



## A Brief Introduction to Islam

Muslims come from a **range of cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds**, making the practice of Islam in the UK varied and reflective of its global diversity. According to the 2011 census, the population of Muslims in England and Wales was 2.4 million, just over 5% of the population. In Scotland, Muslims accounted for 0.83% of the population, and in Northern Ireland, 0.2%. These figures make Muslims the second largest religious group, after Christians, in the United Kingdom, with adherents including an increasing number of young, British-born Muslims, as well as converts. Religious observance of individuals can vary with, for example, some individuals adopting a **Muslim identity** based on their religious belief, whilst others may see being Muslim as solely a cultural identity. Many Muslims also describe a strong connection to the **Ummah**, which is the worldwide Muslim community.

Since its arrival in seventh-century Arabia, there have been various interpretations of Islam that have resulted in different schools of thought and sects. The main historical division is between the Sunni and Shi'a branches, and within these traditions, further differences in belief and practice have led to other schisms. There are also modern movements that can be, for example, reformist or revivalist such as the **Deobandi** and **Salafi**. Other groups, like the **Ahmadiyya** and the **Nation of Islam** self-identify as Muslims, but they are regarded by the majority of the Muslim world as being heterodox.

### Patrons

This leaflet will cover the basics of Islam in order to provide some context to the various Islamic movements that can be found in the UK, some of which will be described in more detail at the end.

## Overview

---

Islam began as a small community of believers in **seventh-century Arabia**. In 2020, Islam is followed by around 23 per cent of the world population, an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims. Muslims believe that Muhammad (alternative spellings include Mohammad, Muhammed) was the last of God's prophets and came to preach a message of monotheism. He is believed to be part of a lineage of prophets, including Moses, Abraham and Jesus, and thus Islam was not seen as a new religion by its early followers but as a perfection and completion of God's message. Followers of Islam believe that the final message of God was communicated to the Prophet Muhammad and is preserved in the Quran (also spelt as Koran), which is the main Muslim scripture.

## The Prophet Muhammad

The Islamic declaration of faith states that **'there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God'**, and thus Muhammad is central to Islamic belief. Muhammad's life is documented extensively by Islamic scholars in sources known as the Hadith, and other writings. There are also various secular biographies compiled by scholars, as well as discussions on Muhammad's life within academia, media and public discourse.

According to the traditionally accepted narrative, Muhammad was born in **Mecca**, Arabia in 570CE. During his adulthood, Muhammad would often retreat to the mountains on the outskirts of Mecca where he would reflect on the state of his society. Tradition states that it was on one of these retreats at the age of 40 that Muhammad was visited by the archangel Gabriel, and during this spiritual experience was instructed to read God's message.

Muhammad then began preaching in secret because his message of one God would challenge the authority of the tribes that controlled Mecca. His small group of followers grew over the coming years and suffered persecution, and so in 622CE they, along with Muhammad, left Mecca for Yathrib (now known as Medina). This emigration is known as the Hijra, and is used as the start-date of the Islamic calendar. The Islamic date for September 2020 is 1442AH (After Hijra).

Once in **Medina**, Muhammad formed the first Muslim community and drafted a charter to bring about peace between rival tribes and ensure the rights of Jews, Muslims, Pagans and other minorities in the city. During his lifetime, Muhammad received more revelations, which changed the way of life of his followers, and slowly reformed some tribal traditions that were considered harmful. Prevailing gender norms were also challenged and women were given the rights of inheritance and divorce that had previously been denied to them. Other examples of change included outlawing alcohol, gambling and usury (lending at excessive interest), and establishing prayer five times a day for believers.

Muhammad died at the age of 63 and was buried in his house, where he had passed away. His grave now forms part of the mosque known as **Al-Masjid al-Nabawi** (The Prophet's Mosque). Millions of Muslims visit Medina every year due to its historical significance, and today Muhammad's legacy lives on in the daily lives of believers who say **'Salallahu alayhi wa-salam'** (Peace and blessings of God be

upon Him), or **'Alayhi as-salām'** (Peace be upon Him) in Arabic after they mention his name. This is seen as a mark of respect. In written English, 'Peace be upon Him' is often abbreviated to **PBUH**.



'Peace and blessings of God be upon Him' is seen in Arabic on the top left of Muhammad's name

After the death of Muhammad, the Muslim community was sequentially led by four of his close companions, who were elected as the caliphs (leaders). These caliphs were not accepted by all of the Muslim community, resulting in various disputes over leadership, the biggest one leading to the split between **Sunni** and **Shi'a** Islam.

