Integrated and Alienated:
Bangladeshis in London’s East End

Justin Gest
Department of Government
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street :: London :: WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom
j.gest@lse.ac.uk

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This chapter presents data from an in-depth, qualitative case study of the Bangladeshi community of London’s East End conducted using elite-style interviews and ethnographic observation throughout the municipal borough of Tower Hamlets. Based on a set of 45 interviews that includes 30 with 18- to 28- year old Bangladeshis, nine with community leaders and imams, and a control group of six, this chapter seeks to better understand the challenges and patterns of civic engagement and alienation among young Bangladeshi men from London’s East End—particularly why some individuals become apartist. It traces the landscape of British Bangladeshi civic life and identity forms, and maps participants perceptions about these factors and the British political system with rough indicators of the weight of different groups in the sample. A later chapter compares and contrasts the findings from the East End with those from Southern Madrid.

The borough of Tower Hamlets and its shared spaces is a crossroads of influences that exhibit the diversity of London and the conflicting pressures felt by its young inhabitants. On Whitechapel Road, street market salesmen hawk bhangra CDs, leather coats and hardback Qurans. On Cannon Street pedestrians walk briskly, donning everything from skimpy skirts to burqas, vintage t-shirts to headscarves. And in Mile End, the treble of hip hop music emitting from mobile phones mixes with the roar of passing buses and the cacophony of English, Shudoh, and Somali Arabic.

Despite the threads of foreign civilisations woven through East End life, the collected data indicate that young Bangladeshis—the first of their families to be born and/or raised in Britain—are actually quite integrated into British society. In interviews, nearly all participants exhibited a strong sense of entitlement to their place in the United Kingdom and the provision of justice, liberty and representation that the democratic system affords. However, nearly all of them also possessed grave doubts about the capacity of the democratic system’s civic institutions to deliver. And nearly all participants’ insecurities about East End civic institutions were connected to their insecurities about the relationships they are struggling to maintain with one or all of the three principle forms of identity that underlie those civic institutions. Within the borough, young Bangladeshi men are confronted by the draw of three primary forms of identity: the national British, the ethno-cultural Bangladeshi, and the religious Muslim. Correspondingly, this chapter explores the roots and continued

1 Apartism (and the adjective apartist) is a complication of the term “alienation” and “alienated.” Apartism is the belief that the democratic state and the referent individual no longer hold convergent interests. The apartist in the minority no longer perceives the state as an entity that is ultimately interested in representing and aiding him or her, and no longer feels any sort of bond with fellow citizens in the most general sense of common membership. Apartism is about the individual’s relationship with national policy—both as a reflection of governmental priorities and as a reflection of the general social will. And while it is very possible that the apartist perceives the state and society as lacking the aforementioned ideals, this sentiment is most likely to be a product of the apartist’s exclusivist outlook about differences of preference and opinion. So from the apartist perspective, if another person’s idea of prosperity, safety, justice or equality does not match the Apartist’s own, then that person must not actually be legitimately interested in those values to begin with.
relevance of each construction, describes the concurrent social pressures each exerts, and classifies the corresponding civic manifestations of each identity form.

Acknowledging that each participant and every young Bangladeshi man in Tower Hamlets confronts similar circumstances, I investigate how and why then the nature and levels of participants’ civic engagement is variable. In the end, I find that, exposed to the same structures of identity and civic engagement and sharing a common sense of democratic entitlement, participants’ different behaviour is attributable to their different perceptions of those structures of identity and democratic engagement. Those who perceive a democratic system and British society that—although imperfect—is ultimately interested in their welfare and affected by their individual activism are more likely to engage in the institutions that promote such activism within the democratic system. The apartist who don’t are characterised by the employment of an exclusivist Islamist moral paradigm that rejects all three forms of identity, including their local mosques, and retreats to an absolutist, closed-minded ideology that espouses the undermining of the very system of government that facilitates its public role.

To this end, the first section will introduce the nature of life and community for young Bangladeshis in the borough of Tower Hamlets with particular attention to the community’s civic history and public life. The second section identifies the primary civic entities garnering activism and civic engagement in the borough. The third section reviews the three intersecting loci of identity for the study’s subjects. And the fourth section examines the roots and basis of the apartist rejection of all three forms of identity and their civic expression.

**Borough Life**

What is so paradoxical about young British Bangladeshi men in Tower Hamlets as a case study in sociopolitical alienation is that the British Bangladeshi population may be the most civically active and socially networked group of people in Great Britain. Seemingly every adult male is a member of several organizations at once—perhaps a community centre, a mosque committee, a volunteer organization, a political effort in favour of a law or governmental ruling, a political party, an advocacy group, or if they are older, an association working for the benefit of a remote village (bari) in the tropical flats of Bangladesh. They likely have at least one entrepreneurial business venture that they tend to “on the side” of—or perhaps during—their primary occupation. Their extended families connect to many people they barely know, in places they may have never visited. And the call of Islam is rarely (and if so, carefully) turned down, whether it means attending a panel discussion, an event or a political function.

Indeed, at any given time outside of normal business hours, one can be relatively certain that the average British Bangladeshi in London’s East End has a “meeting” to attend. And due to the compact seven and a half square miles that Tower Hamlets covers, one can also be relatively certain that the meeting is not very far. Many Banglaridshis execute a remarkably small—what Robert Putnam calls—“civic triangle,” or the area between the venues of home, work and social activities, even as that triangle expands greatly for the majority of Britons commuting from expanding suburbs created by urban sprawl.

The triangle fostered within Tower Hamlets is framed by borders that are marked conspicuously by the shiny high-rises of Canary Wharf to the south and the towers of The City to the west—the beacons of London’s lucrative and powerful international financial centre. While the borough of Tower Hamlets boasts some of the highest salaries in the United
Kingdom, it also has one of the country’s largest communities of welfare recipients and highest unemployment rates. Indeed, the wealth that streams through during the day is taxied off each evening, leaving a community in socioeconomic and sociopolitical despair behind. However, this is the same old story for London’s East End—the proverbial backyard of the British Empire’s naval waterfront, turned trading docks, turned industrial sector. It has always been the downstairs to London’s upstairs. And today, the untouchable symbols of London’s affluence now taunt the 200,000 Tower Hamlets residents from the skyline.

