Islam and Muslim Communities in the UK: Multiculturalism, Faith and Security

Catherine Fieschi and Nick Johnson

This piece examines the relationship of Muslim communities to the UK mainstream between 2005 and 2010. Using the dual backdrop of the country's embedded multiculturalism policy and its counter-terrorism strategy implemented through the Prevent agenda, the authors brush a picture of a tense yet ultimately resilient relationship. While Prevent was often accused of leading to a securitisation of community policy, it is arguable that tensions have led to increased visibility and leadership capacity from the Muslim community, and a recognition of their role and diversity on behalf of the public and the government.

Keywords: Britain, Muslim, communities, multiculturalism, security

The focus of this article is on the relationship between Muslim communities and the mainstream in the UK as they were shaped and perceived throughout a specific, and particularly significant period, from the immediate aftermath of the July 2005 attacks in London to the worsening of the economic crisis and the change of government in 2010. This period is worth examining for two reasons.

The first reason is that it captures the state of the relationship at the time of the attacks of 2005, shaped as it was by several decades of multicultural policy, but also lacking as a result of the nature of this particular version of multiculturalism.

The second reason is that this period marks a significant turning point in the relationship between Muslim communities and the mainstream: a worsening followed by improvement. The worsening is in great part due to the main tension at work throughout the period in question: one that pits a security agenda (and discourse) against a cohesion agenda (and accompanying discourse) – the latter being the 1990s incarnation of the British multicultural project. The result is the perception (by Muslim communities and their leaders) of, at best, confusion, at worst, manipulation. For non-Muslims, the tension was experienced as a set of

Catherine Fieschi is Director of Counterpoint, London. Email: catherine.fieschi@counterpoint.uk.com. *Nick Johnson* is Chief Executive of the British Educational Research Association and a Fellow of The Smith Institute in London. Email: nick.johnson@btinternet.com

The International Spectator, Vol. 48, No. 1, March 2013, 86–101 ISSN 0393-2729 print/ISSN 1751-9721 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2013.761744

mixed messages that soured community relations and undermined trust in the security forces and police, as well as community leaders.

However riven and tense the relationship has been, seven years after the 2005 attacks, over a decade after the 2001 attacks in the United States and the Bradford riots, it would seem that the multicultural framework has prevailed over the forces of deterioration and conflict: Muslim communities have come out of the period better organised, better represented, better understood and, dare we say it, better integrated into the polity. The aim of this article is to show how such an outcome was snatched from the teeth of chaos over the course of a very specific period.

Some might argue that the sharpness of the recession has refocused attention away from such matters, whilst others might argue, quite rightly, that the existence of groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) put pay to any notion of improving relationships. But recessions can make matters worse in terms of community and race relations, and this hasn't been the case in the context of the UK. As for the EDL, while it is a deeply problematic group that has the capacity to make life very difficult in a number of areas, they do not reflect mainstream opinion, nor have they been able to mobilise it.

The British context

Two important contextual issues need to be borne in mind when discussing the changing role of Islam in the UK: the first is a heated debate about Britain's multicultural framework of policies with particular introspection on the left of the political spectrum. Thus the growth in Islam's importance needs to be understood as part of this ongoing discussion about diversity in 21st century Britain. The second is that it is not only Islam's place that has grown in UK public life, but that of religion in general (recent 2011 census figures suggest that citizens of Christian background are increasingly secular, but that this is not the case for Muslims).

A beleaguered multicultural framework

Partly fuelled by the US civil rights movement and the increasingly vocal claims of ethnic minority communities, Britain awoke to what was then termed ''a race relations problem'' during the 1960s. Perceptions of growing immigrant numbers against a backdrop of turbulent industrial relations and rising unemployment gave rise to speeches such as Enoch Powell's well-known – and often misquoted – ''Rivers of blood'' in 1968. This rapidly led to the development of some new radical ideas in relation to the management of diversity. In Canada and the United States, this debate was particularly rich and ideas of multiculturalism began to emerge as a form of political management. Yet as pointed out by Tahir Abbas, quoting Bhikhu Parekh, multiculturalism is ''best understood neither as a

political doctrine nor a philosophical school with a distinct theory but as a perspective on or a way of viewing human life''.[1]

Multiculturalism is best explained as resting on four central insights: The first, is that human beings are culturally embedded – in the sense that they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organise their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance. Second, that different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of life. And, third, that every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation between its different traditions and strands of thought.[2]

