



Remembering the Brave

The Muslim contribution to
Britain's Armed Forces

MCB

A special report by the
Muslim Council of Britain



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An introduction by Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari MBE
Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain

Muslims have been with Britain in good times and bad: contributing to its welfare, standing and defence, and protecting the values of justice and freedom that makes this country what it is today. This short pamphlet outlines the long history of Muslims in the Armed Forces. It also covers the current contribution of British Muslims to the UK military. Though Muslims are underrepresented in the Armed Forces, the number is growing and their sacrifice is deep.

In this publication, the Muslim Council of Britain acknowledges that the operations which the Armed Forces are engaged in today are deeply controversial. But that is not simply a concern amongst Muslims, it is shared by other British people also.

Nevertheless we are all proud to be part of a nation that actively encourages dissent and scrutiny of our government while maintaining a strong support for the welfare of the men and women who are sent to fight on our behalf. We are also fortunate to be in a country that aims to apply higher standards to the conduct of our Armed Forces. That value is coupled by strong civic and

democratic traditions that allow us to debate all these issues in freedom and without fear.

This document highlights past polling data suggesting that British Muslims tend to take the sophisticated enough stand to support our troops while dissenting from the government's decision to send those troops to controversial conflicts.

With thanks to Professor Humayun Ansari of the University of London, we also highlight how, in the past, Muslims often took part in conflicts that were contested in the Muslim world.

In addition, the document examines the Muslim Council of Britain's campaign to provide better welfare for those Muslims enlisted in the Armed Forces.

The Muslim Council of Britain issues a necessary reminder to British Muslims and society at large of the Muslim community's enduring contribution to the nation's Armed Forces.



As we approach Remembrance Sunday, this publication is dedicated as a form of tribute to the heroism and bravery of our Muslim soldiers, particularly in those just wars of national survival.

Amongst the countless First and Second World War memorials around the world are emblazoned Muslim names, which represent the tens of thousands of Muslims who have stood as part of this nation, who fought bravely, and who fell defending this country in corners near and far all around the world. The poignancy of this should not be lost on any of us, especially Muslims who have now made Britain their home.

In 2008, an exhibition at London City Hall entitled 'We Were There', provided many examples of sacrifice, highlighting how over one million men from the ethnic minorities served in the Great War, with a very large number drawn from Muslim villages of the Punjab. In World War II the Indian Army alone provided 2.5 million men.

In recent years, our national discourse has skirted around collective notions of 'Britishness'. Remembering the shared sacrifices of our armed forces who came from all faith groups and racial backgrounds can help us to unite around a 'Britishness' that has optimism and confidence about the future while being rooted in the shared and divergent histories of our country.

Remembrance Sunday is a formal recognition of our achievements as a country, it gives us a moment to pause and consider how this country has evolved since the last wide-scale sacrifice of the Second World War. Today we have come to cherish values that uphold freedoms, diversity, human rights and the rule of law.

If the experiences of Remembrance Sunday, and the sense of unified national moment mean anything to us as a nation, then they must mean that we emphatically reject the malignant cancer of hatred and social division.

Names of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Christian men who died serving the Imperial Camel Corps in World War I. The names form part of a memorial to the Corp at the Victoria Embankment Gardens, London.

Proving Loyalty?

Muslims and Britain's Armed Forces

By Professor Humayun Ansari OBE

Director, Centre for Minority Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London

The British Army's recent operations in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan raise important questions about the role of British Muslim service personnel in it.

Recent well-publicised threats to behead one of their number as a protest against their having enlisted have highlighted, for instance, the need for British Muslim soldiers to feel confident that their religion is not being compromised by them being part of the British Army. Conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq raise complex questions of national identity and loyalty; taking part in such campaigns can be quite challenging.

But, it is also increasingly clear that people have multiple identities and that at any given time one identity, and indeed one loyalty, may take priority over another. Thus, the commitment to fight for one's country becomes above all else understandable.

This has certainly been the case historically. We discover that in the

armies of the British Empire, particularly in India, over a period of perhaps 200 years, there were literally tens of thousands of Muslims who fought on the side of the British. From the early Nineteenth century at least, with British involvement in South Asia steadily growing, Muslim soldiers started to represent an important element in the ranks of those Indians who joined the various regiments of the British India Army, fighting on behalf of, first, Company and, later, Crown. The Punjabi and Pathan Mussalmans (Muslims) came to be recognised as the backbone of the British Indian Army; they made up about a third of that army.

With the consolidation of Britain's empire, Muslim recruits continued to provide essential manpower, fighting in Twentieth century wars on Britain's behalf. Indeed, between 1914 and 1918 the British Army was able to retain the loyalty and commitment of these earlier Muslim soldiers without any serious difficulty. It seems that it succeeded in doing so, at least partly, by incorporating elements of their



religion into the rituals and ceremonies of the regiments concerned.

