

New Muslim Elites in The City

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The City Circle, set up in 1999 by a group of young Muslim professionals, some of whom work in London's financial district (the City) is one of many Muslim organizations established in different cities of Britain, and of Europe, by the generations of Muslims born on the continent, who on the one hand do not want to discard the religious heritage of their parents and on the other, do not feel comfortable within the existing organizational structures.¹ The key point of reference for these new organizations is not the region of origin or some foreign agency, but the national and local context. While engaging in work with different actors of the country's civil society they are at the same time becoming more "ecumenical" in their attitudes to cooperation with Islamic religio-political movements different from their own. The most telling is probably the current cooperation of the young British Muslims involved in the production of the magazine Q-News (Brelwi sympathies) with organizations such as FOSIS or YMOUK (Ikhwan Muslimun and Jamaat-i Islami sympathies) in the organization of the Radical Middle Way project.²

Notably, one of the biggest transformations in recent years within Islam in Great Britain, as well as in larger Western Europe, is that it has ceased to be only the religion of immigrants and is now becoming a religion of European-born citizens. The generational change marks not so much difference in the legal citizenship status of Muslims, as in identity, participation, and understanding of civic rights and duties. While the first generation of immigrants were often unable to play active roles in the public life of the wider society due to lack of cultural resources (e.g. poor knowledge of the receiving country's language or lack of education), their offspring is often quite well equipped with these tools. These young Muslims not only better understand the political and administrative processes of their country, but also are often eager to make use of this knowledge and their civic rights.

New Muslim elites

Citizenship is crucial to the identity of 120 young Muslim Londoners from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are actively involved in running the City Circle's activities. In contrast to the majority of Muslim organizations in the country the Circle refrains in its name and promotion material from direct references to religion or religious community, clearly preferring the reference to the occupational category—employees of the City—or to the larger category of professionals. Its assumed religiously neutral status does not only enable the association

to build up close links with other Muslim and non-Muslim groups and organizations, but also to involve in its activities Muslims from various ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, for example, by inviting them to its weekly sessions. The City Circle likes to describe itself as "an open circle of minds who want to promote the development of a distinct British Muslim identity and to assist the process of community cohesion and integration."³ As such it constitutes an important part of the new Muslim elite⁴ that has emerged in London in recent years and that tries through various projects to contribute to tackling such issues faced by the Muslim population like, for example, educational underachievement or lack of role models, and thus at least partially solve the problem of collective uncertainty. This elite consists of people who very often have cut their Islamist teeth

The members of the new Muslim elites emerging in European cities possess a number of crucial means that allow them to choose between different courses of action and move beyond the formal to more substantive forms of citizenship. This article follows the discursive practices of the City Circle, to analyse how its members play a role in deconstructing media myths about Islam and solving problems of collective uncertainty among young urban Muslims in London.

in all sorts of university Islamic Societies or in one of many Muslim youth organizations and after completion of their studies decided to remain active in the Muslim civil society. Their approach can be on the whole described as constructive engagement with the local and national institutions and is well captured in the following statement by one of its members: "We are not interested in conversions, but in convergence. We, communities together; convergence on

shared interests, shared values, shared objectives and shared future" (Interview with Sajid).

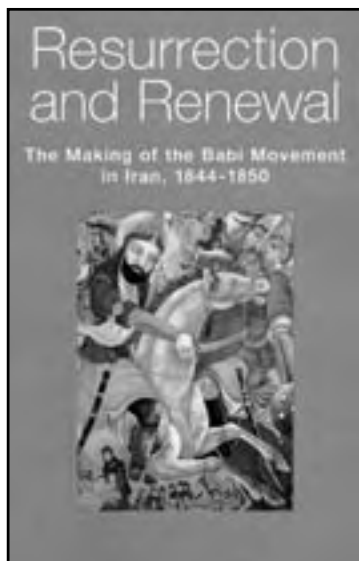
In contrast to the majority of first generation Muslims the core members of the Circle, British-born Muslims, possess a number of crucial means that allow them to choose between different courses of action and to move beyond the formal to more substantive forms of citizenship. Their case upholds the thesis of Verba et al. who argue that the level of involvement in voluntary activities depends on three kinds of resources: time, money, and civic skills, and that when inputs of time and money are coupled to civic skills, then people become not only more likely to participate but also more likely to be effective when they do.⁵ The last resource, namely civic skills, is precisely what the first generation of Muslims who lived their formative years outside Europe, lacked. Those born in Europe, on the other hand, even if they do not manage to gain substantial amounts of cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications (institutionalized cultural capital), they still possess much wider knowledge, than their parents, of the mechanisms how the European societies work, acquired during the process of socialization (embodied cultural capital).⁶ Members of the new Muslim elites possess usually not only substantial amounts of the embodied cultural capital, but also the institutional form of it. All the core members of the City Circle for example finished universities and often the most prestigious ones, such as University College of London or Cambridge or Oxford.