The limited According to a 2001 census, the 65,553 Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets comprise a third of the borough’s population and nearly a quarter of the entire population of 283,063 British Bangladeshis. About 54% of the entire population live in the Greater London area, and nearly all those who are in Tower Hamlets come from the eastern province of Sylhet. The first significant waves of Bangladeshi migrants to settle in the East End arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, before and after Bangladesh’s war for independence from Pakistan. The compact civic triangle is easily derived from their original circumstances. The initial migrants usually worked long hours in automotive or textile factories, and sent much of their earnings back to their families in their bari. “The older generation never complained about harsh times and conditions,” said Tayyib, an office clerk near Brick Lane. “My father left for work in the dark and returned in the dark. Before we came, he lived in the same house with 15 men from our village in Bangladesh, Purpushpal in Beanibazar. There was no halal meat or curry powder back then. So all they ate was vegetables or fish. They asked the Indian chemists for curry powder.” These first migrants were often harassed or openly threatened on the streets of East London and formed extremely tight-knit communities in particular neighbourhoods to rely on one another and protect themselves from racist gangs of British nationalists who would roam the streets of Stepney, Poplar and Mile End. Said Zubair:

The roads in Britain were thought to be paved in gold. But every time I ask my father, he says it was very gloomy, dark and cold. The housing was rubbish. There was six of them and they lived in a one-bedroom flat. He was a tailor. He had stories about racism and being chased. He used to bring home fabric to sew and a lot of the time people would burn it on the way. It’s one of the reasons why Bengali people are so tight now, from relying on each other. It was difficult but he was able to provide for the family. The benefits were financial, not anything else back then. There was the Naz Cinema where they would rotate two Bengali films each week. And the wrestling ring on Commercial Road.

As the nationalist gangs have receded since the 1980s with much of the white British population east towards Essex, greater numbers of Bangladeshis immigrated, and their tightly knit communities expanded to more Council Houses and neighbourhoods in Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets now has the largest percentage of 20- to 34-year-olds of any local authority in Great Britain, at 57% to the national average of 41%. Despite the greater safety in numbers, and probably due to the admonitions of elders, the majority of young Bangladeshis have still maintained a mentality and lifestyle that limits them to their local “square mile.” Due to this compact triangle and well-networked social and civic life, few decisions are made without consulting—or affecting—someone else. So quite practically, the more than 65,000 British Bangladeshis who now reside in Tower Hamlets’ council estates have re-created the

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2 Tayyib
3 Zubair
community structures, values, and—subsequently—the forms of identification of the *bari* village community that defined their grandparents’ lives in Bangladesh.

**Council Estates**

The Bangladeshi neighbourhoods of Tower Hamlets, like most in the East End, are dominated by council estates.\(^5\) Massive, government-administered, concrete and brick structures of modernist and brutalist architecture pack residents together between thin walls and little common areas. They are cramped, congested, with few green spaces and little privacy. Within the overhousing reside young adults who need their own space, but Bangladeshi family dynamics complicate matters. Youths rarely move out of their parents’ flat until they get married. The eldest son is ultimately responsible for caring for the parents in their old age. Once a sister is married, she leaves the family and flat. Her loyalty is first to her new husband and his family. These roles are something Bangladeshis accept over time. Girls feel the need to be in the kitchen or caring for younger children. Boys accept the responsibility passed down from one generation to the next. And within these family dynamics, there is a strong emphasis on “marrying off.” The fact that the girls will one day leave is both an obligation of the parents to help facilitate and a factor in investing in the relationships between siblings. But before anyone gets married, two-bedroom council flats are regularly occupied by families of seven or nine. Bangladeshi families are typically large, and rooms are simply shared until the family can move into a larger space.

Such housing conditions mean that boys are often asked or allowed to go outside to the streets for space and privacy, resulting in less oversight. Exacerbating the lack of oversight is a significant language barrier. Reports from schools are often not comprehended, and many parents don’t always understand Western social and cultural dynamics. In extreme cases, young men bully their parents and siblings. There are high levels of unreported domestic violence. Though cognizant of their gender roles, girls utilize advanced education as a vehicle to resist them. Schoolwork is a conventionally acceptable excuse for avoiding domestic duties and interacting with friends and learning. As a result, young women in the Bangladeshi community are statistically better-educated and higher-achieving than young men. Fadhil, an artist based in Tower Hamlets said:

> There are no facilities for youngsters. They spend their time hanging about. They have nothing to occupy themselves with, so they’re getting into fights and drugs. I used to use a lot of heroin, and it was because you had nothing better to do. It was God’s miracle that I quit. When I was 18 years old, my older brother said to me, ‘You’re digging your own grave right now. And you might as well keep digging because the family is not going to help you out of this.’ We weren’t given opportunities outside the schools. Now you see drugs in the schools. They’ve got no way to occupy their thoughts.

