



OXFORD

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MUSLIMS IN THE MILITARY

**Broadening Diversity in the
British Armed Forces**

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**Flight Lieutenant Nosheen Chaudry (RAF) speaking at
Armed Forces Q&A session at Muslim festival (2016)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The estimated numbers of British Muslims in the Armed Forces are a small fraction of the 2.7 million British Muslims in the UK today.¹ It is estimated that between 570-650 Muslims are members of the Armed Forces². The question is why so few British Muslims join the British Armed Forces, especially given the high unemployment levels among British Muslims (Berthoud and Blekesaune, 2007; Heath and Martin, 2012).

In this report, research findings are presented that highlight young British Muslim attitudes towards Armed Forces careers and examine why these attitudes may exist. Recommendations are made regarding widening diversity in the Armed Forces.

The research presented in this report draws extensively on a wide range of literature, interviews and focus group discussions with young British Muslims regarding career choices and aspirations. It also includes results from an online survey about career decision-making aimed at British Muslims; and supported by in-depth interviews with British Muslim Armed Forces personnel.

Summary of Findings:

- Evidence that a lack of clear information and guidance on career choices within the Armed Forces means it is less likely British Muslims can make informed career choices.
- An adjustment in attitudes may take a generation to realise, but consistent work from Muslim communities, Armed Forces outreach teams, recruitment offices and civic organizations is important to nurture this change.
- Resolutions of real cases of discrimination within the Armed Forces should be developed into case studies to reassure potential recruits concerned with racism in the Armed Forces.
- Understanding how foreign policy is designed and implemented is crucial in clarifying the role that the Armed Forces play in it.
- Apprenticeships and paid University degrees as a route into the Armed Forces should be emphasised further, especially given many Muslim students wish to avoid debt and/or interest.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>

²https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/506367/Diversity_Statistics_1_October2015_Re-release.pdf

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Defence has encouraged increasing diversity in the Armed Forces. The recruitment drive is also mirrored by high unemployment levels among British Muslims. However, changing British Muslim attitudes to and perceptions of the Armed Forces is crucial in overcoming the challenges to Armed Forces recruitment among this segment of society.

The New Labour Government in the 1990s encouraged greater multi-culturalism and pushed for equal opportunities in public bodies. The media³ reported on the discrimination experienced by ethnic minority soldiers; the Armed Forces began being more publically accountable for discrimination and abuse⁴, while the MOD realised the importance of cultural skillsets among soldiers. This intensified the Armed Forces' attempt to widen recruitment⁵. The aims established under the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, which was made partly under pressure from the Commission for Racial Equality, set the target of:

“In an agreement with the Commission for Racial Equality, the Armed Forces intend to recruit 6 per cent of their recruits from the ethnic minorities by 2002. Ethnic minorities currently comprise only 1 per cent of armed forces personnel” (Strategic Defence Review White Paper, 1998).

A freedom of information request in 2013⁶ highlighted that 650 Muslims serve in the British Armed Forces (the Royal Navy had 40 Muslim service personnel, the Army 550 and the RAF 50). Though few attempts have been made to break the statistics down further, it is fairly well known that the majority of Muslim Armed Forces personnel are from the Commonwealth, with a smaller number being British born and bred. According to the biannual diversity statistics in 2017, Muslims still only make up 0.4% of the UK regular forces, compared to just under 5% in wider British society⁷.

This research delves into the lives of active, reservist or former members of the British Armed Forces who identify themselves as Muslim, exploring identity, how service personnel adapt faith matters when working, and when on leave, as well as their career trajectories. During the research, young British Muslims were also interviewed about their career choices and preferences.

The report develops a deeper understanding of faith for Muslim members of the military- the process of identity recognition, the experience of adaptation and negotiation- while also examining the views of British Muslims towards the Armed Forces. Little academic knowledge (Ware, 2013; Hussain and Ishaq, 2002) exists about this crucial topic, especially at a time when the MoD is keen to be more representative of Britain's diverse population.

It is also the case that British Muslims face high unemployment levels and have been statistically shown to experience religious penalties in the labour market (Simpson et al, 2006; Berthoud and

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/jan/13/military-prince-harry-race-issues>;
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-army-racist-tweet-advert-official-account-soldier-blackface-camouflage-jungle-robust-humour-a7369291.html>;

⁴ <https://n.govsite.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2017/04/OSCO-AR16-Summary.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/06/british-army-recruit-muslims-low-number-iraq-afghanistan>

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315082/PUBLIC_1391420325.pdf

⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/622989/Biannual_Diversity_Statistics_1Apr17.pdf

Blekesaune, 2007; Khattab and Modood, 2015). Researchers have found a strong Muslim ‘penalty’ (in the labour market outcome literature, a term used to refer to the poorer labour market outcomes observed, even where factors such as educational attainment and age are taken into account) in unemployment and economic activity rates for both British Muslim men and women from different ethnic groups.

Given the low representation of British Muslims in the Armed Forces, a career sector that is keen to increase its personnel diversity, and the higher unemployment experienced by British Muslims, how can we better understand the recruitment gap? This report does not analyse the number of unsuccessful British Muslims applicants to the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force; but the report is able to critique and question material collated from young British Muslims themselves regarding attitudes towards Armed Forces careers and possible explanations for the lower uptake of an Armed Forces career.

The report begins with an overview of the research methods that were harnessed to gather rich material in the time available. The analysis includes a discussion of how young Muslims are selecting careers and their attitudes towards an Armed Forces career. The report covers perceptions of racism in the Armed Forces and experiences of ‘banter’. Foreign policy implications are analysed in the chapter on ‘National identity and citizenship’; while chaplaincy and religious accommodation is discussed in the next chapter. Finally, the report touches on the impact that personal lives have on career choices and career values.



(Credit: Rooful Ali)

RESEARCH METHODS

This report aims to understand British Muslim attitudes towards careers in the Armed Forces in order to suggest a more informed approach for the Armed Forces in recruitment, outreach and long-term diversification.

A thorough literature review was conducted. This included literature on drives for diversity policy in the British Armed forces and its implementation; managing Armed Forces diversity in other countries; religious accommodation in the British Armed Forces (and in other countries); and attitudes to the Armed Forces in UK, both from minority groups as well as the majority population. The scale of this literature review is detailed to a great degree and rather than include the literature review in its entirety, a selection of it is used in this report.

The fieldworkers conducted semi structured in-depth interviews and Focus group interviews with thirty-four young British Muslims. The participants came from varied geographical regions of the UK including Bolton, Blackburn, Burnley, Exeter, High Wycombe, London, Luton, Manchester, Southampton and more. All participants were between 16 and 25 years of age. The researchers took the standard precautions to obtain informed consent and ensure confidentiality. Participants are anonymised in this report and were fully informed about the research aims and what involvement entails. The interviews explored attitudes towards certain careers and job sectors, their educational attainment and employment experiences, as well as the role of the family and social networks.



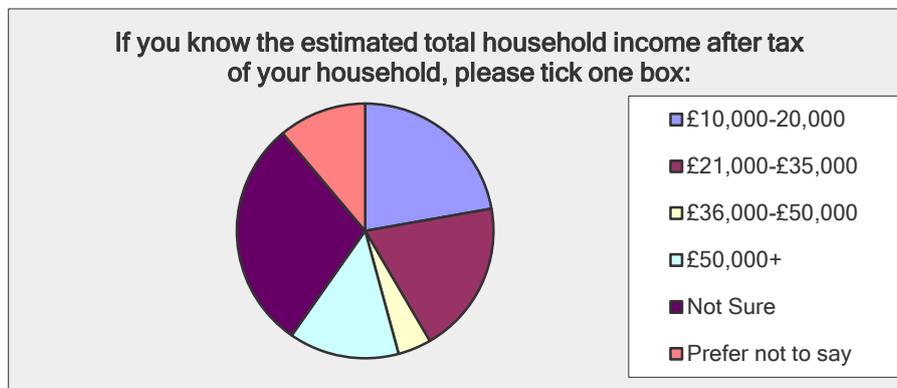
Dr Mustafa speaking with Commander Chris New from the Royal Navy and an Officer from the Royal Airforce

Alongside these interviews, we also conducted ten in-depth interviews with Armed Forces personnel, most of whom were regulars. Eight of these interviews were recorded, two participants requested no audio recording, but only note taking. These participants were met at various events or introduced via networks. Again, all participants are anonymised within this report. The BBC Radio 4 documentary '*Salam to Queen and Country*' was also transcribed as it included helpful material from Muslim Armed Forces personnel. An impartial personal approach was taken during this research in order to engage with the research questions and material in an objective manner.

To supplement the material, an online survey was conducted in 2017. Ninety British Muslim participants aged between 16-25 filled in an online survey⁸ on ‘Career Aspirations and Decision-making’ covering questions on:

- How career choices are made
- Aspirations among young British Muslims
- Barriers that they experience
- Career support structures

Participants answered a series of questions on career sectors, family, discrimination, social networks and personal information. Relevant data has been included in this report. The gender ratio was roughly 50:50. When asked ‘*How religious would you say you are on a scale of 0-10 if 0 is not-at all practicing and 10 is very practicing.*’ The average number was a 7. The lowest was a 2 and the highest was a 10. Regarding household income, the results were as indicated below:



More specifically in this report, where interview participant numbers are included after a quotation, these quotations are from interview data; other quotations are from the online survey unless referenced otherwise. All photographs in this report belong to the author unless credited otherwise.

