

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF FEMALE SALAFI CONVERTS IN BIRMINGHAM

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In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

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Despite the intensification of characterising Salafi women as the *ultimate other* in the West's gendered War on Terror, Salafism—an authentic version of Islam, continues to be one of the most successful agents of female conversion to Islam in the West. Yet the dominant framing of Salafism as a virulent religious ideology that predisposes its members towards violent extremism shows that it is also one of the most misunderstood Muslim sects of our time. Consequently, when viewed from the outside, the significant numbers of women who have converted to its orthodox, non-Western religious belief is an enigma.

Salafisation in the West

Whilst contemporary Salafism has been described as a new global religious movement, it is in fact a rigorous 'puritanical' approach dating back to early days of Islam which Salafis regard to be the time when Islam was at its purest—perfect, complete, without deficiency and in no need of alteration.¹ It was also during this period that the first three generations of Muslims, the *Salaf As-Sālih* (Pious Predecessors)—who are referred to as the *Saved Sect*, lived—united upon guidance from Allah and His Messenger Muhammad (ﷺ).² Salafi beliefs are, therefore, firmly founded in the Qurān and the authenticated statements of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), and refer emphatically to the advice he gave to his Companions (رضي الله عنهم) and to future generations of Muslims—that they are to keep to the *Straight Path*, the *Path of the Saved Sect*, as all divergent paths would lead to the Hellfire.³

¹ Ahmad al-Madane 2005.

² Fawzaan 2003:5.

³ Fawzaan 2013:13.

Salafism's emergence as a *revivalist* sect that seeks to renew orthodox Islam by returning to the fundamentals of the religion has, thus, proven to be an excellent example of how an old religion of a non-Western origin has presented itself as 'new' but 'in a new context and to a new audience' in the West.⁴ Further, Salafism's claim to the 'uncompromising truth', especially in being able to provide 'absolute answers',⁵ along with its 'strong identity-building capacity'⁶ has made it an attractive option for those in search of an authentic religious alternative. Coupled with its intense focus on *da'wah* (missionary) activity, contemporary Salafism's emergence on the 'spiritual marketplace'⁷ has resulted in a network of Salafi mosques, associations and Islamic centres being established across Britain, Europe and many other countries in the global North and South, making it one of the fastest-growing Islamic movements of the 21st century.⁸ Of them, the Salafi community in the Small Heath area of Birmingham in the West Midlands—one of the most deprived wards in the country—is the oldest, largest and most notable of these English-speaking communities globally, and is considered the focal point for practising Salafis in the West.

Salafism's presence in a post-secular society such as Birmingham, with its discernible and thriving Salafi culture which is notably distinct from the culture of its host society and from other Islamic sects in the UK, epitomises the changing landscape of Britain's inner cities; it is also an excellent example of how 'religious beliefs and the performance of religious rituals turn into exclusionary spatial practices', ultimately changing the relationship between 'people and places'.⁹ Salafis are, thus, becoming increasingly visible on the streets of some areas in Britain, and it is no longer unusual to see people of all ages and ethnicities—many of whom are indigenous to

⁴ Partridge and Melton, 2004: 10.

⁵ Hunt 2003:13.

⁶ Meijer 2009: 4; Wiedl 2012:9.

⁷ Hunt *Op. Cit.*, page xvi.

⁸ Inge 2016:38; Koning 2007; Meijer 2009:3; Moreras & Tarrés 2014 & Thielmann 2014, cited in Peter and Ortega, 2014.

⁹ AlSayyad and Massoumi 2011:3,4.

the UK, going about their daily lives dressed in traditional Sunnah-compliant garbs, which are commonly worn by many in the Muslim world. For Salafi men, these garbs comprise a beard, trousers above the ankles, usually a *thawb* (an ankle-length robe) and a head covering such as a *kūfī* (prayer cap) or *shimāgh* (Arab-style head cloth); for Salafi women they comprise a head-to-toe *abāyah*; usually a *niqāb* (face veil), and sometimes gloves.

