

# MUSLIM YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN BRITAIN: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

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Muslim youth organizations reflect some of the most dynamic and important issues currently facing the British Muslim community. The question of young Muslims and the organizations in which they are involved must be a matter high on the agenda of all with an interest in the future of Islam in Britain. In talking about Muslim youth movements in the past and present, one is at the same time looking ahead into the next millennium: the picture is one of exciting new directions, uncertainty, threat, and promise.

In the first part of this paper, I will examine the emergence and development of Muslim youth organizations in Britain, paying attention to questions such as their goals, membership, leadership, ethos, and activities. In the second section, I will assess what needs the different organizations appear to be fulfilling and, in this part of the paper, I will focus on issues relating to ideology, identity, belonging, the future of Islam, and the resolution of generational conflicts. As the discussion progresses, some assessment will be made of the significance of the different Muslim youth groups as elements of the wider Islamic community in this country and a consideration as to where they fit into the overall structure of Muslim activity.

It is not my intention to survey every youth movement that has ever existed and what their activities and ideologies have been. Instead, the focus will be on three major youth organizations, all of which contrast with each other in quite significant ways, and yet which share some common aspirations. In a sense, they will provide the context for the more theoretical second section of the discussion. By concentrating on three particular groups, a whole variety of other youth groups have

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been left aside. The decision to limit the survey to three was simply the result of a choice between giving at least some depth analysis to a small number of organizations, as opposed to a rather sketchy overview of many more.

## **Background**

The presence of Muslims on any large scale is still a relatively new phenomenon for Britain. While there had always been a small number of Muslim students in British universities during the early and middle parts of this century, many would have regarded "home" as the various countries in the Muslim world from which they had come and to which they would return after completing their studies. Though there were of course exceptions, with some students remaining in Britain after graduation, many returned to their countries of origin. With such a transient and temporary group of young Muslims, conditions for the development of permanent youth or student organizations were generally unfavorable.

However, this situation changed dramatically when post-Second World War immigration took place, particularly in that phase which saw a change from temporary male residence to permanent family settlement due to the migration of wives and other family members. As new communities developed gradually in various parts of the country, a process of psychological reorientation took place. It was essentially a change of focus away from a future in Pakistan and other countries of migration toward a future in Britain. The evidence for this shift in attitude could in particular be seen through the greater financial investment of the Muslim community in projects and campaigns that would eventually benefit succeeding generations. These conditions of a more permanent community settlement underpinned by relatively settled family life laid the foundations for the Muslim youth organizations seen today. Coupled with the fact that the British Muslim community is now overwhelmingly comprised of young people, it is perhaps not surprising that youth groups in many cases enjoy a flourishing membership. In a study of young Muslims originating from Pakistan and Bangladesh, conducted by Muhammad Anwar, a colleague at the University of Warwick, it was found that, in 1993, 60 percent of the members of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities were under the age of twenty-five, compared to only 32 percent in the broader community.<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder then that the voice of Muslim youth is now so audible.

## **Profile of Organizations**

*Federation of Students Islamic Societies.* So how have Muslim youth organizations emerged out of the past thirty years? One of the

first reflected the earlier presence of Muslim students in Britain. Thus, the Federation of Students Islamic Societies (FOSIS) was established in 1962 when representatives from different student Islamic groups decided to form a national federal body. Such a cooperative association meant that there could be nationwide collaboration on certain student needs, particularly related to the religious and social welfare interests of new students. This work still continues in many British universities today. Since the constituent Islamic societies that comprise FOSIS are based in universities and colleges, many of their regular activities reflect the concerns and aspirations of the young Muslim scholar. Lecture programs by eminent academics, Qur'anic study circles, and informal discussion groups reflect the scholarly bias of this now well-established organization.