⁸ Survey designed within Survey Monkey (Gold) with unlimited question numbers. The survey link was distributed via twitter, Facebook and send via email to hundreds of groups and individuals, including student groups at 25 British Universities. Any participant who completed the survey was offered the opportunity of being randomly selected to win one of 20 Amazon vouchers.

CAREER CHOICES

“I thought about what being a Pakistani lad with no degree meant in Burnley. It meant nothing – I meant nothing. And I wanted to mean something, to do something with my life. I said to him, I want to be a British soldier because that’s something.”

These are the words of Adnan Sarwar, winner of the 2014 Financial Times essay for his piece ‘British Muslim Soldier’⁹. In the essay he describes his reasons for joining the British Army - little money, poor education and the promise of respect. He eloquently describes his experiences of camaraderie and accomplishment despite criticism from his local community. Adnan’s situation before signing-up is a common one for many Muslims in the UK. Facing the likelihood of long-term unemployment is the norm for many British Muslims who are actively searching for jobs.

The numbers of British Muslims actively searching for employment was highlighted in the report from the House of Commons Women’s and Equalities committee on ‘*Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK*’ (2017)¹⁰. The report was a welcome addition to the available data emphasising the higher unemployment outcomes of British Muslims when compared to other groups (Reynolds and Birdwell, 2015; Khattab and Modood, 2015). For young British Muslims who are not gaining a ‘return value’ from Higher Education studies, the Armed Forces could consider this a space in which to work. For example, Bellany (2003) looks at military recruitment trends and suggests that the Army should offer more training and education in order to compete with the numbers of ethnic minorities going onto higher education.

Other initiatives that Armed Forces (or retired) personnel have employed in certain regions of the UK, is to reach out and work with British Muslim youth. Examples include teaching workplace skills focusing on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) to young Muslims in Huddersfield with the aim of tackling negative perceptions¹¹; running youth personal development courses¹² and working with the Association of Muslim Schools (AMS) to organize a Military Leadership Camp for school leavers at Sandhurst Royal Military Academy¹³.

Research on attitudes to the Armed Forces has also found that lack of information is one explanation for low interest in Armed Forces careers among British Muslims. Hussain and Ishaq (2002) have conducted several studies to gauge the perceptions held by different communities within the UK about the Armed Forces generally and as a prospective career. The studies were conducted mostly by telephone but some were face-to-face interviews, with open-ended questions. These questions included whether the interviewee would consider a career in the Armed Forces, and why. The study on British Pakistanis in the Midlands (Ishaq and Hussain, 2002) revealed 26% had concerns about the Armed Forces profession and 21% had a lack of knowledge of the careers offered. Hussain and Ishaq also highlighted the fact that 58% of British Pakistanis felt it was an appropriate career for a woman and that awareness for a drive in recruitment only reached 47% of the sample.

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/01575acc-76e8-11e3-807e-00144feabdc0>

¹⁰ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/89/89.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.hpca.org.uk/whatwedo.php?id=9> and <http://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2016-04-12/army-teaching-life-skills-to-young-muslims-in-huddersfield/>

¹² See work of project IMAPCT in Bradford - <http://shape-uk.com/impact.html>;

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VT7Pp391MN8>

During data collection, some retired service personnel described recruitment and outreach approaches in BME communities as ‘superficial’. They argued that cultural challenges abroad and the need for diversity should encourage the Armed Forces to have a stronger impact, and for minorities to see the benefit of their skills, talents or cultural assets. The key question is why the MOD has been unsuccessful in recruiting more from certain communities. To seek clarification on this and the other questions raised above, this section confronts the lack of knowledge that exists about the Armed Forces and explores the possible ways that this could be overcome.

In the fieldwork, young British Muslims were questioned about their career choices, whether they have particular careers they are drawn towards and which career options they would certainly negate. They were also asked how certain they are regarding their career choices. The overall results show a lack of knowledge about Armed Forces careers and a limited understanding of wider possibilities within the Armed Forces. The main assumption is that Armed Forces jobs are purely front line.

Respect of Armed Forces as Career

Survey respondents were asked the question “*How do you personally feel about these job sectors? Do you respect or not these career choices? Please explain below. This is not about whether you personally would choose it as a career.*” The list included Lawyer, Teacher, Imam, Journalist, Army officer, Doctor, Police officer, Charity worker. Of the survey respondents, over a third said they respect the Armed Forces as a career option, though some also distanced it from a career option they would be interested in. A selection of responses include:

- *‘They protect our country, major respect.’*
- *‘Yes, lots of mental strength and determination to get to high positions in the army.’*
- *‘I respect this career because this person works to protect and serve their country and those in it.’*
- *‘This is a good career that requires a lot of commitment and compromise.’*
- *‘Anyone who works in the army has my respect, no matter what my political beliefs etc. are. I think to dedicate your life to protecting your country and other people’s lives is incredibly brave and to be an officer means you have reached a peak in your career and have shown extreme dedication, training and commitment.’*

The third of respondents who clearly stated they ‘do not respect’ the Armed Forces gave reasons such as:

- *‘I don’t respect this career very much, no matter what country is being defended. All governments are corrupt.’*
- *‘Though I think it is noble to defend, fight for and die for one’s country, unfortunately our country is involved in conflicts which do not really concern the UK and are not for its defence. The Iraq war is a prime example of this, and sadly many young army officers who went with the best intentions of fighting for their country have lost their lives.’*
- *‘Not something I personally find particularly respectable.’*
- *‘Don’t respect these people at all, because they order the soldiers under their command to kill Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq.’*
- *‘Feel army officers should speak up against aggressive foreign policy.’*

There was also a proportion (just under a third) of the respondents surveyed and interviewed who are undecided in terms of their perception of the Armed Forces:

“I don’t know how I feel about the army; it’s not an opinion I have formed...I guess there are areas of the world where they promote peace, reduce disagreement between people so I don’t know...I guess they have potential for good.” [Interview Participant, 17]

The qualitative interview responses to the same question showed a higher rate of ambivalence towards the Armed Forces. For example, respondents would put forward positive arguments for the Army and then negative arguments, thus seeming uncertain of their position. These young Muslims have not really thought deeply about their attitudes toward the Armed Forces, and seem to acknowledge a very marginal understanding of what service personnel do.



Armed Forces representatives Q&A session. Muslim festival (2014)

Career Misinformation: Frontline Action

It was also clear early on in the analysis that young British Muslims saw those who work in the Armed Forces primarily in terms of frontline service personnel. This element of ‘combative’ action is off-putting for some young people, who immediately deem the Armed Forces as a career unsuited to their particular skills. A number of young British Muslims express concern that they or their parents have of the risks involved in frontline action:

“My dad doesn’t want me to go into Army or police work because he thinks that it’s...to be honest...not worth risking your life for...Like you want to put a price on yourself and go get yourself killed.” [Focus Group participant, 33]

“I’m not exactly knowledgeable in this arena but I wouldn’t want to go abroad and fight in countries where your main death tolls is civilians rather than targeted attacks.” [Interview Participant, 11]

Not only do young Muslims assume that an Armed Forces career is only combative or frontline, they have little understanding of how serving members can be either reservists or regulars while holding varied careers such as engineers, medics, chefs or civil servants. Here a Muslim Army serviceman describes the reaction succinctly:

“When I am out in schools, in the community doing activities and engagements etc. they normally raise eyebrows when my colleague or myself say ‘only 30% of the army is geared up in a combat role.’ So whether that be the infantry or the army corps, the artillery that sort of stuff, the remaining 70% are involved in a whole host of activities and roles and have responsibilities which are easily identifiable on the streets within the UK. The way I’d like to explain it is that you can do everything you’d like to do in the military that you can do as a civilian apart from be a hairdresser or a child-minder.” [Interview Participant, 24]

“It’s not just frontline action, we do other stuff as well to help people...look everywhere in the world, we are everywhere. That’s what I mean it’s just not a job it’s a career to help people as well. But a lot of people just don’t get that?”. [Interview Participant, 26]

In a BBC Radio 4 documentary¹⁴, General Sir Nick Carter concurs with this view:

“I think that they perhaps view it as being about fighting and being an instrument and all of those sorts of skills, which is absolutely relevant and at the heart of the army, but 30 to 40% of the army is not about that at all, it’s actually about doctors, it’s actually about engineers, it’s about technology, it’s about communication, and I think it’s about getting people to understand it’s so much about that sort of opportunity and we have to find a way of getting the message out there that we actually offer so much more than just the ability to go out there and kill people legally.”

Reaching out and informing young Muslims of the potential benefits in committing to an Armed Forces career seems a crucial step in reducing misinformation and lack of knowledge regarding the variety of career possibilities within the service. Several active service personnel mention that the perks of the job include reduced accommodation costs, travelling, playing certain sport, gaining qualifications and skills, none of which were mentioned to them at the outset of joining the Armed Forces.