The fourth and crucial insight is provided by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, whose own understanding of multiculturalism is shaped by his communitarian views on the one hand and his experience of a Québecois society embedded within the Canadian multicultural project on the other. Taylor's perspective is critical because it lays out the principles of what has become known as the ''politics of recognition'' upon which any form of multicultural policy framework rests. The central premise is that different groups need to give allegiance to the same institutions. To do that, they have to feel a sense of identification with and belonging to the wider institutional framework. In turn, that relies on confidence in the group that the prevailing institutions will understand, accommodate and reflect their interests. Such interests are bound up in identities which depend heavily on characteristics like race, ethnicity and – added later – religion. It is important, therefore, for minorities to see an accurate reflection of their sense of self along these different dimensions in the public sphere and that these identities (or identification markers) be acknowledged by other groups in society as well.

For the UK, the kind of multiculturalism adopted from the 1970s onwards was a way of reconciling a certain pragmatism about living together – in practice rather than in theory – with a striking traditional belief in the role of community, neighbourhood initiatives, cooperatives (in a word: the vibrant civil society that provided the societal glue required to live together in a land of unwritten, or at least uncodified, rules). This multiculturalism was, therefore, never enshrined as a doctrine, let alone the national ideology that it is in Canada, but rather as a set of principles that encouraged the celebration of diversity, dialogue between cultures and a measure of minority protection that built on the various versions of the Race Relations Act (1965, 1968, 1976, 2000) and the British Nationality Act of 1948 (and 1981).

---

[1] Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

[2] Parekh discusses how the early 1970s marked the emergence of the multicultural movement at first in Canada and Australia and then in the US, UK, Germany and elsewhere. What Parekh calls the ''multiculturalist perspective'' is composed of the interplay of these three important and complementary insights (Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*).

Significantly however, it moved the UK toward a vision of society based on distinct group identities defined along ethnic or racial lines and this principle came to underpin multiculturalist policies, especially those advanced by the state at both national and local level. The result was a framework of policies that encouraged the affirmation of such identities as the basis of political and social organisation as well as the creation of community networks and programmes based on ethnic or racial affiliation – thereby lending legitimacy to Taylor's view that recognition of identity by others is important for a sense of well-being.

Multiculturalism also increasingly became seen by both the media and the public as a vehicle of the political left, with ethnic minorities increasingly favouring the Labour Party. Whilst many mainstream Conservatives had disavowed Powell's rhetoric in 1968, behind the scenes many were sympathetic. Certainly, the right became the voice of those who wanted to limit immigration. The left's response was an ever more aggressive assertion of multiculturalism. Labour administrations in town halls across the country diverted more resources to minority communities, and encouraged greater organisation and representation amongst ethnic groups. This bore political fruit with the election of the first ethnic minority MPs to parliament in 1987, all of them representing Labour.

Multiculturalism increasingly came under attack from the right, which complained that it gave special treatment to minority communities. It came to be grouped together with such issues as ''health and safety'' and was mocked for being nothing more than ''political correctness'' without any substance. It remained, however, part of left political orthodoxy until the start of this century, a period that culminated in the report of the *Commission on a Multi-ethnic Britain*, published in 2000.[3] This once again reasserted the importance of a multicultural framework for race relations, based as it was on the idea that one's polity required people to be organised as a community of communities and not just as a community of individuals.

Simultaneously, however, a number of events began to cast doubt over the benefits of multiculturalism in Britain. Firstly, the brutal and racially motivated murder of the teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the botched police investigation of his killers raised significant questions about how much Britain's attitudes to minority communities had really changed and, therefore, what kind of claims to success multiculturalist policies could make. An inquiry into the case, led by Sir William MacPherson, was launched by the incoming Labour government in 1997 and its final publication in 1999 was a damning indictment of the Metropolitan Police, which was found to be profoundly institutionally racist. This was followed just two years later by riots in several northern towns in 2001. Prompted by clashes between Asian teenagers and the resurgent far right

[3] Runnymede, *Parekh Report*, 11 October 2000, http://www.runnymedetrust.org/reportIntroduction.html.

in the shape of the British National Party (BNP), the disturbances exposed faultlines within Britain's communities. The subsequent government report highlighted ''the depth of polarisation in our towns and cities. This means that many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives.''[4]

