

BRITISH [MUSLIM] VALUES

AN RCUK-FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECT

Research Report

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1. Overview

British Values and Islam: Public Perceptions and Experiences

1.1 Context

'British values' has become an increasingly prominent concept in twenty-first century Britain, appearing in issue areas from education to counter-extremism policy and citizenship initiatives. The concept is frequently, although not exclusively, discussed where there are concerns around Islam or Muslim communities, practices, or values. Despite this prominence, very little academic research has been conducted on how publics in Britain themselves understand the term 'British values', or how they see the relationship between 'British values' and Islam. This report addresses this gap, by detailing findings from original academic research on the following questions:

- What does the term 'British values' mean to 'ordinary' people within the United Kingdom?
- What do people living in the United Kingdom think of as 'Muslim values'?
- How do people in the UK understand the relationship between 'British values' and Islam or Muslims?

1.2 Key findings

- Many people in the UK find the term 'British values' elusive or problematic.
- Two dominant understandings of 'British values' emerge: (i) political; and (ii) cultural, although many people see 'British values' as historically variable.
- People are also cautious about defining 'Muslim values', seeing these again as culturally and historically variable. Those who did define this term tended to focus on personal conduct, referring, for instance, to modesty or deference.
- Understandings of Islam are dominated by notions of piety and conservatism, with common reference to issues such as Sharia law, Muslim dress, and women's rights.

- We encountered considerable concern around the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists, extremists, or oppressed.
- Many people argued that British values and Muslim values were either similar or complementary, often because of a shared religious base.
- Participants in our research were less optimistic, seeing tensions around issues such as social practices, gender equality, religiosity, and individual rights.

1.3 About the research

This report details findings from the RCUK-funded *British [Muslim] Values: Conflict or Convergence* (ref. AH/N008340/1), hosted by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research. The project ran from 2016 to 2018, and included academics at the University of East Anglia working with participant researchers from within the East Anglia region. The research employed three methods:

- Film-making, with 16 original **films** on the theme 'British [Muslim] values' created by participant researchers in the region.
- Eight **focus groups**, with Muslim, non-Muslim and mixed attendees.
- Semi-structured **interviews** with researchers, and individuals in the region.

Interview with Qudra

I am British, I don't live in a Muslim majority country and so for me I feel like I can stand up and say actually ... I don't know any separation. I don't know if the same could be said in a small village in Norfolk but Norwich is a really unique place for people, there's always been a sense that there's a place for everybody here. And growing up as a Muslim, there was never a sense that we were ... not welcome, okay we stood out for different reasons but it kind of worked in some ways in our favour, it wasn't a bad thing.

I remember people would say to us - myself and my female friends - people would say "You'd see you coming a mile away with your scarves on", although I never actually wore a scarf. But it was never this sense of "Oh God, here they come", it was like, "wow, there they are", I think because Norwich is so small, everybody knows everybody else, it's always felt incredibly integrated and would that be different anywhere else in England? I don't know.

Qudra worked as a participant researcher on the project, producing her own film on 'British Muslim Values'

Interview with Mo

I don't want people to be told what Muslim values are ... I wanted to really kind of make people think and weigh up where things were in time.

In a way I wanted people to reflect firstly on their own identity before making a judgement about Islamic identity. I think to awaken an intrigue, it's not so concrete a thing for me because, for me, there's 95% of things are shared: the differences are very small.

So I think I wanted people to get into that kind of thing and I suppose I want people's imaginations to be aroused by this and to go about thinking of how things are the same and not different.

Mo worked as a participant researcher on the project, producing his own film on 'British Muslim Values'.

Mo worked as a participant researcher on the project, producing his own film on 'British Muslim Values'

2.1 The term 'British values' has no obvious or immediate meaning for many people living in Britain today. Many of our participants found the term **elusive** - 'It's hard to say exactly what they are'; **vague** - 'the actual idea of British values, that collocation, seems to be a very recent and somewhat nebulous term'; **unfamiliar** - 'British values isn't really a term that's in the ... forefront of my vocabulary really'; **unclear** - 'I don't really understand what is a British value'; and, **variable** - 'people have different definitions of British values, so what might be a British value to one might not be to another'.

2.2 Some people go further, seeing the term as inherently problematic. For some, the term serves narrow **political ends** - 'it's politically driven and it's a reaction to immigration, it's a reaction to Islamic fundamentalism quite often'. Others argue the term is inherently **conservative** and retrograde - 'It smacks of colonialism, that we are extra special and different'. Many see the term as unnecessarily **divisive** - 'calling something British values could potentially be seen as divisive'; and **exclusionary** - 'anything to do with specifying identity could be seen as potentially including or excluding certain groups'.