Similarly, the annual FOSIS conference, which brings together many members of the constituent societies, is oriented around issues of a broadly educational nature. In more recent years, new initiatives have been taken up by FOSIS, as much as anything to inject new life into an organization somewhat dwindling in overall popularity compared to its heyday in the 1970s. One example of its efforts toward reinvigoration has been its annual essay competition, launched for the first time in 1994 and sponsored jointly by FOSIS and the Islamic Foundation in Leicester. As Nadeem Malik noted in his report of the Competition Prize Giving evening toward the end of last year, "writing is just one of the ways in which Muslims can begin to play an ascendant role in the affairs of the world and the competition was organized with this end in mind."<sup>2</sup>

Existing in a world of rapid communication and information technology, FOSIS has perhaps recognized the need for young Muslims to contribute to the world of communications, where so much turns on the power of the written word. Fostering these skills in an educational environment that in many ways is alien to Islamic standards and principles appears as one of the many aims of the federation. Another initiative to complement this goal has been the journal produced by FOSIS, known as *al Mizan* (The Balance) and, as one might expect, its content is primarily oriented around the concerns of importance to the Muslim student. Like the organization behind it, *al Mizan* has also gone through something of a facelift in recent years and now appears as a glossy magazine known as *The Muslim*, with the subtitle: *The Voice of Muslim Students*.

FOSIS has formed links with a number of other youth groups, and perhaps one of the most recent and significant collaborative ventures was a training camp organized with the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (IIFSO). The focus of the camp, which took place in October 1994, was on the management skills

needed by leaders of Muslim student groups in order to help them plan their activities in the most effective way. Commenting afterward on the value of the camp, one participant suggested that the practical orientation of the activities "could have a dramatic effect in motivating Muslim students who will be the leaders of the future."<sup>3</sup> Time will tell what the outcomes of such initiative will be and, indeed, what lasting impact they will have upon the organizations themselves. There remains, however, one limitation of FOSIS that it must deal with to stay afloat amid the rapid developments taking place among Muslim youth organizations. Many of its executive committee come from the far corners of the Muslim world, a legacy of the past when most Muslim students came from abroad. Now that the balance has shifted and most Muslims at universities now come from Britain itself, the executive of FOSIS must change its leadership pattern to reflect this new scenario. Only by an element of indigenization among its executive will it come to represent again the interests of Muslim students.

*The Young Muslims.* The Young Muslims (YM) is perhaps the largest youth group and has begun to have an increasingly prominent role in the life of younger members of the British Muslim community. To understand the current YM movement, we need to step back a little further in time and look at its forerunner: the Islamic Youth Movement (IYM). This group was formed in Bradford in the early 1970s from among a number of regional Muslim youth groups that shared an ideology oriented around three broad issues:

- a) the dissemination of the message of Islam among youth; b) [the] provi[sion] of facilities for the study of Islam in an atmosphere which [would] develop personality and character, and c) arrang[ing] social activities such as sports, camping, seminars and symposia.<sup>4</sup>

In the early days, its key activist was Ahmad Jamal, who had been seconded from the Jama'at-i-Islami to develop youth work and education in Bradford. Through schools, Jamal recruited a small core of like-minded individuals to form a youth movement and to set up connections with other youth groups. Thus the IYM was established, and regular weekly meetings were held in Bradford to study the works of Mawlana Mawdudi, Syed Qutb, and other Islamists. Their range of activities soon expanded to include camping trips and, eventually in 1976, the launching of a magazine: *The Movement*. This provided a forum for the propagation of Jama'at-i-Islami ideals and served as a means for communicating information and news about IYM activities.

Writing about *The Movement* in his recent book on Islam in Britain, Philip Lewis suggests that “to read excerpts from *The Movement* is to find oneself in the familiar Islamist world of discourse”; the words are “heavily freighted with devotional meanings within traditional Islam serv(ing) an activist end.”<sup>5</sup> However, the themes that emerged in early articles have been repeated over the sixteen years since the foundation of *The Movement*, indicating that the IYM had at least touched on questions of long-term significance. What were some of these? Many revolved around the disentangling of Pakistani culture from Islam and an emerging pattern of Islamic adherence that, to some extent, would be at peace with its western location. Lewis writes that, for many, “IYM gave them space to retain pride in their Islamic identity, while able to distance themselves from, and critique aspects of, Pakistani culture in the name of Islam.”<sup>6</sup>

