



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## British Responses to 11 September

Nielsen, J.S.

### Citation

Nielsen, J. S. (2002). British Responses to 11 September. *Isim Newsletter*, 9(1), 16-16.  
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17545>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17545>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Western Europe  
JORGEN S. NIELSEN

# British Responses to 11 September

Responses to the events of 11 September have been extraordinarily mixed, not to say confused. They have been further complicated by responses to 7 October and after, when the air raids against Afghanistan started. In Britain, the situation is particularly affected by the high proportion of Muslims with strong links to Pakistan, to Pathan and Pushtun origins, and in some cases directly to Afghanistan.

One of the first questions journalists have been asking has been regarding the number of Muslims in Britain today. This is a question no one will answer at the moment because we are expecting the results of the April 2001 Census – to be reported during the next twelve months – which included for the first time since 1851 a question on religion. So we have to work with vague orders of magnitude. But it is obvious and well known that the public profile of British Islam is dominated by Muslims of South Asian ori-

gins. Public meetings have been held bringing leading Muslims together with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and the Chief Rabbi. The Inter-faith Network for the UK, which brings together leaders of all the main faiths in the country, also issued a measured public statement.

However, much attention was attracted by a small group of mosques and organizations, mostly in London, which expressed support for the attacks and for Usama bin Laden and the Taliban regime. The leader of Supporters of Sharia, Sheikh Abu Hamza al-Masri, based at a mosque in Finchley, de-

clared the attackers to be martyrs and called on young Muslims to join the 'jihad'. Al-Muhajiroun, a splinter group from Hizb al-Tahrir, led by Sheikh Umar Bakri Muhammad, held public demonstrations in several cities in support of the attacks. During October, they alleged that four young British Muslims had died fighting with the Taliban, and that more had travelled to Afghanistan in a programme organized by the Al-Muhajiroun. Relatives and friends of the young men denied the allegations.

These incidents served to illustrate the mixed reactions of the media to events since 11 September. The Al-Muhajiroun demonstrations were widely reported both in print and on radio and television stations. It was usually made clear that they represented only a small minority, but the picture material that accompanied reports often left a sense that the correction was of a token nature. Coming at a time when the concept of 'Islamophobia' had gained a good degree of circulation following the report of the Runnymede Trust two years ago, a number of observers were quick to note a widespread Islamophobia in the press. Runnymede Trust staff have confirmed their view that this has been the case. There have, however, been extensive and often notable exceptions. Perhaps the most surprising has been the public stand which the *Sun* newspaper has taken in its editorial pronouncements against racism and harassment of Muslims. Some commentators have suggested that this has been the result of persistent lobbying by the prime minister's press spokesman. Others have suggested that it reflects the newspaper's well-known sense of where its readers' views are moving (whence its shift from Conservative to Labour in the 1997 elections). A *Guardian* poll on the public's attitude to the war after 7 October also indicated that more than two-thirds of those polled did not see Muslims as a threat in Britain. Other newspapers have commissioned external writers to produce pieces aimed at calming public sentiments.

Politicians have also been busy. Prime Minister Tony Blair has, on a number of occasions, called for civil calm, condemned those who have harassed Muslims, and insisted that the diplomatic and military action has very specific aims which are far from amounting to a 'war against Islam'. He held a widely reported meeting and press conference with Muslim leaders at Downing Street, at which he expressed his support and sympathy for their situation and they repeated their condemnation of the attacks and of terrorism in general. Local members of Parliament have met with local Muslim leaders to express support for their rights. When Lady Thatcher, former Conservative prime minister, said that Muslim leaders had not been strong enough in their condemnation of terrorism, the newly elected leader of the Conservative Party, Ian Duncan Smith, was quick to say that she was not speaking for the party.

## British specificity

From the beginning, the attacks of 11 September have been linked with a number of long-standing issues in the Muslim and developing worlds. Only the *Daily Telegraph* (whose Canadian owner also owns the *Jerusalem Post*) has consistently refused to consider the attacks in a broader context of Western policies towards key issues in the Muslim world, above all the US presence in Saudi Arabia and the question of Palestine. Particularly notable in drawing attention to such links have been Robert Fisk, writing in the *Independent*, and David Hirst in the *Guardian*. But they have not been alone. A number of newspapers have made the point editorially, as did the prime minister by clear implication in a speech to the Labour Party conference.