The rebellion against cultural norms extends into the economic sphere as well. The curry restaurants that have sustained so many families are perceived as the “hard life” by

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\(^5\) Spatial districution of Bangladeshis in the East End has been chaped in part by the discriminatory housing policies of the 1980s, and the persistent hostility of the white working class. For more information about this, see John Eade and David Garbin, “Changing Narratives of Violence, Struggle and Resistance: Bangladeshis and the Competition for Resources in the Global City,” *Oxford Development Studies*, Volume 30, Number 2, 1 June 2002, pg. 139 (13).
many young people. Restaurant work isn’t considered a position of value, but of desperation. Employees arrive at 11am to prepare for lunch, and some nights they do not leave until 1am. Heavily drawn to the materialistic excesses of Western prosperity, many young Bangladeshis exhibit a fondness for chic clothes, fast cars, and sparkling jewellery. The strongest influences are Hollywood, Bollywood, the “bling” culture of hip hop and their idealized lives of affluence and airbrushed contentment. Stories about Canary Wharf bonuses travel like brushfires through the neighborhoods. But they are usually about white people from “the Shire parts.” Feeling barred from such opportunities, many young men are influenced to “go for the quick money” to “retire early.” Though they certainly exist, genuinely successful Bangladeshis whose wealth is based on hard work are not very visible in the community. Drug dealers are very visible though. They have a new girl on their arm every day, and amplify music out of slick cars when they speed through the matte housing estates. “Most Bengali kids want things, and they don’t care about the means of obtaining it,” says Ridwan, a university student from Mile End. “They just live their lives day-to-day.”

Police officers also cruise these neighborhoods frequently, and the most problematic regions are patrolled by plain-clothed secret officers. For many young people, their only interactions with agencies of the British government and local institutions are with the police. In the Cannon Street corridor, the unmarked cars have passed through so often, the local youths have memorized their plate numbers. This instills a significant amount of distrust—not only of government, but also among Bengalis. Yasir, a 22-year-old Argos sales clerk says he films all interactions with police officers with his mobile phone. Ridwan, the university student, says:

More police makes me feel watched all the time. Anything you do, you might be taken in for it. I can’t act normally. This is where they get the wrong perspective about the government. They need to break down social barriers, but by expressing cultural preferences, they suggest that breaking down barriers is conditional on assimilation. The government doesn’t like what’s naturally on the other side of those barriers. So hatred builds in our hearts toward them. I’m an average citizen. Just because I have a beard shouldn’t make me a suspect.

And from the bulk of interview responses, there is a direct and strongly positive correlation between the level of police interaction and the perception of institutionalized racism, and a negative correlation between the level of police interaction and engagement with civic organizations.

With the police and drug dealers, small gangs of teenagers also roam many parts of the borough. They are divided by social groups, which are generally tied to the council estates where members live. When something happens, they often wield a very long, sharp, Bangladeshi fish knife called a *boti* to “cut someone up.” They are just starting to pick up on the fact that a three-inch pocket knife is just as effective, and can be concealed. Historically, gangs have merely been social groups that are irregularly mobilized for a “cause.” Causes range from deterring one guy’s relationship with another’s sister to revenge for “nickin’ a doughnut.” They’re called territorially based names like Cannon Street Massive, Brick Lane Massive, Stepney Terror Posse, or Shadwell Posse. Since the late 90s, the pecking order system of organized crime has broken down into more atomized form. Many kids became

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6 Ridwan
7 Yasir
8 Ridwan
9 Zakaria4, Amjad3, Zamil0.5
scared, were injured, their ambitions took over, and they became more individualistic. Gangs are now very local, and very personal.

**Street Boys and House Boys**

Depending on the parental restriction and housing arrangements of families, teenage boys are easily dichotomized between those that are permitted to go outside after school hours without supervision and those who are not. This dichotomy is closely linked to future dichotomies of class and educational attainment within the Bangladeshi community. Those who loiter together or “cotch” in the streets, the council estate courtyards, and building stairwells tend to join gangs, as much for a sense of belonging as for protection from other gangs. A 28-year-old youth worker from Newham says that “many Bengali people tend to stay within their square mile because there is no culture of exploration. You’re taught at a young age not to leave the flat unless you must. This is built on the idea of safety in numbers from the 1970s, when Bangladeshi migrants were liable to be attacked on the streets. The community mentality has continued, even though time and the conditions have changed.”

The gangs are generally territorial, keeping to and defending their local estate and neighborhood. When a known member leaves his region, he is at risk of violence at the hands of another gang in whatever area he happens to pass through—even if his trespassing is haphazard or innocuous. Members of the E3 gang (mundanely named for their postal code) decided to skip the Bangladeshi New Year festivities this past year, because at last year’s festival, they were attacked by the E1 Boys for straying too far to attend the celebrations. Tales of gun crimes and vicious violence endure in the minds of young people. Deterred by such stories and aware of territoriality, members of gangs are significantly less mobile than non-members in their youth. They remain exclusively in their ward, perhaps exclusively within a radius of mere street blocks—creating what I call a “square mile mentality.”

Still, for many, life outside council flats is more desirable. “The alternative to street wars is being inside,” one gang member said. And being inside is something that many associate with the discipline expected of girls, and with utter boredom. “I don’t have no homework, so there’s nothing to do. I can’t watch telly all day.” His friend chimes in: “If I’m at home, my mum will be asking me to go to the market for something new every five minutes. I’m like, why not just put it all on a list at one time?”

Ridwan, a university media student who still lives in Mile End with his parents, says that the choice to be outside is also one of social image. “These guys my age, they’re just conforming to a subculture,” he says. “It’s a big subculture with lots of fights within, but they’re all actually the same. Even within territories, there are divisions between estates. They’re just seeking some way of claiming territory, when in reality, there are no rigid boundaries. They idealize the lives of gangsters they see in movies about the Bronx.”

In an effort to limit gang association, local police officers more regularly confront those “cotching” on benches or street corners. Non-Bangladeshi residents have also begun to contact authorities at the first glimpse of any small gather of youths—leaving the young men with fewer and fewer options.