### **Main Beliefs**

---

In general, Muslims within the main Sunni and Shi'a traditions share the same fundamental beliefs. These are the belief in the existence of **one God**, the **angels** and the **unseen** (such as heaven and hell), **prophets and messengers of God** from the time of Adam to Muhammad, as well as the **books** that were revealed by God. These include the scrolls given to Abraham, the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms given to David, and an original scripture revealed to Jesus. Whilst early Muslims held that these scriptural texts were essentially valid but misinterpreted, the development of the doctrine of *tahrif* (textual alteration) meant that they were eventually held to be unreliable because their very textual content was wilfully distorted. For example, the message revealed to Jesus is not believed to be the same as what is currently recorded in the New Testament, and thus a final revelation was revealed to Muhammad in the form of the Quran. Other major beliefs include the **day of judgement**, **life after death** and **divine predestination**. (The highlighted beliefs are often referred to as the Six Articles of Faith.)

### **Quran and Sunnah**

**The Quran**, which is the main scripture in Islam, is accepted by Muslims as the direct word of God (although this does not necessarily result in literal interpretations). The revelations that came to Muhammad were written down in his lifetime and formally compiled into the Quran, which is believed to be **unaltered**, after his death. As well as beliefs, the Quran advises on legal matters, for example, in relation to marriage, divorce and business, as well as more general guidance on ethics and etiquette. As it is written in **classical Arabic**, the Quran is not easily translated into other languages, and thus different interpretations and discussions are available alongside it as commentary.

In addition to the Quran, the example of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the **Sunnah**, is also integral to Muslims. As the last prophet and messenger of God, Muhammad is seen as the best example of Islam in practice. Religious biographies that describe his life are known as the **Seerah**, and his sayings and actions are compiled in documents known as **Hadith**. Hadith are considered crucial,

and can also be referred to in order to provide the context for specific Islamic teachings. Whilst the text within the Quran is accepted by all major Islamic sects, different groups tend to have their own collections of Hadith, each claiming theirs is authentic and therefore leading to differing practices. Traditional scholars from the medieval era also developed a systematic method of classifying Hadith based on their degrees of reliability, and rejected several fabricated Hadith.

Rules derived from the Quran and Hadith are often referred to collectively as '**Sharia Law**', although there is no consensus on what this means. In the UK, what are often dubbed '**Sharia Courts**' in the media are seen by Muslims as **intermediaries** in, for example, matters of marital dispute. They have no power to enforce rulings, and provide mediation services to those Muslims who choose to use them.

There are some beliefs which Muslims regard as the foundation of their religion, and essential to practice in their everyday life. These are often referred to as the five pillars and include:

- **Shahadah** - This is the **proclamation of faith** that 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God'. Muslims view this statement as underpinning their faith and hope for it to be their final words before they pass away.
- **Salat** - This refers to **ritual worship** in the form of **five daily prayers**, which is a very important aspect of daily life for Muslims. The prayers are performed at five different intervals throughout the day, after **ritual washing** has been completed. If Muslims are at work, the set times for each prayer means that they may need to break from their daily schedules to find a quiet space or use a prayer room. For Muslim males, praying in congregation on a Friday (the Muslim holy day) is seen as essential (in some cases, extra prayer space may be sought in order to accommodate large numbers). If it is convenient, some Muslims may attend a local mosque. In the case where Muslims are unable to break for worship, they may make up the missed prayer at a later time. Ritual worship is different to a more personal form of supplication (often called Du'a), which can be performed at any time. Within the Shi'a tradition, some scholars allow for the combining of two ritual prayers together, equating to three prayer clusters in total per day. (Note: Salat is the Arabic term; however in the UK ritual prayer is popularly referred to as **Namaaz**, its Persian equivalent).
- **Sawm** - Another key practice for Muslims is **fasting** for a period of up to **30 days**, every year in the month of **Ramadan**. Ramadan is the central point of the Muslim calendar, where individuals abstain from food and drink **between dawn and dusk**. There is emphasis on breaking away from worldly activities and instead, taking time for reflection. Muslims also believe that the first part of the Quran was revealed to Muhammad on one of the last nights in Ramadan, known as **Laylat al-Qadr** (The Night of Power). In this month, time is spent with the family and the community, who often gather together to break the fast in their home or mosques, and distribute food to the poor. Fasting can be missed for various health reasons and observant Muslims will try to make up the portion at a later date. To celebrate the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate **Eid ul Fitr**, which is a festive time spent with family and friends, with extra prayers offered in mosques.
- **Zakat** - This is an obligatory amount of **charity**, calculated at **2.5%** of one's total wealth, which Muslims are expected to give to the more needy every year. Believers are also encouraged to give voluntary charity (known as **Sadaqah**) regularly.

- **Hajj** - The last of the beliefs central for practising Muslims is completing the **pilgrimage** to the **Holy City of Mecca**, in Saudi Arabia, at least once in a lifetime (if they are able to do so). The trip is usually organised in tour groups, which may be arranged according to religious ideology, geographic location or ethnic background, in order to cater for specific needs that may arise. At the end of the pilgrimage, Muslims all over the world celebrate **Eid ul Adha**, the second of the two main Muslim festivals. Muslims may also perform a lesser pilgrimage to Mecca known as **Umrah**, which can be done at any time of the year.



