

## ***Medina in Birmingham and Najaf in Brent – Inside British Islam*** **by Innes Bowen - A Brief Summary**

Innes Bowen is a BBC journalist who has produced programmes such as *Analysis*, *Woman's Hour* and *More or Less* and is investigations editor of BBC2's *Newsnight*. In her book *Medina in Birmingham and Najaf in Brent*<sup>1</sup>, Bowen identifies the main religious trends which inform the thoughts and practises of Britain's Muslim communities. *Medina in Birmingham* draws on significant research and appears to give an informative overview of the Islamic faith in the UK today.

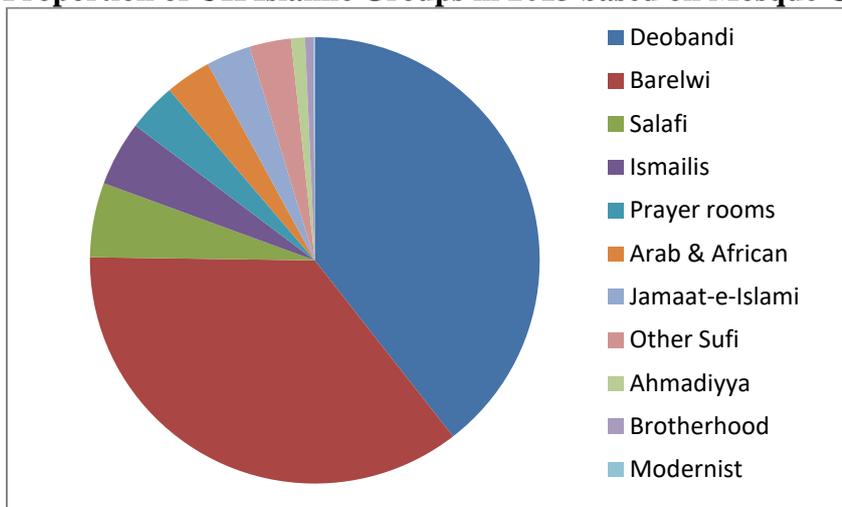
This paper briefly summaries *Medina in Birmingham*, adding its own Introduction and Conclusion.

### **Introduction**

Bowen identifies eight mainstream Islamic groups in the UK:

- Deobandis
- *Tablighi Jamaat*
- Salafis
- *Jamaat-e-Islami*
- The Muslim Brotherhood
- Barelwis
- Shia 'Twelvers'
- Ismailis

### **Proportion of UK Islamic Groups in 2013 based on Mosque Capacity (%)**



Source: Mehmood Naqshbandi, cited in Bowen (2014) p.7.

The diagram above is based on 2013 figures given in *Medina in Birmingham* and shows that the majority of mosque capacity (almost 40%) was provided by Deobandi networks. This was closely followed by Sufi Barelwi Muslims (36%) and the remaining quarter of mosque space was provided by the other Muslim groups in the UK. Each network generally reflects the Islamic tradition in the regions and countries that Muslim communities lived in before they made the UK their home. Most of the above groups form part of the majority Sunni Muslim tradition, except for the Shia Twelvers and Ismailis who are part of the minority Shia Muslim tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Innes Bowen (2014) *Medina in Birmingham and Najaf in Brent Inside British Islam* Hurst & Company: London

### What do Muslims believe?

- Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers. The 2001 census recorded 1,591,000 Muslims in the UK, around 2.7% of the population.
- Those who follow Islam are called Muslims. They believe that there is only one God; the Arabic word for whom is Allah. The word Islam means 'submission to the will of God'.
- Muslims believe that Islam is a faith that has always existed and that it was gradually revealed to humanity by a number of prophets, but the final and complete revelation of the faith was made through the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, who lived between 570 and 632 CE.
- Muslims base their laws on their holy book the Qur'an, and the Sunnah. Muslims believe the Sunnah is the practical example of Prophet Muhammad and that there are five basic Pillars of Islam. These pillars are the declaration of faith, praying five times a day, giving money to charity, fasting and a pilgrimage to Mecca (at least once).<sup>2</sup>

