

The Long View

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Rewriting our future, revisiting our past: creating and capturing Muslim narratives



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of the History of the
West - by the
Islamophobic Right

**DR MYRIAM
FRANCOIS:**
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the need for Muslim
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Don't mention the war:
Muslim Amnesia and
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Palestinian online
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Editors:
**Faisal Bodi and
Arzu Merali**

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

The theme of our place as Muslims within the wider national story is the thread that binds together three of the four articles in the latest issue of The Long View.

For at least the last two decades British society has witnessed a populist lurch to the right which has both been nourished by (and in turn fed) narratives seeking to redefine a pre-immigrant Britain that supposedly existed before the confusion and contamination caused by multi-culturalism.

In this idealised white "Golden Age" of sedate cricket matches on manicured village greens and grimy workers pouring out of smokey factories at the end of their shift, the place of minorities, be they ethnic or religious, has been called into question. Identifying a crisis in British identity they diagnose as a diffidence and timorousness in defending "traditional" British values in the face of a hostile multi-culturalism, their focus has turned on everyone who doesn't look or talk like themselves or indeed espouse the same values. Rather than being a restatement of any kind of a native historical British identity, this identity assertion has actually taken place in opposition to more newly settled communities.

Under this resurgent right wing populism the Scottish are viewed as want-away traitors, the EU a back-door way for Germany and France to control Britain, East European immigrants an army of cheap labour to displace British workers and Muslims a Trojan Horse looking to enforce Islamic values on the silent majority.

How have we arrived at such a critical juncture?

Professor Ian Almond locates one cause in the revision of history to recast the British Empire as a benign and benevolent force. Whether it's the retelling of history in the classroom, the whitewashing of political atrocities and abuses, or the creation of a fictitious past through popular culture the objective is the same - to inform our choices and opinions in the troubled present by reference to a "glorious" past.

He sees how "the slow, subtle, low-key beatification of Empire has insidiously crept into the background of every debate" and that its proponents are thriving in part because they have "been able to grow in a rich topsoil of historical ignorance."

For Dr Myriam Francois the newly-emerged national story leaves little room for Muslims except as a "problem identity" that is there to be tolerated by the "native" majority. The rampant discrimination and targeting of Muslims today parallels the recent rise of right wing narratives (and the retreat of multiculturalism) in which Britons from the

periphery (former colonies) are being pushed to the margins by Britons from the old Empire's core. But while Islamophobia may be a new specificity the challenges we face as a community as a result of racism are largely the same as other BAME communities. Addressing them, therefore, requires a more collaborative approach, more akin to that developed by Muslim groups in France where joining forces with Roma and other anti-racism groups pre-empts official attempts to play "divide and rule" politics. Dr Francois sees the arts as a way in which British Muslims can define their own place within Britain. By becoming producers as well as consumers and storytellers as well as subjects we can start to challenge the racist, politically motivated narratives that have come to dominate what it means to be British.

Arzu Merali takes up the question of how Muslims should address their erasure and misrepresentation from national narratives. She finds problematic the reflexive responses which simply restate Muslim contributions to e.g. the wars Britain has historically fought, as this risks making us complicit in the present-day glorification of the military that seeks to legitimise war against Muslims abroad. While it is important to paint ourselves into the national picture, we must reject the temptation to present ourselves as the same as those who deny our role in society and history because to do so is to acquiesce in their moral abuses, which in many cases run counter to our own divinely inspired values.

The final piece in this edition is by Yousef Alhelou and departs in part from and dovetails with in other ways the theme above. As Palestinians have grown politically and militarily weaker and increasingly more isolated as a result of their abandonment by the Muslim world, this has given rise to a new energy in cyberspace that seeks to diffuse their cause. Historically, mainstream western media has been complicit in propagating pro-Israel narratives. This imbalance, a function of power asymmetry, is being challenged by a new wave of revolutionaries who have made cyberspace their battlefield. Applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp now enable Palestinians to bypass the censors and disseminate their own news and views to a global audience.

Having been undermined by dominant pro-Israel narratives, Palestinians have taken up the challenge of retelling their current and past stories using new media. A lesson perhaps, for us all to take on.

Faisal Bodi and Arzu Merali
Editors

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On the Quiet Capture of the History of the West – by the Islamophobic Right

The fight against Islamophobia could benefit from rewriting the whitewashed history currently dispensed to British schoolchildren, argues **Ian Almond**.

About a year ago, I was having coffee with a Muslim schoolfriend from my childhood. She said to me: “What kind of history are they teaching at school nowadays? My son came up to me yesterday and asked: ‘Mum, was the British Empire a good thing or a bad thing in India?’”. Her son’s history lesson, it appeared, had been all about the wonderful things the British did around the world.

The remark reminded me of something vague, but I couldn’t say what. When I got home, I looked up the matter online, and quickly found the thing that had eluded me: an eight-year old article in *The Guardian*, reporting on the appointment of a right-wing, pro-imperialist, pro-Western academic (Niall Ferguson) as a senior consultant on the UK’s GCSE History syllabus. There was a frustration, apparently, with too much political correctness in the teaching profession. Too much focus on slavery and imperialism, ran the advice – why not highlight the positive things the West has done for the rest of the world? Eight years down the line, my friend’s son was clearly the recipient of this “revised” version of History.

It sounds like an academic point – and I wish it was. But History is important – and bad history, poor history, incomplete history can be dangerous, sometimes even lethal. Thugs will punch a person in the face because they feel that a foreign face has no place in the history of their land; Islamophobes will scream abuse at a woman with a piece of cloth wrapped around her head because they feel the sight has no connection to the history of their own community. Regardless of whether it is a general election or a referendum, people vote on the basis of a past just as much as they vote on the basis of a present. History is important because it explains to us how we got to where we are right now – who lost out and who profited, who suffered and who had a good time, who caused the problems and who tried to solve them. How ordinary people feel about the past that gradually shrinks behind us – whether they regret its loss, are happy to be over it, or deeply yearn for its return – is of profound significance.

The unfortunate thing about History is that, unless we make an effort to look for it ourselves, we get most of it unconsciously, without asking – either from our educational institutions, or from our mainstream culture. We grow up already formatted, so to speak, with an unconscious backdrop of the world in our mind. This unconscious backdrop is tremendously important – all the more so because we hardly notice it is there. It is never thought of as ‘political’, but rather a deep, natural kind of common sense. It is why people can be puzzled when they are told Israel is a settler-colony, or when they hear India asking Britain for an apology (for what – the railways?), or when Greece demands that we return its monuments.

Nearly two-thirds of people interviewed in the UK feel the British Empire is more something to be proud of than ashamed of

Over the past decade, for example, a tremendous whitewashing of Empire and of many of the figures central to it – Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill – has taken place. Winston Churchill – a man who referred to Sudanese as “savages” and Palestinians as camel-dung eating “barbaric hordes”, who was championing at the bit to use chemical weapons against civilian populations in Northern Iraq and north-western India, and who was more than happy to send in soldiers to violently put down the protests of underpaid Welsh miners – continues to be memorialized as a morally courageous, heroic human being on both sides of the Atlantic. In 2017 alone, two major films came out about him (*Churchill* and *Darkest Hour*). Productions like *Young Victoria* and TV series like *Downton Abbey* reinforce a human face of Empire, one which paints a structure that was trying to help other countries, not exploit them. Even flippant films

such as *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) end with the Indian protagonist kissing the feet of Queen Victoria’s bronze statue. When we round all of this off with the widespread public consumption of a documentary genre we can only term ‘Yes-Empire-was-bad-but-we-did-give-them-rail-travel’ (Simon Schama’s *A History of Britain*, Jeremy Paxman’s *Empire*), it is hardly surprising to learn that nearly two-thirds of people interviewed in the UK feel the British Empire is more something to be proud of than ashamed of, and over one-third still wish we had one today.

To make one thing clear: the solution here is definitely *not* to replace a Western-friendly history with an Islam-friendly one. Muslims, like any other group, are every bit as prone to selective amnesia as Europeans. Turkey continues to display an unwillingness to fully acknowledge the violent, large-scale ethnic cleansings of both the 1890s and 1915 – when the Armenian population was nearly completely removed from its lands; because of Erdogan’s popularity in the Muslim world today, it is depressing to see some non-Turkish Muslims also adopt this position in a partisan-fashion, without knowing the facts. Leaving Christians aside, Sunni or Shia-majority cultures also need to adopt a wider sense of history, and acknowledge the violence that they as a majority have inflicted on their minorities.