Pilgrims gathered in the Holy Mosque in Mecca

## Religious Authority

---

Various interpretations of the Quran and Hadith have led to different schools of **Islamic jurisprudence**, which tend to be known as **'legal schools'** as they explain the interpretation and application of Islamic law. Legal schools within the same tradition are generally not antagonistic towards each other, with centres of Islamic learning existing across the world. For example, in the Sunni tradition, the cities of Cairo, Damascus and Medina are well renowned for scholarship, and in the Shi'a tradition, Karbala, Najaf, and Qom.

The four largest schools in the Sunni tradition are the **Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki** and **Shafi**, which are named after the classical scholars on whose writings they are based. Not all Sunnis follow a legal school, although there are geographical trends across the Muslim world with, for example, South Asia largely being associated with the Hanafi School and North Africa with the Maliki School. These schools will tend to differ on details of specific issues, not general religious beliefs. For example, some schools may accept a combining of prayers for specific reasons, while others may not. Within the UK, most Muslims originate from a religious background rooted in the Hanafi School of thought.

The main school within the Shi'a tradition is **Ja'fari**, also based on the teachings of a classical scholar. In 1959, al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the largest institutions of Islamic theology, declared the Ja'fari branch to be an official fifth school of thought in addition to the four Sunni ones, in order to bridge the divide between the two traditions.

## Main Sub-divisions

---

The schism between the **Sunni** and **Shi'a** traditions occurred within the first fifty years of the history of Islam, and was largely a political difference, although theological differences have evolved since. In general, Sunnis believe in authority through consensus, and Shi'as believe in authority as being inherited, through divine lineage. According to **Sunni** tradition (often referred to as Orthodox Islam), **Abu Bakr**, a companion and the father-in law of the Prophet was elected to lead the community and became the first caliph after the Prophet Muhammad's death. After Abu Bakr, there were three more caliphs, **Umar**, **Uthman** and **Ali**, who are referred to as the **Rashidun** (Rightly Guided Caliphs) by Sunnis.

Some followers believed that before Muhammad died, he had nominated **Ali**, his cousin and son-in-law as his rightful successor, and therefore he should have been the first caliph. These followers later became known as **Shi'a (Party of Ali)** and today count for around **15%** of the global Muslim population. The countries with the highest Shi'a populations are India, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, whilst in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran and Iraq, they are in the majority. Despite its initial origins as a leadership dispute, the split between those who supported Ali and those who supported Abu Bakr evolved into differing religious narratives, cultures and traditions.

As Shi'a Muslims place importance on authority within Islam being **inherited**, they revere members of the Prophet's household, known as the **Ahl al-Bayt**, as the successors of Muhammad. This includes **Ali and Fatima**, the Prophet's daughter who was also the wife of Ali, and their children **Hasan and Husayn**. This succession was then passed down in a clergy system known as the **Imamate**. These Imams, in addition to the Ahl al-Bayt, are believed to be **infallible**. Sunnis reject the concept of divine lineage and instead accept the elected authority of three of the Prophet's companions as caliphs, in addition to Ali as the fourth. Sunnis also reject the concept of infallibility.

Owing to this emphasis on the Ahl al-Bayt, one of the most important Islamic months for Shi'a Muslims is **Muharram**, when the Prophet's grandson, **Husayn**, was murdered in **Karbala** (located in modern-day Iraq). The story of Husayn's martyrdom forms a crucial part of the Shi'a identity, and is retold during mourning ceremonies in Muharram. The retelling of the story is often done through lectures, performances, or poetry, and can be an emotionally charged affair for believers. In some cases, mourners engage in **self-flagellation**, causing cuts and bleeding to their bodies, a practice which continues to be a cause of controversy within the Shi'a community. In the UK, it has become an area of concern especially when involving minors. In 2008, for the first time, British courts convicted an individual for putting duress on his two children, both under the age of 16, to participate in the ceremony.

Another belief which is fundamental in Shi'a theology is the concept of the '**Hidden Imam**' (also known as the **Mahdi**). The Mahdi is regarded as a **messianic figure** in both Shi'a and Sunni tradition and is expected by believers to arrive towards the end times, in order to establish justice on earth. References to him within the Shi'a tradition are more central and profound, due to the belief that he is the last of the twelve infallible imams. Shi'as regard the Mahdi as being in occultation (hidden from view) and are awaiting his return to earth.

While Sunni Muslims may or may not follow legal schools, Shi'a Muslims traditionally follow a living scholar (**marja**), rooted in a religious school. For example, in 2020, the highest ranking marja is **Grand**

**Ayatollah Sistani**, who is based in Najaf, Iraq but has millions of followers across the Shi'a world. Shi'as are required to pay **Khums**, which is a monetary contribution (usually 20% of surplus income) to the scholar they follow. Sunni tradition does not have the same system of religious hierarchy as Shi'as, although there is a highly respected scholarly class called the **Ulema**.

