

# A view from the inside

**Abdul Haqq Baker provides an account of the Brixton Mosque and the shifting perceptions towards it, since it was founded.**

Not until the events of 7th July, has the British Muslim Convert community within the UK been under so much scrutiny, as being especially susceptible to extremist teachings which allegedly lead to terrorist activities. This paper will address key issues affecting segments of the British Muslim convert community post 9/11 and 7/7. A unique insider perspective to one such community – Brixton Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre – will be provided from an academic context to enable an authentic empirical overview of factors that contributed towards this community's development. As focus increasingly centres on grassroots community led initiatives, it has become necessary to research and analyse the effectiveness of the British Muslim convert community in countering violent extremism against the prevalent back drop of extremist propaganda. This account intends to provide an alternative narrative to existing academic and political debates regarding adherents to Salafeeyah (or Salafism as it is more commonly known today), the ideological orientation of this particular community. The Salafist ideology is considered by many to be one of the significant contributory causes to violent extremism. Adherents to this particular branch of Islam consider their practices mainstream, away from the extreme spectrums of both liberalism and violent extremism; however, in contrast, critics consider Salafists to be an intrinsic catalyst towards the path of violent extremism. Admittedly, the community's initial isolationist approach to wider society compounded this perception and resulted in further marginalisation.

## **The British convert community in brixton**

The Brixton Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre (aka Masjid Ibnu Taymeeyah) is centre to a diverse multicultural community that comprises largely of converts from Afro Caribbean backgrounds. For example in 1998, 45% of students at the Mosque's community school were Afro-Caribbean from convert parents. The initial founders of the community first began congregating in each others' homes in the mid seventies, culminating into them establishing a small meeting venue and place of prayer at Bellfields Road, a short walk from the Mosque's present locality. The community continued to expand until, in 1990, the move was made to 1 Gresham Road.

Up until 1994, when the existing leadership was elected, the centre was managed by a series of administrations that failed to develop effective and cohesive policies for social and educational development. This, coupled with the inability to access much needed resources from local government to facilitate community needs, led to tensions reaching climatic proportions in March 1993 when the majority of attendees / community members confronted the management of the mosque, requesting elections for new leadership.

It is important to note at this juncture that, unlike the majority of mosques in the UK, Brixton Mosque's congregation comprised largely of Afro-Caribbean converts, and North and West African Muslims who did not adhere to one single ideology at the time. Most U.K. mosques adhere to Islam's four established schools of jurisprudence (Hanafee, Shaafie, Hanbali and

Maliki) the Hanafee school being most predominant among much of the South Asian community. Further branches are found within these schools, such as Deobandis, Tablighis and Barrelvis to name but a few; however, the source of jurisprudence is largely the same. In contrast to a generally singular adherence to an ideology or methodology, Brixton Mosque's leadership accommodated everyone, irrespective of religious belief, so long as it ascribed in some way to Islam. This resulted in Sunnis, Shia, Sufis (the Murabitun Sect) and even Nation of Islam members attending and worshipping there. Instability and obscurity in such a fundamental area as ideology invariably attracted the attention of individuals and groups seeking a platform / avenue to exploit this vulnerability and propagate their beliefs. Abu Hamza, Muhammad Al Masari, Omar Bakri and Abdullah El Faisal were a few who attended the mosque; either by way of invitation from the management or, to simply worship there and assess the prevailing climate. Abu Qatada even attended on one occasion, shortly after arriving in the UK. Study circles were established after prayer by various individuals under the guise of teaching converts Arabic.

Subsequent expulsions from the mosque of those propagating violent extremist 'Takfeeri' ideologies once the new administration had been elected resulted in extemporaneous activities taking place within the local vicinity, whereby these extreme views were further expounded. This was to culminate into a direct confrontation between the mosque and one proponent of extremism, Abdullah El Faisal and his followers in 1993, when he attended Brixton Mosque with thirty to forty of his followers to conduct a study session. This was, of course in flagrant violation on his ban from the mosque and was an attempt to challenge the new administration's authority. Suffice it to mention that this attempt failed due to the somewhat robust response of the administration and the mosque community members.

In an effort to protect the mosque from the increasing attempts of extremist protagonists and their followers to destabilise the mosque and provide an alternative violently radical narrative, the administration took some of the following steps:

1. Changed the charitable status of the mosque into a trust with a set quorum of trustees who had the sole responsibility of electing and deselecting new or fellow trustees.
2. Purchased the mosque premises, placing it under the direct ownership of 'holding trustees.'
3. Prevented the distribution of any publication or leaflets outside the immediate vicinity of the mosque. This included its own material which would, in the event, be distributed from within the mosque premises.
4. Prevented any unofficial classes or study circles taking place.
5. Provided more access to renowned scholars and their students from the Muslim world.
6. Addressed the violent extremists and their ideologies publicly in sermons, conferences and publications.
7. Physical preventative measures were adopted for those physically threatening the security of the mosque and its attendees.

The success of these measures caused some individuals to gravitate away from the mosque in view of the attraction of extremist rhetoric which had now begun to disparage and belittle the mosque and its followers as government stooges and infidels. Richard Reid and

Zacarius Moussaoui were two such individuals lured away by such rhetoric.

### Post 9/11

Shortly after the events of 9/11 the mosque leadership heightened its proactivity in condemning these attacks and highlighting the effects of violent extremist ideology to a wider audience. The leadership's awareness of Zacarius Moussaoui's detainment and subsequent connection with these attacks only served to confirm what had already been established in the mid 90's; namely, that of inculcation of violent extremist 'Takfeeri' ideologies inevitably results in terrorist actions on the premise of distorted concepts of Islam. This was further confirmed when Richard Reid was arrested and convicted for his attempted terrorist action to explode a transatlantic flight using a 'shoe bomb.'

Unfortunately, despite the transparency of the mosque leadership in discussing how both above mentioned individuals progressed along paths to extremism, Brixton Mosque was accused of being an extremist institution which was producing terrorists. The fact that the mosque had successfully fought and thwarted extremist propaganda and its advocates was ignored, as was the successful track record of deradicalising a significant number of individuals who once adhered to the principles of 'Takfeerism' or

violent extremism as it is more commonly known.

### Conclusion

Post 7/7 there has been something of a paradigm shift among statutory bodies and NGOs regarding the initial perception of Brixton Mosque as a hotbed of extremism. Increasingly, the Mosque's experiences and positive contribution towards countering violent extremism is being examined and referenced by academics and statutory agencies alike. Acknowledgement is finally being given to the fact that some of the

most effective counter terrorist measures lie at grassroots levels and that communities like Brixton continue to combat a type of extremism that has long since taken root among the younger generation of British

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Muslims. It would be premature to celebrate the apparent success rate for convictions of violent extremists in view of the fact that a significant number of seeds have already been sown. Existing government foreign policy and its perceived double standards so far as Muslim communities are concerned, only serve to exacerbate soil that is already fertile. ■

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