“Have you seen the RAF adverts? It mentions nothing about the qualifications you can get, it mentions nothing about the different trades, and it mentions nothing about any sports you can play...” [Interview Participant, 26]

Recruitment, Advertising and Outreach

At times it seems that the media eases the proliferation of negative information regarding the Armed Forces and Muslims. In 2017, Colonel Richard Kemp, a retired British Army officer who served until 2006 wrote a damning article in *The Times*¹⁵ arguing that recruiting Muslims into the British Armed Forces is dangerous given the likelihood for infiltration and reiterating the idea that Muslims working in our services should be viewed as a threat, as sleepers and as a security threat. The irony is that in September 2017, news broke that servicemen had been arrested under anti-terror legislation on suspicion of being members of banned neo-Nazi group National Action¹⁶. This story unfortunately emphasises concerns over racism in the Armed Forces, but also that extremism in any form has no place in the Service.

Overcoming the stereotypical perceptions of the Armed Forces by Muslim communities and a tarnished reputation on equality and opportunity in the Forces is done through the work of

¹⁴ BBC Radio 4 documentary ‘Salam to Queen and Country’: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08k1xv4>

¹⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamists-may-have-already-infiltrated-our-armed-forces-jngjcdvjc> and <http://richard-kemp.com/islamists-may-already-infiltrated-armed-forces/>

¹⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/neo-nazi-arrests-latest-soldiers-british-army-terror-charges-court-national-action-mikko-vehvilainen-a7942471.html>

outreach teams. A long-serving Muslim Army serviceman highlights how important it is to highlight the wide variety of work and the positive impact of the Armed Forces worldwide to Muslim audiences:

“I have been heavily involved in working with Imam Asim who was the Muslim chaplain to the Armed Forces and is now the Islamic Religious Advisor to the Chief of the Defence Staff. He and I have worked quite closely together in our outreach. We’ve conducted visits to France and Belgium looking at the contribution of the British Indian army. Predominantly because the biggest section of the Muslim community in the UK comes from the Indian subcontinent...and all of those communities served with valour during WWI and WWII so we highlight that quite a bit. Just introducing the Armed Forces to communities that’s quite important work that we do quite often as well.” [Interview Participant, 24]

“And generally you find that once you get into that discussion then very quickly the Muslim community reacts in a positive way. They see what I had to do in Iraq but then you bring up the humanitarian work...in Afghanistan, the humanitarian work we were involved in Sierra Leone, the humanitarian work we’ve been involved in Syria, how we are deployed around the world for example the royal navy keeping drugs off the streets of the country by intercepting drugs in the Caribbean and South America, by our counter-narcotics operations in Afghanistan, by our counter-insurgency work in certain areas in the Middle East which is stopping attacks in the streets in the UK.” [Interview Participant, 24]

He also advocates reaching out and opening doors for people to come and see the Army, Navy and RAF at work in their barracks, their workspaces, at their duties- because generally when people walk past the military barracks they see a fence with razor wire and armed guards in uniform. This creates a sense of fear of the unknown, a foreign space that civilians do not generally understand. He argues that by opening these spaces up for civilians to visit, these barriers are quickly brought down, and people become more willing to be involved in conversation.

Advertising is also a common complaint among Muslim Armed Forces personnel.

“I think if you see a serving Muslim on an advert that would be a strong driver.” [Interview Participant, 21]

“But what needs to happen is this- for instance in Small Heath there was a poster during Remembrance Day of a person serving in the British army. It was a woman, she was white, non-Muslim and I just think in that kind of area it would be more powerful to have a Muslim example.” [Interview Participant, 19]

“And I think more needs to be done about Muslim contribution. For example there was a guy in Small Heath called Jabron Hashmi- this was a defining moment in my life...Everything you hear about Muslims is negative but Jabron Hashmi was an immigrant like myself, from Pakistani origin - he fought in Afghanistan and he died. And his picture was posted in every paper and his memory lives on. The fact that so many people have died fighting for the British Army, so many Muslims have died I just think in that kind of area it would be more powerful to have a Muslim example.” [Interview Participant, 19]

An innovative advertising campaign was released in January 2018 by the British Army. The £1.6 million campaign called ‘This is Belonging’ has been broadcast across T.V, radio and online media. The campaign has made headlines for its different approach to recruitment. The adverts focus much more on concerns potential soldiers might have about religion or sexuality. In one television advert¹⁷, a British Muslim soldier removes his helmet and conducts his ablutions in a stream before praying on a grassy field. His colleagues respectfully wait in silence for him to finish. The emphasis

¹⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ4OoPNY_YM

in the advert is on belonging, support and 'keeping my faith' which is the tagline that is seen on the screen. This advert has been launched just as this research comes to an end and is an overt attempt by the Army to increase its diversity and to engage potential recruits through understanding and accommodation. It will be interesting to see the long-term outcome of such advertising efforts.

It seems that such open advertising may not be the method chosen by the Air Force. In an interview with Asian Voice¹⁸, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier said that Air Force recruitment would be encouraged through individual interaction:

"I have to make sure that the BAME communities already within the service are part of that because there have to be people that they can relate to, role models that make them say, 'Ah yes, I can be that person in future'...we need to make sure we listen to the communities and say- what would help us explain and relate better?...what preconceptions might you have about us as an organisation? We need to listen to what people are telling us."

However, engaging in low level recruitment requires Muslim Air Force personnel to be engaged in recruitment and outreach efforts. Participant 26, a member of the Air Force, argues that the Air Force is trailing behind in comparison to the Army when it comes to advertising and outreach because few Muslim Air Force personnel are engaged in outreach:

"...I think the Army are doing quite well when it comes to going to mosques and they've got the higher and senior level military people going to the mosques and giving a small lecture about what they do, their daily job. But I haven't really seen that in the Air Force itself - them going to mosques or them going to schools. I think the Air Force itself needs to step up a bit, and they need to change a few things. They just need a person to represent." [Interview Participant, 26]

Though there are increasing numbers of Muslim organizations and mosques willing to work with the Armed Forces, especially with the Armed Forces Covenant¹⁹, this is sometimes seen as short-term and of fleeting impact. In fact, some personnel who have worked with a selection of Muslim organizations to coordinate events and recruitment drives, feel that recruitment drives or Armed Forces events are welcomed by some organizations to signal civic engagement, or as a source of funding, or as a sign of national belonging; rather than acknowledging the need for broader diversity in the Armed Forces. The outreach is ineffective because there is little long term follow-up after an event.

Another matter is that Armed Forces recruiters vary across the country and differ immensely based on funding, geographical location and priorities of the particular Force. However, many see the visibility of their 'minority' officers as of utmost importance in recruitment – they want Asian or Muslim officers in uniform involved in recruitment drives. This isn't always the most successful approach. Uniform at times can be a wall to building relationships, it can be a boundary that stops people from relating to an individual, from identifying with them. If Muslim officers were allowed to build relationships and bonds out of uniform within communities and at outreach projects, to engage with and inspire first, then gradually introduce the more visible elements of being in the Armed Forces such as uniform, it could prove a more successful longer term strategy:

¹⁸ <https://www.asian-voice.com/Opinion/Columnists/Rani-Singh/Air-Chief-Marshal-Sir-Stephen-Hillier-Wants-More-Diversity-in-the-Royal-Air-Forc>

¹⁹ <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/mosque-signing-paves-way-for-muslim-owned-businesses-to-support-armed-forces/>

“I even spoke to them and said, if there’s an AFMO centre in Bradford, and you’ve got a big Muslim community there and someone does come in, a lot of people that work there wouldn’t really know what to say to him [Muslim] when it comes to ‘Oh, can I pray? Can I fast? Can I do this, can I do that?’ So would it not be better if there was an Asian, Muslim person in the military, representing the Air Force to go in there and have a chat with them?” [Interview Participant, 26]

Role Models

Celebrating role models past and present is an ongoing matter within the Armed Forces. Introducing men and women from minority backgrounds who are actively serving can allow young Muslims to identify with some of the values that lead the Muslims to serve in the Armed Forces. Values such as courage, discipline, integrity, respect, loyalty, and selfless commitment are elements that the Armed Forces personnel I interviewed strongly connected with; these are values that could encourage young Muslims to connect and identify with serving Muslim personnel:

“Role models are important but only if they can spend time mentoring and being solid representatives both in own communities as well as at work/ careers.” [Interview Participant, 23]

“When I did my Remembrance assembly a girl came up to me (year seven), she had a headscarf on, Asian girl...I was bracing myself thinking what is she going to say? She said 'My granddad fought in the Second World War'...So in terms of the Muslim contribution, in terms of attracting more Muslims it’s more of the mindset...thousands fought and died and it needs to be highlighted.” [Interview Participant, 19]

“...and what might be stronger- and I hold my hand up and say I haven't been as engaged as I should be- would be Muslims in certain positions [in the Armed Forces] demonstrating as good role models.” [Interview Participant, 21]



