

The Next Stage:
The Role of *The Satanic Verses* in the Evolution
of British Muslim Activism

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During his valedictorian speech at the Muslim Council of Britain's annual meeting, former Secretary General Sir Iqbal Sacranie argued that Muslim activism in Britain over the last 35 years had gone through a series of three stages.

Stage 1 was the period of the 1970s and 80s, during which we built our mosques and institutions. These were mainly ethnically or linguistically self-contained. ... Stage 2 was the late 80s and 90s, the time of the Satanic Verses Affair and the Balkan crisis. At this point, a form of ad-hoc coordination emerged between the communities and organizations. Stage 3 was the creation of the first truly inclusive and broad-based body, the MCB, in which communities and organizations formed a coalition to achieve what was a commonly shared agenda. (Sacranie 16)

Sacranie specifically mentions the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, by Salman Rushdie, as a turning point in Muslim advocacy in the United Kingdom. This book--loved by some for its literary merits, hated by many Muslims for its degrading portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad--prompted many disparate, parochial Muslim organizations to coalesce so they could speak against it with a united voice. Yet even when the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* died down, the newfound ties between Muslim community organizations representing different Islamic schools, ethnicities, and languages did not go away--indeed, they grew closer as later umbrella organizations developed to respond to other threats to the British Muslim community. The response of Muslims in Britain to *The Satanic Verses* turned them into an effective bloc for lobbying and advocacy. Through a survey of academic work and the statements of Muslim organizations themselves, this paper examines the causes and results of this increasing collaboration.

I. Before *The Satanic Verses*

Before the Rushdie affair, British Muslim institutions of a broad scope were few and far between. Most Muslims' Islamic life rotated around their local mosque, which usually catered to a particular ethnicity through the language of the sermons (Urdu, Arabic, Turkish, etc.) and/or the particular worship style of a given group. Muslims in Britain tended to settle near other members of the same ethnicity:

Britain's Muslim community is unevenly distributed with large concentrations in a few large cities. ... Nearly all Turkish Cypriots and half of Bangladeshis live in the inner-city areas of East London. The majority of Arabs and Iranians also live in London... [I]t seems reasonable to assume that there are important elements of "choice" in the concentration of Asians, and even other communities, in certain areas. Clearly, they wish to remain close to their own associations, institutions, particular shops, eating places, and religious centers. (Rex 57)

This suggests that geography might have also been a factor in hindering extensive intra-Islamic dialogue. Furthermore, despite the Koran's teaching that "people are to be valued in terms of virtue, not color or race...it is not the case that ethnic bigotry does not exist in the Islamic world. Asians have no fewer racial stereotypes about whites or about each other" (Modood 105). Even regardless of interethnic stereotypes, most Muslims understandably felt the closest ties with other Muslims with similar backgrounds so cross-pollination was not the norm.

It could be argued that these ethnic cleavages alone were responsible for the lack of pre-1988 pan-Muslim organization in Britain. However, half of the UK's 1.4 million Muslims are South Asians, most of whom are Pakistani in origin (Rex 55). Yet even within this bloc, no major advocacy group arose. Why? As Warner and Wenner argue, there is no religious hierarchy to impose agreement in the Sunni tradition (Warner 463). Even the Shi'a hierarchy of ayatollahs has no means of sanction; unlike in the Catholic

tradition, there are no Muslim sacraments that can be withheld from heretics (461). With no power from above to connect individual mosques and communities together since the caliphate, Islamic religious practice and social life historically have been highly decentralized.

Thus, even in European nations where most Muslim residents come from the same ethnic background, a myriad of ideological and theological differences exist which divide British Muslims beyond simple ethnic categorizations. At approximately 85%, the majority of Muslims in Britain are Sunnis (Rex 58). Within the Sunni camp, however, are adherents of several schools of Islamic thought: Hanafis, Deobandis, Barelvis, members of the Jamiat-Ahl-I Hadith, and members of the Jamiat-Ahl-I Koran. Among the Shi'ites are the Twelvers, the Ismailis, and the Boras. British Shi'a Muslims are "by no means all supporters of the Ayatullah Rouhullah Khomeini's Islamic revolution; some support it, but others oppose or ignore it" (58). There is also a significant Ahmadiyya population. Because of freedom of expression and religion in the West, many Muslim immigrants have access to even more schools and sects of Islam there than they did in their home countries: "As one migrant from Turkey said, 'Here [Germany] I've gotten to know religious communities that are outlawed in Turkey'" (Warner 472). This Western marketplace of Islamic ideas is far from being monopolized by any one interpretation or ideology.

