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THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN'S NEW LEADERSHIP

A Research Note

A Policy Exchange Briefing

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Introduction

This month, the Muslim Council of Britain, which says it is “the country’s most diverse and democratic Muslim umbrella body,”¹ will elect a new Secretary-General, or leader. MCB affiliates, typically mosques, charities and other Muslim organisations, which the organisation says number more than 500,² can vote.

Two candidates are standing – Wajid Akhter and Muhammad Adrees.³ As this note reveals, Akhter, the likely frontrunner, has expressed views which appear ominous for the integration of Muslims into Britain. For his part, Adrees has strongly supported the dictatorial regime in Iran. Both men are also linked to The Muslim Vote, a campaign to mobilise Muslim voters against Labour, which played a part in the defeat of four sitting Labour MPs at the election. Akhter was a spokesman for The Muslim Vote.

The MCB’s relationship with wider society is already troubled. Governments of all stripes have refused to deal with it since 2009, when the then Labour government broke contact after the group’s Deputy Secretary-General signed a statement which ministers viewed as condoning attacks on British forces.⁴ Other positions taken by the MCB have included opposing⁵ a UK government ban⁶ on al-Qaeda and recommending that Muslim girls be veiled in school.⁷ An official review said the MCB had “consistently opposed programmes by successive governments to prevent terrorism.”⁸

Under the current Secretary-General, Zara Mohammed, the MCB sought to present an image of change and sought re-engagement with government. Its claims of change were not accepted and it was not re-engaged with, either by the last Conservative or present Labour government.

¹ <https://mcb.org.uk/election-2025/>

² <https://mcb.org.uk/affiliates/>

³ <https://mcb.org.uk/muslim-council-of-britain-unveils-leadership-candidates-for-historic-2025-election/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/apr/04/hazel-blears-libel-action-mcb> and https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Guardian/documents/2009/03/23/blears_letter.pdf

⁵ <https://mcb.org.uk/mcb-says-terrorist-list-is-ill-conceived/>

⁶ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2001-02-28/debates/bf6251aa-2488-49d1-9fde-37349b5bb156/TerroristOrganisations>

⁷ <https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/02/20/Schoolinfo guidance.pdf>

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8076bfe5274a2e8ab504ab/53163_Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_-_PRINT.pdf

As this note shows, the new leadership makes the prospect of official re-engagement even less likely, and less desirable, than before.

The two candidates for Secretary-General are Wajid Akhter and Muhammad Adrees

Wajid Akhter

Views on Islam and the West

The likely frontrunner is Wajid Akhter, a doctor from Essex with a high profile in the community and a long record of speechmaking, writing, and activism in Muslim politics, charity work and the MCB. Several of his articles have been deleted from the web, a reflection perhaps of their sensitivity, but where this is the case copies survive in archives, to which we link.

He stated in 2022: “To be a Muslim today is an act of revolutionary defiance – standing at odds with the prevailing culture in many ways.”⁹

Akhter advocates British Muslims identifying primarily as Muslim, rather than as British. In the same 2022 article, he wrote: “Most people teach their children to be their nationality or ethnicity first, but this gives such a limited and limiting view of yourself and others that this can lead children to be shallow. It is literally how the evils of nationalism, racism, and fascism are born.... Choosing faith as a primary identity for your children (and of course yourself!) allows a solid foundation upon which to approach the world. Note that I say ‘primary’ as opposed to ‘only’...Teach them to be Muslim primarily.”¹⁰

Akhter, a former Assistant Secretary-General and current National Council member of the MCB,¹¹ added that children “are constantly bombarded by examples of how the Western world is cool – whether through the examples of Captain America, Elon Musk or LeBron James... Make your children realize that they are heirs to an ancient and proud nation so they can hold their head up high.”¹² The “ancient and proud nation” here is not Britain, but Islam, or the Ummah, the global community of Muslims.

⁹ <https://muslimmatters.org/2022/02/03/did-the-prophet-wear-glasses-raising-children-resilient-muslims/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://mailchi.mp/mcb/monthly-update-may-june-2021> and <https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/MCB-Annual-Report-2021-2022-Web.pdf>

¹² <https://muslimmatters.org/2022/02/03/did-the-prophet-wear-glasses-raising-children-resilient-muslims/>

In an older piece, Akhter said celebrating New Year was “the first step on a slippery slope... By adopting the celebrations of others, we are not harmlessly saying a few words or just enjoying ourselves. We are opening the door to disappearing within the dominant culture, to a future in which our children may have Muslim names, but are otherwise indistinguishable from non-Muslims in their habits, customs and appearances.”¹³

New Year, he said, was a “pagan” event that Muslims should not take part in because it “usually involves un-Islamic practices” such as “mixed gender events where people wear fashionable clothes, dance and sing songs, etc. It is necessarily an Islam free zone, not least because it has no basis or relationship to Islam.” Anyway, “what exactly is there to celebrate? New Years...is a celebration that is completely cut off from the reality of the rest of the Ummah. The starvation in Somalia, the murder in Syria, the imprisonment of Gaza, the ethnic cleansing of Burma.”¹⁴

