

Muslim Asylum-Seekers and Refugees: Negotiating Identity, Politics and Religion in the UK

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In the current geopolitical context, religion, nationality and country of origin have increasingly become intertwined and politicized in relation to asylum, both as policy and as personal experience. Based on interviews conducted in the UK with a range of Middle Eastern Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees, this article proposes that regional and religious identity markers have grown to dictate interactions, be they real or imagined, with the host community. Throughout the article we explore the nature of changes in religious identity, identification and practice since interviewees applied for asylum in the UK. We also highlight the significance of a range of gendered factors and experiences, including childhood and growing up in the UK, effective masculinity and un/productive parenthood, in negotiating transformative political and legal realities. More broadly, our research suggests that UK-based Muslim asylum-seekers from the Middle East find themselves exposed to three intersecting vulnerabilities: firstly, their uncertain legal status; secondly, their voluntary or imposed religious identification as ‘Muslims’; and lastly, their exclusion from established Muslim communities in the UK.

Keywords: Identity, Islam, Gender, Middle East, United Kingdom

Introduction

*As you walk on the trace
Of those who left before you,
While the moon is faint in the sky,
Say to yourself, if you can:
Absence is the trace of those who disappeared.*

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

The impetus for this article derives from interviews conducted in January–March 2006 with Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees from the Middle East who were based in either Oxford or Manchester (UK) at the time of meeting. Several key issues and themes emerged throughout the research process, ranging from the planning and implementation stage to the impact of the interviews on the researchers involved, one of whom is himself a Palestinian refugee and whose participation was characterized by his role as a simultaneous insider and outsider. This article discusses a variety of ways in which our interviewees have become *spect-actors* (Boal 1992) who resist, negotiate and enact a number of discourses and counter-discourses, thereby embodying processes of individual and collective transformation. Such an expositive study is particularly necessary at a stage when religion, nationality and country of origin have increasingly become intertwined and politicized in relation to asylum, both as policy and as personal experience.

In many ways, this study complements research conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Lewis 2005: 39), Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (Finney 2005: 23), the Islamic Human Rights Commission (Islamic Human Rights Commission and Ansari 2006), Amnesty International (2006), Atfield *et al.* (2007), and the UK's Refugee Council (Rudiger 2007) on the unequal impacts of British anti-terrorism measures and the global in/security context on Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK. Based on our interviews and broader research on this area, we argue that while mis/representations of Islam have been politicized in such a fashion that they impact on all Muslims (and, indeed, all individuals perceived as such), Muslim asylum-seekers' and refugees' experiences in the UK reflect the complexities and particularities of the encounter between national and macro-politics. Broadly paralleling the abovementioned reports, we propose that Muslim asylum-seekers' and refugees' identities have been transformed in/by the public imagination, moving from an emphasis on their 'refugee-ness' and categorization as either 'bogus' or 'genuine' asylum-seekers, to a primal concern with their Muslim identity, which is equated with a threatening identity. Regional and religious identity markers have become pivotal features during interactions, be they real or imagined, with the host community and its components. This is the case both in terms of citizens' perceptions of Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees, and the ways in which these asylum-seekers and refugees themselves resist and negotiate the system as spectators and actors simultaneously, as what we call *spect-actors* in the asylum landscape.

Following the September 11 attacks and London bombings in 2001 and 2005 respectively, in addition to the controversial publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Denmark's *Jylland's Posten* in 2005, a high level of sensitivity surrounded our attempts to contact 'Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees' to participate in a focus group in early 2006.¹ Like many individuals quoted in existing reports, prospective interviewees expressed anxieties that their opinions and religious identification could potentially

be used by the Home Office to incarcerate or deport them in the future, as a result of being perceived to be a threat to national security. However, while refusing to meet in a group setting, all interviewees who agreed to speak with us explicitly reflected upon the current political environment, seeing the interview setting as a platform from which to discuss the location and experiences of Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees in contemporary Britain.

A discussion of religious identification thus forms the first part of the research findings presented in this article, followed by an analysis of interviewees' perceived visibility in particular locations, a focus on 'the house' as a realm for cultural and religious reproduction, and issues pertaining to parenthood and parenting. Before turning to the substantive analysis offered in this article, we shall firstly provide an overview of the landscape faced by Middle Eastern Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK, and their position within British Muslim communities. We shall then provide a brief overview of the methodology upon which this study is based.

Asylum-seekers, Refugees and Muslims in the UK

A total of 23,610, 23,430, 25,670 and 24,250 applications for asylum were made in the UK in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively.² In 2006 the Home Office categorized 4,305 (18 per cent) of these applicants as being of 'Middle Eastern and North African' (MENA) origin (the first five rows of Table 1) (Bennett *et al.* 2007: 7), while in 2007 the Home Office (2008: 29)

Table 1

Numbers of Applications Made from the 'Middle East'¹, Afghanistan, Algeria and Turkey

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Iran	585	745	1,320	5,610	3,420	2,630	2,875	3,455	3,150	2,375	2,210	2,270	1,835
Iraq	1,075	1,295	1,800	7,475	6,680	14,570	4,015	1,695	1,415	945	1,825	1,855	845
Libya	100	115	115	155	140	200	145	160	125	90	45	45 ²	65 ²
Syria	50	65	95	140	110	70	110	350	330	160	155	155	40
Middle East													
Other	525	565	835	1,035	915	850	825	870	715	735	825	675	500
Afghanistan	1,085	2,395	3,975	5,555	8,920	7,205	2,280	1,395	1,580	2,400	2,500	3,510	3,335
Algeria	715	1,260	1,385	1,635	1,140	1,060	550	490	255	225	260	325	225
Turkey	1,445	2,015	2,850	3,990	3,695	2,835	2,390	1,230	755	425	210	190	180

¹Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and 'Other', as defined by the Home Office.

