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A Community Under Attack: The Foundations and Development of Islamism in London

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Abstract

For nearly two decades, Islamic radicalization and the growth and development of global Islamism has dominated public media and policymaking discourse in Europe and America. Faced with terrorist attacks perpetrated by “home-grown” radicals, in Britain and across Europe and America, countering Islamic extremism from within has become a national and international priority. Hence, an understanding of what motivates some Muslims living in the west to reject so-called “western values” has been key. In the UK, government programs such as Prevent have sought, not uncontroversially, to identify “extremism” within communities before it becomes violent (Home Office 2011). Yet, overlooked in this discourse is an appreciation of Islamism’s origins and what might have made it appealing in Britain before 9/11 and the War on Terror. Analysis which values the long term causes of the British Muslim community’s marginalization in its own right is comparatively rare. Addressing this deficit I will argue, using East London as a case study, that understanding British Muslims as a community which felt its religion, values, and worldview to be under attack is key to understanding why many in Britain’s Muslim community began to turn to Islam for solutions to their political grievances.

Clarifying a definition of Islamism is challenging. Definitions of “Islamist” used by politicians and the media have been robbed of theoretical significance, becoming synonymous with “extremist,” “radical,” “fundamentalist,” and “terrorist.” As the Council on American-Islamic Relations criticised in 2013, “unfortunately, the term ‘Islamist’ has become shorthand for ‘Muslims we don’t like,’” arguing that “the key issue with the term ‘Islamist’ is not its continued use; the issue is its use almost exclusively as an ill-defined pejorative” (Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) 2013). For the purposes of this analysis, however, reclaiming Islamism in its purest sense is a useful endeavour. The term has the capacity to reflect an important shift taking place in this period, which can be located in a narrative of global Islamic revivalism. Islamism will therefore be defined in a thinner sense as outlined by Sheri Berman: “the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life” (Berman 2003). In short Islamism is living one’s life in accordance with Islamic principles, not just in the home but also following Qur’anic teaching on good governance. This parsimonious definition of Islamism permits a much broader and holistic focus on the wider changes taking place in the Muslim community at the time, including but not limited to the radicalization of young Muslims beginning in the mid-1990s.

The vast majority of the literature on the British Muslim identity, social marginalization, and the shift towards Islamism focuses on Muslim reactions to 9/11. Muslim reactions to British foreign policy in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11 have been thoroughly examined, especially the ways in which the policies led to marginalization and the spread of anti-Western messages (Brighton 2007). However, it is increasingly recognized that the role of pre-9/11 events have been comparatively underexplored. In order to understand the development of Islam in Britain today, including the issue of radicalization, it is crucial to fully appreciate the long-term circumstances of its emergence. My paper, using the East London Muslim community, will analyze a chain of local, national, and global events to show that by the time policymakers were focussing on Islamic fundamentalism after 9/11, what they were analyzing was the culmination, not the beginning of an issue. As Jonathan Bronitsky argued in his study of the impact of the Bosnian war on Muslim radical groups in Britain:

Unfortunately, attempts to decipher the emergence of this phenomenon have occasionally been impaired by myopia. Members of the media, policymakers and academics alike have often attributed Muslim radicalization solely to the West’s military action in Iraq and Afghanistan... (Bronitsky 2010)

My study analyzes the era from 1988, the year of the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and an ideological turning point in relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West, to 1997, the election of a new Labour government. The year 1997 marked a transition into a new era of foreign policy towards Muslim countries, the emergence of Islamic terrorism as a policy priority in Britain, and in domestic policy towards British Muslims. Many long-standing grievances under the Conservative government from 1979, such as lack of public funding for Islamic schools and the inclusion of religious status as a question in national censuses, were answered.

The decade from 1988-1997, as a result, was a formative period in the formation of a British Muslim identity and answering why by the end of the 20th century many turned to Islamic or Qur'an-based solutions to these grievances.

In the years 1988-1997, the beginning of the decade leading up to 9/11, British Muslims felt themselves under attack on two fronts. Firstly, there was a widespread perception that Islamic values were being threatened by an onslaught of western civilization. There were fears that, in particular, secular attitudes towards topics such as gender relations, community values, and family life threatened Islamic principles and could prompt irreligion or even apostasy. Secondly, Muslims in Britain felt physically under attack, subject to violence and islamophobia from non-Muslims. This was directly experienced by Muslims in the East End in the form of racist attacks; however, it also concerned a heightened alertness to the persecution of Muslims abroad, locating themselves in a wider global context. Hence, different geographical conceptualizations of "community" will also be crucial to the study by exploring the various ways in which the Muslims in the East End dealt with this perception of attack, and how these reactions formed part of a global picture. Often these reactions involved a rejection of the assimilation policies promoted by the Conservative Party. Reactions were visible in the work of community groups which identified themselves as protecting Islam from secularism. However, reactions also included a shift in younger Muslims towards literalist interpretations of Islam. Yet, what all reactions had in common was a widespread shift to look for answers to these problems within the Islamic community on a local, national, and global level. This is hugely important in explaining why some young Muslims became susceptible to radicalization.

Methodology and East London as a case study

In understanding the British Muslim identity and the origins of radicalization it is vital to study the community in East London. The East London Mosque in Whitechapel during the period analyzed in my study was the largest in the UK at approximately 60,000 patrons, as well as one of the oldest, with origins dating back to 1910 (The Muslim News 1990). Its predominantly Bangladeshi congregation covered the Tower Hamlets, Bethnal Green, Stepney, much of Hackney, and played an important part in leadership of the national Muslim community, home to organizations such as the Islamic Forum for Europe, the Young Muslims Organization (YMO), as well as the Muslim Educational Trust. Testament to these, the East London mosque in the early 1990s gained a reputation as both a more radical and a more youth-oriented center compared to the more culturally Islamic Bangladeshi Brick Lane Great Mosque. The work of John Eade and David Garbin have highlighted the importance of the ideological cleavage between these two places of worship, and in particular the conflict between secular Bangladeshis celebrating Bangladeshi New Year with music and dance, and the "fierce condemnation" this brought from the East London Mosque's leaders who saw it as "unIslamic" (Eade and Garbin 2006). The reputation of the mosque has continued into the present day,

exemplified most recently by the media focus on events such as the radicalization of Shameena Begum, who left her home in Bethnal Green to marry a fighter for the so-called Islamic State in 2015 (Halliday, Gani and Johnston 2015).

East London as a wider area is of central importance in the history of the British Muslim identity and the development of Islamism. It has historically been one of the most multicultural areas in Britain and the history of districts such as Brick Lane document the associated frictions and conflicts. Cultures often clashed and a particularly severe stretch of racial violence against the Bangladeshi community arose in the early 1990s, a violent culmination of long running and smaller National Front attacks on immigrant communities in the 1970s (Gilman 2014, 171). The Muslim response to racial attacks in the East End exemplified particularly well how an Islamic religious identity, rather than racially-oriented identity, achieved the primacy it has today for British Muslims.

