

Long Read Review: The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain by Sayeeda Warsi

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*In **The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain**, Sayeeda Warsi offers a book that is part memoir and part political commentary. Drawing on her Yorkshire childhood as the daughter of Pakistani immigrants and her role as the first female Muslim cabinet member, she reflects on the rise of Islamophobia, government responses to terrorism and questions of difference and identity in contemporary Britain in this frank, insightful and perceptive read, writes Tahir Abbas.*

***The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain*. Sayeeda Warsi. Allen Lane. 2017.**

Find this book: 

Sayeeda Warsi is a daughter of Pakistani immigrants. Yorkshire born and raised, an accomplished lawyer and member of the Conservative Party, she unsuccessfully sought election as an MP in 2005. Defeated but not outdone, David Cameron elevated her to a life peerage as Baroness Warsi of Dewsbury. Warsi was subsequently appointed to the Cabinet between 2010-12, entering as the first ever Muslim woman to hold such a position.

In her brief but eventful political life, Warsi achieved recognition, success and notoriety, receiving her fair share of supporters and loyalty from dedicated civil servants, but also a number of detractors from within 'British Islam' itself to the right-wing elements of her own party. She is now getting [a very different kind of attention](#) for her first book, *The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain*, which is part memoir, part social analysis and part political commentary.

Shortly after her [superb](#) takedown of the Cambridge-educated, former BNP leader Nick Griffin on BBC's *Question Time* in 2009, I left for Turkey in 2010, returning in 2016 to a very different Britain from the one I left. Warsi's now infamous speech in 2011 observing how [Islamophobia has 'passed the dinner-table test'](#), as well as her resignation over the bombing of Gaza in 2014 triggered by the deafening silence of her party's leadership, were half-forgotten events by then.

Since 9/11 and the global economic meltdown in 2008, societies everywhere have transformed, and politics has changed. Islamic State-inspired or planned attacks on Western Europe have created fear and alarm, with Brexit and Donald Trump casting dark shadows over matters of diversity, difference and the reasons given for divisions. An ever-growing Islamophobia makes the task of positive change an ever-greater challenge.

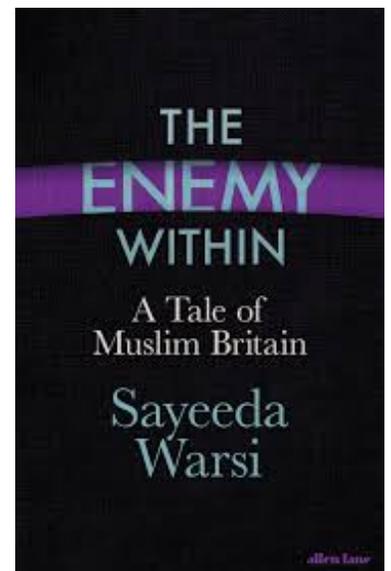




Image Credit: Baroness Sayeeda Warsi ([Global Panorama CC BY 2.0](#))

The Enemy Within chronicles Warsi's memories of life as a young Muslim woman growing up in a South Asian household. She discusses the importance of her family values: notions of hard work, respect for others and their differences and, importantly, fully supporting women as much as men, a perennial struggle facing many. The growing status of the family was achieved through self-employment and eventual financial success. It motivated her desire to become a confident and self-assured woman working in high politics in later life. Her path to political power, however, was not easy, laced as it was with many obstacles along the way.

The opening sections of the book explore what it means to be a British Muslim. Warsi reflects on her experience growing up in Yorkshire while facing the challenges of deindustrialisation also affecting other parts of the North and the Midlands from the 1960s to the 1980s. Warsi describes herself as the daughter of a poor father; however, she grew up not at the heart of her community but at the margins: close enough not to be seen to be apart, but far away enough not to be absorbed by the pervading culture. A strategic rational action defined her middle path, one that has navigated the often frozen-in-time heritage bubble existence of many South Asian Muslims in the North and the Midlands and the need to uphold a pro-integration Islamic outlook on life and society, inspired by Sufi leanings derived from the Barelwi School of Sunni Islam.

The book moves into a wider social and political commentary, with themes of terrorism and Islamophobia most occupying her thoughts. Warsi cogently explains why the UK government has failed to understand terrorist violence and how to adequately deal with the problem. In reality, such violence does not occur in a vacuum. It is often a response to dehumanisation, suppression and subjugation. Policymakers, however, are quick to disregard the importance of inequality, racism, discrimination, stereotyping and the demonising of Islam in normalising anti-Muslim sentiment. Crucially, this Islamophobia drives both violent Islamism and far-right extremism. Warsi also outlines the waves of populism that are sweeping Britain, and how after Brexit and the election of Trump as US President, these challenges will only intensify.