²As noted in the text, Libya was re-classified as an 'African' rather than 'Middle Eastern' country in 2008 and 2009.

Source: Derived from UK Home Office statistics for 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.

used the term 'Middle Eastern nationals' to define 5,060 (22 per cent) applicants, again the subtotal for the first five rows of the table. Such regional labels are misleading on several fronts; in part because in 2006 the stated percentage of applications originating from countries categorized as 'Middle Eastern' (as indicated in Table 1) included Iraq, Libya and Morocco, but not Afghanistan, Turkey or Algeria. Despite often being included in definitions of the Middle Eastern region (e.g. Eickelman 2001; Chatty 2010; Moghadam 1998), these three countries have systematically been categorized as 'Asian', 'European' and 'African' countries respectively by the Home Office. A further complicating factor is that from 2008 onwards, Libya has no longer been classified as a 'Middle Eastern' country by the Home Office, rather being placed alongside Algeria as an 'African' country. Having disconnected Libya and Algeria from the 'Middle East', the percentage of applicants classified by the Home Office as being of Middle Eastern origin in 2008 and 2009 has subsequently decreased to 19 per cent (4,955 applicants) and 14 per cent (3,320 applicants) respectively. However, taking Afghanistan, Algeria, Libya and Turkey consistently into consideration would lead to a larger, and more consistent, overall percentage of MENA applicants; between 29 per cent (in 2009), 31 per cent (in 2006) and 35 per cent (in 2007 and 2008) (Bennett *et al.* 2007, Home Office 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c and 2009d).

Given that this article focuses in particular on Palestinian and Kurdish asylum-seekers' and refugees' experiences, a brief note is necessary with regard to their invisibility in Home Office statistics. In the data reproduced above, the category 'Middle East Other' comprises 14 additional nationalities, including 'Palestine', 'Israel', 'Egypt', 'Morocco', 'Lebanon' and 'Jordan.' Since Palestinians are based in a variety of host countries across the Middle East (primarily Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, but also Egypt and Iraq), as well as in Israel and 'the Palestinian controlled areas of the Gaza Strip and West Bank' (the phrase used by the Home Office (2006)), Palestinian applicants could be considered to be included in the statistics offered under the category 'Middle East Other', as well as being included amongst those arriving from Iraq.

The Home Office (2006) claims that although it does record applicants' language as Kurdish when relevant, it 'does not record ethnic groupings' and therefore could not, for instance, respond to a question posed under the Freedom of Information Act regarding the number of applicants of Kurdish origin who had been returned to Syria. Since Kurds 'are not recognized as a distinct nationality or ethnic group in the asylum determination process' (Griffiths 2000: 302), their absence from the statistics leads us to infer that they will have been placed under the country of their former habitual place of residence, with the majority of Kurds originating from Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran (*ibid.*).

Although applicants' religion is not recorded in Home Office statistics, given that the countries listed above have majority Muslim populations, it appears uncontroversial to claim that a large proportion of these Middle

Eastern asylum-seekers are Muslim by birth and/or identify as such. According to the UK's 2001 Census, there were 1,588,890 Muslims in the country in 2001, of whom 74 per cent were from an 'Asian' ethnic background (including 43 per cent Pakistani and 16 per cent Bangladeshi), while less than 7 per cent were from 'another White background including Turkish, Cypriot, *Arab* and Eastern European' (ONS 2004, our emphasis). As such, only a minority of British Muslim citizens originate from the Middle East, meaning that Muslim Middle Eastern asylum-seekers and refugees in turn find themselves a clear minority amongst the Muslim community in the UK, and with only a limited pre-existing support system in terms of MENA-oriented masjids (mosques),³ cultural centres, or community groups.

With reference to asylum-seekers' rights and responsibilities upon arrival in the UK, individuals applying for asylum are not normally allowed to seek work until a favourable decision on their asylum claim is reached by the British government.⁴ During this period asylum-seekers may receive basic financial support, accommodation, free legal counsel and medical treatment from a range of governmental institutions including, at the time of research, the UK Border Agency, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) (which has more recently been replaced by the Asylum Support Customer Contact Centre) and Social Services. Asylum-seekers are obliged to report on a regular basis (ranging from daily to monthly) at specified locations (including police stations and immigration/reporting centres), and to comply with a number of immigration rules. Asylum-seekers are constantly reminded that they are 'liable to be detained' if they do not strictly adhere to these regulations. Such support and obligations may continue for several years, while first hearing and subsequent appeal decisions are made.