### What is the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims?

- The division between Sunnis and Shi'a Muslims is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam. They both agree on the fundamentals of Islam and share the same Holy Book (The Qur'an), but there are differences mostly derived from their different historical experiences, political and social developments, as well as ethnic composition. These differences originate from the question of who would succeed the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the emerging Muslim community after his death.<sup>3</sup>

While Muslims from various countries and regions around the world share so much of their faith in common, it is important to understand how some of their beliefs and practises can vary. The following summary of Innes Bowen's book *Medina in Birmingham* should help to give a greater insight into Britain's Muslim communities.

### Deobandis

- The largest British Muslim network, founded 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonial India by scholars **Mohammed Qasim Nanaotawi** and **Rashid Ahmad Gangohi** to protect the religious practises and identity of Indian Muslims. They established an Islamic school called *Darul Uloom* (House of Knowledge) in the village of **Deoband**.
- The *Jamiat Ulama e Britain* (JuB) is a Deobandi group formed in 1975 by Pakistani scholars for the following reasons:
  - to educate Muslims in the UK
  - to provide chaplaincy services to Muslims in prison and hospitals
  - to give Muslims information about things such as the dates of Muslim festivals
  - to ensure that mosques comply with UK law
  - to advise Muslims what is permissible and not permissible.
- Deobandis draw scholarly advice from the **Jamia Uloom Islamia School** in Karachi, Pakistan, but the network has scholars from towns all over the UK. Bowen is aware of some 22 Deobandi

<sup>2</sup> Information taken from BBC websites: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/>  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad_1.shtml)  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/ataglance/glance.shtml> accessed on 6.6.17.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from BBC website: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia_1.shtml) accessed on 6.6.17. See p. 6 for further details.

educational institutes (*darul ulooms*) in the UK<sup>4</sup> which usually offer education to students from around 11 to 22 years old.

### ***Tablighi Jamaat***

- Deobandi missionary movement founded in India in the 1920's by **Maulana Mohammad Ilyas**. It's members visit Sunni Muslims door-to-door to bring back less committed Muslims to practise their faith and to be involved in missionary work (*dawa*).
- It's approach to being a good Muslim is based on 6 principles (*chhe baten*):
  1. the creed of Muslims there is no God but God and Mohammed is his messenger
  2. prayer
  3. the acquisition of knowledge
  4. respect for other Muslims
  5. the purification of one's intentions and to remain sincere and self-appraising
  6. the sacrificing of time for missionary work.

### **Salafis**

- The Salafi school began in the 1740's through the work of the Islamic scholar **Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab** who stressed the oneness of God (*tawid*) and resisted traditions in the Arabian peninsula which he felt were forbidden innovations (*bida*). The word 'Salafi' comes from the term *salaf* in Arabic meaning 'predecessors'; referring to the Prophet Mohammed and his disciples.
- **Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab** formed an alliance with a local tribal leader **Muhammad ibn Saud** in 1744 so that Saud would be the political leader (*amir*) and ibn Abd al-Wahhab the religious leader (*imam*). That alliance continues today in the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** where a Salafi version of Islam influences everyday life.
- Salafis wish to return to what they consider as the **basic tenets of Islam**, avoiding modern additions and to imitate the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his disciples. They tend to avoid music, TV and photographs of living things. Men often wear trousers or robes that do not cover the ankles and women usually veil their faces when not with their closest family.