There is ample evidence to suggest that thousands of Muslims loyally fought and died on Britain's behalf, but their sacrifice has been rarely acknowledged. Only now is the heroic story of how Muslims from Britain's far flung empire held the line during the First World War beginning to emerge out of their letters written in the trenches of the Western Front in France. We now know that at the start of the First World War, within the first months, the British forces took a pounding; reinforcements were desperately needed. Two divisions of the Indian Army were mobilised and Indian soldiers deployed on the Western Front. Though they played a crucial part in holding the line, displaying great determination, Indian soldiers received scant attention in accounts of the War. Why they fought so bravely was because they simply wanted to win honour on the battlefields. Honour – *izzat* – was very important to Muslims; it was deeply embedded in these

soldiers' psyche; one wrote, 'you did things which were right in your point of view even if it meant death'; the British tradition of absolute loyalty to the regiment dovetailed with the value of *izzat*; loyalty to the regiment was paramount. and these Muslims were convinced that only in the army any *izzat* could be acquired (Mahamod Mazafar Khan, 19th Lancers – France, Oct 1917). For *izzat*, if necessary, they were prepared to lay down their lives. To be sure, they were also motivated to join the army to satisfy their basic needs – many came from poor families. This gave rise to a relationship with the British often referred to as 'tasting the salt' – the salt of Britain. So, when wars broke out, it was time for them to repay; for Jemadar Shamsheer Ali Khan (34th Poona Horse) in April 1917 in France 'it is time for showing valour'; this value of loyalty was greatly appreciated by the British officers who led them – indeed, those who led the Indian regiments immersed themselves in the cultures of India and every effort was made to facilitate Muslim troops in the fulfillment of the requirements of their faith

Indian Muslim soldiers attend Eid prayers at the old East London Mosque, 446-448 Commercial Road in 1942

“These men died fighting British rights and liberties and the nation’s most cherished values.”

– for example, ‘which direction to pray in and bury the dead’ (Dafadar Fazi Khan, 19th Lancers – France, Oct 1916). British officers were careful to observe arrangements for key religious rituals like Ramadan (or *Ramazan*) – Havildar Ghufra Khan of the 129th Baluchis, wrote to Subedar Zaman Khan (4 August 1915), ‘arrangements to keep Ramazan are excellent’; In August 1917, Abdul Ali Khan (6th Cavalry in France) informs how Eid was celebrated on the battlefield – ‘all the Muslims of their divisions have their prayer together; about 1,500 hundred men assembled and offered their prayers for the King’.

There developed a tremendous bond, attachment, between officers and their men, further reinforcing loyalty. The real test of Muslim loyalty to Britain came when, in November 1915, the majority of the Indian Army was withdrawn from France to fight in Mesopotamia – Germany’s Turkish ally, the Ottoman *Khalifa* (Caliph), presented fundamental dilemmas – Muslims troops arriving there had to face Turkish Muslims in combat. What must have caused them deep anguish was the fact that a year earlier, on 14 November, 1914, the Sheikh-ul-Islam in Istanbul had declared Jihad on behalf of the Ottoman government, urging Muslims all over the world – including in the Allied countries – to take up arms against Britain, Russia and France – ‘when the 15th Lancers reached Basra they were ordered to fight Turks... they, however, declined to take up

arms against their brother Muslims and asked to be sent to some other theatre of war; orders to fight near holy sites of Karbala and Baghdad were too much for the Muslim members of the 15th Lancers, almost the entire regiment refused to march’ (Fateh Ullah, June 1916). However, even at such challenging times many Muslim soldiers in the British India Army did take part in those battles.

British Muslims supported the war effort in quite rational terms: a resolution, proposed by a leading Muslim convert Lord Headley, seconded by the imam of the Woking Mosque, Maulvi Sadr-ud-Din and unanimously passed by the British Muslim Society in September 1914, expressed ‘delight to find that their co-religionists in Islam were ... carrying into effect the principles of Islam as inculcated by the holy Prophet Mohammed ... freely pouring out their life blood in defence of honour and for the love of truth and justice’.

While largely forgotten until now, at the time, Muslim sacrifices were acknowledged with gratitude. Wounded Muslim soldiers fighting in France were treated in special hospitals along the south coast in Brighton, Bournemouth and Brockenhurst. Those among them who died received burial rites according to their religion. The first burial in this country of an Indian Muslim soldier who succumbed to wounds received while serving in France took place in the Brook-



wood Cemetery in December 1914. Floral tributes were placed on the coffin by local Muslim converts. In 1915 the burial of an Indian Muslim officer took place. At the request of the imam of the Woking Mosque, the local commanding officer detailed fifty soldiers, headed by an officer, to attend the funeral in order to pay military honours to this gallant Indian soldier. Three rounds were discharged and, in a fusion of Muslim practices with British military traditions, the “Last Post” was sounded by the bugle boys. The Chairman of the local Urban Council deemed it ‘an honour to have men who fell as a result of the war buried in the district’.