Research Methodology

This exploratory article is based on research conducted with 14 Muslim MENA asylum-seekers, refugees and naturalized refugees in Oxford and Manchester. These two locations were selected due to the interviewers' familiarity with the general context in both cities, and existing contact with Middle Eastern asylum-seekers and refugees there. Of these interviewees, eight were Palestinians from a wide range of geo-political backgrounds: one adult male born in Ramallah (Palestinian Occupied Territories); a married couple and a married man born in different refugee camps in Lebanon; and a family (parents and two adolescent sons) from a refugee camp in Syria. Before applying for asylum, the adult Palestinians were formerly respectively employed as a hairdresser, an editor and secretary, an archaeologist, an architect and a primary-school teacher. At the time of interview, two of our research participants had been granted refugee status and subsequently British citizenship, while the remaining six Palestinians were awaiting decisions on their asylum applications or immigration status. Of the three Kurdish interviewees, two were from Iraq (where they had held ad hoc jobs) and one was from Turkey

(formerly a journalist). The research sample also included one Afghan, one Yemeni (sociology graduate) and one Libyan (IT graduate), who were all asylum-seekers at the time of interview. The Palestinian adolescents and the Afghan interviewee had been studying in primary or secondary schools before arriving in the UK. Three interviewees were female (two Palestinians and one Kurd), and two were aged under eighteen (two Palestinians). Participants had lived in the UK for between four and 13 years when interviews were conducted.

Given that particular groups of asylum-seekers and refugees often form strong social networks (see Crisp 1999; Koser and Pinkerton 2002), three separate chains of contacts emerged during the research process. In Manchester, an existing Palestinian contact known to the interviewer (YMQ) led to the identification of three additional interviewees (of Yemeni, Palestinian and Libyan origins). In Oxford, one of the same interviewer's Oxford-based Palestinian contacts subsequently introduced both researchers to four Palestinian interviewees (a family), while another Palestinian known to the interviewer agreed to participate, alongside his wife. The three Kurdish refugees were contacted in Oxford through two different routes – firstly by advertising the research project to a local language centre and secondly via a researcher at the University of Oxford. The final participant, a young Afghan, consented to participate during a visit by one of the interviewers (EFQ) to an Oxford-based further education college.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all individual interviewees and an additional family-centred group discussion⁵ was held, involving the Ramallah-born Palestinian man and the Palestinian parents and adolescents who had been born in Syria. The analysis presented below is based on these interviews alongside informal conversations held with the interviewees and observations made throughout the research period.

The Kurdish participants were interviewed by EFQ, while those based in Manchester were interviewed by YMQ. All other interviewees met with both researchers for between one and three interviews lasting a minimum of 45 and maximum of 180 minutes each. The interviews were informal in nature and the interviewer/s asked a minimum number of questions, encouraging interviewees to direct both the form and content of the discussions. All interviews started with the broad question 'Can you tell us about your experiences of living in the UK?' with the interview developing as a discussion based around the responses provided.

While the participatory and loose format of the interviews was productive with 13 participants, a greater level of intervention was required in one interview in order to overcome the interviewee's initial insecurity and anxiety. The researchers' accentuated role in this particular case, which successfully facilitated the completion of the interview and indeed the incorporation of three additional family members to the encounter, must be noted.

Three of the Palestinian interviewees felt more comfortable communicating directly in Arabic, rather than English, which affected the dynamics of the meeting accordingly. In these cases, YMQ posed a small number of questions

in Arabic directly, and only interrupted the interviewee occasionally to translate for the second author. Given EFQ's intermediate understanding of Arabic at the time of interview, she was, as a whole, able to follow the interview, waiting for her colleague to offer a more in-depth overview of the interview upon the interviewees' departure. This collaborative approach to interviewing allowed for the interviewees to express themselves freely in their mother tongue, with minimum interruption for interpretation, and with an increased sense of dialogue between the interviewee and YMQ. Given YMQ's identity as a Palestinian refugee, it may also have been the case that the interviewees felt more comfortable communicating directly with him, rather than with a non-Muslim female researcher, and this will have influenced the course of the interviews in many ways. Indeed, there was at least one occasion when the interviewee felt able to discuss a sensitive issue in Arabic, that he stressed he would have been unable to speak about in English in an English-speaking café. It may have been the case that YMQ's background therefore offered different levels of protection and security to the interviewees that the female researcher would have been unable to grant. It is also possible, however, that interviewees will have presented themselves in a particular way due to YMQ's identity, and also due to the fact of there being two researchers rather than just one, throughout the interview.

A Note on the Researchers' Positionality

At the time of interview, the first author was a doctoral student based at the University of Oxford, and this project formed part of a pilot study designed to inform the development of her doctoral research on a refugee group based in Algeria. Her previous experience of conducting research on and with refugees and asylum-seekers from across the Middle East, Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa influenced the development of the research methodology, just as her particular interest in the gendered experiences of asylum is reflected in the analysis presented below.

As indicated at different points throughout this article, the second author of this piece was himself an asylum-seeker at the time of research. Although he had previously conducted research with refugees living in Lebanon (where he himself had been born as a refugee and was employed as a teacher at United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools) for various academic institutions and non-governmental organizations, this was the first time that YMQ conducted interviews in the UK. As a brief note concerning his role and experiences whilst working on this project, we quote from an exercise in reflexive self-analysis which YMQ completed at EFQ's request towards the end of the interviewing period:

From the outset of this project I have felt that I have been an insider more than an outsider vis-à-vis what is happening in the 'undefined places' explored in the interviews. My legal status, as you know, also embodied a psychological barrier

at the beginning. At times I have been tempted to ask questions that are mainly associated with my situation; perhaps, subconsciously, I have tried to draw some kind of linkage, or rather an identification, between the interviewees and myself. Having the 'authority' to structure and ask questions (although most of the time these were not actually directly posed) has highlighted the indecisiveness that an asylum-seeker can have when invited to direct an interview which is intimately related to his or her own experience. I have sometimes felt under scrutiny as a co-interviewer who has failed to escape from his identity and status in the course of the interviews. It is very bizarre how I, on certain occasions, have wanted to announce my absence. I have wanted to say: I am only an asylum-seeker who desperately wants to verbalize the situation without any academic pressure. Can I be an asylum-seeker and a co-interviewer of asylum-seekers and refugees at the same time? That is a very difficult question to answer. Would I look at this from a different perspective if I had refugee status? I do not think so.

