

## **Medina in Birmingham; Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam**

*Innes Bowen*

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*Medina in Birmingham; Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam* by Innes Bowen seeks to explain to a mainly non-Muslim readership the complexities and nuances of different Muslim groups that have come to live in Britain since the 1950s. The book aims to be “a guide to the ideological differences, organisational structures and international links of the main Islamic groups active in Britain today” needed in order partly to counter the perception that Muslims form one homogenous mass. It follows in the tradition of ethnographic works begun in the colonial period, that were produced in order to inform the British Government about the thinking and culture of those under its administration and, more importantly, about whether they were planning any uprisings or posed any threat. An example of this approach can be seen in Bowen’s assurances that the Twelver Shi‘a living in Britain do not unequivocally support Iran:

The most striking feature of Britain’s Shia community is the lack of influence that the Islamic Republic of Iran exerts over it, despite all of its resources. [...] The fact that Najaf school secularism has triumphed over Tehran’s Islamism will be something of a relief to [the] British government. (p. 162)

Bowen also remarks on how little Britain’s police force know about the Muslim groups with which they have co-operated:

A police officer I spoke to despaired at the ignorance of many of his colleagues, yet even he knew little about 95 per cent of the mosques in his patch and was oblivious to the fact that one of his favoured Muslim organisations had played host to a jihadi leader from Pakistan. (p. 2)

This book, then, may also be used as a guide book for Britain's police that are having to implement the Government's counter-terrorism strategy.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each of which examines the political origins and sources of funding for some of the major Muslim groups in Britain: the Deobandis, Tablighi Jamaat, the Salafis, Jamaat-e Islami, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Barelwis, the Twelver Shi'a, and the Isma'ilis. These are based upon research carried out privately by a convert named Mehmood Naqshbandi (p. 6). The information about Naqshbandi that Bowen provides is limited, stating simply that he has put together his research in his bedroom while working full time in IT. Strangely, she does not mention the following part of his biography:

Mehmood Naqshbandi has worked as a consultant with the IT company Logica for over twenty years. He specialises in IT solutions for investigation, intelligence and the criminal justice system. He provides Technical Authority services to the Police, Home Office, Ministry of Justice, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Serious Fraud Office and other government agencies. Mehmood converted to Islam in 1982 and is active in the Muslim community in Britain. He has observed at close hand the growth of Muslim militancy over two decades and uses his knowledge and insights to advise government departments and the police on topical issues.<sup>1</sup>

Many Muslim intellectuals in Britain have expressed their disapprobation of the British Government's counter-terrorism programme, entitled "Prevent" (see the following open letter signed by over 360 leading academics: <http://www.protectingthought.com>), and the fact that its approach toward Muslim communities has been conducted with "suspect until proven innocent" as a starting point, overlooking much of the hard social and communal work that individual Muslims and Muslim organizations have carried out in the face of immense social, political, and psychological challenges. Bowen's book similarly makes the question of affiliation to terrorist groups a major theme. It includes, as some criteria of whether Muslims are "moderate" or not and can therefore be trusted or not, the issue of loyalty to the monarchy (Does that also make non-Muslim anti-monarchist Britons suspect?); the degree of secularism and support for secular society (What about all the British Christians who feel that they are under attack from hard-line secularists?), and whether there is the

desire to see a society run according to “sharia” law (itself an immense subject that is not explored in the book).

The other theme addressed is that of “integration,” another complex issue that is presented here somewhat superficially, based upon the state-cultivated assumption that the degree to which Muslims are “integrated” into a society depends solely upon Muslims themselves (Issues such as prejudice against Muslims that prevents them from integrating are overlooked). One way in which Bowen assesses whether her interviewees are “integrated” or not is the way that they dress. A good, well-integrated Muslim that is “on our side” is one who wears a suit or jeans and is clean shaven; a not-so-good Muslim that obstinately refuses to integrate is one who has a beard and wears loose clothing.

Bowen is very clear about who are to be considered the “good Muslims” that tick the right boxes: the Nizari Ismailis and the reformist Dawoodi Bohras. The Agha Khan, the head of the Nizaris is “the most European of the Islamic figureheads.” He “has the appearance of a debonair individual wearing a suit and tie” (p. 167). The Nizaris do not use “sharia law” to settle disputes; rather, they “appear at ease with secularism” and “make use of Britain’s arbitration law.” They “displayed affection towards Britain, its institutions and rulers,” and so Bowen can conclude that “If true faith and true integration for British Muslims are about feeling a love for Britain and its people, then the Ismailis have led the way” (p. 185). Bowen uses terminology that expresses her sense of how she sees traditional Dawoodi Bohras as alien and “Other,” describing their clothes as “costumes” (p. 175), “uniform” (p. 178), “garb” (p. 192). A good Bohra is someone who does not wear it all the time: “Haki Kapasi wears jeans and, like other reformist women, only covers her hair at religious gatherings” (p. 182). This statement comes within the context of discussing Bohras who marry non-Muslims and drink alcohol.