Thus began a debate on segregation and fragmentation that was already well underway before the collapse of the twin towers in 2001, and certainly before the 7/7 attacks in 2005 – in other words, long before the focus fell upon Britain's Muslim communities. The government's new phrase of choice was ''community cohesion'' which went through a number of reinterpretations over the years but essentially shifted the focus from promoting group identity to promoting interaction between groups. This debate broke out into the open in 2004 with two high profile interventions, ostensibly from the liberal left, that tried to call time upon Britain's multiculturalism. First came an assault from the editor of *Prospect* magazine, David Goodhart, who argued that there was an inherent tension between solidarity – high social cohesion and generous welfare paid out of a progressive tax system – and diversity – equal respect for a wide range of peoples, values and ways of life.[5] This was followed by an attack on the divisiveness of multiculturalism by Trevor Phillips, then chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). The following year, Phillips would famously claim that Britain was ''sleepwalking to segregation''.[6] However, by then the bombings on the London underground had occurred and the nature of the debate had entirely changed.

The balance sheet

Overall, we can claim a positive balance sheet for multiculturalism in its time. Over the years since the 1960s, Britain has undoubtedly seen a reduction in racism and intolerance and a greater appreciation of diversity. However, inequality has remained stubbornly ingrained within some ethnic minority communities. In its valedictory publication in 2007, the CRE pointed out that an ethnic minority British baby born today is sadly still more likely to go on to receive poor quality education, be paid less, live in substandard housing, be in poor health and be discriminated against in other ways than his or her white contemporaries.

By the start of this century therefore, multiculturalism was coming under increased attack and was no longer the default language of the left. A critique emerged which argued that, despite it obvious successes in the past, multiculturalism had had its day. At its core, the argument was that we had focussed too much

[4] Cantle, *Community Cohesion*, http://resources.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/Publications/Documents/Document/DownloadDocumentsFile.aspx?recordId=96&file=PDFversion.
[5] D. Goodhart, ''The Discomfort of Strangers'', *The Guardian*, 24 February 2004, http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/24/race.eu.
[6] Phillips, ''After 7/7 Sleepwalking to Segregation''.

upon culture at the expense of socio-economic indicators and improvements in life-chances.

Some even claim that our ''increased understanding'' of Islam is no more than an ''Orientalism take II'', a general Western *mea culpa* which is just as reifying of Islam as a culture and as a faith as our previous less reverent take on it. Exotic fascination has been replaced with patronising reverence at best, fearful certainty at worst. For example while we no longer look upon the veil as expressing a fundamental Oriental otherness, we have reified it as a quaint cultural expression or fetichised it as a symbol of Islam's fundamental backwardness, neither of which captures the diversity or subtlety of reality. It is in this context as much as any debate about terrorism that we need to look at Britain's current relationship to Islam.

The prime minister that ''did God''

Faith was never a comfortable part of Britain's multicultural settlement: our notions of diversity were about race and ethnicity. In part because the Church of England often provided a point of integration and connection between host and new communities. In part though, it had to do with a British rejection of faith in the public sphere (a paradox of course given the lack of formal separation between church and state). This was a notion particularly championed by the left which remained sceptical of the power of religion and, indeed, associated the Church of England with a conservative view of society which did not equate with the vibrant diversity of Britain as it approached the millennium. This anachronistic vision was seemingly best encapsulated by former Prime Minister John Major's expression of British identity as nuns riding to evensong past the village cricket pitch.

This aversion to faith was challenged in the first instance not by Islam but by the overt religiosity of Tony Blair, who made his faith central not just to his personal character but to his political philosophy. The story of the struggle between Blair and his advisors over the place of religion in public life is a well documented tale. And one in which even the most gifted spin doctor is eventually flattened by Blair's convictions. The incident of the *Vanity Fair* interview (in 2003) for instance, during which a touchy Alastair Campbell interrupted his boss to abruptly interject that ''we don't do God'',[7] went down at the time as an extraordinary illustration of the power of unelected officials in Blair's entourage, but nearly a decade hence, it feels like an anachronism. Since then, both as PM and certainly since his stepping down, religion has been at the forefront of Blair's public life. Blair has since converted to Catholicism and founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation for inter-faith dialogue.

[7] C. Brown, ''Campbell Interrupted Blair as he Spoke of his Faith: 'We don't do God''', *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2003, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html.