Yet most importantly, one of the main reasons East London gives a particularly valuable insight into the development of British Islamism is through the opening of new archives at the East London Mosque in 2015, the first mosque ever in the UK to do so. The invaluable insight into the development of a community and Islamic identity this gave is unparalleled. Along with personal memoirs, local and national news reports, metropolitan archival records from the council and a detailed analysis of the burgeoning British Muslim newspapers in this era, which have been comparatively understudied, they form the bulk of the evidence used in my report. Whilst the development of an Islamic identity in East London has thus far been studied from a sociological and anthropological perspective, the archives opened up a new way of understanding British Islam in this period as a historical process.

The study will move forward in four main stages. Chapter One will examine the failure of authority figures to deal with racism in East London and how that affected the formation of a Muslim identity during the period 1988-1997. Chapter Two will move on to look at the experiences of British Muslims as a group who felt their religious way of life to be under attack. This chapter includes two case studies to assess the ways in which Muslims responded: the ongoing campaign for single-sex Muslim schools and the Muslim Women's Helpline. Chapter Three will detail the effect of ummah on Muslim reactions to British foreign policy and global affairs during this period. Discussion will center around Muslim reactions to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, the first Gulf War, and the massacre of Bosnian Muslims from 1992 onwards. These events led many Muslims in London to translate their own experiences of discrimination into a global landscape of anti-Muslim persecution. The final chapter will explore how all these factors combined to create a wider sense among Muslims that they were under attack and directly contributed to the growth of Islamism and the spread of anti-Western messages among Muslim youth.

Chapter One: Racism, discrimination and the British Muslim identity

“If you refuse to be ‘black’ or ‘Asian’ you don’t exist” (Nahdi and Versi 1995)

The vast majority of British Muslims were of South Asian, Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi origin. This meant that most British Muslims looked distinct from white Britons and, like other ethnic minorities, they experienced racism from ethno-nationalist groups throughout the late 20th century. Often in the form of violent physical and verbal attacks on the streets, it took place in a context where Muslims suffered disproportionately from poverty, poor education and, particularly in Tower Hamlets, homelessness. An inadequate response from the authorities, this chapter will argue, had a direct effect on the Muslim community in the East End: they gave up on looking to the establishment for help and began to look for solutions to these problems within their own ranks. More specifically, faith became a central factor in social care efforts which had an important impact on the religious identity of British Muslims living in the East End.

One of the most multicultural areas in London, the East End and particularly districts such as Brick Lane, experienced prolonged stretches of racist violence towards South Asians. The 1970s saw significant amounts of violence shown towards all people of color, including Bangladeshis; most famously the violent murder of Bengali Altab Ali in 1978 by racists happened in Tower Hamlets. This incident was enshrined into the local memory when Altab Ali Park was opened in his remembrance (Gilman 2014, 171). However, this legacy of violence towards first generation immigrants continued to affect young Muslims born to immigrant families in Britain. In particular, violence escalated in the period 1991-92, leading up to the election of a British National Party (BNP) Councillor in Millwall, Tower Hamlets. The BNP, a far-right nationalist party, famously advocated the repatriation of immigrants of color. In February 1992 Bangladeshis set up a rival organization, the Tower Hamlets Anti-Fascist Committee, and 1,500 British Bangladeshis marched on April 6th against a BNP election rally taking place that day (The Muslim News 1992). This escalation set in motion a series of tit-for-tat attacks, including a violent clash in Aldgate in 1993 in which BNP supporters entered Brick Lane to distribute leaflets, some performing Nazi salutes and some damaging Asian restaurants on the street (Choudhary 1993).

While these experiences alienated a close knit local community, it was the response of the authorities that really changed their approach. There was a deep mistrust of the police and their ability to protect Bengali residents; it was the police who permitted the BNP supporters to march through Bengali areas. There was particular Muslim grievance with the police response to young Bangladeshi men, frequently targets of racists. Begum Suratan Nessa, whose son was in a coma following a beating from racists, gained national coverage when she protested the acquittal of the attacker without charge. “I am frightened” she commented, “those who almost killed him will feel even more confident now” (Meyers 1995). Politicians in the area proved unconcerned with the violence against immigrant communities. Rather than defending the Bangladeshis,

leaflets from Newham South Conservative Association argued Labour were taking part in “ethnic cleansing,” preventing white tenants from public housing (Choudhary, Riots in the East End 1993). Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats were famously accused of pandering to BNP arguments when their party activists issued leaflets which linked black and Asian people with the area’s housing shortages. Even Labour, traditionally a party of antiracist campaigning had PR problems in January 1994 with two prominent resignations of the Secretary and Chairwoman of Labour in Millwall over the party’s anti-racist stance made them quit. They commented, “the BNP came in with a slogan of “rights for whites” and local people said: “that’ll do for me.” We think that on the housing issue local people should be listened to, and as a result we are called all sorts of things” (Wintour 1994).

Crucially, this response to racism on the streets took place in a context where Bangladeshi Muslims suffered disproportionately from homelessness and poverty, and their children were more likely to leave school without any qualifications. For instance, according to reports from the Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign in 1988, 95% of families living in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation were of Bangladeshi origin (Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign 1988). Episodes of cruelty and racism arose from this, such as allegations of abuse of Bangladeshi families at a hotel in Finsbury park (Asian Times 1984), as well as evictions, one of which involved 70 Bengali homeless families and a case at the High Court (Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign 1988). These problems were intimately linked to the physical, racial attacks Muslims experienced; the same lukewarm and uncoordinated official response pervaded the response to Muslim social welfare concerns. This was particularly manifest in the Liberal Democrat councillor’s response to housing problems discussed above. Tower Hamlets liberal councillor Andrew Goodchild caused local outrage and was referred to the Commission on Racial Equality for his remarks that “because of the cultural patterns of the Bangladeshi community they will accept a degree of overcrowding for longer periods than is usual among the rest of the community... an awful lot of people in the existing community say it’s unfair that their children don’t have a chance of getting accommodation in the community” (Hackney Gazette and North London Advertiser 1989).

However, in dealing with these problems the extent to which Muslims looked to antiracism campaigning for help was limited. Instead, the role of religious groups in poverty alleviation and social work was increased. The limited relevance has been explored in the findings of sociologists such as Robert Miles and Nassar Meer, the latter who claims that the “poverty of understanding” when it came to race meant that Muslims were twice as oppressed compared to other religious groups who had their religious status recognised (Meer 2010, 75-76). Yet, the extent to which a limited response from the authorities prompted the community to take matters of social welfare into their own hands has been underexplored. Greater London Council (GLC) records display a surge in community associations identifying as “Muslim” in name applying for funding during the 1980s¹. From Clapton Muslim Welfare Association to the Hackney Muslim

Council and the Pakistan Muslim Welfare Association combined religious education with poverty alleviation and social welfare activities. Their constitutions were testament to this emerging, distinctively Islamic form of social welfare. For instance, Hackney Muslim Council stated their top two objectives as “To promote unity amongst the Muslims” and “To organize social, religious, cultural, educational, political and sports activities [for the unemployed] in the interest of the Muslims” (Hackney Muslim Council). The East London mosque also increased its existing services in letter writing, social work and translation as well as activities for young people. It played a crucial role in bridging the divide between religious practice and poverty alleviation. In their own words:

East London is suffering from decades of urban neglect and deprivation, a rising rate of crime and racial harassment. The almost indifferent and apathetic attitude of the central and local authorities leaves the mosque with no other option than to try to fill this gap and support the community in whatever way it can with its scant resources. (Honorary Secretary 1985)

Significantly, many of these Muslim groups included youth work in their social care programmes, with Clapton Muslims Welfare Association developing a lively new Youth Sub-Committee registered with the authorities. Alongside “discussions, lectures, meetings on religious, family, cultural, economic, social and other topics of interest to the community” their main pledge was “to work for the cause and to promote the understanding of Islam, and to strengthen the bonds of Islamic brotherhood in the community” (Clapton Muslim Welfare Association 1980). These events took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before main period of analysis within this study. However, they are crucial in understanding how faith was instilled in a younger group of Muslims. The combination of social work and religion played a fundamental role in raising a new generation who were more religiously aware and had durable effects on young Muslims throughout the 1990s discussed in the following chapters.