Her discussion on the Shi‘i community in London uses the same kind of terminology that the British military used in Iraq, calling Northwest London the “Shia Triangle” (obviously reminiscent of the British naming a particular area north of Baghdad the “Sunni Triangle” and another area south of Baghdad “the Triangle of Death”). Bowen’s “Triangle” actually overlooks a fairly large Shi‘i population in South London. But just as the British colonialists did not let the reality of demographics on the ground spoil their carving up of the Middle East and North Africa into sections, so here we find that a region has been named and given a reality of its own in the mind of the author, and by extension, potential readers.

The emphasis on this particular Triangle is all the more puzzling when Bowen then says that “away from the powerbase of North West London, it is

Muslims of Indian and Pakistani origin who run over three-quarters of Britain's Shia mosques and Islamic centres" (p. 146). In the midst of this semi-military approach to Shi'i populations in London is a sudden switch to that subject that, for some reason, so many non-Shi'a cannot resist peeking into: temporary marriage. From her interview with myself, which took approximately 90 minutes or more and during which a range of topics were covered, Bowen has selected this topic, claiming that I am a "candid supporter" (p. 137) and have laughed about it being "quite common." This is, unfortunately, a misinterpretation of my reaction toward what was for me simply a point in passing among other far more important points. It is not quite clear where this fits into the overall discussion of the book.

While providing a useful overview into the ideologies and affiliations of the above-mentioned groups, what would perhaps enrich the book still further would be to provide the colonial context out of which, in particular, the Indo-Pak organisations emerged. It would also perhaps be helpful to show how Britain's intelligence services have both sponsored and utilized such groups. Bowen hints at this when, in answer to the question of why Britain has allowed members of the Muslim Brotherhood to settle and continue to operate from within its borders, she explains that "the Brothers are important as a source of information and access to Islamist politicians abroad" (p. 114). However, just as she was reticent on providing Mehmood Naqshbandi's full credentials, similarly, she omits to mention that the Sufi Muslim Council, set up as a kind of "response unit" to Salafism, was, in fact, the brainchild of certain Neo-Conservatives in the United States.

As the ex-British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, sacked for highlighting human rights abuses, has revealed:

We found that one of the prominent authors on the SMC website, who also writes for the SMC magazine "Spirit", is Zeyno Baran "a self confessed neocon who works for the ultra right wing Hudson Institute. She is close to the Uzbek regime and close to the oil and gas interests in Washington and Central Asia." Hedieh Mirahmadi, another member of the Sufi Muslim Council, a practicing Naqshbandi and colleague of one of its self-proclaimed leaders, Hisham Kabbani, is revealed to be "an apologist for the Uzbek regime and the founder of the neocon "Committee on the Present Danger". She is also a foreign policy analyst at the right-wing neocon think tank, the American Enterprise Institute."<sup>22</sup>

Similarly to the language that the British Government used in its military policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bowen echoes the "hearts and minds" mantra that came to circulate in the media several years ago: "The Sufis may have

won the fight to counter the influence of the Salafis. But when it comes to the bigger battle for Muslim hearts and minds – that against the Deobandis – the Sufis still have a long way to go” (p. 134).

Bowen also does not go further to explain why Ashur Shamis, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who set up a separate organization from the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood Organization in order to overthrow Colonel Gaddafi, was assisted by British intelligence with regard to protecting his safety and why he was accused of receiving American and British support (pp. 103-04).

This book is a smooth and easy read. It is well-structured and perhaps packages existing intelligence on Muslim organizations and groups into a form that makes it more accessible for Government members, police, and the general reader. From an academic perspective, it requires more critical analysis of the author’s own ideological perspective and transparency with regard to links to those organizations from which she obtained her information.

## Endnotes

1. This information was given for a conference entitled ‘Muslim-Government Relations in Changing Security Contexts’.<https://www.soas.ac.uk/politics/events/muslimgovtconf/participants/#MehmoodNaqshbandi>).
2. [https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2006/08/the\\_neoconserva/](https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2006/08/the_neoconserva/).

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