The majority of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims across the world and in the UK coexist peacefully, although some Muslims within both traditions can be antagonistic to each other. Recent political conflicts in Iraq and Syria have resulted in a rise in sectarian tensions amidst the political struggle for power, whilst sectarian violence in Pakistan is also on the increase. Within both religious traditions there are also other smaller schisms. For example, within Shi'a Islam, there are the **Ismaili** and **Alawite** groups, whilst in Sunni Islam there are the **Deobandi** and **Salafi** groups (more information on some of these movements is available at the end of this leaflet).

### **Sufism**

Sufism is a large tradition within Islam and is a broad term that is used to describe various movements of **Islamic mysticism**, and is not a distinct sect. Sufis, who **may belong to either the Sunni or Shi'a tradition**, believe in the importance of constant awareness of God's presence. **They stress the divine-human relationship**, love for the Prophet Muhammad, as well as discipline of the mind and body.

Traditionally Sufis were formally part of orders called **Tariqas**, led by an esteemed teacher who can trace his spiritual lineage to the Prophet Muhammad, his family or companions. These include the **Chishti**, **Naqshbandi** and **Qadiri** orders, branches of which exist in the UK. The Tariqas are generally not intended to replace traditional legal schools of thought (like Hanafi), but complement their teachings. Today, some Muslims may not be part of a Tariqa, but adopt a Sufi outlook to life. Some practices associated with Sufism include group **Zikr** (worship), celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, and the revering of **Saints**.

### **Lifestyle**

---

Observant Muslims tend to follow a lifestyle that is guided by principles derived from the Quran and Sunnah. This covers a wide range of topics including diet, dress and family life. For example, many Muslims only consume meat that has been slaughtered according to specific requirements and deemed halal (permissible). One of these requirements is that the animal is fed and looked after well, then cut at the throat when it is conscious and drained of blood. The recitation of God's name during this slaughter process is essential. There is often criticism from animal-rights groups who regard the process as inhumane, and in some countries, such as Switzerland, meat prepared without stunning is banned. Muslims argue that the process (which is similar to the Jewish requirements for Kosher) when performed correctly, minimises the pain of the animal.

In the UK, there are different opinions about the use of stunning within the Muslim community, which has resulted in varying definitions of what constitutes halal and the emergence of several halal regulating bodies. Some large supermarkets have halal products available in areas with significant Muslim populations, whilst some popular food outlets, like Nandos, offer halal options. Halal meat also excludes that taken from carnivorous animals and swine, whilst most seafood and all vegetables are permitted. Intoxicants such as alcohol and other (non-medical) drugs are forbidden, and smoking is discouraged as it is harmful to one's health.

# حلال

'Halal' written in Arabic

Muslims may sometimes be distinguishable by their dress. Islamic tradition states that men and women should dress **modestly**, and this has been interpreted and expressed differently across the world. For example, some Muslim women may wear what is widely known as a **Hijab** (headscarf); a loose fitting dress that originates in the Middle East called an **Abaya**; a dress with baggy trousers originating in South Asia called **Salwar Kameez**; or a face covering called a **Niqab**, which is worn by a small minority. The Niqab does not cover the eyes, whereas **Burkas**, which are an all covering garment, do cover the entire face (such as the blue burkas worn in Afghanistan). Burkas are rarely worn by Muslim women in the UK. The majority of British Muslim women also do not wear a Hijab, although some young British Muslim women are increasingly fusing various cultural and religious influences to create their own sense of modest style. This is illustrated by the rise of modest fashion blogs and Instagram 'Influencers', as well as alternative clothing brands.



Images taken from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/24118241>

Muslim men may grow a **beard**, with some movements such as the **Salafis** seeing it as an obligatory part of the Sunnah. It is largely accepted that men should also be modest, and covered from the navel to the knee at least. Some individuals may wear a long garment called a **thobe** (usually white), which originates from the Middle East. It is also common for Muslim men to wear a cap during prayers.

The **family** is an important institution for Muslims. Strong family ties and marriage are encouraged, since sex outside marriage is impermissible. Partners are often found by individuals themselves, and recently, there has been a rise in Muslim introduction/marriage websites, such as SingleMuslim.com. In some families, potential spouses are formally introduced by parents or family networks, in what is often referred to as an 'arranged marriage'.

As in other aspects of life, marriage arrangements and rituals vary between generations, cultures and ethnic backgrounds of British Muslims. The primary religious rite is known as the **Nikkah** (Arabic for marriage contract), where both parties sign their consent to the marriage in the presence of witnesses.