The failure of racial politics and the rise of a religious identity

Racial attacks and discrimination, as we have seen, led to a galvanisation of the Muslim community in the East End, marginalized by the slow responses of the authorities to the racial issues. Yet the increased response from mosques and Muslim organizations as providers of social services were not recognised in the official response. This included the response from anti-racism campaigners, local authorities, politicians and the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) which was established by the Race Relations Act in 1976 as a public, non-departmental body to promote racial equality. The problems Muslims faced in Tower Hamlets and in Muslim areas across the country were seen as “color”

London Metropolitan Archives holds records of all GLC funding applications. This includes: GLC/RA/ 1 GR/03/036: ‘Clapton Muslim Welfare Association’, GLC/RA/GR/03/07: ‘Hackney Muslim Sports Council’, GLC/ RA/GR/03/107: ‘Pakistan Muslim Welfare Association’.

problems, rather than as religious persecution which many believed it was. Muslims, due to their predominantly Bangladeshi origin were characterised as “brown,” “Asian,” or even “black” by the Commission on Racial Equality (CRE) and antiracist politicians on the left such as Diane Abbott, the latter who claimed in an open letter opposing the Gulf War “blacks in Hackney were feeling the repercussions” despite that the violence was disproportionately against Muslims as a specific group (Hackney Gazette and North London Advertiser 1991). The more Muslims felt failed and unprotected by the politics of race, the more they identified with and were united by their religion.

This frustration at the response of the authorities in dealing with this issue led to an outpouring of anger from representatives of the Muslim community, largely directed at the CRE. The national Muslim press, beginning with *The Muslim News*, founded in 1989 by Muslims from Wembley in the wake of the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, wrote articles hostile towards the CRE. In particular, they criticised its racialized view of minority rights, pushing instead for a recognition of religious identity. This is best reflected in a public letter to *The Times* from Faud Nahdi and Ahmed Versi, the editors of *Q News* and *The Muslim News* respectively, the two widest read Muslim newspapers in the country. Their words not only explain the hostility of the Muslim press to the CRE but the extent to which, by 1995, a self-consciously religious identity had crystallised in reaction to antiracist efforts. They declared that their newspapers were boycotting the black CRE Chairman Herman Ouseley’s call for “ethnic minority editors” to support the CRE’s anti-racism measures. They claimed that the British reputation for tolerance “is being seriously undermined by the actions and attitudes of those who seem intent on refusing to accept and respect our Muslim identity.” They saw Ouseley’s call as of “no consequence” to their community, but “most probably we will not be missed...because if you refuse to be “black” or “Asian” you don’t exist” (Nahdi and Versi 1995).

Their hostility towards being classified by skin colour over religion stemmed from a widespread feeling that antiracist campaigners and secular Britons in general did not understand the importance of the Islamic faith to its adherents. For instance, in 1992 non-Muslim filmmakers at *Channel 4* made a documentary named “The Story of a Community,” exploring the Bangladeshi Muslim community in the East End. The documentary attempted to understand the social and economic problems Muslims in the area faced. Yet the *Q News* TV review of the programme provided a telling reaction to mainstream British interpretations of South Asian culture. The programme was criticised for its coverage of religious problems, which were “as usual, abandoned” (Khan 1992). It claimed the 1992 violence was primarily “anti-Islamic” and that this led to “the older generation becoming defensive...and the younger generation even more disenchanting”. Yet the Muslim reaction to the documentary took pride that despite the misunderstandings of the non-Muslim filmmaker, a strong Islamic message shone through.

It may not have been the producers’ intention to look at the role religious identity plays in the lives of Bangladeshis in East London but the interviewees tended to speak for themselves when they identified religion as an important part of their lives. (Khan 1992)

This rejection of categorisation by race in favour of a strong reliance on a community of Muslims to solve their problems went unnoticed by the authorities into the later 1990s. Yet this development is vital to understanding the foundations of Islamism in Britain; feeling besieged and insecure, Muslims stopped looking to secular anti-racist groups and the authorities for protection and towards their religion. In a fundamental sense they resorted to Islamism, putting faith at the center of issues which might have once fallen outside the remit of the mosque such as social welfare and legal protection. It was the beginning of a process in which, feeling their faith under attack, they looked to defend themselves looking back at the essentials of Islam and its role in the social lives of Muslims. As will be explored in the following chapter, the practice of defending Islam as at the center of a Muslim's identity became politicised from the 1980s onwards.

Chapter 2: Attack on Islamic principles

“Islam is not something that can be learnt and adhered to overnight. It must be lived, breathed and fostered until it cannot be separated from life itself”- Union of Muslim Organizations (Union of Muslim Organizations 1975, 10)

Secular culture, western values and the media

Aside from attacks by racists in the street, facing discrimination and poverty, the growing importance of a religious identity meant that many Muslims in the East End increasingly felt their religious principles to be under attack just as strongly by secular, western values. Government policy did not recognise religious groups in census data and refused to fund Muslim schools. Yet there was a wider sense in the community that there was an insidious media and secular culture which sought to discredit Islam and push Muslims to abandon their faith. Two ideas were particularly powerful in prompting a defensive attitude from Muslims. First, the idea that Muslim women were being corrupted by promiscuity and irreligion in Western society was powerful. They were seen as particularly vulnerable to the effects of gender mixing, for instance. Secondly, elderly and especially devout Muslims worried young Muslims would assimilate into Western culture, losing their faith and Islamic values along the way, either to Christianity or secularism.

This sentiment can be observed in varying degrees of strength across the community. Among more radical, youth-centered organizations such as the Young Muslims Organization (YMO) it was particularly explicit. The YMO, founded in 1988, served the younger members of East London Mosque's congregation (Sookhdeo 2015). For instance, the group's constitution celebrated a cultural wing of Dawatul Islam as providing “creative, meaningful and wholesome cultural alternatives to the decadent unislamic culture, and combat the dirty and morally repugnant literature” (YMO 1990). There was an active sense that they had to fight back, as “just as the weather is cold and dry, so are the British people in their attitude towards religion.” They claimed, “we

are entrusted to convey the words of Allah...all the more, to the young Bangladeshi Muslims who have kept their faiths rekindled, despite the adverse propaganda by the media against Islam” (YMO 1990). There was a fear that, as analyzed by McRoy, future generations of Muslims would become “brown Sahibs” like Rushdie himself, who hate their culture, becoming “morally lose” or apostate (McRoy 2006, 14).

