

Young, Muslim and British: Between rhetoric and realities

*In Britain, public discourse on young Muslims tends to be framed in negative terms, associating them with religious extremism or terrorism. A new volume edited by **Sadek Hamid** focuses on other aspects of being young, Muslim and British. He finds that there is a multiplicity of young British Muslim experiences and their identities are not static but continuously evolving, influenced by wider national and global dynamics.*

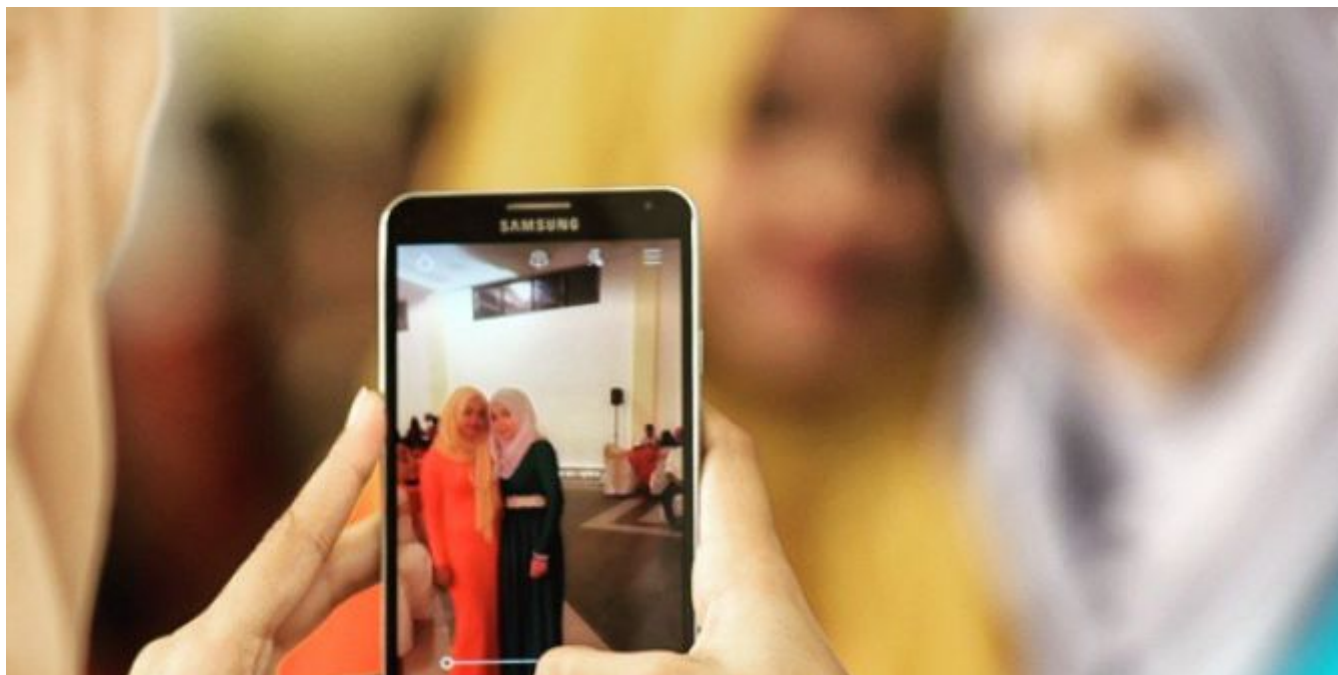


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Over the last decade, public discussion about British Muslim young people is almost always linked to discourses about their alleged failure to integrate, involvement in crime or association with violent extremism. This reflects wider concerns about the hyper-visibility of Muslims in Europe and debates about immigration, secularism and threats to national identity. The fixation with these negative frames often ignores the fact that the vast majority of Muslim youth are trying to live quite ordinary lives.