Hailing from many cultures, Muslims have historically combined their religious beliefs with their cultural traditions. However, there is an increasing awareness amongst British Muslims of some



**cultural practices** that conflict with Islamic principles and may be harmful, such as **forced marriages**. According to the Quran and Sunnah, consent by both parties in the presence of witnesses is strictly required, although overt or covert forced marriages are still practised by a minority. In 2014, it became a **criminal offence** to force someone into marriage in England and Wales.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** is another damaging cultural practice, with no religious basis, that is prevalent in some African and, to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern communities. It is an illegal practice in the UK, as set out in the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003; however, the first UK conviction for FGM was not until early 2019. In 2015, the National FGM Centre was established as a partnership between Barnardo's and the Local Government Association, in order to help children and families at risk.

In terms of religious guidance, Muslims will usually consult the imam of a local mosque or another religious scholar they can access. In cases where a precedent does not exist or if it is unclear, a **fatwa** (religious instruction) can be sought. Examples of such cases can be questions linked to modern scientific developments like IVF treatment, or a specific issue pertaining to marital affairs. A fatwa must only be given by a qualified Muslim scholar, is **non-binding** and acts to provide an opinion rooted in Islamic knowledge and reasoning, which the enquirer may or may not choose to accept. One fatwa that is well known in the UK is that which was issued by the Iranian cleric, **Ayatollah Khomeini**, calling for the death of **Salman Rushdie**. Rushdie was accused of offending Muslim sentiments in his book, *The Satanic Verses*, which was published in 1988. Khomeini's fatwa was later criticised by many Muslims for being an irresponsible response to the issue, as well as an abuse of religious authority. (The furore caused by the publication of book is often referred to as the 'Rushdie Affair'.)

With technological advancement and globalisation, the internet is increasingly being used by Muslims looking for guidance on specific issues. Some traditional scholars have been critical of internet guidance and fatwas and feel that some information relayed can be untrustworthy, and taken out of context.

## **In the UK**

---

According to statistics from 2011, Muslims form an estimated 5% of the total population of England and Wales. The majority of this Muslim population are young, British-born Muslims, who have English as their first language (a significant proportion may also speak an additional language). In general, Muslims tend to be on the lower ends of the socio-economic scale, and often suffer higher levels of unemployment, poverty and ill-health than the national average. In terms of demographic spread, in London, the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham have the highest Muslim populations, whilst Bradford, Luton and Blackburn have the highest proportions across the country. To an extent, the areas with high populations of Muslims are reflective of the waves of migration and settlement that occurred after the Second World War.

It was as early as the 1800s, however, that the first Muslim communities were established in ports such as Cardiff and South Shields, and included Indian, Somali and Yemeni servicemen. After the commonwealth migration that followed in the mid-twentieth century, the number of Muslims in the UK grew considerably. The predominantly male workers who had come to fill labour shortages were soon joined by their families, and although the myth of returning 'back home' remained for some, the majority settled in the cities and towns where they worked. (It is important to note that before the

late twentieth century, Muslims were largely identified in the public sphere through ethnicity, not religion. Some academics believe this shift was significantly influenced by the Rushdie Affair.) Whilst the highest proportions of British Muslims remain of South Asian (specifically Pakistani and then Bangladeshi) heritage, there are also significant communities from Arab, African-Asian, African-Caribbean, Turkish, and Somali backgrounds.

Furthermore, a report by Faith Matters suggests the number of **converts in the UK may have risen to 100,000** by 2010. The majority of these converts are reported to be women, and although this is popularly thought to be due to marriage to a Muslim man, the study found this not to be the case. Women who were interviewed stated they converted for a variety of reasons, mainly spiritual, whilst some had kept their own non-Muslim faith within marriage, before deciding to convert at a later stage. While conversion to Islam has increased, it is not a recent phenomenon and it was an English convert and Victorian gentleman by the name of **Abdullah Quilliam** who in 1889 founded the first mosque (also an orphanage and school) in Liverpool.



Abdullah Quilliam 1856-1932

Thus, the British Muslim population today is very diverse, with historical Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi traditions existing alongside modern, reformist, revivalist and political movements. There are also other movements that, despite sharing some Islamic beliefs, have now become independent religions, such as the **Baha'i**. Some of these are discussed further at the end of this leaflet.

This varied landscape within the Muslim community also includes numerous civic organisations and umbrella bodies. One such organisation is the **Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)**, which is often seen as speaking on behalf of British Muslims in the public sphere, although it is questionable to what extent it can be representative of such a diverse population. **The Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB)** is an advisory and facilitatory body that aims to encourage good practice across mosques and Islamic institutions. There are also charitable and non-profit organisations that work with the British Muslim and wider community, such as the **Islamic Society of Britain (ISB)**, the **Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)** and **Islamic Relief**, which is a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC).