However, concerns, albeit less strongly worded, were widespread across the community. Alcohol and sex outside marriage were strictly condemned as *haram* under Islamic teaching, yet were openly condoned in mainstream British culture. While for many the greater danger posed by mainstream British society was atheism, the threat of Christianity as a rival faith also loomed. For instance, the Church of England’s announcement of a “decade of Evangelism” a few months after the end of the Gulf War was received very negatively by the community. Dr Badawi, speaking after an emergency meeting of the Imams and Mosques Council and the Muslim College, claimed the Church was targeting “Muslims in the UK in order to bring our young generation into the Christian fold. Muslims are being discriminated against in education, housing and other social services.” He argued that strengthening “Islam in this part of the world” or “internal resistance” and in particular, targeting young people would “counter the Christian threat” (The Muslim News 1991).

Two influential Muslim campaigns, both centered in London are valuable examples of the actions many in the community took to preserve their religious principles against what they perceived to be an attack. First, a vigorous, long running campaign to secure public funding for Muslim single-sex schools. Second, the establishment of a helpline providing Islamic solutions to social problem facing Muslim women. Taken together, these two London-based campaigns are revealing of a much wider sense of unease and victimhood within the Islamic community with the impact western secular society was having on British Muslims. Not only did Muslims feel dislocated as outlined in the previous chapter, but during this period began to organize to defend the Islamic values that set them apart in the first place.

Public funding for Muslim schools

The most immediate and direct way in which Muslims in the 1990s felt their religious principles to be threatened directly by government policy was over the issue of Muslim schools. The lack of public funding, or what many Muslims saw as the government’s refusal to fund single sex Islamic schools, was the most significant way in which Muslims both in the East End and across Britain saw their values as under attack. Throughout the late 20th century, the fact that Jewish and Christian faith schools were funded by the state yet public funding for Muslim schools was denied was a common source of Muslim frustration. For instance, in 1989 the Jewish community had secured state aid for fifteen primary and five secondary schools despite having a population of only 450,000. While there were an estimated one million Muslims in Britain, they had not secured state funding for one Islamic faith school (Hiro 1991, 189). However, in the 1990s the political

campaign stepped up a notch with increased lobbying efforts from the Muslim Educational Trust (MET) and the IQRA educational trust, established in 1990. This perceived sense of injustice was regularly covered in significant detail in the Muslim press, with headlines such as “Yet another Jewish school gets funding,” and “Calling the lie over Muslim Schools” (The Muslim News 1995) (The Muslim News 1989).

There were two main ways in which Muslims saw their values as under attack through the issue of Muslim schools. Firstly, there was the issue of the mixing of genders, discouraged under Islamic teaching. Without public funding for Muslim single-sex schools, it was much less likely that Muslim boys and girls would be taught in separate classes. The second issue was one of religious education. There was a sense from British Muslim campaigners that Britain as a society was either irreligious and secularised, or pushing Christian values on Muslim students. This issue led to common cases of parents exercising the right to pull their children out of non-Islamic religious studies or sex education lessons and campaigning to have Islamic studies examined as an O or A level (Union of Muslim Organizations 1975, 9).

This concern about the erosion of Islamic values as a result of Muslims sending their children to secular schools originates in the 1970s, when the wives and families of male South Asian migrants began to move to the UK (Hiro 1991). For instance, in the Union of Muslim Organizations’ June 1975 pamphlet on “Islamic Education and Single Sex Schools” these ideological concerns are strikingly clear. It discusses the “distress” of migrant Muslim women on seeing “scantly clad” Western women, and links this shock to concerns about Islam in a secular society: “A major worry for Muslim parents is the fact that their children soon begin to adopt English standards and ideas.” He claimed children could begin to question “religious ideas which seem to be strangely alien to life in a Western materialistic society” (Union of Muslim Organizations 1975, 10). Running throughout this narrative, hence, is a notion that Western society is corrupting and Muslims must come to the defence of the principles of Islam. Each Muslim, it was emphasised, has a duty to ensure the “flourishing existence of the Muslim Community in Britain depends entirely upon every Muslim in Britain today” (Union of Muslim Organizations 1975, 11) and their individual efforts. Muslims must stand by the Quranic principles of single-sex Islamic education, if necessary, “in defence of Muslim girl absenteeism from secondary schools” (Union of Muslim Organizations 1975, 14).

Yet these concerns persisted into the 1990s; laws on funding had not changed. This is evident from the dialogue between the East London mosque and the Muslim Educational Trust (MET). In their 1992 official feedback document from the Muslim community to the Department of Education following the government’s White Paper on “Choice and Diversity,” the East London Mosque office and the MET spokesperson argued: “It cannot be denied that this society’s moral and spiritual moorings are rather adrift and need to be strengthened.” They continued that without religious education, teaching morality is “neither feasible nor possible. It is the consciousness of our responsibility and accountability to our Supreme Creator that decide the spirituality and morality of a person” (Muslim Educational Trust 1992, 1). This is evidently a more

complex argument than simply that they deserve the right to choose a faith school as a minority to preserve culture. The feedback raised strong objection to section 8[3] of the Education Reform Act which stipulated that national religious education syllabuses should “reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian” (Muslim Educational Trust 1992, 4). They saw it as a hostile piece of legislation negatively impacting Muslim communities.

The failure of nationwide Muslim education campaigns meant that by the 1990s, Muslims in the East End began to take matters into their own hands. Muslims including the Bangladeshi Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets (BENTH) and Bangladesh Parents Association in Tower Hamlets (BPATH) wrote to the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) to ask for their Labour leader Neil Fletcher to withdraw his “latest exhibition of anti-Muslim ignorance.” Fletcher had argued segregated schools would “pave the way for apartheid in British education” and “set back the struggle of British Muslim women for equal rights” (The Muslim News 1990). Muslims in Tower Hamlets launched an East London schools programme in which they wrote to parents to change some predominantly Bangladeshi schools into “model schools in accordance with Islam.” This included banning sex education lessons and teaching English as a third language (The Muslim News 1990). Yet this campaign was limited in its effect, unable to implement the holistic curricular change activists at the MET advocated.

This long-standing grievance, which had existed as long as Muslim families had lived in the UK, went unresolved until the election of the Labour party in 1997, when Tony Blair’s election campaign embraced multiculturalism and funding for faith schools (Tomlinson 2008, 126). While the Muslim community were ultimately successful in their struggle, the extent to which this was due to Muslim campaigning is questionable. Longstanding feelings of isolation and practice in resistance and campaigning would have a lasting effect, bringing the community together. It included prominent figures within the London Muslim community, famously Yusuf Islam (also known as Cat Stevens). The length of the fight for recognition brought Muslims together as much as their lack of success until the new millennium isolated them, their values and political beliefs from the rest of British society. Yet more importantly, feeling their values under attack, they turned to Islam as a social counter-narrative to that provided by British society, Islamism in a basic sense.