The scale of the sacrifice

By the end of the First World War in 1918, India had sent over one million volunteer troops to fight side by side with the British. Muslims were disproportionately involved. They saw action in France and Belgium; in Gallipoli and Salonica; in East Africa; in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia. Over 47,000 were killed and 65,000 were wounded.

During the Second World War over 2.5 million men and women from the Indian sub-continent, formed the largest volunteer force ever seen in history. They served in Africa, Burma, Malaya and in the Middle East. Again over 24,000 were killed and 65,000 were wounded. As in the First World War, hundreds of military awards were won. These included thirty Victoria Crosses, the highest award for bravery.

As Remembrance Day approaches our thoughts turn to observance of commemoration of all those members of the British armed forces who lost their lives during the wars. Special services will be held and wreaths laid at war memorials throughout the country and at London’s Cenotaph. But how many of us will be aware of the magnificent role that thousands of Muslims played in those wars?

How widely, for instance, is it known that more than 1.3 million Indian soldiers served during the First World War, a large proportion of them, Muslim? That they suffered heavy casualties – 53,486 died, 64,350 wounded and 3,769 were missing or taken?

The contribution of the Indian army to the Second World War was even greater. By 1945, 2.5 million men had fought in the war. Again, a substantial number were Muslim. The price paid was heavy – 36,092 volunteers were killed or reported missing, 64,354 were wounded, and almost 80,000 had to endure captivity as PoWs.

Moreover, Muslims employed in the British merchant navy, over 50,000 by the beginning of World War I, also took a heavy toll. During the First World War 3,427 Indian crew members in British merchant ships were killed and 1,200 were taken prisoners. In World War II – 6,600 killed and 1,022 wounded, plus 1,217 PoWs.

Picture courtesy of Imperial War Museum

At Tower Hill, half a mile from Aldgate, the heart of the Bangladeshi community in Britain, there is a poignant monument to the men of the British merchant Navy who lost their lives in the two World wars. Among the names of the 26,833 merchant seamen killed in the 1939-1945 war, there are names of Muslims: Miah, Latif Ali, Uddin. Just a few of the 6,600 lascars and 1,022 wounded working in the most dangerous part of the ship. Their sacrifice for 'King and Country' is recorded and honoured in bronze.

These men died fighting defending British rights and liberties and the nation's most cherished values. Their ultimate contribution reflected the commitment and unity of heroic proportions and deserves to be honoured in a fitting manner.

And one particular Muslim woman's contribution symbolises this heroism more than anything else. Noor Inayat Khan (1914-1944) – daughter of Inayat Khan, a sufi musician from Bhopal in India - joined in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in November 1940. Later she was recruited by the Special Operations Executive during World War II. She was dropped in occupied France in 1943 to gather military intelligence. Betrayed to the Germans she was arrested in October 1943 and transferred to the Dachau concentration camp. There she was tortured, but showing immense courage refused to divulge the secret codes. Having attempted escape twice, she was declared

'highly dangerous and shackled in chains. In 1944 she was transferred to Dachau Concentration Camp and executed. She was one of the few people to be awarded the George Cross as well as Croix de Guerre with Gold Star, the highest British and French awards for non-combat gallantry.

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The Armed Forces

Reflecting Modern Britain

The Muslim contribution today

There are an estimated four hundred Muslims serving in Her Majesty's Armed Forces, and, according to the Ministry of Defence, that number is rising.

At a recent function for Muslim service personnel, the Chief of the General Staff (the professional head of the British Army), General Sir David Richards said Muslim soldiers, sailors and airmen were “serving the United Kingdom with such distinction today and I have no doubt, in the future”.

The Armed Forces and the Muslim community

Though the number of Muslim recruits to the Armed Forces is rising, the number is still too small to reflect the size and depth of Britain's Muslim community. This is partly attributed to contentious operations that the United Kingdom is engaged around the world.

But it is wrong to believe that there is a widespread Muslim antipathy towards our armed forces.

The actual picture is more complex and demonstrates the sophisticated

choices that British Muslims, like their fellow countrymen, can make in supporting our troops while censuring the politicians who send them into harms way.

This was exemplified in June 2009 when the polling organisation ICM surveyed British Muslim attitudes on our Armed Forces' service in Afghanistan. The ICM-run survey of 500 British Muslims over the age of 16, found that 78% said they opposed Taliban attacks against UK and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan and three-quarters of those surveyed said it was wrong for the West to intervene militarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

These nuanced views are possible because of the strong civic and democratic traditions that allow us to debate all these issues in freedom and without fear in this country. Loyalty does not mean the suspension of our critical faculties and failure to question our contested international engagements.