YMQ, March 2006

Both interviewers were acutely aware of the potential impact of the research project upon YMQ, given his legal status and own experiences of applying for asylum, and held regular de-briefing meetings to discuss concerns as they arose. Based on our experiences throughout this collaborative project, and the feedback obtained from our participants, this study provides an invitation for future research to invite refugees and asylum-seekers to become co-researchers rather than simply 'participants' and 'interviewees.'

Ethics

All names mentioned throughout the course of this article are pseudonyms, and in some cases personal information has been omitted to ensure interviewees' confidentiality and anonymity. All interviewees gave their consent to the anonymous use of the interview data when publishing the results of the research; in the case of the adolescents interviewed, both they themselves and their parents consented to their participation in this research project.

Limitations of the Study

The research conducted with these fourteen participants cannot be seen to be representative of all Middle Eastern Muslim asylum-seekers or refugees in the UK. Indeed, the responses provided during interviews offer insights into the commonalities and differences of these individuals' experiences according, for instance, to legal status, individual preferences and beliefs, nationality, gender, age and marital status. As such, we examine the asylum process in the UK and its impacts on those who suffer multifaceted, religious, political, legal, social and linguistic alienation. We offer these findings in the hope that further academic research may be carried out on the issues highlighted below.

The Research Findings

Personal and Collective Identification

Bearing in mind the diversity of its interpretations and implementations, personal and collective identification in relation to Islam was a central, and often ambivalent, element arising from the interviews conducted. All of the Kurdish participants (Sidi, Farhana and Salem) responded to the authors' interest in speaking with Muslim asylum-seekers/refugees specifically, and yet even before her first interview took place, Farhana sent one of the authors a pertinent message about her non/religious and cultural identity through her choice of interview location, inviting EFQ to have a beer in a pub in East Oxford. During our first meeting, she stressed: 'I am Muslim, by birth, but I don't identify as such', highlighting repeatedly that she does not have (m)any Muslim friends, that she consumes pork and alcohol (which are haram, or Islamically prohibited), and engages in other activities which she defined in the interview as signs of a 'bad Muslim'. While Farhana is a pseudonym, her real name carries a strong Islamic connotation, and she continued her interview by indicating that she finds it very difficult having a 'Muslim name'. She stressed that for her, her name is a 'visible signifier of a religious identity which has been fixed upon me' and yet which she does not identify with. Farhana reiterated this in her second interview, strongly indicating the extent to which her name, and all it symbolizes, is a central concern for her.

Salem, another Kurdish refugee, on the other hand, did not so unequivocally distance himself from Islam, rather describing himself as 'not religious'.⁶ Further, when asked about the impact of religion on his experience of living in the UK, Salem referred to his experiences of racism, but with reference to his own religiosity, ambiguously described himself as 'neither pro nor anti'. At the same time, he proposed that religion can be a great provider of comfort and that it is therefore 'normal' that some asylum-seekers/refugees should grow more interested in religious identity and practice in times of need. By simultaneously distancing himself from religion and offering this explanation of increased religiosity in others, it is possible to suggest that Salem was in turn portraying himself as not requiring such forms of 'comfort', as somehow independent of this need and therefore as emotionally self-sufficient.

These multiple re/presentations of religious identification reflect not only the heterogeneity of the category 'Muslim', but also the multiple ways in which people define themselves and present themselves to others. Both Farhana and Salem made precise references to the notion of religious practice and identity, ranging from non-committal descriptions of themselves as 'not religious' or 'neither pro nor anti', to a more dissociative labelling of being only a Muslim 'by birth' or a 'bad Muslim'. It is possible to interpret Salem and Farhana's ambivalent relationship with Islam to be of a personal or cultural nature, based on their previous and current individual understandings of their own identities. While Farhana referred to her 'visibility' as a

Muslim due to her name (while her cultural identity is 'invisible'), her distancing from her 'birth' religion did not appear to be related to her presence in the UK, since her rejection of Islam had reportedly been a motivating factor in her claim for asylum.

As we discuss below, however, transformations in religious practice and identification may be instigated by the political and social environment in which individuals are currently located, with their real or imagined visibility leading to their hiding or modifying their approaches to Islam. Indeed, while individual descriptions of religiosity and practice may of course reflect personal feelings and preferences, they may in addition be determined not only by the identity of the listener or interviewer, but also to a large extent by the national and international realities framing the topic under consideration. In this sense, interviewees can be positioned as both research participants and *spect-actors* of the broader political landscape: in the current context, where Muslim identity/identities and practice(s) have become so driven by politics, words may be dependent on external factors as much as, if not more than, internal ones. In this respect, Salem's disengagement from religion (which we can refer to as an 'in-between affiliation') could be interpreted as a strategy utilized to resist being categorized by others according to his religious identity in such a context.

Unlike Salem and Farhana, five of the Palestinian participants elaborated upon their personal relationships with Islam with particular reference to the ways in which the asylum experience has modified their religious practice, beliefs and perceptions. In line with Salem's interpretation above, Musa reflected that the 'boredom' (*dajjar*) which accompanies processes such as being in (immigration) detention or unable to work legally, often leads one to 'focus on yourself'; he attributed his decision to grow his beard and concentrate more on fulfilling his spiritual needs directly to his sense of 'boredom', aimlessness and stagnancy since applying for asylum in the UK.