Muslim Women’s Helpline

As shown in the role of single-sex education in the campaign for Muslim schools, Muslim women and girls in British Muslim communities became politicised as a defensive tactic against secular culture. This persisted into the 1990s. In response to newspaper reports of exorcisms or honour killings in which young Muslim women were murdered by their families (Levin 1992); the idea that secular feminists were leading Muslim women to diverge from the teachings of their faith had become a common theme in community discourse. For instance, at the Young Muslim’s annual summer camp in 1991, attended

by over 3000 young Muslims from across England, Rahanah Sadiq one of the prominent speakers argued “feminism makes girls lose all their femininity” she added “the mother is the linchpin of the family” (The Muslim News 1991). There was a sense that feminism was an inherently white and secular concept that undermined the traditional role of the women in the family.

London-based Muslim Women’s Helpline (MWH) became operational in 1989, set up by a panel of eight young Muslim women with backgrounds in social work from the Islamic Cultural Center. A confidential advice line for Muslim women suffering from problems arising from divorce, abusive husbands, teenage children, family members sexually assaulting daughters and being a single parent. It sought to find solutions for Muslim women to such social problems that were often taboo within the community, from people who understood their faith and social context. It was immensely successful, in the first three years dealing with 3000 calls from London Muslim women (Muslim Womens Helpline 1992).

Yet the Helpline made no secret of the strategy underpinning its foundation. As much as it existed to help the Muslim women and girls in abusive relationships, it was as much a protection of the Muslim faith. “For every new convert to Islam”, the Women’s Helpline argued, “there were perhaps five “born” Muslim women and girls being led away from the faith”. The women facing social problems, it was argued, see their problems as resolved “not by Muslims who shunned them but by non-Muslims. These girls and women were prey to secularists and feminists” (Muslim Womens Helpline 1992). The Women’s Helpline would frequently hark back to these principles when asking the community for funding as opposed to marketing the helpline as a purely philanthropic exercise. In 1991, when funds were running particularly low, the Helpline’s paper made this explicit, drawing on Muslim disquiet at the Church of England’s launch of a “decade of evangelism” in December 1991.

It seems particularly important with the Decade of Evangelism upon us (and its implicit interest in preying on the vulnerable and isolated which often means women and children) that the Helpline should not be allowed to collapse because it is a unique Islamic service to the Muslim community and in supporting women who are the corner-stone of the family it is helping to stabilize and strengthen Muslim society as a whole. (Muslim Womens Helpline 1990)

The MWH is part of something much bigger, self-consciously locating itself in a wider debate about the future of Islam in the face of western secularism. Sara Sherrif, a prominent community figure as a founding member and deputy editor of The Muslim News warned that the British Muslim community would have “nobody but itself to blame social and familial disharmony and strife emerges more often than at present to damage the already battered image of Islam” (Muslim Womens Helpline 1990). The ideological as well as philanthropic mission of the Helpline highlights the way in which social work simultaneously became a political action centered on the protection of Islam, which will also be observed in the work of the Young Muslims Organization in the following chapter. As well as a philanthropic success, it

was another strategic reaction; the Muslim community was reforming from within to defend its religious values from external attack.

Chapter 3: A civilization under attack: the narrative of global Islamic revivalism

“My nationality is Islam” – Saleem Siddiqi (Siddiqi, Dr 1999)

When the prophet Muhammed migrated from Mecca to Medina in June 622, known as *al-Hijrah*, he enacted the first demonstration of what is now called *ummah*, or the global Muslim community. Understanding *ummah* and its central position in the core spiritual beliefs of all Muslims, including British Muslims, is essential in explaining the importance of the global events in shaping the discourses of Muslims in East London, in Britain and across the Western world. A sense that the global *ummah* was under immediate threat transformed the anxiety and malaise that underpinned the issues discussed in previous chapters into open, forceful opposition. During the formative period of 1988-1995, three events took place which triggered the development of an alternative discourse at odds with British government policy and public opinion. These were the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, the outbreak of the Gulf War and the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims from 1992-1995, before NATO action. Community organizations such as the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs and the Muslim Parliament were formed to provide a platform for a British Muslim discourse on these events. They were unanimous in condemning the *Satanic Verses*, united in a scepticism of Western motives waging war against a Muslim leader in Iraq, and universally outraged at John Major’s inaction despite the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims. The effects of these events on the East London Muslim community were profound.

Largely thanks to this concept of *ummah*, the Muslim community in Britain took a great interest in global politics, particularly where Muslim majority countries were involved. As well as tracking the welfare of Muslims in their diaspora countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, they took an active interest in members of the *ummah* in Palestine, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. This is powerfully exemplified in the content and layout of the two largest British Muslim newspapers during this period, *The Muslim News* and *Q News*. Despite identifying in their slogans as the “News and Views of Muslims in the United Kingdom” and “Britain’s only Muslim weekly” respectively, the layout of both these newspapers illustrates that the affairs of the global *ummah* and the affairs of British Muslims were prioritised equally. On their front pages the headlines, “Christians on killing spree of Muslims” would sit side by side with “CRE and ICRC to launch leaflets on religious discrimination” (The Muslim News 1996). Beneath the headline “Panic on Cairo streets” a report on the Egyptian earthquake that “shocked the Muslim world” was a feature on Qur’anic readings on BBC radio (Q News 1992). The Muslim News ran a “Washington Diary” with a permanent correspondent monitoring US foreign policy towards Muslims, while the Bosnian war consumed the headlines of *Q News*. Smaller publications such as *Impact International* exclusively

covered the affairs Muslim community around the world. This blurring of boundaries between foreign and domestic news is telling; this was a community highly sensitive to developments more likely to have profound personal responses to foreign affairs affecting the wellbeing of members of the *ummah*.

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988 was the first watershed in the development of this British Muslim alternative discourse. The outrage, anger and disappointment felt by British Muslims led to a profound sense of isolation and disaffection which would characterise their experience in the decade to follow. After the Ayatollah made his *fatwa* against Rushdie, permitting Muslims to lawfully assassinate him, Khomeini became a publicly popular figure whose image was frequently appeared on placards in protests across the country (The Muslim News 1989). In a demonstration organized by the British Muslim Action Committee over 80,000 Muslims converged on London on May 27, 1989 to have the book banned under English blasphemy laws. In the East London Mosque, a petition was circulated, signed by hundreds, calling the book "a stab in the back for the Muslims of the world" (The Society of Muslim Scholars UK 1989) and was supplemented by large protests in the immediate aftermath.

Yet politically, in East London, the situation was fraught with tension and division. The crisis had highlighted the inadequacy of antiracist politicians to fight for Muslim concerns. Black London MP Paul Boateng who often campaigned for racial justice dismissed Muslim anger as having nothing to do with the "black discourse" (McRoy 2006, 10). Meanwhile, Hackney North MP Diane Abbott became embroiled in a dispute. Despite being a long-time ally of ethnic minority causes, she denied that the book should be banned under free speech. Abbott was attacked by Hackney Pakistani Welfare Association after she said any calls for censorship by fundamentalist religious leaders should be resisted. Iqbaluddin Ahmad, chair of the Association said he was "surprised and disappointed by her comments" (Melody 1989). Calling the book "filthy and provocative," he argued, "Salman Rushdie has provoked one million Muslims of the world yet Diane Abbott is unable to support the call for banning his book" (Melody 1989). The crisis was also an important contributing factor in the Muslim rejection of an identity based on race and a move towards a religious identification. The CRE's lack of concern over the issue and the lack of support from MPs such as Abbott acted as a catalyst for Muslims to form a self-consciously Muslim political identity.