Since IYM was essentially the youth wing of the Jama'at-i-Islami, many from the Jama'at were anticipating the day when members of its youth groups would emerge as natural leaders for its organizations, such as the UK Islamic Mission. However, in many cases their hopes did not come to fruition, for many IYM members found themselves moving on from the organization into further academic study and then into the demands of family life and careers, which left little time for active participation in the Jama'at. Ideals and ideology were not enough to sustain a youth movement without paid workers. Not only that, some elements of the Jama'at ideology began to pale, particularly when set against the background of Jama'at activities in the turbulent affairs of Pakistani politics in the late 1970s. So what began from strong beginnings eventually reached its demise and, by the end of the 1970s, IYM had almost ground to a halt in Bradford. But it would be unfair to say that flames of earlier enthusiasm fueled by IYM ideology had been completely turned to ashes. For in the mid-1980s, the embers of IYM rekindled themselves with the launch of the YM-UK, again in Bradford and under the leadership of Dr. Munir Ahmed and his wife. This new involvement of women was one of the first characteristics of this “new look” renamed Islamic youth movement. For perhaps the first time in British Islam, there was a formal national organization that encouraged and made space for the involvement of women.

There is no mistaking the wide-ranging spectrum of activities in which YM members now find themselves involved, though its national annual camps are perhaps one of its trademarks. The strength of YM today in Britain must in some sense be a reflection of its diverse interests, which allows members of different character, ability, and enthusiasm to find some activity that matches their aptitude, whether this be international tours and conferences or local community work. Not surprisingly, YM's membership is considerably broader when compared

to that of FOSIS, and particularly in terms of the age ranges represented. Its national camps cater to those as young as seven years old as well as to those in their early twenties.

Like its forerunner, YM established quickly a vehicle for the communication of its ideals and activities. The glossy magazine *Trends*, now under the editorship of Sarah Joseph, wife of a former YM president, appears to have captured successfully a large section of the Muslim magazine market intended for young Muslims. In many ways this is not surprising, for it is presented professionally, with color and a good layout, and carries articles that address issues that affect directly the lives of young Muslims: contraception, clothes, the rights of women, divorce, the law, and others. To some extent, there has also been evidence of a shift away from reliance on the thought of Mawlana Mawdudi and the evolution of a climate of questioning on such issues as boundaries between Islam as a religion and its received cultural packaging.

The YM have always held ties with a parent organization, and invariably one ultimately associated with the Jama'at-i-Islami. But early in the 1990s, its institutional affiliation changed. After several years of increasingly distancing itself from the UK Islamic Mission, it saw the new Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), established by ex-YM and UK Islamic Mission members, and directed by Faruq Murad in Leicester, as a new and natural parent body. As a former YM leader, Murad is in an ideal position to carry forward the ideals and aspirations of the youth organization that he once knew from the inside. Only time will tell whether ISB will form the right kind of bridge with YM and will, at the same time, avoid the various pitfalls that beset the relationship between some YM members and their UK Islamic Mission counterparts.

It is also a matter of time before some assessment can be made of the adequacy of the ISB approach, which seeks to embody "a more creative and imaginative outlook . . . (raising) the consciousness of Muslims about their Islamic contribution to British society."<sup>7</sup> Implementation of strategies to effect those approaches rest on an emphasis upon the relevance of Islam to British society and, perhaps as a natural concomitant of this, a reliance on communications in the medium of English. Since YM has close links with ISB, to some extent their similar concerns are part and parcel of the same venture, and the ideology of establishing an Islam rooted in Britain is common to both agendas. Both seek to provide a forum for dialogue between Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, other English-speaking Muslims, and British converts or reverts to Islam. Its annual camps are perhaps the highlight of the year for keen YM members. Up to two thousand participants were attracted to its 1994 gathering, held in the East Midlands last August. With the theme "Islam: Rise to the Call"

propagated by international Jama'at-i-Islami leaders such as Khurram Murad, it is perhaps not surprising that so many young Muslims were in attendance.

