



BRITISH MUSLIMS: MOSQUES

Mosques provide space for daily prayer and other community gatherings. This guide provides an overview of mosques in Britain including what they are for, and how they are governed.



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KEY POINTS

- Approximately 85 per cent of British Muslims are Sunni; 15 per cent are Shi’a.
- In 2017, there were 1,825 mosques in the UK. The majority were associated with South Asian reform movements (72 per cent). Drawing on Middle Eastern traditions, nine per cent were Salafi, with three per cent representing mainstream Arab or African Sunni Islam. Around six per cent were run by and for Shi’as (including Ismailis). The remainder were non-sectarian prayer rooms.
- In 2017, 72 per cent of mosques had facilities for women, though the nature and extent of these varied.
- Mosques provide space for daily prayer, the weekly *Jum’a* and other community gatherings. They offer *Qur’an* classes for children, and the larger ones host *Shari’ah* Councils.
- Internal mosque disputes concern management and election issues. At times, conflicts also take place between neighbouring mosques, or mosques of different sects.
- Mosques have become a target for hate crimes.
- Although many mosques are religiously conservative, few have been linked to jihadi extremism, a key exception being Finsbury Park Mosque in north London.
- The suitability, training and standards of mosque leadership have been discussed within Muslim communities and by Government with a review published in 2010 on Muslim Faith Leaders.

MOSQUES IN THE UK: NUMBERS AND PROFILE

Data collected on Islam and mosques in Britain by Mehmood Naqshbandi shows that, by September 2017, there were 1,825 mosques (*masjid*) in the UK, an increase from 1,640 in 2015. Around 600 of these were registered with the Charity Commission. In addition, there were a number of hired halls, chaplaincy rooms, temporary premises and mosques under construction.

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Reflecting global trends, some 85 per cent of British Muslims are Sunni, with the remainder Shi'a. In 2017, around six per cent of the UK's mosques were run by and for Shi'as (three per cent by Twelver Shi'as, and a further three per cent by Ismailis and Bohras).

In terms of mosque affiliation and attendance, Sunni Muslims have organised principally around sectarian groupings that have their roots in 19th and early 20th century reform movements from South Asia and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East. The importance of these traditions can still be witnessed in the UK's mosque profile. In 2017, in addition to Shi'a mosques, 41 per cent of mosques were Deobandi, 24 per cent were Barelwi, with a further four per cent representing other Sufi traditions, and nearly three per cent linked to Jama'at-i Islami and its later manifestations.

Drawing on Middle Eastern reform traditions, over nine per cent of mosques were Salafi, with three per cent representing mainstream Arab or African Sunni Islam. Most of the remainder were non-denominational Muslim prayer rooms, in universities, hospitals, airports and other public places.

In Bradford, the first mosque, founded in 1959, served all Muslims in the city. Like many mosques,

even today, it was established in a converted house. However, as the Muslim community grew, separate mosques were opened for Deobandi followers from West Pakistan, Bangladesh and Gujarat in India, for Barelwis, Ahmadiyyas, Shi'a, and Muslim university students of all backgrounds (see Glossary below). By 1989, there were 31 mosques of different persuasions in the city; today there are over 90. Bradford is home to the Al-Jamia Suffa-Tul-Islam Grand Mosque which can accommodate up to 8,000 for prayers, the largest in the country. Founded in 1983 by Shaykh Muhammad Habib-ur-Rehman Mahboobi, a Sufi Master, it was housed in what had once been a large textile mill until 2012 when the new purpose-built mosque was opened.

Birmingham's 162 mosques include two of the largest in the country, each accommodating over 6,000 individuals for prayer, Birmingham Central Mosque (Deobandi tradition) and Central Jamia Mosque Ghamkol Sharif (Barelwi). These large mosques are not typical, however, as about half of all the UK's mosques have a capacity of under 300.

Yemeni Arab Muslims, the community with the longest history in the UK, still cluster in areas where their forebears settled more than a century ago, in ports and major industrial cities. Sheffield, Liverpool and Cardiff, for example, have mosques and cultural centres managed by and for Yemeni Muslims. More recent arrivals, including many Somali Muslims, generally attend the mosques of longer-standing Muslim minorities, though there are now dedicated Somali mosques in London, Manchester and Leicester.

Seventy-two per cent of mosques provide facilities for women, although these may vary. However, only 49 per cent of the largest group (Deobandi) do so. All Shi'a mosques and 96 per cent of Salafi ones have women's facilities. Even where women are given access, gender separation often results in them being allocated inferior space and resources to men. Women's attendance, however, is optional, whereas men's is obligatory.

WHAT ARE MOSQUES FOR?

Mosques provide space for the five daily prayers (*salah*), the weekly communal prayer (*jum'a*) and for other prayer gatherings, at times of Ramadan and Eid. The only formal requirement is that a mosque be ritually clean. Calligraphy and book shelves for copies of the Qur'an may be present, but there is an absence of pictures and images. A series of clocks will show the prayer times. Provision is made for worshippers to wash (*wudu*).