Our interviews with Khalil and Ahmed, however, did not support the proposition that these men's intensification of practice and belief was primarily related to a need to obtain internal comfort, but was rather based on their reaction to and interaction with the social unrest and instability which followed the aforementioned events. Both Khalil and Ahmed indicated that they have experienced an 'intensification' (*taṣāʿud*) and increased awareness of religious belief and practice since applying for asylum. Like the two teenage boys interviewed,⁷ they indicated that this change had been a 'conscious one'. They explained that their decision had been prompted by a desire to learn more about their own religion, in part to compensate for and defend themselves from what they defined as 'ignorant attacks' on Islam in general and on themselves and their families as Muslims more precisely.

In addition to references to racism between Muslim refugees/asylum-seekers and the British community broadly, an extra dimension of religious tension and marginalization was expressed in relation to the interaction between Muslim British citizens and Muslim refugees/asylum-seekers. This is a

tension which has been independently documented in a report commissioned by the UK's Refugee Council and the University of Birmingham (Atfield *et al.* 2007: 48).

Hence, although Khalil invoked the notion of Muslim fraternity by saying that 'all Muslims are brothers', he subsequently stated that 'Asian Muslims' tend to pray in one place (but see Naqshbandi 2006 for divisions within the British Asian Muslim community), while 'Arab Muslim refugees' pray in another. One reason for this separation may be the language used to deliver the Friday *khutba* (sermon), as British Asian imams often offer their *khutba* in the *muṣallīn*'s (worshippers') main language (such as Urdu), in addition to English, rather than in Arabic. Similarly, Ahmed (who arrived as an asylum-seeker in the mid-1990s and is now a British citizen) sadly reflected upon the rupture (*qaṭī'a*) which exists between the British Asian Muslim community and the more recently arrived Middle Eastern Muslim asylum-seeker/refugee community, a distance which, he claimed, is epitomized in the different masjids which are frequented by these groups. In this sense, it is interesting to note these interviewees' comments vis-à-vis the visibility of refugee identity, as identifiable according to where they pray, and the importance they assigned to the masjid in its potential as a realm for shared space and belonging.

Visibility and Space/Place

Visibility, either as a Muslim or as a Muslim refugee/asylum-seeker, or as an asylum-seeker more broadly, arose as a fundamental theme in many interviews. This included six explicit accounts of racism, Farhana's perceived visibility as a Muslim due to her name and Khalil's reference to Muslim women's visibility due to the hijab or the way they dress. The latter also identified several locations where refugees and asylum-seekers are readily identifiable as such. In a range of reports documenting the impact of the September 11 attacks and the London bombings, Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees have highlighted their sense of being particularly visible and under scrutiny whilst using public transport (the target of several attacks/attempts) and public services (Rudiger 2007). The post-office, where refugees⁸/asylum-seekers cash their allowances, has also become a conspicuous example of such a location: simultaneously a key medium connecting the holders of the asylum-seekers' Application Registration Card (ARC), this space/place forces and enforces the unveiling of ARC holders not only to the clerk behind the glass, but also to 'normal' citizen-clients in the queue. Subtly withdrawing the ARC card from a pocket or wallet, attempting to minimize disclosure, the key protagonist feels that this space/place becomes a stage where all lights are on him/her.

One of the authors of this piece describes his experiences of queuing up at the post-office, and of preparing to do so, as being categorized by both

attraction and repulsion:

You are attracted to the place because it is where you obtain your money, it is in essence your only means of survival since the Home Office doesn't let you work; they won't let you contribute or act for yourself. But you are repelled because it forces you to become visible to a 'public' with whom you neither share legal status nor even the purpose of visiting such a location.

Various levels of subjectively experienced exclusion and marginalization therefore emerged throughout the interviews, often related to different types of space and location (on spaces and places see Escobar 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 2002; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003). Khalil referred to 'the house' (*bayt*) and 'the home(land)' (*mawṭin*) as a symbol and forum for social closeness and 'belonging' (*intimā*'), as a place where he can feel comfortable, relaxed and welcomed. Khalil stressed that he 'cannot find the home here', although his search continues. In the cases of both Abu Omar and Musa, however, while these men each have a physical house and a family within the house, there was a tangible sense of a double-edged exclusion, of otherness, or dislocation, within this space. Not safe outside his house, where Abu Omar is unable to communicate in English and continues to be an asylum-seeker after six years living in the UK, he is equally unable to communicate freely with his children inside the house, as they speak his mother-tongue (Arabic) poorly. Musa's sense of alienation from his house and home derived from his enforced dependence upon the British government (via NASS or Social Services) which provided his family with accommodation and a weekly allowance whilst prohibiting him from earning a wage legally – leading, to paraphrase Turner (1999: 2), to Musa feeling that NASS 'is a better husband' to his wife, and 'a better father' to his two daughters.

'The House', Culture and Religious Reproduction

'The house' was also referred to by several interviewees as both the location for the family, and for cultural and religious reproduction. Four of the Palestinian parents interviewed (Ahmed, Nadia, Um Omar and Abu Omar) stressed their roles as providers of religious knowledge and information for their children within the house, and their desire for their children to have a 'deep' understanding of Islam, especially in today's political environment. Unlike Farhana's decision to distance herself from Islam in part on the basis that she believes this would give her more freedom as a woman, Nadia, a Palestinian mother of two, indicated that she had recently experienced an emerging desire to learn more about Islam and what she calls 'the self within religion', and to interact more with other Muslim women than before. Part of the rationale behind Nadia's desire was her recognition that she is her daughters' principal source of knowledge about Islam. For her, an in-depth engagement with Islam, rather than a disengagement from Muslim identity and practice, is a productive means of equipping her daughters with

the relevant knowledge to enable them to make decisions concerning their own femininity and womanhood.

