

Book Review: Muslims in Britain: Making Social and Political Space

by Blog Admin

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*With contributions from world renowned scholars on British Muslims and from policy makers writing on issues of concern to Muslims and others alike, this book explores how British Muslims are changing social and religious spaces to develop new perspectives on Islam. Providing a broad and comprehensive examination of the key issues surrounding Muslims in the UK, this book will be a valuable resource for students, lecturers and researchers in sociology, social policy, geography, politics, Islamic studies and other related disciplines, find **Sherry Sayed Gadelrab** and **Robert Mason**.*



Muslims in Britain: Making Social and Political Space. Waqar I. U. Ahmad and Ziauddin Sardar (eds.) Routledge. May 2012.

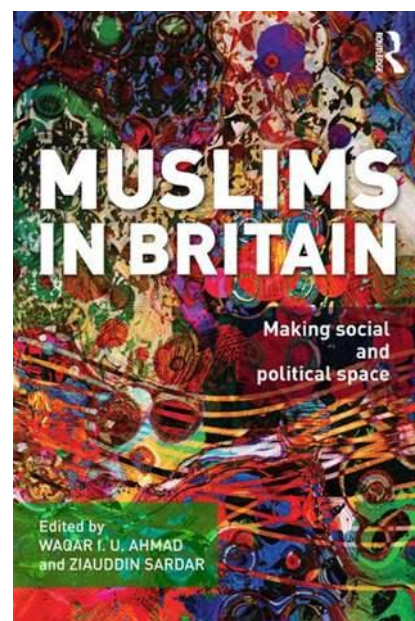
This book draws together a number of important chapters in the under-researched field of Muslims in modern Britain. It should be read with a particularly keen eye by any members of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition who wish to move on from an era of British Muslim relations dominated by security issues, notably embodied in New Labour's [Prevent strategy](#). The Prevent strategy aimed to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism, but 'stigmatised and alienated' British Muslims after it was revealed that the programme was being used to gather intelligence about innocent people who are [not suspected of involvement in terrorism](#).



The editors of this book are both well known in the field and have contributed much to the debate on Islam, Britain and identity. Waqar I. U. Ahmad is a former Chief Social Scientist at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and a Fellow of the Muslim Institute; and Ziauddin Sardar is Professor of Law and Society at Middlesex University, and is considered a pioneering writer on Islam and contemporary cultural issues having authored over fifty books. A former columnist on the *New Statesman*, he is also the co-editor of *Critical Muslim*.

In chapter 2, Professor Rosemary Sales discusses what it is to be British, but largely not through the British Muslim experience. Sales considers the historical and geographical contexts of Northern Ireland, exclusive Conservative leadership definitions, and the multicultural policies promoted by New Labour. She concludes that "Britishness is too contested as an identity to be a source of unity" although there is some evidence that British citizens, including Muslims, have a strong attachment to their local area and British democratic values. History has shown that these elements have not, nor have ever been, unique to the UK or consistently implemented by the British government.

In contrast to chapter 2, Louise Ryan in chapter 5 relies heavily on focus groups with young Muslims living in London to comprehend their experiences of Islamophobia and prejudice post 7/7, but interestingly not the overt racism which was identified as being isolated to specific individuals or found in more rural parts of the country. However, the danger is that cases such as [Yasir Abdeloultalib](#) who was attacked by a gang in London in 2004 for wearing white robes to prayers, or the [gang attacks on Muslim students](#) at City



University in 2009, are overlooked.

Ryan addresses the suspension of immigrants between the local and transnational, and the transformations in identity that take place through greater opportunities to articulate their sense of self through a common culture but still within the parameters of Islam. The freedoms of expression and of British culture obviously affect British Muslims in different ways, including their sense of home and interactions with family members or friends still residing in the country of origin. What would have been a valuable addition is another perspective on young Muslims in London from focus groups held in other UK cities. The research could also have taken into consideration that Muslims in other parts of the world experience similar cultural changes, as well as in the country of origin where the core identity is largely constructed.

Nasar Meer in chapter 8 notes the heterogeneity of British Muslim communities and the shifting sands of identity and collectivity on which Muslim definitions rest. He finds that there is some erosion of cultural boundaries rather than religious ones, which ties in nicely with Ryan's chapter on youth. However, it goes on to link fundamental Islamic commonalities with specific voting behaviour (such as a backlash against Labour in the 2005 general election), political engagement and lobbying. These have concrete outcomes in terms of achieving state funding for Muslim schools which promise to be a long term measure in generating a common British Muslim culture. Meer concludes that simple labels of 'first' and 'second' generation Muslims are insufficient in conceptualising hybrid or kaleidoscopic identities, just as 'moderates' or 'Islamist' are. In an era of poor governmental understandings of domestic and foreign Muslim groups and divisive policies (ranging from structural segregation to anti-asylum policies and British nationality tests that focus on knowledge, not community spirit), further studies in this area should be implemented as a matter of priority.

With chapters covering religion and politics, governance, gender issues, religion in civic space, inter-ethnic religious relations, and the role of intellectuals and activists in reforming Islam and renovating the British political landscape, this book provides a broad introduction to the current debates on British Muslims in Britain today. The book is especially strong in discussing the role of British Muslims at critical boundaries, whether between the local and transnational, across the public and private spheres and across the gender gap. Whilst its most important contribution to the sparse literature is in identification and discourse on established and emerging topics of some of the key issues for British Muslims, its weakest point is transgressing the critical boundary between academic research and policy prescription. This explains one of the fundamental challenges facing disparate Muslim communities in the UK. Without effective and sustained scholarly interaction with communities beyond the subject matter, policies discussed in the book are likely to remain in situ and unreformed. However, against a backdrop of books such as [Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure](#) by Tahir Abbas and [Young, British and Muslim](#) by Philip Lewis, this book offers a broader perspective which academics across different fields could find useful.

Dr Sherry Gadrelab has recently completed a PhD in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, on the impact of the shift in the medical understanding of the differences between male and female bodies on the construction of gender and sexuality in nineteenth-century Egypt. She holds an MA in Middle East History (with a thesis on medical healers in Ottoman Egypt) and a BA in Journalism and Mass Communication from the American University in Cairo. Her most recent publication is "The Popularisation of Medical Knowledge in Ottoman Egypt: 1517 – 1798" in *Lokman Hekim Journal*, published by Mersin University, Turkey. [Read more reviews by Sherry.](#)

Dr Robert Mason has just completed a PhD in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, on economic factors in the foreign policies of Middle East states. His thesis is soon to be published with I B Tauris under the title *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East*. He was a visiting fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh during 2011 and holds a BA Combined Hons International Relations and Politics from the University of Westminster. [Read more reviews by Robert.](#)

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