### **Some Contemporary Issues**

---

Violent and non-violent **extremism** has been an area of concern, and has affected the Muslim community in a variety of ways, especially after the attacks in the USA in 2001 (9/11), Madrid in 2004

London in 2005 (7/7). In the UK, some groups that are regarded as inciting violence have been scrutinised, and in some cases proscribed by the government under **The Terrorism Act 2000**. One such group is Islam4UK (previously known as **al-Muhajiroun** and several other names), a small group headed by **Anjem Choudary** that believes in implementing Islamic governance in the UK. Islam4UK and other such groups are widely rejected by the mainstream Muslim community.

Some **violent extremist ideologies**, such as those espoused by **al-Qaeda**, are thought to have inspired a group of young British men to commit a series of suicide bombings on the London Underground in July 2005, which shocked the British Muslim and wider community. There have been a number of other incidents involving lone actors who have become inspired by violent teachings, often through online material. More recent incidents are said to have been inspired by **ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)** including attacks in Westminster and London Bridge in 2017, the Manchester Arena bombing, 2017, and the London Bridge stabbings in 2019.

Violence is rejected by the majority of Muslims, who often feel exasperated that a disproportionate amount of media focus is given to fringe groups and their leaders. Government strategies, such as **Preventing Violent Extremism (Prevent)** that were created soon after the July 2005 bombings in order to counter extremism, have also been accused of spying on some communities and demonising Muslims as a whole, especially Muslim students.

Another issue of rising significance is **anti-Muslim prejudice** (often referred to as **Islamophobia**). While such sentiment is not recent, there has been evidence of a rise in anti-Muslim prejudice in British society, including the media and politics. For example, studies have shown that newspapers frequently report Muslims as being a threat to British life and in some cases, have deliberately fabricated negative stories. Political parties and street movements like the British National Party (BNP) and English Defence League (EDL) regularly target Islam and Muslims in their campaigns. **Tell Mama**, an organisation which documents anti-Muslim attacks, records a yearly rise in such cases being reported, including attacks against Muslim women and mosques. Statistics continue to show that women who are visibly Muslim (especially those who wear the *hijab*) are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes.

## **Movements in the UK**

---

### **Sunni based movements**

The majority of Muslims in the UK are Sunni, and follow a general practice of Islam, rooted in the Hanafi legal school. However, there are also other smaller movements that identify as Sunni in their general beliefs, but may have different ideological or theological beliefs on certain issues. Some of these movements are listed below.

#### ***Deobandi***

This is a **reformist** Sunni movement rooted in the **Hanafi** legal school that was founded in India in 1867, as a reaction to British colonialism. Fearful of the loss of Islamic education, seminaries were set up in order to preserve Islamic knowledge and traditional scholarship. With the arrival of commonwealth migrants from the Asian subcontinent in the twentieth century, Deobandi seminaries called **Darul Uloom** were also set up in the UK, the first one being established in Bury in 1973, with two other seminaries located in Birmingham and London. Graduates of the Darul Uloom join the

**Ulema** (scholarly class). There are many mosques and organisations in the UK that identify with the Deobandi movement – around 40 per cent of the UK’s mosques are thought to be Deobandi.

### ***Ahle Sunnat wal Jama'at (ASWJ)***

This movement originated from a town called Bareilly, India in 1904, as a **response to the Deobandi movement**. It disagrees with the Deobandi view that some Sufi practices such as the veneration of Saints are against Islamic beliefs. ASWJ also believes that the Prophet Muhammad possesses certain qualities such as being **omnipresent** (hadir), which distinguishes it from other Muslim movements. The tradition of the ASWJ is popular in the Asian subcontinent, and followers are sometimes referred to as **'Barelvis'** (derived from the founding town) by other Muslims, which the ASWJ consider to be a derogatory term. ASWJ mosques exist across the UK, and are distinguishable by, for example, **celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday** with public processions. (Note: The term Ahle Sunnat wal Jama'at [People of the Sunnah and the Majority], can often be used by other Sunni groups, in order to distinguish themselves from Shi'a theology.) Around 23 per cent of the UK’s mosques are ASWJ.

### ***Tablighi Jamaat***

This **revivalist** religious movement was founded in India in 1926, and is an offshoot of the Deobandi movement. Widely regarded as a conservative movement, **it concentrates on the propagation of Islam to Muslims**, with members typically going on retreat to different towns and cities, inviting Muslim households to observe the fundamentals of Islam. Women in the Jamaat have their own meetings in local neighbourhoods and mosques, encouraging other Muslim women to practise their faith. Various mosques in the UK are associated with the Jamaat, while a planning application for a large Tablighi Jamaat Mosque in Newham, London was turned down in 2012. This was due to concerns by the local authority that it would not adequately benefit the surrounding area.