2.3 Public attempts to define the term 'British values' are dominated by two understandings: (i) political and (ii) cultural.

2.4 Political understandings of 'British values' emphasise liberal democratic norms and standards, often seen to be universal for citizens. These include: **tolerance** - 'tolerance of difference, tolerance of different faiths, religions amongst others'; the **rule of law** - 'Yes, rule of law ... and with that a democratically elected government as well'; **equality of opportunity** - 'I think we're free to live our lives as we choose ... I like to think British values means equality of opportunity for everyone'; and, **freedom** - 'we are a little bit different because I think we are probably one of the only countries in the world where the defining characteristics of freedom are upheld as strongly as they are here. And I would give those as being the rule of law, equality under the law, personal

liberty ... [and] ...representative government, so that whatever sort of a mess they make of it, we can sling them out and try somebody different'.

2.5 Cultural understandings of 'British values' focus on British ways of life. The emphasis here is upon social norms such as **self-deprecation** - 'I think we like to champion the underdog, that's a British quality. Also, laugh, be able to laugh at themselves, and not to take things too seriously'; **integrity** - 'once becoming Muslim I understood more about British values, about my culture. Decency, honesty, integrity, decorum. All aspects of traditional British being'; and **reserve** - 'I think it's quite a British thing to be reserved'. Reference is made, too, to social practices, whether **religious** - 'Christmas is most important for British people to celebrate', or **everyday** such as drinking 'Tea!.'

2.6 Many participants in our research argued that British values **change over time**, although optimistic and pessimistic views evaluate this change differently.

2.7 Pessimistic views point to a **decline in social and political conduct** in Britain, and sometimes beyond in recent years - 'There's been an abandonment of value in the last 50 years. It's quite evident in Britain, Europe and America'; and 'people have changed in their manners, in their way of life ... it was much better many years ago, but now the younger generation has no values at all'. Some link this decline to a rise of **materialism** and social licence: 'the new generation kind of messed up because now all you see on social media [is] drugs, women, cars, that's it.'

2.8 Optimistic views highlighted progress on issues including **multiculturalism** - 'you have all these new different religions and stuff coming into the UK and you look in our sort of, age group, and you think everyone is mixing along quite well and if you go back 30,40 years when our parents were around, that wouldn't happen ... they wouldn't welcome them with open arms'; **gender equality** - 'both sexes have learnt that we don't have to hold the traditional values'; and a relaxing of **Britain's class structure**. 'The maids weren't

allowed to look at their mistresses, they had to keep their eyes down, they were told off if they caught anybody's eye, had to back out of the room. And you can't believe that now ... it just wouldn't happen now'.

2.9 The most positive discussions of 'British values' tended to emerge out of **comparison** with other countries. In general terms, for instance: 'it's important to understand that proportionately Britain maintains a high cultural standard compared to many other countries'. More specific comparisons focused on intolerance or inequalities elsewhere - 'some religions and stuff like that, if someone else doesn't agree with them then they'll go, like, shooting people and stuff like that, but with British people ... we don't'; and 'in Saudi [Arabia] ... there isn't liberty, there's no democracy and there certainly isn't women's rights'.

Interview with Lila

I think this 'British values' ... shouldn't be discussed to an extent that it causes division, it shouldn't. It's really not that relevant or important, as long as we have a universal understanding and mutual respect and all that, that's what matters.

Just because somebody doesn't agree to a democracy, doesn't mean they're against Great Britain. Lots of people don't want to vote - non-Muslims as well - they don't want to vote because they just think 'what's the point?'

Lots of people have their own views but I just don't want this research about British values to cause more division and more ... try not to fix something that's not broken.

Lila worked as a participant researcher on the project, producing several films on 'British Muslim Values'.

3. Public understandings of ‘Muslim Values’

3.1 Participants in our research demonstrated scepticism, too, to the idea that there are identifiable, uniform or unchanging Muslim values. Some pointed to geographical or **cultural differences** - 'not all Muslims from around the world have got the same values or the same culture, we haven't'; **historical change** - 'Muslim values are changing as times change and as cultures change, and as Muslims are influenced by other things'; and, personal **interpretation**: 'it's quite personal. It's like if I'm homophobic then my Islam would be homophobic. If I'm violent, my Islam would be violent. If I'm a feminist my Islam would be feminist. It's really that simple'.

3.2 Specific depictions of 'Muslim values' focused on personal conduct, especially **hospitality** - 'one specific thing that jumped out at me when I was travelling a lot in predominantly Muslim countries was hospitality'; **respect** - 'I've worked with a lot of the young people for a long time, and a lot of them have been Muslim, and it has always struck me that they're very respectful towards other people and especially towards older people and to women'; **deference** 'we have to always respect adults and we cannot speak to adults rudely'; and, **modesty** - 'you have to be really decent in front of your parents'.

