



Modernity and Islam:

The Role of British Muslims in the Global Framework *The Dorchester, London*



*Friday
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The Role of British Muslims in the Global Framework

Faith Regen Foundation aimed, through this roundtable discussion, to facilitate a dialogue between The Rt. Hon. Dato` Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia, and a cross section of Muslim leaders in the UK. It was an opportunity to discuss and address global issues that concern Muslims in the UK.

Modernity and Islam

THE ROLE OF BRITISH MUSLIMS IN THE GLOBAL FRAMEWORK

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1. Introduction and Rationale

Faith Regen Foundation (FRF) aimed, through this roundtable discussion, to facilitate a dialogue between The Rt. Hon. Dato` Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia, and a cross section of Muslim leaders in the UK. It was an opportunity to discuss and address global issues that concern Muslims in the UK.

The discussion also provided an opportunity for the Malaysian Prime Minister to articulate his initiative on the 'Global Movement of Moderates', with Muslim leaders in the UK. It was hoped that the discussion would inspire and imbue leaders and others to address issues such as moderation through leadership and cohesion.

2. Background

Faith Regen Foundation is committed to working towards increasing social harmony in our society and we are achieving this by empowering and regenerating individuals and communities, through the vehicle of increased capacity, economic independence and a stronger voice. Through faith communities, and through groups like ours, you can have a genuine impact in ameliorating many of the most damaging effects of social exclusion and poverty. – Dr Husna Ahmad OBE



The Prime Minister of Malaysia is greeted by FRF Chairman, Brian McAndrew

As the Malaysian Prime Minister was on a state visit in the UK, we thought it timely to try and secure some of his time to engage with a cross section of British Muslim leaders. The example of Malaysia

lends itself as a role model, from which there is a great deal to learn. At the same time we felt this would also be an opportunity for the Prime Minister to meet individuals whom he normally would not have the chance to meet and for them to provide their unique perspective on the issue of modernity and Islam.

There is a good general awareness of Malaysia and its dynamic and progressive leadership among the Muslims in the UK. Malaysia is a shining example of a Muslim country with a democratic government which embraces multiculturalism. This South Asian country is a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and democratic society that has benefited from the positive interaction and synergy between its diverse communities. Against the backdrop of the recent events in North Africa and the Arab world labelled the 'Jasmine Revolution' and the 'Arab Spring', the Malaysian experience of continuous progress and 'people-first' thrust is a striking contrast.



Delegates at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

Muslims in Europe, and in the UK in particular, are facing increased discomfort due to Islamophobia. Reactionary responses from individuals and radical organisations tend to aggravate the situation. There is a need to provide an unemotional and a constructive engagement with the West to counter radical thinking against Islam and Muslims. This need is felt now more than ever. Leaders, especially young emerging leaders, need insightful thoughts and exemplary conduct. This discussion will hopefully pave the way to further action and commitment for positive engagement with British society.

Below are some of the key factors that are affecting Muslims in the UK today.

2.1 Employment

Even before the financial crisis, Muslims in Britain had an employment rate of only 38%.¹ Today, that figure is likely to be lower. Specifically, Muslim women have the highest levels of economic inactivity across all faith groups, and therefore, rather unsurprisingly, suffer the most from poverty. In particular, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women have the lowest employment rate of all ethnic groups at just 26.5%.²



Brian McAndrew, Chairman of FRF, welcoming the delegates

Studies have consistently illustrated that British Muslims on the whole, are more likely to be unemployed than non-Muslims.³ The challenge for us therefore, is of how we can raise aspirations, create opportunities, and increase the involvement of young Muslims in society.

Faith Regen Foundation recently hosted a roundtable discussion on Women and Employment at the U.S. Embassy in London with leading delegates from the world of employment, with the goal of identifying key barriers and obstacles to accessing employment and progressing in the workplace, as well as touching on creative approaches to encourage individuals to enter and remain in employment.

2.2 Equalities and Discrimination

Equality and discrimination is still present in UK society whether in the workplace or institutions. The Equality and Human Rights Commission is trying to tackle the five main strands of discrimination which are race, gender, faith, disabilities and sexual orientation. For Muslim women from ethnic minorities,

¹http://www.fairuk.org/docs/OSI2004%208_UKmuslimlab.pdf

²<http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/8803-TSO-GenderEqualityDuty-FactSht.pdf>

³<http://www.thecitycircle.com/city-circle-blogs/can-madrasahs-bridge-the-education-gap-for-british-muslims>

there are a number of challenges to contend with; pay gaps, part-time work, access to childcare, maternity leave issues, etc. all of which are deepened by current government cutbacks.