The politics of theological distinction apparent in the ‘Salafisation’ of urban spaces across the world also appears to be a strong and important motive for some of its adherents’ internal and international migration to places that are more conducive to leading a Salafi lifestyle. However, even a geographical location can fall under the media spotlight and be susceptible to Islamophobia—for example, Birmingham has been ‘depicted as a place of hatred and intolerance where terrorists are born’, or, expressed another way, a ‘hotbed for extremism’ and the ‘jihadi capital of Britain’.¹⁰ While radicalisation in such places is indeed a serious problem that deserves our full attention, in many instances, visibly distinctive lifestyle changes are simply a means by which individuals are able to ‘engage with society in a critical way’.¹¹ For Salafi women, in particular, recent research has shown that personal lifestyle choices and the decision to wear religious attire such as the *abāyah* or *niqāb* have more to do with the politics of identity in their efforts to become better Muslims, rather than with making a political statement or attempting to Islamise the public sphere.¹²

¹⁰ ‘Why are Muslims in Birmingham portrayed as folk devils?’, by Imran Awan (2016).

¹¹ De Koning cited in Peter & Ortega 2014:151.

¹² Ibid: pages 151-153; see also Inge 2017.

Salafi Women Caught in the Crossfire

Although the sartorial practices of Muslim women as members of a ‘uniquely patriarchal religion’¹³ has long been the subject of the Orientalist gaze, in recent times, the dominant view of the ‘veil’ as a sign of oppression and passivity has instead given rise to security concerns attributable to its association with religious extremism—violent or not. Salafi women have, thus, become embroiled in a new moral panic that perceives hypervisible Muslim women as the new ‘folk devils’¹⁴ that embody a dangerous threat to wider society—a notion which was heightened with sensational media reportage of female Islamic State (ISIS)¹⁵ supporters such as their ‘poster girl’ Shamima Begum dressed in attire which, regrettably, closely resembled the Sunnah-compliant hijāb of Salafi women.

The media’s homogenisation of an otherwise heterogeneous group of female believers, specifically in relation to the methodologies of their belief systems, demonstrates how Salafi women’s image problem as potential extremists in British society is so easily exacerbated. Such views are also perpetuated by the UK Government who in an effort to curb ‘homegrown’ terrorism, base their policy on inaccurate findings, such as, for example, the Casey (2016) report which unjustly claimed that females living within segregated minority communities in Britain live ‘parallel lives’ and are in desperate need of ‘emancipation’ from ‘regressive cultural practices’¹⁶—an assertion which is not true for female converts to Salafism. Ironically, even the Government’s former counter-extremism commissioner Sara Khan, who, in her efforts to ‘safeguard’ young Muslim women from the ‘lure

¹³ Kumar 2012, cited by Rashid in, ‘Everyone is a feminist when it comes to Muslim women’: Gender and Islamophobia: Source: ‘Islamophobia Still a Challenge for us All’, by Farah Elahi and Omar Khan, 20th Anniversary Report 2017, page 61.

¹⁴ ‘A Constructed Threat: Identity, Intolerance and the Impact of Anti-Muslim Hatred’, TellMAMA Annual Report 2016, page 12.

¹⁵ Islamic State: The women and children no-one wants’, by Quentin Sommerville, 11th April 2019.

¹⁶ Sorry, Louise Casey, but Muslim women are held back by discrimination, by Aina Khan, Tue 6th Dec 2016, accessed 23 October 2020.

of extremism', clearly alienated the very people she hoped to 'protect' when she openly professed that she viewed 'Salafism [and Wahhābism]' as 'bastardisations of Islam' and its adherents as 'fascists'.¹⁷

Alongside political rhetoric such as Boris Johnson's own 'friendly' fascist likening of veiled Muslim women to 'letterboxes' and 'bank robbers' in a 2018 *Daily Telegraph* article,¹⁸ it is hardly surprising that trigger events such as high-profile terror attacks and political events which have drawn out public debate on issues such as immigration, international relations and the fight against extremism, has resulted in Salafi women becoming prime targets of retaliation and retribution because of their hyper-visibility in public spaces. Consequently, Salafi women routinely find themselves subjected to a variety of abuse in wider British society which includes spitting, intimidation and even violence, not to mention verbal taunts such as 'Ninja', 'Batman', 'Bin Laden' and more recently 'Aunt Lydia'—a brutal religious zealot in the dystopian novel and popular TV drama *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting the ways in which the entertainment industry can influence religious bigotry.

