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Andrew's white cross, Hussain's red blood: Being Scottish Shia in Brexit's no-man's-land

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Abstract

Brexit was a project shaped at the fringes of official politics. Unusually, however, it maintained its fringe-like qualities, including its lack of clarity and ambivalence, even as it took center stage in the political affairs of the country for more than three years. In such a transitional period, powerless segments of society, including vulnerable nonwhite communities, face a much larger and more multifaceted crisis than other sectors of the population. The question of border controls and forms of identification for migrants and those of hyphenated nationality is an alarming sign of a homeland turning into a hostile environment. By relying on data gathered in a three-year-long ethnographic study of the Shia Muslim communities in Scotland, I elaborate on how Scottish citizens marked by their religious culture and darker skin are handling the uncertainty created by Brexit.

Keywords

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Bloody Brexit

Brexit is distinguished from other recent political phenomena by its extreme uncertainty and lack of clarity. Brexit did not begin as a clearly elucidated political scheme, and it was undecided at the outset what the Brexit project meant. It accrued numerous, not necessarily compatible, meanings during the 2016 referendum. Even after Boris Johnson entered 10 Downing Street with the 2019 Tory landslide victory, with Brexit a major election issue, it is not evident what the British people should expect in the coming years. Brexit was a project shaped at the fringes of official politics. Unusually, however, it maintained its fringe-like anti-establishment rhetoric, including this uncertainty, even as it took center stage in the political affairs of the country for more than three years. In this, it resembles somewhat the "state of exception" which, in Giorgio Agamben's words, "appears as a legal form of what cannot have legal form" (Agamben 2008: 1). Like the state of exception, Brexit created a "no-man's land between public law and political fact" (Agamben 2008: 1) or between the juridical order and realities on the ground. Indeed, Brexit could only be successful given this ambiguity, which allowed its presentation as a pseudo-rebellious shock to the status quo. Gradually this state of ambiguity has turned into a state of exception, which in itself has demanded novel and unusual legal forms. Indeed, Johnson and his ilk have contributed to creating this ambiguous situation, and they were successful in turning the sense of urgency they manufactured into an election win.

One explanation for the success of such a manufactured project can be found in William Davies' *Nervous states* (2019). He argues that Brexit was a political project shaped around *feelings*. Certainly, the politically nostalgic desire to "take back control" of the homeland and the fear of migrants were some of the central ingredients of the sense of rebellion surrounding the project.

Feelings of nostalgia, resentment, anger and fear have disrupted the status quo.

Populist uprisings, as manifest in the victories of Donald Trump, the Brexit campaign

and a wave of nationalist surges across Europe, are cases of this, and have been

widely criticised for their denigration of expertise and harnessing of emotional

discontents. (Davies 2019: 12-13)

Yet, Davies recognizes that new political possibilities might emerge as a result of the

decline of old conceptions of expertise and professional politics. Democracies constantly

transform themselves, Davies argues, through the power of feeling (Davies 2019: chapter 3).

Feeling, as juxtaposed against "reason" and "expertise" could be perceived as a political

force, and democracy gives voice to forces that could otherwise take a more destructive form.

We are living in one such turning point in the political histories of the world, in which

feelings are flooding into the realpolitik. As they are destroying the old world, they are

creatively shaping the new; ironically based on visions of a halcyon era in the past such as

empire.

In such a transitional period, powerless segments of society, including marginalized

nonwhite communities, face a more multifaceted crisis than other sectors of the population.

The question of border controls and forms of identification for migrants and those of

hyphenated nationality is an alarming sign of a homeland turning into a hostile environment.

The period of uncertainty for them is a period of sharp vicissitudes regarding their place in

society. They understand that, in the words of Gurminder Bhambra:

Expressed concerns about globalization—the movement of capital—were often

euphemisms for concerns about immigration—the movement of labour—and the

presence of racial and ethnic minority populations in the UK and US. (Bhambra 2017:

217)

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By relying on ethnographic data gathered in a three-year-long study of Scottish Shia

Muslim minorities from 2017 until 2020, I elaborate on how some of Scottish Shia citizens

are handling the uncertainty created by Brexit in the region known as north of the border.