### **Jamaat-e-Islami**

- Founded in 1941 by **Sayyid Abdul A'la Maududi**, who went on to lead it until 1972. Maududi was a journalist and Islamic revivalist living in pre-partition India. He considered that Muslims are obliged to establish the sovereignty of God over the earth and to reject secular government. In **Pakistan**, JI's politicians have helped to implement an Islamising agenda which included the introduction of an Islamic penal code and ensuring that all laws were compliant with *sharia*.
- In the **UK**, the ideas of Maududi were first promoted by the **UK Islamic Mission (UKIM)** which was founded in 1962. From the late 1970's, UKIM centres of worship began to be established. In 1973, another **Jamaat-e-Islami** - inspired organisation, the **Islamic Foundation (IF)** was formed.
- By the mid-1990's, various bodies claimed to represent Muslims in the UK. The **Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)** was therefore formed in November 1997 so that the government

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<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the *Daily Mail's* Edna Fernandes counted 166 Muslim schools in Britain; 26 which were Darul Uloom. 20 June 2010 *Inside the Muslim Eton* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1288053/Inside-Muslim-Eton-Their-day-starts-3-45am-goes-disciplined-20-hours-Their-aim-produce-Muslim-elite-leaders-.html#ixzz3aZguSpAN> accessed on 19.5.15.

could deal with one organisation. In 2005, the MBC had around 400 affiliates from what appeared to be a diverse range of Muslim organisations including Deobandi, Sufi and Shia networks. However, Bowen questions quite how diverse its membership was, feeling that the MBC was in fact dominated by those aligned to the *Jamaat-e-Islami*.

## The Muslim Brotherhood

- Founded in Egypt in 1928 by a school teacher called **Hasan al-Banna**. He encouraged charitable work, personal piety and a vision of society living under Islamic law and the oath taken by **Brotherhood** members became: “Allah is our objective. The Quran is our constitution. The Prophet is our leader. Jihad is our way. Death for the sake of Allah is our greatest wish.”
- Its branch network spread quickly through Egypt, and in the following decades, similar organisations were formed in other Arab countries. However, the Egyptian government outlawed the organisation in 1948 when it realised that it was prepared to use violence to further its political aims.
- In 1961, Arab speakers in the UK founded the Brotherhood’s first British organisation, the **Muslim Students Society** (MSS), based in **British universities**. In 1962, a joint effort was made by Arab Muslim Brothers, south Asian **Ji** activists and Malaysian Islamists to launch the **Federation of Student Islamic Societies** (FOSIS).
- In 1997, the more UK-focused Brothers set up the **Muslim Association of Britain** (MAB) to reach out beyond the student and exile communities and to lead Britain’s increasingly diverse Muslim population. Through the MAB, the Brothers capitalised on the growing politicisation of the UK Muslim community in the lead up to the Iraq war, becoming part of the **Stop the War Coalition**. The latter turned into the **Respect** party which leading MAB activists joined.
- Muslim Brotherhood exiles in the UK are only a small proportion of the Muslims in the UK but, like the *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JI), Bowen considers that they have exerted a considerable influence out of proportion to their size, which has been followed by greater scrutiny.

## Barelwis

- Sufi movement established in the northern Indian town of **Bareilly** in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Its founder, **Maulana Ahmed Riza Khan**, used his knowledge as an Islamic scholar to defend Sufi practises against the ideological attacks of the Deobandis.
- The type of Sufi practises some Muslims disapprove of include celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad’s as a festival (known as *mawlid* or *milad al-nabi*), venerating their **deceased spiritual leaders**, elevating them to the status of ‘saints’ with their graves being places of pilgrimage. the more exuberant forms of religious meditation (*zikr*) such as those involving dancing and the use of a musical instruments other than a single drum.
- Barelwis Sufism is the main religious tradition in the rural **Mirpur district** of Pakistan, the ancestral homeland of most of Britain’s Pakistani Muslims. During the 1970’s, Barelwi Muslim immigrants began to establish their own mosques and institutions in the UK. Their **spiritual sheiks**, known as *pirs*, also began to pay annual visits to their followers in Britain and some sheiks began to establish permanent mosques and centres in the UK.
- The Barelwi missionary organisation is called the *Dawat-e-Islami*. This organisation makes use of modern technology to supplement traditional methods of the message with its preachers communicating in Urdu and English via its website. In 2003, there were 5 small Barelwi institutions in Britain compared with 25 Deobandi *darul uloom* colleges.