The impact of Blair's attitude (and his wife's) toward religion and spirituality in general (including the presence in a Labour government of overtly conservative Catholic ministers such as Ruth Kelly) is not to be underestimated: religion went from being the preserve of conservative (small ''c'') classes and derided by progressives (despite a strong Christian Socialist strand in the Labour Party) to being once again an acceptable topic of debate even on the left, cohabiting, more or less happily, with the tolerant liberalism instilled by multiculturalism.[8]

Religion's renewed presence in public discourse could lead to the impression that the numbers have increased, yet this is not the case. Aside from a numerical increase in those who label themselves of a Muslim faith, the numbers show no increase in church attendance or denominational affiliation. According to the Office for National Statistics and the 2001 census, there were 41 million Christians in the UK in 2001, making up 72 percent of the population. Though how much this is actually a reflection of religiosity as opposed to an easy label adopted by people for whom religion plays little or no role in their life is difficult to say. People with no religion formed the second largest group, comprising 15 percent of the population.

About one in 20 (5 percent) of the population belonged to a non-Christian religious denomination of which Muslims were the largest group. There were 1.6 million Muslims living in Britain in 2001. This group comprised 3 percent of the total population and over half (52 percent) of the non-Christian religious population. Church attendance continues to fall, though of those who attend the proportion of 16 to 25 year olds is slightly on the increase. As for mosque attendance, while still very low for young Muslims, it seems to be on the increase.[9]

Numbers aside, faith has itself once again become a subject for policy. There is a national Interfaith Network, comprising many local organisations aimed at

[8] In mid-September 2010, it was interesting to note both the negative press around the Pope's visit to the UK (which included a letter denouncing his presence signed by a number of prominent British figures), as well as the furore around Baroness Warsi's (Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party) comments in Oxford at the Conference of Church of England Bishops that this coalition government ''does God'', http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/sep/15/coalition-does-god-baroness-warsi.

[9] Ascertaining what might be exact numbers is extremely difficult. A lack of information is only one of the hurdles. The other is the manipulation and ''contextualisation'' of the figures. While most organisations involved in monitoring (both Muslim and non-Muslim) can claim fairly confidently that there has been an increase in mosque attendance, especially by young Muslims, this is often couched in terms that do not allow for even a guess as to what those numbers might be. Christian Research (http://www.christian-research.org/ Christian Research) revealed relative trends in 2008, that put at 683,000 the number of Muslims attending mosque. But in 2004, *Christianity Today* (http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/) had placed that number at 930,000, thereby claiming that Christians had been overtaken by Muslims in terms of religious observance. The difficulty lies in part in such studies measuring ''attendance'' along once-a-week Christian lines, whereas mosque attendance and being a part of the mosque community – especially for youth – can take many other forms. It is however predicted with some confidence that given the demographics in most Muslim communities and the tendency of mosques to recruit youth, the number for 2013 will be greater than 2001.

bringing the faiths together. Religion and belief were introduced as a ''protected characteristic'' under Britain's extensive anti-discrimination legislation and the government has even gone so far as to introduce a national Interfaith strategy and set up a ''faith unit'' within Whitehall's permanent structures. Indeed, in recent years, faith has become more dominant in political debate than race. The future of many of these initiatives is now more uncertain through a combination of the severe public spending cuts and the new British government's indifference to much of this agenda. Rather than promising a massive ideological reversion, the likelihood is that the cohesion agenda will drift into disrepair, but that faith will remain a topic for debate without enough reference to the communities into which it is embedded.

It is clear that the combination of the role of religion in Britain as well as the multicultural framework within which social and economic choices were being made led to a situation in which religions and other groups had much to gain by organising, but paradoxically, one which left them vulnerable to targeting should one community in particular be associated with a problem. When 9/11 happened, and then subsequently even more so in the wake of 7/7, the Muslim community (in the singular at the time) and the multicultural framework were left open to criticism as well as instrumentalisation.

