# Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion in Britain: The Case of Arab Minority

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**Abstract.** This article falls within the scope of debate about *'Community Cohesion'* in Britain. Community cohesion is at the centre of public policy initiated in response to the urban disturbances in northern towns.  Many official reports pointed out that lack of community cohesion is an element jeopardizing security and safe coexistence. In this sense, this article explores hindrances to intergroup coexistence, given that this issue is the main concern in this pluralist society since the attacks in London in July, 7, 2005, through the study of intercultural relations between Arab minority of London and mainstream society in Britain. This research adopts an approach which aims to contribute to the understanding of the reasons hampering community cohesion through juxtaposition of viewpoints of both the minority and majority group. The originality of this approach lies in the fact that it tackles the issue of integration from two sided points of view: the point of the majority group and the point of view of the minority group; unlike most literature on intergroup relations which basically focus on the integration of the minority and its adaptation to the dominant culture.

**Keywords:** *community cohesion, multiculturalism, Arabs, London, integration*

## Introduction

Migratory movements constitute one of the characteristic of human societies. Economic and demographic differences between the North and the South intensify dynamic movements of migrants. On the one hand, economic stagnation in the South is a tremendous driving force of exodus towards the North.  On the other hand, countries of the North try to stimulate manpower and skilled persons of the South to meet the needs of a prosperous economy.  Following this migratory process, settlement of minorities in the countries of the North resulted in the emergence of societies composed of several ethnic and cultural groups.  To meet ethnic and cultural transformation undergone by the host societies, multiculturalism has been adopted as a model of integration in different countries like Australia, Canada and Great Britain.

However, in Britain, the bombing attack in London in July, 7, 2005 marks a turning-point in the adoption of cultural pluralism. This strategy of integration based on communities living side by side and keeping their cultural singularity has been put into question by many circles in the country. The media and many political parties called for imposition of cultural homogeneity. Hence, we talk of "death of multiculturalism in Britain". The hazardous urban riots in some British towns in 2001, moreover, laid bare the difficult coexistence between cultural and ethnic groups in the country, a dilemma about which politicians were invited to find an outlet.

## 1. Methodology and sample characteristics

This research investigates factors contributing to community cohesion, laying emphasis on the case of Arab minority in London. The approaches and methods used include semi-directed interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, and collective discussions. The sample consisted of 35 persons from the Arab minority and 32 persons representing the host society. The participants are from different ages, from 22 to 58, and socio-economic status.Thecriteriafor selecting the participantsweretheirwillingnesstotakepartin thestudy.During the fieldwork phase of this article, participants were reluctant to take part. However, with the help of Arab associations based in London, we convinced many to participate. Theaimofthestudy, however, wasnotto makeempiricalgeneralizations,but to explore the manner they attempt to weave their networks of social relations in a pluralist society. The study was based on two main parameters: degree of knowledge of the other and the choice of persons with whom they interact in their social environment.

## 2. Social contact and networks: Majority group perspective
### *2. Knowledge of the other*

Through focus group interviews held with members of the majority group, it is apparent that one of the reasons hampering intergroup contact is ignorance of the other 'culture. In the consciousness of the majority group, knowledge of other is based on juxtaposition of norms and culture of their own group with the culture of the minority group, in the sense that the sacred, morality and conservatism attached to the Arab group are opposed to secularism and individual freedom

characterizing the majority group's conduct. Misunderstandings, ignorance, denigration are aspects that dominate knowledge of the minority group.

This perspective concerning the other and his culture is tinged with several ambiguities and is often related to cultural and religious otherness. It results in a situation of misunderstanding which gives birth to mistrust, prejudice, fear and ignorance as Professor Akbar Ahmed accentuate:

> "Unfortunately, many people in the West do not understand the true teachings of Islam. It is a failure of both the media and the Muslim community itself to effectively teach non-Muslims in the West about their faith. Muslims need to work harder to educate others about Islam, especially when there are voices from far-right groups that promote mistrust and misunderstanding of Islam. Only through better understanding and dialogue can we build a peaceful and secure society, with people of all different faiths and cultures living together[1]."

The media is the major source of knowledge of the other. It is striking that knowledge of others is built, not through familiarity, but generally through the means of communication. This tendency is stressed by Edward Said in "*Covering Islam: How the Media and the Expert determines how we see the rest of the world*". The Western media, he confirms, determine what people like or dislike, and what they know and what they do not know about the other.These means of communication are reactivating the vision of the antagonistic relationship between Islam and the West. Edward Said claims that untruth and falsehood about Islam and the Muslim world are consistently propagated in the name of objectivity, liberalism, freedom, democracy and progress[2].