The experience of non-members is significantly different. They do not go out with as much freedom and tend to socialize in more structured environments at the mosque, family events, and schools. They are often more studious and mobile as they get older. This provides

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10 Qadim10
11 ZB2
12 Ridwan1
a range of experiences beyond the local neighborhood, transcending any likelihood of a square mile mentality. “All of society’s problems are due to a person’s upbringing and environment,” says Tayyib.13 “In my house, my father emphasized education, education, education. If there was no studying, there would be no food on the table.” Similarly, Bilal says that his father always repeated the Shudoh phrase, kholomar ago, Sylheti for, “From the tip of your pen…”—signifying that one should earn money via their education and intellect.14 For another non-gang member, his childhood was simpler: “My parents were proper dominant in my life,” he says. “They were constantly telling me what I should do, and I got so tired of hearing it that I just listened and did it.”15

The youths venturing beyond their square-mile are exposed to opportunity, difference, and a variety of lifestyles. Paradoxically, this means that they are also exposed to experiences with discrimination and Islamophobia. Tayyib says:

Young people fear difference, he says, because they usually have no experience with it. Schools can create boundaries of territory like housing estates. And youth clubs don’t solve this, because they do not transcend territorial divisions. ...But those who do leave their square mile often encounter employer discrimination. With my marketing degree from Westminster, I wanted to get into banking and marketing. When I called an agency, they told me that I was too inexperienced. When I checked the profile of the ultimate hire, he was less experienced than me, but he was white.16

Another university graduate, ZA says:

With higher-end jobs, some companies discriminate against people. It makes you question democracy. ... There is a small minority of racists. Mile End is like a second Bangladesh. But say I was dressed like this in the City, I’m bound to get looks. People are thinking, ‘What’s he doing here? He doesn’t belong.’ But I’m gonna do what I want to do. So they can think what they want. I don’t give a crap.17

In his first excursion outside of London, one gang member participant joined a neighbourhood youth group trip to a fun fair in the country. But he said that when he and some friends arrived, white youths asked them collectively, “Where’s your bomb? Is it in your rucksack?”18 Another participant says that he has even been harassed navigating through internet social networks such as Facebook. Once while playing online Texas hold’em poker under his Arabic username, another player made comments to him to suggest that he was a terrorist. “What are you gonna blow up next?” he was prodded.19

Can’t Forget the Ghetto

With the mixed consequences of leaving and staying within Tower Hamlets there is an ongoing dialogue between those individuals who are trying to “move on up,” and other who claim they “can’t forget the ghetto”—a cultural monologue mimicking that of American

13 T3
14 B2
15 U1
16 T5
17 Zamil1.3
18 Zaid2
19 Faisal2
blacks as heard in the hip hop songs that are regularly played on mobile phones and car stereo systems. On the one hand, participants described a sense of blissful ignorance that is enabled by leaving the conflicts that take place within the square mile. However, several participants criticised those who move out for trying to shirk obligations to their families, to their community, to their religion, and to their relatives in Bangladesh. Many of those interviewed blame the desire to leave on the insidious influence of Western social norms which dictate that children can move out of the parents’ home at age 18, remain unmarried, and retain little obligation to their families or communities. That said, other participants said that they wish to move out of the borough precisely for the benefit of their loved ones. “We’ve lived in the borough for 12 years now,” said Bilal, a medical student from Stepney. “And I wouldn’t want for my brothers and sisters to be living here for another 12 years, surrounded by drugs and other problems, and people who are happy with being mediocre in their lives.”

For many, the greatest common denominator that keeps Bangladeshis in or near Tower Hamlets is the presence of the Bangladeshi-run East London Mosque and the activities of its London Muslim Centre. So those who do move, move eastward. From the east, it’s easy to commute back and forth to go to the mosque and shop for the food and clothing. Yusuf works step from the mosque but lives outside the borough says:

My parents are 62, 63-years-old. My dad is 50% up for moving. My mom is 100% for staying. She’s made a lot of friends in the neighborhood and hears the call to prayer from their house on Parfett Street...They’re used to a small colony, and they want to maintain the feeling of living in a bari...It’s the next best thing to Bangladesh. It’s a lot more difficult to adjust. Personally, I drive, I’ve got my car, and I can get used to new areas.

But once you go to the east, it’s not that easy to move back. The people who have moved out of Tower Hamlets are getting used to it. I guarantee you 100% they are not moving back. Once they’ve got their own houses in a quiet, safe neighborhood with better schools, they don’t want to come back to what’s comparably a slum. The young kids today want to get out faster than previous generations. They want a big house, a nice car, that kind of life.

It’s been two years since I moved out to Wanstead, Redbridge, but I still come see my parents every day. Tower Hamlets is still the hub of the Bengali community—the place to connect to your community of Bangladeshis and to know what’s going on. The people outside of Tower Hamlets, their day-to-day lives are still affected by what happens inside.

Thus Tower Hamlets, and not Sylhet Town or Dhaka, endures as the true home-away-from-home for many British Bangladeshis—but increasingly so, as the memory of life in Bangladesh fades. Indeed the later generations, the young people who were the first in their family to be British-born or British-raised citizens and are the subjects of this study, have a very different relationship with Bangladesh and Britain.

A Sense of Entitlement

Because they experienced the hardships of Bangladesh that motivated migration and the journey to Britain, the first generation’s image of the British state is typically one of a provider—the government that bestowed great benefits on a people who had yet to contribute to the system. The second generation, the vast majority of whom did not experience their
parents’ journey, has a very different relationship with the British state. Quite simply, they feel entitled to the benefits that are afforded to other British citizens without question. Interview data reveals a very strong feeling of entitlement, rooted in their oft-denied personal feelings of Britishness. This feeling among participants transcends their differences in the nature and levels of civic engagement, and is a clear testament to the integration of study participants and the Bangladeshi community. As we see in the statements below, this sense of entitlement takes different forms, but the message is clear: Britain is my country as much as anyone else’s.

**Among those who were democratically engaged:**

Ridwan: My parents came to Britain because they saw an opportunity for a better life. They were uneducated and worked in takeaway shops. They were migrants and they knew that if they messed with the government, there would be problems. …They felt a little displaced.