In the main prayer space, there is no seating just an open hall for prayers to be performed. There is a mihrab or alcove, the traditional purpose of which was to amplify the *imam's* voice during prayers. This also fulfils the important function of indicating the direction of prayer, towards Mecca. Those attending *salah* or *jum'a* set out their prayer mats facing it. Adjacent to the *mihrab* is a *mimbar* or pulpit, from which the Friday *khutbah* or sermon is delivered. For ceremonial reasons, the *khutbah* is given in Arabic, although a talk in the local language is a longstanding tradition from the early days of Islam. Although it is obligatory for a call to prayer (*adhan*) to be made before *salah*, this can be done simply and without amplification.

The majority of mosques offer Qur'an classes (*maktab* or *madrasah*) where Qur'anic Arabic recitation and Islamic studies are taught, and where young Muslims imbibe the community's religious norms and values. These classes are generally held after school and at weekends. Questions have been raised by Muslims and non-Muslims alike about the pressure of having to attend additional classes at the end of the school day, about rote learning, the use of punishment, and the lack of teacher qualifications. An Association of Muslim Supplementary Schools was set up in 2008 to support and represent these schools and to raise standards.

Many of the larger mosques also host *Shari'ah* Councils. First introduced in the 1980s, their legal services include the reconciliation of family disputes, divorce certification, and the production of expert opinions for cases in civil courts.

In addition to their religious purposes, mosques in the UK have always had community and political functions, with *imams* having a role as local and sometimes regional and national brokers and representatives. This was particularly important prior to the formation of national representative bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain

Most mosques welcome visitors, for example during Islam Awareness Week or as part of educational or interfaith programmes. 'Visiting My Mosque' day is an annual occasion when mosques all over the UK are open to visitors, providing opportunities for them to learn more about the religion of Islam and the everyday lives of their Muslim neighbours, as well as to see Muslims from a different perspective to that normally presented in the media.



CASE STUDY: A LOCAL MOSQUE IN LEEDS

The Al-Madina Masjid was founded in the early 1970s by local Pakistani and Indian Muslims. Originally situated in two small houses, as the Muslim population grew it became necessary to extend, and then to build a new mosque. The Makkah Masjid, as it is now known, was opened in Burley, Leeds, in 2003. Like many other mosques in the UK, it was made possible through the generous donations of Muslims, and was built only after a series of planning applications, rejections and negotiations with the local council. On land that had once belonged to the Christadelphian Church, Makkah Masjid is a purpose-built mosque on three floors which can accommodate over 2,700 people, both men and women. In addition to daily prayers, the weekly *jum'a* and prayer gatherings during Ramadan and Eid, it co-ordinates funerals, marriages and conversions (the repetition of the *Shahadah* by new Muslims). Prayer times are displayed on its website.

Serving an area inhabited by Muslims and Hindus of South Asian descent, and a large number of university students, the mosque is outward-looking, hosting interfaith events, and school and university visits. Run by a management committee, and part of Leeds Muslim Council, it is led by Imam Qari Asim, a solicitor by profession, and prayer leader at the mosque.

The mosque's website is regularly updated with posts and tweets about Muslims in the UK, their history, problems, achievements and initiatives, particularly those of young people and women. Issues of mosque security and hate crime are taken seriously, with the mosque working with the police and other faith bodies to provide guidance. Other resources include a step-by-step guide to the Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*), responses to questions about grooming and sex abuse, information on 'Visiting My Mosque' day, a radio discussion on LBC about what Muslims are doing to combat extremism, and videos of talks by Qari Asim and others.

MOSQUE CONFLICTS AND EXTREMISM

Hate crimes have become an increasing problem for mosques in the UK in recent years, as a report from the Press Association revealed:

Hate crimes targeting mosques across the UK more than doubled between 2016 and 2017, new figures have revealed. Police forces recorded 110 hate crimes directed at Muslim places of worship between March and July this year, up from 47 over the same six month period in 2016... [R]acist abuse, acts of vandalism at mosques and bomb threats feature heavily among the reported hate crimes. Smashed windows at mosques, damage to cars parked outside and graffiti were all recorded along with physical assaults on Muslims on their way in

or out of the buildings, two cases of arson and two complaints of bacon being left on mosque doors.
(Rachel Roberts, in *The Independent Online*, October 2017)

Historical research on UK mosques has shown that, in addition to complaints from non-Muslims about planning, parking and prayer times, disputes between rival factions in local areas were not uncommon. Some witnessed deep rivalries between Barelwis and Deobandis over control of a mosque. There have also been protests by Sunni Muslims about the presence of Ahmadiyya centres (some Muslims do not accept the Islamic legitimacy of the Ahmadiyya). Some Shi'a mosques have been defaced with Sunni-inspired graffiti. Mosque protests and intimidation by far-right groups also have a history in urban Britain.