Dato Mohamed Iqbal introducing the Prime Minister of Malaysia

2.3 Islamophobia

This is a challenge that underlies all the issues mentioned above. The common perception that Muslims have brought all their problems upon themselves, through their refusal to integrate with mainstream society, the association of terrorism with Islam, and the growth of far-right groups, all point towards difficult times ahead.



Delegates at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

2.4 Arab Spring and Jasmine Revolution

Another challenge facing British Muslims today is of the wave of protests currently engulfing the Middle East. The protests, each related to specific circumstances in each country, can be generally categorised as relating to economics and rising food prices, corruption and greed which means there are more calls for greater transparency and accountability in government. Muslims are rebelling against repressive regimes and insisting on the rights and freedoms enjoyed by others and benefiting the Muslim Faith.

Our challenge as global Muslims therefore, is of how to respond to the protests, and what we in positions of strength, can do to help. Specifically, how do we formulate a response to these events, and then engage with policy makers to represent the views of British Muslims?

Faith Regen Foundation recently hosted a panel discussion with Senior Advisor to the Special Representative at the U.S. State Department for Afghanistan/Pakistan, Vali Nasr on this subject. He emphasised that the economic difficulties were the main cause behind these changes.



Vali Nasr speaking at our Panel Discussion on 'The Changing Dynamics of the Muslim World'

3. The Organisers

About Faith Regen Foundation

FRF is a Muslim inspired multi-faith charity, operating at both a national and international level to build bridges with and between multi-faith communities, government and civil society. We use our networks with faith-based communities as well as statutory and non-statutory bodies to promote

interfaith dialogue, address poverty, regenerate deprived areas and provide greater opportunities for employment and training to ethnic minority groups.

FRF has demonstrated expertise in organising high level international networking conferences in its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue for the benefit of empowering marginalised and vulnerable communities. We have organised international conferences in collaboration with the Philadelphia Cathedral and the Islamic Society of North America, the Department for Trade and Industry and the National Health Service University.

In June 2008, FRF held a conference in partnership with UMCOR and the Commonwealth Foundation on the Role of Women in Peaceful Co-existence. There were contributors from Sri Lanka, Israel, Bosnia, UK, and the Vice President of Gambia.

In October 2009, FRF held a two-day Faith and Climate Change conference to stimulate global interfaith and intra-faith action on climate change. As well as presenting the results of focus groups from ten different countries, a key note speech were given by MP Edward Miliband the former Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, and current Opposition Party leader.



Saif Ahmad, Ed Miliband and Dr Husna Ahmad OBE at the Faith and Climate Change conference

In October 2010, FRF held a forum in partnership with ASLI called the World Muslim Leadership Forum. The conference was designed to bring together academics, policy makers, business people, and members of NGOs to put forth ideas on how best to develop the Muslim world in terms of economics, social cohesion, and politics. Key note speeches were given by The Crown Prince of Perak, Malaysia, His Royal Highness Raja Nazrin Shah, and the event was chaired by Shaukat Aziz, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan.



Brian McAndrew, HRH Raja Nazrin Shah, Shaukat Aziz and Dato Michael Yeoh at the World Muslim Leadership Forum

FRF events have been attended by a cross section of society including the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad, the Vice President of The Gambia, Ministers of Parliament, activists, senior government officials, academics, international non-government organizations and faith leaders. By bringing together people from the government, community and faith sectors, FRF strives to highlight key issues in tackling inequality and sought to create greater social cohesion.



Delegates, including the Prime Minister of Malaysia, at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

4. Roundtable Discussion

The roundtable discussion took place at the Crystal Suite of the Dorchester Hotel in Park Lane London. The event commenced with a recitation from the Holy Quran followed by a brief welcome from the Chair of Faith Regen Foundation, Brian McAndrew. From this point, the event was chaired by Sir Iqbal Sacranie. Sir Iqbal invited Dato Mohamed Iqbal to introduce the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Rt. Hon. Dato Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak. The Prime Minister then went on to speak about what he felt were the key issues which needed to be tackled to find a balance between modernity and Islam. Following this, the roundtable discussion commenced. At the end of the discussion the Group CEO of Faith Regen Foundation, Dr Husna Ahmad OBE was requested to give the concluding remarks. Finally the Prime Minister graciously agreed to cut a cake to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Faith Regen Foundation.

