

The Long View

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The Nation and the New World: The Need for Better Political and Emotional Spaces



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tracing global
Hindutva

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JOÃO SILVA JORDÃO

The Underlying Myths
that Fuel Divisions in
Islam ...and how we
can Demolish them

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

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Cover photo: United Against Fascism
in India national demonstration in
London on 25th January 2020, (c)
South Asia Solidarity Group.

India's problem with fascism is well documented. While many point to the 1992 demolition of the historic Babri Masjid as a seminal point in the rise of Hindutva supremacist politics, the seeds of today's domination of the national political landscape were planted several decades before India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the national flag above the Lahori Gate of the Red Fort in Delhi in 1947. Far less has been written about the spread of these ideas - inspired by Mussolini and Hitler - in the Indian diaspora.

Our lead article by **Amrit Wilson**, an expert on the Indian diaspora, locates the rise of the Hindutva movement in the UK in the racialised political systems of British colonial systems in east Africa and the subsequent socio-economic disruptions occasioned after their independence. Hindutva found a captive constituency in once successful economic migrants turned political refugees who now found themselves at the bottom of the class system in the UK.

Instead of directing their ire towards their oppressors, many Hindus found solace in the message that whatever their predicament, they still ranked above Muslims in the pecking order. From very early on, the Rashtrita Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) directed its efforts at controlling Hindu social and political organisations which sought to perpetuate caste-ist and anti-Muslim ideas both in the UK and back in the homeland.

The mainstreaming of Hindutva has made it more difficult for opponents to argue that it is a hate ideology not deserving of any kind of public platform. Social media in particular, with its notoriously loose restrictions on hate content, has been a fertile campaigning grounds for this far-right. But the increasing influence in social media companies of Zionists, anti-Muslim bedfellows of Hindutva, has made the prospect of curtailing Hindutva even harder.

In our second article, the founder of the Muslim news website 5Pillars **Roshan Muhammed Salih**, shares his experiences of the discrimination he and other Muslim-led organisations face to simply share content via the main social media platforms. Whether it's over articles highlighting Israel's continuing oppression of Palestinians, or criticism of the western liberal drive to normalise homosexuality, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have all been very eager to censor them and sanction the originators, often with serious financial repercussions.

The social media behemoths have proved vulnerable to state influence even if it means compromising their much-lauded commitment to freedom of expression. Salih has seen his initial excitement at the space offered by digital media to challenge the anti-Muslim mainstream media give way to cynicism and a questioning of whether the US social media giants can provide Muslims a genuine platform to speak for themselves.

If the expansion of the internet has failed to break the dominance of corporations and states in controlling information content, it has

also proved to be a useful tool in propagating anti-Muslim views. Among the more preposterous anti-Muslim campaigns being waged by India's ruling BJP is the Corona-jihad, the idea that Muslims are deliberately infecting Hindus with the Covid-19 virus in pursuit of a religious war. As the pandemic rages across India, the ubiquity of social media has simply provided another opportunity to demonise Muslims in India, leading amongst other things to the scapegoating of the country's Tabligh-Jamaat movement.

As we put this issue to bed the deadly virus shows few signs of relaxing its grip on the planet. The microscopic parasite that has paralysed the world is forcing us to rethink many of the things we take for granted. Across history, as **Dr Sadek Hamid** reminds us in the third article, pandemics have often led to huge social and economic upheavals. But as old orthodoxies start to be questioned, he laments the response of Muslims which he claims has been largely confined to navel gazing about religious particulars. Instead of contributing to wider debates about the environment and public health many in the community's leadership have just been fixated on what it means for collective ritual worship.

For the author, this exceptionalising of the pandemic highlights the glaring "divide between those whose worldview clings to an imagined literalist past that denies the validity of knowledge outside scriptural sources and those that want to contextualise their religious heritage authentically to apply it to the challenges of the modern world." The pandemic has created a climate in which everything is once again up for debate and it behoves us as the heirs of a history-changing intellectual tradition to make more meaningful contributions to the bigger universal challenges facing us as human beings.

In spite of the deathly plague sweeping the world, the Sunni/Shia schism in Islam is one of those festering wounds that continues to play out in bloody violence. Few Muslim countries have been spared the conflicts that are often political in nature but are nevertheless expressed and justified in doctrinal terms. Our final article is a personal plea from a Muslim to end this crippling impasse. **João Silva Jordão** proposes that we break with the personality-oriented histories which characterise discussion of leaders after the first four of the Prophet's successors and "spiritualise" the concept of leadership to focus on the message that they each conveyed. For Jordão political legitimacy should not rest in the material fact of leading the community but in how faithfully the candidate conveyed the Prophetic message.

In focusing on message, Jordão offers a way of reimagining our world outside the ever constraining narratives that currently affect so much of the oppression experienced today. It is a sliver of much needed hope. We should heed it.

Faisal Bodi and Arzu Merali
Editors

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From Nagpur to Nairobi to Neasden – tracing global Hindutva

The disturbing rise of Hindutva supremacism in India has been mirrored by a corresponding growth of extremism in the Indian diaspora, particularly in the UK where the efforts of such groups are now feeding into public policy decisions, says **Amrit Wilson**.

In the six weeks or so before UK's 2019 general election, [WhatsApp messages started circulating urging UK's Hindus to vote Tory](#), claiming the Labour Party was anti-Indian for criticising Modi's policies in Kashmir. Soon after, in the Gujarati Hindu heartlands of Leicester, Harrow and Brent leaflets dropped through people's doors emphasising this message. Then, with just over two weeks left till election day, a spokesperson for the Hindu Council made a statement in [support of Rabbi Mirvis' claim that Labour Party is anti-Semitic, adding that it is 'anti-Hindu' too](#).

It was a very public flexing of muscles and declaration of position by Hindu far-right groups who, as their interventions indicated, are directly linked to the Modi regime. To understand them we must look at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Sangh Parivar, the family of Hindu supremacist organisations (including killer gangs, cow vigilantes, cultural and students' organisations and women's wings) to which the BJP belongs, and in particular at the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the authoritarian, militarist, cadre-based organisation which controls this sinister family.

The pivot around which the Hindu far-right revolves

People often hesitate to use the word fascist but it is the only accurate description of the RSS. Established in the 1920s, in Nagpur, in Maharashtra, in opposition to India's anti-colonial movement, it is the pivot around which the Hindu far-right groups in India, and also Britain, revolve. It provides ideological direction, as well as leaders. Narendra Modi, for example, is a life-long RSS member, as is his powerful Home Minister, Amit Shah, as are most BJP cabinet ministers and Chief Ministers of BJP ruled states. In Britain many [leaders of organisations allying with the BJP are members of the HSS, its overseas wing](#).

The RSS was modelled on Mussolini's Black Shirts and inspired by the Nazis. Its ideologue M.S. Golwalkar, for example, regarded Hitler's treatment of Jews as a [model of 'race pride' which India should](#)

[emulate](#) in its treatment of minorities. Its views on religion also do not originate in India's ancient history but are drawn from the 'scriptural' and elite-based interpretations of Hinduism encoded by British colonialism, and their deliberate policies of divide-and-rule in response to the first war of independence of 1857. It has also adopted the [strategic British rewriting of Indian history](#) as an age-old struggle between Hindus and Muslim 'invaders'. These distorted ideas of religion and history together with some basic tenets of European fascism have helped shape the Islamophobic and misogynistic notion of Hindutva which, though sometimes mistaken to be a religious philosophy, is in fact the political ideology of Hindu supremacy.

Like many other fascist organisations, the RSS wishes to extend its territory creating a right-wing Hindu Indian state or [Akhand Bharat](#) extending across South Asia and swallowing up Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Myanmar. It also aims to establish a world community of right-wing Hindus.

In 1947, it set up one of its earliest, and in hindsight, most fruitful overseas outposts in the heart of the Hindu immigrant community in Nairobi in Kenya. The [Nairobi branch launched Shakhnas](#) ('activity centres' where children and adults are taught the RSS version of Indian culture and history and provided physical training to be fighters for Hindutva) and organised [Satsanghs](#) (gathering where revered leaders of the RSS held discussions and religious songs were sung) and successfully drew in the Gujarati community, who were mainly from a rural background and eager like many immigrants to set in stone the deeply conservative traditions they had brought with them.

