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'If we were attacked, I'd die for this country'

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Muslims in Britain have weathered the hostility aroused by 7/7 and feel confident about the future

In the days and weeks after July 7, as the capital slowly recovered, Muslim leaders gave warning of a nationwide backlash. By the end of July, according to the Islamic Human Rights Commission, attacks on Asians had risen more than thirteenfold. The Muslim Safety Forum reported a 500 per cent increase in attacks across London compared with the same period in 2004. By July 28 nine mosques had been attacked, and one garage fire-bombed.

Many Muslims questioned by Populus for the *Times*/ITV News poll complain of a rise in hostilities within the past year — 79 per cent say they have experienced more abuse during that time, and 74 per cent feel that Muslims are viewed with suspicion by their fellow citizens. This contention is one with which 60 per cent of the general population agree.

While the figures on abuse are worrying, most Muslims feel generally optimistic about their role in British society, with 92 per cent saying that they make a valuable contribution to it and 57 per cent agreeing that, as a group, Muslims will prosper financially and socially in the UK in the future. Having weathered the rise of the far Right in the 1970s and endured the divisive Salman Rushdie affair in the Eighties, many Muslims feel confident in the tolerance of British society.

In Beeston last week, several Muslims spoke at length about the increasing hostility they have witnessed since 7/7. The younger generation blamed the readiness of "over-eager" local police to stop and search Muslims. For the older generation, though, the abuse was often more psychological.

"It would be very helpful if there was a little more emphasis on teaching children about Islam at school," said Mohammed Khalid Mian, 44, a restaurant cook, echoing our poll finding that 56 per cent of Muslims feel that non-Muslims view Islam as a religion that encourages violence. "I don't think many British people really know about Islam; they think it is a violent religion that is concerned only with terrorism. Do they know that it is anti-Islamic to commit suicide? Do they know it is anti-Islamic to kill innocent people? It would be useful to teach the truth to children at school. In fact, many adults could benefit as well."

Near his house, that afternoon, I spoke to two young Muslim men as they sat in a sports car, waiting for a friend. Both complained bitterly about a lack of understanding by police patrolling the area. "Things have calmed down, don't get me wrong," said Hussain, 34. "This isn't a violent area. Everyone who lives in Beeston seems to get along. It has always been like that. But the police can be heavy — if you're an Asian kid driving a flash car, you'll get stopped."

His friend Khan, 38 (he agreed only to give me his surname), agreed. "They'll never tell us why they're stopping us," he complained. "Institutional racism is the main problem. We can take care of ourselves if someone in the street has a go at us, but what are we supposed to do when we come up against the police?"

While 79 per cent of the Muslims we polled said that pupils should have the right to wear religious dress regardless of their school's uniform policy, only 42 per cent of the general population agreed. Yet there seems to be a general perception of freedom of choice in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Asked if they thought that modern British values were a threat to the Islamic way of life, only 36 per cent of Muslims agreed. About the same percentage thought that the values of British society degrade women. This is best explained by the explosion in numbers of Muslim youth in this country in the past two generations, and their adoption of liberal, less religious, values.

When I put these questions to Hussain, the young man in the fast car, he at first looked bemused and then laughed. "How could British values be a threat to Islam?" he asked. "For a start we are the minority here. I love this country. I consider myself British first. If we came under attack, I'd die for it. I think you have to live and let live — that is why so many people want to live here. People like our tolerant society."

In stark contrast to the "sleepwalking to segregation" thesis recently perpetuated by such organisations as the Commission for Racial Equality, our poll shows that the Muslim and non-Muslim populations are not poles apart on integration.

Over 87 per cent of Muslims say they have close personal friends who are non-Muslim. While 57 per cent of Muslims say that they find public acts of drunkenness offensive, 54 per cent of non-Muslims agree. On public displays of affection between members of the same sex, the figures are more distinct — 44 per cent of Muslims find these offensive, compared with only 30 per cent of non-Muslims. But, to buck the preconception of a prudish Muslim population isolated behind religious dogma, only 29 per cent of Muslims say that they find women wearing low-cut tops or short skirts offensive.

Since 7/7 many Muslims have felt intense unease while travelling on the London Underground, feeling the scrutiny of fellow passengers and finding themselves staring at fellow Muslims. Our poll shows, though, that lingering notions of the danger of Tube travel have been largely dispelled. Of the non-Muslims, 57 per cent could understand why Muslims would find it offensive if people felt anxious at seeing someone whom they thought was Muslim on public transport with a large bag or rucksack – yet 48 per cent of Muslims said that they could relate to these anxieties. Only 18 per cent of Muslims actually felt anxious when they saw a Muslim-looking person on public transport with a large bag, and just 25 per cent of non-Muslims were afraid.

In the immediate aftermath of 7/7, the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell on July 22 added to the fears of many Muslims. “I was very scared,” says Mohammed Shahid, 22, a market researcher from Barking in East London. “If police can make that kind of mistake, what’s to stop it happening again? And now, after the raid in Forest Gate, I am even more scared.”

“People looked at me on the Tube after 7/7,” adds Zahir Shah, 21, also from Barking. “I looked at other Muslims, too. You feel scared for a few days – then things get back to normal. That’s what I like about London

Populus interviewed 1,131 Muslims aged 18 plus by phone and online between June 1 and 16. Interviews were conducted across the country. Results have been weighted to reflect the population profile of British Muslims as a whole. Populus also interviewed a random sample of 1,005 adults aged 18-plus, from the general population, by telephone between June 9 and 11. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. www.populuslimited.com.

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