

How the government lost the plot

A desperate search for a new policy towards Islam has yet to produce results.



A war, a riot, a terrorist attack or a row over blasphemy: not long ago, Britain's government knew exactly what to do when a crisis loomed in relations with the country's Muslims. As recently as July 2005, after bombs in London killed 56 people, Tony Blair was confident that he could avoid a total breakdown of trust between Muslim Britons and their compatriots.

Using an old formula, the prime minister called in some Islamic worthies and suggested they form a task force on extremism. Then, hours before the worthies were due to reconvene and mull their response, Mr Blair breezily announced that a task-force of top Muslims had just been created. They moaned, but dutifully went to work.

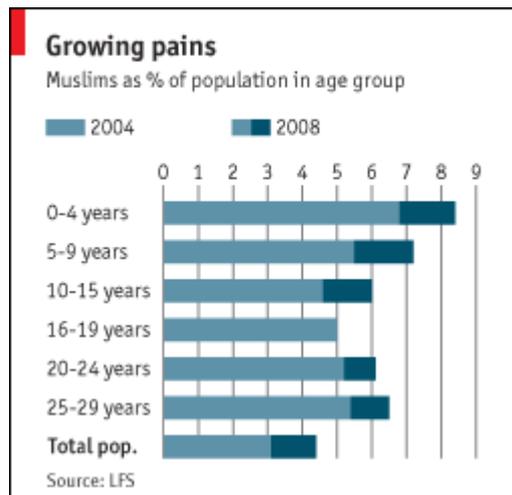
That system of trade-offs, the equivalent of the "beer and sandwiches" once used to woo trade unionists, had some big drawbacks. It gave hardline Muslims—generally male, old and new to Britain—disproportionate sway. It also led to some dubious bargains; for example, Muslim resentment of British foreign policy was parried by, in part, huge generosity towards the cultural demands of some Muslims—such as the right to establish schools where the curriculum bears scant relation to the lessons other young Britons get.

But in its own odd terms, the old system "worked". Messages could be relayed between the corridors of power and the angriest and poorest parts of the Muslim street; and Muslim leaders could be induced to expend personal and political capital urging their flock to co-operate with the police and provide useful information.

Now that system, and its unspoken compromises, lies in ruins. It was jettisoned in the autumn of 2006, when the government downgraded existing ties with the Muslim Council of Britain (in which movements close to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists of Pakistan were strongly represented) and tried to find different interlocutors.

But attempts to define a new policy towards Islam in Britain have been floundering since then. The Muslim population is in many ways diverging still more from the mainstream. With its large, young families, it is also growing much faster (see chart): there are 2.4m Muslims today, according to the Labour Force Survey; the census of 2001, a rather different measure, put it at 1.6m. The government is under fire from the political centre-right for being too soft on radical or reactionary Muslim groups who stop just short of endorsing violence. It is also

attacked from the left (Muslim or otherwise) for using the fight against terrorism as an excuse for a general assault on Muslims and their cultural rights.



Hazel Blears, the communities secretary, sought to clarify official thinking in a speech on February 25th, after a stream of reports that the government was about to launch an ideological war against illiberal or extremist ways of thinking, even if they were not directly associated with violence. The government, she said, would reserve the right to deal with people whose ideas were unpleasant through a “spectrum of engagement, carefully calibrated to deal with individual circumstances”. With groups that have “an equivocal attitude to core values such as democracy, freedom of speech or respect towards women” there might be “some scope for limited engagement”, the minister carefully added. But on certain forms of “absolutely unacceptable behaviour”—such as homophobia, forced marriage or female genital mutilation—the government would firmly enforce the law with no regard for a cultural “oversensitivity” that had gone too far.

Her speech suggests that a debate within the cabinet on which war to prioritise—the one over ideas and values or the one against terrorism—is unresolved. The government wants to keep its options open.

But the failure of current policies aimed at fostering moderate Islam can hardly be overstated. After spending lavishly on a strategy called Prevent that was supposed to empower moderates—at least £80m (\$116m) will have been dished out on such efforts by 2011—the very word “prevent” has become discredited in the strongholds of British Islam, which include east London, Birmingham and a string of northern industrial towns. At the Muslim grass roots, there is a sense that any group or person who enjoys official favour is a stooge.

Many in the government, meanwhile, think their partners are not delivering value for money. The whole relationship has deteriorated since August 2006. After a foiled plot to blow up transatlantic flights, and amid huge ire over the war in Lebanon, a group of prominent Muslims, including two now in government, signed an open letter arguing that British foreign policy in general, and its softness towards Israel in particular, was an important factor behind a surge in extremist sentiment.