In 1966 an RSS office bearer who had emigrated to the UK received an order from M.S. Golwalkar himself telling him to set up a branch in London. Initially, as [HSS records tell us](#), the new branch struggled for manpower (it was run entirely by men) and its activities were comparatively low key. This changed when East African Asians started arriving in Britain in large numbers as a result of the Africanisation policies in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi. By

the [end of the 60s Shakhnas had sprung up](#) in cities like Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford and in Harrow and Brent in London where the refugees had settled.

East African Asian communities and their changing identities

The new communities had brought with them their view of the world and the intense racism against people of African origin, which came from their [intermediate position in the rigid racial hierarchy](#) of Britain's East African colonies (they had been located below white people but above, and looking down on, Africans).

However when they entered Britain they faced blatant racism. Their British passports were at first not considered sufficient for entry into the UK and some were rendered stateless. Stripped of their wealth and status, the men tried, often unsuccessfully, to get white collar work, while the women, who had rarely worked outside their homes and communities were forced to take up the lowest paid, most unpleasant jobs in small factories and sweatshops simply to make ends meet.

In the 70s, I was lucky enough to conduct a series of one to one interviews and conversations with women who had arrived comparatively recently from East Africa for my book ['Finding a Voice, Asian Women in Britain'](#). Women like Prabhaben (not her real name), for example, who was in her late thirties, and worked in harsh conditions in a laundry. She told me how she felt:

'I came to Britain from Nairobi in 1968. There [I had] such a wonderful life. The life of a boss. The days seemed to be longer, the air sweeter than it can ever be in England.... I used to be proud. We had servants. Here it is we who are the servants'. [In the laundry,] 'our women suffer, they are paid low salaries, they have to face the insults of the supervisors...all English women. They don't know English but it is more than that. It is that all your life you have been soft and this treatment stuns you... but one or two of us have begun to speak up'.

Prabhaben's words show that she was both bemoaning the loss of her class

privileges in East Africa, and angry at her exploitation as a low-paid worker in Britain. This mixture of emotions was common among the women who spoke to me. It gave rise to an intense anger and outrage which sparked and sustained the historic strikes at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester, Grunwick and Futers in Brent where women from this community were the driving force and often the leaders.

The impact of these struggles on the women involved was enormous. They claimed a new-found collective identity arising not only from taking a stand as exploited workers but from collectively confronting racism at work. It often involved also winning a struggle against patriarchy at home since they were largely from families and communities where menial work outside the home was looked down upon. Patriarchy dictated that even if they had to take up such jobs out of sheer necessity, they should not make this publicly visible by participating in a strike.

For many of the women involved and many in the community who supported them, these intense struggles brought a sense of hope, a possibility of radical transformation. But betrayals by the trade union leadership (as at Grunwick) extinguished this. Years of Thatcherism followed, clamping down on the power of rank and file trade unionists. Through this whole period, however, and despite their self-identifying as workers, Hindutva ideologies remained rife in these communities.

At the same time in the 80s and 90s, the policies of multiculturalism and later, faith communities helped the Hindutva groups to flourish as never before, acquiring recognition and resources from local councils, while also heightening divisions between Hindus and Muslims, who at the time of the Grunwick and Imperial Typewriters strikes, had worked closely together.

The Hindutva organisations began to cater for families as a whole. Children, for example, would be drawn in through *Shakhas*, often held in schools as part of after-school multicultural activities, whilst older men and women were catered for by Hindu Associations and local temples which began to proliferate in the 70s, either started by the Hindutva organisations or gradually taken over by them. Among them were the Radha Krishna Temple and *Bhaktivedanta Manor* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) better known as the Hare Krishnas which had started in the 1970s fuelled by the Orientalist fascination with "the East". In 1978, the temples were brought under the umbrella of the National Council of Hindu Temples (NCHT) which was also controlled by the HSS.

A deep sense of insecurity seemed to cling to the East African Asian community - a result, perhaps, of having had to migrate twice in as many generations. As Kamlaben a woman in her sixties told me in the early 2000s *Even respectable people are insecure. One day you may have money, next day*

you have none. One day you may have your morality, next day you may lose it... People think there is something wrong with you.

While in many rural communities the ownership of land had been a mark not only of class and caste but also of honour, prestige and 'respectability', for the Gujarati Hindu communities who had been mainly traders, particularly in East Africa, money was the key to this much sought after 'prestige' and 'respectability'. The Hindu far-right were able to play to their insecurities by bestowing the identity of being a 'respectable' person which was based on feeling superior to others - particularly Muslims, oppressed caste people and Black people.

The rise of the BJP, the corporates and the love affair with Modi's Gujarat

Back in India the BJP had been launched in its present form in 1980 emerging from earlier right-wing Hindu supremacist parties also controlled by the RSS. It was not initially very successful, winning only two seats in the 1984 general election. This changed in 1990 when the Sangh Parivar launched a campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid, a 500-year-old mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, claiming that it was the site of a Hindu temple which was the birthplace of Ram. The demolition itself was planned carefully in advance by the RSS with the knowledge of senior BJP leaders. In December 1992 a mob of 15,000 Hindutva activists led by senior BJP leaders destroyed the beautiful building, sparking violence between Hindus and Muslims across the country which claimed some 2000 lives.

Against this background, the BJP rose to power and, between 1998 and 2004, ruled India in alliance with a number of other parties. The Congress Party, its main rival, had, with its own record of anti-Muslim communalism and a pogrom against Sikhs in 1984, acclimatised the electorate to the BJP's more systematic anti-minority politics. While Congress embraced neoliberal policies, implementing structural adjustment policies and other conditions for an IMF loan, the BJP too began to reshape its nationalism to fit in with neoliberalism. It modernised, as it were, its violence against Dalits and religious minorities by embedding it within the predatory neoliberal version of 'development' which the BJP now stood for.

In 2001, before he came to power as Prime minister, Modi became Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat and launched the so-called 'Gujarat model' of development. Huge swathes of land and coastline were converted into Special Economic Zones and handed over to corporations massively subsidised by the state. High levels of growth in relation to the rest of India were accompanied by some of the worst rates of farmers' suicides, nutrition poverty levels exceeding all-India levels, an inci-

dence of child malnutrition of 47%, (higher than the national average), and the virtual elimination of labour rights.

The corporates hailed Modi as a hero and flocked to Gujarat. Reliance, Essar, Tatas and many more have regarded Modi as a 'Vikash Purush', or man of development. In addition there are those like Gautam Adani, notorious for his environmental crimes in Australia, whom Modi helped to nurture. His favours were returned and many went out of their way to support the Hindutva project. Jaguar, Dunlop, Jindal and many other multinational companies, for example, sponsored a three-day World Hindu Congress where at a workshop on education a pamphlet was distributed listing the five enemies of Hindu society, five fingers in the claw of the demon Mahasur. Among them were Marxists, 'the thumb of the demon's claw,' which has given birth to 'multiple bastard offspring like Communists, Socialists, Liberals, Maoists, Anarchists and all other forms Leftists,' and Muslims who are the 'poisonous fruit of Islam'.

But by the late 1990s the support for Modi and Hindutva was also coming from Asians from East Africa, particularly those who had once fled Uganda for Britain. Many of the more well-off had returned when Idi Amin was ousted to build or rebuild businesses. Among them were the Madhvanis, who before they were expelled, had owned an empire of 52 industrial, commercial and agricultural companies in East, Central and South Africa in addition to assets in India.

The Madhvanis returned to Uganda in the 1980s, repossessed their properties and with loans from the World Bank, East African Development Bank and Uganda Development Bank and encouragement from President Museveni rebuilt and extended their empire which today has an annual turnover of \$500 million in Uganda alone.

In 1994, to give thanks to God, Manubhai Madhvani decided on a lavish 'Festival of Spiritual Unity' in London. In fact it turned out to be mainly about Gujarati Hindu unity. High profile Hindutva-supporting Godmen Morari Bapu and Swami Chidanand Saraswati were the stars while in the interests of a 'multi-faith approach' Maulana Wahiuddin Khansaheb, a Muslim who is approved of by Modi and also supports Zionism, sat on the dais.