Nor is there anything exclusively British about this Western love of Empire – the United States has been practising a whitewashing of its horrifying history in Latin America for decades, producing a whole package of shows and films set there (most recently the Tom Cruise film *American Made* (2017) and the Netflix series *Narcos* (2015)) which sugar coat or delete U.S. political intervention. Both France and Belgium, too, should probably interrupt the moral lectures they give other countries to fully confront the genocides they are responsible for – whether it is in the Algerian interior or the Congo Free State.

On either side of the Atlantic, the various protests over statues of racists and Confederate generals on university campuses have attracted a lot of brief, high-intensity media coverage – but these are mere skirmishes. The real propaganda war by the Right was won years ago, in our classrooms, on our radio stations and across our TV screens. The slow, subtle, low-key beatification of Empire has insidiously crept into the background of every debate – and anyone who dares to point out that Churchill actually

wanted to gas “savages”, or that Margaret Thatcher consciously collaborated with a fascist dictatorship, or that British war crimes in the 1950s were inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of Kenyans during the Mau Mau uprising (torture, castration, burning alive, etc)...anyone who tries to articulate any of this is seen as a wide-eyed fanatic.

For Muslims in the West, these History wars are especially sensitive. Most British Muslims in the UK have grown up in, and economically benefited from, the post-war geopolitical success of a first-world country with a two-hundred year history of exploiting the developing world. Many of those exploited countries – Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iran – were Muslim-majority regions (indeed, by the 1920s, over half of the British Empire was Muslim). Although these issues should be a concern for all of us, British Muslims in particular find themselves in the center of the maelstrom today – especially on thorny questions such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine. The careful fading-out of the word ‘imperialism’ from our public discourse – and its replacement with less offensive terms, such as ‘influence’, ‘occupation’, ‘administration’ and even ‘development’ – brings with it the installation of a certain mindset and a slew of related fantasies: that we in the West always intervene in non-Western countries for their own good, never for our own benefit; the

idea that we ‘give’ too much in foreign aid, as though the problems in these countries were wholly free of our own relationship to them; perhaps most insidiously, the illusion that there is a place called ‘the Muslim world’, geographically separate from Europe. There are many reasons why a whole cacophony of racist, under-informed, bigoted voices (Katie Hopkins, Douglas Murray, Nigel Farage, Milo Yiannopoulos) are thriving in our public discourse today. The semantic impact of ISIS – and the appalling effect it has had on the image of Islam for non-Muslims – is surely one of them. But if the echo chamber that is the British, Islamophobic, anti-immigrant Right at the moment is thriving, it is in part because it has been able to grow in a rich topsoil of historical ignorance.

Today, perhaps more than at any previous time, we need a courageous approach to History. A History, both in our schools and on our screens, that will not shy away from atrocities or complexities. This does not have to be exclusively negative – reminding people constantly about the genocides their forefathers committed, or the dark histories of their governments. It can be positive, too. A common racist refrain is that ‘Muslims don’t belong here’. Some of the oldest Muslim communities in Britain can be traced back to Yemeni families who came here to live in the 1860s. In other words – and I place the words in italics because they are not spo-

ken often enough – *Muslims have been living in Britain for over one hundred and fifty years.*

As an academic and a historian, I openly plead guilty to a charge of idealistic bias. I am not unaware that there are other factors – tremendous factors – at work in the rising levels of hostility towards Muslims. Not least among these, the unavoidable economic dimension of Islamophobia – that it disproportionately comes, like most racism, from a white, impoverished, working-class punished by austerity. No one is suggesting that attacks on mosques or the abuse of Muslims on the street can be vanquished overnight with a couple of history workshops and a TV-series. Nor am I denying the Muslim community’s part in this whole problem – some of the more conservative and inward-looking trends within British Islam today, many Muslims will admit, have cultivated a siege mentality in the community which only serves to make things worse. But if the roots of Islamophobia are historic and systemic, then any solution for it will have to be equally long-term, and equally systemic. The path that takes us from a GCSE school syllabus to the Nazi salutes of the English Defence League may well be a winding one, but it is very clearly there for anyone willing to see.

• **Ian Almond**

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Rewriting our future: the need for Muslim narratives

Joining forces with other communities, embracing shared narratives of marginalisation and using the arts to articulate our own experiences and aspirations is essential if the Muslim community is to overturn enforced, racialised constructions of its identity, says **Dr Myriam Francois**

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”

Marcus Garvey

Recently I watched a play called “Salt”, written by Black British playwright Selina Thompson. Much more than a play, Salt is a performance of ablated history, in which Selina recounts her journey as she retraces one of the routes of the Transatlantic Slave Triangle – from the UK to Ghana, on a cargo ship, to Jamaica, and back. She recounts just how making that journey

opened her eyes to a history – and thus to an identity – she had hitherto felt removed from. A history which through its absence had left her feeling culturally isolated. Ill at ease with herself and with her wider identity as a black British woman. Black history is just one part of the truncated history British schoolchildren are raised on and which – alongside a doggedly resistant whiteness of our public sphere – ensures that those whose lived reality cannot fit the narrow story Britain tells its children, find themselves in various forms of metaphorical and actual conflict with the motherland. When the country which birthed you denies your full existence, forces you into narrow strictures which negate your reality and expect you to toe a line which betrays your humanity, the fireworks are surely inevitable.

Marginalisation has many layers to it – they can be economic, social, political and yes, also cultural. When the story of who ‘we’ are as a nation, doesn’t make space for your story, or worse still, denies the truth of your life’s experience, it is hard to see how you are meant to feel a sense of belonging without betraying yourself. And beyond the merits of nation states, nations require a sense of common interest and shared identity to function healthily – without a shared sense of belonging, we risk becoming competing islands with little interest in collaboration toward the project of a ‘greater’ good.

For many minorities, Muslims included, the reality of the British story of who we are as a nation, leaves little room for a sense of Muslims as anything other than a problem identity and one being 'tolerated' by an implied 'native' in-group. The rise in pundits and even academics now willing to employ terms such as 'native' in order to draw ostensibly racial divisions as the basis for 'true belonging' signals a crisis of identity, a profound questioning of what it means to be British – who gets to define it and who is included within it.

The narrative around British Muslims has been drearily repetitive for over a decade now. And some of the issues facing British Muslims have – perhaps not surprisingly – proven worryingly constant. But for all the attention placed on British Muslims as somehow an 'exceptional' group, not a small number of the challenges facing British Muslims also affect many other minority groups in the UK.

Today, there are over eight million people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK. Three in four of them report experiencing racism. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) said racial abuse and bullying of children rose by one-fifth since 2015-16 to more than 10,000 incidents recorded by police last year. And a recent survey highlighted the percentages of people from black and Asian backgrounds reporting racial discrimination has grown by more than 10 points since the EU referendum – 71% of people from ethnic minorities face discrimination, up from 58%. Although Brexit is a very new dynamic in British politics, it has effectively resurrected some very old notions of belonging. The British comedian and 'national treasure' John Cleese caused uproar when he commented recently that 'London is no longer an English city', subsequently defending his remarks by saying I'm a "culturalist, not racist." His comments are indicative of a changing sense of what makes Britain not just 'great' but British, from the heyday of multiculturalism, lauded as antidote to empire, to the current confusion of what form of nationalism can and should be adopted which doesn't in fact embolden and reinforce far-right notions of belonging as based on race and/or ethnicity.

During the height of multiculturalism from the late 1970s, emphasis was increasingly placed on the value of other cultures to Britain and on the notion that Britain itself, is made up of a mosaic of identities, all of which were conceived as enriching the nation. Idealised by some, it also had its critics, not least among those who saw multiculturalism as an extension of imperial ways of thinking, with white Britishness at the centre, and non-white forms of Britishness tolerated, and in some cases celebrated, at the periphery. Just as Britain was the centre of empire, with its colonies useful satellites, post-colonial Britain embodied an idea of Britishness which while restricting who was entitled to belong to

the nation, upheld a sense of white Britishness as the 'true' or 'authentic' identity. Non-white identities were permitted to entertain quirks and customs but not to intrude on the core of Britishness by seeking to adapt it to a more representative story of the island or to shift the balance of power away from the core to the periphery.