3.3 These resonate with broader public understandings of Muslims as **pious** 'If you're a practicing Muslim you'll pray five times a day, there are so many rights and rituals around it, [in] which the secular and the religious are kind of intertwined', and **devout** 'if you are of the Muslim faith you are probably far more committed than if you're of the Christian faith, in this day and age'. Others argued that Muslims are increasingly **integrated** within Britain 'my Muslim friends who are teenagers ...would act differently in their house compared to the values they have outside; 'and, **liberal**' - Muslims here in Britain, because they're

being influenced by Western values, are changing and becoming more liberal towards homosexual rights and stuff like that'.

3.4 Less positive characterisations of Muslims in Britain today argued they are **easily offended** - 'it is very, very easy to offend Muslims, they're easily offendable, offended as a group. I don't want to generalise, but that's what it seems, in a way that you don't get with other religions'; **non-conformist** - 'when we have British Muslims in this country, they don't actually follow our rules. Our rules being removing head wear'; and **vulnerable** - 'I think this radicalisation and marginalisation actually needs to be looked at quite seriously'.

3.5 When discussing Islam and Muslims, participants in our research often made reference to specific norms, practices and ideas. Particularly prominent were issues around **personal presentation and dress** - 'the bigger the beard the better, apparently, so I'm told' - and - 'I'm a Muslim [but] if you're living in this country, I don't think ...you should actually ... cover your whole face ... because that would be threatening'; **Sharia law** - 'in Sharia law you're not meant to have a bank account, you're not allowed interest'; **hate preachers** - 'Islam is merely an excuse for some manic, power-crazed - whoever he is - to, to, if you like manage the radicalisation'; and, **gender equality** - 'forced marriage and you know, like, FGM as well, that happens with the Muslim community as well sometimes, so it really concerns me', and 'I'm really interested about how [the] Muslim community can have, is allowed to have more than one wife'.

3.6. These characterisations of Muslims and Muslim practices fed into common - although not universal - understandings of Islam as **conservative** - 'in Christianity and Judaism there are very liberal arms of those religions which welcome gay marriage and homosexuality generally. ... I may be wrong - but I think it's more of a problem for Islamic culture to deal with'; having a **primacy** for believers - 'the nation of Islam is always going to be stronger than the host nation'; **moral** - 'in my religion and in my holy book ... it doesn't say anything

about killing people or anything ... All it says is be nice to someone and whoever helps you'; and, **routinised** 'If you are Muslim, you must pray'.

3.7 Many contributors expressed frustration with media and political representations of Islam and Muslims. Prominent here was a concern with the tendency to equate Islam with (and blame Islam for) **terrorism** - 'politicians, they only focus on Islam when there is a bomb here or a bomb there, and they use it as a tool to attack certain people, certain communities'; and, 'Non-violence is very important to Islam. That seems to have got lost in the media's perception where they seem to conflate terrorism/extremism with a religion', and **fundamentalism** - 'it's almost like every Muslim is capable of Islam[ic] fundamentalism ... And, you don't, you don't have the same comparison with Christians'.

3.8 People expressed frustration at the disproportionate reaction to Muslim **dissent** - 'Whatever they say that contradicts the mainstream liberal elite ... people say "Ahh you're a Muslim: it shouldn't be like that'. And, several argued that Muslims are **stigmatised** through government initiatives such as the Prevent programme, which tends to focus a 'microscope on one section, the Muslims, because they're the ones most likely to bomb you or kill you, or whatever', and in British life more generally 'I think when you hear British and then a Muslim, you think, "Oh, Muslim", so you just get this stereotype straight in your head'. **Muslim women** were seen by some as doubly stereotyped here: 'When we go for a job, when we go about, you do get this sort of feeling, "oh dear, she's a woman, she's oppressed'.

Interview with Muqaddam

Yes, we understand that there's a lot of radicalised people, we understand that. But think about the everyday Muslim. There's however many billions across the world, not every single one is a terrorist, not every single one wants to harm you, and not every single one wants to impose their religion on you", which is largely the sentiment that you see out there.

Muqaddam worked as a participant researcher on the project, producing a film on 'British Muslim Values'.

4. 'British Values' and Islam

4.1 A number of participants in our research argued that British values and Muslim values were **inherently similar**, such that - 'There's very little differentiation between Islamic values and British values ...there's no separation and that has to be made clear'. **Specific examples** were given to illustrate this at times, for instance - 'the things that people tout as being British values I think sometimes are quite aligned to what ... I understand [as] being Muslim values, things like generosity, charity'. As one non-Muslim put it: 'I think they do respect our values. Their values are nearly the same'.