Tripping up

Nearly three years on, the government’s biggest problem is that it is struggling with two big questions at once. One is the set of problems described under the catch-all term of “cohesion”—narrowing the social, economic and cultural gap between Muslims (especially in some poor urban areas of northern Britain) and the rest of society. The second is countering

the threat from groups preparing to commit violence in Britain or elsewhere in the name of Islam.



The government says the two problems are related: poor, frustrated and mainly self-segregated groups are more likely to produce terrorists. Muslims as a group lag behind other Britons in qualifications, employment, housing and income (see chart). But in fact the overlap between exclusion and extremism is messy. And attempts to fight terrorism through tougher policing, which can alienate whole communities, make boosting cohesion harder.

Among those who claim to speak for disadvantaged Muslims and articulate their grievances, there has been an outpouring of indignation over the government's stated aim of "preventing violent extremism" by making Muslim communities more "resilient" and better at dealing with hotheads. The idea seems to stigmatise all Muslims, many complain, while the violent extremism of, for example, the white far right is ignored.

Another gripe is that the Prevent programme has poisoned relations between central government and the city councils through which the money is channelled. Some say councils are being strong-armed into carrying out "community" programmes that are really thinly disguised police and intelligence work.

In Birmingham the council's loudest activist, Salma Yaqoob, complains that Prevent money goes only to those who avoid suggesting that British foreign policy helps to foment extremism, even though the link obviously exists. (Indeed, a government security minister, Lord West, admitted in January that to deny it was "clearly bollocks".) Resentment of the gag was exacerbated by the recent Israeli assault on Gaza. Many Muslims followed it on Middle East-based media that presented an even gorier picture of Palestinian suffering than other British viewers saw.

The Gaza crisis also triggered a round of name-calling within the world of British Islam that has laid bare a rapid diminution of the middle ground on which emollient types hope to stand. Senior Muslims at the Quilliam Foundation, a "counter-terrorism think-tank" which has received nearly £1m in funding from the home and foreign offices, issued in January a denunciation of Israeli actions that was mocked as faint-hearted by more radical Muslims, while voices on the political right questioned whether the government's "investment" in this body was paying off.

Torn between remaking the Muslim community—a task that turns out to be much harder than the designers of the Prevent strategy ever imagined—and simply fighting terrorism, the government, understandably, feels it can hardly be expected to abandon the latter. Probing and pre-empting attacks by Muslim extremists is now understood to occupy about 75% of the energy of the British security services, who claim to have had some success in reducing the number of terrorist plots that are stopped only at the last minute. Another less obvious factor in British thinking is strong American concern over the risk that a British-born Muslim could enter the United States and commit a terrorist spectacular there. A healthy slug of America's anti-terrorism spending goes to forestall just such a possibility.

Meanwhile a string of high-profile court cases involving terrorist conspiracies has served to increase the emotional chasm between Muslim Britons and their compatriots. As an example of two worlds diverging, take reactions to the plight of Binyam Mohamed, an Ethiopian who sought asylum in Britain and was later incarcerated in Guantánamo Bay. He says he was tortured by his American captors, with help from the British secret services.

Mr Mohamed returned to Britain on February 23rd, to mixed reviews. For Muslims (and human-rights campaigners on the secular left) his saga is a tale of American brutality and British collusion. In the rambunctious popular press, however, he is portrayed as a nuisance whose presence in Britain will burden the taxpayer and waste the security services' valuable time in surveillance.

A way forward

For all the problems besetting British Islam, however, there are plenty of individuals who exemplify at least part of the solution. Among them—at least until the recession makes it harder for strivers to climb out of poverty—are successful young professionals and entrepreneurs, often women, who have managed to fly high in business, medicine, accountancy or the media. "We have prevailed in a two-fronted struggle" against social conservatism and discrimination, says Saeeda Ahmed, the founder of a social-affairs consultancy in the north (to hear an interview with Miss Ahmed, see article).

But successful British Muslims as well as poor ones resent the fact that the rest of society often sees them mainly as potential extremists. Sarah Joseph, a convert to Islam who edits the glossy monthly *Emel*, says Muslims are fed up with being asked if they are against violence; they want people to know what they are for, such as social justice. The sad fact, in a country that has come to live in fear of terrorism, is that many Britons are indeed more interested in assessing Muslims' potential for violence than in anything else about them.

The Economist, New York, 26 fev. 2009, Britain, online. Disponível em <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 6 mar. 2009.