Despite the extremely difficult foreign policy pursued by the government which appears to



have a sharp and adverse focus on countries with majority Muslim populations, Muslims in the United Kingdom have shown commitment to the country by being the second largest faith group after the Christian faith in the Forces.

Recruitment within the community may be low, but the Muslim Council of Britain also argues that this is also because of general difficulties that the armed forces have in recruitment and retention.

Institutional Muslim support for the Armed Forces

As has been demonstrated in this publication, there is a strong and long-standing association between Muslim communities and British Armed Forces. Our commemoration of Remembrance Sunday should solemnly celebrate the immense sacrifices made by the soldiers, sailors and airmen, many of whom were Muslims, killed in the First and Second World Wars.

The Muslim Council of Britain recognises this link and respects the professionalism and dedication of Britain's Armed Forces. The MCB has worked with all three Armed Services to encourage British



Muslims to serve their country. We hope that we will see increased numbers of British Muslims taking up positions in our Armed Forces just as they have done so in other sectors of our society.

For this to be successful, however, it is imperative that the high reputation of our armed forces is zealously protected. It means also that we renew our commitment to higher standards. We should ensure that the actions of a few does not diminish the overall expectations of our armed forces to abide by international laws of war and uphold fundamental human rights.

The MCB has consistently campaigned since its inception that the UK's Armed Forces should truly reflect the religious and cultural diversity of present day British society. In turn, military leaders have engaged positively with faith communities, and recognise that there is a long way to go to ensure an inclusive service culture.

Securing the welfare of Muslims in the Armed Forces

As part of its engagement with government and military leaders, the Muslim Council of Britain has

Left
Judge Khurshid Drabu, the MCB Advisor on Constitutional affairs, who is also the Muslim member of the Ministry of Defence's Religious Advisory Panel with the former Chief of the Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Glen Torpy and civil liberties campaigner Shami Chakrabarti

Right:
General Sir David Richards with Group Captain Ul-Haq, Imam Asim Hafiz and Corporal Mohsin Ali Mughal at the launch of the Armed Forces Muslim Association
[Picture: SAC Stewart Paterson, Crown Copyright/MOD 2009]

‘Muslims in the United Kingdom have shown commitment to the country by being the second largest faith group after the Christian faith in the Forces.’



Left:
Secretary General Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari attending a Remembrance Sunday ceremony

Photos right
Former MCB Secretary General Sir Iqbal Sacranie with former Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir Michael Walker at an MCB event encouraging greater engagement with the Muslim community

lobbied hard for the spiritual and welfare needs of Muslim service personnel to be catered for.

Many of challenges that face serving Muslims are no different to those faced by any other soldier. However, it is also important to cater for the spiritual and religious needs of Muslims just as for servicemen from other faith backgrounds.

The MCB welcomes initiatives by our armed forces towards greater recognition of the needs of their Muslim recruits. We hope that such initiatives will also allow increased numbers of Muslims to take up positions in our armed forces.

As a direct consequence of the MCB's work with the Armed forces, the Ministry of Defence in 2005 officially worked with the MCB for the recruitment and retention of the first ever Imam (Civilian Chaplain) for the Tri Service.

Conclusion

British Muslims join hands remembering the brave at a time when current operations raises complex questions of national identity, personal loyalty and what it means to be British.



Imam Asim Hafiz, the first-ever Muslim chaplain to the British armed forces, acknowledges the hesitation some Muslims may feel in enlisting: He encapsulates common dilemmas thus: “At the moment, because our current conflicts are in Muslim countries it could be more challenging for a Muslim to join the armed forces.”

“Another challenge though is how the Iraq and Afghanistan war are perceived by Muslim communities in Britain. It can be hard to join the Armed Forces and there is concern as to how you will be received back in the community. But I would like to stress this is no different to Catholics serving in Northern Ireland. This is not an issue isolated to Muslims.”

“What we have to understand is that everybody has a variety of identities that makes them an individual – it could be their faith, it could be their culture, it could be their job: at different times one identity might take priority over another.”

“To empower the Muslim community to contribute towards achieving a cohesive, just and successful British society.”

The Muslim Council of Britain is a national representative Muslim umbrella body with over 500 affiliated national, regional and local organisations, mosques, charities and schools.

The MCB is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole; encouraging individual Muslims and Muslim organisations to play a full and participatory role in public life.

The MCB has been built on consultation, co-operation and co-ordination among Muslim institutions and concerned Muslims throughout Britain.

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Cover photo: Indian Muslim soldiers attend Eid prayers at the old East London Mosque, 446-448 Commercial Road in 1942