This perception of Islam and Muslims has been increasingly determined and rendered turbid by fear of religious fundamentalism. The spiritual ardour and strong sense of identity among the Arab minority are perceived as a threat. This was the case even before 2001, but the trend has been greatly accentuated by the events of September 11, July 7 in London and the subsequent military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Haddad, 2004: 125). A number of issues such as terrorism, religious fundamentalism were the subject of unprecedented attention after the events mentioned above. Elizabeth Poole in *Reporting Islam: Media Representation of British Muslim*, points out that Islam and individuals who practice

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[1]Kourosh Ziabari and Akbar Ahmed, "the dialogue of civilizations, not the clash of civilizations", Fair Observer, January 28, 2015.
[2]Said, Edward, *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world.* New York: Random House, 1997.

this religion are frequently stigmatized in media discourses which formulate views and knowledge of an overwhelming majority of British population[3]. On the whole, the media is the central source of knowledge about the other. Given the misrepresentation that dominate media's coverage, knowledge of other cultures and norms is globally erroneous. This is likely to create a gap between different cultural and ethnic groups.

### 2.2 Intergroup contact

The sample composing mainstream society members was invited to assess interactions and contacts in terms of importance, intimacy and frequency with members of the Arab minority. In most of the answers, it is obviousthat interactions with members of the same ethnic group are predominant. The in-group contact is taken more pleasant and comfortable whereas intergroup contact is seldom and performed on a superficial level, or usually eschewed as Edward confirms:

> "You know, our cultural norms are not the same, their conduct is often restricted by cultural, and especially religious beliefs, additionally, our way of life is a bit different, so I usually prefer to have a shared bond with people who lead a life that is similar to mine, corrosive effects of intolerance for diversity alongside a commitment to strict manners of behaviour and being make our regular interaction a bit difficult and rare"

The ambiguity engulfing intergroup contact is related to anxiety due mainly to religious disparity between the two groups. Within the Arab group, there is no distinction between temporal and spiritual dimensions. There is clearly an apprehensive concern about the intensity of religious commitment among the Arab minority. However, members of mainstream society adopt a secular orientation. When one third of Britons said they had no religion, almost all people belonging to ethnic minorities report adherence to a religion. In addition, 90% say it is an important element personally (Modood 2000: 49). If about a quarter of whites in Britain visits a place of worship once a month, two-thirds of Muslims go to the mosque at least once a week. Religion has an important influence on the way they lead their lives, against only 5% among whites (Modood 2000: 49). The fury generated by the Satanic Verses, military interventions in the Arab region are behind

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[3]Poole, E. (2002) *Reporting Islam: Media representations of British Muslims*, London, New York, I.B. Tauris.

shaping of  public perception of Muslims and Islam in Britain (Field, 2007).  Besides, intergroup contacts are influenced by events on the national and international scene. The impact of geopolitical events on the internal situation affects intergroup contact. Intergroup contact remains a prisoner of media treatment of Islam and a long history of representations of the other shaped during different periods of clashes between the West and the Arab and Islamic world.  These events, according Vertovec, affected interactions and perceptions between the minority group and the host society:

> "The anti-Muslim sentiments have increased as a part of a big xenophobia, as many non-Muslims in Great Britain oppose changes in their schools, public policies and social services that have been made to accommodate the lower perceived foreign ways ... like the public sphere tends to provide a prominent place for Muslims, Islamophobic trends may amplify" (Vertovec 2002: 33).»

Even though, cultural diversity is an opportunity for mutual cultural enrichment for a tiny group of mainstream society. The establishment of a link beyond one's ethnic group is favored by openness to differences between cultural groups and tolerance of different cultures, values and ways of life. Religion is not a factor preventing them from mixing with friendship networks drawn from work, neighborhood without attaching any importance to religious or cultural belong of the persons.

## 3. Social contact and networks: Minority group perspective
### 3.1 Ethnic and religious interaction

Regarding intergroup contact from the minority group perspective, Arab group tends to give priority to interaction with members of ethnic, religious or national group. The reason evoked for the desire to rub shoulders with members of one's ethnic group is ascribed to a question of mentality, kinship and the need to mitigate the effect of cultural disparity. Confining his network contacts to one's ethnic or religious group emphasizes the cardinal importance of sharing the same cultural values. The choice of networks of social relations beyond the national, ethnic, or religious becomes increasingly less recurrent and more strongly limited. The divestment of social relations outside one's ethnic group is reinforced by an increased distrust of others and inadaptability to cultural changes. This tendency is explained not only by a question of mindset or difficult intergroup interaction, but also by the concern of insecurity manifested with regard to the culture of the country of origin.