Highlighting Armed Forces personnel of Muslim faith via Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA) Facebook page. From left to right: Sgt. Laher, Major Naveed Muhammad MBE Royal Signals, Noor Inayat Khan (Credit: AFMA, MOD, AFMA)

Role models are crucial in creating a welcoming space for young people, for encouraging them to see the career as one where they could ‘fit in’. In the BBC radio documentary ‘Salam to Queen and Country’²⁰, a Major Jasmine comments that *“Also most of our role models within the British military happen to be white Caucasian, but if you can’t see role models and if you can’t see serving Muslims going about their day-to-day business, then you might not think that there’s a place for you here.”*

²⁰ BBC Radio 4 documentary ‘Salam to Queen and Country’: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08k1xv4>

Recommendations:

- There is a perception of the Armed Forces as being all front line action. There is also a lack of awareness in the diversity of Armed Forces careers. These are crucial barriers to recruitment. Much more work needs to be done by outreach teams, recruitment offices and in terms of advertising to debunk the notion that an Armed Forces career is limited to one or two types of jobs. This could also be assisted more broadly by Muslim communities welcoming the opportunity for youth to speak with and question service personnel, especially reservists who may be the link between civilians and full time regulars.
- Linked to the above, there is a perception that to join the Armed Forces in any position, people must have absolute peak fitness, health and intellect. This is a challenge for many people and some may be encouraged to apply if certain positions or roles are shown to be less physically demanding than others.
- The Armed Forces Muslim Association could partner with popular Muslim websites aimed at young Muslims (some examples include Mvslim²¹, The Muslim Vibe²² and Ilm Feed²³) to write a series of blog posts or an article documenting, week to week, the diverse roles and responsibilities of active Muslim service personnel.
- AFMA could also approach large media organizations (such as British Muslim TV) to produce an informative documentary about the lives of Muslims in the Armed Forces, aiming to widen understanding and informing British Muslims more broadly of the identities and lives of these service personnel. This should not be about increasing recruitment, but more generally about widening understanding and quashing misconceptions.
- Assuming that young Muslims are identical in their practice of faith amounts to essentializing them. Some young Muslims will care less about halal ration packs, celebrating religious festivals and having chaplaincy service provision than others. Reaching out to young Muslims who do not necessarily attend mosque regularly, who may not live in an urban space or who may not socialise in ‘Muslim’ community events is equally important. This could be more successfully done through social media.
- The Armed Forces is perceived as a hazardous occupation, with high risks. The risks could be better explained and explored with young people. Through exploring the vast array of possible jobs available within each branch of the Armed Services, the fear of risk could be tempered or managed accordingly.
- There is a lack of diversity in Armed Forces role models, which means it is less likely that young Muslims feel connected to Armed Forces, as it has fewer people that they can identify with. Encouraging long-serving British Muslim service personnel to allocate a portion of their time to building relationships with young Muslims and to provide spaces

²¹ www.Mvslim.com. Described as a platform with the aim of empowering Muslim youth. Includes segments on entertainment, history, culture, travel and fashion.

²² www.themuslimvibe.com. Described as a grassroots media platform to inspire, inform and empower Muslim millennials to build a strong and united Muslim identity.

²³ A UK based website featuring articles about Islamic history, Muslim personalities and inspirational stories.

for young Muslims to visit and ask questions is imperative. It may also be more successful if the personnel were to begin out of uniform, allowing youngsters to identify with them as British Muslims who have achieved. After a period of time, the visual elements of the job could be introduced, thus identifying them firmly as Armed Forces service personnel, who have already built up rapport and positive role model status among the young.

- Language in the Armed Forces is at times distinct from civilian discourse. Training for service personnel who are involved in outreach should include understanding how daunting and foreign certain terminologies are to some civilians. Even terminology such as ‘Sergeant Major’, ‘Fusilier’, ‘squadron’ or ‘brigade’ is unfamiliar to many civilians.
- Armed Forces personnel could speak with other organizations such as UK Scouts movement on how they have been able to engage with specific communities and the lessons learned regarding accommodating practices.



(Credit: Rooful Ali)

DISCRIMINATION & RACISM

Increasing anti-Muslim attitudes and prejudice in wider British society has been monitored by academic and policy think tanks (Runnymede Trust, 2017; Sheridan and Gillett, 2005; Allen, 2010a; Allen, 2010b; Amnesty International, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2012; Seta, 2016). Anti-Muslim attitudes are especially evident and most powerfully disseminated in the media, popular fiction and film (Shaheen, 2003; Poole, 2002; Moore et al, 2008; Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Contemporary anti-Muslim attitudes place Muslims as the 'other', implying that they are a 'threat' and an 'enemy within'. Negative public attitudes have consequently led to hyper sensitivity and vigilance among British Muslims towards both racial discrimination and Islamophobia, both of which are heavily intertwined. Many young people have experienced physical, verbal or online attacks, including some of our respondents:

“Yeah I have...I've been involved in three major racial attacks. Two of the three were physical.” [Interview Participant, 9]

Concern over negative attitudes towards Muslims inevitably leads to young people searching for workplaces that are seen as 'safe' spaces, where faith is tolerated and understood, and where racism is (perceived to be) less likely.

A significant body of literature explores race and religious equality in the Armed Forces. Some researchers such as Crawford (2000) assess the grievance procedures in the Armed Forces, explore the portrayal of the Armed Forces in the media and collate survey data on the experiences of Armed Forces personnel. In the mid-1990s, his research highlighted that despite improvements, racism was a persistent problem experienced by personnel: in his surveys he finds that 60% of black and 40% of Asian personnel (Crawford, 2000: 148) have experienced racism, but very few took formal action due to a fear of career consequences. Crawford disagreed with other researchers (Beevor, 1991) who argued that racism was usually found in the lower ranks. Certainly the experiences of the Muslim Armed Forces personnel seem to suggest that if direct racist attitudes are experienced, they are experienced in the very early stages of an Armed Forces career, among new incoming recruits rather than perpetuated by senior staff or officers:

“The young join with often bigoted and ignorant attitudes and after a year they leave educated and motivated, having interacted with people they originally disliked. They are inspired by their leaders, and gain their respect, thus changing attitudes. The sergeant may be a black Ghanaian, or Pakistani, but that year of training offers an opportunity to change racist and prejudiced attitudes, or at least enforce tolerance or respect.” [Interview Participant, 20]

*“I don't think it depends on the branch of the military; it's more to do with the rank. All the people that were with me on the officer training course were very different to the people who were with me on *****. Even within the regiment there were some people there who had university degrees. There were lawyers, doctors, GPs who were on side...”* [Interview Participant, 18]

Banter

More recent research has suggested that even after improvements in disciplinary procedures against harassment and discrimination, it takes time for such information to circulate more widely. Von Zugbach and Ishaq (2000) argue that the media has sensationalised racism in the Forces and have not given credit where it is due for the positive changes that the Forces have made, thus deterring minorities. Basham (2009a and 2009b) addresses the issue of 'banter' in the Forces, arguing that it is still a pervasive problem and one that may slip under the radar of discrimination. Several descriptions of episodes which Muslim Armed Forces personnel described as 'banter' were discussed in the interviews:

"We were somewhere in the North...within a training area. We were being taught how to throw a grenade, this was at the very start. We were crawling up a hill and we'd throw a grenade into a ditch at which there were hypothetical enemies. Now one person was crawling up the hill, then threw the grenade, that didn't go in the ditch - the grenade landed on the hill and started rolling back down towards us. It wasn't a real grenade...no one was harmed. But one of the Sergeants made a comment that 'That's a perfect example of what you shouldn't do- make sure you throw it properly or in some cases you crawl to the top of the hill then drop it. If you throw it that way, it can roll back down on you.' Then he said something like 'If it does roll back down on you, the people at the end of the ditch would say something like "Allahu Akbar" and "thank Allah".' That sort of thing. It was meant in a light-hearted way. At the time I thought 'Hold on a second!'...That's one attitude that I think you'll find, they make the odd joke...banter in that particular instance and he was just trying to make the lads laugh. But other than that there's nothing sort of sinister about it, no." [Interview Participant, 18]

'Banter' is described as a playful or friendly exchange of teasing remarks or jokes. The problem lies in drawing the line between teasing and offence. There is more risk that banter will be construed as harassment if the person making the 'harmless' remark or joke is in a more senior position than the person at whose expense it was taken. However, as heard from several service personnel, the recipient may well take it as a joke and think nothing of it rather than seeing malice in it:

"You see the army culture is very different to normal culture. When I went on tour there were a group of lads from Northern Ireland and the verbal abuse they got, which came under banter, was incredible. Personally I never got anything directed to me as such...but speaking about the Muslim community, the Asian community, when people are talking amongst themselves I heard stuff that was generalising about certain communities. In the heart there was no such racism - there was mainly fear. They weren't racists because racism is a genuine hatred towards another race and I've never experienced racism but misconceptions and fear, yes." [Interview Participant, 19]

There are indications within the interviews with Muslim Armed Forces personnel that the job requires a level of self-confidence and emotional resilience that protects recruits in the cultural norms of the groups. The Muslim service personnel indicated that they did not hold grudges, nor did they take banter personally:

"Things were said in jest and all that but I didn't feel...I mean that was just jest...you have to have a bit of a thick skin...You're not the only one getting the mick taken out of. It needs a bit of a thick skin. It needs a sense of humour...I think it also needs a bit of background in having been in more diverse communities." [Interview Participant, 21]

Though these attitudes seem to be prevalent among the currently serving British Muslim Armed Forces personnel, race and faith based banter risks the chance that real offence will be taken. The

Armed Forces has attempted to challenge the image of it as a workplace that ignores racism, making stronger statements on its disciplinary procedures, claiming that discrimination or bigotry will not be tolerated, however in terms of recruitment, the impact lies in whether these statements and actions are heard more widely by the public.