A notion of the significance of cultural and religious continuity featured strongly in many of the interviews with Palestinians, with Abu Omar in particular seeking reassurance from one of this article's authors (YMQ) that his children are 'doing alright now' and 'will be alright in the future.' During our interview with his sons, aged 14 and 16, the boys indicated that they do not want to return to the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria and find it difficult to communicate in Arabic. They stressed that they dislike Arabic-language television and prefer rap to Arabic music, although the eldest, who intends to be a music producer, said that he might consider using Arabic music 'as a sample' in one of his songs. Despite this self-perceived distance from Arabic cultural and linguistic features, the teenagers eloquently discussed the need for the British public to reject mainstream stereotypes about Islam, and concluded by stating that they are 'proud to be Muslim.' This is a sense that they explained as having developed both as a response to their personal experiences of racism on the one hand, and (unlike Khalil and Ahmed) their friendships and identification with other Muslims from their community, and the supportive role played by their parents, on the other.

Razak's situation, as a young man who left Afghanistan as a 14-year-old unaccompanied minor, and who currently shares a house with other male Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees, was diametrically opposed to that of Abu Omar's children. When asked whether religion played a role in the way that refugees experience living in the UK, Razak awkwardly admitted that he is Muslim, but does not practice. He explained:

When I lived in Afghanistan, my mother used to tell me to pray. She would tell me to pray and I would. If I were at home now, with my mother, she would tell me to pray and I would. But now, here, I don't.

Immediately following this account, Razak recounted a story about his experiences one night when he had 'lots to drink', a key event which he appeared to use to represent his distance from Islamic practice. The explicit juxtaposition of his absent religious practice as connected to the absence of his mother, with his account of his night out 'drinking', is noteworthy. We can perhaps interpret this in relation to his age upon leaving Afghanistan, and his related dependence on, or desire for, external cultural and religious reference points.

Throughout his interview, Razak indicated that when he left the British foster family he had lived with as an unaccompanied minor, and had moved in with other Afghan young men, it was 'difficult to decide which culture to use.' He stressed that it took him 'about four months' to establish what form of cultural conduct was appropriate in each context, what he could/not or should/not do, when and with whom.⁹ He referred to the correct usage of the

handshake as a form of greeting, as the key cultural cue that he had failed to master. Implicit throughout his interview was the notion that he was 'too young' when he left Afghanistan to have a firm memory or independent understanding of 'correct' and 'incorrect' modes of behaviour, covering all aspects of social and religious life. Unlike Um Omar's teenage daughter, who recently approached her mother with questions about whether it was haram (prohibited) or halal (permitted in Islam) to hold hands or to kiss a boy, Razak demonstrated that he does not have a readily accessible mentor to help him determine what is acceptable behaviour, and that he often feels both culturally and religiously 'lost' as a result.

Razak's relationship with Islam has therefore also changed since arriving as an unaccompanied minor asylum-seeker in the UK, but very differently from the changes experienced and represented by the other refugee youth or Palestinian adults interviewed. In addition to providing preliminary insights into some connections between religion and the experience of living in the UK, several of the issues discussed above also indicate some ways in which religion, gender and family relations are connected in the asylum landscape.

Parenthood and Parenting

In his interview, Sidi presented himself as a Kurdish refugee, successful student, productive employee, and, most importantly, as a father. He explained that he has four children, and that he is greatly concerned about his eldest son (aged 19), who, much to his distress, is not interested in studying. He continued by stating 'I sacrifice my present day, my today, for my son.' Sidi's main concerns in the UK are related to his own and his son's social mobility and self-improvement, achievable, he explained, through a combination of education and 'meaningful' employment. Sidi is therefore saving the wages from his two jobs to buy his son a shop, 'so that he can be his own boss.'

An additional approach to good parenthood was outlined by Ahmed, a former Palestinian refugee (now a British citizen) who presented himself in terms of his productivity as an employee and as an active member of the community. For him, good parenting is intimately related to the transmission of Islamic knowledge, and to encouraging his daughters to engage critically with both Islam and 'their country's' (referring to the UK) cultural and religious frameworks. As with Sidi, productivity and employment, alongside a role as a 'good father', therefore arose as central features of manhood and masculinity.

In contrast with Sidi and Ahmed's well-established lives, Um Omar and Abu Omar were evidently encountering multiple difficulties as marginalized Muslim asylum-seekers, and as parents. Abu Omar, a Palestinian who has lived in the UK for six years, was so apprehensive throughout the initial phase of the interview that it appeared we would have to leave, until he suggested that we might like to meet his wife. While Abu Omar had quietly stated that 'Everything's OK, there's no racism, everything's fine', his wife

immediately reversed this discourse upon her arrival in the living-room. Compared with her husband's barely audible whispers in both English and Arabic, Um Omar spoke with striking confidence in English (a language which she is still in the process of learning), emphasizing: 'Things are hard. There is racism and I am very concerned about my children. They are attacked and insulted, both at school and on the street.' As Abu Omar nodded, confirming his wife's words, Um Omar clearly described how difficult it was to raise their four children in the UK, outlining her fears regarding their linguistic, cultural and religious losses. The couple's concern for their children's future was palpable throughout the interview, forming the central feature of the discussion.