During the surge in the political weaponization of nostalgia and xenophobia, Scottish Shia

communities have reinterpreted and rearranged their religious teachings, rituals and symbols.

The religious beliefs, teachings, and practices of Muslims are not as static and frozen as many

assume. The myth that migrants bring their religion with them and simply pass it on to the

next generations, without this process affecting the nature of their religion in any way, has

been consistently challenged by scholars (Mandaville 2007). In post-Brexit Britain, such a

reductionist conception could be damaging to these communities, particularly in policy-

making settings. How are Scottish Shia communities adapting to the uncertainty of the post-

Brexit world? How do they negotiate their identity during this transitional political stage from

being a part of the European Union to going it alone?

From the standpoint of Scottish Shia Muslims, we might think of Brexit as a

Deleuzian deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 2000). Brexit uproots conventions and

habits. It puts a question mark over already problematic issues of identity, "race," and

ethnicity. It forces people to revise and reexamine their convictions about nonwhite and non-

Christian communities in Britain. In reaction, Scottish Shia communities have adopted

strategies of "reterritorialization," including adapting their use of community centers, actively

pursuing interfaith dialogue, and engaging in religiously framed health campaigns in

association with the NHS (National Health Service). These strategies involve forming

grassroots organizations, negotiating alliances of symbolic power with other faith

communities, and reterritorializing the body through philanthropic civic engagement, sharing

blood in donor schemes, and thereby forging gift relationships with the majority (Titmuss

2018 [1970]). In these ways, they try to regain the social capital that seems to be liquidated

and denaturalized by the nationalist trajectory of grand politics. The imposed disconnection between their subculture and geographical territory has been followed by reterritorialization and reconnection of the two. Accordingly, the organized efforts of Scottish Shias to react to the Brexit referendum can be seen as combining two main themes: (i) defending the legitimacy of hybrid identity through civic engagement, and (ii) reconnection *with* and reinterpretation *of* historic Shi'i survival techniques.

Hussain of Scotland

Shias constitute a minority within the predominantly Sunni Muslim minority in the UK. Although there are no reliable official figures for the size of each denomination, we know from the 2011 census that there were 76,737 Muslims in Scotland, 1.45 percent of the Scottish population (Elshayyal 2016; Alibhai 2018). It has been claimed that the Shia population in the UK (including England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) makes up eight percent of British Muslims (El-Menouar 2017: 14). If that percentage is applicable to Scotland, that would mean there are around 6,138 Scottish Shia Muslims. Given my observation of Shi'i centers and religious ceremonies around Scotland, the number of 6,138 seems to be reasonable.

There is also no indicator that the Shia population follows different patterns of political tendency, financial status, and social well-being in comparison with other, predominantly Sunni, Scottish Muslims. Most of the Scottish Shia communities live in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and East Renfrewshire. The main community figures are also divided between the two main cities. In 2010, the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society (SABS) was registered in the capital city of Edinburgh as a faith-based organization and charity for the Twelver Shia Muslims of Scotland. It was set up to serve as an umbrella organization, working in close relationship with other Shi'i foundations established in Edinburgh before 2010. These other foundations, such as *Jafaria Foundation* and *Wali Al-Asir Trust,* were founded by mostly

Pakistani-British communities, which are the oldest Shia communities in Scotland. Many members are second- and third-generation migrants, and English is their first language. Divisions between organizations are also associated with family rivalries, and with enduring, yet frequently defied, caste divisions. The mission of SABS is to bring these organizations together and link the Shia community to the larger society, as well as to forge connections with political, health, and faith-based institutions and other bodies in civil society.

I asked one SABS member, Fatima, about the effects of Brexit on the Shia community. She told me that Scottish officials have dedicated some budget for more security for mosques and Muslim shops around Edinburgh. The time she learnt of these measures, she said, was when she realized that everybody is worrying about the fallout of Brexit.