Inequality and Empire

Poverty, economic marginalisation, more broadly, remain serious concerns for many Muslim families in the UK's forgotten working class neighbourhoods. In deprived areas, the question of belonging is less theoretical – it is in the cracked concrete of sub-par accommodation, and in over-

It has become clear that there is serious resistance to recognising structural issues of discrimination in the UK.

crowded homes and queues at food banks. It's in free school meals replacing missing home meals and in the drugs trade, offering a seemingly lucrative alternative to those failed by the schooling system. The percentage of Muslims in British prisons has increased by over 50% in the last decade. Many of those individuals are detained over drugs charges – less than one percent there on what many would assume to be the source of this swollen number: terrorism charges.

When we discuss deprivation separately from both the history of immigration to the UK and the role of empire within that, we risk truncating the national understanding of why Britain looks the way it does, starting the conversation at immigration, rather than empire. This leads to a sense of white entitlement, grounded in the hierarchies of belonging linked to the concepts of native and immigrant. If black and brown folks are in the UK due to immigration, then this is simply a question of their 'desire' to live here, in what is perceived as an inherently more desirable setting, rather than forging continuities between displacement, economic impoverishment of nations such as India, political turmoil created by empire, such as in the cases of Pakistan and Bangladesh and elsewhere. Poverty and inequality in the UK today cannot be discussed separately to the conditions of inequality which forged an un-

equal starting point and therefore, unequal outcomes, for many people of colour, of which many are Muslims. Solutions to these issues must be approached through a collaborative approach which rejects the essentialisation of Muslim identity as somehow unique and exceptional and instead, focuses on continuities of experiences of deprivation and inequality across communities. Building solid coalitions beyond the Muslim 'silos' seems to be an essential part of this, not least to avoid repeating work which others may have been paving the way for long before.

Inequality and the 'Muslim' label

How useful is the 'Muslim' label? During policy conversations around Muslims in prisons, I often question to what extent the label 'Muslim' is even helpful when it appears that class and race are far more relevant explanatory variables. Although some issues faced by Muslims in British prisons are religion specific, it seems the risks associated with locating the root of the problems which led to incarceration within 'Muslimness' simply reinforces the enduring perception of Muslims as a problem community. This in turn shifts the focus of policy solutions away from structural solutions towards 'cultural' and 'religious' ones. With that said, sometimes Muslim is the right label, particularly when we discuss Islamophobia.

As the government recently announced its decision to reject a working definition of Islamophobia on the grounds that it could impede legitimate criticism of the religion, it has become clear that there is serious resistance to recognising structural issues of discrimination in the UK. It took the February 1999 Macpherson report to recognise institutional racism within the police force and to provide a working definition of the term. Macpherson defined institutional racism as "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin", as "processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people". But speaking to the Guardian 20 years on from the Macpherson report, Stephen Lawrence's mother, Doreen, said progress reforming institutions was "stagnant". Institutional racism is one part of the puzzle when grappling with the inequalities faced by British Muslims and key to tackling it is the recognition that questions of struggles for racial inequality cannot be separated from the wider struggle against Islamophobia.

For years, Muslims and academics working on Muslim issues have listed the manifold ways in which Muslims experience not only 'anti-Muslim prejudice' of the hate crime variety, but also institutional Islamophobia, a clear and persistent 'Muslim'

penalty evident from housing to education, employment to dating. Part of this puzzle is the institutional racism which Doreen Lawrence and other campaigners have been flagging for decades – but it contains an additional element, which marks the specificity of Islamophobia, as a form of racism, namely a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.

And more than 20 years since the Runnymede Trust published its seminal report, 'Islamophobia: a challenge for us all', it is on the rise. I believe tackling Islamophobia is going to require outreach efforts which have so far been largely limited to interfaith partnerships. While interfaith work has its importance, it is vital to reach out and build coalitions with non-faith groups from political parties, to other minority communities and human rights groups.

In France, the various anti-racism organisations (Anti-Roma, antisemitism, anti-racism, etc) form a united front in challenging the variations in the manifestation of racism, their unity sends a strong message that regardless of political posturing on issues such as the definition of Islamophobia, those experts and activists from different communities recognise the shared nature of the struggle and stand united in opposing it. Such a united front also ensures that any attempts to discount the nature of Islamophobia as indeed a form of racism cannot be used to isolate one community. It also means that the question of definitions would no longer be one pitting the government against the Muslim community's definition (although the All Party Parliamentary Group is far wider than this), it would be the government failing to recognise a definition shared across a range of anti-racist organisations. Since the validity of a term is partly built on consensus, this would leave the government with the unfavourable option of ignoring anti-racism campaigners from across the different types of racism, which clearly reflects more poorly on their equality record.

Creating a wider understanding of issues facing Muslims and building empathy within a wider culture of suspicion and hostility is also going to require demystifying Islam itself. Research by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding in

America found that knowing something about Islam is an even stronger predictor of lower Islamophobia than is knowing a Muslim personally. And yet, positive campaigns around the values of Islam, their relevance for contemporary society and their potential benefit for others are few and far between.

Neglecting the arts

On this issue of building awareness around Islam and Islamic values, the arts are a massively underestimated and underfunded resource. Some of the most powerful and culture changing moments in the current anti-racism struggle in America have been created by film and music. For this, independent film-makers and artists, writers, singers and dancers needed to be supported through community funding which is currently virtually absent. Film in particular has the power to change hearts and minds in a way which is virtually unparalleled – stories of underdogs or narratives which challenge the status quo are far more readily heard and understood through this medium than any single other form of communication. Studies show that the passive state in which we consume film and music make us far more receptive to their messaging than other mediums of communication. Meaningful efforts to shift attitudes towards Islam and Muslims ignore the power of the media and the arts at our peril – it is in these realms that young Muslims can find their voice, build coalitions with non-Muslim peers and with sufficient funding, produce art on their own terms. It is also through a coalition of business (funding) and the arts (culture) that Muslims can build a power base which makes them a community of producers, whose ideas and contributions are perceived as desirable and needed, versus a community of 'need' (requiring support, charity, pity).

The African –American community's ability to produce films such as "Get out" (Jordan Peele) or series such as "Black-ish" (Kenya Barris) has dramatically shifted the conversations around race issues in America. Today, black cultural pioneers are sought after and courted for their ingenuity and creativity. I have no doubt British Muslims can achieve the same but this will require the allocation of funds towards art based projects,

ideally through the creation of patronage systems and an 'Academy for Muslim Arts', the aim of which would be specifically to foster British Muslim artistic talent. Example of such success, such as actor Riz Ahmed, and his ability to impose conversations around representation and Islamophobia are indicative of the potential of this avenue.

While British Muslims face a wide range of challenges, one of the greatest is not internalising the essentialising gaze cast upon the community and rejecting efforts to reduce Muslims to a monolithic identity. The current narrative which many Muslims replicate is of a poor and embattled community which needs 'help' and sympathy – instead, we need to revamp how we see ourselves and how others perceive us – we need to support, financially and otherwise, those cultural producers forging a new, empowered and confident sense of self – one which recognises the wealth of creativity being produced by the current and next generation. The future culture wars are not being fought in the papers or in books – they are being fought and won on Instagram and social media more broadly, and in the arts, speaking to a millennial generation which cares far more about celebrities than statistics. Shifting the narrative is also going to require the community growing in acceptance of its breadth – the faulty Muslims, the mentally ill Muslims, the 'imperfect' range of identities which manifest under this umbrella but whose diversity only enriches the narrow pictures in which Muslims are currently being cast.

Britain needs to start telling a different story of itself, one in which its 'minorities' are not an afterthought or a footnote. But Muslims can be a critical part of this shifting conversation, starting by telling our own stories, on our own terms – and using the light of the arts to shine on the real beauty within.

• Dr Myriam Francois

is a journalist, broadcaster and writer. Her documentaries have appeared on Channel 4 and BBC among others and her writing has featured widely in the British press, including the Guardian, the New Statesman, the Telegraph, CNN online and Middle East Eye, among others. In 2019, Myriam set up the website "weneedtotalkaboutwhiteness.com" to open up conversations in the UK around white racial identity and its impact.



Rohingya Appeal

The Rohingya are fleeing violence and persecution, and desperately need your support. IHRC Trust is raising funds to help MAPIM deliver critical aid to Rohingya refugees who have fled to Bangladesh and Malaysia.