### ***Salafism***

The modern Salafi movement (sometimes referred to as **Ahl al-Hadith**), is based on a **reformist** Sunni ideology that advocates a literal interpretation of Islam. Groups that describe themselves as Salafi, emphasise the purity of early Islamic practices, and believe that individuals from the first four generations of Islam should be emulated. Whilst they do not follow any of the four traditional Sunni legal schools, they are most influenced by the Hanbali School. Mainstream Salafi scholars reject using violence, but a minority have been linked to advocating armed resistance. Various expressions of Salafism exist in the UK, and organisations include Masjid Ibn Taymiyyah, Brixton (the **Brixton Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre**), the **Islamic Centre of Luton**, while in Birmingham there is the **Green Lane Mosque, Salafi Publications, and The Greenfields Primary School**. Salafism is concentrated in London and Birmingham in the UK and is popular amongst black converts to Islam, including those from African-Caribbean and Somali heritage. It is thought to be the fastest growing branch of British Islam in 2020.

### ***Wahhabism***

Wahhabism is a term that is often used derogatorily, to refer to a movement that was founded in the early 18th century in Arabia, by **Mohammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab** (1703-1791). Abd-al-Wahhab wanted to bring Islam back to its roots, and was closely involved in the founding of the modern **Saudi state**, which continues to endorse his religious perspective. The movement is perceived by its opponents to be one of the most conservative, and sometimes, extreme forms of Islam. It is critical of

Sufi practices in particular, and other groups such as Shi'a Muslims are seen as heretical. There have been claims that Wahhabi ideology is being promoted by the Saudi state in the UK, through the propagation of religious literature, and the funding of mosques. (Note: It is often argued that the Salafi movement [above] emerged from/or is the same as the Wahhabi movement. This is a contentious issue, and an oversimplification, but the terms are still frequently used interchangeably).

### **Shi'a based movements**

Shi'as are a minority amongst the mostly Sunni Muslim population in the UK, and globally, forming around 15% of the total Muslim population. The majority of the Shi'a community are **Ithna Ashariya** (also known as '**Twelvers**' due to their belief in twelve infallible imams), and predominantly come from the Indian subcontinent and Iraq. The **Al-Khoei Islamic Centre**, London was established in 1989 to serve the community, whilst there are also various other mosques and centres around the country. Sometimes these centres are known as **Hussainiyas**. London is also home to the first English language Shi'a TV channel by the Ithna Ashariya community, called Ahlul Bayt TV. Within the Shi'a community, there are also other smaller schisms and movements that differ on ideological or theological beliefs, an example of which are the Ismailis.

### ***Ismaili***

Ismailis emerged after a schism that occurred in 764 in the Shi'a community over the lineage of divine Imams, and account for an estimated **10%** of the global Shia population. Unlike the majority of the Shi'a community which believes in twelve infallible Imams, the Ismailis believe in **seven**. The largest group within the Ismaili movement is the **Nizari** branch, which believes that there is an 'Imam of The Time'. This Imam is regarded as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and accorded the right to make decisions on the Ismaili faith, as he sees necessary. The **living Imam** has the title of **Agha Khan**, the 49th and current Imam is **Shah Karim al-Hussaini**. Nizari Ismailis have a small but strong presence in Britain stemming from the nineteenth century, with London being home to some important Ismaili institutions. These include the **Aga Khan University**, **The Institute of Ismaili Studies**, and **The Ismaili Centre**.

### **Political movements**

#### ***Hizb ut-Tahrir***

This is an international political movement that was founded in 1953 in Jerusalem by Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, with the UK branch being founded around 1986. The movement advocates an **Islamic state (Khilafah)** across Muslims lands, with the aim of uniting all Muslims under **one religious identity**. The group mainly spreads its ideology through literature and meetings. It was thought to have a membership of around 8,000 in the UK in the mid-2000s and a smaller membership in 2020. It has been under scrutiny by recent British governments for inciting violence, with calls for it to be proscribed under The Terrorism Act 2000. However, investigations found that it did not promote violence and terrorism, and thus did not meet the proscription criteria. The movement continues to attract controversy, especially due to its practice of spreading its ideology on politics and the Khilafah on university campuses. The NUS (National Union of Students) has included Hizb ut-Tahrir on its 'No Platform Policy' since 2004.

## Other movements

### ***Ahmadiyya Muslim Community***

This is a distinct movement that was founded in 1889 by **Mirza Ghulam Ahmad** (1835-1908), who was born in Qadian, India. Ahmad described himself as a **Prophet** sent by God, as well as the awaited **Messiah** and promised **Mahdi**. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is a proselytising movement, with an estimated 1.6 million followers across the globe, called **Ahmadis**. They are mainly located in South Asia, with a sizable UK chapter that was established in 1913. There are an estimated 25,000 Ahmadis in the UK. The biggest Ahmadiyya Muslim Community run mosque in the UK is called **Baitul Futuh** and is located in South London.

The movement split in the early twentieth century and a sub-sect called the **Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement** was formed. One of the differences between the two groups is that the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement believes that Ahmad was not a Prophet but a reformer. For this reason, the Lahoris are not seen as entirely heterodox as the Ahmadis who are considered as non-Muslims by the majority of the Muslim world.