‘Chill Factor’

Perceiving certain job sectors will attract workers who hold negative attitudes towards minorities creates a ‘chill’ effect (Li and O’Leary, 2007; McCrudden et al, 2004). Muslims could have trepidation about applying to the Armed Forces because they perceive the Forces as not standing up to those who try to intimidate minority co-workers and they may fear being indirectly discriminated against or even being marginalized by colleagues.

“...the ‘chill factor’ – the various social and psychological factors that may discourage individuals from an under-represented group from applying to a firm – such as historical associations with a different group, real or expected discrimination from workmates in the opposite community, or disapproval from friends and family.” (McCrudden et al, 2004)

Ishaq and Hussain (2002) conducted research among British Pakistanis in the Midlands regarding a career in the Armed Forces. They found that 32% of respondents avoided applying to the Armed Forces due to perceived racism. They also surveyed Scottish Pakistanis (Ishaq and Hussain, 2001) in Glasgow asking why they thought ethnic minorities were not applying to join the Armed Forces, among other reasons, 22% said the main reason is fear of experiencing racism.

There was a similar trend among participants in this research. They emphasised a fear of working in a sector that expects long dedicated service yet the environment may not be as welcoming to minorities, where they expect to experience marginalization or ‘cool’ attitudes towards them due to their ethnicity or choice of faith.

“...the British Army I don’t really know if I’d want to because I feel it would be quite racist and you wouldn’t be looked on in an equal way.” [Interview Participant, 15]

*“I grew up in a place called *****...but it used to be a Navy base so everyone is a bit racist, they really don’t like Muslims because it’s got such a strong sense of connection to the Armed Forces...It was just a really big thing, like you wouldn’t believe how much of an issue it was. So when I came to *****, it’s not very far away but it was a completely different world.” [Interview Participant, 7]*

These concerns are not helped by news such as the recent arrest of two Army personnel for belonging to a banned Far Right group. Though this is proactive action on the side of the Army, it unfortunately reinforces the perception of racism in the Armed Forces, emphasising that anyone committing to a career in the forces could expect to experience intolerance.

Generational Change

Research that has focused on more diverse Armed Forces around the world, such as in the USA, have argued that it is a matter of time before recruiting minority ethnic and religious personnel becomes the norm. Bodnar (1999) argues that the change in representation is essentially a function of time, which would develop over generations- a process, which he calls ‘percolation’. This is also

the case with regards to racism, discrimination and anti-minority behaviour/attitudes. Here, a long-serving Muslim member of the Armed Forces explains how the Armed Forces has changed:

“cases that come up now are dealt with a lot differently and I think that’s where we have moved very, very quickly in being able to address situations where a soldier, male or female, may come forward and say ‘I’ve been subject to discrimination or violence’ or whatever it may be. I think those processes have come into being very quickly. Quite rightly and also perhaps unfortunately as a result of issues not being taken seriously at the time. Perhaps there was a culture that allowed for some of the stuff, which now quite rightly are seen as quite abhorrent. You know, certain ways of speaking to people, certain way of treating women, certain way of treating people’s religious beliefs that was accepted even 20 years ago is very much a no no now.”
[Interview Participant, 24]

However, there are barriers that could slow this process down. Kirby (2000) highlights the structural and perceptual barriers for a lack of ethnic minority representation in the US Special Forces. He finds that a lack of knowledge about assessment and training processes creates barriers for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. He also highlights that there are perceptual barriers – because many minority youth lack exposure to the Forces, it means less are inclined to see it as a career option. If they also perceive themselves likely to experience discrimination, this exacerbates the problem of recruitment.

Armed Forces Personnel

None of the Armed Forces personnel interviewed for this research described any experience that they considered to be direct or indirect discrimination. The closest any of the personnel came to experiencing discomfort was in moments of ‘banter’ as they described earlier. This may be indicative of the Armed Forces not tolerating racism and taking claims of discrimination more seriously; it may also reveal the increasing acceptance for diversity and difference among service personnel:

“I haven’t had any instance within the military where I’ve directly had [negative] comments, indirectly [or] towards Muslims in general. You won’t find any of the officers saying anything at all.” [Interview Participant, 18]

“Since I’ve been in I haven’t seen any racism or discrimination at all. It probably has changed because the military more reflects British society...Yeah. I can’t think I’ve ever gotten any form of negativity for being Muslim in the British army.” [Interview Participant, 25]

“The first question for example, I’m serving now, I’ve been in the air force for X years so people that don’t know I’m serving or I’m in the military, the first question they ask is ‘Oh do you face racism?’ Or, ‘Is there a lot of racism involved?’ And it’s the same questions they ask and you feel there should be someone to clear the air, clear these misconceptions and misunderstandings...there is no racism at all. I’ve served for X and a half years and I’ve faced no racism at all because they take racism seriously, you could be dismissed. So that’s what I mean, they do look after you.” [Interview Participant, 26]

Recommendations

- Encourage more Muslim Armed Forces personnel to openly talk about their experiences, friendships and comradery in public to combat the perception of racism and discrimination in the Armed Forces.
- Case studies should be developed of any tribunal outcomes or accounts of individuals having faced disciplinary procedures due to racism or discrimination. These case-studies should be shared widely.
- Offer recruits the opportunity to be mentored by long-serving Muslim service personnel in a voluntary capacity. Muslim service personnel acting as mentors could play a strong direct pastoral role for Muslims in the military. Though the Armed Forces have religious pastoral leaders in place, who care for the religious well-being of all Muslim service personnel, connecting long-time service personnel with new recruits could play a strong role in strengthening self-identity of new recruits, but also provide junior service personnel the support they may need from others who have similar backgrounds and Armed Forces experience.
- Improving diversity rates across the Armed Forces is vital to reducing discrimination and division. The long-term strategy on increasing diversity will in itself encourage more people from minority backgrounds to feel comfortable joining. A serviceman put it succinctly:

“I think we still have a lot of work to do as a way forward as we’re trying to become an organization – and what I’m talking about is the Royal Navy, the Army and the Air Force – in order that we become more reflective of society, we still need to make some adjustments but we’re in that...catch 22 situation where we need to attract people in, so the system then sees a need and puts the resources in place to make changes happen much quicker. So I think we’re in a pivotal moment in time at the moment and the challenges of previous operations have had an impact on recruiting there’s no going away from that, but I think the desire from the very top of becoming reflective is certainly being felt on how organisations such as mine are really looking at how best we can get a message out to the communities that look at us as an employer of first choice.” [Interview Participant, 24]



Army awareness away weekend for British Muslim teenagers (Credit: SHAPE UK)

NATIONAL IDENTITY & CITIZENSHIP



(Credit: Rooful Ali)

The link between Armed Forces service and citizenship has been increasingly put under the spotlight. Signalling national identity is becoming gradually more complicated, especially in the increasingly securitized society. Given that the securitization agenda is felt keenly among British Muslims, its impact on British belonging and national identity is important when reflecting on Muslims identifying with the Armed Forces.

Vron Ware (2012) is at the forefront of looking at how the civilian and military worlds intersect. In her article 'Whiteness of the glare of war' (Ware, 2010) she uses the war in Afghanistan to show that the era of 'new imperialism' has racialized citizenship, where whiteness is a marker of indigeneity in Britain, and citizenship or access to welfare is to be earned. She argues that nationalists often recall the Second World War as a time of unity amongst Britons and highlights that this 'Churchillism' and the formalisation of the Military Covenant in 2011 puts the soldier in a very revered position. Muslims who are citizens but criticize foreign policy are seen '*as a homogenous and unpatriotic section of the population*' (Ware, 2013: 137). This has been described by other academics as a politics of 'dis-ease' (Archer, 2009) for British Muslims following their treatment by the government who tried to grapple with the Muslim ummah's transnational nature throughout the 'war on terror'. Archer states '*British Muslims have found themselves seen ambiguously as a threat.*' (Archer, 2009: 313). PREVENT has led to Muslims being very wary of institutions and government bodies. This has also led to scepticism among British Muslims with regards to the Armed Forces, at times seeing them as colluding with the security services in monitoring communities. This inability to discriminate between security institutions is in itself problematic.