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Don't mention the war: Muslim Amnesia and the Need for Collective Memory

Reflexively showcasing Muslim contributions to Westernised society will not in and of itself address the Islamophobia-motivated erasure and misrepresentation of Muslims from national narratives. That requires a wider, more forceful recognition and restatement of the role played by colonialism in subalternising racialised minorities, argues **Arzu Merali**.

“**A**rmed Forces Day was one strand of a package of proposals put together to re-militarise British society in a bid to stave off the popular backlash from failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, lest anti-war sentiment hinder future conflicts.

“It is by now well established by serious scholars of the topic that this was done in a bid to place beyond critique the violent, extractive and discredited foreign policy doctrine to which all UK political parties, British business, sections of our media and the country's military elite were (and for the most part still are) fully committed. The hope was that even mild criticism would be conflated with an unpatriotic lack of support for individual soldiers.”

*Joe Glenton, former veteran,
'Armed Forces Day is a propaganda
tool for arms firms and the military
– and the public are footing the bill'*

We live in a moment of what seems to be permanent war. The war on terror stretches towards the two-decade mark and all political currents vis a vis Muslims seem swept up in it, as if we had no global relevance as a civilization before or since, as if we as individuals have no historical agency. We exist in the space between how we are presented and perceived by everyone except us and an idea of latent Muslimness – some memory of a time gone when the Prophet (pbuh) his companions and family lived, and when Muslims lived and ruled according to their own terms. Permanent war is the latest in a century or perhaps more process of ahistoricising Muslims and indeed all non-Western Europeanised ‘others’ politically, socially, philosophically and so on.

It is one of the deepest ironies of the current Muslim state that a community which evolves its theology, law and social understanding of the revelation of Allah (swt) from the Sunnah of the Prophet Muham-

mad (pbuh), and informed further by his Seerah, cannot understand the project of ahistoricisation it is enmeshed in. We live in times of real and bloody wars, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen to name but a few, yet in Westernised settings our civil society has projected itself in these twenty years as a response to centuries old tropes (still being) used to demonise and exclude us – Muslims as violent, Islam as spread by the sword. Initially we portrayed ourselves as peaceful and pacifistic in our opposition to the War on Terror, latterly loyal to the military cause of whichever Europeanised state in we reside¹. Just look at the rise in Muslim loyalty to the military in the UK in recent years, both as recruits and as blind supporters.

Just as the wider social narratives – as Glenton above has outlined – have shifted from anti-war to war as a normalised part of national identity, Muslims – or at least significant parts of its institutions have tried to socialise to these ideas whilst seemingly oblivious to the *volte face* in their positions or the engineering of those social and political currents by the government. We also fail to understand ourselves and the times we live in as ongoing history – a history in which we can be agents not subjects if we so choose.

As Muslims we come from varying traditions that agonise over how to validate and interpret both the sayings of the Prophet and the example he set from his own (hi)story, or even to re-evaluate how to come to these conclusions (even controversially so). Yet we accept without realising it that the moment we currently live in is the ultimate and now only viable – and moral – form of social and historical organisation. We internalise that everything to do with our own histories – whether that is to do with our multiple heritages, or our religious beliefs – is old, outdated and in need of capitulation to this ahistorical norm. Even as Francis Fukuyama revises his claim that the liberal

national state is the End of History, we fall over ourselves to make his previous thesis real. We are more Fukuyama than Fukuyama.

We seem adrift from this change in narrative of the liberal nation state. And this loss of anchor is important.

Understanding Islamic Iberia: Interfaith or pluriversalism?

There is a recent interest in the Muslim history of Europe, with a main focus on Andalusia. It is hailed as a period of inter-faith co-existence and tolerance (which in large part it was) – often crudely offset against the idea of Muslims as historically violent marauders. A ‘proof’ that we are not all bad (at least in some earlier incarnation). It is a crude point to make, but just as crudely it can be argued that Muslims at that time weren't just making history, we were doing history – setting up libraries and institutions of knowledge production, reading, writing and learning.

Cordoba in the year 1000 CE had running water and street lighting for its perhaps one million residents. Meanwhile the sites of today's ‘imperium’ were huts along the Thames and Seine in their tens of thousands. How is it then that we do not understand ourselves and the political and social milieus we find ourselves in? We neither see ourselves as transnational members of the ummah or fully autonomous citizens of the nation state? We are simply the subjects of whatever political project we live in, trying to sheer ourselves of those vestiges of ‘history’ that mark our deen as ‘other’ ‘alien’ and ‘incompatible’ with the political projects we find ourselves in. Day in day out there are fights and controversies about Muslim adherence to values deemed outdated, or worse still inimical to the project of modernity dressed not in its actual highly politicised and prejudiced guise, but presented as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, as if has always been thus, awaiting realisation in this very moment – with Muslims and all other others to be brought by force if necessary to kneel at its altar. Just look at the demonisation of parents protesting the No Strangers project in Birmingham, UK.

Whether it is rejecting or feeling embarrassed about parents protesting sex education changes, or celebrating British militarism, these attempts to ‘humanise’ or ‘normalise’ Muslims, to make them understood as ‘just the same’ as their co-citizens is one of the strands of counter-narrative work to Islamophobia discussed by the Counter-

Narratives to Islamophobia project in which IHRC was a partner in 2017 – 2018 with the University of Leeds and five other European Universities.²

In its work on the UK, it became clear from those interviewed and that the work overviews that sought to tackle Islamophobia, the need to have inclusive histories and national stories is crucial, but so too is acknowledging Islamophobia as a form of violence that is relational to both recent and colonial history and current events in various Westernised settings that refer to each other in order to perpetuate each other. We cannot discuss e.g. 'Islamic Spain' in any incarnation especially that of inter-faith harmony without recognising that it is the nation state and the ideology that underpins it – of a monoculture without diversity – that destroyed that 'inter-faith' harmony and society in a genocidal manner.

As argued by scholars such as Ramon Grosfoguel, this understanding can extend to all Westernised settings. In order to tackle the abject disempowerment we face, we cannot aspire to a future of liberation without acknowledging the various pasts that inform us as (i) beings of conscience i.e. as Muslims in the active and participatory sense, (ii) subalterns – the 'others' – in a system that privileges a narrow idea of human being, to which we can only fail to aspire to, like so many other racialized others; and (iii) agents for change in both a vision of an Islamic messianic end of history or any number of utopias, Islamic or otherwise, or any combination thereof.

We need to understand Islamophobia as a form of violence against Muslims as others, but in an ongoing sense as a struggle against Islam as (an) idea(s) and experience of political and social organisation and mobilisation and more importantly liberation.

And liberation is a shared goal. We can't be afraid to explain what we want, question what is possible and deny what has been done to us in its name.

Protesting the colonial

"The English invaded more than half the world. Of the countries that they ruled, how many languages do the English speak?... People from third world countries contributed to making Britain, Great Britain, which up to this day they are in denial about..."

Parveen Sadiq, community elder
(translated from Urdu)

The erstwhile UK Prime Minister David Cameron, in 2016, criticised Muslim women who did not speak English, announcing plans to test the English skills of spouses allowed to come to settle in the UK, with the possibility that they may be deported if their skills were not up to an acceptable level. Assed Baig, for Channel 4 News, produced a piece that showed Parveen Sadiq make this blunt and contextual complaint – not in

English. The piece serves two purposes for this discussion. Firstly as a way of giving voice to the people deemed outside the pale by the narrative that Muslims are segregationist; it also gave space to the autonomous voices of grassroots Muslims, whose more incisive critique has hitherto found little expression in the national conversational space. Secondly it provides badly needed historical and historiographical context. Put simply, it reminds us all of the history of Muslims and racialised others in British history, in particularly in the context of British colonialism. As Parveen Sadiq highlights, although deeply entwined in the longue durée of colonial history, the problematization of Islam and Muslims in the UK context largely represents itself as ahistorical and transnational. There is no overt conversation about the presence of Muslims or other racialized communities in the UK.

We need to understand Islamophobia as a form of violence against Muslims as others, but in an ongoing sense as a struggle against Islam as (an) idea(s) and experience of political and social organisation and mobilisation and more importantly liberation.