Thus, there is no clear Muslim consensus when it comes to UK political life. In voting patterns as well, Muslims vote for right, left, and center; while Muslims who do not consider Islam important to their lives have a greater tendency to vote for left-wing parties and only a minority of Muslims of any stripe vote for the right, there is no clear

trend overall (Klausen 65). “There is no Muslim vote in any European state,” the UK included (Warner 471). Without clear preferences at the polls and little impetus for large-scale Muslim organization, the national government tended to ignore the needs and interests of British Muslims.

II. British Muslims’ response to *The Satanic Verses*

The controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* prompted the creation of the first British Muslim umbrella organization. After enduring years of racist attacks and economic inequality, why was it this event that provoked the Muslim community into becoming a Muslim bloc? Tariq Modood writes that “an oppressed group feels its oppression the most according to those dimensions of its being that it (not the oppressor) values the most”; by the same token, these dimensions are where the group “derives its greatest collective psychological strength” (Modood 104). A community that has built its identity primarily around the fact that it is Muslim (as opposed to concentrating on race or class) can use that identity to shield itself from attacks in any other “dimension of being.” Put simply, though British Muslims may experience great economic or racial hardships in their lives, as long as they can rely on their faith those hardships are easier to bear. If that anchor of faith is attacked, so is the psychological coping mechanism for dealing with every other attack, so it must be defended vigorously. Indeed, it is not merely a right but a duty of all Muslims “to guard the honor of their Prophet” (118). Many Muslims saw this defense in the case of the Rushdie affair as a test of “ghairat”:

[G]hairat is about the quality of one’s pride or love--pride in one’s religion or the Prophet. While izzat is something to be maintained, ghairat is

something to be tested. *The Satanic Verses* was for many Muslims an unavoidable challenge to demonstrate their attachment to and love for their faith: their *imani ghairat*. And naturally the more the book was lauded as a literary masterpiece and so on, the greater the challenge, and the greater the response required. (119)

Between the psychological need to defend the Islamic base of one's response to widely experienced oppression and the religious duty to demonstrate one's faith by protecting its reputation, it is easy to understand why British Muslims reacted so fervently to *The Satanic Verses*. The novel struck a potent nerve that no British anti-immigrant incident had inflamed on such a scale previously.

The political mobilization that took place around *The Satanic Verses* was largely due to the efforts of two men, Dr Manazir Ahsan from the Islamic Foundation and editor of Muslim magazine Impact International Hashir Faruqi (Salaam). Hearing troublesome things about the book, Ahsan bought and read it soon after its release. After reading it, he alerted Faruqi and within less than a month they brought together over twenty Muslim mosques and institutions in the first British Muslim umbrella organization, the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA).

Through the UKACIA's efforts, the bulk of the British Muslim response to *The Satanic Verses* was civil in nature. The UKACIA served as a major contact point for communication between the British government and the Muslim community, keeping up a correspondence with British Home Secretary John Patten. Even in the face of perceived condescension, the UKACIA set a "benchmark" of civil and articulate discourse for future Muslim organizations to meet (Salaam). By not taking a hotheaded approach to government-community relations, the UKACIA was able to form a reasonable consensus among the Muslim community and appeal to moderates.