A plethora of Muslim organizations formed after 1988, giving British Muslims a platform in which to react to events such as the publication of the *Satanic Verses*. This included the first self-consciously British Muslim newspaper, *The Muslim News*, which identified as the "News and Views of Muslims in the United Kingdom." The United Kingdom Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) also formed in October 1988 as was the Muslim Parliament, headed by the Islamic activist Kalim Siddiqi. Both these organizations aimed to coordinate and publicise British Muslim narratives on current affairs and issues of Muslim interest. McRoy's seminal work *From Rushdie to 7/7: The Radicalisation of Islam in Britain* gives the concept of *ummah* the place it deserves, at the center of understanding how British foreign policy had powerful, sometimes radical

effects on the Muslim population. However, McRoy's and Rutheven's focus on power struggles within the Muslim community as a result of the Rushdie crisis, such as the rise of more hard line religious groups is key to understanding the process which the Rushdie crisis set in motion. As McRoy argues:

The *Satanic Verses* provided the Mawdudists and other hard-liners the opportunity to increase their influence, vindicating their thesis that no compromise is possible between the absolute truths of Islam and the falsehoods of the infidel, jahili West. (McRoy 2006, 11)

However, while this effect was immediately observable in areas such as Bradford, most notably through the infamous book-burning in a protest, in the East End the effects were not as immediately observable. This effect of the Rushdie affair in London would have its greatest impact in the context of further crises which would further isolate the Muslim community.

Only a year later the outbreak of the Gulf War was to exacerbate tensions. On August 12, 1990, immediately after military intervention began, a declaration following a meeting of 35 UK Muslim organizations condemned the presence of non-Muslim troops in the Gulf. In a joint press statement, they agreed: "we cannot tolerate the intervention of non-Muslim powers in this essentially internal Muslim affair" (The Muslim News 1990). In light of this Muslim disquiet, Pnina Werbner's seminal anthropological study of rhetoric at a conference of Pakistani Muslims in Manchester during the Gulf War is of crucial relevance. Her language analysis of the arguments made revealed the way in which global events were directly incorporated into local experiences of Muslims. British foreign policy in many ways was not foreign at all to British Muslims but instead was presented as an extension of their experience at home: as Werbner concluded, for Muslims in Manchester "the local and the global are mutual constitutive" (Werbner 1994, 216). Yet more crucially, she discussed the Muslim rejection of what is termed "axiomatic moral imperatives," such as "our boys" fighting for peace and Saddam Hussein as a dictator. The notion that Saddam was a malicious despot, for instance, was rejected by large numbers of British Muslims, and as a result there was a sense that Muslims were "[setting] themselves morally apart from British society" (Werbner 1994, 217). This contrasted with widespread British support for the war and increased the isolation felt by Muslims in Britain, fostering a sense of disaffection with their government, which they felt represented the opposite of their world view.

In the East End, the effects of the Gulf War were felt acutely. Matching a rise in violence against Muslims across the North of England in 1991, committee members of the Iraqi Community Association in Dalston were sent death threats. A spokesperson for the headquarters told the local newspapers: "They tell us that our days are numbered and if anyone gets hurt in the Gulf we'll pay for it. We've also been sent an "official" Iraqi calendar, with all the pages ripped out after January 15 – the deadline Saddam Hussein was set to withdraw from Kuwait" (Fowler 1991). The fact that the Iraqi Community Association opposed Saddam as a dictator yet still fell victim to violence from the white British population reinforced a sense of being under attack. Hence they saw themselves

as “victims not only of Saddam Hussein, but of the British as well” (Fowler, 1991). While they rejected Saddam, the Muslims at the Iraqi community center continued to locate themselves in a global narrative of persecution and isolation.

This sense of alienation was widespread in the community, yet the opposition Iraqis in Hackney exhibited towards Saddam was not matched by other Muslims in the East End. Manzila Paula Uddin, a Muslim Labour councillor in Tower Hamlets described the sentiments she felt within her predominantly Bangladeshi and Pakistani community: “we want to be British Muslims and I feel there is no clash of loyalties in being both. But it is other people who are forcing us to take sides.” She spoke of an “anti-Muslim attitude in the country...which is no longer war related but has been strengthened by the war” (Chaudhary and Hill 1991). This exemplified a wider sense of being under attack from the outside and a need for Muslims to decide where their loyalties lie. Uddin’s experience from talking to constituents revealed a youth more confrontational and strident in challenging the narratives circulating in Britain about the Iraq war. She argued that young Muslim men had begun “drawing on the very essence of militant Islam. Many of them said they supported Saddam because it’s the first time they’ve known a Muslim leader stand up to the West” (Chaudhary and Hill 1991). As Werbner highlighted, it was this refusal to accept established British “axiomatic moral imperatives” that further isolated Muslims from the majority of British public opinion. In the same way that racism, secularism and media portrayal caused Muslims in the East End to turn their back on mainstream British beliefs and value sets, British foreign policy had a similar effect.

Moreover, this sense of alienation from British ideas about the war strengthened the sense of solidarity with the *ummah* in many young people. Nearly a decade later, Mohammad Omar, 25, who grew up in Hackney who had trained as a Mujahedeen with guerrilla fighters in Pakistan, specifically identified the Gulf War as a key moment in his journey to jihad abroad, describing himself and “many others” as “shaken by the Gulf War.” He selected a key moment from when his youth in the aftermath of the Gulf War which made a profound mark on his worldview: “I saw Hizb ut-Tahrir debating at SOAS with intellectuals, like deans, who quite frankly got trashed by them. They seemed to provide a solution” (Vasagar 2000). Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) did not advocate protest through established channels such as writing to MPs or political lobbying and often preached that Muslims voting in the UK was forbidden under Islam. As will be outlined in the following chapter, their reactions to these global events did not just contrast with British axiomatic moral imperatives, they openly declared war on them. HT advocated extreme reactions to the events of the Gulf, most notably when Omar Bakri Muhammed, a HT leader at the time, put the group in the national headlines when he proclaimed “[John] Major is a legitimate target; if anyone gets the opportunity to assassinate him, I don’t think they should save it. It is our Islamic duty and we will celebrate his death” (Taji-Farouki 1996, 181). The fact that such radical ideas were inspiring young Muslims as a direct result of the Gulf War is emblematic of the changes that were taking place: practicing Islam and being represented by the British government, for some, was becoming contradictory.

It was clear that by 1992 British Muslims in the East End were greatly concerned about the wellbeing of the global *ummah*. By the time stories emerged of Muslim persecution in Bosnia almost immediately after the Gulf War, its impact on the British Muslim community was especially grave. The starkest reactions to this war came from the now active group HT. Jonathan Bronitsky's analysis highlights the ways in which HT used the inaction of the British government in the face of the massacre of Bosnian Muslims to argue that Muslims, even if they were white and secular as in Bosnia, would never be safe in the west. This was particularly observable in the East End, which became a center of activism over Bosnia. Ed Husain, who was a student at Tower Hamlets College in 1993 but who went on to become a HT leader was particularly active in promoting this narrative. He booked a lecture theatre at the college under the title "The Killings Fields at Bosnia" to raise awareness of the conflict and collect donations for Bosnian Muslims. He prepared for a talk titled "Bosnia Today – Brick Lane Tomorrow," by distributing over 30,000 leaflets to houses, markets and mosques. The event's title specifically targeted British Muslims' sense of unease, arguing that what happened to the Bosnian European Muslims could happen to them. The event consisted of a protest march through the Newham entitled "Concerned Muslims Living in Tower Hamlets" (Bronitsky 2010, 13). In student unions across London with high proportions of Muslim students, from SOAS to LSE, HT used "Bosnia weeks" to show more brutal films and images of the war and recruit young Muslims to the organization (Evans 1994). HT planned to use the sense of unease in the community exacerbated by the Bosnian issue to advance their anti-Western message.