This feeling botchesthe openness to other cultures and leads, in extreme cases, to withdrawal into one's community. This case is more visible among people with a lower education level and social and professional difficulties of integration.

In fact, this choice is often justified by the desire to be at ease in their cultural lifestyle to which they assign the values of generosity, solidarity and spontaneity. In contrast to a British lifestyle is considered materialistic and individualistic. The cultural traits of their culture are considered more advantageous emotionally and socially. Hence, social relations are limited to members of their ethnic and religious group. Contacts with members of the majority society are rare, often avoided and are described as less positive.. This perspective reflects a negative image that is related to several traits derived from cultural, social, and religious sphere. For instance, spirit of individual freedom is deplored systematically. It is a negative vision that permeates the minds so much and is behind positions taken within families such as rejection of certain western values for fear of cultural identity dissolution.

### 3.2 Out-group contact

A category of the Arab minority supports broadening the scope of interpersonal relationships beyond their own ethnic and religious group. Those who have relations beyond members of their ethnic or religious group are indifferent to nationality, culture or religion. Motivated by a desire to amplify their network contacts, and with the start of the process of acculturation and progressive understanding of the cultural values of British society, social networks go beyond ethnic, cultural or religious boundaries. The choice of out-group contact is mainly due to conditions of life, work and sometimes to rejection of a steadfast attachment to the cultural model of the group of origin. In contrast to the first tendency, this category adopts a lifestyle that is not bound by religious or cultural factors. Despite cultural belonging, this category of the Arab group is more progressive in its attitudes about traditional roles and relationships within families as Mahmoud, a resident aged 43, stresses:

> "Since we live in this country, we should not lead an isolated life, rather openness to others in necessary; it is a source of enrichment. British people here are really good; (they) talk to me. Friendly people: know most people because I try to have friends beyond my ethnic group, this is really important we are all humans after all.

Again, our life is here, we have to integrate so as to lead a successful life in work, in dealing with others…"

This category sticks to intergroup contacts. The relations with members of the host society are developed not only in quest of social integration, or as a mode of relation dictated by politeness and proximity due to the neighborhood, but also as an insertion in a network of relations with a degree of involvement and exchange more or less intense. This category has a positive opinion of living in Britain, describing it as just, peaceful, especially with respect to access to social and healthcare services. The respondents have no feeling of rejection by their multicultural environment; rather, they do not find any barriers stopping them from socializing outside of their ethnic and religious group.

## 4. Hurdles to intergroup contact
### *4.1 Cultural and religious divergence*

One of the points of intergroup discrepancy is the moral framework governing relations within the Arab minority.  Within the minority group, patriarchal models still prevail. Legitimized by religion, they are rooted in the culture to the extent that the individual is generally incorporated and subject to the family and the ethnic and religious unity. In contrast, within the majority group, individual freedom is put forward. Attachment to traditions and the concern for keeping the cultural singularity are contrasted with the passionate zeal of the majority society for individual liberty. To put it another way, loyalty to traditions and customs of the Arab minority is opposed to loyalty to all that is impersonal in the British society. If the Arab minority remains, overall, attached to traditional values, values of individual freedom is the key element within the host society. When they are caught between two contradictory cultural systems, the two groups can manifest varying attitudes between the permeability, openness to other culture, and impermeability or rejection of other cultural values.

Intergroup divergence is thus due to cultural disparity.  Ethnocentrism, moving in both directions, degrades intergroup relations, and can, in a more subtle, provoke the alienation of both groups. The effect of ethnocentrism on intergroup relations is embodied in the formation of a narrow and defensive cultural identity and perception of members of other cultures in terms of stereotypes.

 Islam is simultaneously a prophecy and legislation. It encompasses social

and political aspects of life.  This was the case of Christianity before the decision not to submit the entire social and political life to the Church. The challenge, therefore, regarding intergroup relations, is the place of religion in the constitution of the two groups. Christian culture of the host society seems to have abandoned the religious reference. This was the result of historical processes of secularization, which distinguishes the spheres of existence by bringing religion into the sphere of privacy. On the contrary, the Arab minority, as a whole, is not secular. Moreover, the Muslim minority does not belong to the Judeo-Christian heritage as the rest of European immigrants. It is simply alien to this cultural and social heritage. It is a minority that is considered marginal to the history of Britain and its empire.