The active members of SABS are mostly young Scottish Shias from Pakistani-Scottish families. But the second tier of members also includes university students, including a handful of Iranians, Arabs, and other Scottish nationals. The Director General of SABS, Ali Abbas Razawi, is a young British-Shia religious scholar, whom I have met many times in the past few years. In one of the Shia-Sunni interfaith sessions in Edinburgh, he was asked about his "heritage" by an audience member. In a humorous response, he retorted that "I am a descendant of the prophet, as well as Scottish." To fully appreciate this joke, it is necessary to know that the Shia clerics (known as Ayatollahs in the West) wear either a white or a black turban. The black turban distinguishes a descendant of the prophet, who might be called *Sayyid*, *Syed*, or, in its plural form, *Sadaat*. This lineage is more cherished in Shi'ism than Sunnism. Twelver Shi'ism is a school and tradition shaped around the idea of the twelve imams and divine leaders of the Ummah, who are the direct descendants of the prophet and connected with him through blood (Daftary 2013: 60-104). The very name of the Society is also *Ahlul Bayt*; it means *the Household of the Prophet*.

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In a debate with a Sunni scholar at the University of Edinburgh, Razawi emphasized the role of the grandson of the prophet, the third Shi'i Imam, in the constitution of the Shi'i identity. Imam Hussain was killed in the tragic battle of Karbala after refusing to accept the legitimacy of the power of Yazid, the caliph of the time. He added:

> Everything that we [Shias] are, comes from the culture of Karbala. We as a community have been suppressed for 1,400 years. So, what kept us alive is this culture of resilience which Karbala gives us. But what is it? Hussain knew that I need to stand against the oppression of Yazid and if I am killed because of that I know that my legacy will remain and people will remember me. And that was what happened. That is the legacy of Karbala. It teaches you to stand against oppression (not by sword) but by your heart, by your tongue.

This "culture of resistance," he suggests, is the outcome of the search for an empowering mythology representing the suppression and collective pain of the Shias, and their enduring status as a minority in the Muslim world. One finds framing and reframing of the story of the uprising and killing of Hussain and his followers in the politico-religious literature at every turning point in Shi'i history (Chelkowski 2010).

In Scotland, the story of Hussain has found yet another politico-religious connotation. The blood of Hussain was the blood of the prophet. It was spilled, a few decades after Muhammad's death, as a sacrifice for his community and in continuation of the true legacy of the prophet. In its Scottish form, members of the Shia community are encouraged to give blood to fellow Scottish citizens as a new form of commemoration of Hussain. Blood donation, from this recent perspective, is the modern embodiment of Hussain's altruism (*Isar*). The Scottish branch of the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign (IHBDC) works under SABS. IHBDC is the largest cross-ethnic blood donation campaign in Europe, and was founded in the UK by the second and third generations of Shia migrants at 2006. In a few

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years the Campaign became the central civic engagement activity of SABS in Scotland. In 2014 the Scottish Parliament even passed a motion in support of the Campaign (Motion S4M-11308). Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, has also endorsed the Campaign. Every year, the Campaign organizes blood drives in association with the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS) aimed at getting both believers and nonbelievers to give blood. This particularly happens in the month of Muharram (the first month in the Islamic calendar), the month in which Hussain's blood was spilled.

I met a community leader from Glasgow, a man in his sixties, and an active figure behind SABS. On the SABS website, there are plenty of images of him with the First Minister of Scotland, other Members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs), nurses in SNBTS, and Christian, Jewish and Sikh community leaders, with a small Scottish flag in his hand. The Scottish flag features a white X-shaped cross, representing the cross of Saint Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, on a sky-blue background. During my interview, in 2018, the community leader showed me this small Scottish flag, and told me that not only does he carry it with him all the time, but that he is proud that he has sought and obtained blessing (*tabarruk*) for the same flag in his pilgrimages to Mecca and Karbala. Knowing that I am an Iranian citizen, he said with deep regret that he still has one mission to accomplish: that is to travel to the city of Mashhad in the northeast of Iran and visit the holy shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth of the Shi'i Imams, to obtain his blessing for the flag. Evidently, that Scottish flag is for him a sacred and blessed object.