However, Brotinsky's argument does not explore the much wider impact the arguments made about Bosnia had on the British Muslim community. In East London, the same area where HT focused their efforts, this concern was more expansive than a radical student group. Fundraising efforts were intense and between 1992 to 1993 the mosque congregation gave £1000 in donations to charities helping Muslims in Bosnia, which is especially significant given that it was only £300 less than what the congregation gave to Bangladesh, the home country of the vast majority of the local community (East London Mosque 1992-1993). Sermons began to warn the *dawa*, or the Muslim community, to make brothers aware of "on-going Muslim oppressions in Palestine, Kashmir, Algeria, India and Bosnia" (East London mosque 1992-1993) and the questions it raised about being Muslim in the UK.

"After Rushdie, the Gulf War, and now Bosnia, I have been forced to describe myself in terms of religion," wrote Nasreen Rehman in 1993, an influential London academic and writer. "For 20 years I have never felt that being a Muslim was a problem. Then it changed" (Alibhai-Brown 1993). These three global events, particularly when examined together, reveal a watershed in how British Muslims as a collective identified. Most importantly, after each event Islamist messages advocating mistrust of mainstream British discourse gained ground. Increasingly, Muslims began to look to Islam as a faith and as a community for protection. First, many Muslims in the East End believed the Rushdie crisis proved they could not trust non-Muslim anti-racist campaigners to advance

their aims. As Meer highlights, a disjuncture emerged between how others viewed Muslims and how Muslims viewed themselves (Meer 2010, 77). Second, the Gulf War was seen by many as a sign that the British government and international organizations such as the UN did not understand or value the concept of *ummah* or the sanctity of Muslim holy sites. Third, for some Muslims the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims and British inaction raised concerns about the ability of Muslims to ever be accepted into or fully protected in a non-Muslim society. Instead, they should look towards their faith for security. Following these events, the reaction of British Muslims to the War on Terror in 2001 was hardly surprising. Even the Muslim Mayor of Hackney, Saleem Siddiqi, a public servant well integrated into the local government establishment (a councillor since 1990) claimed he had to avoid discussing international affairs with other politicians, including with councillors of his own party to minimise conflict: “he will not understand the point of view of mine” (Siddiqi, Millennium Memory Bank 1999). An acute awareness of the condition of the *ummah* around the world and its contrast with the foreign policy the government pursued at that time hence contributed to a sense of alienation from the establishment and a predisposition towards Islamist messages.

Chapter 4: Youth, radicalization and Islamism

“Our call for [jihad] in Bosnia was not limited to east London but heard all across the UK. As we predicted, the ummah, once given the idea, delivered” – Ed Husein, Hitzb-ut-Tahrir (Husein 2007)

While some of the responses to feelings of marginalization from Muslims in the context of the East End were social work or political campaigning, a minority of Muslims, particularly young people, turned to extreme Islamist messages as a solution. Radical groups in London, mainly Hitzb-ut-Tahrir, (and later its splinter group al-Muhajiroun) took on common Muslim grievances with Britain’s foreign policy, protecting Islamic values and placing religion at the center of the identity of second generation immigrant Muslims. This ideology, a new Islamism, most visible at the time in HT’s messages was Islamist in an exclusive way, arguing that living a social and political life fully in accordance with Muslim values *ipso facto* meant opposing the British state and society. The polarising messages of these groups were far from resonating with all Muslim youth at this time, but in the early-mid 1990s extremist messages were much more prevalent in youth groups and student unions, in large part as a result of deliberate and incessant targeting by HT.

HT were founded in 1953 as a pan-Islamic organization seeking to unify Muslim-majority countries into an Islamic caliphate. By the late 1980s HT had established cells throughout the Middle East and Central and South Asia, aiming to infiltrate militaries to facilitate HT a coup (Ahmed and Stewart 2010, 158). A British branch of HT was founded in 1986 when Omar Bakri Muhammad, a hard-line Islamic preacher, moved to Britain from Syria. They soon grew rapidly in London, flooding student unions and youth Islamic Societies with debates and leaflets inviting them to mass rallies. Although

it was a trans-national group, HT in Britain quickly took on its own identity as English-speaking and oriented towards second-generation Muslims feeling an identity clash between Islamic and secular British values (Nawaz 2012). Much of HT's recruiting power lay in appropriating sentiments common in the Muslim community, such as concerns about British foreign policy, taking them to radical new levels. In response to concerns about Western secular culture, for instance, HT chose a militant approach; they spread posters around East London campuses of Muslim women in face veils carrying AK-47s. It was captioned: "Women of the West – Cover Up or Shut Up" (Nawaz 2012, 71). These posters were created with an intent to polarise; offending white students and presenting an uncomfortable dichotomy between Britain and their faith for Muslims in these colleges. HT claimed they were simply following through on Qur'anic messages and protecting the *ummah*, and their message presented Muslim and British society as diametrically opposed.

East London, home to one of the largest Muslim communities in the UK, became an important recruiting ground for HT. They targeted young people in Sixth Form colleges across East London using sleek propaganda and quick-witted, articulate students in public debates. For one such student, ex-HT leader Maajid Nawaz, the Newham College campus in East Ham, East London played a key part in the development of his own extremist ideology. A second-generation Pakistani immigrant and a member of HT, he became president of the Newham College Student Union at 16 years old (Nawaz 2012, 69). He directed funding for the Islamic Society towards the group and away from more traditionally religious and less political factions. According to Nawaz's accounts, religious acts such as prayer were politicised and performed on the streets before rival non-Muslim gangs. Often, students would stay up all night making propaganda posters with religious messages and then inundating student unions the following day. Yet HT student activists felt their "victory in the student elections felt as though it was part of a bigger picture" (Nawaz 2012, 70). HT knew how to make an impact and held rallies across London during this period, using colleges such as Newham as a base. The energy and charisma of the group, gathering in prominent locations such as Wembley Stadium and Trafalgar square gathered 7-8,000 at a time. Their "Rally for Islam" in 1995 boasted converting 50 non-Muslims in one day, including passers-by through the "intellectual persuasion" (The Muslim News 1995) of the educated young HT members there. Their anti-government rhetoric appealed to the young and their message of redemption from the "excesses" of Western society such as drug abuse resonated with disillusioned students searching for greater meaning in their lives (The Muslim News 1995).