But I have the same rights as an MP. Why should I conform like my parents? I feel the need to question them. That’s my right. I’ve gone through assimilation by being brought up here. The way my parents didn’t question, I will. Their mentality is from a different time. It’s my duty as a citizen to question. ²¹

Zaki: I don’t feel indebted at all. I pay taxes. The only difference is my skin colour. I don’t think people should feel indebted to this country. Some parents might, because they fled to this country for a safer life. So maybe that generation would. And maybe some parents may feel like their children should feel indebted. ²²

**Among those who are not engaged:**

Zakaria: It’s all about perceptions. May dad, he sees black and white. He sees the police, and says they’re on the right side of the law. He respects institutions, and thinks the police would only bother you if you are a criminal. But I know better.

I guess he does feel indebted, but I don’t know why. He worked for it. I guess it’s for the opportunity here.

Yeah, obviously the UK gave me a school and stuff, but that’s my right, ‘cause I’m born in this country. There’s a bare minimum that they owe me. It’s like the way you aren’t a grateful because your mom gave you clothes when you were born. I expect that. Sometimes I tell the police, ‘I’m paying your salaries with my taxes, and you’re giving me shit.’

My father’s pact is his pact. Not mine. It’s like if my brother owes you 10 pounds, that’s your deal with him, not me. ²³

Uqbah: My dad was a tailor, living in Brick Lane when it was just becoming Bengali. It was worth coming here just to get a better life, but they fear that the day will come when immigrants get kicked out. I don’t fear that like they do.”

**Among those who are engaged in forms of participation that undermine the system:**

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²¹ Ridwan6.
²² Zamil2.
²³ Zakaria4.
Ismail: I didn’t choose to be born here. ...I appreciate the government. I may not vote, but I appreciate the benefits it provides. In return, I owe them my taxes. Doing your part, taking part in community activities to improve the neighbourhood.24

It is this remarkably strong sense of entitlement that informs many of the trends this chapter will underscore—young Bangladeshis’ activism, their feelings of rejection at the hands of British society, and their disappointment when this sense of entitlement is unfulfilled by civic institutions. Above it all, it reflects the extraordinary integration of this group into life in London and the United Kingdom. And as the following sections explain, it is this very integration into the community that makes certain individuals’ alienation from it so profound.

Civic Life

Bangladeshis in the East End were not always so integrated in the United Kingdom. As the earliest generations of migrants in the 1960s and 1970s were mostly comprised of single men with families in South Asia, most civic organization remained connected to the political events surrounding Bangladesh and its 1971 liberation from Pakistan, or inspired by them. Sarah Glynn has documented how developing community activism followed the progress of the new nation, and probashi (Bangladeshi emigrants) proclaimed their beliefs in the principles of socialism, secularism, and democracy.25 At the time, these principles echoed the 1971 movement organizing for Bangladeshi independence from the Islamist politics of (then) West Pakistan and the Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami party. Most Bangladeshis sought a secular government that facilitated their cultural norms, which were more closely tied to those of the greater Bengal region spreading across borders with India. After most family reunification had taken place in the 1980s and ties with Bangladesh faded with the purity of the independence movement, the first generation’s leadership was challenged by a more Anglicised second generation, which forged effective alliances with radical activists in the Labour Party.26 These individuals became active in an array of community organizations and government entities that remain relevant today, but continued their parents’ tradition of socialist secularism. However, they are now being undermined by a generation of young, British-born activists inspired by the Islamism that their grandparents rebuffed in Bangladesh. This generation rejects the more formal town-hall politics of their elders, which has failed to emancipate them from the marginalisation of the urban East End, and increasing numbers seek ideological guidance and inspiration from a revivalist sect of Islam.27

As this evolving political culture has been squeezed into a mere 40 years, the civic manifestations of each trend endure.

Amidst the extraordinary cohesion and civic action within the Bangladeshi community, the vast majority of established movements and organizations administered by Bangladeshis remain for Bangladeshis. Because of this insularity, Bangladeshis hold little influence on the direction of policy and administration of borough politics in greater Tower

24 14.
Hamlets, despite their internal politicization. People of Bangladeshi origin hold 30 of the 51 seats on the Council. However, many respondents (and council employees) said that the borough is effectively run by the bureaucracy of officers and managers who are mostly white and hail from the “shires” of outer London. Some fault the infighting and incompetency of Council members for leaving such a void of power. Indeed, several of the Bangladeshi representatives are not even literate in English, and struggle to communicate beyond their base of older Bangladeshi voters. But in any case, this disconnection between the size of the Bangladeshi community and its continued subjection to the political will of others, has frustrated young and old alike. In response, many Bangladeshis face a choice of either constructing non-governmental bodies of leadership or simply disengaging from British civic life completely by perhaps even joining gangs.

Either way, much of the civic engagement by second generation British Bangladeshis is not actually affiliated with the national government or wider British society. Local political institutions must compete with alternative forms of informal power based on faith, family, and frustration, what can only be called “village politics.” Previous studies of East End political culture have illustrated a competition for support between the secular nationalists of the earliest generation of Bangladeshi migrants and the rising coalition of Islamists. However, I find that there has been a pluralisation of the public sphere in the East End and a *masala* (mixture) of civic entities has emerged, reflecting the complexity of political identities. Today’s British Bangladeshis choose from a selection of socialist formal democratic institutions, the secularist capitalist desi-politics, the inclusive, territorialized Islamism of the mosques, and the exclusive global Islamism of aparthist groups.

Council and British government represent only the one form of leadership in the East End, though many young Bangladeshis do engage such formal institutions. Other power brokers claim a significant degree of influence and sway. More mundanely, there are economic power brokers—capitalist, and often secular, business owners who can throw their money and weight around behind certain causes. Colloquially, they are referred to as *desi* politicians—meaning “back home,” playing the role of village elders who prefer muscle over the British political tradition of oratory and persuasion. A second power broker is the mosque. The East End is spotted with *masjids*, often in places you’d least expect. But the London Muslim Centre and its East London Mosque remains the most powerful leader of the Islam-conscious in the borough. Its sponsorship or support is golden and influences the thousands that attend its *jummah* services each Friday afternoon. Its form of socialist Islamism suggests that Muslims’ adherence to Islam should go beyond ritual prayer, and extend to inform private, individual decision-making. A third power broker is the anti-establishment Islamist group, Hizb-ut Tahrir, and its expanding reach among young Bangladeshis and other Muslims in Britain. Unlike the underground group, Al-Muhajiroun, which has advocated violence against the British state and society, Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT) remains legal. In frequent, passionate, well-scripted meetings around Tower Hamlets, high- and low-level members express forms of an ideology that condemns Western, liberal democracy as an un-divine, and thus ultimately flawed, system that works against the global interest of Islam and Muslims.