In this report, we have attempted to identify the key messages that came out of the roundtable discussion and highlight them below.

4.1 Moderation and Extremism

Delegates discussed the Prime Minister's initiative, the Global Movement of Moderates. The Prime Minister explained this movement as increasing cooperation and leadership from Muslims around the world in order to discredit and oppose extremist ideas and advocate moderation of Islam.

I [...] urge us to embark on building a "Global Movement of the Moderates" from all faiths who are committed to work together to combat and marginalize extremists who have held the world hostage with their bigotry and bias. We must, and I repeat, we must urgently reclaim the centre and the moral high ground that has been usurped from us. We must choose moderation over extremism. We must choose negotiations over confrontation. We must choose to work together and not against each other. And we must give this effort utmost priority for time is not on our side. – The Rt. Hon. Dato Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia

It was reiterated that Muslim leaders need to raise awareness to combat stereotypes and discrimination and need to take a stand together against extremism to give a positive face to Islam in the West. Muslim leaders must build on the principal of moderation in Islam.



Observers at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

However, there was a warning that we must be careful that the call for moderation does not diminish the needs of Muslims around the world.

It is essential to highlight the positive actions of Muslims in society in order to counter negative perceptions of Islam and counter extremism.

4.2 Politics

“We need to try to get more Muslims involved in politics and entering Parliament.”
– Lord Sheikh

Currently, more British Muslims are entering politics; there are 8 Muslim MPs in Britain, including 3 Muslim women elected for the first time. However it was noted that, as important as having Muslims present in Parliament is, there is a stronger need to have Muslims included in the decision-making process.

It was highlighted that it is essential to get more Muslims interested in and involved in politics. The most effective way in doing so is through educating youth on the importance of this involvement and the impact it would have on their community.



Delegates at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

4.3 Media

“Moderate Muslim leaders need to be more present in mainstream media.”
- Mohamed Ali Harrath

The discussion on media cited the danger for politicians adopting extremist ideas and discussing these ideas through mainstream media. The importance of having a greater presence of moderate Muslim leaders in mainstream media both in the UK and worldwide was highlighted by the delegates. It is essential for the moderate views of these leaders to be portrayed and widely present in society.

There is, furthermore, a need to promote education of Islam, halal food, culture and practices in the general British community in order to create greater cohesion. Having this knowledge easily accessible and accurately portrayed by mainstream media is essential to this.

There is also important to highlight the role of youth, grassroots initiatives and other possibilities the UK offers. It is as essential to show the positive aspects of Islam as it is of Muslims living in UK society and the opportunities that it provides.

4.4 Leadership and Unity

“It is important to have leadership in order to push for unity, not only in the UK but on an international level.” – **Baroness Uddin**

As political leaders in the UK, Muslim Members of Parliament need to show Islam in a positive light. Through powerful leadership and through the call for moderation, negative perceptions could be pushed aside.

There is also a need to encourage Muslims to increase their participation in society, through such things as joining the police and military. In order to encourage unity, it is important for British Muslims to participate in British society and to demonstrate adherence to both British and Islamic values.

A strong leadership is imperative to influencing and encouraging unity among Muslims in the UK and on an international level. The delegates noted that there currently seems to be a lack of unity around the world. If Muslim leaders work together, this united front would be more effective at promoting a moderate Islam.



Delegates at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

Many Muslim organisations in the UK are currently focusing on leadership in the hopes of creating a more cohesive society for future generations. As the delegates noted, this leadership is especially important for young Muslims and their need for positive role models. Giving positive inspirations to youth, who are the next generation of leaders, is essential for unity.

The wider Muslim community needs to use every opportunity to send a message to the country; a message that tells people that we care about creating a society where Muslims and non-Muslims can co-exist respectfully and peacefully, and where Muslim organisations play a significant role in helping to uplift communities and regenerate entire geographic areas. This is a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the universal values of Islam in a non-Muslim society.



Observers at the Modernity and Islam Roundtable Discussion

4.5 Education

“Knowledge is needed to bring about change, not violence.” – Anas Sarwar MP

Delegates agreed that the power of knowledge and education was as essential as the role of leaders in promoting cohesion in order for everyone to work together to achieve change. This education must happen from the inside. In other words, by educating Muslim youth about moderation, change will then be able to transfer into society.