In an interview with the Muslim weekly newspaper *Q News*, the current amir of YM, Ahtisham Ali, noted that part of his vision for YM was a reemphasis of its *da'wah* activities. So far, a large part of YM's missionary work has been toward lapsed or nonpracticing Muslims. Ali wants to change this so that concentrated efforts are made toward the propagation of Islam among the non-Muslim community. One of the ways this will be achieved is through the active participation of core members in community work that may not necessarily benefit the Muslim community directly. So, for example, some brothers and sisters are associated with such charities as Help the Aged, others with the Samaritans. These activities are just further building blocks in the struggle of YM to live by its motto: "Here to help create and maintain in Britain a society where the people live by Islam."<sup>8</sup>

This ideal, however, is perhaps common to some of the other youth organizations currently present in Britain, such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and an organization known as Jam'iat Ihya' Minhaj al Sunnah (JIMAS). So how does YM's method differ from other groups? In the words of its leader:

We attract the youth, we purify them, and we try to train them by giving them *tarbiyah*, so that they will go back into and help the society they live in. With HT [Hizb-ut-Tahrir] it is to propagate the idea that the *Khilāfah* is the end and that the *Khilāfah* will solve all our problems. With JIMAS it is to change and purify the '*aqīdah*.'<sup>9</sup>

It remains to be seen whether the approach of YM will pay off in the end, or whether in the battle for numbers and activists, the more radical antics of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir will prove to be the more appealing.

*Hizb-ut-Tahrir*. No discussion of Islamic youth movements in Britain today would be complete without some mention of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT); so captivating has its ethos become for some young Muslims that the omission of any discussion of it would leave an obvious gap. Though not a group oriented specifically around a young Muslim agenda, HT's popularity rests largely among young Muslims, particularly students. Its centrally defining concept is that of *khilāfah* and the ideology that aims toward a global Islamic state with a single *khilāfah* at its head and the entire ummah united under its leadership.

HT has become renowned for strongly worded propaganda. One key activist is recorded as saying, "The Hour of Resurrection will not come

until the faithful believers (Muslims) fight the Jews and kill them.”<sup>10</sup> For the sake of this discussion, the interest is not so much in the nature of these statements, but rather in the reasons for HT’s popularity. By exploring this issue in the very broadest sense, the second section of the paper finds a natural starting point, which is the assessment of what needs Muslim youth organizations appear to be fulfilling and what makes them so appealing and what fuels their popularity?

## Analysis

For some answers to these questions, whether one has HT, FOSIS, or YM in mind, discussion must rest ultimately on the question of identity and, more specifically, on religious identity. Talking about HT’s appeal, one Birmingham-based psychiatrist observed that its appeal lay in the identity that belonging could bring. He said, “instead of rituals they can learn at the mosque, the radical groups function as clubs, providing support (and) friendship. They give them an identity which British society hasn’t.”<sup>11</sup> Why is this?

Young Muslims are growing up in a society where Islam means very little to the general population, except what information, accurate or otherwise, they have acquired through the media. Since Britain is not the first home of Islam, attempts to establish a firm foundation for it in this country have brought problems and difficulties, as well as creative and positive opportunities. Now that religious and social facilities have been successfully established in many different Muslim communities around the country, concern is turning to some of the more subtle questions facing the community, particularly its younger members. It is within the forum of youth groups that tentative answers may be offered to some of the dilemmas of being young, British, and Muslim. Away from the often narrow, sectarian, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural biases of some parents and elders, youth organizations offer a space in which creative thinking about the place of Islam in Britain can take place.

Something that FOSIS, YM, and HT share is that many of their activities appear to be unrelated and perhaps even radically divorced from the majority of mosque communities in Britain. In the 1950s and 1960s, when community development was organized largely around mosques, youth work was often seen as one further dimension of the general establishment of communities. However, and perhaps regrettably, the aspirations of many young Muslims have often been at odds and in conflict with what many imams and mosque committee members have envisaged for the future. In the early days, this resulted in the establishment of youth groups in some sense cut off from local Muslim populations, particularly and inevitably in the case of FOSIS, and it appears that little today has changed. Part of the reluctance of today’s imams to

take the youth agenda on board has led to an increase in a large body of youth becoming involved with non-Muslim organizations, some of which are oriented around the popular culture that depends on *bhangra* music for its propagation.