4.2 One common explanation for this complementarity was a common **Abrahamic foundation** to contemporary social and moral values - 'we are more similar than we have differences, and most of the religions are based on moral values, so British values ... [are] initiated from a religious base anyway so I can't see a conflict'. **Britain's Christian heritage** was mentioned in this context - 'our British values are mostly based on Christian values, then, and they are fairly similar to Muslim values aren't they?'

4.3 Other explanations for this similarity focused on **integration and social learning**, for instance 'Some Muslims might come across [to the UK] ... and they'll hold some of their Muslim values, but they'll also take some of our British values and agree with them and have them as part of their values as well, which is where then they integrate with us because we can share the same views and things like that'.

4.4 This similarity was seen as desirable, providing **opportunities for social and inter- cultural dialogue** - 'I don't see any conflict, I see more hand to hand ... it makes a bridge together, that's even better for the future, for the community for society'.

4.5 Other participants argued there were significant differences, and even tensions between British values and Islam. At their most benign, this included around **social practices** such as alcohol consumption 'Some Muslims drink here, but if it was over in their own country they wouldn't be allowed'.

4.6 More significant were concerns around **gender equality** - 'Muslims' ideology has a slightly different idea of what relationships between the sexes should be than our society which is basically secular'; and - 'forced marriage, yeah, so that's a normal thing for them where[as] here we don't agree with it, it's not legal'. As this person continued - 'the people I know that are Muslims, they have no tolerance for women'. Others, finally, highlighted different levels of **religiosity** - 'one of the core British things is - we don't really get that religion is so important, we just don't get that', and variable emphasis on **individual rights** 'in countries where the Muslims are majority, there's no acceptance to others, there is no individual rights, and if they just think about this, they found these things here in the UK, in Europe, in their new lives, new communities'.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 Although the term British Values is highly contested, and arguably misappropriated, there is the potential to construct a narrative around British Values that can have a positive effect on social cohesion. Rather than British Values being used to differentiate between 'in' and 'out' groups the inclusive qualities or values of tolerance, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom, integrity, self-deprecation and reserve should be emphasised without regard to religious faith or practice or its absence.
- 5.2 An inclusive approach of this sort involves recognising that such values will be understood differently, and that this is not only acceptable but also healthy in a liberal democratic political environment.
- 5.3 There remains a risk that 'British' is still understood or used as a proxy for ethnic identity or place of birth. This has implications for public perceptions of individuals not fitting this model of the ideal citizen, including recent migrants, members of non-Christian faith communities, and members of Black and Minority Ethnic communities.
- 5.4 The use of terms such as 'British values' within security politics – such as the Prevent Strategy - risks generating public scepticism or disengagement, not least given suspicion of politicians and their motives.
- 5.5 This study has also demonstrated the wide range of experience and diversity of different Muslim individuals and communities across the eastern region and highlighted the heterogeneous nature of people following a particular faith. The temptation by politicians, media and some Muslim organisations to homogenise 'British Muslims' and negatively stereotype diverse communities, should be resisted as counterproductive to social well-being and cohesion.

5.6 Discussion groups and citizen-created media of the sort used in this research have real potential to generate public discussion around life in Britain today, and - indeed - empathy toward the lives, experiences and challenges faced by others.

6. Further Information

6.1 The researchers

Lee Jarvis is Professor of International Politics at UEA. He is single or joint author or editor of eleven books, and over fifty articles or chapters on the politics of security and terrorism. These include *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (with Richard Jackson, Jeroen Gunning, and Marie Breen Smyth); *Anti-terrorism, Citizenship and Security* (with Michael Lister), and *Counter-Radicalisation: Critical Perspectives* (with Christopher Baker-Beall and Charlotte Heath-Kelly). His research has been funded by the ESRC, the AHRC, NATO, and the US Office for Naval Research. **Email:** l.jarvis@uea.ac.uk

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Teaching, Learning and Scholarship Knowledge Community of NAFSA: Association of International Educators between 2015-2018. She is the recipient of 2016 Society for Cinema and Media Studies Outstanding Contribution to Pedagogy Award, and has recently been selected as a HEA National Teaching Fellow. She is the author of *Women and Turkish Cinema: Gender Politics, Cultural Identity and Representation* (2012) and editor of *Directory of World Cinema: Turkey* (Intellect, 2013). She is the director of *Growing Up Married* – an internationally acclaimed documentary about forced marriage and child brides in Turkey. Email: e.atakav@uea.ac.uk

6.2 Further resources

- Website: <https://britishmuslimvalues.wordpress.com/>
- Article: What British Muslims think about the term 'British Values', *The Conversation UK*: <https://theconversation.com/what-british-muslims-think-about-the-term-british-values-86423>

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Prof Lee Jarvis, Prof Lee Marsden and Dr Eylem Atakav
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