In an interview in September 2024 with Ajmal Masroor, the man who ran against Zara Mohammed for the MCB Secretary-Generalship in 2021, Akhter talked about the “battle for ideas” in universities and said Muslim students had to pick a side. He told a story about being asked, as a student himself, to go clubbing by a fellow Muslim:

“I said, you are a Muslim, you know what the answer to that question should be. We shouldn’t be in the club on a Friday night. And you know what his response was? He said, I promise to you, by Allah, there are more Muslims in the club on Friday night than there are in your prayer room on Friday Jummah. He’s right....In most universities, I promise you....there are more Muslims in the club on Friday night than there are in the Jummah prayer. There is a battle for ideas in university, not just degrees. You are part of this battle for ideas and it is up to you which side you are going to fall on, because at the end everyone ends up becoming one or the other... This group [students], they really are up for grabs.”¹⁵

Akhter is not exactly anti-Western. In another piece, he praised some Western achievements, including air travel and the rule of law. But he again made it clear that he sees the West as separate from Islam. “We are sore at ‘the West’ and blame them (with some justification) for many of the ills that plague us,” he wrote. “A neutral observer would be forgiven for thinking that practising politically aware Muslims have only one default setting with regards to the West – hatred. This isn’t the case so I thought I would

¹³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240710144647/https://muslimmatters.org/2012/12/28/4-reasons-why-muslims-should-not-celebrate-new-years/>

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240710144647/https://muslimmatters.org/2012/12/28/4-reasons-why-muslims-should-not-celebrate-new-years/>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=search&v=544257061365728> – from 11.30

highlight 5 examples where the West has advanced human civilization in ways that Muslims can and do appreciate.”

After listing the achievements, he added: “I know the West has much to be ashamed of and that these few points don’t make up for the Holocaust, the Spanish Inquisition, Hiroshima and many more tragedies. I also know that many of these [achievements] have their basis in extending the militaristic and colonial reach of the West.”¹⁶

The Muslim Vote

Akhter was a leading activist and spokesman for The Muslim Vote (TMV) – a campaign to mobilise Muslim voters against Labour and the Conservatives at the recent general election and elect candidates sympathetic to Palestine and hostile to current counter-terrorism policy.¹⁷ TMV played a part in the defeat of four Labour MPs, including the shadow cabinet member Jonathan Ashworth, by independent pro-Gaza candidates at the election, and the near-misses suffered by several others, including the now health secretary Wes Streeting.

TMV is supported and endorsed by a number of Islamist organisations including MEND and the Muslim Association of Britain¹⁸ (two of the groups named as being assessed for extremism by the then Communities Secretary, Michael Gove, in March 2024.)¹⁹ One of TMV’s key figures was the pro-Palestinian activist Muhammad Jalal, real name Jalaluddin Patel, a former UK leader of the now-banned Islamist extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir.²⁰

Speaking as a TMV representative on the YouTube channel of Islam 21c, part of the foundation set up by the extremist Haitham al-Haddad, Akhter said: ““We refuse to accept building our lives, our communities, our future here in this country on the dead bodies of our brothers and sisters overseas... Those who did not vote for the ceasefire [in Gaza] should have some consequences at the electoral box...”

“Until now as a Muslim community we’ve said Labour gets the vote. A lot of people now are saying we’re not going to vote for Labour, let’s move to [other parties]... That doesn’t work, we’re going to go for principles-based politics... We need to be able to work together, to have a unity of purpose... The Muslim Vote is what happens when Muslims unite for a single cause...”

¹⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140912054928/https://muslimmatters.org/2014/09/09/5-reasons-to-praise-the-west/>

¹⁷ <https://themuslimvote.co.uk/pledges/>

¹⁸ https://themuslimvote.co.uk/our-supporters/#supporters_tax-ngos

¹⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-03-14/debates/4E9FCBC1-F151-470C-840B-1CC58EBF73F4/ExtremismDefinitionAndCommunityEngagement>

²⁰ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13069939/Plot-oust-MPs-Gaza-ceasefire-Muslim-Vote.html>

“Our guidance is in general to avoid voting for anyone from the Conservative or Labour parties. There are some exceptions – those who voted for the ceasefire and have a good track record with issues related to the Muslim community ... Some people will be scared. The people who are going to be scared are the ones who profit over and above from us being disunited... The rest of them will see the fruits when we become united, inshallah.”²¹

Speaking to The New Arab, Akhter said: “This is not just us begging for scraps from the table. This is a long-term process of us making our voice heard.”²²

Organising British Muslims

In a speech at the East London Mosque in November 2023, Akhter advocated “organising” and “uniting” the Muslims of Britain into a “powerful community” which will “change from the hand that is begging to the hand that is giving... from the people who are protesting to the people we are protesting to... For that you have to sacrifice, you have to work...