I asked him if he supported Scottish independence. His answer was positive, as it is for many other Scottish Shias. He said that even the idea of establishing an organization such as SABS is related to broader transformations in Scottish identity. The turning point, he said, was in 2010 when a member of the Scottish National Party (SNP) approached the current SABS members:

In 2010, I realized that Scotland is going through an identity change. The Scottish National Party won the election. When they won, they were more outreaching to all minority groups and we took the opportunity to engage with the Scottish parliament through working with the SNP. With that we were able to engage with the rest of the political establishment: the Labour, the Conservatives, the Greens and others, who then realized that the Shias have their own [independent] identity.

Scottish society has experienced several boosts to its identity in the past twenty years, from the establishment of the Holyrood parliament in 1999, to the rise of the SNP in 2007 and 2011 elections, to the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014, and finally the revival of discussions about independence after the Brexit referendum. Scotland predominantly voted against Brexit (Sturgeon 2016), and uncertainty around the consequences of what is perceived to be an English political project has affected Scottish political feelings.

The most noticeable characteristic distinguishing Scotland from other European societies is the absence of nationalist, right-wing parties such as the *Vlaams Blok* (Belgium) and *Rassemblement National* (France). Rosie and Bond, in their study entitled *Routes into Scottishness?* (2006), observed that regardless of their political positions, "all the parties in the Scottish Parliament stress their belief in an inclusive Scottishness determined by factors such as birthplace and residency rather than more exclusive determinants like ethnicity and parentage" (Rosie and Bond 2006: 142). The authors also show that seventy percent of Scottish respondents confirmed the Scottish identity of a nonwhite person living in Scotland who speaks with a Scottish accent and who claims to be Scottish. Interestingly, the percentage seeing people who were born in England as Scottish is much lower. Only forty-four percent of Scots considered the English-born, in similar conditions, to be Scottish (Rosie and Bond 2006: 154).

In fact, there is a mutual engagement between Scottish politicians and minorities. With the assistance of SNP members of parliament and government, the Shia community has found an opportunity to reconstruct their image, and negotiate their identity, particularly through contributions to the SNBTS. This has led to greater political recognition of their community and their achievements. The Shia community leader from SABS also told me that "When we were children, what we learnt about Shia faith was all what our mothers showed us in our homes. There was no community center where we can go." But by 2018 everything was different:

> After eight years, through blood donation and many other events the Shias of Scotland have awoken the rest of the Scottish society. They are showing the humanitarian and loving side of the Shias which has always been passed down from generation to generation by the love of Ahlul Bayt.

This is a very important aspect of identity negotiation, because it lets Shia minorities be seen and represented by themselves, not through the mediation of Sunni Muslims. Moreover, it allows younger Scottish Shia Muslims to see their identity as unique, yet related to other Muslims and non-Muslim Scottish citizens. Identity conjures up a unique matrix between particularity and universality. The altruistic civic engagement of the minority, expressed in a gift relationship with broader society, helps them achieve political recognition in the midst of a transformation in national identity, which will help the Shia minority to negotiate the uncertainty and fear of the post-Brexit era.

I tend to highlight the power of religious feelings, harnessed to defend the dignity of the minority in turbulent times. The white cross of Saint Andrew and the red blood of Imam Hussain are two symbols, one of the patron saint of a nation and the other of the patron saint of a minority. Through organized civic engagement, SABS has offered its members a unique, yet universally valid, combination of the two. This has been encouraged and recognized by

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SNP politicians. This mutuality establishes a successful pattern of engagement between the politicians and minorities, allowing the manufacture of calming and collaborative religio-national sentiments, to counter the side effects of the anti-migrant feelings that have flooded into politics after/through Brexit.

Acknowledgments

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