Multiculturalism and UK Muslims

It is important to evaluate the position of the Muslim community in the UK in September 2001. To some extent it is worth pointing out that while multiculturalism had indeed made an impact on Muslims in the UK, Islam and the Muslim communities had not initially been the targets or principal concerns of those who advocated multiculturalism. Britain's postwar race relations were fixed for a number of years by the arrival of the Windrush generation of Afro-Caribbeans in the late 1940s and their subsequent history of discrimination and protest. That protest frequently turned violent, particularly in clashes with the police – from Notting Hill in 1958, through Brixton in 1981 to the Broadwater Farm estate in 1985. Indeed, the criminal justice field was central to debates over racial equality with the Scarman Report after the Brixton riots becoming the basis for a set of police reforms that to this day inform the notion of community policing and much of the discussion and practice that have animated the UK since 7/7. As we shall see, despite the context being very different, the experiences of Muslims after 7/7 bear some resemblance to those of the Afro-Caribbean community.

In many respects the Muslim communities were not as far along in their multicultural response as others were. In part because they were more isolated, but also because religion was a late addition to the list of collective identities. Statistics of

racial inequality were just that – about race. Religion was not even asked about in the Census until 2001.[10]

Muslim political representation was also not as robust as that for other minority communities. The main organisation that had emerged as the voice of the Muslim community was the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The story of the emergence and role of the MCB is a complex one, but most simply told by the political journalist Martin Bright:

> The origins of the MCB can be traced to the *Satanic Verses* affair, when Iqbal Sacranie came to prominence as a leader of the opposition to Salman Rushdie's novel. The idea for an umbrella organisation for British Islam was first floated when Michael Howard was Home Secretary in the last Conservative Government. But the idea was taken up with particular alacrity by Jack Straw, always with an eye to his Muslim constituents in Blackburn, and the organisation was officially founded in November 1997. Straw championed its cause, first as Home Secretary and then, after the 2001 election, as Foreign Secretary.[11]

The report by Bright, from which this quote is drawn, was controversial and fuelled the debate concerning which groups governments should (and could) be seen to legitimately engage with for security and other purposes. But more to the point here, the report highlighted what 7/7 had laid bare: that despite an active policy of multiculturalism, the government had only *one, single* interlocutor when it came to the Muslim community (still very much perceived in the singular at the time) – and not a terribly reputable one at that. In the wake of 7/7 it became glaringly apparent to both the UK public, and even more so to the government, that Muslim communities were much more diverse than this umbrella organisation had led them to believe, that many did not feel in the slightest represented by it, and more importantly that many felt let down by the government's single-minded pursuit of the relationship with the MCB, which they did not respect and which many did not trust.

This is an important point, because it means that in some respects the Muslim communities had only benefited from a variant of multiculturalism which is more akin to patronage networks than to representation and access. What is meant is that in pursuing a single relationship with the MCB, the web of organisations and variety of leaders that multiculturalism is meant to create never had the chance to flourish. As such, the multicultural framework did not – could not – deliver for the Muslim communities because it was stunted.

This duality – a multicultural system capable of much, but that had not delivered for this particular community – is important because it means that 7/7 marked

[10] Thus, for most ethnic minority communities, their housing conditions, their educational attainment and their general health are likely to be worse than the national average. This can be broken down into 'Asian', but it is not as easy to do for Muslim communities.

[11] Bright, *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries*, 12.

the realisation both that the multiculturalism agenda needed to be stepped up in Muslim communities and that it was useful for security purposes – paradoxically, at the very time at which its relevance and utility were more generally being called into question for the UK as a whole. While complex, this course of action makes perfect sense in the context of the Muslim communities – multiculturalism was deemed useful to bolster fragmented relationships within the communities. But ''community cohesion'' was perceived as the policy *du jour* at a national level to foster relationships between communities. A set of security concerns were then grafted onto this dual-track system.

The Prevent strategy and the securitisation of state services

The next sections of the article are a good illustration of the weight of events on existing policymaking.

Despite the re-evaluation of multiculturalism, and despite its weaknesses (outlined earlier), where multiculturalism had been effectively implemented prior to 7/7, the Prevent agenda put in place in the wake of 7/7 was perceived both as effective and as legitimate by communities. Where multiculturalism was stunted, Prevent policies were perceived as nothing more than the victimisation of Muslims, the securitisation of public services and the annexation of the cohesion agenda for counter-terrorism purposes. But in both cases, the concomitant implementation of these two, potentially contradictory agendas (especially when it was done from within the same government department, as was the case with the newly created Department for Communities and Local Government), gave rise to confusion and scepticism.