The three Muslim groups discussed in this paper appear to fall into three distinct typologies, despite some of the similarities among them. The basis for the typology rests upon the differing relationship each of them has with time in relation to their activities. This might at first sound like a surprising basis for a typology, but its appropriateness will be demonstrated below.

Looking first at FOSIS, it is evident that many of its activities are oriented around present needs, especially those of new and incoming students to university. Even its planning strategies and methods are about meeting the immediate needs of students in the here-and-now, not the here-and-after. On leaving the university, FOSIS will have fulfilled its promise for many young Muslim students, and the orientation of university life upon one day at a time will be left for succeeding generations.

In contrast, YM has a clearly defined set of goals about what it envisages for the future. One senses that its leaders have a picture in mind of the kind of society that they dream of establishing. For YM, future ideals shape their ethos of the present. Activities in the here-and-now are oriented around the fulfillment of the future, and its strategies for this fulfillment rest upon a long-term vision. There is nothing about this anticipation that is content with taking one day at a time, waiting in a casual manner to see what unfolds. Instead, strong ideologies will pit themselves against everything that a rapidly changing society can level against them, and YM dreams of emerging victorious. The plans and events of today reflect the hopes and dreams of this future victory.

In contrast with both FOSIS and YM, HT has a vision for the future, but one that is shaped by the past. In many ways more outwardly radical than the other two groups, HT has taken recourse in ideas and ideologies embedded in Islamic history to find solutions to what it considers to be the struggle of the future. Though described by Kalim Siddique, leader of the so-called Muslim Parliament of Great Britain, as nothing more than a "futurology,"<sup>12</sup> HT is rooted in a vision that simply looks ahead; its hope of the future is based upon what has gone before.

Common to each group, however, are similar underlying themes of belonging and identity saddled to a powerful and often emotionally appealing ideology. Each stand as alternatives to what is on offer in secular, individualistic liberal society and from among the community activities fueled by the inward-looking clan politics of some elders. In many ways, youth organizations provide the ideal basis for the consolidation of

identity that naturally comes about through living in a minority situation, while particularly taking account of the aspirations of an up-and-coming third generation. Each group appears to be more concerned with people than with buildings and structures. They have learned from the biases of the past that elaborate mosques, ultimately will do little for the future development of Muslim youth when compared to religious and social gatherings with clear aims in mind.

The religious identity of young Muslims today appears to be constructed as a result of the pressures brought about by the impact of two largely incompatible and opposing forces. On the one hand, secular society allures the young members of all communities toward a future bound up with material and individualistic satisfaction. On the other hand, strong forces of cultural traditionalism weigh heavy upon many young Muslims as they try to rise above the factionalism and petty disputes that still plague many communities. Between these two competing worldviews, young Muslims are taking refuge in organizations that offer a clear set of goals and ideals and that attempt, in some measure, to enable them to live as Muslims in British society. Some of the strategies used by the groups surveyed toward the realization of this ideal are perhaps more successful than others. But in each case, it has entailed a rising above the limited worldview that besets many of the elder, poorly educated generations. For Muslim youth today, the struggles to live in submission to God in a society tainted by racism and pockets of anti-Muslim prejudice appear as obstacles to be conquered and overcome, rather than as reasons to retreat into the world of internal community politics.

In many ways, YM appears to be the most pioneering in terms of developing an urgently needed British Muslim identity. As one of its former presidents noted during an interview, "a British Muslim is being evolved, but first, young Muslims must understand Islam and become attached to their faith intellectually rather than (simply) emotionally."<sup>13</sup> In an interview with *Q News*, he said:

By creating a British Islamic culture, we will be carrying on what our great forefathers achieved, who developed Islamic cultures wherever they went. It is our job to be innovative, creative, adventurous, bold, chivalrous and create a new British Islamic culture.<sup>14</sup>

But this question of a British Muslim identity throws up an important question regarding the hierarchy of different identities that constitute the sense of self. Where some young Muslims may want to identify themselves as, first and foremost, Muslim and then British, others seem to be rejecting an identity based upon a prioritized hierarchical structure.