A regular flow of newspaper headlines reiterate the threat posed by disaffected **young Muslims radicalised on the internet**. Significant numbers appear to be vulnerable to terrorism, ready to migrate to ISIS held territory and could pose a security threat if they return to Britain. These stories appear to vindicate negative conclusions gleaned from **certain polls** which suggest that young Muslims are less integrated have less in common with their non-Muslim peers, possess ambivalent loyalties and indicate a preference for Islamic schools and Sharia law.

While there are legitimate questions to be asked, sensationalist journalism does not increase our understanding of what most young **British Muslims actually think about these issues** or the challenges they experience in their everyday lives. This narrow focus has the effect of flattening young Muslim Britons into one-dimensional characters and ignores other findings which point to Muslims **displaying greater levels of loyalty and identification with Britain than the wider population**.



However, as contributors to a **new volume** that I have edited point out – the vast majority of British Muslim young people have no interest in religious radicalisation and are more likely to be pre-occupied with the mundane anxieties of adolescence. That being said, they are faced with a set of extraordinary social, cultural and political challenges due to their **Muslimness which can affect their full participation in public life**. This is evident in relative socio-economic disadvantage, media representation and discrimination experienced in seeking **employment**.

Of the nearly three million Muslims recorded in the last census, around 33 per cent are under 15 years old and **about 50 per cent are under 24 years**. Like members of other faith communities, they interpret and apply their religion in different ways. While most retain some form of emotional attachment to Islam, they are not necessarily observant on a daily basis. Some alternate between phases of commitment and indifference, while others are deeply observant. While there are conservative **isolationist minorities** that refuse to see themselves as anything more than ‘Muslims living in Britain,’ many have strong secular outlooks that foreground their ethnic or national identification over a religious one, while others strategically deploy different identities depending upon context. Young British Muslims are therefore ‘living Islam’ in various ways –embodied in various individualised levels of personal piety and public practice.

According to various **research reports** published during the last ten years, the top concerns that consistently worry British Muslim young people are; ‘relationships’, mental health issues and rehabilitation after leaving the criminal justice system, sexuality and sexual health. They have also **voiced strong views** in the areas of education, identity, belonging and citizenship, community leadership, media, policing and **crime**. Many continue to speak about the impact of racial and religious prejudice, not feeling fully accepted as British citizens and how they cope with the pressure to prove their loyalty to the state. Many British Muslim youth also feel a deep sense of inequality and often feel unable or express dissent for fear of being accused of being ‘unBritish.’ Few people appreciate the emotional toll on a **generation who have grown up in the shadow of 7/7** with increasing Islamophobia and rise in far-right racism. It is young Muslim women who are under the most pressure as they are most often on the receiving end of anti-Muslim hate crimes.

The negative framing of youthful British Muslims is starting to be disrupted by the exposure given to **their achievements in the fields of charity, art and culture**. Young people are active in various voluntary groups and have been at the frontline of innovative projects that **serve good causes all across the UK**. For instance, Muslim charities such as the Al-Imdaad Foundation were among the first to respond to the floods that affected people in Cumbria in 2015 and delivered £10,000 in donations to victims. Volunteers from the Sunni Muslim Youth, ‘Bite-Size’ Maddrasah of Oldham, Greengate Trust and the Drive4Justice Team from Blackburn have raised thousands of pounds for the **refugees in Calais**.

A talented **new generation of Muslim artists** that include photographers, calligraphers, photographers, musicians and film makers are not only expressing their themselves through art but also **challenging stereotypes and raising political consciousness**. The Hip-Hop duo **Poetic Pilgrimage** are renowned for their spoken word poetry and address issues of gender, racism and religion in their music, while for some, **Harris J** is the halal version of Justin Bieber. All of these examples demonstrate the multiplicity of young British Muslim experiences and illustrate how their identities are not static but evolving in a continuous state of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’ They also show us how their lifestyle choices are being made and remade in the context of wider national and global dynamics.

About the author

Dr Sadek Hamid has written widely about British Muslims, young people and religious activism and is the author of *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (I.B. Tauris, 2016). He tweets: @sadekhamid





Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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