Three years later with the Swaminarayan Temple building completed in all its opulent glory, President Museveni, himself, by now a neoliberal star of the Global South and admirer of Modi, paid a visit. All the big names of South Asian business, including Manubhai Madhvani were present when Museveni urged more Asians to return to Uganda. The Madhvanis' love for Modi has continued with Aparna Madhvani, daughter-in-law of Manubhai, recently composing a paean of praise for him about his (mis)handling of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Throughout the 1990s funds were also being collected from ordinary people in communities in the UK. Hindus were urged to demonstrate their piety by buying gold bricks for the construction of the Ram temple on the site of the Babri Masjid and, in 2001, Barry Gardiner, MP for Brent North and Chair of Labour Friends of India, a devoted follower of Modi, visited Gujarat and personally presented Modi with a cheque for £1 million collected by Sewa International for earthquake relief. After the Gujarat genocide of 2002, progressive South Asian organisations in Britain exposed Sewa International for diverting funds raised for earthquake relief and channelling them to organisations directly involved in carrying out the violence. Gardiner was the first of a number of MPs, both Labour and Tory, whose adulation for Modi was linked to Hindutva supporting vote banks in areas like Harrow, Brent and Leicester.

The Gujarat genocide of 2002 and responses in the UK Gujarati Hindu community

In 2002, Modi presided over systematically organised genocidal attacks on the minority Muslim population of Gujarat. Some 2000 people were murdered and 200,000 displaced. As feminist academic Tanika Sarkar wrote, women were specifically targeted 'their sexual and reproductive organs attacked with a special savagery' and 'their children, born and unborn... killed before their eyes'.

The BJP declared that Gujarat was the 'laboratory of Hindutva'. The genocide became a blueprint which would be repeated again against Christians in Odisha in 2008 and against Muslims in Muzaffarnagar in 2013.

Following massive protests in the UK and US and scathing criticism from international human rights organisations Modi was banned from entering the US and UK. Barry Gardiner, however, continued to adore Modi, displaying a prominent endorsement from him on his own campaign material and in 2013, attempting to invite him to the UK – only changing his mind after South Asian, human rights and trade union groups staged a vocal protest outside his constituency surgery.

The intense propaganda by the Hindutva organisations had encouraged many East African Asians to fall in love with India, not the real country with its diverse communities and religions and rich syncretic culture, but an imagined Hindu India centred round a mythical shining Gujarat. Many had never actually lived there; the fact that many people of Indian origin in the UK were Muslims, a considerable number from outside Gujarat, or the large proportion of Sikhs in the Indian diaspora was erased from their discourse. (More recently the BJP has tried to take Sikhs under their wing by launching the notion of *Dharmic*

communities who include Sikhs).

As for the Gujarat genocide, many did not think it was of much relevance. Others supported it – even those who had been involved in the strikes of the 1970s.

In 2004, I visited a woman who had once been a militant participant in workers' struggles. Her family, like that of a number of the other workers of the 1970s had gone up in class. She told me 'whatever has happened [in Gujarat] is the right thing'. As I eventually called a minicab to leave her house, she warned me not to travel with a

In the last two decades, a new suave, westernised image of Hindutva has emerged particularly in the world of finance and business

Muslim driver repeating tropes straight from the playbook of the RSS (which are very similar to those surrounding Black men in white supremacist discourse) that Muslim men and Black men are 'beast-like' and 'oversexed' and a danger to Hindu women. When I asked her about the rapes of Muslim women in 2002, she said 'Hindu men have been too meek in the past'.

What she was regurgitating, perhaps unknowingly, was a version of the words of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the revered icon of Hindu supremacists – that for a Hindu man to rape Muslim women is justifiable and that not to do so when the occasion permits is not virtuous or chivalrous, but cowardly.

Resistance from Dalit organisations

While the intense Islamophobia stirred up by the Hindutva forces was normalised and invisibilised in Britain by the discourse of the War on Terror, their caste-based discrimination and abuse could not be so easily hidden. The everyday practice in Britain of the notion of caste led, for example, to elderly patients being refused care because 'upper-caste' medical professionals would not touch them, workers being sidelined or refused promotion, schoolchildren bullied for reasons of caste, and Dalits refused entry to temples.

After almost a decade of campaigning, by Dalit organisations, in 2010 a law against caste-based discrimination was effectively passed by the outgoing Labour

government and eventually the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 imposed a 'duty' on the government to make caste an aspect of race in the Equality Act of 2010. However, this 'duty' has not yet been met. Instead, in response to the Hindu far-right's claim that it would stigmatise the Hindu community, the Tories have all but scuppered the law. However, the struggle to end caste-based discrimination continues and so does the Hindu far-right's angry opposition to it. A 2019 BBC film by YouTuber Parle Patel, exposed not only blatant caste-based exclusion but the attitude of Satish Sharma, the Chair of NCHT who claimed on camera that caste discrimination does not happen and that even the word caste should not be mentioned as 'it is as toxic for us' as the n-word. According to Sharma, caste is non-existent because 'we do not have a hereditary, hierarchical, endogamous structure' (in fact this is an almost textbook definition of caste). A dedicated supporter of the right-wing of the Tory party, Sharma was in 2019 suspended from Chairpersonship of NCHT for electioneering on behalf of the Conservatives after the Charity Commission raised concerns.

New faces and strategies of neoliberal Hindutva

In the last two decades, a new suave, westernised image of Hindutva has emerged particularly in the world of finance and business. These new representatives are men like Manoj Ladwa, Narendra Modi's chief strategist in the UK, himself a HSS member, and Alpesh Shah, hedge fund manager and columnist for the pro-Modi *Asian Voice* newspaper.

These men frequently reflect Modi's deepening relationship with Israel. So while India becomes the world's largest purchaser of Israeli weapons accounting for some 50% of Israel's arms sales and providing a huge boost to the Israeli economy, Alpesh Shah notes in an open letter to Modi that 'It has to be the business of this [India's] government how Hindus are treated worldwide... This doctrine is not novel in International Relations. The people of Israel provide protection for Jews wherever they are in the world, of whichever nationality. We shall extend no less protection to Hindus'. Shah skates over the fact that Hinduphobia unlike anti-Semitism has no historical material reality.

And while Modi attempts to replicate in Kashmir the policies Netanyahu has been following in Palestine, in the UK, Zionists and Hindutva forces are increasingly working together. At a meeting at the House of Commons about the Caste law, attended among others by Satish Sharma and Conservative Party donor Lord Jitesh Gadhia, Bob Blackman (the rabidly pro-Hindutva Tory MP from Harrow East) welcomed Gideon Falter, the CEO of the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA) and called for the need to learn from the way the CAA had got the

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism passed in the Labour Party. (The IHRA definition effectively brands those who criticise [Israel's actions and policies against Palestinians as anti-Semitic](#)). Clearly Blackman and Gadhia were seeking something similar to prevent criticism of the BJP government in Britain, possibly along with criticising the Hindu far-right defined as Hinduphobic.

Currently, Labour leader, Keir Starmer is trying to cosy up to the Hindutva brigade, by distancing the party from a resolution in favour of Kashmiri self-determination passed by the Labour Conference under Corbyn. But no amount of [pandering](#) to Hindutva organisations is going to change the minds of the many die-hard Tory supporters and Brexiteers like Satish Sharma. They know that India's billionaires have much to gain from post Brexit deals and they are comfortable in the knowledge that the BJP's aims are looked after by [RSS supporting Priti Patel](#) and [Rishi Sunak](#), whose father in law, [Infosys founder and Modi admirer NR Narayana Murthy](#), backed Modi for his second term.

Solidarity and resistance in Britain

If the Hindutva forces have managed to insert themselves into the fabric of global capitalism and joined its facilitators in Britain, the anger of ordinary people of all faiths and none has spilled out in protests in the UK, preventing Modi visiting before he became Prime Minister and confronting him and his entourage every time he has visited since. Every protest has faced threats from Hindutva groups and individuals in the UK, usually online, while public meetings have faced attempted disruptions - on one recent [occasion](#) by masked intruders.