UKACIA's hallmark was that it approached the Rushdie affair by applying pressure through the accepted routes in the British system – the courts, lobbying politicians, forming alliances. This was a strategy supported by legal professionals and other informed sections of the community, thus allowing UKACIA to draw on 'in-house' expertise and improve the quality of the Muslim presentation. (Salaam)

This strategy also succeeded in earning respect from the British government. This would help future Muslim organizations led by former UKACIA members in establishing their credibility as well. The UKACIA also circulated a petition calling upon the publisher of the novel, Penguin Books, to

One – to withdraw and pulp all the copies of *The Satanic Verses* and to undertake not to reprint it in the future.

Two – to offer unqualified public apology to the World Muslim community.

Three – to pay damages equal to the returns received from the copies already sold in Britain and abroad. (Salaam)

Using its contacts at Impact International, UKACIA spread the word about *The Satanic Verses* among the Muslim community by publishing extracts from the novel in the magazine and urging readers to ask the publisher and authorities to meet their demands “through telegrams, letters, telephones, personal representations and through all civilized and legitimate means” (Salaam).

Of course, not all Muslims were content with letter-writing. In India and Pakistan, anti-Rushdie riots led to fifteen deaths and many more injuries (Modood 114). *The Satanic Verses* was banned by 57 countries, some punishing ownership of the book with up to three years in prison (Wikipedia). When the UKACIA wrote to Muslim ambassadors in London asking for their help, one of the letters was forwarded to the Ayatollah Khomeini and led to his infamous fatwa calling for the death of Rushdie and all others involved in the book's publication (Salaam). This fatwa led Rushdie to enter

the protection of the British government and live in hiding for nine years (Wikipedia). During the next four years, three translators and one publisher of *The Satanic Verses* were attacked because of their association with the book; one, Hitoshi Igarashi, was killed. Given the chaos that broke out elsewhere in the world, British Muslims' reactions could have been far more explosive. Local groups burned copies of *The Satanic Verses* during protest marches in Bradford and Bolton, Rushdie received a number of death threats, and five English bookstores were bombed (Salaam). Nevertheless, most British Muslims responded to the controversy in a peaceful manner. This is no doubt due in part to the UKACIA's existence as a civil outlet for their frustrations.

III. Post-*Satanic Verses* organizations and goals

While the UKACIA was an important Muslim umbrella organization during the Rushdie affair, its unity was fragile.

UKACIA's efforts were not well coordinated with local initiatives such as those of the Bolton Action Committee or the Bradford Council of Mosques in early 1989. The rhetoric from...Dr Kalim Siddiqui, particularly in support of the Khomeini Fatwa, jarred with the approach of his erstwhile colleague, Dr Zaki Badawi..., who publicly offered Rushdie a refuge in his own home from any would-be assailants. (Salaam)

Thus, after the Rushdie affair the UKACIA quickly broke up. This did not mark the end of broad British Muslim organization, however. One of the first descendents of the UKACIA was the Muslim Parliament, founded by the charismatic (and dogmatic) Dr. Kalim Siddiqui in 1992. This organization was meant to "empower Muslims with their separate and distinctly Islamic institutions to meet their needs independently of the British government and local authorities" (Muslim Parliament). The Rushdie controversy had an alienating effect on some British Muslims, who believed that "the rest of [British]

society doesn't want to know them” or pay attention to their needs (Masood, qtd. in Gardner). Thus, Siddiqui argued, the Muslim community should govern itself. The Muslim Parliament “sought to discourage Muslims from entering mainstream politics or even from voting in elections; rather, the focus of debate was the need to create a “non-territorial Islamic state” in Britain” (Muslim Parliament).

When Siddiqui died in 1996, this political vision withered and the Muslim Parliament radically changed its tack, seeking to build alliances with other Muslim and non-Muslim groups and choosing political goals within the system. The Muslim Parliament still exists in this incarnation, though it has lost most of the radical constituency that supported Siddiqui’s original vision.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) has become the central Muslim umbrella organization in Britain. Many British Muslims observed “[t]he need to coordinate efforts on wider issues of common concern...in the course of the Rushdie affair. This created a climate of trust and cooperation between many diverse groups” which permitted 250 Muslim organizations in Britain to form the MCB in 1997 (Muslim Council). One hundred more groups have joined since then. Many people involved with the MCB, including former Secretary General Sir Iqbal Sacranie, were previously involved in the UKACIA, and one can observe similarities in the two organizations’ approaches as a result. As stated in the MCB History, Structure, and Workings, “[t]he MCB’s approach to dealing with civic affairs is one of participation, not agitation; in dealing with government, it is one of constructive engagement. This means that the MCB strives to deal with problems and influence policies and outcomes through principled and effective participation” (Muslim Council). Unlike the UKACIA, however, the MCB’s mandate is

