

Western Muslims and Integration: Challenges and Opportunities

A Conversation with Kishwer Falkner

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Q: What are the biggest challenges to the integration of Muslims in the United Kingdom today?

A: I think some of the challenges have to do with Muslims themselves and some are to do with public policy. I'm optimistic about Muslims because I think they are beginning to realize that their own destiny lies in their hands, that they have to define the kind of leadership they want, and set about engaging more openly in the public debate through the media. They're also carrying out some of the traditional functions of dissent in democracies, which is to advocate for your cause, to take a prominent role in advocacy and in putting across your point of view.

I think those challenges are the easier ones. I think the more difficult challenges are to do with the shocking socioeconomic factors that still blight Muslims. I'm talking about studies that show that only a few years ago—2001—28% of Muslim households were living in rented accommodation, not owning accommodation, in a country which is largely home-owning. There's exceptional overcrowding; 32% of them live in overcrowded homes. There's very high youth unemployment; 31% of Muslims of working age have no qualifications.

All of those things—the socioeconomics and the mobility for migrants that drives migrants to success, which is the idea of moving up the ladder, capturing the American dream—that seems to be much more ephemeral, and I think in public policy the state really has to engage to try and change some of those things, to improve education and take away the factors that keep Muslims back.

Q: Do these problems resolve naturally over the course of several generations?

A: In normal circumstances, it should work itself out over time. That's been the natural course of migration in the past. What concerns me in the UK is the very high levels of spatial segregation combined with a very generous family reunion policy whereby the new entrants to those communities are also still coming from agrarian, rural, extremely poor areas, with very low literacy rates and no exposure to the English language. I think when you keep replenishing the pool in that community with people who have those backgrounds, it's very difficult to change the content of the pools. They're locked into this first-generation bind.

Q: How does your position as the sole Muslim front bencher in Parliament affect your views on these issues, as a citizen and as a policy maker?

A: It makes me a lot more responsible than I might otherwise be, because I recognize that I'm being honored to have a unique position in this regard. I don't always agree with a particular political line on this. And my party is very good in allowing me to speak from the back bench when I dissent with my party's position on some of these matters. It happens extremely infrequently, but as a precautionary factor I tend more often to speak on the sensitive issues from the back bench rather than from the front.

Q: How did the 2005 bombings affect the status of Muslims in the UK?

A: The first effects were as to be expected: there was, of course, complete revulsion on the part of Muslims that these young men came from our community. It was a very depressing scenario that could have resulted in us either becoming more inward-looking or metaphorically pulling the covers over our head and not addressing any of the issues and hoping that it would all get better when we woke up in the morning. We didn't react that way. I think our initial reaction was less cohesive than it might have been. But I think we're coming together to address the broad issues that lead not only to terrorism, and we've also become much more aware of the marginalization of our communities and society and are working much better now to address those broader issues. So I'm upbeat and optimistic about the Muslim community of today, versus the Muslim community after 9/11.

Q: Has it helped Muslims to condemn terrorism in a very direct, explicit way for the rest of the community to see? Or is it a given that this would happen abroad?

A: I rather resented being asked all the time to condemn terrorism. I thought it was self-evident that all thinking people reject terrorism. No one has ever stood up and said to me, "Oh, I think terrorism is a great thing. Isn't it fantastic we knocked off 3,000 the other day?" So to me it is a given that one would condemn terrorism, and I resented this endless call for Muslims to do it. However, as I said in one conference when accused of not having done so, I'm happy to go back to 19th century school tactics. Give me a couple of sheets of paper and I'll write "I reject terrorism" 500 times. Is that enough? Or should I do it 1,000 times? I think this is rather silly. Of course Muslims reject terrorism.

In addition, Muslims should be very clear about the line between terrorism and the appropriate deployment of freedom of expression which, of course, they are entitled to. Sometimes we don't like freedom of expression when we say things that might offend others. But it's part of the democratic discourse.

Q: One of the reasons I ask is that in the U.S. there are some legal theorists or social critics—I'm thinking of Khaled Abou El Fadl, perhaps, or of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im—who have expressed concern about the threats they get for speaking out in a certain way, and there's some ambivalence as a result. They have said that they don't feel as free to express themselves here. Is that the case in England as well?

A: I can imagine that it is more difficult to speak out openly here. I think there is far greater self-censorship on the part of Muslims than there is on the part of the majority population, particularly the right-wing and reactionary elements of the majority population. And it is

deeply offensive to hear what they say about us and not have a voice to express that back. I don't mean to sound patronizing, but when British Muslims look at American Muslims, we feel rather pleased that we are British and not American.

Q: What can Americans learn from the differences between the American and British contexts? I'm thinking of American society as a whole: how Americans understand integration, multiculturalism, and diversity, and public policy on these issues. Can the British experience teach Americans something here?

A: On the whole, looking at the socioeconomic, educational, professional, positive indicators of migrants to the United States—particularly Muslim migrants—I think American society does pretty well. I think the one area where it is not working any longer, where there is real danger of the breakdown of social cohesion, is with regard to understanding that there is a wide Muslim world out there—nearly two billion people—that has the right to exist in much the same terms as the West does. American society is very poor at understanding that and then engaging with debates about democracy and pluralism and human rights and so on. Until the U.S. stops thinking in terms of a clash of civilizations and starts thinking in terms of the expansion of civilizations, we're not going to get very far.

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