Days after Modi came to power in May 2014, two oppressed caste girls were [raped and murdered](#) and their bodies hung from a tree in Uttar Pradesh. The grief and rage following this and Modi's silence had led to the first mass protest against the ruling

BJP in which Dalit women in their thousands joined with South Asia Solidarity Group (SASG), an anti-racist, anti-imperialist organisation with a decades long record of campaigning against the atrocities committed by the Indian government. Caste Watch UK, Britain's largest Dalit organisation and SASG continued to work together holding public meetings and further protests, staging street theatre and vigils in remembrance of [Rohith Vemula](#) and in solidarity with those attacked in the [Una atrocity](#).

In response to the tsunami of moblynchings of Muslims, Christians and Dalits, these two organisations continued to work together, sometimes joined by UK women's groups and human rights organisations. On August 15, 2017, India's Independence Day, under the banner 'Resist the Republic of Fear', they marched through the streets of London carrying posters of those who had been lynched; 15 year old [Junaid Khan](#), murdered when he was returning from Eid shopping, for no reason other than he was a Muslim; [Sapnil Sonewane](#), also 15, lynched because he was a Dalit and had fallen in love with a girl of another caste; [Muhammed Akhlaq](#), killed in his home on the pretext that he had eaten beef; [Pehlu Khan](#), a dairy farmer murdered by a gang of some 200 'cow vigilantes' and many others.

Modi's second term has seen the annexation of Kashmir; the handing over of the land the Babri Masjid had stood on to a Hindutva organisation for the construction of a massive Ram temple and in December 2019 the enactment of laws and processes which go against India's secular Constitution and could well be the [first steps](#) towards the ethnic cleansing of India's Muslim population. This is the last phase in the creation of a fully-fledged Hindutva fascist state and against it a massive movement of resistance has risen up, sweeping across India, its voices amplified by solidarity from across the world. In Britain, on 25 January 2020, the eve of India's Republic Day, UK's Indian Muslim Organisations joined hands with SASG, Caste Watch UK, and the Kashmir Solidarity Movement to march 3000

strong in solidarity with the resistance in India.

Since February this year, having taken no measures to control Covid-19, Modi hosted a huge and glittering gathering to welcome Donald Trump to India. The days that followed saw a [pogrom against Muslims](#). When a lockdown was finally implemented, it was at four hours' notice which left thousands of migrant workers and daily wage earners whose work sustains the cities penniless and without shelter or transport. Many have [died](#) of starvation or police brutality or simply of exhaustion. As Covid-19 spreads through India like wildfire, the BJP has heightened its Islamophobic propaganda, [blaming Muslims](#) for spreading the virus and taking advantage of the lockdown to [target activists](#) against the citizenship laws, charge them under India's draconian and colonial anti-Terrorism law, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, and throw them into prison.

Even in this dire situation the Hindutva forces continue to sing the praises of Modi, CB Patel, the editor of Asian Voice, even claimed that 87 per cent of people are happy with the lockdown which tells of the '[compassion and humanity at the core of Indian ethos](#)'. Meanwhile solidarity with the resistance continues unabated taking innovative forms from online concerts to raise funds for the survivors of the pogroms and migrant workers to meetings linking the voices of activists from Kashmir, India and beyond, reminding the world that Modi, like Netanyahu, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Orban and Trump is a fascist who must be fought and defeated and that Modi's cheerleaders don't speak for the majority of South Asians in this country.

Amrit Wilson

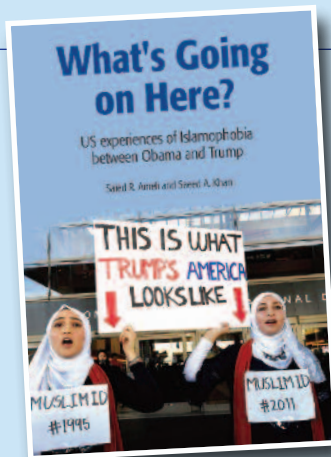
Wilson is a writer and activist on issues of race and gender in Britain and South Asian politics. Currently she is a member of South Asia Solidarity Group. Her books include 'Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain' which won the Martin Luther King Award and has been republished in an extended form in 2018 and 'Dreams Questions Struggles: South Asian Women in Britain'.

New Publication

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Muslims need to create their own Social Media Platforms

Muslims are facing unprecedented censorship and pressure from social media companies and that's why we must urgently create our own platforms, argues journalist **Roshan Muhammed Salih**.

Social media used to be great. Those of us who didn't have a voice on the mainstream media could, at last, express ourselves freely on platforms which attracted millions of people.

This was a godsend for small media companies like mine, the British Muslim news website 5Pillars. We really believed that through sheer hard work and editorial knowhow we could build a community platform that would genuinely represent the priorities and concerns of British Muslims. A platform that would say all the things that the mainstream wouldn't.

And how would we drive traffic to that platform? Mainly by posting our content on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

And indeed for several years it was great and the people came-a-flocking. With the mainstream media either demonising Muslims, ignoring them or trying to choose who should speak for us or not, a gaping hole was left for people like us who were determined to tell the community's stories unfiltered.

So there's no doubt that platforms like Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter and YouTube have played a huge role in the growth of our website. As they have for countless others. And in doing so they have helped minority communities find a voice for themselves which is so lacking in the mainstream.

What's more, it isn't just about getting the stories out there. Social media sites have also allowed platforms like ours to fundraise to support the journalism that we are doing. Advertisers will naturally gravitate towards online sites with huge traffic flows so with advertising revenue fairly negligible for organisations like ours, social media has offered us the ability to directly appeal for funds to people who follow us.

So with the chance to build a business and reach millions of people, what's not to like?

Fake News

Sadly, a few years ago things began to change and this change seems to have coincided with the mainstream media and politicians heaping pressure on the likes of Facebook to censor alternative opinions. This was done, of course, not under the banner of "censorship" but under the premise of cracking down on "fake news."

The Department for Education is now even setting up its own "rapid rebuttal unit"

to tackle so-called fake news in the media. It's said to be one of the first department-specific teams in government to challenge "misinformation at the source" and rebuff "misleading content" before reaching the mainstream.

But I'm one of the few journalists who has always been sceptical about the fake news furore because I believe that the main disseminator of fake news has always been the mainstream media itself. After all, these are the people who manufactured consent for the Iraq war, and for the Tory Party victory in the General Election following a prolonged demonisation campaign against Jeremy Corbyn over anti-Semitism. And I could go on and on.

Ultimately we must remember that fake news in the mainstream media is far more significant than fake news in the alternative media because it has the ability to reach far more people and create far more impact. So in my view the fake news crisis was not actually about stopping fake news; rather, it was about reasserting the dominance of the mainstream media.

The fact is that the mainstream media is heavily distrusted by the British public and is shedding audiences. A recent YouGov poll for Sky News found that two-thirds of the public don't trust TV journalists, and almost three-quarters don't trust newspaper journalists. On top of this, the viewing and readership figures for the traditional media are plummeting in a multi-channel and online world.

But rather than take a good, long hard look in the mirror and admitting that this is because of false reporting, the targeting of minorities, and the parroting of the Establishment line, journalists have instead decided to bury their heads in the sand and blame "conspiracy theorists" in the alternative media instead.

Anyhow, the constant barrage of propaganda about the dangers of fake news seems to have had an effect on the social media giants who've responded by censoring alternative views.

How censorship works: Facebook

So how exactly is the alternative media being censored by Facebook? Well, let me speak about my own experiences at 5Pillars.

Around a year ago we started to get notices of Facebook violations even though we

were posting the same kind of content that we had always posted. Certain videos and articles attracted particular attention from the censors, such as anything to do with LGBT issues or Israel/Palestine.

Don't get me wrong, in principle I have no problem whatsoever with Facebook's Community Guidelines. I too believe that graphic content and hate speech should not be on a social media platform that is available to millions of people, including children. In fact, 5Pillars is completely committed to fair and accurate journalism and this is the reason why we have signed up to the independent regulator IMPRESS which has the power to investigate complaints against us and sanction us.

But the thing is we weren't getting sanctioned for hate speech or graphic content. We were literally getting sanctioned for writing impartial news stories on Israel's treatment of the Palestinians or the controversy surrounding the issue of homosexuality in the Muslim world.

And believe you me, Facebook was judge, jury and executioner.