not limited to a specific issue or event; the organization can tackle any problem regarding Muslim welfare that it can form a consensus on. The MCB's structure is confederal in nature, distinguishing between national, regional, and local member organizations and encouraging the devolution of MCB initiatives.

One of the main political goals of British Muslim organizations today is to get legal recognition of Muslims as Muslims. Britain has plenty of jurisprudence regarding the rights of minorities, but all of it defines minorities in strictly ethnic terms. Thus, a Pakistani woman can wear a headscarf to work not because she is Muslim but because she is Pakistani, and headscarves are customary Pakistani dress. This has created the absurd situation that while the rights of ethnic minority Muslims in Britain are fairly well recognized under the law, white converts to Islam have no rights at all regarding their faith (Modood 109)! This loophole has also carried over to matters of hate speech; racists have successfully defended themselves by saying that their vitriol was targeted at Muslims in general, not a particular ethnic group. British Muslim organizations have lobbied hard to change the law so that it recognizes religious as well as racial abuses, to mixed success. The 1986 Public Order Act was amended in January 2006 to recognize religion, but a House of Lords amendment and the defection of numerous Labour MPs meant that the amendment was much weaker than British Muslims would have liked. Instead of prohibiting "reckless, abusive and insulting" speech or behavior based on a target's religious affiliation (as opposed to their race, the law now only protects against intentional incitement to crime on religious grounds (BBC News). Nevertheless, from a Muslim standpoint, the amendment is a step in the right direction, and it is encouraging that the Labour government has been listening to Muslim demands well enough that it

created the bill to begin with.

IV. Conclusions

A family goes to mosque around the corner; a student participates in her university's Islamic faith meeting. Even with the rise of the MCB and British Muslim organizations before it, most Muslims' religious experiences and social ties are still located at the local level. No British Muslim organization has been top-down, monolithic, and effective; because of the diversity of the religious community, collective action groups will continue to have an umbrella, confederal structure for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, developments in the Muslim community--and Britain as a whole--have made it clear that national issues matter.

Not just *The Satanic Verses* but many elements in British society have, unintentionally and intentionally, struck at what many Muslims hold most dear: their faith. Once Muslims realized this fact, parochial considerations could no longer outweigh the need for collective protection of their rights in society and sense of dignity. They needed a united voice on the issues that affected them all: right now, welfare, antiracism, legal recognition, protection of civil liberties, and various other areas; in the future, perhaps something altogether different.

Returning to Sacranie's speech to the MCB, the British Muslim community has passed through three stages of development. So what, he asks, is the fourth stage?

It seems that one strategic choice is for Muslims to be doing much more for the moral and social upliftment of society as a whole, rather than just for their own communities. It will mean replacing an inward-looking approach with greater engagement as individuals in the civil society around us. It will mean the age of identity politics is over." (Sacranie 17)

To put it another way, Muslim activism in the future will be less of asking what your country can do for you, and more of asking what you can do for your country. This makes sense; as current activism helps British Muslims to slowly overcome economic inequality and the handicap of recent immigration, they will be better able to do good in the world, as their religion commands. According to Sacranie, it is not mere economic factors that hold back the arrival of this fourth stage, however. It will require an even greater recognition among individual Muslims of the value of collective action and an increased capacity to tolerate differences: “the change also needs a greater level of self-confidence. We should overcome the fear of disappearance and cultural dilution and be more willing to mix and befriend” (17). How long it will take for this mindset of an all-embracing Islam that is truly British to develop is anyone’s guess. Certainly, however, the possibility of future Muslim organization will build upon the successes of organization today.

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