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Imagining a Muslim Diaspora in Britain? Islamic consciousness and homelands old and new

Seán McLoughlin

Introduction:

The 15 million people of Muslim descent now settled in Western Europe represent the most significant movement of labour into the continent since the Second World War. Representing a wide range of nationalities, with their own particular cultures and histories of migration and settlement, they maintain diverse connections to their homelands old and new. Increasingly, many have been born and brought up in Europe and inhabit complex hybrid identities, as well as making citizenship-based claims for equality and respect. Nevertheless, amongst such groups, there has also been growing consciousness of an overarching 'Islamic' identity in recent years. Its focus is feelings of belonging to, and participation in, a 1 billion-strong Muslim community (*umma*) world-wide. Suggesting that the frame of a 'Muslim diaspora' complements the study of Muslim Britain at local and national scales, this brief essay critically explores the emergence of trans-national Islamic consciousness in the UK since the 1960s and 1970s.

Defining 'the Muslim Diaspora'

The last two decades have seen notions of diaspora and transnationalism become extremely fashionable in scholarly and political discourse. To some extent, these concepts revisit traditional issues in the study of migration and minorities, race and ethnicity, which explore processes of movement and settlement. However, the classic definitions of diaspora relate it to a group's consciousness of, and connection to, places and people elsewhere, whether in terms of a homeland or other historic centres of dispersal. While there is a danger that an

emphasis on ‘diaspora’ constantly returns analyses to a question of *roots* in the past rather than *routes* in the present, the shift in terminology does recognise that many people’s contemporary lived experiences can no longer be seen as contained by the nation-state. Indeed, while diasporas have often succeeded in remaking ‘homes’ abroad, some theorists have pointed to the significance of the metaphorical spaces ‘in-between’ old and new homelands for imagining alternative forms of belonging. Symbolically and ritually connecting Muslims through time and across space, the idea of a transnational *umma* is especially well resourced to suggest a consciousness of community which need not conflict with being at home in particular locales but does shape people’s orientations to the past, present and future. However, perhaps especially when attachment to the old country has faded, and/or in the face of present exclusion, it does retain the potential to transcend place and envision alternative moral and political orders.

The Limits of Diaspora

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the limits as well as the possibilities of a diasporic Muslim identity: in Britain, for example, there are two other scales which routinely shape the configuration of Islam. First, Islam is most immediately tangible at the scale of the neighbourhood and most especially in terms of Muslim institutions such as mosques. While ritual gatherings have enabled congregations to affirm and transmit homeland beliefs and practices since the 1950s and 1960s, such institutions have also had to adapt to new local environments, co-operating when necessary across various religious and ethnic divisions, and especially when presenting a public face to outsiders. However, mosques have also been a location for struggles over status and power, as well as instruments of exclusion, particularly in relation to women and young people.

Second, the secular state and its public institutions have profoundly shaped the dynamics of being Muslim in Britain. Approaches to the recognition and regulation of Muslims as

‘Muslims’, have been configured very differently over time, with the claims of religious leaders accommodated by some local councils during the 1980s, long before there was national level legal protection of citizens against religious (as opposed to racial or ethnic) discrimination. However, with the UK government perceiving the nation-state to be simultaneously threatened by crises of cohesion and security following riots in 2001 and the events of ‘7/7’, the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda of the late 2000s has unambiguously marked a clear shift in the state’s gaze from ‘race’ to ‘faith’ to ‘Muslims’.

The Muslim diaspora in context

The significance of more transnational Islamic networks, activism and imaginaries in the UK can only be understood in dynamic relationship to these local and national scales. However, as the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the Arab Spring more recently, demonstrated so iconically, in the late modern Muslim world Islamic revivalism has become central to articulating young people’s hopes for better futures across borders as well as within them. Of course, nascent British Muslim diasporas were not isolated from such global processes even in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, South Asian origin Islamic movements, such as Jama’at-i Islami, had a small but well organized following in the UK amongst mainly urban origin migrants (often students and professionals) from this period. However, for demographic reasons, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that their discourses impacted on British-born Muslims. Among educated segments of the second and third generations, a significant minority embraced the idea of following a universalizing ‘true’ Islam as a strategy of self-identification. In so doing, a multi-ethnic, Islamized modernity now articulated in an English language vernacular, was distinguished from the ethno-cultural homeland Islam of their parents and the mosques.

In many ways, this began to mark the end of diaspora as ethno-national affiliation. It also helped many map out clear boundaries for behaviour, in (con)testing Western contexts of

cultural pluralisation and consumer capitalism. Even amongst those who were not pious or educated, feeling blocked out of Britain and rarely feeling at home when visiting the subcontinent, the idea of Islamic identity (if not practice) was in some way appealing.

From Diasporic Politics to Everyday Transnationalism

While the idea of the *umma* has a clear historical and territorial orientation in terms of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam and its Prophet, like their co-religionists overseas, some British Muslims have responded to various international conflicts and injustices in the postcolonial Islamic world by producing a more de-territorialized *ummatic* discourse calling for unity and self-reliant action amongst Muslims as a victimized community of suffering.

In Britain, the era of a diasporic Muslim identity politics was first catalysed during the Rushdie Affair of 1989, followed by the Gulf and Bosnian wars of the early to mid-1990s, the on-going situation in Palestine and Kashmir, and the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq following '9/11'. All have triggered heartfelt feelings of Islamic co-responsibility to Muslim peoples and places elsewhere. For a very small number, more widespread conspiracy theories and utopian dreaming have been translated into trans-local action, including taking up arms overseas or at home. However, the predicament of Muslims across the diaspora has more often resulted in charitable giving, as well as peaceful protest and productive participation in a burgeoning British Muslim civil society. Moreover, for a growing number of Muslims in the UK, cosmopolitan connections to the wider Muslim world are becoming part of a more everyday transnationalism, whether in terms of media consumption, seeking education, fashion or travelling for religious tourism.

Conclusion

It is apparent, then, that the dynamics of Muslim Britain must be understood at a combination of local, national and transnational scales. It is also important to recognise that at each of these scales, powerful notions of what counts as Islam tend to get imposed as the norm. In contrast, more 'demotic' or everyday lived experiences of being Muslim in the home, the street or elsewhere have been marginalized in research as much as public policy. So, while in the past policymakers and researchers overlooked the significance of religion, it is common now for formal and institutional constructions of religion to be overplayed. Indeed, the way that both government and Islamic leaders can view ‘Muslim’ identities as relatively fixed can be mutually reinforcing. Another consequence is that the fuzziness of everyday improvisations of ‘doing’ religion can become obscured, with hard boundaries always assumed between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’. What is required instead is an account which locates the multiple and often competing ways in which Islam is, or is not, narrated and performed in specific, structurally constrained contexts. Such an agenda will properly refocus attention on differently positioned embodied subjects and the reasons why they do, or do not, identify as Muslims, at specific intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, generation and sexuality.

Further Reading:

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