Clearly the various responses outlined above will be recognizable in other European countries in varying degrees, depending on the particular configuration of political, ethnic and cultural balances. The specificity of the British response is related in part to the length of time that Muslim communities have been present – longer than in most of the rest of Western Europe. Since the early 1990s there has been a major demographic shift by which much of the leadership has been taken over by younger people born in Britain, a change that was triggered, at least in part, by the Rushdie affair twelve years ago. The encounter of social marginalization in some parts of the community and some of the radical Islamism present among London-based exiles has, at the opposite end of the scale, offered a route by which a few young men have been lured into violent resistance in parts of the Muslim world. An example of this was the instance in 1999 when a small group of young men, mostly from Birmingham, found themselves facing a Yemeni court on charges of plotting terrorism in Aden. But a

significant element in the British context has also been the marked shift towards political inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities instituted by the Labour government since it came to power in 1997. This has increased the value of the organized Muslim leadership's investment in working within the local and national political system.

Another dimension of the British situation, which I suspect is shared with France, is that the two countries had their 'affairs' – Rushdie and headscarves – twelve years ago. I have recently had occasion to observe at close quarters the response in Denmark to the 11 September events. My impression is that there are many more issues, tensions and sensitivities are being concentrated into this response than has been the case in Britain. In a sense Denmark appears to be experiencing 11 September and the Rushdie affair all in one. The political and cultural debate bears many similarities to the debates we saw in Britain in 1989, above all the issue of the degree of Muslim integration into and identification with Denmark – and the consequent questions about Muslim 'threats' and 'loyalties'. At the same time the demographic chronography of Muslim immigration and settlement is such that the Danish-born Muslim generation is beginning to become politically active a decade later than in Britain. The result is that Muslim organizations have recently seen a growing generation shift in their leadership, and that young Danish Muslims are also becoming active in the political parties. With the decision to hold a parliamentary election on 20 November, the issues of immigration and refugee policy have been placed firmly into a context of post-11 September public debate about Islam, and Danish Muslim election candidates are being exposed to harder public scrutiny and interrogation about views and backgrounds which previously would have attracted rather less attention. So the Danish response has become dependent on the strength of a democratic and liberal tradition which has already for some years been under threat from the nationalist right expressed in the Danish People's Party. By comparison the British environment has had time to construct the experience and the networks which can provide the resilience necessary to get through the current crisis.

## Note

\* The following account is drawn from the abstract of British press reporting on Islam in Britain, which my Centre publishes in the *British Muslims Monthly Survey* ([www.bmms.net](http://www.bmms.net)).

Jorgen S. Nielsen is professor of Islamic studies and director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC), Department of Theology, University of Birmingham, UK.



[HTTP://WWW.UNDERCURRENTS.ORG](http://www.undercurrents.org)

Anti-war demonstration in London, 18 November 2001.

gin, a fact of which the public was reminded very directly during the racial disturbances in some northern cities in the early summer of this year.\*

In the immediate aftermath of 11 September there were a number of incidents of 'low-level' harassment of Muslim targets. Some Muslim websites closed down after they were flooded by hate mail. Mosques and Muslim buildings were attacked by air guns and stone throwing. Behind the ostensible Muslim targeting has often been traditional racism. Individuals and families have been harassed in public. There have been cases of women having their head scarves ripped off and others being physically attacked. Often such attacks have been directed against Asians regardless of whether they really were Muslim or not – thus a number of Hindu and Sikh individuals and institutions have also been targets.

## Covering Muslim responses

Muslim organizations were quick and explicit in their condemnation of the New York and Washington attacks. The Muslim Council of Britain issued a very sharp statement already on 12 September, as did a number of local organizations and leaders as well as Muslim members of Parliament, Lords and Commons. Further statements appeared over the following weeks as events internationally and nationally developed. In many mosques and Muslim schools prayers were said for the victims, and in many towns Muslims, Christian and Jewish leaders met to pray together and to issue joint statements of condemnation and appeals for calm. Pub-