The psychological toll of gendered Islamophobia on the lived daily experience of Salafi women in the West has been profound, not only because they are disproportionately subjected to consistent prejudice in the form of 'low-level' incidents of discrimination,¹⁹ but because oftentimes this abuse stems from within their own families, many of whom also struggle to understand their motives for religious conversion to Salafism. The targeted nature of such hostility for hypervisible Salafi women has clearly impacted their engagement with wider society and has caused them to avoid situations which they feel may put them at risk. Further, the acceptance of this

¹⁷ 'It's up to us to stop these Muslim girls making the worst mistake of their lives', by Alex Preston, 28th October 2015, accessed 15th September 2020.

¹⁸ Islamophobic incidents rose 375% after Boris Johnson compared Muslim women to 'letterboxes', figures show, by Lizzie Dearden, 2nd September 2019, accessed 15th September 2020.

¹⁹ TellMAMA Annual Report 2016, *Op. Cit.*, page 18.

victimisation as a seemingly ordinary part of their daily lives has meant that the day-to-day activities of female Salafis are limited mainly to the confines of their homes as well the safety of their local neighborhoods and minority communities. Significantly, the socioeconomic effects of this gendered discrimination have resulted in Salafi women becoming one of the most disadvantaged groups in the country in terms of 'neighbourhood deprivation, housing, educational and health disadvantage, unemployment ... [and] a broken social mobility promise'.²⁰

The assault upon Salafi women is also perpetrated by liberals across the political spectrum whose shallow thinking, like that of the far right, has rendered them incapable of envisaging how any woman would willingly accept being part of what they believe is an extreme and oppressive religion that supposedly places its women in an inferior position.²¹ More significantly, what is common to all these stunted ways of thinking and stereotypes of Islam [and Salafism] is that they deny both Muslim women and men any agency or 'the ability to make the moral social choices other groups are assumed to enjoy'.²²

²⁰ 'From '9/11' to hate groups: the economic marginalisation of the West's Muslims', by Cj Werleman, September 13, 2017.

²¹ Rashid, 'Islamophobia Still a Challenge for us All', *Op. Cit.*

²² *Ibid.*

Salafism is not Wahhābism or Extremism

The other more complex factor contributing to the stigmatisation of Salafi women and their conflation with the threat of Islamic extremism is that the term ‘Salafism’ — often mistakenly referred to as ‘Wahhābism’, has become synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism, jihadism or terrorism.²³ Apart from the media (mis)handling of Salafism, much of the negativity ascribed to contemporary manifestations of this ‘new’ religious movement is undoubtedly attributable to the proliferation of literature post-11 September 2001 that ‘appears “scientific”, but which tries to either condemn or to rehabilitate a Wahhābī or Salafī ideology that has usually been constructed to serve the purpose of its different authors’.²⁴ While Salafis hold in high regard the reformist efforts and scriptural works of *al-Imām* Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhāb (رحمة الله) — a *Mujaddid* (reviver of the Sunnah: the Prophetic way) of his era, a misappropriation of the term ‘Salafism’ with the pejorative ‘Wahhābism’ has also resulted in the false assumption that Salafism’s origins stem from the ‘historical reform movement begun in the 18th century in the Arabian Peninsula’.²⁵

By default, an incorrect understanding of the origins of Salafism indicates that it is connected to ‘the religious institutions of Saudi Arabia, a particular way of practicing Islam, or even a certain religious imperialism associated with the [Saudi] kingdom’.²⁶ Though Salafis do hold Saudi Arabia in high esteem for upholding the Islamic Creed, such essentialism tends to oversimplify the role of Salafi actors in the global development of Salafism since it views them as ‘mere agents of a wider process of the “Saudisation” of Islam, a process meant to serve the Saudi national interest’.²⁷ In other words, the emergence of Salafism viewed from within a realist paradigm of international relations reduces it to an ‘exogenous phenomenon’

²³ Bonnefoy *Op. Cit.*, pp 39,40.

²⁴ *Ibid*: pages 39,40.