This is not simply an issue of rehashing the well worn and correct analysis of the late A. Sivanandan, "Colonialism and immigration are part of the same continuum – we are here because you were there." As the award-winning website, Our Migration Story: The Making of Britain (2017), outlines, migration to the British Isles is constitutive of the identity of the 'nation' – rather than the current myth that the nation is of one people, language and religion, currently fending off the erosion of this identity from cultural 'invaders'. Using

"the words and research of over 60 historians based in universities and historical institutions – including the National Archives, the Imperial War Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Royal Historical Society – this website presents the often-untold stories of the generations of migrants who came to and shaped the British Isles."

Counterintuitively, this project goes back not a century, or even two, but two thousand years to document wave after wave of migration that makes up the society we live in, and also then unpacks, or perhaps more literally,

unravels the myths of a homogeneous ethnic and cultural majority that existed from time immemorial. It rehistoricizes the space which we have become accustomed to assuming has no history – or at least no history within which we can have meaning as anything other than other.

As academic and broadcaster Myriam François has stated there is a need for the reinventing of the story of the nation with an understanding of this history: "nations need what you might call national myths as part of social cohesion, that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are inclusive and help to feel that we are united by a common thread."

She elaborates, "We need alternative national conversations, alternative national myths which look back at the history of the UK, not in an exclusivist, I would say in many cases racist way, but in one which acknowledges the history of the multiple peoples who now inhabit this island and acknowledges the multiple ways in which the UK historically was intertwined with other cultures and civilisations and how our history is now an emerged one..."

There is doubtless a push by UK civil society to make the 'Muslim presence' known. Eager to displace the idea of Muslims as (relatively) recent immigrants, there is now a focus on the role of Muslims in the two world wars of the 20th century. Multiple projects have highlighted the numbers of colonial troops, navy men and even Muslim spies as examples of (a) Muslim historical presence, integration, and loyalty. The Royal British Legion has been part of this process too. These have in and of themselves merit in identifying and attempting to centre the idea of Muslims as part of the military and recent history of the UK. This is a history ignored to the point that its exclusion from curricula about the war amounts to erasure. You will not find it in war time drama from Colditz to Dunkirk. At a time when the iconography of the two world wars is becoming ever more intrinsic to the idea of the nation in the UK, what could be wrong with this?

Militarisation and mythology

"In both Iraq and Afghanistan, once the reasons for going to war were found to be false, or unattainable or just forgotten, those with a vested interest in continuing the wars resorted to one of the oldest tricks in the book. They cultivated the myth of the soldier as hero."

They told you that you might not understand why the war continued but that you should support the soldiers. They told you that to stop the pointless slaughter would be sacrilege to those heroes that had already died," said Ben Griffin, Veterans for Peace, at an Oxford Union debate, "We will not fight for Queen or country", 2013

The myth of the soldier as hero is not new, but as Griffin states earlier in his speech, this is a narrative of jingoism and a patriotism that is geared towards starting

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and perpetuating wars, for war's sake (and the vested interests of those ordering those wars) only.

An attempt solely to integrate Muslims into this discourse is to integrate Muslims into the mythology that serves great injustice. Even if this history – and it is an actual history of participation, as British / Westernised subjects in British / Western / Imperial / Colonial projects – were to succeed, if we could get the state, its institutions and the bulk of British society to accept us as part of this, what would this achieve? What would it mean? That Muslims can be part of a national war machine, regardless of whether it was right or wrong? That any critique of current wars or colonial pasts has no place in the current political and civil conversations? This is the silencing of political and moral debate, not just the silencing of Muslims. There is or at least used to be a very different national narrative that delineated social responses to the two world wars in the UK. The first was deemed a catastrophic loss of life at the hands of war-mongering elites in Europe, who saw nothing wrong in sacrificing millions of European men for nothing more than continental and transcontinental land grabs. The Second World War was seen a principled fight against fascism. The last ten to fifteen years has seen these narratives morph into one of a 'moral cause' in the first war and an example nationalistic heroism for the second. There needs to be more than simply a push to include Muslims in those narratives. Above all, understanding that narratives of history and narratives of nation morph and change, and can be manipulated in the service of injustice is essential. Finding ways to navigate 'history' always, is key. It's something that Muslims, with their reliance on historical traditions of narration should perhaps be more attuned to, except it doesn't seem so.

Who are the humans?

"Europe wants immigrant labour but not the immigrant, the profit from the one, not the cost of the other – except that the immigrants now are mostly from eastern Europe and what used to be the numbers theory – the fewer the immigrants, the more easily can they be 'digested' – the phrase belongs to the original director of the Institute of Race Relations – is today the managed migration thesis of the government. Except, too, that the refugees and asylum seekers, thrown up on Europe's shores, stem from the uprooting and displacement of whole populations caused by globalisation, and the imperial wars and regime change that follow in its wake."

A. Sivanandan

What legally defines a 'British national' is essentially at the whim of a state governed in its own continuing colonial interests. There is no way around this. We are British or not, get a visa or not, get demonised, deported and then receive an apology or get demonised more not on our own merits or the injustice of our oppression but by a few individuals – primarily the UK Home Secretary – and the political culture fomented around her/ him. This bucks the expectation of many that the British state is essentially the 'just state' that Muslim civil society leadership in particular aspires to and seeks to persuade of Muslim humanity and thus deserving of inclusion within the story of the nation. As poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan

Finding ways to navigate 'history' always, is key. It's something that Muslims, with their reliance on historical traditions of narration should perhaps be more attuned to, except it doesn't seem so.

explains: 'If you need me to prove my humanity / I'm not the one who's not human.'

Sociologist of religion Sariya Cheruvallil Contractor has highlighted that the types of conversation between Muslims and the institutions of state need to be reset while others look to establishing a clear and honest narrative within political, academic and media discourse about the causality of the 'problems' ascribed to issues of Islam and 'Muslimness' that is fair, unbiased and reflects a wider understanding of structural and geopolitical factors rather than relying on Islamophobic narratives to support contentious but ultimately devastating ideas and policies. Others seek to expound a clearer understanding of how racism, in particular anti-Muslim racism is a form of organisation that as Ramon Grosfoguel argues, underpins various hierarchies of inequality in the current national and world order.

Understanding and Experiencing Islamophobia in the militarised state

"I feel like people are more open to talking about it now because everyone is talking about it or seeing it in Trump or this caricature. People are probably more comfortable now but it's still deeply uncomfortable in challenging it in everyday life. So, social media and I guess

challenging Trump is fine and talking in a very abstract way about how Islamophobia is really bad, that seems to be okay, but on the other side I still find it very difficult to have conversations with people who think that they know everything, who think that they understand the way that Islamophobia operates in society but still get it through to them that actually it's multi-layered and it's still very prevalent even though people are so aware of it."

Samayya Afzal, activist and researcher

Even the idea of Islamophobia has been shorn of its political and historical context. How that applies to militarism and militarisation in the UK and other Western contexts will be discussed further, but it is worth noting the findings of the CIK project on the issue of understanding history – in particular the *longue durée* of colonial entanglement and its impact on Muslims in the current moment, alongside how structural racism works. Without this attempts to humanise Muslims or include them in the existing national narrative – whether by filling in bits of missing history or condemning those things deemed un-British (insert the adjective of your Westernised nation state name here) you will simply reinforce the cycle of exclusion, risking what journalist Nesrine Malik identified as reinforcing connections with and thus validating narratives of Islamophobia.

Understanding the longer historical context of Islamophobia and racism / racialization of the other is essential to understanding the multiple situations of Muslims and other oppressed peoples worldwide. Whether you start that process at the Crusades or 1492, or even later, we cannot get out of the bind we are in without understanding where it came from.

The current situation of the UK as an increasingly militarised state has been documented elsewhere, as has the impact of increasing militarism of national discourse. It is worth noting that both have crept up on all, not just Muslims, unawares. Nevertheless, where critical civil society has taken note, Muslim civil society has been largely silent, remaining oblivious or proactively cheerleading the process. As a summary of the evidence of both militarisation and the impact of militarism, think of the increased presence on the streets of soldiers, deployed in peace-time but also increasingly at times of crisis (floods, possible Brexit scenarios) in ways that are now unquestionable. The presence of the armed forces on ceremonial and royal occasions was always the norm so the newer presence of military on the streets, e.g. the huge presence at the London Olympics of 2012 of troops, the mooring of a warship for the event and the placing of missiles atop nearby roofs, and subsequently the deployment of soldiers at other events e.g. Wimbledon has largely gone unnoticed.