## Shia ‘Twelvers’

- The **Shia** Muslim tradition spilt from the main **Sunni** branch of Islam following the death of the **prophet Muhammad** in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. At this time, most of the early Muslim community accepted **Abu Bakr**, a close companion of the Prophet, as their new spiritual and political leader or ‘caliph’ and became known as the ‘Sunni’ branch of Islam. The dissenting minority which became known as ‘Shia’ Muslims thought that the **Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin, Ali**, should have been the **successor of the Prophet** instead. The term Shia stemmed from the phrase *Shiat Ali*, meaning the **partisans of Ali**.
- Mainstream Shia are called ‘**Twelvers**’ (or *ithna’ashari*) because they believe that Ali was the first of the twelve leaders of the Muslim community, known as Imams. According to the Twelvers, the Twelfth Imam, **Muhammad al-Mahdi**, went into ‘occultation’ – that is he became hidden from sight – at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. The Twelvers believe that the **Hidden Imam** will one day return to usher in an age of justice and peace where the world will be governed according to God’s law.
- Shia Muslims form a majority in **Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan**, with Shia movements and governments stretching through to **Syria and Lebanon**. In Britain, there is a particular concentration of Shia Muslims in **north west London**.
- Shia Muslims share certain core beliefs and rituals with Sunni Muslims but centuries of parallel development have resulted in some differences in belief and practise. Leading Shia scholars are called ‘*marjas*’ who play an important role in Shia communities. The most outstanding *marjas* are given the title *ayatollah* and the most esteemed of these ‘Grand Ayatollah’. The living *marja* most familiar to the non-Muslim world is the Iranian Grand Ayatollah; the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In some quarters though he is not considered a scholar of the greatest rank and his authority has been challenged in the past by the Grand Ayatollah in Najaf, Iraq. For example, most Shia Muslims in the UK follow the latter: the **Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani**.

## Ismailis

- The **Ismailis** are Shia Muslims who recognise **Ismail** as their **sixth Imam**; as opposed to the followers of the majority ‘Twelver’ branch of the Shi’ite faith who follow a rival successor. Ismailis have some 15 million followers worldwide, with up to 50,000 in the UK; comprising 2% of the UK’s Muslim population. However, Bowen suggests that their resources and influence within Britain are greater than their numbers.
- There are two branches of the Ismaili faith in the UK - the **Nizari** and the **Dawoodi Bohras**. The larger **Nizari** Ismaili tradition is led by the **Aga Khan**, which numbers between 10,000 and 50,000. The other British Ismaili tradition is the **Dawoodi Bohras**, who have some 6000 followers in Britain. The **Dawoodi Bohras** are led by **Syedna Mufaddal Siafuddin**, the 53<sup>rd</sup> **Dai**.
- The **Bohras** display more of the outward signs that have come to be associated with the Muslim identity, with their men being mainly bearded and the women often wearing a distinctive form of hijab. Through a network of mosques and colleges, the Bohras leaders propagate a textual version of Islam. The **Nizari** by contrast, have dress codes that reflect the norms of the societies in which followers live.

## Conclusions

- The various Muslims communities in the UK share much in common but, as with all World Religions, Innes Bowen's book *Medina in Birmingham* shows that some of their beliefs and practises differ depending on the traditions in the regions from which they draw inspiration.
- During the history of the majority Sunni Islam, some Muslim scholars and their followers have promoted a reform in the practise of their faith to reflect more closely that of the Prophet and his followers. These movements could be compared to those that took part in the Reformation in Christianity during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and have caused differences between those, like Sufis, who defend a Islamic tradition that has evolved over time to be faithful to divine revelation and others, like Salafis, who advocate a more 'reformed', original faith.
- To have an appreciation of those who follow Islam in the United Kingdom, it is important to be aware of the various traditions that they follow and *Medina in Birmingham* appears to be helpful starting point for this.

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*September 2021*