Multiculturalism after 7/7

As discussed earlier, multiculturalism was already under sustained assault from the right and increasing questioning from the left when it began to be appreciated through the prism of terrorism. In December 2002, a group comprising the Home Office, the Local Government Association, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Inter Faith Network published definitive guidance on community cohesion which claimed that:

- Communities should show a common vision and a sense of belonging;
- Diversity of different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities;
- There are strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

With some changes at the margins, notably by the Commission for Integration and Cohesion in 2007 and by the government the following year, this has remained the main statement of intent for government policy in the past decade and multi-culturalism was for all intents and purposes replaced by Community Cohesion.[12]

Relations with minority communities were already being reconsidered when terrorism struck. And while 9/11 had some impact upon UK public opinion, it was not until the reality of British-born, relatively ''well integrated'' bombers attacking the London underground struck home, that security became a driving force in policymaking and the lens through which community relations would be assessed and conducted.

The first reaction immediately post 7/7 was largely one of panic. The prime minister announced a Commission on Integration at a live press conference, much to the surprise of his civil servants who then scrambled to work out what this would mean in practice. For Blair, significantly given his own religiosity, this was a commission looking at the role of faith, and inter-faith work in Britain. However, he faced a battle with his then Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, who was reluctant to give the commission such a focus. This led to delays and resulted in a far more locally-focussed inquiry into how communities could interact with one another.

A more immediate reaction than the Commission, was the creation in summer 2005 of a series of task groups looking at the role of Muslims in the UK and what could be done to increase resilience against violent extremism. The task forces and the utter (if well meaning) incompetence that characterised them were revealing of a government that did not know its Muslim population or even have a passing acquaintance with mainstream tenets of Islam – and that had relied naively on a small number of individuals who had led them, at best, down political blind alleys, at worst, into dangerous positions.[13]

Though there was little evidence of a strategic approach, it was clear that from then on, cohesion policy, certainly at a governmental level, would be driven by a preoccupation with the Muslim communities and the threat of terrorism.

[12] This has not been without its critics, traditionally from the left and anti-racist campaigners who feel that it does not do enough to tackle discrimination and puts too much of an onus upon minority communities rather than the white majority to achieve cohesion. A chief proponent of community cohesion has been Ted Cantle, who led one of the government's investigations into the northern riots of 2001. Much of his approach is rooted in contact theory which became increasingly recognised as a tool in Northern Ireland (Crisp and Hewstone, *Multiple Social Categorization*). For Cantle, strong and positive relationships between communities need to build on the basis of shared experiences and meaningful interaction (Cantle, *Community Cohesion*, 29). Cantle's critics though argue that his ideas are rooted in a more assimilationist approach and ignore structural inequalities (Wetherell, *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion*).

[13] On this, see the report by Bright, *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries*. For post 7/7 remarks and accounts, see especially chapter 3 and the remarks by Lady Falkner (member of the Working Group on Tackling Extremism and Radicalisation), as well comments by Khurshid Ahmed of the British Muslim Forum, 27-8.

Despite the prevailing critique of multiculturalism that took it to task for slotting people into distinct community identities, the government's response to terrorism was to default to this approach when it came to the Muslim community.

The paradox in the case of Muslim communities is double. First, the Muslim communities started benefitting from some of the basic tenets of multicultural policies (in terms of leadership development, support and recognition) just as the policy was being wound down for everyone else. This led to the second part, which was a shift toward a deeper multiculturalism that encompassed a move away from interfaith while focusing on the Muslim communities more exclusively.

Prevent in practice

To respond to the threat of international terrorism, the British government established a counter-terrorism strategy known as Contest. 'Prevent' was one of the 4 'P's of this strategy and it was designed to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremists. The other 'P's were

Pursue – to stop terrorist attacks;
Prepare – where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact;
Protect – to strengthen overall protection against terrorist attacks.

In a nutshell, Prevent was an attempt to ''communitise'' security through a system of cross-departmental partnerships and the delivery of programmes through local authorities in partnership with local and community associations. The agenda brought together the Department of Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Communities and Local Government (created out of the Home Office in 2005), the Department of Justice, the Home Office, the Department for Universities and Skills and, finally, the Department for Culture, Media and Sports. The Prevent strategy had five strands aimed at addressing the main factors identified as the key drivers of radicalisation in UK communities:

- challenging the violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices;
- disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they are active;
- supporting individuals who are being targeted for recruitment to the cause of violent extremism;
- increasing the resilience of communities to violent extremism;
- addressing the grievances that ideologues are exploiting.