The close alignment between effective masculinity and effective fatherhood and productivity was evident in both Sidi and Ahmed's representations of their respective lives, while it might be possible to describe Abu Omar's situation as that of a 'weakened', 'displaced' and 'dislocated' man, father and worker. With reference to his productivity, Abu Omar moved to sit with the female interviewer to present her with a selection of letters from various UK-based companies, thanking him for the completion of satisfactory contracts. However, because Abu Omar was not eligible to be granted permission to work due to his immigration status, he was unable to be paid for his work. Despite this legal impediment, or perhaps precisely because of this, it appeared particularly important for him to stress his productivity, even if it was 'voluntary' or 'unpaid', both in front of other Muslim men, and in front of the female interviewer. In this sense, the act of working, rather than the act of being paid or being 'the breadwinner' was associated with 'being' per se, and of wanting to regain his position as an active participant and actor both in society and his own family. This short example indicates one way in which an individual's legal status and the period they have lived in the UK may influence their experiences of living and working in the UK and of being fathers and husbands in this reality.

Providing an additional perspective on experiences of masculinity in the UK, interactions with the opposite sex were a key feature discussed by the unmarried men in the group. Khalil, a Palestinian refugee who arrived in the UK four years ago, switched to Arabic before reflecting that although he may be able to establish a transient relationship in Britain, he is unable to become a potential boyfriend or husband due to his uncertain legal status. Indeed, his status would in essence dictate the dynamics of any relationship he might consider establishing, since, at the time of writing, asylum-seekers and refugees without indefinite leave to remain in the UK are required to request permission from the Home Office if they wish to marry.¹⁰ In this case, the stability of any relationship is intimately related to achieving legal stability through being recognized as a refugee.

On the other hand, Razak, a young Afghan man, shyly admitted that he only has one female friend, and that he finds it difficult to speak with girls/women, including with the female author of this piece, while Um Omar and

Abu Omar quite proudly commented upon their sons' popularity with girls. They accepted that, while in Syria they would not have 'gone out' with girls, they most probably would see girls socially 'here', and that they thought this was 'alright'.

A further element of change vis-à-vis gender relations or contact with the opposite sex was spontaneously expressed by Salem, a single male Kurdish refugee, who outlined how his ideas about gender roles and identities had changed since arriving in the UK almost a decade ago. Salem claimed that, while he had initially found it 'extra-ordinary' that women should have 'such a high position' in British society, today he would describe this situation as 'normal', and as an expression of 'equality'. This particular choice of words, alongside the unprompted discussion of this issue with the female interviewer, is worth brief reflection: are Salem's words an expression of his personal views or have they transcended his personal opinions and rather become part of the discursive space shaped by national and international politics? Given that women's rights and the position of women in Muslim societies have become essential symbols justifying military intervention under the auspices of the 'War on Terror' (Rutter 2004), we may ask to what extent we could interpret Salem's words as an act of striving to belong to his 'new' country, to indicate to the listener that he shares the same views as those held by his neighbours and colleagues. In this way, Salem is both an observer (or spectator) of his host society, and an active participant who projects a particular image of himself to the interviewer.

Asked specifically whether they thought that there was any difference between male and female refugees/asylum-seekers' experiences of living in the UK, the participants' responses were divided. On the one hand, Salem suggested that female asylum-seekers, perceived as weaker and less threatening than men, would find it easier to negotiate the system, and to ask for, and obtain, help. He also assumed that women were more readily accepted as refugees, with the decision being related to the British government's desire to send the women's country of origin a 'clear indication' regarding un/acceptable ways of treating women. While he also indicated that women have specific responsibilities (e.g. as mothers), neither he nor Khalil could think of any gender-specific difficulties experienced by female refugees. With regards to a perceived commonality of experience, both Um Omar and Razak claimed that male and female refugees/asylum-seekers experience asylum in the UK 'in the same way', claiming that there are 'no differences'.

Concerning Um Omar's description of male and female refugees' experiences as 'the same', the male interviewer suggested that in Syria Um Omar would have been particularly aware of the different status and experiences of men and women. YMQ would therefore have expected her to identify similar differences in the UK. It would have been insightful to speak with Um Omar in a female-only environment, to establish if she might have revealed an alternative response to this question under those circumstances. Given the candour with which she discussed other issues, straightforwardly

contradicting her husband on several occasions, it is unclear how a female-only interview would have affected her representation of herself and her experiences in the UK.

Only Farhana, however, stressed that many female asylum-seekers, especially single women, find it particularly difficult to live in the UK, often being subjected to different forms of sexual and gender-based violence in detention and accommodation centres. She explained that her awareness of this situation arose from having lived with women who were raped in such circumstances, and from her role as a mediator in women's support groups. Her long-standing involvement in women's groups in her place of origin clearly impacted upon her interpretations, concerns and modes of involvement in relation to women's experiences as asylum-seekers in the UK, differentiating her approach from that of the other participants.

Concluding Remarks

Both the parents and the children (in particular Razak) interviewed as part of this study have shed a light on the ambivalence which may characterize Muslim asylum-seekers' perceptions and relationships both within and outside of their households. The absence of particular family structures and externally-provided cultural and religious reference-points surfaced as central concerns for interviewees facing a series of challenges in their immediate and broader hosting environments. As a result, this article directly contributes to studies pertaining to the experiences of Muslim asylum-seekers in the UK, and provides the basis for a comparative study focusing on family structures, and the transmission and representations of Islam in different European hosting countries.