In Tower Hamlets, there is a fight for the minds of young Bangladeshis between the formal government and these three sides. But ultimately, from the perspective of civic engagement, they can be dichotomized by their outlooks: The desi-politicians, the mosque, and the local government complement the British state and society by working within it. The political group *Hizb-Ut-Tahrir* challenges the foundations supporting that society and state. This section examines each.

**Desi-Politicians and Village Politics**

Because of Tower Hamlets’ compact geography and the sheer concentration of Bangladeshi people within its borders, the borough often feels like a village. As social and kinship networks, business markets, gossip, and mosques follow suit, politics does too. “The people running the show are unelected,” says Qadim, a former gang member turned keen political observer. “It’s a village mentality. It’s the village elder who speaks the loudest, who knows the most people, who has the most sons, and is the most financially stable. Before in the London communities, it was about the desis’ honour and respect. Now it’s all about their money and power.”

One political leader said that he cannot successfully govern by sequestering himself in Britain’s formal political institutions:

> I feel like I’ve been bridging British and Bengali culture all my life. I’m not Bengalizing the system; I’m trying to broker an understanding between young Bengalis and older Bengalis. The politics of Bangladesh is about muscle. It’s more about hammers, guns, manpower, and dynasty, than it is about vision. The politics of Britain is still relatively intellectual. But that said, I’m certainly exposed to Brick Lane politics—screwing people over for power. You have to play your cards right. I wear a suit, but during the campaign, I sit around eating beetle nuts, drinking tea late at night, speaking in the language people know best. Politics in Tower Hamlets, you can’t always do it by the book. There are village politics. Young people can either be put off by it, or be inspired by their affiliations with individuals or organizations. We haven’t been motivated to engage them, and some of my elders don’t want to.

Most politicians are not as adroit. The image of the Council and local government is characterised by inaction, and the voids of power they leave. Desi-politicians take pride in filling the vacuum. This year, Council administrators were going to cancel the annual carnival for the Bengali New Year—Baishakhi Mela—for what was called a lack of public funds, but suspected to be bureaucratic laziness. However, a group of desi-politicians contributed over £100,000 to force the Council’s hand. One member of the group said, “The Council bureaucracy thinks that Bangladeshis are too busy fighting over petty issues like Baishakhi Mela, and are missing the bigger picture. The Councillors are dummies who don’t have the knowledge to fight the managers’ reluctance to hold the festival in what’s somehow known as “the festival borough.” A similar group is also lobbying for the renaming of Shoreditch Underground Station to ‘Banglatown.’ Most desi-politicians live outside Tower Hamlets in Slough, Redbridge, or East Finchley. Hearsay suggests that many are involved in heroin trafficking and sales between Bangladesh and Tower Hamlets. The borough is one of the cheapest places to purchase heroin in Europe. It currently costs about £3.50 for a tenth of a gram of very poor quality, unfiltered heroin from Bangladesh—inside the so-called “Golden Triangle” of heroin production in southeastern Asia. “There are two ways to make

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29 Qadim3.
30 Yusuf10.
your mark here,” Qadim explains. “Either you’re a big man in fighting. Or you’ve got a lot of money. The desis do their fair bit of community work. It lends them credibility and shoulder-rubbing access to the right people.”

However, the desi-politicians do not only try to out-maneuvre the government in the interest of the wider Bangladeshi community. There is also significant infighting within the community for positions of power and influence. The golden chair will soon be the Parliamentary seat expected to be vacated by George Galloway and won by the Labour Party. His replacement would be the first Bangladeshi person to serve in Parliament outside of Bangladesh. “It’s a dream seat,” says Yusuf. “The winner would be on the level of Baroness Pola Uddin, the only Bengali baroness.”

Desi-politicking is also one way for the older generation of Bangladeshis to maintain some relevance. Nearly each of the tiny governmental districts inside Bangladesh’s Sylhet region has an association in the United Kingdom: those for Golabgoinj, Beanibazaar, Balagoinj, Bishnath, Jogonathpur, and the list continues. These organisations are based on who they know and their role in the Bangladeshi politics “back home.” The nature of the relationship between Bangladeshis in the UK and their country of origin has to be understood, therefore, according to different interconnected arenas (local, regional, national, transnational). The first generation living in London might have kept a strong attachment with their ancestral villages through regular visits, the improvement of their family properties and regular remittances; but since the mid-1980s this financial involvement has been institutionalized through the work of many “development groups” (Jonokollan Shomittee) controlled by lineage leaders closely linked with the activities of Bangladeshi political parties in London, in particular the Awami League. The creation of these groups coincided with a sub-regional decentralization of governance in Bangladesh which reinforced the role that probashis (emigrants) could play in local Sylheti politics. The secularist desi-pols thus promote the idea that Bangladeshi cultural heritage remains central to the greater integration of young people in Britain, by centring their sense of identity as part of a cohesive minority within wider society.

Though often subject to the consequences, young people tend to stay out of this fray—a dogfight about issues and places irrelevant to their British lives.