One way of bridging between the Armed Forces and the Muslim communities is in emphasising the commonalities that they have. One of the commonalities is in remembering the service of the many Muslim soldiers who had fought alongside British troops in the past. Shared histories are influential in aiding Armed Forces recruitment and are also used by Muslim organisations to highlight their roots in British history. The Ministry of Defence's exhibition *'We Were There'* (2000) describes its purpose as *'our tribute to the contribution made to our defence by military and civilian personnel from what was then the British Empire and later the Commonwealth and whose descendants now form part of the richly diverse ethnic population in the United Kingdom.'*²⁴ The focus on contributions made by soldiers from the Commonwealth and the British Empire in the First and Second World Wars is important to connect with the heritage of young British Muslims, who may feel disconnected from the history of their country. Similarly the Muslim Council of Britain created a special report *'Remembering the Brave'*²⁵ (2014) to memorialise the role that millions of Indian Muslim soldiers played in World Wars. It is a document that looks at the honour involved in fighting for the British, and the favourable accommodations put in place for Muslims, despite poor conditions generally. The document also supports the role of Muslim British soldiers, and justifies both the dissenting position against the recent overseas conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the validity of being a Muslim soldier for the British military. In 2016, the British Muslim Heritage Centre opened a new exhibition called *'The Stories of Sacrifice'*²⁶ focusing on the *'400,000 Muslim Soldiers from India who fought for Britain in WW1, in addition to a further 280,000 Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians who fought for the allies'*. The think tanks British Future and New Horizons launched the project *'Unknown and Untold'*²⁷ in 2015, again looking at the shared military history of WWI. These reports and exhibitions aid in removing notions of incompatibility between Islam and Britishness.



**Serving Muslim Armed Forces personnel visit the Peace Memorial Garden in Woking, dedicated to all the Muslim soldiers who died in WWI and WWII
(Credit: Armed Forces Muslim Association)**

²⁴ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20040524045421/http://www.mod.uk/wewerethere/>

²⁵ <http://www.mcb.org.uk/rememberingthebrave/>

²⁶ <http://www.bmhc.org.uk/storiesofsacrificeexhibition/>

²⁷ <http://www.1muslimsoldiers.org.uk/>

That being said, the impact of more recent foreign policy actions are also highly relevant to grievances felt by British Muslims. Bayar and Ertan (2016) assess the impact of foreign policy on Muslim immigrants and host societies in European countries, particularly in relation to welfare and citizenship. They find that multi-cultural policies are still needed to counter the harmful effect that foreign policy decisions have on Muslim citizens' feeling of belonging. Part of the solution may actually lie in disaggregating between foreign policy decisions and the Armed Forces. While public attitudes are generally positive towards the Armed Forces, though critical of foreign policy (Gribble and Wessley, 2015); many Muslims are not able to differentiate between the two. Conversations with senior Armed Forces personnel that have worked with and among Muslim communities say that there is little understanding of the relationship between democratic decisions made in Parliament regarding foreign policy and the Armed Forces following those directives. They fear that historical foreign policy grievances such as colonial rule, the British role in carving up the Middle East and so on are held firmly in the popular imaginations of Muslims.

This is evidenced by the responses in the online survey, where negative attitudes towards the Armed Forces were explained mostly through the lens of foreign policy and military deployment abroad:

Survey Respondents:

"Warfare and current British political judgements aren't the best."

"It's purely a government serving organisation."

"Don't always agree with foreign policy of the UK."

"Because it is an industrial complex built for colonialism."

"Anti-Islam tendencies in the foreign policy."

"Different life to the one I want, don't agree with going to war, don't believe "in 'defending the country', etc."

"Don't always agree with foreign policy of the UK"

"Don't agree with UK military actions."

"Orders may conflict with personal moral values."

"I do not agree with all the military engagements the UK is involved in."

Muslim Armed Forces personnel bear the brunt of this negativity (Qureshi and Zeitlyn, 2013) in both on and off duty life. They experience negative comments, stereotypical judgements and at times lose friendships due to the heated nature of foreign policy matters:

"What people have said to me is that essentially you're aiding and abetting a kuffar army against Muslims so whatever your role is you've got blood on your hands." [Interview Participant, 25]

"The Palestinian friend that I was talking about- I'm not friends with him any more for this very reason [foreign policy]. We had a massive argument that he thinks it's morally reprehensible that I can join the British Military." [Interview Participant, 18]

Service personnel underscore the idea that they are willing to act upon political decisions and follow orders, but their responsibility lies in doing it in a principled way, upholding the values that attracted them to a career in the Armed Forces:

"...as a member of the armed forces I feel I am doing something that is a very difficult job and in that environment I want to be someone who is doing the right thing. And we're taught in the army in principle about values and standards, and courage being the ability to do the right thing on a difficult day. So I would want to go there and represent that..." [Interview Participant, 19]

“Clearly it wasn’t a military decision, the decision to go into those places [Afghanistan and Iraq] was a political situation very much. As members of the Armed Forces we are a tool of the government to deploy once all the checks and balances have been carried out and as far as we’re concerned when the government says ‘Go there,’ the checks and balances have been carried out...we worry about accomplishing the mission as it’s been given to us...A lack of understanding about the fact that the deployment to Iraq was a political decision, not a military decision – and it’s important to bear in mind that certainly for Iraq there were probably more non-Muslims who were against the operations in Iraq than Muslims and the fact that ‘anti’ sentiment really resonated within the Muslim community, that legacy then stayed on and transferred from one generation to another...when you are able to explain to people that it was a political decision, not a military decision therefore me as a soldier I couldn’t decide on whether I went out to Iraq or not but when I went out there it was my decision on how I behaved and making sure that I was about to maintain the highest standards was my decision.” [Interview Participant, 24]

There are other Armed Forces personnel who disagree with explaining away the role of the Armed Forces in foreign policy as simply a separation between politicians/democracy and the Armed Forces. The following excerpt was similar to two other discussions I had, that argue that the Armed Forces should be more proactive in owning up to mistakes it has made in foreign policy situations, while at the same time acknowledging that the intention is always to act in Britain’s best interest, defensively and strategically. This cannot be done if the response is to push foreign policy fully and solely on democratic institutions and politicians in Parliament.

“I think it’s a ludicrous argument that a government makes a policy, we merely enforce it and it’s got nothing to do with us...I think that basically says you’re a sheep and that you’re willing to kill and hurt other people because the government has decided arbitrarily they’re an enemy. For example Iraq was an enemy in 2003 and now we’re assisting. Government policy can change...it essentially says if you join the army, you’ve got no control over what happens and if you’re told to attack someone you’ve got to...that’s a recruitment negative...I think a better strategy would be to explain why military intervention is necessary and what exactly you’re doing on the ground, rather than just blaming it on the government.” [Interview Participant, 25]

The literature surrounding Muslims, citizenship, national identity and the armed forces shows its complicated nature. It is evident that the notions of nation are being increasingly militarised, and elements of foreign policy, transnationalism and continuing ‘otherness’ create a difficult path for Muslim identity management. Several British Muslim initiatives have taken place in recent years attempting to engage with both matters relevant to the Armed Forces and British Muslims. In 2014, Tabinda-Kauser Ishaq, a female Muslim fashion designer created the ‘poppy scarf’ to coincide with the centenary of the first Muslim soldier being awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery as he fought for Britain in the First World War. The scarf was designed with Muslim women in mind, with the support of the Islamic Society of Britain and integration thinktank British Future. The scarf was designed to be inclusive and could be purchased and worn by anyone regardless of faith or gender. It meant that Muslim women who wished to wear it as a headscarf, could do so. Though some Muslims criticised the scarf as an attempt to assimilate²⁸, for other Muslim women it was a sign of shared remembrance.

Projects initiated by those with Armed Forces experience have begun garnering more attention. The ‘Changing perceptions’ project in Bury (organized by the Oppo Foundation)²⁹ uses football

²⁸ Overview of some negative views on the topic: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dilly-hussain/poppy-hijab_b_6077892.html

²⁹ <http://www.theoppofoundation.com/changing-perceptions#changing-perceptions-bury-fc>

to break down barriers and create greater understanding between communities. They describe the project as:

“A cross section of the local community (made up of service personnel, veterans, reservists, members of youth groups and members of faith groups) will be invited to watch the match and participate in a positive conversation to build understanding, challenge misconceptions and create long lasting beneficial relationships that they can then take back to their communities.”