For example, the Facebook complaints experience is a total nightmare. This is how it works: out of the blue you get a notification that you have committed a violation and often your ability to monetise content or post stories is restricted because of the violation. The reasons given will be very brief such as: "you have violated our guidelines on hate speech or graphic content" with the offending post attached. You will then be given an opportunity to appeal but this is limited to pressing a button and that's it. There is no chance to argue your case and explain why Facebook has made an error; you are simply at the mercy of the reviewer. So in effect you have no ability to mount a defence.

5Pillars has been sanctioned many times in this way by Facebook and it is my sincere belief that all of the posts we were punished for should not have been flagged up because they could have been justified by the news context. What's more, if you get sanctioned your ability to fundraise on Facebook is restricted or prohibited, as is your ability to advertise your work. So in effect Facebook has the power to destroy businesses simply by switching off the lights; you and your livelihood are at their complete mercy.

Moreover, Palestinian voices are particularly vulnerable on Facebook. Last October Facebook deleted the page of the popular Palestinian news website, the Palestinian In-

formation Center. PIC had nearly five million followers on Facebook, a testament to its popularity and credibility among a large cross-section of Palestinians and their supporters internationally. But, for Israel's trolls on social media, PIC was simply too effective to be allowed to spread its message. And, as usual, Facebook obliged.

This oft-repeated scenario – where pro-Israeli social media trolls zoom in on a Palestinian media platform while working closely with Facebook management to censor content, bar individuals, or delete whole pages – is now the norm. Palestinian views on Facebook are simply unwanted, and the margin of what is allowed is rapidly shrinking.

When in September 2016, the Israeli government announced its willingness to work with Facebook to “tackle incitement,” the social media giant was ready to reach an understanding, even if that meant violating the very basic freedom of expression it has repeatedly vowed to respect. During that period, the Israeli government and Facebook agreed to “determine how to tackle incitement on the social media network,” according to the Associated Press citing top Israeli officials.

And the icing on the cake? Just last month Facebook appointed Emi Palmor, the former Israeli Justice Ministry director-general, to its Oversight Board which will be tasked with content moderation on Facebook and Instagram. Palmor, who is a lecturer in the Israeli Defence Forces, is one of 20 members selected from around the world to be appointed to the ‘independent’ board. The Board will review content referred to it both by users and Facebook and has the power to overturn Facebook's own decisions.

Unaccountable Twitter

Now let me briefly talk about a few other major social media sites that we use – Twitter and YouTube.

While Twitter has only ever censored me once (for expressing my happiness about the war propagandist Alistair Campbell being depressed) and remains, in my view, a freer platform than Facebook to express opinions, it has banned us from advertising our posts. And in typical unaccountable social media giant style, it didn't give us a reason for deeming us unworthy but just said we did not meet their criteria.

So given that we were no longer allowed to advertise on Twitter we reasonably assumed that we should stop the small campaign ads that we were running. But of course that would be far too easy and Twitter effectively refused to stop taking our money despite the fact that we were getting no service in return.

I don't want to bore you with the details of my financial dispute with Twitter but suffice it to say Twitter is just as unaccountable as Facebook. When you converse with them over their messaging service you definitely get the feeling that you are talking to a robot rather than a human being; and all you get is stock answers which don't really address your question. So I literally had to ring my

bank to instruct them to stop paying Twitter.

But I guess the more interesting question is why did Twitter stop our advertising? I have no idea frankly but I'm sure it had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that its executive with editorial responsibility for the Middle East is also a part-time officer in the British Army's psychological warfare unit. As Middle East Eye revealed last year, Gordon MacMillan has for several years also served with the 77th Brigade, a unit formed in 2015 in order to develop “non-lethal” ways of waging war. On its website the British army unit says: “We are a combined Regular and Army Reserve unit. Our aim is to challenge the difficulties of modern warfare using non-lethal engagement and legitimate non-military levers as a means to adapt behaviours of the opposing forces and adversaries.”

All very reassuring.

And guess what? Just like Facebook, Twitter doesn't appreciate Palestinian voices too much. In 2019 it suspended three accounts belonging to the leading Palestinian news website, Quds News Network, without explanation. You can see a pattern emerging, can't you?

YouTube censors Press TV

5Pillars hasn't focussed on YouTube a great deal so we are yet to experience their wrath, but another company I worked for, Press TV, most definitely has.

Press TV is Iran's 24 hour English-language news network and has been censored by YouTube several times. The pattern is a familiar one – Press TV will build up an audience of several hundred thousand subscribers by posting lots of quality content and then YouTube will abruptly delete its page. This process has happened on at least five occasions since Press TV started broadcasting over a decade ago and quite frankly it is a galling experience for journalists to see all their hard work disappear with the flick of a switch.

I myself used to have many videos on YouTube from all over the world and some of them had millions of views. Those videos were my online CV and I regularly used to brag about them to anybody who would listen. But they have now disappeared into thin air, as have my bragging rights.

Again, as with Facebook and Twitter, there is no proper appeal process at YouTube and all you get is a notice that you have infringed their Community Standards, which is almost certainly untrue. Much more likely is that YouTube, as an American company, is complying with U.S. sanctions on Iran which targets all Iranian entities regardless of issues such as freedom of the media. I just wish YouTube was honest enough to admit it.

The upshot of all this is that I now find myself self-censoring on social media platforms so that I don't get kicked off. So when I see a story about LGBT issues or Palestine I think very carefully about posting it, whereas before I wouldn't think twice. And I'm not talking about stories which incite hatred or show graphic violence; I'm talking

about legitimate fact-checked news stories.

Ultimately, that's the only way to have a prominent presence on social media and survive and thrive – by self-censoring and making sure you never cross the lines that your opponents have drawn in the sand.

Islamic alternatives?

The truth is that social media giants such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have way too much power and our dependence on these platforms makes us vulnerable to being censored. The American social media giants are no longer the saviours of alternative journalism; in fact they have destroyed the journalistic model for so many news organisations by hoovering up online advertising and pulling the editorial plug when they see fit.

So we have a few choices in front of us.

Firstly, we could simply persevere with the social media behemoths which is what we are doing at the moment. This is a very tempting course of action because we already have major platforms on them in which we have invested a lot of time, money and effort. But it also means that we will have to self-censor in the hope of staving off that inevitable day when we are kicked off permanently. And let's face it, what's the point of doing what we do if we are prepared to self-censor?

Secondly, we could seek to migrate to other platforms which are not based in the West. Both China and Russia have massive social media platforms although most cater for Chinese or Russian speakers so the English language audience is just not present there yet. Moreover, what's not to say that China and Russia won't censor us one day too? In fact, I'm sure you would get censored on a Chinese platform if you started criticising China's repression of the Uyghurs.

Thirdly, the Muslim world could give some serious thought to creating its own social media platforms. I understand that this is a gargantuan task given that the American social media giants have such a head start; not to mention the divisions within the Muslim world itself. But I do believe there is a compelling reason to create such platforms (the lack of freedom of speech and Islamic values on the U.S. platforms) whereas in the past none existed.

I, for one, am willing to migrate immediately to a Muslim-led social media platform if a credible one could be created. And I believe millions of others would be ready to do the same. It would be a task which could take years, even decades, to accomplish and see flourish. But it is all about controlling our own destiny and taking it out of the hands of our potential enemies. And if it were to happen, believe you me I wouldn't miss the likes of Facebook one little bit.

Roshan Muhammed Salih

is the editor of British Muslim news website 5Pillars and is a documentary maker for Press TV. He has been a journalist for 18 years and in the past has worked for London Weekend Television, Islam Channel, Al Jazeera and others.

Is a Better World Possible? Muslims, Leadership and the Coronavirus Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic may have exposed the unpreparedness and weaknesses of the established political order but it has also underlined the ongoing failures of leadership in the Muslim community, especially its inability to think big and strategically, argues **Sadek Hamid**.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

Arundhati Roy

The Covid-19 pandemic has become a world-changing event, which is likely to leave its mark for generations to come. It has drawn comparisons with the influenza outbreak of 1918 in which 500 million people were infected globally and 50 million died. The two decades following the contagion were characterised by rising ethno-nationalism, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression in America and the rise in authoritarianism that eventually led to the Second World War. While some similar socio-political conditions exist today, the world is much more densely populated in a fragile international order with a deep planetary environmental crisis and a deep recession that seems inevitable.