In terms of the impact of militarism – it is twofold – it perpetuates injustice involving polarised communities, demonised minorities and authoritarian political space at 'home, whilst justifying military interventions and full-blown wars abroad. According to Sam Walton in his 2014 report for Quaker Witness for Peace, "A huge cross-party government programme dedicated to ensuring that the military are popular in society has implications other than the popularity of the armed forces and ease of military recruitment." He and others identify stifling criticism of war; glossing over negative aspects of the military; the wrong motivations for youth work; the danger of becoming an overly militarised society and failure to support members of the armed forces properly. The impact on society then and the concomitant need for the dehumanisation of Muslims in order to pursue this agenda is clear. The worse Muslims and Islam are deemed to be, the more legitimacy is conferred on any war against them elsewhere, which justifies suppression at home and so on and so on.

As I wrote in 2002, before the UK and its allies were embroiled in major wars around the world, the 'here and the there' are intimately connected. If we are going to discuss political violence, as academic Hilary Aked stated back then, "If you are going to talk about that you need to talk about foreign policy, state violence as well you need to also talk about political violence in the far right as well."

It is worth noting that far right groups centre much of their iconography on the armed forces, and even link their events to military parades. In recent months it has been revealed that even the government fears the rise of far right extremism within the armed forces and has released a guide for senior officers to spot signs in members.

Muslims, the military and national myths

The rise of projects that seek to make known the Muslim contribution to wars does have a restorative effect. It is a history that has been erased. Based on popular culture and school text books, you would have

thought that there were few people of colour involved e.g. in the Second World War, except perhaps the segregated African American GIs brought over with US forces. The 2006 movie 'Indigenes' that follows Algerian soldiers who enlisted and fought for France, goes some way to unmasking this, but the details are even more startling than this cinematic depiction of both loyalty and aspiration on the part of colonial soldiers. The original French army, defeated at the outset of the Second World War, contained huge numbers of colonial soldiers, many of whom, like the 17,000 black mainly West Senegalese soldiers, were killed and often summarily executed by the Nazis. The freeing of Algeria from enemy control saw the entry of Algerian fighters into De Gaulle's army, swelling its ranks from 50,000 to half a million. Despite the crucial role played by these troops in the allied victory, they were both literally expunged from the historical record and mistreated in their aspirations, whether nationalist or assimilationist, post the war. The BBC, in 2009, revealed secret documents from the war records of the Allies that saw France, the USA and the UK conspire to ensure that no black troops were shown to be involved in the liberation of Paris, and that it was an (almost) all white affair. Photos of allied troops marching into Paris were shot post event with all white units pictured only. Indeed, so few were the white troops that not enough could be mustered to fill the photos, and 'lighter skinned' soldiers from North Africa were added to the shots to pass as white.

Whilst this contribution as well as those of the many Muslims and other peoples of colour must of course be addressed and integrated into historical narratives, so too must a critical evaluation of those wars. The Toledo Society's podcast 1400 OMG! Is an example of making recent 'European' history 'relevant' to Muslims. It claims to be neither prescriptive nor authoritative. That is more than a start to the process of reclaiming narratives.

The podcast looks at these events through the eyes of Muslims worldwide asking about the the impact or relevance of these wars. How were Muslim aspirations

instrumentalised by different parties post the First World War and betrayed in the inter-war and post-Second World War moments? How did the fall of the Uthmaniyah Khilafa – contribute to the New or Continuing World Order?

This type of critique exists in many spaces but increasingly is being marginalised even from Muslim spaces. We need as a first step to be able to (once again) talk about, question and demand redress for e.g. the violent suppression of the Algerian claims for independence in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War that culminated in the genocidal war waged by France against the liberation movement which eventually saw an independent Algeria emerge. Simply adding the forcibly forgotten contribution of Muslims to the French war effort, cannot square the 'contradiction' of a supposed fight against fascism which itself morphs into the most extreme forms of fascistic violence. We need to not only call this out but demand another world imagined outside this vicious cycle.

We have a chance still to revisit history, its textbooks at school, to reflect critically in civil society. This should be the 'national' process, but failing that, as Miriam François states, we : "rethink the stories we tell our children about who we 'are' and we need to acknowledge the historical wrongs that have been done in order to recognise the historical inequalities that have fed into some of the current inequalities..." Until then we will be simply perpetuating our own oppression by way of wars and militarism and their accompanying mythologies.

• Arzu Merali

is an author and broadcaster. She is Head of Research at the Islamic Human Rights Commission.

¹ There is, of course, another essay and more to be written about the reversal of these principles during the Arab Spring according to cynical, arguably tribal like identities. But that is for another day.

² Comments quoted from Myriam Francois, Samayya Afzal, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Hilary Aked come from this project.



Nigeria Appeal

Currently there are thousands of children, women and men suffering as the result of the violence of the Nigerian police and army. Members of the Islamic Movement have been routinely targeted, with over 1500 killed in the last three years alone. They have left behind dependents who are often destitute and shunned. Families are left without enough income for basic necessities like food and clothing, children loose out on education.

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Palestinian online advocacy countering Israeli propaganda

The rise of the internet has spawned a new generation and new forms of resistance to Israeli occupation. **Yousef Helou** looks at the growing role social media is playing in the fight against Israeli occupation.

Palestinian history has been subjected to distortion by Israel and its supporters since the days of the Nakba in 1948 — from the old notion that Palestine was a land without a people to today's propaganda use of the term "self-defence" to justify an illegal military occupation's killing of civilians.

Despite being colonised for seven decades, Palestinians say their narrative is not given equal space in Western media, which prefers to cite officials from the state of Israel.

The seven-decade Palestinian-Israeli conflict has taken a heavy toll on the Palestinian side. Everything has been politicised. Politics has become deep-rooted in the fabric of society. Social media platforms are used for socialising and for expressing political views, sharing statements, posting messages and breaking news in Arabic and English.

Applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, Whatsapp and Telegram enable Palestinians to break their geographical isolation and disseminate breaking news, information, photos and videos of events in a timely manner in an uncensored way not subject to Western editorial policy or certain guidelines. Palestinian citizen journalists and their online activism provide live commentary on international media outlets.

Thanks to the digital revolution and social media platforms, Palestinians are turning to a method with which they can try to redress the imbalance in traditional media reporting.

When media outlets quote official statements from the Israeli military, for example, Palestinians challenge the Israeli narrative by sharing photos, videos and witness statements of what took place.

Sometimes the online battles between pro-Palestinians and supporters of Israel are more ideological. Pro-Palestinian voices seek to counter Israel's dehumanisation of Palestinians and show that they are simply yearning for freedom.

Palestinian online campaigns now aim to counter Israeli narratives and challenge Israeli trolls who spread inaccurate information and distorted facts. Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp are the main three tools in the hands of Palestinians.

The past few years have been a turning point in the struggle with the usage of these tools giving rise to a new phenomenon.

First: Facebook

The most recent online campaign is called "Ihbid" ("Strike" in Arabic). Activists calling themselves the Electronic Army of Habed comment on Facebook and Twitter posts made by public pro-Israeli social media accounts.

They use the hashtag #Ihbid194, in reference to UN Resolution 194, which called for the right of return for Palestinian refugees to their homes in what is now Israel. The other significance of the number "194" is the bid of the Palestinian Authority to make Palestine the 194th member of the United Nations.

Ameen A'aded, one of the co-founders of Ihbid, said the group's Facebook page has attracted some 26,000 followers and the main activity of the campaign is to dispel misinformation posted on pro-Israeli accounts.

"On May 15, we targeted the pages of 15 Israeli embassies around the world and embassies of countries that recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital," said A'aded.

Another co-founder is Hassan al-Dawood, who said Ihbid volunteers are in the hundreds.

"Members of this electronic army are highly educated and many of them live outside [the Palestinian territories]. They are frustrated about Western media's biased coverage in favour of Israel," Dawood said.

The volunteers don't always fight back with information. They have bombarded social media posts with photos of the Palestinian flag and other symbolic gestures.

"My account was disabled for three days

by Facebook," said Iman Mohammad. He suspects he was being reported to the social media giant by Israeli critics. "I was threatened five times by Israelis for my online activism and for being a member of this electronic army."