Another project that has been implemented in differing geographical contexts is a project called IMPACT³⁰. The organization is based in Bradford and it aims to clear misunderstandings within communities regarding the role of British Armed Forces. The purpose of the project is to increase community cohesion and reduce resentment towards the Armed Forces; while simultaneously strengthening a sense of belonging and Britishness in disenfranchised youth:

“Project IMPACT (Integration of Military Personnel & Adaptation to Civilian Transition) is a community engagement and citizenship programme delivered in communities to break down barriers and increase engagement with the Armed Forces at a grassroots level. It aims to improve understanding of the British Armed Forces. Currently serving and ex- members of the Armed Forces delivered the pilot for Project IMPACT in Bradford schools supported by the Armed Forces Community Covenant and the Armed Forces Muslim Forum. The project has been successively delivered both in the form of a community cohesion project and as an educational citizenship programme for schools. In 2016 Lt. Col. Nat Haden, replicated aspects of Project IMPACT in Scotland to increase engagement with the BAME Community in Glasgow.” (Project Director, IMPACT)

Recommendations

- Specific programmes should be developed for citizens, to explain how foreign policy is established and how decisions are made. This could be done holistically with government policy makers, Ministers, think tanks and the Armed Forces. Enlightening the public on how foreign policy is designed, developed and how it is linked to civic responsibility/democracy is important.
- Until the MOD is honest about the impact that foreign policy decisions have on British Muslim communities and the wider public, the religious accommodations provided by the Armed Forces will be seen as a PR campaign or tokenistic gestures at best.
- Distancing of Muslim Armed Forces personnel and their families in their local communities and in civilian life should be strongly discouraged by leading community organizations, leaders and activists. It would be helpful if young British Muslims were able to choose an Armed Forces career without backlash, marginalization or judgement.

³⁰ www.shape-uk.com

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE & SOCIAL NORMS

The British Armed Forces and many other European Forces (Stoecki and Roy, 2015; Michalowski, 2015) have made great strides in accommodating the religious observance of Muslim personnel, both in order to integrate serving Muslim personnel and encourage long-term retention, as well as to improve possible recruitment outcomes from these communities. Initiatives such as halal ration packs when service personnel are out in the field, prayer rooms and a review of the dress code have been introduced. Most significant was the establishment of the role of Muslim Chaplain in 2005, currently held by Imam Ali Omar. The MOD also have an Islamic religious advisor to the Chief of the Defence Staff, Imam Asim Hafiz OBE, who also helped to set up the Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA).

Gilliat-Ray and Ali (2012) look at the way in which Muslim chaplaincy in public and other institutions is valued. Through the Muslim Chaplaincy Project, they conclude that Muslim chaplaincy has had an influence not only on the institution but on the Chaplain's own practice, the practice of their clients and on the wider public. Imam Asim Hafiz (2015) builds upon this and argues that the institution of chaplaincy is a unique way in which to provide leadership for British Muslims. Muslim chaplains offer something unique as their role is professional with proper networks, education and training. They are trained to understand the particular needs of the British Muslim communities and are exposed to a variety of people. Ware highlights their worth as a bargaining platform in the UK:

“Within a relatively short period, Muslim servicemen and women, in common with sexual minorities and other faith groups, saw the recognition of their position within the institution as an opportunity to organize their own forms of mutual support. In doing so they were able to articulate incontrovertible claims to citizenship as well as perform a strategic role within the defence-diplomacy nexus.” (Ware, 2013:131)

When asked what the AFMA means to the Muslim service personnel, they highlighted the network as a support group, a space to celebrate religious events and to meet likeminded Muslim service personnel:

“The main thing for me is the fact that I am able to connect with other Muslims and share the same thoughts and processes that weren't there before its inception. Whether or not one chooses to engage in it is kind of academic. The fact that it's there and that there is someone to turn to with questions, the fact that you can share thoughts is a big thing.” [Interview Participant, 21]

“Number one I didn't find out for several years because I think they were very poor at selling themselves at that point. I was probably in the military 4 or 5 years before I knew they existed... They had an event at Sandhurst; they had a dinner party for Eid actually. And then I went to a few things after that. It was nice to know there were other people available, but afterwards there were lots of dinner events where they eat lots of food.” [Interview Participant, 25]

The Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA) has also been involved in organizing Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) for Muslim service personnel. If the opportunity for Umrah (the lesser pilgrimage) to Mecca also arises during deployment, then service personnel are permitted to take up the opportunity:

“I think so. I think the military is completely misunderstood. But they’re probably making some leeway recently with these Hajj tours...approved by the UK military and that’s been quite positive.” [Interview Participant, 25]

“There’s been a push for us to do Hajj. I mean, unheard of when I first started the fact that that exists now.” [Interview Participant, 21]

“In the Navy and we got a chance to do Umrah together. So the ship went into Jeddah, then we actually disembarked with the Saudi Naval force for effectively half a day, did Umrah then came back.” [Interview Participant, 27]



**Personnel arriving at the Armed Forces Muslim Association
Eid celebration gathering (Credit: Armed Forces Muslim Association)**

Religious practice and accommodation within the Armed Forces has other dimensions, aside from the organisational aspect. Abu-Ras and Hosein (2015) argue that religious practice adds to the resiliency of Muslim military personnel in the Armed Forces. Their study, interviewing Muslim military personnel and veterans, found that their resilience comes from religion and spirituality, from family and the community. The post-9/11 environment, however, has meant that Muslims in the Armed Forces suffer unique faith-related stresses such as ‘walking-on-eggshells syndrome’ (Abu-Ras and Hosein, 2015: 187) and suffer psychological distress practicing invisibility and abandoning practices. They argue that the chaplains can help change this, alongside better sensitivity and cultural training. Stark (2011) looks at the fatwa requested by the head Muslim chaplain in the American army in September 2001, which states that it is permissible for Muslim military personnel to participate in the war in Afghanistan and other countries. This is most interesting in seeing the way that chaplains in the military can influence Muslims in terms of religious guidance and national identity.

Religious guidance is very important to young Muslims who may feel anxious about certain duties or positions, unaware of the variety in Islamic legal opinion:

“I plan to do my job making sure that I stay within the limits of Islam. There will be certain challenges related to my career but I will seek advice from scholars if I ever need advice on religious matters.” [Survey Respondent]

It is certainly the case that many Muslims feel that their career choices are restricted by religious observances such as modesty in dress codes or norms such as having a beard if male.

“Wearing a religious clothing can sometimes limit my career choices e.g. airline pilot.” [Survey Respondent]

“I wouldn't work somewhere that forced me to compromise on my religion (i.e. keeping a beard, praying...)” [Survey Respondent]

“I would like to find a job where I can openly practice my faith.” [Survey Respondent]

“Not going to do anything that violates my religious beliefs. Would probably leave a job if it made me feel uncomfortable for religious grounds, such as finding it hard to pray.” [Survey Respondent]

Young British Muslims realise that many accommodations have been made to help Muslim service personnel. Asking for time to pray during the working day, changes to meal times during Ramadan and being provided with halal food is now the norm in the Armed Forces. Here are some excerpts from Armed Forces servicemen:

“When it comes to prayer, prayer times it's acceptable [in Air Force]. You can pray 5 times...when it comes to Ramadan and fasting they're quite aware of that. If you've got your fitness test coming up they could push that back or forward so that's quite good as well. Seeing the family- so they know our culture is different to their culture so they are quite flexible when it comes to that.” [Interview Participant, 26]

"Nowadays, there are prayer facilities for everyone. We've got halal food available and even special ration packs. We've moved a long way so I don't think it's difficult...If you want to practise rigidly, a watch keeping system isn't consistent with praying five times...You have to adjust." [Interview Participant, 28]

Socio-religious norms

Muslim socio-religious norms on the other hand, differ depending on the context, community and individual. Religious norms are informal understandings that guide the behaviour of some members, often developing over time and are inherited through generational knowledge and assumptions. These norms may not formally be religiously mandated, though some Muslims would argue they are. Some British Muslims for example, would argue that working within certain job sectors could be difficult if they wish to avoid certain religious prohibitions, to retain religious convictions or to preserve a certain dress code. This could include for example working in a bar, banking, modelling or being an air steward (Ahmad et al 2003).

“Many individuals often associate mathematicians with banking- this is a field I want to stay away from particularly since Riba is such a big sin in Islam.” [Survey Respondent]

“I would not take a job that conflicts with my religious/ moral values (e.g. advertising for an alcohol brand.” [Survey Respondent]

“Will not want to work in wholly haram environments like a brewery, and am quite sceptical of the banking system too.” [Survey Respondent]

Social culture where alcohol and drinking is the social norm and anyone deviating from this is seen as alien can be problematic in certain career sectors. An Air Force serviceman described how he found the social culture very difficult to deal with on a regular basis. The popular drinking culture made him tired of the lifestyle in mess and he felt that socialising as a family was oriented around drinking-related social spaces, thus excluding his family from meeting others. This can leave them lonely and isolated. A new young army recruit described his concern over being excluded due to the drinking culture, but says it has not been as problematic as he had originally envisaged:

“My only concern was whether I’d be able to survive the social environment, which essentially thrives on alcohol...I don’t go to that many events because there aren’t that many really, but it’s been OK. I think people always do wonder why don’t you drink or why have you got a different drink to me but it’s generally ok.” [Interview Participant, 25]

There seemed to be a willingness, even among service personnel who describe themselves as practicing Muslims, to be flexible where possible in terms of their faith. This may mean that Eid is not celebrated with family if on deployment for example, or prayers are delayed if a team is on the move. Participant 21 said that being in the Armed Forces doesn’t suit all Muslims, not all Muslims would find it possible to accept the responsibilities and the flexibility needed. He said that while service personnel have to be strong-willed and confident in their faith, he also emphasised that they need to be able to adapt to military life.