This calls for the legitimacy of “hyphenated identities” where in the phrase “British-Muslim,” the word “British” is used as a noun rather than as an adjective. This method of self-description thus takes into account the full legitimacy of two identities without having to place them in rank order. If this could become a widely accepted strategy for British Muslims, it would overcome successfully the impasse some have identified in being both Muslim and British.

In his article “On Not Being White in Britain: Discrimination, Diversity and Commonality,” Tariq Modood discusses the whole notion of hyphenated identities.<sup>15</sup> He calls for the legitimacy of an identity based upon two different national identities, such as “British Pakistani.” While this may be appropriate for some, I would argue for the importance of a religious dimension to any hyphenated identity, especially being applied to the younger British-born members of the Muslim community. Modood’s model leaves this aspect of faith aside, making it of limited application for many of the young British Muslims who wish to assert the prominence of both their religious and national identities. In many ways, then, YM offers a forum for the development of a British Muslim identity.

This contrasts strongly, however, with HT’s ideology. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Farid Qassim responded to the question of how British Muslims can show a commitment to jihad by saying “there is no such thing as British Muslims. There are only Muslims.”<sup>16</sup> But such rhetoric is popular with a certain strand of young British Muslims, particularly those wounded by the racism and anti-Muslim sentiment they face in some inner cities. Organizations like HT offer a forum for the establishment of a collective identity that seeks to stand up and defend actively the sense of self that rests upon Islam. Its slogans act as catalysts for the mobilization of activists, rallying points around which the youthful enthusiasm and sense of injustice felt by its members can find a focal point.

The word *reaction* in many ways captures some of the attempts made by young Muslims to find a way of being British Muslims, especially where they feel religious identity is under threat. Youth organizations of whatever ethos are, to some extent, the reactive outcome of attempts to deal with this situation, though among some groups more proactive methods appear visible. One of the most obvious ways that this trend of reaction can be identified is in the increasing observance of *hijāb* (wearing a head scarf) by many young Muslim women, especially those in colleges and universities with strong Islamic societies. This is, no doubt, part of a growing religious awareness, but it also seems to be a reaction against the wider society and particularly those elements of it that are explicitly racist. One observer has noted:

Far from being fearful of standing out as targets of violence, many of the devout Muslim girls regard the *hijāb* as a gesture of defiance. The Islamic groups have been quick to take action in the anti-racist struggle, offering not only self-defence classes but also a new and powerful sense of identity to members.<sup>17</sup>

This sense of identity can be fostered within a youth organization that refuses to use the yardsticks of the majority community to measure self-worth. It captivates, harnesses, and reshapes the sense of "not-belonging" that some young Muslims have grown up with, transforming it into a feeling of fitting in and conformity based upon a collective shared identity rooted in Islam.

In many ways, the current generation of young Muslims has grown up as strangers in British society. The experience of racism for some, particularly in their later school years, has mitigated any sense of being part of British society. On the other hand, some of the elements of cultural backwardness they perceive in their own communities has left a number of young Muslims feeling divorced from any meaningful activity within the world of their parents and grandparents. Youth organizations have recognized this sense of estrangement, and in some modes, a constructive process of reevaluation about society and the role of young Muslims within it has taken place. Hans Mol, a sociologist of religion, has talked of this experience, and some elements of his analysis begin to sound familiar with examining the experience of Muslim youths in Britain. He writes:

The stranger questions what is unquestionable to the in-group. He examines what is self-explanatory (to the natives). His objectivity is the direct result of the failure of his previous rules of guidance and his loss of status, all of which compel him to re-think instead of thinking-as-usual.<sup>18</sup>

Some Muslim youths may have felt themselves to be aliens. As members of a religious minority in Britain, the process of constructive reevaluation of where Islam provides the mechanisms for dealing with this experience makes the role of Muslim youth organizations, both now and in the future, of paramount importance for the development of Islam in Britain.

## Endnotes

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