Intergroup divergence is thus due to disparity between two cultural worlds. The Arab community derives its originality from its identification with Arab and Islamic civilization, while the majority society belongs to the Judeo-Hellenic civilization, which leads to a dialogue of the deaf, embittered by theological controversy, always more or less latent (Joelle 1988: 280-281). In addition, relations between the two religions were not only marked by controversy and divergence, but also by the rivalry and confrontation and its impact is still etched in people's minds.

### 4.2 Impact of history and geopolitical events

Relations throughout history between the West and the Arab and Islamic world were dominated by periods of conflicts and wars. The Mediterranean was certainly a historic place of productive encounters, but it was also a theatre of violence and confrontation conducted in the name of religions. Consequently, one of the strong points of divergence is the effect of history which activates fear and hostility. Historical conflicts mingled with imaginary tales are associated with contemporary events to update a historical experience of confrontation between Christianity and Islam, between colonizers and colonized. This gives birth to an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and differences between the two groups.

The major points of divergence between the two communities are exacerbated by the media which raise the question of compatibility of Islamic culture with Western culture. The media were exploited to accentuate cultural differences and to determine the perception of others in a series of disfigurement and stereotypes.

In addition, the model of integration in Britain based on communities living side by side may be accounted as a flaw. Ethnic concentration in specific geographical

areas tends to prevent the process of acculturation and assimilation, restricting inter-ethnic contacts. The density of cultural minorities influences the rate and nature of their incorporation into the culture of the host country. This hardens and solidifies cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities and led to the creation of enclaves.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, this study of intergroup contacts between Arab minority of London and members of mainstream society in Britain reveal that there are both internal and external factors botching a harmonious social interaction. In addition to religious divergence, the great varieties of ethnic and specific cultural traits of each community have an effect on intergroup relations. It is the impact of societal factors which emphasize difference and reactivate stereotypes and prejudices affecting intergroup contacts. To ameliorate ethnic relations, the question of knowledge is necessary, but also the regulation of media excesses is of cardinal importance.

*Media: regulations of media excesses*

Intergroup contact is nowadays influenced is by the media which shape the perception and knowledge of others. News presentation from a multicultural perspective proves essential to develop bonds of understanding and reduce inter-cultural discrepancies. Without imposing any restriction on freedom of expression, the media should adopt a code of conduct and ethics. Processing events in a manner contrary to the pluralistic nature of society is a practice to avoid. In this regard, familiarity of media professionals with different cultures will certainly be useful. Information technology specialists and academics may participate in this sense. Besides, Inter-professional contacts are often a good way to rationalize passions. In this way, the flawed representation woven on historical conflicts and cultural and literary writings which exceed the limits of truth and accuracy can be corrected.

*Education: a means to know the ropes*

In many cases, problems of intergroup relations cannot be understood fully if we do not take into account effect of the collective memories on intergroup relations. Intergroup contact is largely influenced by stereotypes and prejudices rooted in the collective memories. Knowledge of others, in this case, is an entry leading to a harmonious coexistence that cannot come into the surface without a

multicultural education which combats negative representations. This knowledge constitutes a rubber to erase the negative perceptions of others, which are reconfigured by political and social circumstances and the media (Islam and secularism commission, 2006: 49 -50).

Multicultural education which should start from school is the vector of the knowledge of others.  The school has a huge responsibility in the process of socialization and acculturation of the individuals within communities. In this context, the development of programs is essential so that cultural diversity is represented and transmitted through the school curriculum. Still, we may wonder if knowledge is sufficient to dampen the shock provoked by cultural diversity, perceptions, and representations of the others by various means throughout several periods. Intergroup relations in a pluralist society cannot be dissociated from the international context. Certainly the relation of the majority society with its ethnic minorities, including the Arab minority is shaken by events in the world. This reflects the impact of geopolitical problems on the internal situation.

For years, the response to the unease that dominates intergroup contacts is cultural.  Suffice it to mention, in this regard, the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by UNESCO on the eve of the events of September 11. It seems that usefulness and effectiveness of such initiatives, aimed at developing knowledge and cultural dialogue are insufficient, in the absence of real political will and a democratization of global relation, given that hazardous geopolitical situations have often an impact on internal situation in pluralist societies.

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