Her perspectives on the 7/7 bombings and what ultimately became known as the UK 'Prevent' strategy should be read widely. Warsi fundamentally disagrees that Prevent offers any real value. Rather, for her, it places communities under the watchful eye of the intelligence, policing and security services, securitising differences by treating not just would-be terrorists, however defined, but Muslims as a whole as a threat to 'shared values', regarded as the precursor to violent extremism. This [conveyor belt theory](#) is thoroughly discredited by leading thinkers but remains a

popular theme in the minds of many policymakers and professionals.



Image Credit: Baroness Warsi and Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, The Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (now Cooperation) at Lancaster House, 2010 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office CC BY 2.0)

For Warsi, the solution to the malaise facing British Muslims is political action leading to political change. This includes Muslims coming together to eliminate the differences that have been exploited by the UK government, forcing Muslims to play against each other in the ‘Muslim industry’. The process, perpetuated by [New Labour until 2010](#), allowed these ‘approved Muslims’ to be incorporated or abandoned by the state at will. Warsi fervently notes that the lack of a Muslim political middle path allows extreme voices to get into power. These actors speak loudest and with the greatest passion as mainstream politicians dodge people’s foremost concerns, attempting to appease them with half-truths about the state of the nation or its identity on the global stage.

Warsi reflects on a conversation with her long-time mentor, Eric Pickles, who stated that ‘the state is not going to do anything for Muslims. Stop demanding things from it.’ Her response is to articulate the need for a British Muslim space that is organic, self-determined and wholly owned by Muslims, not for themselves but for society as a whole, knowing that the category of ‘Britishness’ is itself under severe scrutiny. There is a risk, however, that the search for an ‘English Islam’ as the new moniker that defines the space of British Islam is at odds with Englishness defined as a racial and ethnic category rather than a civil one, as is the case of a [Scottish Islam, which is very much part of Scottish national identity](#). Muslims across Britain need to make strategic alliances with each other. If they refuse to think independently of government, Muslims will continue to suffer. Certainly, as Warsi confesses, for all the talk on the misguided activities of [New Labour](#) in the recent past, there is little or no will on the part of the present government when it comes to the Muslim space today, save for more of the status quo.

The alternative to this is not disengagement but greater engagement. Muslims must prove themselves as worthy citizens, she attests, separating questions of political and cultural engagement from the idea that conservatism among Muslims leads to terrorism *per se*. It is a clear statement on conservative Islam. While needing ongoing adaptation, it is not the reason for violent extremism. While I fully agree with this position, there is a risk that waiting for Muslims to iron out their differences ignores the opportunity to utilise the process of becoming itself as an important element in the progress needed for positive change. Moreover, British Islam does not need British

Muslims to singularly espouse or uphold an advanced notion on citizenship. Often small but necessary wins are required to achieve desired outcomes.



Image Credit: Former Foreign Office Senior Minister of State, Baroness Warsi meeting with Amnesty youth activists who handed over a petition on Afghan women's rights in London, 24 July 2013 (Foreign and Commonwealth Office CC BY 2.0)

The Enemy Within is a preeminent political account of the British Muslim experience, focusing on the most pressing concerns facing communities: namely, the twin evils of terrorism and Islamophobia. Warsi's analysis of the problems facing British Muslims today is frank, and at times quite witty, as she pokes fun at the absurdity of the men around her. It is also a brave book, written by a woman, a northerner and a Muslim. Warsi went to the top of politics and fought for her stated aims as a Conservative, but also as a proud British Muslim. She rose to the position in spite of the wider problems of the Conservative-dominated Coalition. Her achievements are remarkable, making hers a special story. She witnessed it all, amassing a penetrating sense of the social problems, but could she have done more?

Warsi concludes that in spite of all that is good and right about diversity in Britain, British racism is resistant. Indeed, it continues to reinvent itself, with all the focus now on 'the Muslim', who represents a colour, culture and creed seen as problematic for the state, homogenising a vast people and a global faith community, reducing it to all that is loathed about the self but projected on to this predefined other. British racism is, ultimately, ubiquitous and omnipotent. In the end, this is the issue, is it not? Warsi contends that resistance is not futile. Neither is political action. She does concede, however, that the challenges grow faster than the opportunities.

All memoirs contain or exclude aspects that enhance the status of the writer. Warsi, like most other politicians and autobiographers, invariably suffers from this. Her perceptiveness with regards to being British and Muslim, the depth of Islamophobia and the ineffectiveness with which terrorism is dealt with by wrongly focusing on ideology as the only precursor to violent Islamist extremism, however, reveals a book containing detailed insights and critical reflections, all combined with oodles of chutzpah. That the book is a feminist tract is also clear from Warsi's position as a working-class Muslim woman not only struggling to fight racism, but, crucially, sexism too.

The Enemy Within is a delightful, detailed deep dive into the personal and political world of the woman behind the

public face and the TV slots. No matter what commentators and policymakers think of the recent Conservative Party antics, Warsi is the most successful Muslim woman in British political history. Make of that what you will.

Professor Tahir Abbas FRSA is currently Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE Department of Government, and Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London. His forthcoming book is *Beyond Islamophobia, Radicalisation and the Culture of Violence*, published by Hurst in 2018.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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