Economic instability has impacted the most vulnerable, caused massive job losses, wrecked international industries and left tens of millions of people in precarious fi-

nancial circumstances. Existing structural inequalities, poverty and unemployment rates will probably accelerate alongside the growth of populism, protectionism and political violence. Ironically, the trillions of dollars spent on countering security threats were not able to prevent the hundreds of thousands of deaths inflicted by a type of microscopic virus that scientists have warned about for decades. It has become the fastest spreading disease in history and might mutate into more dangerous strains that remain within human populations for years to come. These dynamics combined are accentuating new cultural and economic trends that could result in radical transformations that change our world in ways that cannot be imagined at this time.

Emboldening Authoritarianism

The crisis has allowed populist leaders in Brazil, Hungary, India, Brazil and the Philippines to seize more power. The global distraction has given the likes of Netanyahu cover to annex major parts of the West Bank, while in India, Modi's government has used the crisis to further crack down on Muslim citizens, branding Covid-19 a "Muslim disease" intended as a "corona jihad" against Hindus. The Chinese state

has continued its oppression of the Uyghurs interned in forced labour camps with a high risk of infection while Rohingya Muslims fleeing their homelands in Myanmar face a similar plight trapped in the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh. The rise of anti-Muslim discourse has also been weaponised in Europe and the United States, as Muslims are blamed for the spread of Covid-19 and countries such as the UK smuggle in new legislation in the name of promoting public health to strengthen the surveillance abilities of the state.

These problematic attitudes were mirrored among Muslim communities in the West. In the UK prominent scholars and mosques were also reluctant to close places of worship on the basis of ill-informed edicts that insisted on mosques remaining open "until and unless the government places a total restriction on religious places." It was countered by others who issued a forceful rebuttal that questioned the devotion to the buildings, given that the whole earth is a considered as mosque and that historically no jurist ever advised people to place their lives in danger in order to join a communal prayer. The fact that highly regarded Muslim religious scholars and umbrella bodies resisted public health guidance and only complied under state



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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pressure does not engender confidence in their abilities to provide any kind of leadership for Muslim communities.

The 'New (Post) Normal': The World After Covid-19

Following a pandemic, or any large-scale catastrophe, there is a pervasive sense that the world is fundamentally unpredictable. Most of us have been forced to adjust to the 'new normal' of living under lockdown, working from home and avoiding non-essential travel. While these restrictions will be eased the new normal may never see a full return to "business as usual" as people have been forced to reconsider their priorities. Many have lost loved ones or know individuals who have died as a result of the virus and will reprioritise what they value most in life. A number of these epochal events have been anticipated by some thinkers who suggest that we are all experiencing *Post Normal Times (PNT)* – an 'in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense'. They argue that the emergence of Covid-19 is an example of a PNT occurrence and sign of future things to come. The changes might be more lasting the longer the crisis persists. Equally after a year or two, most things may return to as they were before.

Of course, nobody can know for sure what will unfold in the future; however, two broad visions have been articulated by those who study global macro and micro trends. Some of the main features of the first, envisage a return to the status quo for the continued benefit of a tiny minority, confident in their ability to ride out the coming climate cataclysm and has no interest in systemic reform. This could lead to the grim prospect of another long period of austerity, as governments try to rebuild their economies but unintentionally might trigger a collapse of both state and welfare systems. The hopeful characteristics of the second envisions a future that involves positive governmental interventions that protect life and well-being and abandons the endless pursuit of economic growth. It eschews fossil fuel dependency and avoids rapacious habitat destruction and species extinctions. Both these dystopic and utopic ends of a spectrum may seem far-fetched at this moment but, then no one at the beginning of 2020 was expecting the surreal situation in which we now find ourselves.

Challenges for Muslim Political leadership

Tackling Covid-19 requires wise and effective leadership in a time dominated by uninspiring, mendacious politicians. The exception to this general tendency has been the handful of female leaders such as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, whose handling of the crisis has been described as a "masterclass" in political leadership.

Other countries with effective responses to the pandemic such as Finland, Iceland, Denmark, Germany and Taiwan are also led by women. It is a struggle to find similar qualities in political leadership in Muslim countries. There is also a deep-seated reluctance to acknowledge the equality of women and allow them to become leaders or share leadership with men in religious or political institutions because of misogynistic, patriarchal readings of Islamic law. This misplaced resistance ignores the role played by Muslim women during the life of the Prophet, contributions made by countless historical female religious scholars, scientists, doctors, philanthropists and political leaders, contemporary heads of

The pandemic has highlighted a divide between those whose worldview...denies the validity of knowledge outside scriptural sources and those that want to contextualise their religious heritage authentically to apply it to the challenges of the modern world

state and the growing number who are leading positive social change today.

At the heart of this predicament is a lack of commitment to core Islamic ethics. Realpolitik trumps religious rhetoric. Many Muslim countries are led by incompetent, repressive rulers that have no regard for the rule of law or human rights. These governments are plagued by economic mismanagement, nepotism and a lack of accountability. These problems are compounded by the competing geostrategic interests of the major foreign powers that support these states to help stifle the will of the majority. In the 21st Century, the most damaging external intervention to have occurred was the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq which set off a chain of events that resulted in the failed Arab uprisings, regional instability, ruthless proxy wars and ongoing refugee crises which has helped to proliferate violent religious extremism. Previously esteemed political leaders applauded for their ability to advance their countries' development, have disappointingly taken an authoritarian turn, are reluctant to cede power and often become embroiled in controversy. The leadership deficit and lack of good governance remain some of the greatest inhibitors to realising the potential of Muslim societies today and perpetuates the political crisis and conflicts that some societies are currently undergoing.

Challenges for Muslim Intelligentsia

Muslims have dealt with epidemics in the past, producing scholarly treatises on preserving public health and the juridical and ethical dimensions of contagious diseases. However, today we are facing an unprecedented and challenging dilemma. Aside from some notable exceptions, Muslims are largely absent in the debates outlined above. The current global crisis demands responses from religious scholars and philosophers beyond adapting religious observance to this new reality. Despite having a large number of world class scientists, doctors and academics, we appear to lack macro thinkers, public intellectuals and polymaths who can provide visionary leadership and use their knowledge to develop unique insights or creative solutions for complex, multidimensional challenges. This absence of thought in leaders can partly be attributed to what some commentators have described as the intellectual decline accelerated by colonialism, characterised by loss of identity, illiteracy, stultifying legalistic orthodoxy and failure of institutions, all of which led to a crisis in Islamic civilisation.

Respect for all types of knowledge was a dominant feature of classical Islamic culture. However, today many modern scholars are prone to addressing contemporary challenges by referring to juristic precedents produced hundreds of years ago in vastly different social milieu. The pandemic has highlighted a divide between those whose worldview clings to an imagined literalist past that denies the validity of knowledge outside scriptural sources and those that want to contextualise their religious heritage authentically to apply it to the challenges of the modern world.

In Muslim majority states, religious minded citizens often appear to be preoccupied with religious factionalism of one type or another and restrict themselves to questions of the shariah ordinances on blasphemy, apostasy and criminal law. Many religious activists among Western Muslim communities appear to be preoccupied by sterile debates about feminism, secularism, perpetuate sectarianism or are overwhelmed by trying to deal with Islamophobia and the securitisation of their presence. Despite these difficult challenges that are specific to our Muslimness, we cannot separate ourselves from the challenges confronting the rest of the world. Until we are able to confidently shape a coherent synthesis between the sacred and secular, our responses will remain reactive and limited to fire fighting and we will be unable to contribute to the betterment of humankind. Muslims should resist a widespread tendency to exceptionalise our problems and instead see the bigger universal challenges, help shape the debates about the most pressing issues challenging us as human beings and play our role in helping to solve global problems such as the environment crisis.