Some volunteers said they went after posts by US President Donald Trump for his role in relocating the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

"Our posts are polite. We do not use abusive language. We engage in discussions and support that with information, pictures, videos and links to articles. We were surprised to see Jews who are anti-Zionists support us in these online discussions," said Ahmed Jouda, the head of the volunteer group.

Second: Twitter

The Palestinian leadership severed ties with Washington after Trump's December 2017 announcement to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Since then, Twitter has been the main communication channel between US and Israeli officials from one side and Palestinian officials on the other.

At the moment Twitter is the only means of communication between rival politicians from Israel/US and Palestine over the frozen Middle East peace process.

American, Israeli and Palestinian officials appear to be following Trump's lead on how to behave on Twitter: instead of being involved in secret peace talks behind closed doors, they are now engaged in open public relations warfare.

The chances that US President Donald Trump will be able to broker a peace deal between the Palestinians and Israelis appear dimmer by the day. Trump, however, does seem to be having another kind of influence on all the parties involved: Twitter spats.

Examples of this digital diplomatic offensive are hard to miss.

In February, Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian Authority's chief peace negotiator, tweeted: "The US so-called peace team not only added to the separation of Gaza from the West Bank but has destroyed any chance of peace between Palestinians and Israelis."

Jason Greenblatt, Trump's Middle East envoy, responded by tweeting: "Saeb: I saw your many tweets today. Your

fears/emotions show — that won't help Palestinians. I don't agree w/ your assertions & you have offered no realistic solutions. Time to get serious & use your intellect. Palestinians deserve it. My door is open — don't waste more time."

Greenblatt also took aim at Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, tweeting in April: *"Basically, you're saying: Give us the deal we demand or no deal. That's consistent with Palestinian prior attempts. How has that worked out for Palestinians? Do you want to lead your people to opportunity & prosperity or just keep saying the same tired lines over & over again?"*

conference because they accuse the United States of seeking to impose its policies, which the Palestinians say favour Israel.

"So #JaredKushner disclosed to Al-Quds newspaper that Jordan, Egypt & Morocco will be attending the Bahrain 'workshop' & that their official declaration will be forthcoming! Strange spokesman indeed," she tweeted on June 11.

disclosed to Al-Quds newspaper that Jordan, Egypt & Morocco will be attending the Bahrain "workshop," & that their official declaration will be forthcoming!

Strange spokesperson indeed. Hanan Ashrawi (@DrHananAshrawi)

was unheard of before Trump's presidency.

Twitter diplomacy has become the only means of communication. It's not known for how long it's going to last but as long as American and Israeli officials turn their backs on any meaningful negotiation for peace, war in the Twittersphere will continue.

Third: Whatsapp

Whatsapp newsgroups have become, for many Palestinians, the favourite tool to keep up to date with the breaking news around the clock. The practice took root during Israel's 51-day onslaught on Gaza in the



Saeb: *I saw your many tweets today. Your fears/emotions show - that won't help Palestinians. I don't agree w/ your assertions & you have offered no realistic solutions. Time to get serious & use your intellect. Palestinians deserve it. My door is open - don't waste more time.* Jason D. Greenblatt (@jdgreenblatt45)

Shtayyeh replied: *"Any political initiative that does not call for ending Israeli occupation and establishing an independent and sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital on the borders of 1967 with settling the refugees cause is not acceptable to the Palestinians."*

Any Political initiative that does not call for ending Israeli occupation and establishing an independent and sovereign Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital on the borders of 1967 with settling the refugees cause is not acceptable to the Palestinians. Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh .

Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation Executive Committee, is one of the most active Palestinian officials on Twitter. This has exposed her to attacks from pro-Israel trolls. *"Once again: I have blocked & will continue to block Israeli propagandists to prevent them from gaining access to my account & using it to spread their distortions & lies. I will not expose my interlocutors & friends to their venom,"* she tweeted in April.

Ashrawi criticised the US-sponsored conference on the Palestinian economy, scheduled for late June in Bahrain. Palestinian officials are boycotting the

Other Palestinian officials active on Twitter include the ambassador to the United Kingdom Husam Zomlot, Palestinian president's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh, Hasan Al-Shikh, head of the general authority of civil affairs and member of the Fatah central committee, and former Gaza Health Minister Basem Naim, the only Hamas official tweeting in English.

Israeli officials have not stood idly by on Twitter. When they're not attacking the Palestinian side themselves, Israeli officials often express support for their American counterparts in online spats with Palestinians.

Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Eli Ben-Dahan was vocal in his support for Trump's decision to cut funding to the Palestinians and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. "Finally, the US President tells the Palestinians the truth. These Arabs have cheated the world for years. They took money from donor countries and instead of building a state, the leaders lined their own pockets," he tweeted last year.

"On the governmental and official level, I do not think Twitter or Facebook is conducive to helping the peace process because there can be great misinterpretation of what is said, however for activists there is a route to engaging with officials through Twitter, but it is politicians who can choose what to respond to them" Kamel Hawwash, British-Palestinian academic told The Arab Weekly

Such a high volume of Twitter spats among US, Israeli and Palestinian officials

summer of 2014.

Local media companies created newsgroups encouraging the public to join them to receive breaking news in the form of notifications, be it texts, videos, photos or links to news articles. This trend replaced the short one-by-one text messages and long, often boring e-mail messages containing the unfolding stories, news releases and invitations to events.

"WhatsApp has dramatically surpassed Facebook and Twitter in being the fastest most practical medium in disseminating the news. It has many features such as recording audio messages, live video chat and most importantly it's ad-free. It also can be used offline as long-term messages" said Khalid Safi, a social media expert.

Anyone from anywhere in the world can join WhatsApp newsgroups by asking the administrators to add their numbers. "With the busy life here, I do not have much time to surf news websites or watch TV, so the WhatsApp newsgroups provide me with what I need to know, without the hassle of reading long analytical pieces," said Murad, a Palestinian who lives in London.

Because Gazans have been experiencing many hours of power outages a day for 12 years, this means their connection to WI-FI routers are often disrupted. The alternative is to buy relatively expensive data bundles from local cellular companies. Ironically this service is only available on G2 telecommunication technology. The upgrade to the third generation is subject to Israeli approval because it has the final say in allocating radio frequencies.

Those who live outside Gaza enjoy this free service, making followers feel they are

on the ground experiencing the events when they forward notifications to each other.

WhatsApp groups are run on a voluntary basis. Those who have English-language followers translate the breaking news and share it on other social media platforms. Any member of the group from different geographical locations can share and send or add any piece of information related to unfolding events.

The journalists' and ordinary people need to receive news in summary format as it occurs, making WhatsApp groups the core of the transformation in alternative media.

The rise of the internet and the emergence of alternative media has enabled Palestinians to make their voices heard and present their narrative. The reliance on social media platforms has become a necessity considering what Palestinians say is Western media bias in favour of Israel's narrative.

To this end, a wave of Palestinian citizen journalists, armed with laptops and smartphones, have decided to take the lead. A debate is taking place about Facebook's integrity and its tight collaborations with Israel in censoring Palestinian content. Israeli officials said the collaboration aims to tackle "incitement" on the social media network.

Some Palestinians engage in a process of "cyber-democracy," criticising their own leaders, expressing their point of view, calling for reforms and asking for their rights. They take part in a democratic process in which young people participate, debate, discuss and send messages to their rulers.

Whether they are WhatsApp notifications or Facebook posts, or Tweets, these are effective means to connect Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and those in the diaspora. Israel's enforced physical territorial separation between the Palestinians of besieged Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and those living inside Israel — the green line areas — has been overcome thanks to social media.

When Palestinians were gearing up for the climax of the "Great March of Return" on May 15 this year to mark the Nakba, what Palestinians describe as the Catastrophe of 1948 when Israel was established at the expense, suffering and displacements of the indigenous Palestinians- Palestinian activists took to social media to advocate the aims of the march and coordinate events and demonstrations across Gaza.

As a journalist, Whatsapp news notifications spared me time watching the news and accessing news websites. I have become addicted to reading them and sharing them. It has become the umbilical cord that links me to my homeland.

Fourth: The power of the picture

Muthanna al-Najjar is a well-known local Palestinian photojournalist. His

Facebook account was closed down by Facebook many times without any explanation.

