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BIRMINGHAM, MUSLIMS & ISLAM: AN OVERVIEW IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIMS: in the city, of the city

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Birmingham's Muslims: in the city, of the city

This project is more than academic research. Bold and unique, this three year programme will consider the story of the city's Muslim communities – their past, present and future – to better understand their contribution to the success of the city. Recent events across the city and country have significantly impacted cohesion. Often misrepresented or misunderstood, Muslim communities deserve a safe space where they have the opportunity to have open and honest conversations with leaders, institutions and policymakers about the issues that matter to them and impact their everyday lives. As a leading Russell Group institution, the University of Birmingham occupies a singular niche to facilitate this. Building on our links across the political sphere, state apparatus and the city, we aim to bring together diverse groups for a range of engaging, relevant and pertinent activities.

Birmingham – as a city and as a university – has a strong commitment to fairness, tolerance and co-operation. This project aspires to generate new ideas to support and encourage others to understand Birmingham's Muslim communities as both 'in' and 'of' the city.

DISCLAIMER

This paper contains the views of individuals that were engaged and duly interpreted by members of the project's research team. Responsibility for any errors therefore lies with the author(s):

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INTRODUCTION

This paper comprises material which formed part of a submission of written evidence to the Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life in April 2016.

BIRMINGHAM, MUSLIMS & ISLAM: AN OVERVIEW

Perceptions of Birmingham can be oppositional when it comes to Muslims and Islam. On the one hand, Birmingham has been referred to as a city that is “totally Muslim where non-Muslims just simply don’t go”¹ while on the other, observers have suggested that it is the “best place in Europe to be pure Muslim”².

What is known is that outside of London, Birmingham is one of the UK’s most multicultural cities.

While the concept of multiculturalism has come under political scrutiny in recent years, Birmingham’s multiculturalism is what sociologist Paul Gilroy would refer to as factual rather than prescribed³. In this respect, Birmingham’s multiculturalism is experienced convivially through everyday experiences of living within and alongside different communities and people. In this respect, Birmingham’s everyday multiculturalism is ordinary, taken-for-granted and to some extent, unexceptional.

A significant minority within Birmingham’s multicultural population is its Muslim communities, the largest outside of London.

According to the 2011 Census⁴, there are 233,923 people in Birmingham who identify as Muslim. This is equivalent to 21.8% of the city’s population, a percentage that is significantly higher than the 4.8% average for Muslims in England and Wales.

Not only does Birmingham have the youngest demographic of any city in Europe, the youth demographic among its Muslim population is also particularly striking. Of those who identified as Muslim in the 2011 Census, 97,099 were children. This means that 41.5% of Birmingham’s Muslims are aged 16 years or under⁵.

Outside of the capital, Birmingham’s Muslim communities are some of the most diverse in Britain comprising both ‘old’ and ‘new’ Muslims.

Birmingham’s ‘old’ Muslim communities – which outnumber its ‘new’ equivalent – arrived in the city from the Indian sub-continent and East Africa in the decades following the Second World War.

While the majority of these ‘old’ Muslims are of Pakistani heritage, they are far from homogeneous and include Punjabis, Sindhis and Blauchis as also those who identify as Pashtun. Predominantly though, the majority (between 60-70%) are of Mirpuri or Kashmiri heritage.

Birmingham’s ‘new’ Muslims arrived more recently and came from a wider range of geographical locations including Eastern Europe, West Africa and the Middle East. Their arrival has led to a growth in Muslim communities in the city of Somali, Kurdish, Iraqi and Iranian heritages. The city is also home to both white and black converts to Islam.

¹ Steve Emerson, US terrorism expert on Fox News, 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/11/fox-news-steven-emerson-birmingham-muslims>

² Ed West, 2011 <http://tinyurl.com/MuslimBrum>

³ Paul Gilroy. *Multiculturalism and Post-Colonial Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006).

⁴ Office of National Statistics

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>

⁵ Office of National Statistics

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>

It is important to note that indigenous and heritage cultures shape and inform religious affiliation and practice in the city. Given the majority of Birmingham's Muslims are of Pakistani heritage – and Mirpur specifically – so the culture of Pakistan and Mirpur flavours how Islam is understood, interpreted and practiced in the city.

Within the diversity that exists within Birmingham's Muslim communities, tensions do sometimes occur.