This is particularly pressing given that deforestation, urbanisation, pollution, ecological destabilisation, zoonotic diseases and flooding are more likely to impact Muslim countries in the next two decades, which will have a subsequent effect on the spread of infectious diseases and the ability of these nations to feed themselves. This has already been painfully seen in countries suffering from war such as [Yemen](#), the island state of the [Maldives which is at risk of disappearing](#) by the end of the century along with the [coast of southern Bangladesh](#). All of these climate challenges have inter-related consequences on migration, population displacement which may escalate into political conflicts that could exacerbate the refugee flows of which Muslims comprise the world's majority. These problems are in addition to the failure to develop economic policies that address poverty, social inequality, gender justice and provision of basic needs such as housing, education, employment, health care and food security. In addition, most Muslim nations are a long way from being able to influence the direction of scientific and technological debates on Artificial Intelligence, digital surveillance, Transhumanism or the likely development of [Next Generation Sequencing, Big Data, AI and AI combined apps that can detect diseases](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge that requires a truly global response at inter-governmental, regional, national and grass roots levels. Rising to this challenge will necessitate massive transformational change. Shared problems will have to be solved by developing consensus. Muslims need to lead by example and pool our expertise –this implies the collaboration of religious and secular leadership and necessitates the cooperation of experts in different disciplines to develop solutions. It also requires the development of grassroots networks that provide ethical, creative, future oriented leadership that create non-sectarian, co-operative partnerships that promote social justice, alongside those of other faiths and none. Encouragingly, this is happening and has increased during the Covid-19 crisis, as emerging virtual and real world alliances

are helping to form social movements making positive change.

Thinking Global and Acting Locally

A sense of communal solidarity has emerged worldwide as people come together to support the most vulnerable in their societies. There is a real spirit of “we will get through this together” which has resulted in the increase of [mutual aid](#) projects such as volunteers buying groceries for the elderly and those confined to their homes. Muslims have been at the forefront of serving local communities and [have displayed numerous acts of generosity and support](#). In the UK, Muslims businesses were particularly active in this regard with restaurants helping to stocking up food banks, offering free food to the homeless, one centenarian raising £200k for charity and many [NHS Key Workers](#) carrying on their duties despite fasting more than 17 hours a day during Ramadan. It is notable that the majority of these responses come from ordinary Muslims in local communities and not those who claim leadership or from larger representative bodies.

While all of these grassroots led efforts and acts of solidarity are commendable, systemic state level changes still need to occur. The growth of social-political activism during the Coronavirus crisis holds the potential for a bigger culture shift that politicians cannot afford to ignore and can result in policy changes. Recent examples of this include the mass demonstrations in American cities against police brutality which influenced [Los Angeles City Council to propose cutting \\$150 million from the LAPD and reinvesting those funds into communities of colour](#). In Minneapolis, the trigger point for these events, the city council has voted to [disband the Police Department](#) and instead develop a new public safety approach. The “Black Lives Matter” slogan has also become a multiracial sentiment which has gone global and caused many governments to confront uncomfortable truths. Other promising initiatives include a radical set of

proposals put forward by academics in the Netherlands with their ‘Five Proposals for a Post-Covid-19 Development Model’ which makes the [link between economic development, the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem functions and diseases like Covid-19](#). This recommendation was given added momentum by a similar call by the [Degrowth Open Letter](#), signed by more than 1,100 experts from more than 60 countries, calling for Degrowth as a way to tackle the consequences of the Coronavirus.

We are now at a critical historical juncture. The dominant response within Muslim communities has been characterised by a micro focus on religious observance and inability to view the Coronavirus crisis as a universal problem that requires us to transcend group interests. We need to draw upon our faith as inspiration to help create a better future out of the opportunities presented by this crisis and contribute to improving the collective good. [Ecological degradation, over farming and destruction of wildlife has played a role in the outbreak of various infectious diseases](#) in recent history and cannot be ignored any longer. [Muslims have rich resources in our religious teachings that can inform our interactions with the environment](#) and create a more harmonious balance between humans and nature. The challenge to make the transition to sustainable societies requires states to commit to low-emission, climate resilient futures as well as a shift in our personal norms and practices. We also have many different [models of effective, ethical political and religious leadership](#) – retrieving and contextualising this knowledge is a collective challenge and work in progress. When we decide to re-imagine and put these ideas into practice building a better world may indeed be possible.

Dr Sadek Hamid

has written widely about Islam in Britain. He is the author of *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism*, co-author of *British Muslims: New Directions in Islamic Thought, Creativity and Activism* and editor of *Young British Muslims: Between Rhetoric & Realities*.

NEW publication

Political Islamophobia at American Policy Institutes: Battling the Power of Islamic Resistance by Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria

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Looking at the RAND corporation, the Brookings Institute and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Saghaye-Biria overviews these three think tanks' obsession with Islam and Muslims since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. She discusses the implications for Muslim societies of the direction of travel proposed.

Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria

is an Assistant Professor at University of Tehran, Faculty of Islamic Knowledge and Thought.

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The Underlying Myths that Fuel Divisions in Islam ...and how we can Demolish them

Sectarian divides within Islam are socially destructive, politically costly, and in the worst cases, result in unimaginable tragedy- they are certainly one of the main elements holding the Ummah back and are one of the favourite weapons that the enemies of Islam love to use against us. Beyond the well-known historical and political axioms that run through Islamic sectarianism, we can find psychological traumas and ideological myths that must be diagnosed, and in some cases, quasi-therapeutically treated and seriously questioned, argues **João Silva Jordão**.

Editorial note: for reasons that will become obvious, the author has extensively used the term “Shia” and “Sunni” out of sheer necessity and for clarity, but paradoxically ultimately argues that we should try and phase out the use of these terms, particularly in what concerns the spiritual domain.

The Majority vs. The Minority - The Predictable Tango

Before we start analysing sectarianism within Islam specifically, we have to start with two propositions. Firstly, sectarianism in Islam is marked by the fact that the two “opposing” camps, Sunni and Shia, constitute a very clear majority and minority respectively. Secondly, in any dispute, the fact that there is a majority and a minority go a very long way in conditioning the general attitude and behaviour of either camp- and this is not specific to Islam. In any binary political dispute that juxtaposes a larger camp against a smaller camp, the majority will usually adopt an attitude akin to that which a majority is likely to adopt, and the minority, likewise.

And this awfully predictable Tango usually goes something like this: the majority will often blame the minority for being sectarian and for compromising the unity of the whole. The minority in turn will say that the majority usurped the leadership and that under its leadership, things would be better, and mistakes of the past would have been avoided. This is exactly the myth that runs through Communism’s historical divide between Stalinists and Trotskyites for example, which is also marked by a fierce dispute over succession as well as an ongoing debate over who was most worthy of inheriting leadership- and so too do we find a similar dynamic that runs through the main divide in Islam.

Another particularly important underlying myth behind both camps pertains to a general vision of what the Prophet came

down to do in the first place.

In Sunni mythology, the Prophet incrementally turned an initially resistant and reluctant, even sometimes hostile Arab society into a virtually homogenous contingent of pure believers and unquestionable followers. The inner circle of this mass of unwaveringly faithful followers are the companions of the Prophet, the Sahaba.

In Shia mythology, the Prophet came as a reluctant messenger who was besieged on all sides, at all times, by either enemies, hypocrites or traitors- with only a very select few genuine followers. These rare genuine followers consist mostly of the Prophet’s family, the Ahl-ul-bayt.

Neither of these narratives are, of course, anywhere near nuanced enough so as to be able to realistically reflect how political struggles play out, nor how the psychology of the human mind operates, nor much less how religions spread and are practised.

And here is how these two myths are then used as rocket fuel to incite sectarian tensions and inevitably, violence- each side will paint the other as having an inherent hatred for the Prophet’s support base that their respective mythos enshrines.

The Sunnis will say that the Shia disrespect and insult the Sahaba. The Shia will say that the Sunnis praise those who wronged and hurt the Ahl-ul-Bayt. Each will find some way to project the historical foes of the ones they so love onto the whole of the “other” side, therefore making it all the more likely that they come to see their fellow Muslims as an enemy.

Much to do About a Lot- a More Realistic and Productive Narrative

So, let us try and start to unwind these destructive and unrealistic myths by proposing a more serene, realistic and perhaps more constructive narrative.

A much more realistic, theologically and religiously accurate view of the very basic significance of Prophet Muhammad’s mission was that he was sent as a mercy to mankind so as to make those he encountered, and those whom he influenced, whether directly or indirectly, better persons than they were before. It is in no way necessary, nor desirable, to believe that he was either a perfect man surrounded by mostly vicious and treacherous characters whose sole purpose in life was to pretend that their conversion to Islam was sincere when in fact they wanted to destroy it from within, nor that he was a magical man whose effect on the society around him completely escapes the general trends of human behaviour so that he somehow turned virtually each and every person that he came into contact with into perfect human beings who were thereafter incapable of imperfection.