²⁵ *Ibid*: page 41.

²⁶ *Ibid*: page 41.

²⁷ *Ibid*: page 148.

with a ‘soft power’ approach that strips it of its authenticity.²⁸ Perceived in this way, Salafism is nothing but a ‘foreign intervention ... a kind of contamination that in the end is to be blamed for episodes of violence’.²⁹ More importantly, it distorts and obscures ‘the truly transnational and grassroots dimensions of religious actors by focusing on state power and its supposed capacity to actually manipulate and control non-state actors’.³⁰

Salafi historiography reveals that much of the confusion over the definition and origins of Salafism in the history of Islamic thought within Western scholarship is attributable to the work of major reformist figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935), who, in an effort to modernise the Muslim world used an approach which they claimed was Salafism, but in actuality was heavily influenced by ideas from the European Enlightenment.³¹ Their anti-textual and rationalist approach which came to be known as *Salafiyyah-Tanwiriyyah* (enlightened Salafism) would go on to instigate the hybridisation of Salafism during the 20th century, and inspired like-minded modernist thinkers such as Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) to develop the revolutionary methodology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which aimed only to gain ‘political ascendancy, power and leadership’.³² Later, those committed to the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) — such as their figurehead, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) who was executed for his attempted overthrow of the Nasser regime in 1966 CE—would be revered by nearly every ‘jihadist-extremist’ group in the world.³³

Whilst it could be argued that the evolution of hybrid versions of Salafism occurred as a consequence of activists in the Muslim world

²⁸ Ibid: page 9.

²⁹ Ibid: page 9.

³⁰ Ibid: page 9.

³¹ Lauzière 2016:4.

³² ‘A response to Western academics who categorise Salafis into Quietists, Politicos and Jihadists—and why this is a false categorisation’, by Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Wāhid, 16th March 2017, accessed 11th Oct 2020, page 3.

³³ Abdul-Wahid 2017: *Op. Cit.*

attempting to keep up with the project of modernity in the West or to fight the ‘crusade against Islam’³⁴, according to the ‘purist’ Salafi narrative the hybridisation of Salafism was an insidious plot set into motion by those who seek to bastardise the banner of Salafiyyah and destroy it from within—a battle which began with the first of the deviated sects, known as the *Khawārij* (Khārijites).

The hyphenisation of Salafism alongside the ideologies of violent terrorist groups has even caused a stir within Western scholarship, and it has been acknowledged that ‘a great deal of intellectual work’ has gone ‘into constructing and legitimising [a] narrative’ that equates Salafism with Wahhābism, which, thereby, portrays it as an ‘alien’ and ‘deviant’ ‘Saudi export’ believed to be ‘at the root of the terrorism of al-Qaeda.’³⁵

³⁴ Wiktorowicz 2004:2.

³⁵ Bonnefoy *Op. Cit.*, pp 10,9,40.

Researching Salafi Women in the West

The rise of global Salafism and the emergence of a new hybrid Salafi identity has signified not only the changing face of religious belief and practice in contemporary Europe and globally but has also revealed the significance of modern spirituality and the return to religion in a post-Enlightenment era. Yet despite its popularity as an alternative lifestyle choice, Salafi women often find themselves placed at the centre of very harsh and offensive debates concerning the question of how ‘dangerous Salafism is’³⁶—a sentiment which could have dire consequences on their human rights and civil liberties,³⁷ especially when one considers how their citizenship rights³⁸ can so easily be stripped away for reasons of ‘security’³⁹.

Thus, as a female sociologist who converted to Salafism over two decades ago, I decided to meet the need for urgent research that challenges crass stereotypes and the misrepresentation of Salafi women by conducting fieldwork in the postcolonial and post-secular city of Birmingham—famous for being the ‘hub’ of ‘purist’ Salafi *da’wah* in the West. Having lived as part of Birmingham’s Salafi community since the late 1990s I had felt first-hand the effects of being caught in the crosshairs of the gendered War on Terror, especially in light of the UK Government’s Prevent Counter-Extremism Strategy (2015) under which we might easily be defined as extremist due to our seemingly outright ‘opposition’ to fundamental ‘British values’.⁴⁰ This spurred me to use my unique ‘insider’ position as a Salafi woman

³⁶ ‘Normalization of Islamophobia – What do we mean by that?’ by Martijn, March 30, 2019.

