

## **Sufis, Salafis, and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism**

*Sadek Hamid*

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In *Sufis, Salafis, and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism*, Sadek Hamid provides a rich history of nearly four decades of Muslim organizing in Britain. Replete with careful typologies and periodizations, the work reflects the author's intimate grounding in the world of British Islam, and provides a unique insight into the challenges and successes of four trends he describes as the "reformist Islamist Young Muslims UK (YM), the Salafi-oriented JIMAS (Jamiyyah Ihya' Minhaj as Sunnah)...the radical pan-Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the neo-Sufi Traditional Islam Network" (2). With a focus on the origins and ongoing transformation of these tendencies, Hamid explores the widespread perception—most prominent in news media and policy narratives—that Muslims in Britain have grown more religiously observant over the last three decades. It is by addressing this question of increased youth religiosity that Hamid provides a nuanced corrective to a variety of approaches to the study of Muslims in the West—most notably, orientalist accounts that extricate Islamic movements from historical and political conditions, functionalist narratives that frame Muslim activism as a psychological response to instability, and crisis-driven securitized perspectives that grew prominent in Britain following the 2005 London bombings.

The Introduction addresses the contested character of the book's central terms, and acknowledges how classifications like 'Islamist' and 'Salafi' have been shaped and politicized in a post-9/11 climate. Here Hamid echoes Mahmood Mamdani's incisive critique of Good Muslim-Bad Muslim discourse (2004), which he argues reduces rich contestations within the Islamic tradition to a battle between "extremist" and "peaceful" interpretations of scripture. Hamid emphasizes how such narratives obfuscate the multifaceted nature of Muslim collectivities and Islam itself, repeatedly citing the "complex religious diversity" and "heterogeneous" character of Muslim activism and discourse (3). Hamid's appeals to multiplicity aptly reflect the capaciousness of Islam, capable of containing complexity and even contradiction without dissolving into its constituent parts.<sup>1</sup> But to what extent is the refrain of Islam's plurality—frequently repeated by

de-radicalization pundits and anti-Islamist ideologues concerned about the problem of “political Islam”—entangled with more pernicious projects in our contemporary moment of War? To what extent do such appeals discipline Muslims as much as they remind us of the vast character of the Islamic heritage?

The following four chapters are dedicated to the respective study of the Young Muslims UK, JIMAS, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and neo-traditionalist networks. This section is rich in historical detail, though the book’s more conceptual and analytical contributions appear in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 5, “*Dawah* Discourses Understanding the Appeal of the Trends,” Hamid examines five discursive frames constructed and relied upon by the aforementioned Islamic trends: ‘To be a Good Muslim,’ ‘Islam is the Solution,’ ‘We are One Ummah,’ ‘Struggle between Islam and the Rest,’ and ‘The Search for a British Islam.’ Like the central typologies of the book, these frames drawn from and challenge one another, and take inspiration from intellectual genealogies that far exceed Britain itself. Most significantly, however, this chapter clarifies a driving normative commitment of *Sufis*, *Salafis*, and *Islamists*: de-exceptionalizing Islam and Muslims.

Perhaps in response to the ways Islamic practitioners have been constructed as a suspect population by the media, security services, and courts since 9/11 (and even more so since London’s 7/7 bombings), much of the text seems to revolve around rendering Muslims more legible to a non-Muslim audience. Indeed, the author’s repeated casting of Muslims as a “faith community” commensurable with others and reliance on the discourse of “identity” successfully inscribe the political discourse and ethico-legal dilemmas of Muslims in accessible terms that manage secular anxieties. This narrative—compatible with the language of many post-9/11 interfaith initiatives—carries obvious risks: Does knowing Islam through Christocentric notions of “faith” obfuscate more than it illuminates? To what extent do efforts to normalize Muslims rely on simplistic readings of difference (that reify it, while simultaneously incorporating the Muslim Other into sameness)? Such questions have been explored at length in critical examinations of liberal pluralism and the politics of multiculturalism,<sup>2</sup> as well as in the many scholarly interventions that have challenged the deployment of “religion” as a transhistorical category (and in some cases, described the specific conceptual and political dangers this poses for the study of Islam).<sup>3</sup>

Hamid’s turn to Social Movement Theory (SMT) in Chapter 5 is another means by which he lends legitimacy to the efforts and concerns of

young Muslim organizers. This move aptly challenges the relegation of the study of Western Muslims to the purview of Security Studies, and explores youth religiosity through a set of questions that does not pathologize Islamic practice. Lauding Quintan Wiktorowicz's edited volume *Islamic Activism, A Social Movement Theory Approach* and decrying functionalist readings of Islamic activism, Hamid explains the methodological benefits of SMT. He reflects:

Resource mobilisation, for example, demonstrates how Islamic activists function as rational actors, rather than individuals who are guided purely by dogmatic adherence to religious ideology. From this perspective, these activists' decision-making process can be said to be driven by tactical and strategic assessments of costs and risks and not only ideas about theology and piety. (90)

While this approach serves as an important corrective to most vernacular theories and everyday etiologies regarding Muslims in the West, it also raises a number of concerns. What kind of subject does this strain of SMT assume? Does the centering of "costs and risks" over "theology and piety" merely replace essentializing depictions of Muslims (as actors impervious to historical transformation) with the assumptions of bourgeois economics? In other words, does replacing the figure of the fanatic or terrorist with that of the "rational actor" actually provide us with greater analytical clarity?

In Chapters 6 and 7, "Fragmentation and Adaptation: The Impact of Social Change" and "Contemporary British Islamic Activism," Hamid traces the factionalism, growth, and challenges of the aforementioned Islamic tendencies. He notes how the Traditional Islam network, for example, experienced three phases: its inaugural phase, as it emerged in opposition to better-established religious orientations; its post 9/11 iteration, marked by new attention to the specificity of Muslim life in the West; and a third period of internal divergences—most notably between what Aftab Malik terms "conservative traditionalists" characterized by a focus on *madhhabi* adherence and "progressive traditionalists" interested in locally contextualizing Islam (129). Hamid also maps out a similar series of sub-tendencies within Salafism (127). Notably, compared to its scathing critique of most trajectories in British Islam, *Sufis, Salafis, and Islamists* demonstrates relative generosity to the "Traditional Islam" (TI) network—a formation in which Anglo-American scholar Hamza Yusuf (under much criticism since late 2018 for his prominent role in the UAE Peace Forum) continues to play

an internationally significant role. This approach raises further questions about Hamid's appraisal of more politically vibrant strands of Muslim activism.

Indeed, a striking feature of Chapters 6 and 7 is Hamid's use of terms like "evolved" and "maturation" (117, 118) to describe shifts from ummatic discourse propagating a deterritorialized (and supposedly "de-cultured") Islam, to "indigenised" (116, 136) forms of Muslim identity. This is most evident in Hamid's discussion of the changing manifesto of the Young Muslims UK, which moves from describing itself as a "limb of the the global Islamic movement" in a land of falsehood (*bāṭil*) in 1993, to emphasizing dialogue with non-Muslims and membership "diversity" in 2012. Elsewhere, the author describes this process as advancement from "dogmatic Islamism" to "pragmatic considerations" (118). While Hamid cites modest fashion, the music industry, and Muslim comedy as examples of Islam acquiring local relevance, one is left wondering how the author would evaluate state projects dedicated to regulating Muslims' global sensibilities. Would the internalization of such state imperatives (and Muslims' transformation into imperial citizens) also represent a form of Islam's "indigenization"?

While *Sufis, Salafis, and Islamists* represents a refreshing and empirically grounded account of dominant Islamic trends in Britain, the political imperatives and ethical stakes *underpinning* observations of increased religiosity among British Muslims are left relatively under-examined. A main premise of the book appears to be dispelling a popular conflation between "assertive Muslim identities" (2) or "faith-based activism" on one hand, and "violent radicalisation" (5) and "terrorism" on the other. Does a counter-narrative like Hamid's adequately challenge these securitized dichotomies, or does it—perhaps with the aim of making space for Muslim civil society efforts—ultimately *adopt* hegemonic conceptions of terrorism and violence itself?

Overall, Hamid successfully illustrates how "Islamic identity formation" (4) is shaped not only by imperatives within the Islamic tradition itself but also by local contingencies, transnational flows of knowledge, international political and economic crises, and sometimes even individual psychological dispositions. In this sense, it provides a more holistic view of Muslim life in Britain than dominant accounts of Islam in Europe. One may ask, however: have we not already witnessed the production of almost two decades of scholarship emphasizing that Muslims, like other collectivities, are also complex, historically situated, full of contradictions, and

dynamic? Perhaps a generative engagement with *Sufis, Salafis, and Islamists* would build upon Hamid's observations by demonstrating what is compelling about Islam itself—not simply as religion (a secular category), but rather, as what it claims to be: a complete way of life.

Muneeza Rizvi

PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Davis, CA

## Endnotes

1. A point most emphatically argued by Shahab Ahmed (*What is Islam?* 2015) and Talal Asad ("The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 1986) in the latter's careful challenge to anthropologist Abdul Hamid El-Zein.
2. See, for example: Talal Asad, "Multiculturalism and Identity in the Wake of the Rushdie Affair," *Politics & Society* 18, no. 4 (1990): 455-480; Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Ghassan Hage, *A White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Zed Books, 2011); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
3. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).