

Trust, representation and communication are key to increasing engagement between the British Muslim community and the government

The ongoing situations in Afghanistan and Iraq and high profile debates on multiculturalism raise questions about British foreign policy and the support of British Muslims for the government's overseas policy decisions. [Robert Mason](#) and [Sherry Sayed Gadelrab](#) examine opinions of the British Muslim community around political engagement and how stronger links between this community and the coalition government could be developed.



How engaged are British Muslims with British politics? The Iraq War, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) – with particular reference to British operations in the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AfPak) theatre – Islamophobia following 9/11, and ongoing debates about multiculturalism, integration and radicalisation, pose questions about levels of political engagement by British Muslims. We have looked at the British Muslim community response to British foreign policy and the lessons that the coalition government could learn about broader community engagement.



For young British Muslims, [Iraq](#) has had the biggest effect on their political engagement. The contemporary nature of the conflict and the daily media coverage it generates, as well as family members it may involve, are immediate reasons for this. There is also a more widely held view that these conflicts represent a double standard in British foreign policy characterised by misleading intelligence, poor timing, and a low threat. Interviewees have told us that they believe there is a “trust deficit” in British foreign policy that is going to take time to fix. AfPak is also seen as an area of contention, since the controversial [remarks made by David Cameron about terror groups](#) in Pakistan in July 2010, the impact felt by British military operations in Afghanistan, and the overall feeling that new airport security checks were inherently Islamophobic and/or racist.

The way foreign policy is formulated is itself a bar to British Muslim community engagement with government. As [Tony Blair](#) implies in *A Journey*, getting any community on board with future British foreign policy will be especially difficult if the ‘...paradigms of [government] opinion that are formed, harden fast and then become virtually unchallengeable’ persist into the coalition government. There is still potential for change and space for re-engagement with mainstream British Muslim organisations through creating new communication channels but up to now, the government has been perceived to be responsible for this lack of consultation with the grass roots of British Muslim society. This has been recognised as a problem since at least 2007, when [International Development Minister, Shahid Malik](#), said that the government needed to organise itself better around Muslim engagement, especially in empowering young Muslims and ensuring their voices are heard.

Who is willing to engage is therefore paramount in the search for community-government cohesion. So far, the government has been more willing to engage with the [Quilliam Foundation](#) than any other British Muslim organisation, yet this relationship is overshadowing voices which might be more critical of British foreign policy. The space left to engage with government on contentious issues has thus been drastically reduced which means there are less incentives for Muslims who might be politically aware to become politically engaged. Only [47 per cent of British Muslims](#) were expected to vote in the 2005 general election, as opposed to 68 per cent of the general electorate. Declining political engagement particularly amongst British Muslim youth has been identified as a problem by the [Federation of Student Islamic Societies \(FOSIS\)](#), which is trying to encourage British Muslim students to become aware of the political issues that impact on them and what they can do to make their voices heard in response. The difficulty is that British Muslim youth are still being affected by the media furore after potential violent extremists such as [Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab](#) attended a UK university.

Negative media coverage isn't the only challenge though, since there are also differences within the education system. British Muslim youth are more likely to [take issue with UK foreign policy](#), and the need to address cultural tensions and reconciliation, in comparison with those youth from deprived areas that are more concerned about being heard in British society. In order for young British Muslims to have more of a say in British politics, two things need to happen: there needs to be a move from the suspect youth mindset back to helping set the [political] agenda and a greater push for active political participation supported by government. Active political participation presupposes a solid number of Muslim MPs from which to draw

inspiration. The number of British [Muslim MPs did double to 8](#) in the May 2010 election, out of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. However, the number would have to double again in order for British Muslim MP numbers to be anywhere near representative.

The problem is that British Muslim MPs are ‘...mostly backbenchers with [little influence over policy making](#)’ who are restricted by party control from playing an active role in decisive policy debates on salient issues that deeply affect British Muslims, like...the war on Iraq.’ That’s because all British Muslim MPs spoke out against the Iraq war: including Mohammad Sarwar, Khalid Mahmoud, Lords Amhed and Patel, and Baroness Uddin and although they could be seen to have indirect influence on government thinking through meetings, including with Tony Blair after the 7/7 attacks, their direct influence was limited.

Despite obstacles hindering Muslims’ real engagement in British politics and the poor performance of some Muslim MPs, we can’t claim that Muslims are passive in their political engagement. The percentage of British Muslims supporting Labour fell by half, from 75 per cent in 2001, to 32 per cent in November 2004, blamed on Blair’s support of the GWOT; thereby making their own dissatisfaction felt through the ballot box. British Muslims have traditionally voted for Labour, but the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have [shifted more of the Muslim vote](#) (41 per cent of the total votes) to the Lib Dems as opposed to the Conservatives (16 per cent of the total votes) since they supported the two wars. Across the party, criticism of two unpopular wars against Islamic countries and counter-terrorism legislation that unfairly discriminated against Muslims [helped the Lib Dems gain a massive increase](#) in support in a YouElect poll carried out in April 2010.

Although British Muslims are not a monolithic community, their participation is likely to remain highly informed by a range of issues – first and foremost the way the government contextualises them in the [Prevent review](#). Then the extent of FCO outreach activities; the greater detail, differentiation and understanding in parliament of what Islamist politics are and which groups should be engaged with, and what more can be done in this respect; and the extent to which British Muslim MPs are able to advance whilst reflecting the concerns of both British Muslims and the wider British public. On the British Muslim community side, a greater effort is needed to communicate on behalf of a diverse British Muslim community, to actively participate in the mainstream political process and lobby within it effectively, whilst presenting a coherent view of why their voice should be considered an asset during the process of foreign policy formulation. In this way, more can be done to mend fences, avoid further alienation of communities, and push for greater civic engagement. Surely, that would be a large part of the big society realised.