³⁷ Sorry, Louise Casey, but Muslim women are held back by discrimination, by Aina Khan, Tue 6th Dec 2016, accessed 23 October 2020.

³⁸ ‘UK shooting range uses Shamima Begum image for targets’, by Mattha Busby, 27th February 2019, accessed 26 October 2020.

³⁹ New: Priti Patel’s powers to revoke citizenship are the broadest in the G20, Meanwhile MPs are debating the government’s Nationality and Borders Bill, which could give the Home Office unprecedented new powers, by Ben van der Merwe, accessed January 19, 2022.

⁴⁰ ‘Instead of Fighting Terror, Prevent Is Creating A Climate of Fear’, by Amrit Singh, January 1, 2017.

and researcher to explore in greater depth the reasons why a religion which is so commonly associated with violence, repression and acute social control of its female members continues to be a popular lifestyle choice for the demographically diverse females in the Salafi community to which I belonged.

Further, apart from benefitting the research with my own reflections on becoming Salafi as a second-generation British-Pakistani woman during Salafism's fledgling years, I also hoped that as the wife of one of Salafism's pioneers in the West, I would be able to facilitate community-based research in collaboration with various stakeholders—both within my Birmingham community and Salafis nationwide. In doing so, I aimed to make an original contribution towards an 'egalitarian' and 'ethically superior'⁴¹ narrative of Salafism's emergence as a 'new' revivalist religious movement in the UK nearly thirty years ago.

Consequently, this study situates the history of British Salafism as a grassroots movement from within, and is enhanced by first-hand accounts from some of Salafism's pioneers in the West such as Shaykhs: Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Wāhid, Abu Iyād Amjad Rafiq, Abu Hakeem Bilāl Davis, Abdulilāh Lahmami, Abu Idrees Muhammad, the late Abu Talhah Dawūd Burbank (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ) and others; it is further augmented by the speeches and writings of some of the most esteemed contemporary Salafi scholars such as Ibn Bāz, Sālih al-Fawzān, Rabī' bin Hādī al-Madkhalī, etc., and eminent scholars of the past such as Mālik bin Anas, Ahmad bin Hanbal, al-Bukhārī and Ibn Taymiyyah (رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ).

Ultimately, my 'insider' research reveals that contrary to crass stereotypes of hyper visible Muslim women as brainwashed female cult victims destined to become *jihadi brides*, *becoming* and *being* a Salafi woman is a largely social act of gradual personal change—one that enables such women to turn their lives around using a religious problem-solving perspective. More importantly, this research also demonstrates how the symbiotic relationship between creed and methodology within Salafism clearly symbolises a vehement

⁴¹ Striffler 2015:8.

condemnation of extremism and terrorism, and thereby debunks the current framing of it as ‘one of the West’s new political bogey-men’.⁴²

Consequently, my doctoral thesis focused on the conversion narratives of thirty Salafi women who are members of the Salafi community in Birmingham, and focused on discovering:

Why women from varying social and cultural backgrounds choose to convert to an orthodox interpretation of Islam known as Salafism.

Research questions included:

- What is Salafism?
- Who is a Salafi?
- What is the appeal of Salafism across cultures, especially for women from different social and cultural backgrounds?
- What features do women have in common that lead them towards converting to Salafism?
- How is Salafism as a transnational movement so successful at retaining its general universal features and adapting to local circumstances?
- What is the future of Salafism in the West?

Dr Naheed Anwar’s ethnography of Salafi women in Birmingham makes an original contribution to knowledge by demonstrating how shifting identities are an important means by which we can understand more complex issues surrounding the discourses of gender, religion, and identity — especially in relation to broader socio-cultural processes occurring at both a local and global level. As a Salafi woman who gender segregates, Dr Anwar was able to complete her doctoral thesis in 2021 as a distance learning student kindly facilitated by the University of Roehampton. For further enquiries on her research please visit ResearchingSalafism.com

⁴² Bonnefoy *Op. Cit.*, book cover.

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