Rather, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was a magnificently successful wide-spectrum social reformer with a Divine Mission and Message- not someone who could suspend the basic rules of human limitations for those around him nor solve the contradictions of human existence all in one go.

After all, is it not obvious that one of his main messages is that we are all capable of sin and virtue, and that we should try as best we can to decrease our sins and increase our virtues so as to pass with the best grade possible the exam that we call life? So that we make use of Islam to the best of our abilities so as to honour our souls in this predicament that we all find

ourselves in? So that we try to follow the Islamic method as best we can as we make our way through this temporary, imminently imperfect, ever-testing, ever-trialling *dunya*?

We must, firstly in the name of truth, eloquence, historical rigour and basic standards of intelligence, and perhaps as importantly, in the name of healing our Ummah and neutralizing the endemic sectarianism running through it and the horrors that it produces, meet in the middle. And this convergence should not, and cannot be done in a coy, reluctant, nor passive manner- not least because the most sectarian voices also tend to be the loudest and most vehement. We must be proactive, and completely unafraid to stand up to the pernicious sectarian voices for the simple reason that they are in and of themselves a test, a fitnah that we must face up to- whether that battle be fought in fighting the sectarian impulses within ourselves, or in standing up to those most intent on spreading sectarianism by urging them to turn to piety and righteousness instead. This is a fight we simply cannot walk away from.

Muslims Can Unite Around the Concept of the 'Rashidun'

But this general overview will not be enough to fight sectarianism. The dispute around the succession of the Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the Ummah is at the centre of sectarian strife and will con-

tinue to be. We must find specific ways and ideas with which to heal the wounds and move forward.

The concept of "Rashidun", which asserts that the first four caliphs of Islam were rightly guided, can be a central beacon of hope for an Islamic community increasingly torn apart and destroyed by sectarian strife. After all, if Sunni-influenced historical interpretations tend to call the first four Caliphs "Rashidun", i.e., the rightly guided Caliphs, surely there is no need to lionise anyone past the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib, as if it was some sort of religious obligation. Any leader that came after the "Rashidun" should be evaluated strictly on a case by case scenario- and this advice is particularly poignant for Sunnis. On the other hand, Shias would do well to completely disregard concerns regarding the righteousness of any of the first three Caliphs, as there is plenty of evidence that the Prophet Muhammad loved and thought highly of them all- and surely he knew best.

Another angle one may adopt is the following - when dealing with the leadership dispute one must seek to circumvent the orthodox leadership dispute in and of itself, insofar as the leadership dispute is the discussion over who should have sat on a certain chair, or who should have been given what political position, responsibilities and title at a certain time in history, and for whatever reason they were not.

The distance of time that separates us from the period during which the leadership dispute actually took place acts like a

moat which is filled with spite, frustration and ultimately the loss of vision regarding what the discussion over the leadership dispute seeks to establish in the first place, what its primary objective is, or at least, should be. At root, the discussion really seeks to inform us regarding the true principles of Islam, its content and priorities and ultimately, how one should go about fulfilling one's religion to the best of one's abilities.

Apart from locking us in endless historical debates, the distance of time between ourselves and the events being discussed is only getting greater, and so too are the problems that it causes. One way to fight against the destructive force, that is the spite that these debates inevitably generates, is to transform the debate around the leadership controversy by reconceptualizing what the concept of leadership actually means, and do this in the light of the actual teachings of Islam, more specifically, by analysing how leadership is transmitted and communicated, and most importantly, to realize that religious leadership, in the full theological and spiritual sense, surely supersedes political power as conceived in a secular, material sense.

For clarity, let's take a step back- one can say that Prophet Muhammad's leadership over us all as Muslims is not one that relies neither on his physical presence nor distance, nor does his authority begin at the time of his having amassed any degree of political power, nor is it diminished by the events in which he will have lost it. Rather

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the root of the legitimacy of his leadership stems from his teachings and legacy, which are transported through time by means of books, stories, sayings and other media, as well as a more direct form of leadership felt by the directly inherited results of the Prophet Muhammad's actions. One can extract some degree of insight from this alone, namely, by looking at, for example, at the leadership of Imam Ali and Abu Bakr as not being necessarily reliant on their political power, and much less in their ascension to the official position as leaders of the Ummah.

What we are seeking is to spiritualize the very concept of leadership, instead of falling into the vulgar limitations of secular and material conceptions of leadership.

Thereafter one must define the extent to which the leadership dispute is in fact a leadership not merely pertaining to sitting on a symbolic or literal throne nor in the holding of any worldly political title during the age in which the two lived. In fact the leadership dispute is more easily recognized in the throne that is in our very understanding, the throne upon which sit those whom we consciously or subconsciously grant our respect and ultimately to whom we defer when it comes to many of our decisions and thought processes by means of a relationship of trust, i.e., faith. And all of this while of course remembering at every turn that, realistically, none of us will never even come close to the merit and high-status of the first four Caliphs, and that our thoughts, attitude, words, and actions should reflect this accordingly.

Demolishing Sectarian Divides- the Theological Argument

Now let us look at some Quranic verses that call on us to bridge sectarian divides and promote religious and political unity

within the religion of Islam and in our Ummah:

• **3:103** - *You shall hold fast to the rope of Allah, all of you, and do not be divided.*

• **6:159** - *Those who divide themselves into sects do not belong with you (Oh Prophet Muhammad). Their judgment rests with God, then He will inform them of everything they had done.*

• **23:52** - *Verily this (your nation, the Ummah) is one nation, and I am your Lord, so keep your duty to Me.*

• **30: 31-32** - *(Adhere to), turning in repentance to Him, and fear Him and establish prayer and do not be of those who associate others with Allah; like those who divide their religion into sects; each party rejoicing with what they have.*

• **42:14** - *And they did not become divided until after knowledge had come to them - out of jealous animosity between themselves. And if not for a word that preceded from your Lord until a specified time, it would have been concluded between them. And indeed, those who were granted inheritance of the Scripture after them are, concerning it are in disquieting doubt.*

And if the religious calling isn't enough to galvanize us into fighting sectarianism- even though it certainly should be- then we can apply simple logic. Here one will have to engage in a certain paradox, perhaps even an unfortunate one, and yet possibly necessary contradiction, which pertains to the very use of the terms Sunni and Shia. After all, as one will have noticed, not least throughout this article, these terms are used often because we need to use them for theological, historical and political analysis- after all, even in this article, which argues against sectarianism, both terms have been used extensively. But one can argue that even though the use of these undeniably sectarian denotations are inevitable, one can also say that we should certainly seek to phase them out when we refer to our own religion- and eventually, seek to remove

them from our vocabulary altogether, especially when it comes to strictly religious affairs.

After all, has the Quran and the Prophet not instructed us that, if we believe in God and His Messenger, that we are to be called "Muslims", and that this is the term we should preferably apply to each other, as well as ourselves? If we have been specifically instructed on how to define our religion, as we have been, who are we to impose, on ourselves or on others, any addendums, whether it be for clarity, for clarification regarding proto-tribal affiliations, or indeed for whatever reason we personally may see fit, such as providing specificities on which school of thought we prefer or which branch of jurisprudence we adhere to?

Have we come so far apart that the term "Muslim" isn't good enough for us? Is it because we are so proud of our own sect that we insist on using these terms? Or worse still, do we insist on using them out of spite for our fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, to the extent that we need to generate a gap between ourselves and them, even going as far as effectively splitting our single religion into several religions- even if it clearly goes against what we have been advised by the Quran and the Holy Prophet himself?

Surely saying that we are Muslims is more than enough.

I made this choice a long time ago. When someone asks me what religion I follow, I only ever have one answer- I am a Muslim, thank God.

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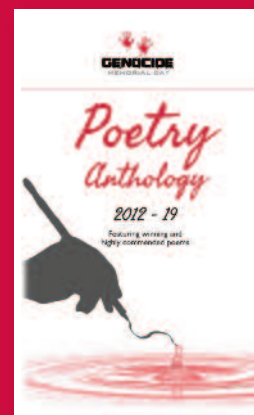
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