Undoubtedly, HT were prominent and well-known, particularly among young Muslim circles in London during this period. However despite this, only a small minority of young Muslims actually joined groups such as HT or campaigned to advocate their messages. The situation in the East London mosque at this time can, however, tell a story of the wider impact an extreme form of Islamism had. Many of the messages similar to those HT put out gained hold in more mainstream religious organizations in East London. For the first time, there was a much wider sense that, as Hiro concluded, "young people,

unlike their first-generation parents, began to study Islam as an ideology rather than a ritual” (Hiro 1991, 188). By the mid-late 1990s this Islamist effect was beginning to become clear among young people in the congregation of the East London Mosque.

The youth wing of the East London Mosque’s Islamic Forum of Europe, the Young Muslims Organization (YMO), is a strong example of a more mainstream organization impacted by a more fundamental type of Islamist resurgence. Founded in 1988 by East End Bangladeshis, it served the younger members of East London Mosque’s congregation (Sookhdeo 2015). For Ed Husain, an East London Muslim of Bangladeshi origin who later became a prominent HT radical, the YMO was a springboard into some of the arguments the most extreme Islamists were making. He was recruited by them in particular due to his “restlessness” and the “training” (Husein 2007, 121) he received in leafletting, debating and publicising messages at YMO. Attending the East London mosque, he was involved in a YMO effort to spread their messages across the local area and beyond, particularly in schools. The posters it propagated, like HT’s, targeted students: “Most students travelled to and from the Poplar campus by bus, walking from the bus stop...they walked past gold-painted graffiti proclaiming “Islam is the Solution” and, beneath that, “YMO”” (Hiro 1991, 122). While their messages, prominent in schools such as tower Hamlets College did not campaign against British foreign policy in the same way as HT, they were still Islamist in the sense that they strongly advocated going back to Islamic teaching for principles by which to live.

The YMO official policy document for 1995 exemplifies this, addressing two key issues with striking clarity and fundamentalism. The first is the issue of the mixing of genders in schools. Rather than simply arguing that mixing should be discouraged or avoided, the YMO went one step further, arguing that the mixing of women with non-Muslim men, in education and the workplace is *haram*, or forbidden. They argued “the Prophet (SAW) discouraged women to pray even in the Masjid so that they don’t come in contact with men Sahabas, so how is it possible for us to allow free mixing” (YMO, Young Muslims Organization Policy Document Appendix 1 1990). Even “looking” at the opposite sex is identified as *zina*, which is the Islamic legal term for unlawful sexual intercourse, “because it is by look that people enjoy the beauty of the opposite sex” (YMO, Young Muslims Organization Policy Document Appendix 1 1990, 11). The second, more controversial issue explored was the topic of women’s rights to leadership. The YMO concluded in the first few lines of this section that: “In Islam, women leadership is unlawful. There is enough evidence of this in the Qur’an and Hadith” (YMO 1990, 13). They claimed the Qur’an only permits women to be leaders among other women, where she will not have regular contact with unmarried men unrelated to her. They YMO argued “the fact that women are not considered fully matured in wisdom and decisiveness is proven by the statement in the Qur’an that women’s evidence is half that of men. Allah says “And get two witnesses out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women.”” (YMO 1990, 14). This is powerful in its context as a departure from mainstream politics towards a society governed solely according to Islam. The UK had just emerged from over a decade of leadership from Margaret

Thatcher. Benazir Bhutto was at that time Prime Minister of Pakistan. The YMO effectively implied that for Muslims, these leaders should technically be illegitimate, undermining a basic aspect of living in British society.

This policy document exemplifies accurately the lengths to which the YMO advocated going to live by the principles in Islamic texts. This form of Islamism went beyond simply looking to religion and the *ummah* for social, political and spiritual guidance; it thoroughly rejected as un-Islamic basic aspects of living in Britain and most other countries in the world. Yet while HT and the YMO took extreme and literalist interpretations of religion, many of the arguments these groups made shared the same core concerns as many other sectors of the Muslim community. For instance, the Muslim Women's Helpline worried about the Church of England's "decade of evangelism" as HT preached about a Christian crusade in the Gulf. The concerns raised by the Union of Muslim Organizations about gender mixing and secular schools as discussed in Chapter 1 were shared by the YMO, who advocated firmer adherence to religious texts on gender. This did not mean disagreements between radical and moderate Islamists were not fierce. For instance, at a protest about Bosnia in 1992 at which 3000 people rallied in Trafalgar Square to end "Holocaust 1992," the Muslim press chastised the extremists as "a small but vocal minority of Muslim hooligans" who "unfolded a banner marked "Jihad" and began to heckle and shout down the speakers" (Q News 1992) and "short sighted airheads." Yet Q News also believed in intervention to stop the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims, and in fact criticised the "hooligans" for not doing enough: "Actions, not words brothers!...Why were they in Trafalgar Square and not Sarajevo?" (Sheikh 1992). The radical messages HT advocated during this period were damaging the credibility of what Muslims saw to be a worthy cause.

Conclusion

"We must be clear: the ideology of extremism and terrorism is the problem; legitimate religious belief emphatically is not."— Theresa May, Prevent Strategy Foreword, 2011

Opening the relaunch of the UK government's Prevent strategy against violent extremism, the then-Home Secretary Theresa May claimed the primary result of the programme would be to "respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat from those who promote it" (Home Office 2011). Government strategy since then has centered around drawing a sharp distinction between an "extreme" and a "moderate" ideology and chastising groups, including HT, that failed this test of extremism. Underpinning this strategy is the assumption that the arguments of groups which "oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society" (Home Office 2011) do not share the same concerns as the vast majority of Muslims, even though they overwhelmingly reject the violence, extremism and divisive rhetoric of groups such as HT. Yet the study of the East End has shown while the measures employed by different groups within the Muslim community varied, their concerns and the marginalization they experienced was broadly similar.

Members of the East London Mosque, the Muslim Educational Trust, the editors of *The Muslim News* and young HT members alike felt that both Muslims and Islamic principles across the world were under attack and should be protected.

I have analyzed the role the period c.1988-1997 and the historical developments which took place in it in their own right, exploring the reactions of British Muslims in the East End to evolving global and national circumstances. Remedying some of the myopia in current research, I have sought to draw greater attention to pre-9/11 events as causes of today's divisions and the foundations of Islamism in Britain. As this paper has explored, the Muslim experience of the late 1980s and early 1990s was characterised by isolation, anxiety and mistrust of the government and secular British culture. The community in the East End responding to key issues such as racism, poverty, the Rushdie crisis and British foreign policy vis-à-vis the *ummah* by looking for support and comfort within their faith. Many lost confidence in their government and the principles of British society. Through measures such as the Muslim Women's Helpline and educational trusts they sought to protect their religion from threats on the outside. This is Islamist in a basic sense; a turn towards leading a life more guided by Islam as a reaction to external threats and insecurities. The responses of groups such as HT in Britain and organizations like the YMO were variations on a common concern.

Examining the concerns and reactions of the British Muslim community before 9/11 in this way has another important effect, rationalising the study of Islamism in Britain. Understanding the origins of the social marginalization that many Muslims still feel today makes it much easier to examine the core arguments and concerns of more extreme forms of Islamism and why they appealed to some Muslims in the first place. Archival efforts within Muslim communities across the UK such as that of the East London Mosque Archives are crucial to these efforts. Continuing research into the pre-9/11 period, consequently, can go some way in penetrating complex and intractable debates on Islamism and radicalization in today's public discourse.

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