Al-Najjar filmed the famous short video interview with 29-year-old wheelchair-bound Palestinian Ibrahim Abu Thuraya who was killed by an Israeli sniper on December 16th, 2017. The video went viral after he shared it on his Facebook page. Soon after he posted the clip and shared it, he said that his account was targeted repeatedly by hackers.

Despite this, he has been overwhelmed with how widely his video has been shared across international news outlets, stressing that social media is a great tool. Without it, he knows his video would not have reached tens of thousands of Facebook users, and western audiences around the world.

"The phenomenon of citizen journalists has increased in recent years across Palestine, especially in Gaza which is often the target of air, sea and ground attacks. The reason for this is an awareness of the powerful role social media can play in drawing the attention of the international community to our plight, especially as there is training offered by media centres and educational institutions providing advice to users on the importance of being credible, using the correct terminology, posting accurate, genuine breaking news", Al-Najjar said.

New media platforms have a role to play in showing the world what is happening on the ground. Social media allows people to share news, disseminate photos and videos which reflect daily life under occupation - all you need is a smartphone with internet data. We must not underestimate the power of pictures and footage emerging from inside the occupied territories and from around the world. Forms of resistance have evolved in light of social media compared to 17 years ago, before the rise of the internet

Palestinians are winning the online battle, and Israel cannot prevent the spread of harrowing images of Israeli injustices against Palestinians, some of which have become iconic symbols of resilience and defiance.

Obstacles and Facebook's fight against Palestinian content

While Israel's ban on 3G technologies for the only two Palestinian telecommunications and mobile companies has caused problems, some Palestinian journalists and social media activists use Israeli Orange sim cards - a much faster network - in order to be able to live-stream, post and share content in real time.

Palestinian-British academic and author Ghada Karmi has said that "there is no question that social media has an important role, it is the best medium and primary source of information that people use, as Palestinians are often under the

influence of the Israeli narrative that is trying to suppress the Palestinian side of the story".

In recent years, Israeli authorities have been monitoring the Facebook accounts of Palestinians, arresting hundreds across the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as Palestinian citizens of Israel, accusing them of inciting violence.

While Palestinians consider their posts an essential expression of their frustration, Israeli authorities often class these posts, including those with songs, as a crime punishable under Israeli law. The authorities are imposing a form of digital crackdown, a practice which attacks freedom of expression.

During the three Israeli devastating wars on Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, Palestinian social media activists won the cyber war by countering the mainstream narrative of their besieged territory. Despite a suffocating physical and digital blockade imposed in 2007, they have reached vast numbers of people around the world.

Palestinian citizen journalists and activists say digital battles are effective. With technology, they can clarify the victim from the victimiser. They can defend their cause and combat attempts aimed at distorting the truth, especially considering the weakness of official Palestinian state-run media outlets when compared to the powerful and well-funded Israeli propaganda machines and media networks.

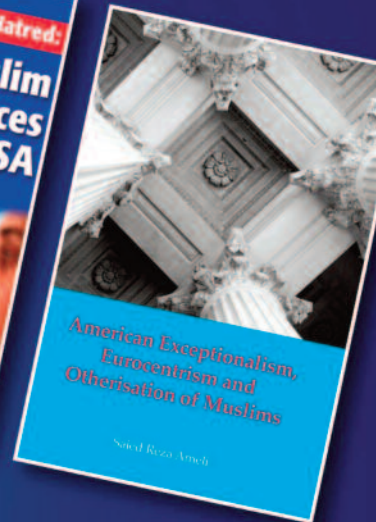
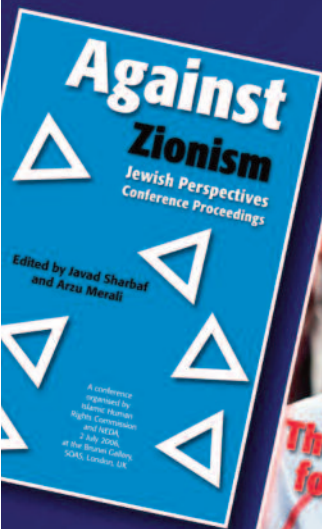
It is also important to state that the digital space is targeted from time to time by local authorities in Gaza and the West Bank; therefore online censorship and repression of Palestinians' free speech also exists. But the focus of this topic is on Palestinians' advocacy to their struggle and freedom and exposing the gross human rights violations, crimes and racist policies committed by Israel.

Social media platforms are powerful tools in the hands of Palestinians and have changed the way events are covered in Palestine. Thanks to this technology, Palestinians are making their voices heard, highlighting their suffering, frustrations and humiliation under years of Israeli military occupation in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and besieged Gaza.

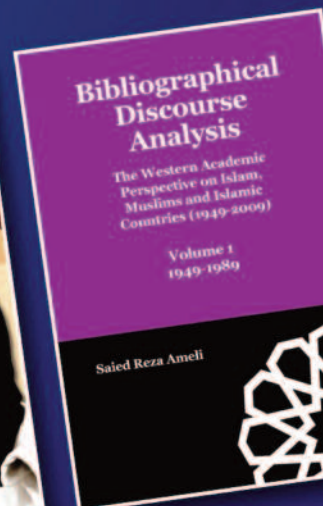
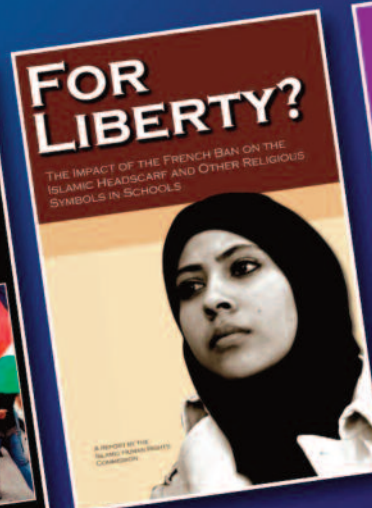
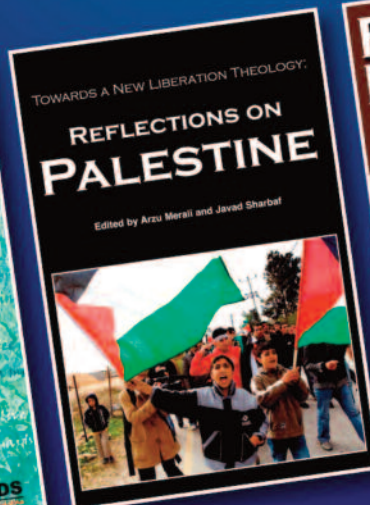
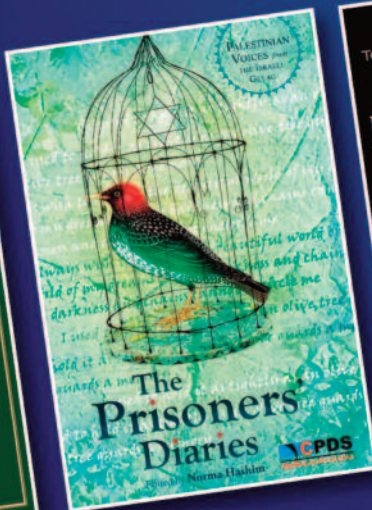
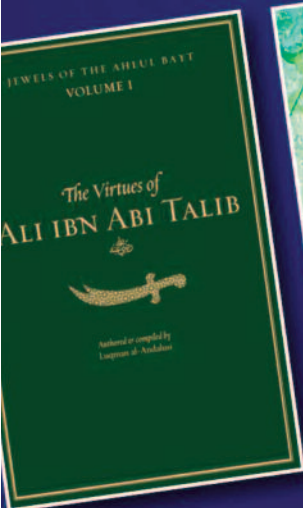
Advocating for Palestine and national rights has become a campaign taken up by those who have the ability to reach an international audience, whether they are officials or activists, or normal citizen journalists

•Yousef Alhelou

is a Palestinian journalist, political analyst based in London. He has been covering the Palestinian-Israeli affairs since 2005 and reported on the Israeli wars on Gaza in 2008 and 2012 as well as other major events. He has MA in International Relations, and currently a PhD candidate focusing on media and colonialism. He is a former Reuters journalist fellow, attended Oxford University and is a United Nations alumni.



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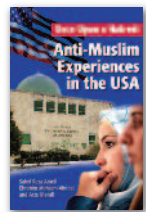
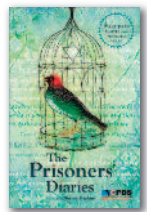


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