Key activities and main motivations

Among the projects carried out by the City Circle, the educational ones—career guidance for students; Saturday school consolidating students' knowledge in National Curriculum subjects; and Jannah Club teaching children Quran and Arabic—occupy the most important place.⁷ These projects have the same objective, that is, "to create a balanced and sensible individual" (interview with Shazad). All of them also spring up from the same negative assessment of the current situation of Muslims in the country and in particular from analysis showing the poor performance of Muslim children at schools. "Intellectually we are backward, economically we are backward. Look where all indicators are. Muslims have to learn so much!"—notes one of the Circle's members (interview with Sajid). However, it is not only the willingness to improve the performance of Muslim children at schools that is driving members to get involved in the above mentioned projects. Almost all persons interviewed talked also about a strong desire to share their personal success with others, as Sajid puts it: "If we have made it, [achieved personal success] we need to try to transfer these skills back to the community and help others below us to get there as well."

Although the educational projects are the flagship of City Circle, it is its Friday-sessions that have popularized the association among the wider public. The aim of these weekly gatherings frequented, on average, by around 100 people is to act as a forum of debate and discussion on the issues concerning the country's Muslim population. Although the vast majority of speakers and listeners at these sessions are Muslims, it is not uncommon to find among the panellists, as well as among

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the audience, non-Muslims. For example, one of their gatherings after the 7 July bombing devoted to "the criminal distortion of the Islamic texts" was being filmed by the BBC Panorama; while 2 weeks later Roger Mosey, BBC Head of Television News, was under a storm of questions from the audience trying to explain "how BBC sees the world." Recently, and in particular after the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, the City Circle debates have started to play not only a role of important intra-community debate forum, but with more and more broadsheet newspapers referring to the opinions expressed during these sessions⁸ they have also begun to influence the larger discourse on Islam in Britain. Thus, ironically the organization that does not make any claims of representing Muslim population in the country or to speak on its behalf, has played a significant role in shaping the debate on the possible causes and results of the terrorist attacks in London. In this way the Circle has been able to counter the attempts of hijacking the discourse on Islam in Britain by some groups and to propose more complex views of the facts.

Making Islam a less lonely place

Not only do the Circle's weekly gatherings contribute to enriching the debates on Islam and provide many of its participants with intellectual and spiritual nourishment, they are also very important vehicles of social networking among young Muslim professionals in the global city. Actually, the desire to get to know other Muslim professionals has been one of the root causes behind setting up the organization. This is evident for instance in the following account of one of its founding members: "initially it was more like people getting together for a bit of a lecture but really to go out afterwards for curry. Because nobody knew anybody. In London it is difficult to connect with people 'cause it is such a huge city." Although the main outcome of the networking within the organization is building bonding social capital, as the majority of friends that members of the Circle make through the meetings and projects are Muslims, it also enables building bridging social capital (particularly at the institutional level) as the organization is closely cooperating with a number of non-Muslim bodies (e.g. Fulbright Commission).

The City Circle with its weekly sessions does not only make Islam a "less lonely place" as one unmarried member put it, but also provides them with an alternative to drinking culture that is the most popular way of socializing among young Britons. Obedience of the Islamic prohibition

of drinking alcohol entails "refusal of commensality" and "rejection of social intercourse,"⁹ and in practice means exclusion from a very important part of British culture. Practising Muslims are thus forced to search for other means of socializing that would comply with Islamic instructions. The desire to create vital alternatives to drinking culture has been in fact one of the most commonly advanced explanations by the respondents for setting up the association, as made clear in the following account by a member: "While I was doing my work I always felt as you was wearing a straight jacket because I did not participate in pub culture and the rest of it. So I very strongly felt the need of finding a halal alternative, where we Muslims could hang out and chill out without being concerned about alcohol." Although the Circle has not solved the problem of halal ways of socializing for all concerned young Muslim Londoners, it has definitely provided some of them with an important substitute.

The emergence of groups similar to the City Circle in other parts of Europe (e.g. Presence Musulmane in Brussels) allows one to hope that the numerous problems faced by Muslim populations in Europe will be debated openly and addressed adequately. The new Muslim elites growing in European cities are challenging classical notions of citizenship not only by claiming public recognition of their sameness, but also of their difference. With the assistance of citizenship, which is today one of the major discourses of entitlement, they have been following the footsteps of ethnic minorities, women, gays, and lesbians in seeking space for their heritage and values in both the public and private sphere.

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Notes

1. The empirical material for this article was gathered in July and August 2005. All names of informants have been changed in order to provide them with full anonymity.
2. See www.radicalmiddleway.org.uk.
3. See www.thecitycircle.com.
4. By Muslim elite I mean social actors who participate directly or indirectly in processes of decision making that are important for the future of Muslim population and the wider society.
5. S. Verba, K. L. Schlozman, and H. E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 271.
6. Both terms are used in the sense given them by Pierre Bourdieu, "The forms of capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243-48.
7. For more information about the projects, see: www.thecitycircle.com.
8. See, for example, M. Bunting, "Orphans of Islam," *Guardian*, 18 July 2005; Z. Sardar, "Beyond blame and shame: what we must do now," *New Statesman*, 25 July 2005; E. Mosood, "Muslim Journey," *Prospect*, August 2005.
9. M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 40.