More specifically, this brief analysis has aimed to complement research conducted by a range of institutions including Amnesty International, the Islamic Human Rights Commission and the Refugee Council, on the impacts of the contemporary global in/security context on Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK. In this environment, religion has increasingly become a tool used by the media and politicians as a common denominator underlying new policies and the trans/formation of public opinion. Simultaneously, Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees' lives, whether practising or not, are marked by physical and psychological alienation from both their country of origin (due to their request for political asylum) and the country which they hope will offer them protection (because of the impediments they face upon and following their arrival). This alienation is not only embodied in the specificities of their asylum journey, but also in the current political setting that incriminates and forcibly categorizes them as a threat to national security.

As indicated in the introduction to this paper, upon their arrival in the UK Muslim asylum-seekers from the Middle East region find themselves assigned to three overlapping minority groupings with respect to their uncertain legal

status, their religious identification, and their exclusion from established Muslim communities in the UK. Our interviews thus suggest that the popular usage of the label 'Muslim' has overshadowed not only differences and tensions between Muslim asylum-seekers/refugees and more established Muslim British citizens (a finding supported by Atfield *et al.* 2007: 48), but also the complex politicization of individuals' voluntary or imposed identification as 'Muslim'. One proposal which thus emerges from our research is a need for a greater degree of engagement from the Muslim community in Britain to incorporate Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees into the social and political realm irrespective of their ethnic or national backgrounds.

Contrary to assumptions that religious practice intensifies in order to fill a 'void', we argue that publicly recognizing one's religious beliefs will ultimately be directly influenced by internal and external factors alike. In the cases explored above, interviewees' increased religious engagement could be understood as resulting from their legal and political disengagement and marginalization from their broader host-environment. Conversely, an explicit distancing from Islamic identity and practice could be perceived either as a result of personal preferences or as part of a discursive mechanism designed to address and convince a particular listener or interviewer in line with the national and international realities which frame the topic under consideration (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009). In this, and other ways, Muslim asylum-seekers and refugees' experiences in the UK embody the complexities and particularities of the encounter between national and macro-politics.

1. In this respect, it is important to critique the notion that group participatory research may be a useful means of discussing sensitive topics, as proposed by Chambers (1992) and Mosse (1994). It is essential to differentiate between sensitive topics as relating to concepts of modesty and embarrassment, and issues which may enter the realm of the socially unacceptable/dangerous. In this research project, defining potential participants as 'Muslim refugees' appeared to be a sensitive and politicised issue which created scepticism for participating in the project in general, and even more so in a group-setting.
2. Bennett *et al.* (2007) and Home Office (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c and 2009d). In comparison, 84,130 applications were made in 2002, dropping to 25,710 by 2005, and further to 23,610 a year later. Between 2002 and 2007, between 13 per cent and 17 per cent of applicants were recognized as refugees and granted asylum and 9–11 per cent were offered some other sort of protection (including on humanitarian grounds) (Bennett *et al.* 2007).
3. According to Naqshbandi, approximately 1,300 (96 per cent) of masjids in the UK are Sunni and 65 Shi'a (2 per cent). Of the former, the vast majority are 'Asian-run' masjids (Deobandi, Bareilli and Maudoodi-influenced in their majority) while 'approximately 12 are very large institutions with very substantial numbers of Arab-speaking worshippers' (2006).
4. Laws pertaining to asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK are frequently changed. At the time of writing (April 2010), an asylum-seeker whose initial application for asylum has not been processed within 12 months may apply for a work

permit while awaiting a decision, though the granting of this is discretionary and may equally take some time. If, after this period, the individual's application is refused, they are no longer legally allowed to work in the UK unless their appeal is accepted.

5. Regarding the different dynamics in individual and group interviews, see Michell (1999), Morgan and Krueger (1993), and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990).
6. In an Islamic context, the term 'not religious' is usually interpreted as meaning that a Muslim does not practice in a stringent manner, but still considers him/herself to be a believer.
7. The teenagers (aged 14 and 16) were introduced to us by their parents, who were both present throughout the interview. We explained the aims of the project, answered their questions, and obtained their informed consent, in addition to that of their parents. Hussein and Mustafa appeared fully relaxed in our presence, asked us several insightful questions about the project, and commented on each other's answers. Regarding some methodological and ethical issues surrounding interviewing youth in a participatory fashion, see Armstrong *et al.* (2004), Boyden (2000), Grover (2004) and Punch (2002).
8. Refugees continue to receive their allowance at the post office until they receive their Status Documents from the Home Office, at which point they are allocated a Job Seeker's Allowance unless they are already employed.
9. The notion of culture as a tool therefore arose in two of our interviews: the teenage boys respectively referred to Arabic music as a 'sample' to be used in a rap song, and of finding it 'difficult to decide what culture to use' when, where and with whom.
10. Whilst a highly controversial practice which has led to the Home Office being taken to the High Court, asylum-seekers and refugees who do not have indefinite leave to remain in the UK, *and who do not belong to the Church of England* (hence the charge that this practice is highly discriminatory), are required to apply to the Home Office for a Certificate of Approval, allowing them to have a religious or civil marriage. See the Home Office website for further information (www.home-office.gov.uk). Following a High Court ruling, as of April 2009 the Home Office no longer charges for the application for a Certificate for Approval.

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