These can take place along ethnic lines as in 2005 when in the Lozells area of the city there were two nights of violent confrontations between groups of Black Caribbean and Pakistani heritage people. Those clashes were sparked by allegations of the gang rape of a teenage girl of Black Caribbean heritage by men of Pakistani heritage. However, no evidence has ever been found to support the allegation nor has a victim ever been officially identified⁶.

At other times, tensions have occurred along religious lines. For instance in 2008 it was widely reported in the media that the Alum Rock Road area of the city was a 'no-go area' for Christians following a handful of confrontations with Muslims⁷.

At times, tensions exist both within and between Muslim communities also. For example in 2014, a man died following an outbreak of violence in the Sparkbrook area of the city between groups of men with Afghan and Pakistani ethnicities. The precise cause for the outbreak of violence

remains unknown⁸. Similarly too, anecdotal evidence suggests that there have been tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims as also some aggression being shown towards the Ahmadiyya community.

There have also been a number of incidents in the city involving Muslims and their communities that have attracted adverse national attention, in the media as also the political spaces.

Nonetheless, these handful of examples are quite exceptional and do not accurately reflect the successful, positive contribution that Muslims make to the success of Birmingham on a day to day basis.

BIRMINGHAM'S MUSLIM IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Similar to other minority communities in the city, the majority of Birmingham's Muslims live in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods. This is important because as research has shown, living in deprived areas directly correlates to poor health, low family income, and under-average educational achievement⁹. Unsurprisingly, indicators of deprivation show that Birmingham's Muslims experience a higher rate of unemployment and economic activity than others in the city¹⁰.

The majority of Birmingham's Muslims (71.7%) live in seven of the city's most

⁶ The Guardian, 2005
<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/oct/24/race.ukcrime>

⁷ The Telegraph, 2008
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2058935/Police-advise-Christian-preachers-to-leave-Muslim-area-of-Birmingham.html>

⁸ The Daily Express, 2014
<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/486565/Violence-leaves-one-dead-and-two-injured-in-Birmingham>

⁹ Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett. The spirit level: why equality is better for everyone. London: Penguin (2010).

¹⁰ Muslim Council of Britain, 2015
https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf

deprived wards: Sparkbrook (19,372); Bordesley Green (18,629); Washwood Heath (16,847); Springfield (13,461); Lozells and East Handsworth (10,853); and Nechells (8,822)¹¹. Of these, Bordesley Green, Washwood Heath and Nechells are in the top 1% of most deprived Super Output Areas in the UK. The socio-economic situation of many of the Birmingham's Muslims therefore would seem to have the very real potential to detrimentally impact their ability to actively participate in the public life of the city.

This is not the situation for all of the city's Muslims however. So while Birmingham is home to the highest number (44,687) of Muslim 'low achievers' (Never Worked and Long-term Unemployed Population) in the UK, it also home to the highest number (6,033) of Muslim 'high achievers' (Higher Managerial, Administrative and Professional Occupations)¹².

The young demographic of Birmingham's Muslims is again important in this respect due to the adverse impact it is likely to have in the medium and long term in relation to employment, and education.

The potential impact on education can be illustrated by the fact that in a number of wards across the city, Muslims account for more than 80% of the school age population. In Washwood Heath, 86% of all children aged between 5 to 15 years are Muslim¹³. It is worth noting that this ward

was one of those most affected by the Operation Trojan Horse allegations (see below) including Park View School (now Rockwood Academy).

In terms of educational attainment, Muslim children of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have improved markedly in the last two decades. Likewise, the gender attainment gap has narrowed for those same two groups¹⁴.

In the independent sector, some Muslim schools in Birmingham have recently topped the city's league tables in terms of GCSE level attainment.

The fact that Muslims make up more than 80% of the school age population in some areas of the city raises a number of pertinent and pressing questions about educational provision. While some of these are considered in more detail in the following section, the shadow cast by Operation Trojan Horse is likely to overshadow and indeed inform many of the discussions about how the educational needs of an increasingly diverse population might be met. Given the political salience of the matter and the likely continued interest of the national media, it is likely that Birmingham and its Muslims communities will continue to be problematized as regards education in the city.

¹¹ Arshad Isakjee & Chris Allen. "A catastrophic lack of inquisitiveness": A critical study of the impact and narrative of the Project Champion surveillance project in Birmingham." *Ethnicities* 13, no. 6 (2013): 751-770.

¹² Muslim Council of Britain, 2015
https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf

¹³ Muslim Council of Britain, 2015
https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf

[content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf](https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf)

¹⁴ Muslim Council of Britain, 2015
https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf