

Historically, Muslim sectarian tensions in Britain have been low. There is rising concern within the community that hostility could be increasing. However, this is countered by a hope, and support for, increased social cohesion in the future.

Key factors that are seen to impact on sectarian relations:

- 1) The 'trickle-down' effect of geopolitics
 - Sectarian conflict in the wider Muslim world, i.e. Syrian Civil War, Iraq post-2003 invasion, Pakistan since the 1980s.
 - Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran: competition for leadership of the Gulf region and the Muslim world, the 'Shi'a Crescent' theory, support of sectarian militant groups by Gulf and Middle Eastern states.
- 2) 'Hate preachers'
 - Use of social media and satellite television to spread sectarian teachings.
 - The legal and political barriers to tackling the issue i.e. deportation, freedom of speech
 - Some see hate preachers as encroaching on the British Muslim community's on-going identity formation process by introducing an unwanted negative rhetoric.

Sectarianism in Britain:

- Online: Evidence of sectarianism most prevalent online.
 - Social media – examples easy to find, varying in severity.
 - Anonymity factor: how serious to take these threats? Do the normal rules of social engagement apply? – The British legal system is still adapting to this new medium.
- Offline: Minimal and low-level
 - Lack of reporting/data – have to rely primarily on anecdotal evidence.
 - Universities: evidence that levels of sectarian intolerance are likely to be higher within Islamic Societies- Centre for Social Cohesion study (2008): 30% students hostile to the idea of Shi'as as true Muslims, 15% hostile to idea of Sunnis as true Muslims, 30% not sure on both. The relationship between Islamic Societies and an increased number of Ahlul-Bayt Societies within universities as a potential reaction to/symptom of sectarianism.
 - Separate communities – occupy separate social spheres. Not necessarily negative in of itself, but perpetuates divisions and impressions of differences.

"Many perceive the British Muslim community to be at, or approaching, a 'cross-roads'."- p.3

"Sectarian violence on a large or frequent scale is unlikely to develop in Britain because of the absence of many of the main drivers of sectarian violence, such as deliberate intra-Muslim socio-economic disparity, authoritarianism and denial of rights."- p.36

Positive action:

- Umbrella organisations (i.e. MCB, MINAB) – promote best practice, joint statements, co-operation → leadership, representation and legitimacy
- Community initiatives – co-operation on common interests/issues, relationship-building, familiarity
- Interfaith initiatives have set a precedence for co-operation, but: *intra*-faith initiatives occupy a different space and so face different obstacles

Conclusions about the 'British context':

- Absence of many of the main drivers of sectarian violence, i.e. deliberate intra-Muslim socio-economic disparity, authoritarianism and denial of rights. Also, Britain is not a majority Muslim state and, therefore, the government has nothing to gain from using sectarianism as a political tool.
- Often sectarian violence is linked causally to political, social and economic dissatisfaction and the ineffectuality of peaceful protest. As a liberal democracy, Britain guarantees all citizens freedom of religion and equal civil and cultural rights, regardless of religious sect. Also, the democratic process, while not perfect, provides channels through which most grievances can be raised without needing to resort to violence.
- Due to these factors, and the counter-action taken by the British Muslim community, the report concludes that sectarian *violence* of the kind seen in the Middle East is unlikely to develop in Britain. However, the community may experience a rise in sectarian *hostility/tension*. Overall, the report is cautiously optimistic for continued and increased community co-operation and cohesion.

For the full report and further information:

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