The Mosque and its Moral Paradigm

East End mosques and their committee members—historically a centre of power in all Muslim communities—act as the socialist, Islamist balance to the desi-politicans’ secular capitalism in Tower Hamlets. Religious practice in the East End was initially based around small prayer rooms in council flats or private commercial spaces. During the 1980s, several larger facilities became available in neighbourhoods with large concentrations of Bangladeshis. Many mosques converted synagogues, community centres and parking lots to accommodate growing congregations, as when the East London Mosque—Tower Hamlets’

31 Qadim3.
32 Yusuf4.5.
33 Eade and Garbin, 2002, page 140.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Garbin, 2005, page 5.
biggest—expanded to create the multi-purpose London Muslim Centre in recent years.\textsuperscript{38}

Today, such larger facilities are still complemented by a plethora of localized prayer rooms that often cater to a tightly related congregation and date back to the Bangladeshi community’s early days in London.

Immediately after 11 September 2001, there were a string of attacks by non-Muslims on Muslims, but also by non-religious Muslims on religious Muslims, who were erroneously blamed for the rise of religious extremism and the British backlash. “Now, my mum can’t walk down the street without being harassed,” it was said. In response, the mosque’s Young Muslim Organisation began heavy recruiting to build bridges with the less religious people—particularly gang members on the streets of the East End. One former gang member says, “It failed because, ultimately, we saw little in it for us. They wanted our protection, and we all knew that we didn’t need to join a group to go to heaven. The Islamists weren’t prepared to share power. Some of us were businessmen and [street leaders] and we knew they weren’t sincere.” Still, among its thousands of members, the East London Mosque and others in the neighbourhood wield significant power. After the 2003 commencement of the war in Iraq, former-Member of Parliament George Galloway received the tacit endorsement of the East London Mosque and opened an office on Brick Lane. “Mosque endorsements have always been subtle and cautious,” Yusuf says. “People began to understand that Galloway was the choice. The regulars got the vibes and spread it.”

The strength of the mosque against the pragmatism of desi politics resides in its employment of a compelling moral paradigm that counters that of the British government and the desi-politicians who purportedly play along. Using the teachings of the Quran, Hadith and Sunna, this moral paradigm informs individual decision-making in rejecting Western society’s expedient rationality that relegates morality as a secondary concern, and instead supports a falsely clear-cut morality of justice that examines the means as much as the ends. Perhaps obliviously, the British political system is actively competing with these values of Islamic faith, family and culture—which many in the East End perceive to be quite distinct from each other.

The vast majority of Islamists couch their adherence to this paradigm by referring to a principle from the Hadith of Said Al-Bukhari and Said Al-Muslim, which teaches that as long as government laws do not ask the individual to do something that is haram or sinful, then they should be abided. But many perceived injustices straddle the border of good and evil in the minds of many young Bangladeshi men interviewed. Britain’s participation in the Iraq war is foremost among them. There is a “mentality of being victims,” one British Muslim leader says. “This could be a product of the little perceived difference of the 2-million-person-march against the war, and the continuous bigotry, hypocrisy of foreign policy. It is viewed as a moral issue—evidence of a deep spiritual malaise [in Britain]—where national interest is represented in greed, arrogance, hatred, and usurping others’ rights. These are the major moral vices, which are destructive within us as individuals. When governments display this on a massive scale, there are consequences.”\textsuperscript{39}

However, British haram extends beyond the national foreign policy in the eyes of many participants. Beyond the support for an unjust war, they say British society is culpable for its lifestyle. Several participants say they believe they fight the temptation of such sin

\textsuperscript{38} See Eade, John, "Reconstructing places: changing images of locality in Docklands and Spitalfields", in Eade, J. (Eds),\textit{Living in the Global City}, (London: Routledge, 1997), pgs.127-145.

\textsuperscript{39} Zaki1.
everyday—in the form of the most mundane aspects of life in the West. Amjad, a strictly religious, unemployed 20-year-old who spends his days at the East End Mosque, says:

They try to teach British values. I follow the values of my religion...I follow the Quran like my rulebook, and look to it for guidance. Everything you see around you in society are temptations. Naturally, I’m tempted. I think the whole reason for having these things around us is to serve as a test. It’s quite hard, like if you see a woman in front of you. If she’s beautiful, naturally you want a second look. But Islam teaches you to lower your gaze. It’s the same with waking up in the morning from your warm bed to go to the masjid for prayer. It’s about fighting the nafs [desire]. You win, you lose, but there’s always a chance to get back on the track. We learn from our mistakes...I don’t need to find out about temptations. If the Quran says don’t drink, I know I’m not missing out.

Viq, a 26-year-old business owner from Stepney, says, “It’s the culture and ideas in this country that is messing things up. It’s the idea of freedom and secularism. Guns don’t kill people, ideas do. ...But the government [rhetorically establishes] that excess and materialism is okay. And that criminality in white collar crimes isn’t wrong unless you get caught.” In response to such value discrepancies, many of the study participants have morally divested themselves from the institutions of the state. As several stated, their sovereign is Allah. “Right now, the government is a religion itself,” says Ridwan. “It runs our lives more than Islam runs our lives. ...We’re supposed to believe in it. But there is a lack of faith.”

Local Politics and the British State

“Of all the Muslim ethnicities in the UK, the Bangladeshs are the most organized,” states Qadim with certainty. “The Pakistanis, they’re huge, but they’re split into castes, villages, you know. So why in Tower Hamlets, if we’re so organized and hold a majority of Council seats, why do issues like overcrowding and unemployment go un-tackled?” Many young Bangladeshis interviewed asked similar questions, and the answer from Council employees deters many from engagement in formal British politics.

