BRITISH MUSLIMS IN BIRMINGHAM: POLITICS AND IDENTITY

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

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Identity & Belonging

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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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GLOBAL FEARS, NATIONAL POLITICS, LOCAL LIVES

The last three decades have entirely reshaped the ways in which Muslims in the West are perceived. All of us are aware of this narrative. It begins the Rushdie affair, and the swift construction of the sense that the world was inhabited by a global Muslim community. Us and them. The narrative is weaponised after the Al Qaeda attacks in New York in 2001. Despite being condemned by the overwhelming majority of Muslims, further attacks in Spain, France and the UK further help to portray Muslims as a security threat in Europe and North America. In those nations, demagogues and extremist groups from the political right increasingly exploit the securitisation of Muslims, melding them together with aspects of cultural difference, to promote exclusionary ethnocentric nationalisms. And the President of the United States himself serves as the paradigmatic example of this phenomenon.

That's the global tale – but with this contribution I want to draw attention to a different, more local narrative. The local narrative is not a counter-narrative to global troubles, but it does offer a space for reflection on what the routine othering of Muslim citizens means for life everyday life in Britain – identities and futures. It is eight years since I began my doctoral research on Muslim identities in Birmingham[1] [2]. The project was not originally designed to be directly related to the politics of security or terrorism. But when conducting ethnographic work, in interviews and workshops, the politics of being Muslim in the 'West' was never far away.

This is for several reasons. Firstly, you can't prevent the routine representation of Muslims within political, media and popular discourse, from impacting upon the ways that Muslim feel about their place in Britain. The weekly, if not daily media and political discourses of Muslim terrorists, or as cultural threats invades the consciousness of British Muslims even if they make an effort to avoid glancing down at the headlines of the morning papers. Islamophobia is a growing phenomenon; as Tell MAMA have demonstrated, every extremist attack provokes a small minority of Britons to direct hate towards Muslims, be it on the street and online[3]. The Prevent agenda is now a standard feature of public policy, and is increasingly heard and talked about, even if seldom encountered in tangibly and personally by Muslims as they go about their everyday lives. What began as a 'community' programme has transformed into an agenda which has institutionalised discourses of Muslim risk within schools, universities, and hospitals.

Locally specific events and controversies also shaped the politics of Muslim identity in the city. Indeed, Birmingham was chosen as the city of Prevent 'pathfinders' before the policy was rolled out nationally. Muslim community actors were asked to grapple with the problem of how to engage with a scheme, about which they had major reservations. In 2011, this dilemma was further complicated by the exposure of Project Champion[4]. Project Champion

[1] Isakjee, A. (2016). Dissonant belongings: The evolving spatial identities of young Muslim men in the UK. *Environment and Planning A*, 48(7), 1337-1353.
[2] Isakjee, A., & Allen, C. (2013). 'A catastrophic lack of inquisitiveness': A critical study of the impact and narrative of the Project Champion surveillance project in Birmingham. *Ethnicities*, 13(6), 751-770.

[3] Littler, M. and Feldman, M., (2015) *Tell MAMA Reporting 2014/2015: Annual monitoring, cumulative extremism, and policy implications*. Online at: https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Tell%20MAMA%20Reporting%202014-2015.pdf
[4] Isakjee, A., & Allen, C. (2013). 'A catastrophic lack of inquisitiveness': A critical study of the impact

(distinct from the Prevent agenda) was a thoroughly ill-judged counter-terrorism scheme which managed to install over 270 surveillance cameras in the areas of the city most densely populated by Muslims. Researching Muslim identities in the city at the time gave a real sense of just how pernicious it is to securitise the streets that local people identify with – and that local people call their home. When local activists exposed the scheme, they also uncovered how democratic structures and representatives had been bypassed in the construction and funding of the scheme. Trust between Muslim residents of the city and its governing institutions were eroded further.

The Trojan Horse scandal however risks having even more longer lasting impacts on the politics of Muslims in Birmingham. The suggestion, however muddied, contested or even discredited, that Muslim governors or teachers may have tried to further restrictive or conservative social practices in state schools, provokes an image of Muslim communities as cultural threats to ordinary British institutions. There have long been challenges, and sometimes tensions, in how teachers, schools and parents navigate religious practices of children within school settings. With Muslims comprising over a third of schoolchildren in Birmingham, the controversy has escalated fears of cultural clashes or so-called 'takeovers' of public spaces and institutions[5]. Muslims in the city have also been subject to the 'fake news' of Fox News claiming that Muslim 'zones' in the

city were no-go areas for White British citizens. They also faced the all-too-real phenomenon of eighteen individuals from the city travelling to Syria to fight for ISIS and other extremist organisations[6].

And yet, quite apart from all that, underneath the specifically 'Muslim' aspects of their identities, most of the quarter of a million Muslims in Birmingham continue their lives, shaped as they are by more routine negotiations common to other social groups in the city. The majority of Muslims in the city can no longer be classed as diaspora – they are 'Brummies', often third-generation and even fourth-generation citizens, with a strong sense of belonging to the city. Areas such as Washwood Heath, Sparkhill, Aston, Lozells and Balsall Heath, and the highstreets along those neighbourhoods, are even physically shaped substantially by the Muslim populations that have lived there, setting up businesses, community centres and places of worship. Just as citizens of all creeds and backgrounds face the social and economic pressures of life in austere times, so does the city's Muslim populations. We know from census data that there residents in areas with large proportions of Muslim populations also overlap with those which are also socio-economically disadvantaged. Birmingham's young citizens now grow up in a landscape in which the former council chief admitted that youth services have 'all but gone'[7]. Not to mention the fact that minorities suffer disproportionately as a result of budgetary changes in the last decade, on top of suffering

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and narrative of the Project Champion surveillance project in Birmingham. *Ethnicities*, 13(6), 751-770.
[5] Holmwood, J., & O'Toole, T. (2017). *Countering Extremism in British Schools?: The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair*. Bristol: Policy Press.
[6] BBC News (2017) *Who are Britain's Jihadists?*. Online at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32026985

[7] Gentleman, A. (2016) *Birmingham Council Chief: Years of cuts could have catastrophic consequences*. Online at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/12/birmingham-council-chief-years-of-cuts-could-have-catastrophic-consequences

from higher unemployment and lower wages[8]. Simply put, Birmingham's Muslims everyday concerns and challenges are similar to those of other citizens, and other minority groups. Their concerns are about securing good quality education, finding work in a precarious labour-market and being able to afford a home in an increasingly elusive housing market. Muslims in Birmingham share common interests and goals with their fellow citizens, and it is important to remember that, so as to avoid any tendency to stigmatise or fetishize young Muslims as fundamentally 'different'.

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Whilst the challenges for Muslims in Birmingham might be significant, we also have to recognise the significant successes of urban multiculturalism which has flourished in the Midlands over the last fifty years. My doctoral research demonstrated the extent to which Muslim migrants in Birmingham had made the city, not merely their residence but their home. Along with that anchoring of belonging, comes deep ties to the city – emotional, financial, and political – that so many Birmingham residents share. In the city, Muslims have risen to become political and cultural leaders, even if the proportion of minority ethnic figures in city leadership still falls short in some institutions. Muslim-led civic society organisations in Birmingham have become established, and increasingly collaborate with other secular and faith-based groups, including through Citizens UK[9], to achieve mutual objectives. Muslim men and women in the public and third sector are now in a position to provide

leadership, create space for dialogue, openings for action and to build alliances – when sufficient state support is available. And most importantly of all, as successive Muslim populations become embedded in the city's social and political life, new generations of young 'Brummie' Muslims can provide fresh perspectives, priorities and ideas for participation in public life..

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[8] Runnymede Trust (2017) *Islamophobia: still a challenge for us all*. London: Runnymede Trust.
[9] Citizens UK (2017) *The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All*, Online at:

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/newcitizens/pages/1261/attachments/original/1499106471/Missing_Muslims_Report_-_Electronic_copy.pdf?1499106471