“We need to become an organised community... we need to become an Islamic community rather than just a community of people who happen to be Muslims... We all want Saladin [the Muslim leader who defeated the Crusaders] to come today, right? But no-one wants to be his father. You will not get Saladin until you build the environment for Saladin, until you become his teacher, until you become his madrassah, his helper, his friend and his ecosystem. Build that first, and Allah will send you Saladin after Saladin after Saladin until you don’t know what to do with them.”²³

In the same speech, Akhter said there was a “darkness here in this country. When we see everyone, from the highest elected leaders of the land, straight away they go down to a school to reassure the students who are from one side of the conflict, don’t worry, I’m with you. And they should do that. Because anti-Semitism is not from our religion, it’s not from our culture. There’s no word in Urdu or Arabic or Bengali called Holocaust, because we never did something like that... But who was reassuring the Muslim students? Anyone? No. They only got one reassurance: you say one word out of line, we’ll come down on you like a ton of bricks. The other darkness you can see is that Ministers will go to the marches in support of the war, and they will speak there. And yet if you go on Saturday to say please don’t kill children, you’re called hate-filled extremists. British citizens in Israel? Free flight, come home to safety. British citizens in Gaza? You’re on your own, mate.”²⁴

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db2mRKC6TUc>

²² <https://www.newarab.com/news/will-gaza-war-cause-upset-uk-general-election>

²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t39Au_F7y7U

²⁴ Ibid.

Akhter's speeches and writings sometimes evoke a lost golden age of Muslim supremacy and power which could be restored through a united and organised faith. He wrote: "Muslims have never gotten over losing Andalusia (Spain) to the Reconquista... We lament about how we brought enlightenment to Europe and then managed to find ourselves totally eliminated from the Iberian Peninsula."²⁵

In 2024, at the Nur-ul Islam School in London, he said: "We didn't just lose in India, and Pakistan, and Bangladesh. We lost everywhere. We lost in Algeria and North Africa, we lost in West Africa, we lost in central Asia, we lost and we lost and we lost and we haven't stopped losing for more than 150 years..."

"If you try to unite the Muslim world politically, like we are trying to do, but your people are either the illiterate religious or the literate murtadd [apostates], you have no hope. We need to bring all three together... We need a vision that has the Quran in one hand and the science book in the other hand... In this school, they're learning not only to be a professional, they're learning the Quran. They're learning to be good Muslims and good citizens. They're learning what the difference is between morals that come and go, and morals that we live by and stick by... If we unite, we can win."²⁶

Win against whom is not specified. Nor is the meaning of "we" exactly clear. It cannot mean Muslims, since it states that "we lost" in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Algeria, North Africa and central Asia – all Muslim-ruled places. It may mean the wrong kind of Muslims, those who do not subscribe to the idea of "uniting the Muslim world politically."

Muhammad Adrees

The other candidate is Adrees, another doctor, who like Zara Mohammed is from Glasgow. He leads the Muslim Council of Scotland (which does appear to have relations with the UK government: he was invited to a reception at Downing Street in January 2023). Much older than Akhter, he appears a figure from an earlier era of Muslim leadership. He was prominently involved in the campaign against the showing of the film *The Lady of Heaven*, which some Muslims deemed anti-Sunni or blasphemous. In a heated argument on a BBC news programme Adrees told the film's producer he had "no right" to make or show the film.²⁷

The Muslim Council of Scotland under Adrees is also a supporter organisation of The Muslim Vote.²⁸

²⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240425081121/https://muslimmatters.org/2018/01/09/social-media-and-the-struggle-for-tomorrow/>

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RB-J0xpB90>

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ai2QaOPLzsQ>

²⁸ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/explainer/uk-election-what-is-muslim-vote-why-matter-tmv>



Adrees (left) holding an anti-Prevent placard on a demonstration in 2017.

In 2017 Adrees travelled to Iran on a delegation, meeting Iranian officials and the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini and praying at Khomeini's shrine. Writing about his trip in a magazine published by the Islamic Centre of England, described in Parliament as the voice of the Iranian regime,²⁹ Adrees praised Khomeini and "the Iranian Revolution, when the great leader led the nation to its destiny."³⁰

Adrees also praised Iran's treatment of its Sunni and non-Muslim minorities. That year, according to the US State Department's annual report on freedom of religion in Iran, at least eight people were executed for *moharebeh* [war against God]. At least 102 members of minority religious groups were in prison for their religious activities, plus 174 individuals for alleged *moharebeh*, 23 on charges of "insulting Islam" and 21 for "corruption on earth." The report said the government continued to harass, interrogate, and arrest Bahais, Christians (particularly converts), Sunni Muslims, and other religious minorities and there continued to be reports of arrests and harassment of Sunni clerics and congregants.³¹

²⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-02-06/debates/433738C5-1041-4CF5-9C76-A0B09A9B0A64/IranianRegimeThreatToUK#contribution-BF487F1E-C9D6-41E5-AFD0-07F207A4315D>

³⁰ https://issuu.com/islamtoday/docs/islam_today_issue_52_october_2017

³¹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>

Conclusion

Advocates for re-engagement with the MCB often argue that it can be a bulwark against extremism. Yet the man most likely to be its leader has expressed views which are more hardline than those of the current Secretary-General. The Muslim Vote, of whom he was a spokesman, sought to do as much political damage to the Labour Party as possible. As such, the MCB would make an odd bedfellow for any government in the coming years.