CASE STUDY: THE FINSBURY PARK MOSQUE

Originally known as the North London Central Mosque, it first opened in 1988 to serve a growing North London Muslim population, both North African and South Asian in ethnic origin. In 1997 it came under the control of Abu Hamza al-Masri, an Egyptian-born mosque leader (*imam*) who had fought in Afghanistan from 1991-93 and had visited Bosnia during the war there. He founded 'Supporters of Shariah', an organisation which provided support for refugees and Mujahideen from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir and Palestine. It drew in young men from the UK and Europe, introducing them to the ideology of al-Qa'ida and the Taliban.

From 1997 to 2003 – when it was raided by police in connection with the Wood Green Ricin plot, and Abu Hamza was dismissed from his post by the Charity Commission – the mosque was the focus of an extremist network. In addition to the ricin plotters, an Algerian-Briton terrorist involved in the Russian Beslan massacre was a frequent attendee. Three of the 7/7 bombers, Siddique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, and Jermaine Lindsay, had attended the mosque and listened to Abu Hamza's preaching. Five of those involved in the failed 21 July plot later in 2005 had been trained by Muhammed Hamid, the radical leader thought to have taken over from Abu Hamza after the latter's arrest in 2004.

A significant proportion of those who later went on to plan or commit terrorist offences at home and abroad have been linked to the Finsbury Park Mosque in some capacity or another, but it is also the case that many of those who worshipped there over the years showed no signs of having been radicalised. In 2005, control of the mosque was handed over to the Muslim Association of Britain. Since then its aims have been both to provide a space for local Muslims to worship, and to focus on community and interfaith initiatives.

The events that occurred at Finsbury Park Mosque have fed into a broader debate among Muslims and in Government about mosque leadership.

In addition to internecine conflicts, internal disputes have sometimes occurred over election and management issues, raising questions about political interests, representation and mosque leadership. These have often been linked to political factions back in South Asia or the Middle East, and there is evidence that the politics of these regions has been imported to mosques and ethnic associations, and has also influenced British party politics at the local level. More recently, the impact of global jihadi networks on mosque leadership has become a cause for concern, as the case of Finsbury Park Mosque illustrates.

MOSQUE LEADERSHIP

There has been a long-standing tradition in British Muslim communities for mosque leaders (*imams*) to be imported from the regions from which migrants first came. This has meant that the majority were far more familiar with the culture of their homeland than with the challenges of leading a mosque in the UK. Few of these men were well qualified or spoke English, and their role was limited to leading prayers, teaching Qur'anic recitation and giving the Friday sermon (which rarely related to the issues faced by British Muslims, especially young people or women). They had little contact with the world beyond the mosque.

From the 1990s, the number of British-trained *imams* increased, although research from 2007 revealed that only eight per cent had been born and educated in the UK, with a further eight per cent from the Middle East, and the vast majority – some 84 per cent – from South Asia. The research revealed ‘a deeply conservative body of individuals maintaining traditional languages, certain types of qualifications and still largely recruited from the place of origin’ (Geaves 2008: 105).

Since that time, there has been greater professionalization of the training and standards of *imams*, and more recognition of their changing role and the demands placed upon them. A greater number are younger, speak English, and are more able to connect to British Muslim communities. As a result of concerns about the risk of radicalisation, there has been increasing intervention by Government (including a Muslim Faith Leaders Review, and initiatives to improve training provision and to link Islamic seminaries to the higher education sector).

GLOSSARY

ADHAN: call to prayer

AHMADIYYA: an religious movement established in India at the end of the 19th century; the founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, claimed to be the long-awaited Mahdi and renewer of Islam; for this reason, Ahmadis are not accepted by other Muslims

BARELWI: a Sufi reform movement established in 19th India during colonial rule

DEOBANDI: a conservative Sunni reform movement established in 19th India during colonial rule

HAJJ: annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca

IMAM: prayer leader

JAMA'AT-I ISLAMI: a reform movement established in India in 1941 by Maulana Mawdudi

JUM'A: Friday congregational prayers

KHUTBA: sermon

MAKTAB; MADRASAH: supplementary classes for Qur'anic Arabic recitation and Islamic studies

MASJID: mosque

MIHRAB: niche in mosque interior

MINBAR: pulpit

SALAFI: Islamic reform movement established in the Middle East at the beginning of the 20th century, which draws directly on the Qur'an and Sunnah for guidance

SALAH: five daily prayers

SHARI'AH: Islamic laws

SHAHADAH: declaration of faith

SHI'A: 'party of 'Ali'; Shi'as are divided into Twelvers, who accept a lineage of twelve *imams*, and those who accept seven *imams* (Ismailis and Bohras)

WUDU: ablution before prayer

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READ MORE

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