In practice, the Prevent agenda was designed to create a dense web of agreements and partnerships between community groups and programmes working hand in hand with local communities. Any program that was seen as building such ties between the local authority (including the police), local government services and community associations could qualify for Prevent funding.

Prevent can be seen as a logical development: the result of a public services reform agenda that privileged users and local delivery on the one hand, and community based policing on the other. Prevent was a consistent link in this chain – it joined up government, it was partnership-led and used public services as a means to transform both local communities and affect the national landscape. In other words, though it was controversial, Prevent was consistent with government policies that pre-dated the terrorist attacks of 2005. And, in comparison to the state-led, top-down policy and the brazen incursions of security forces into every aspect of public life that characterised many other European reactions (for e.g. the Netherlands), the UK's attempt to diversify its approach to security by tasking public services to help deliver it, as opposed to tasking security agencies with invading vaster swathes of the public sphere, was quite pioneering. If ultimately problematic.

Put in place effectively in late 2008, the Prevent agenda was a hugely controversial topic in the UK, so much so that in 2010, the fledgling programme had its first official review. This was followed by its virtual termination by David Cameron's coalition government, which repatriated *all* of the Prevent responsibilities to the Home Office, thereby fundamentally altering the very nature of the agenda and its community and public service objectives. Derided by some Muslim associations as the ''provoke'' agenda, ridiculed by others for its ineptness, grudgingly appreciated – or simply exploited by those who benefited from its largesse (45 million pounds over a couple of years), the Prevent agenda came under fire from many quarters. For example, writing in *The Guardian* in September 2009, Yahya Birt (a prominent Muslim scholar and commentator and former director of the influential Muslim organisation, The City Circle) gave voice to sentiments that were widely shared across Muslim communities in the UK:

> Under the Prevent policy, aimed at countering violent extremism, local authorities have had to prioritise counter-terrorism. Youth services, community safety and neighbourhood teams, social inclusion and regeneration teams are all being inveigled into this cause. Community workers are concerned about how to preserve relationships of trust with those they are helping, particularly with Muslim young people. One youth worker I spoke to complained of police intrusion into his work, of being pressurised to reveal details about his clients and to breach his professional code of confidentiality. Youth services, he said, were being driven towards counter-terrorism and away from drugs and criminality.[14]

Inayat Bunglawala of the MCB writing at roughly the same time, had this to say on the shortcomings of Prevent:

> Yesterday the *Guardian* reported that John Denham, the new secretary of state at the Communities and Local Government Department, wants to see a policy shift away

[14] Y. Birt, ''Don't Repeat this Mistake'', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/sep/14/islam-extremism-far-right-terrorism.

> from defining the government's relationship with Muslim communities solely in terms of tackling extremism while also developing a more explicit strategy to resist white racist extremism. This should be applauded by all who desire to live in safer communities.[15]

The final paragraph sums up the feelings of many both within and outside of the Muslim community: that Prevent had used the knowledge gained from years of multiculturalism (however stunted) in order to categorize communities, use this knowledge against them, securitise the relationship and had essentially asked them to spy on each other in return for grants.[16]

In essence, Prevent was widely perceived as intelligence gathering under the guise of community cohesion. Furthermore, criticisms abounded as to its effectiveness. Yahya Birt, again:

> The vast majority of Muslim institutions that have signed up to Prevent are too distant from the violent fringe – their response has always been to kick the al-Muhajirouns of this world out of the mosques. They have felt more comfortable using Prevent funds for pet projects that have little direct impact: a government-commissioned audit found that only 3 percent of projects targeted those ''glorifying or justifying violent extremism''. Why would this blanket approach work any better in preventing far-right terrorism? We need universal reasons – not counter-terrorist ones – to tackle inequality on a basis that all British citizens can accept as equitable and fair.[17]

The main debate around Islam in the UK in the past few years has been dominated by Prevent and the fallout from Prevent. Prevent has drawn messy but effective battle lines: between those who argue that combating extremism is a job for professional counter-terrorists and those who feel that this needs to be part of a community agenda; as well as between those who argue that combating Islamic extremism is about countering a ''perverted'' theological narrative with an ''accurate'' theological counter-narrative against those for whom it is a social matter of community cohesion, rather than a matter of theological accuracy.