The role of teachers, Imams and other role models and educators in society were highlighted by the delegates as being essential. Education needs to filter down to younger generations and they are the first point of contact.

“Positive role models for young British Muslims are good for cohesion.” – Amina Dahbi Skali

The role of organisations is also vital to uplifting and regenerating communities. They are able to reach those who are more isolated and are more likely to work from the ground up, including the communities.

The role of British Muslims in terms of engaging with the wider world means that we should be trying to empower people to really think about the world around them, and the contribution that they can make.

5. Conclusion

The roundtable discussion was a success because it brought together under one roof a group of Muslims who represented a diversity of sectors and ethnicities which made the discussion richer and more vibrant. The sectors represented were the banking, legal, politics, education and employment, media, charity, religious institutions, youth, think tanks, and the environment. The ethnicities represented were Afghan, Arab, Bangladeshi, British, East African, Indian, Malaysian, Pakistani, Somali and Sri Lankan. We also made reasonable adjustments for an interpreter to be present for our Deaf Unity representative.

The clear articulation and thoughts expressed by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, particularly on the Global Movement of Moderates, provided a lot of food for thought for the discussions. What came out clearly from the delegates was their optimism and determination to improve the lives of Muslims both in the UK and abroad.



The Prime Minister of Malaysia cutting the cake to celebrate the 10th anniversary of FRF

A clear message that was reiterated throughout the discussion was that the role of British Muslims in terms of engaging with the wider world needs to be strengthened; it means that we should be trying to empower people to really think about the world around them, and the contribution that they can make. This is what we at Faith Regen had in mind when we recently completed work on the Green Guide for the Hajj. We did this to promulgate the message that we are all stewards of this Earth and that, as individuals, and as a community, we have an immense responsibility to think about our role in this world. Our responsibility is not only to protect the lands and resources that Almighty Allah has provided for us, but to help one another.

6. LIST OF DELEGATES

Hosts of the roundtable discussion

Dr Husna Ahmad OBE, Group CEO, Faith Regen Foundation

Brian McAndrew, Chairman, Faith Regen Foundation

Chair of the roundtable discussion

Sir Iqbal Sacranie, Chairman, Muslim Aid

Prime Minister's Delegation

The Rt. Hon. Dato Sri Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia

Hon. Dato Sri Anifah Hj Aman, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Malaysia

Hon. Dato Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Minister of Defence for Malaysia

HE. Datuk Zakaria Sulong, High Commissioner of Malaysia for the UK

Dato Mohammad Kamal Yan Yahaya, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister

Dato Husni Zai Yaacob, Deputy Secretary General for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Dato Mohamed Iqbal, Malaysian Institute of Management

Dato Michael Yeoh, CEO, ASLI

British Delegates

Baroness Polla Uddin, House of Lords

Lord Sheikh House of Lords

Anas Sarwar MP, Glasgow Central

Saif Ahmad, CEO, Global One 2015 and MADE in Europe

Akeela Ahmed, CEO, Muslim Youth Helpline

Sharjil Ahmed, Manager, Bank of London and Middle East

Mohamed Ali Harrath, CEO, Islam channel

Shappir Alim, Trustee, MCEC

Ibrahim M. Al Sini, Lecturer, King Abdulaziz University

Omar Faruk, Founder, EcoMuslim

Lakhte Hassanain, Chairman, Muslim Hands

Abdul Malik, Chairman, Muslim Weekly

Abdi Gas Muslim, Founder, Deaf Unity

Abbas Nowradaddeh, Solicitor, Johns & Saggat Solicitors

Bakhtyar Pirzada, Vice-Chairman, Muslim Charity

Amjad Saleem, Head of Communications, Cordoba Foundation

Dr Shuja Shafi, Deputy Secretary-General, The Muslim Council of Britain

Amina Dahbi Skali, London Regional Manager, MOSAIC

Khalid Sofi, Chairman, MADE in Europe

Observers

Khalid Ahmad, Student, London School of Economics

Zahra Ahmad, Student, Palmers Green High School

Julian Bond, Director, Christian Muslim Forum

Ziyaad Desai, Student, School of Oriental and African Studies

Dr Nujhat Jahan, Director of Operations, Faith Regen Foundation

Mayeesha Jamil, Student, School of Oriental and African Studies

Sarah Javaid, Director of Operations, MADE in Europe

Dr Nahy Nassar, IT Executive, Faith Regen Foundation