They are sometimes collectively referred to as **Qadianis** (after the town), which the Ahmadis consider a derogatory term. Ahmadis also suffer persecution in Pakistan, where they are not considered to have Muslim identity. In Pakistan, but also in the UK, extreme forms of anti-Ahmadi sentiment call for the death of Ahmadis who do not convert to Sunni Islam. In March 2016, Asad Shah, a Glaswegian Ahmadi shopkeeper, was murdered by an anti-Ahmadi Muslim man.

### ***Baha'i***

The Baha'i faith is a syncretistic religion that emerged in 1844 Persia. Although it borrows some elements from Islam, it now regards itself as an independent religion. Followers believe in monotheism, prophets of God including Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, but also final messengers after them, including **Bab** (1819-1850) and **Bahauallah** (1817-1892). The Baha'i believe messengers, like Bahauallah, are manifestations of God on earth. It is estimated that the religion has a following of up to six million worldwide, with a small community in the United Kingdom. Local groups meet regularly across the country, while there are eight large houses of worship across the world, the spiritual headquarters of which are in Haifa, Israel. The Baha'i suffer persecution in Iran, where they are seen as heretical and are often accused of having political motivations. Baha'i can be imprisoned in Iran and can be prevented from accessing higher education or the workforce because of their beliefs.

### ***The Nation of Islam (NOI)***

The Nation of Islam is a Black Nationalist movement that was founded in 1930 in America by **Wallace Fard Muhammad**, and whose current leader is **Louis Farrakhan**. Although the NOI borrows some Islamic teachings and symbols, it has other distinct beliefs of its own. These include the belief that Wallace Fard Muhammad, who founded the NOI, is a **Prophet** and **manifestation of God**. There are also separatist views on racial mixing and diversity. Individuals such as **Malcolm X** and **Muhammad Ali** are well known as having been involved in the movement, before breaking away and later joining a more mainstream strand of Islam. The European headquarters of the NOI are located in Brixton, South London. Farrakhan has been banned from entering the UK since 1986 (see Inform leaflet, The Nation of Islam).

The above list is by no means exhaustive and is largely reflective of which groups are the most visible in the UK. There are many other movements, some of which may emphasise cultural, ethnic or racial identity, while others may have a Universalist or messianic message. The **Gülen Movement** (also known as **Hizmet**) for example, has its origins in Turkey and is inspired by the teachings of **Fethullah Gülen**, a Turkish scholar, whom followers view as a model for the rest of the Muslim world. One Gülen inspired organisation that has various branches across the UK is called **The Dialogue Society**. It describes itself as a non-religious civic organisation, although some argue that it may have a specific religious and/or cultural perspective. Other much smaller movements can often be syncretistic and for example, mix Sufi philosophy with new age practices. One such group is the **M.T.O Shahmaghsoudi School of Islamic Sufism**, which has a strong relationship with Persian culture, and practices holistic healing and meditation. It has a centre in North London and also runs a supplementary school called **M.T.O College**, which offers Persian language courses.

### **Further Information**

Ali, Abdullah Yusuf (2004) *The meaning of the Holy Quran* (Arabic/English) Amana Publications.

Ansari, Humayun (2012) *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800*. Hurst and Co.

Armstrong, Karen (2002) *Islam: A Short History*. Modern Library.

Brice, Kevin M.A. (2001) 'A minority within a minority: A report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom' *Faith Matters*. Swansea University.

Bruinessen, Martin van and Stefano Allievi (2011) *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*. Routledge Islamic Studies Series. Oxon: Routledge.

Elahi, Farah and Omar Khan (eds.) (2017) *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All*. London: Runnymede.

El-Menouar, Yasemin (2017) "Muslims in Europe: Integrated but Not Accepted?" Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Esposito, John L. (ed.) (2009) *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford University Press.

Geaves, Ron (2001) *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Lives and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*. Kube Publishing Ltd.

Gilliat-Ray, Sophie (2010) *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Inge, Anabel (2017) *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kersten, Carool (2019) *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes and Issues*. London: Routledge.

Lewis, Philip (2007) *Young, British and Muslim*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Lewis, Philip and Sadek Hamid (2018) *British Muslims: New Directions in Islamic Thought, Creativity and Activism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lings, Martin (2006) *Muhammad: His life based on the Earliest Sources*. Inner Traditions.

Malik, Maleiha (ed.) (2012) *Anti-Muslim Prejudice: Past and Present*. Routledge.

Metcalf, Barbara (2014) *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pew Research (2009) *Religion & Public Life Project Mapping the Global Muslim Population*. Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population>

Ruthven, Malise (1997) *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## HOW INFORM CAN HELP

- o By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- o By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

*New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) and [abebooks.co.uk](http://abebooks.co.uk)

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

© Inform October 2020

[Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