“You need definitely flexibility. I think it’s really important...but I think your background is important in terms of how you’ve grown up. If you have happened to have grown up in a diverse culture and what I mean by that is people around you, your friends around you, that has an influence on how you will be able to interact later on in time [in the Armed Forces].” [Interview Participant, 21]

Recommendations:

- Little public information and evaluation is available on the efficacy of Muslim chaplaincy service in the Armed Forces and AFMA. The Armed Forces Muslim Association could benefit from surveying the effectiveness of chaplaincy services among personnel to evaluate whether members feel sufficiently religiously supported. Further studies need to be conducted on whether potential recruits know about these pastoral services from the outset and whether they have any effect on recruitment and retention.
- It could be beneficial if AFMA were to have more representation with service personnel from the Navy and Air Force. Given the strong ties with the Army and the larger numbers of Muslims in the Army, there is potential for feelings of ostracism to build from Muslims in the other two services.
- The wider the cultural and religious awareness among British Armed Forces personnel, the more comfortable British Muslim recruits could feel about joining. In future, a broader awareness of the sensitivities surrounding some religious norms could help make British Muslim recruits feel welcomed and encourage a sense of long-term belonging.

PERSONAL & CAREER VALUES

Career decisions are likely to be shaped and guided by personal circumstances. This may include family commitments such as having dependents; health-based pressures or lifestyle preferences. Participants were presented with a list of statements concerning values that could be important in deciding which career to follow. They were asked to indicate for each whether it matters very much, somewhat, or doesn't matter to them. The results show that:

- Participants value the financial security of a career and the standards of living that it supports, whereas a high earning wage is less important to the majority of respondents.
- Helping others, inspiring them or supporting society is a value that many young Muslims consider significant in their career decision making. They highly rated 'To be able to help other people' 'To give back to society' and 'To inspire other people'. This highlights that many young Muslims are interested in careers where they provide a service or a dedicated to a cause. This may give them a sense of purpose and meaning beyond just earning and job security.
- Within the workplace, participants identified that having an understanding boss/ workplace is important to them, as is an interesting job with variety.
- Living near one's family mattered very much for a significant proportion of the respondents.

Among the first generation who were economic migrants in the 1960s, there was an assumption that they would be migrating for a period of time and returning home. This attitude led parents guiding their children to focus on transferable skills and careers, jobs that could be taken up 'back home' such as engineering, accountancy and medicine. With this rationale, careers such as the Armed Forces would have been side-lined due to the civic emotional investment it would entail and the training commitment it would require from cadets. Fast forward five decades and we find that few Muslim families have an Armed Forces history or connection, thus few British Muslims have invested into the Armed Forces – the majority of Muslims in the Armed Forces are from the Commonwealth. Parents and guardians play a strong role in guiding young Muslim career paths.

The data highlighted that mothers were the most influential member of families when guiding career choices, with fathers coming a close second. Living with or near the family is a cultural norm for many Muslims, who are unlikely to commit to careers which would need them to permanently move away from their immediate family.

From the online survey, 62% of respondents said that their family does not constrain their career choices in any way. Those that felt the family did limit their career choices, highlighted that

working near parents was expected; 11% said they need to contribute financially to the family and 13% said they are not permitted to travel long distances and of those surveyed, just under 50% said they need job flexibility.

“I think yes living in a Pakistani family you want to be able to look after your parents and stuff when they get old so obviously like you would want a job where you can be close to home potentially.” [Interview Participant, 13]

“I mean my family is quite close knit so they at least would have wanted me to stay by and not move out...I want to stay as close as I possibly can but then again the thought of staying here does make me feel really claustrophobic as well at the same time.” [Interview Participant, 14]

Service personnel acknowledge that for families, a career in the Armed Forces can take its toll. The usual process of moving to a new post every few years can be difficult for relationships, settling partners and children in new locations has been tiring. The more recent emphasis from the Armed Forces is for families to settle in one location and for personnel to work longer from one base. This encourages families to buy homes and see a longer-term future in one geographical space. However, for many Muslims who have grown up near extended family networks, or in geographical areas with Muslim amenities such as halal butchers, mosques and supplementary schools, settling far from such conveniences can be difficult to accept.

This experience is amplified for those spending the first year of training at Sandhurst. Though Sandhurst and its new recruits are very international and welcoming, there is a requirement to stay on site and spend many weeks away from family.

“It’s very tough, especially on those that have families or in relationships, because relationships suffer due to lack of contact. The service personnel usually stay on site for very long periods of time, and do not have much time away, no on site spaces for families either. It’s easier for the young and single.” [Interview Participant, 20]

Recommendations:

- The MOD or the Armed Forces themselves could make clear the length of service, possible location at the bases around the UK and the housing context for interested youngsters, in order for them to make informed decisions regarding a career in the Armed Forces.
- Exploring possible apprenticeships or paid University courses could be of interest for young Muslims, given Muslims try to avoid debt and financial insecurity due to the religious prohibition on interest. This may be an element of an Armed Forces career that could be discussed in more depth with Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) or the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).
- Second and third generation Muslims could be made aware of the drive for greater diversity in our Armed Forces, in the hope that they may consider encouraging another generation of British Muslims to consider it a career. Parents seem to be key to informing and guiding their children and an important sponsor in the lives of their children.

CONCLUSION

This research project began two years ago with the quest to understand the reluctance of young Muslims to join the Armed Forces. We intended to explore deeply held attitudes that influence young Muslims regarding their career choices. The analysis also aimed to highlight some of the underlying concerns young Muslims have, find misinformation they hold, and highlight pitfalls in Armed Forces British Muslim recruitment and outreach. Ultimately, the project intended to put forward suggestions for a more diverse intake in the future British Armed Forces.

It is striking that in public perception racism remains a problem in the Armed Forces. While some literature would argue that there has been a generational shift away from minority intolerance in the Armed Forces, continuing claims of racism, paired with increasing perceptions of a racialized military identity is problematic. Observations that the Armed Forces are distancing themselves from right-wing groups and taking a firm line in relation to racism need to be more thoroughly emphasised and publicly understood.

It is certainly the case that the change that is sought in terms of a more representative British Armed Forces will take a generation or more to achieve. The attitudinal changes are beginning to be seen as young British Muslims are connecting with a nation they see and feel as their own. Though an immediate increase in diversity of the Armed Forces is desirable, long-term work in communities is crucial for reaping the changes that could occur in a generation or so. It would be unhelpful to reduce funding and staffing of Armed Forces projects and engagements in Muslim communities because increased recruitment has not become immediately evident. Changing perceptions and attitudes takes time, effort and dedication.

There is definitely a need for more Armed Forces recruiters themselves to either be from minority ethnic or faith background in order to appreciate potential anxieties and concerns that interested youngsters may have; or recruiters must be immersed in understanding the culture and communities from which they are attempting to recruit. During this project I had the opportunity to meet several dedicated individuals from the Armed Forces with a wealth of experience and knowledge in recruitment from ethnic and religiously concentrated geographical spaces, but they are few and far between.

It is understandable that Muslim Armed Forces personnel may feel an onerous demand on their time to continually act as 'representatives' in outreach. They may prefer to focus on the job they joined to do. However, there is a real need for more young, motivated and articulate British Muslim service personnel from across the three arms of the Forces to engage more regularly with youth clubs, secondary schools and sports clubs. It may be an idea to engage further with those service personnel or reservists who have retired, but who believe in the purpose and role of the Armed Forces.

The focus on mosques as a location for outreach is admirable, as long as the aim is to put parents and grandparents at ease regarding the Forces. They most certainly should not be seen as a 'one stop shop' for recruitment. Many young Muslims are not in the habit of attending mosques regularly. As young Muslims' lifestyles change from that of the first and even second generation, so does the way they spend their spare time. Focusing on mosques also excludes swathes of young British Muslims who may not connect with one specific mosque or any mosque at all.

Strengthening the existence and work of a cadet group such as the Army Cadet Force or the Air Training Corps in geographical areas of ethnic and religious minority concentration could improve later diversity in the Armed Forces. Even for those who do not go on to join the Armed Forces, such cadet groups are seen to provide a great service to the communities they work with - significantly improving youth leadership skills, investing a wealth of positive values, and providing a space for the development of a strong support network.

We know that the numbers of Muslims who attend universities and graduate with degrees is substantial. There is a lack of awareness of scholarships and officer-cadet based entry requirements to undergo training and then commission to the Armed Forces. Most young Muslims assume that the entry point is at cadet level. For communities that value education for their children, giving them fuller information about the two differing entry points could be helpful.

Broadening diversity is beneficial for numerous reasons. The cultural and lingual assets that ethnic and religious minorities bring to Armed Forces are useful. Increasing diversity also enhances a sense of belonging for other minority Armed Forces personnel. It also encourages minorities to consider the Armed Forces as a career that welcomes and reflects the diversity we find in wider British society. However, the work that needs to be done in order to achieve a cohesive message and support greater diversity includes not only the tri-services, but also Government departments, schools, social and religious groups and civic organizations. This report contributes towards that process of broadening diversity in the British Armed Forces.



(Credit: Rooful Ali)

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