Prevent was to be this broader, more inclusive strategy but relying on a multicultural revival for the Muslim communities and then co-opting many of the cohesion mechanisms for security purposes, it may have neither served its purpose nor made the Muslim communities more receptive to the government's appeal for help and self-regulation.

---

[15] I. Bunglawala, *The Guardian*, ''Calling Time on Prevent'', 14 August 2009.

[16] Reading the transcript of the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Preventing Violent Extremism Committee debate and comments gives a very good overview of the criticism and concerns of a vast number of UK actors regarding the Prevent agenda, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf.

[17] Y. Birt, ''Don't Repeat this Mistake'', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2009.

As pointed out by the Local Government Association and by many others, both in the UK and elsewhere:

> There are subtle differences between work intended to improve community cohesion and work specifically targeted at Prevent. Community cohesion projects are about building stronger relationships between people of different backgrounds. Prevent is about continuing and enhancing the work that local authorities currently deliver in building cohesive, safe and strong communities while recognizing and addressing the new challenge and threat of violent extremism. Preventing violent extremism projects are targeted projects that deal with a specific threat to support and protect vulnerable individuals within a community.

Delivering Prevent projects in ways that did not become a substitute for community cohesion was the great challenge. One that was only partially met.

In many respects, Prevent was the heir to multiculturalism: it recognizes the importance of strong community ties and strong community leadership in building resilient, empowered communities. But by doing so it places a heavy responsibility on communities that were often not yet able to exercise such control over their own, often because the very same multicultural policies have led to a significant measure of isolation (and therefore lack of development of many skills). This in turn has made them more vulnerable to both erroneous and often paranoid interpretations of world events, but perhaps more importantly even, vulnerable to remaining no more than an offshoot of politics and conflicts in the ''home region'' (see the relationship between politics and ''home'' Bangladeshi politics and nationalism in Tower Hamlets) or vulnerable to predatory ideological assaults from the likes of Saudi groups (Brixton Mosque).

Conclusion: so where are we now?

The Cameron government that came into office in 2010, immediately sought to reform the Prevent agenda, and the reformed 2011 version of Prevent has decoupled the counter-terrorism agenda from the government's ''integration strategy''. Prevent is firmly part of Contest, the UK's counter-terrorism strategy and located in the Home Office. Responsibility for communities and the integration agenda is shared amongst government departments, but resides mainly with a greatly reduced Department for Communities and Local Government. While this may appease some critics, it is also a rejection of many of the community-building initiatives of the previous administration. This change has resulted in the resources that had been made available for Prevent activities as community activities being reduced and more strictly allocated. *In fine*, the results are nuanced: the decoupling of the strategies has been effective in restoring a sense that community activities were not being supported merely as a way of ''keeping tabs'' on various community organisations. However, this has also resulted in less investment in

what – counter-terrorism aside – accounts for the kind of social capital that is the bedrock of trusting community relations and cohesion.

As outlined at the beginning of this piece, we would argue that the relationship has improved and normalised: communities may have been angered and alienated, but their outspokenness and confidence in the public realm, as well as the voiced tensions within communities with respect of public policy suggests they are now more confident about making their opinions known and doing so effectively. The complexity of the situation, the multitude of dissenting voices also point to new emerging leadership, to varied media outlets, to more articulate and decisive demands. In other words, the Muslim communities are both more engaged and more confident. Conversations that never could have happened, and indeed never did are now taking place because the lines for a more authentic – because more symmetric and balanced – dialogue, however painful, have been opened.

References

Bright, M. *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries. The British State's Flirtation with Radical Islamism*. London: Policy Exchange, 2006.

Cantle, T. *Community Cohesion: A New Framework for Race and Diversity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Cantle, T. *Community Cohesion: a Report of the Independent Review Team*. London: Home Office. http://resources.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/Publications/Documents/Document/DownloadDocumentsFile.aspx?recordId=96&file=PDFversion, 2001.

Crisp, R. and M. Hewstone. *Multiple Social Categorization: Processes, Models and Applications*. Abingdon: Psychology Press, 2006.

Parekh, B. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. London: Palgrave, 2000.

Phillips, T. ''After 7/7 Sleep Walking to Segregation''. Speech to the Manchester Council for Community Relations, 22 September 2005. http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/social-change/research/social-change/summer-workshops/documents/sleepwalking.pdf.

Wetherell, M., M. Lafleche and R. Berkeley, eds. *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion*. London: Sage, 2007.