁷

The lack of favor the Council found among mosque attendees who knew about it owes not only to its long-term leader but also to the audacious views he and others disseminated. There is an inherent paradox in the simultaneous quest for reform and consensus-building and in the simultaneous call for advancing *tajdīd* and uniformity. Vanguard, ground-breaking opinions may become mainstream at some point. Still, this would entail a lengthy and divisive process. In retrospect, it was naïve of al-Qaradawi and his colleagues to think that their original facilitating contributions could be quickly and widely accepted.

The scope of the reception of the notion that mortgages may be legitimized in a broad context demonstrates this point. The Council's 1999 fatwa on mortgages was ground-breaking in the ideology and methodology it introduced and in its conclusion (that any Muslim living in Europe who is not a homeowner and does not

find other financial means to buy a home may take a mortgage). Its bold approach is why the Council was initiated in the first place. However, being so far beyond the pale of what was considered normative at the time of its publication, and in several different ways, it could not be the substance from which consensus is built.

The surveys showed that the Council's conditional legitimization of mortgages remained highly controversial.²⁰⁸ This was the case among all but one of the mosques surveyed, including at the Stockholm Mosque. There, 50 percent of respondents thought that conditionally legitimizing mortgages was correct. The highest approval was among attendees of the al-Nur Mosque in Reykjavik (85.7%), the lowest at Birmingham's Salafi Mosque (10%). In the aggregate of all mosques, 36.8 percent of respondents agreed to conditionally legitimizing mortgages.²⁰⁹

Even interviewees who presented pragmatic-leaning and integration-minded opinions, including a few who did not resent al-Qaradawi and even appreciated him as a credible religio-legal authority, said they were in total disagreement with the legitimization of usury, regardless of the arguments presented in its favor. They found the idea of paying interest in order to buy a home an outrageous deviation from correct Islam and described the fatwa as an unacceptable and ill-founded statement that human beings can transform the *haram* to *halal* using sophisticated terminologies.

Conclusion

Results from field studies in eight European Mosques show that the European Council for Fatwa and Research has failed at its self-declared objective to become the primary religio-legal authority for Muslims on the continent. The Council itself is partly to blame for this failure. It neglected marketing its views properly, and it advanced divisive religio-legal opinions rather than those aimed at building consensus.

Some reasons for the failure lie within the nature of European *iftā'*, and they would hamper any attempt at creating uniform religio-legal authority. This includes that most believers are not particularly interested in shariah-related questions arising from their minority position, and that those who bother to investigate shar i matters enjoy plurality of opinions and are tempted to investigate questions within their ethnic community. Those conclusions align with other findings on Islamic religious authority in Europe, which attest to the pragmatic engagement of Muslims with religious law and to their diverse religious practice.

In November 2018, the Council elected a new president: 'Abdallah b. Yusuf al-Judai , born in 1959 in Iraq, replaced Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who retired due to old age. Al-Judai and the new leadership, all of whom are now European-based, announced the launch of a smartphone app to improve the Council's marketing. The app was to include a feature allowing users to send questions directly to the Council and to be regularly updated with the latest fatwas.

As of November 2021, not all fatwas can be found in the app, which was last updated more than two years ago. There is no feature allowing the direct sending of queries to the Council. Instead, the app provides an email address, a phone number, and links to the Facebook page and website of the Council.

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- ²⁰² For information about the surveys, please refer to Endnote 189.
- ²⁰³ David H. Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2021), 43–44.
- ²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 59–64.
- ²⁰⁵ Interview, Dortmund, September 17, 2018.
- ²⁰⁶ Interview, Reykjavik, September 22, 2017.
- ²⁰⁷ Interview, Reykjavik, October 1, 2017.
- ²⁰⁸ Two studies of Norwegian Muslims also indicated that the Council’s conditional legitimization of mortgages remained highly controversial. Eighty-eight percent of Torkel Brekke’s sample of Muslims approached in mosques, Muslim organizations, and online agreed or strongly agreed that “Conventional banks provide interest-based loans, which are totally forbidden in Islam.” Seventy-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that they have actively searched for interest-free loans: Torkel Brekke, “Halal Money: Financial Inclusion and Demand for Islamic Banking in Norway,” *Research & Politics* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 4–5. Borchgrevink and Birkvad argued that the leaderships of Pakistani mosques in Norway accepted the European Council for Fatwa and Research’s fatwa on mortgages, whereas the leadership of Somali mosques did not. Several of their Pakistani-Norwegian interviewees rejected the fatwa: Kaja Borchgrevink and Ida Roland Birkvad, “Religious Norms and Homeownership among Norwegian Muslim Women,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2021): 1–18.
- ²⁰⁹ For information about the surveys, please refer to Endnote 189.

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This volume presents the papers given at the sixth post-graduate conference, "Muslims in the UK and Europe" organised by the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge on 17 June 2021. The purpose of the conference, held online this year, is to provide a forum for emerging scholars on Islam and Muslims in the UK and Europe to present findings from their graduate research and offer critical reflection on each other's work. The worked-up papers are presented here with minimal editorial intervention. Alongside the proceedings from earlier years, they offer a snapshot of emerging trends in scholarship in this growing field. The papers were organised into four panels: Social Exclusion and Identity; Islamophobia and Securitisation; Religious Authority and Subjectivity; and Diaspora and Mobility. The eight papers presented here range in geographical focus from Britain to Bulgaria, and Italy to Sweden, with a preponderance focusing on Britain.

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