Participants point fingers in various directions, but most led to the individuals on the Council and the bureaucratic managers beneath them. One mid-level Council employee says that several Tower Hamlets Councillors “are literally illiterate in English, and are elected essentially via village politics. They’ve occasionally come to a school to encourage degree attainment and learning, when they can’t even boast the skills they’re touting. The kids just laugh. They think, ‘these people can’t possibly represent our interests.’” The effect of this image is significant as the Council seems at best detached from British reality, and at worst irrelevant. “The Tower Hamlets Council has more Bangladeshi councilors than any other, but there’s more infighting for power. ...Most young, entrepreneurial Bangladeshis avoid political service, because of the damaging reputation of these people. Politics seems not as desirable.” Another side believes that the Council is really managed by career bureaucrats pushing paper beneath the Cabinet. They argue that this group of decision-makers is unreflective of Tower Hamlets and unaccountable. “The politicians’ inability to deliver

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40 A2.
41 V4.
42 B6.
43 Ghalib 1.
44 Yusuf5.
leaves the real power to the non-Bengalis from the Shires who run the council’s bureaucracy,” says one desi-politician. “But fewer than 100 Council employees are Bengali. There is no Bengali management. The Council doesn’t represent the community, which gets a raw deal.”\(^{45}\) One Council employee says, “There are no Bengalis in the top three tiers of the government’s bureaucracy in Tower Hamlets’ civil servant hierarchy. And most of them don’t even live in Tower hamlets. They live in the shires.”\(^{46}\)

Levels of activism among young Bangladeshi study participants are quite high—particularly in comparison to white Britons in the control group. However, perhaps because of the Council’s low profile and low standing, little activism is through government channels. Similar to the generations before them, those interviewed tend to associate themselves with organisations and groups that are either non-governmental or not directly overseen by the government. These include neighbourhood groups, volunteer efforts, sports teams, school-related activities, mosque associations, and also gangs—which represent a deviant variety of civic engagement. However, in recent years, the Council’s youth services division has developed a set of evening youth clubs to appeal to Bangladeshi boys between 12 and 25-years-old. Taking place in neighbourhood community centres, these clubs are open anywhere from twice weekly to everyday and give young people a place to congregate after other venues have closed. They are usually run by other Bangladeshi members of the community who are slightly older, but young enough to offer relevant guidance. In the homogenous atmosphere, there are discussions about East End and Bangladeshi politics and the community, which make use of a moral paradigm that is more Islamic than secular. The government ties are almost clandestine, and the effort has been relatively successful.

The government is simply not a credible entity in the eyes of many young people. However if they are approached in the right way, previous successes show that they can be mobilised to participate. One local Council member says:

The boys here are much more politically active than boys in other boroughs, when you compare them to Afro-Caribbean boys. While some are active because they’re genuinely interested, other are active because they’re part of a youth organization or political culture. Then there are also the mass movements, like the one Galloway created. Young Tower Hamlets boys have been more politicized of late. A lot of credit goes to Galloway, as much as I hate to say it. But people are much more aware of political issues than they used to. However, being active is something different.

But I still think that the vast majority don’t understand what they are a part of. As a council, we put more money toward young people and more is done to bring them in, but I think that the truth is that the majority of them are simply not interested...

The kids are far more talented than we give them credit for. You don’t have to be in the system to be politically active. The problem is that there are so many young ones who do not know that there is life outside of Tower Hamlets. They don’t have any exposure to the outside world...

Many young people are confident enough to give police officers the lip, but not confident enough to speak out publicly. They have the talent to challenge authority, and that’s raw

\(^{45}\) Yusuff6.
\(^{46}\) J7.
talent that should be tapped. Instead, I think we tap those who are going to get involved anyway. It just makes the council officers’ lives easier.\textsuperscript{47}

Though a general lack of confidence in government efforts and efficacy are nearly ubiquitous, participants split over the next step in logic. While some believe the system is the best available, others believe it is irreparably flawed. This manifests itself most conspicuously in the choice of whether or not to vote. “In Islam,” Omar says, “we believe in choosing the better of two evils.”\textsuperscript{48} However a growing movement of Islamists—particularly those from Hizb-Ut Tahrir—is canvassing college campuses and street corners, arguing that voting is \textit{haram}. “If I voted, I’d be supporting a government that allows haram things,” says Naz. “Islam is about black and white, halal and haram. The better of two evils is still evil.”\textsuperscript{49}

In this microcosmic dispute, the government is losing the fight to sway perception.

\textbf{The Activist Apartism of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir}

Reviewing the previously discussed civic institutions in the East End, we see that Bangladeshis’ civic entities have traditionally remained \textit{within} the Bangladeshi community, reluctant to build bridges to incorporate non-Bangladeshi or orient itself for purposes that are not of specific interest to Bangladeshis. However, the younger generation of people under 30-years-old has little use for political associations that look out for the interests of remote villages on the other side of the world, investment opportunities to build a hotel in Sylhet Town, or a mosque committee that conducts meetings in a foreign language. Their sphere is Britain. And given their expressed feelings of entitlement, the second generation feels empowered to end quietism and seclusion by expressing themselves, jettisoning certain Bangladeshi traditions, and joining wider British society as a recognized member. Many established civic entities do not attract or embrace this younger generation, and there are limited alternatives. While youth groups are sprouting around the East End, these groups tend to attract (and some argue, babysit) the young people with video games, billiards, and ping pong; rather than genuinely attempt to address the conflicts and issues in their lives. As a result, some young people engage in apartist groups that do, and others do not engage at all.

There are thus two types of Apartism. There is the \textbf{Passive Apartism} of a socio-politically withdrawn citizenry. This group would be characterized by nihilism or hopeless disenchantment with the democratic system, leading to marginalization from it and the other civic entities mentioned above. This is best exhibited by the scores of gang members encountered during the fieldwork, many of whom were not interested in giving interviews. Passive Apartism is also demonstrated by other groups of non-Bangladeshi gang members, the severely impoverished, and some members of the severely complacent middle-class. However, among the Bangladeshis, the social cohesion and activist culture of the community suggests that most passive apartists are a recruitment effort away from becoming active.

An \textbf{Active Apartist} is an individual who is similarly alienated from the democratic system who responds by actively seeking to undermine it. After attending a variety of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir meetings in the East End over my fieldwork, it is clear that the transnational political party reflects and attempts to spread this actively manifested Apartism. Although other activists lament the intransigence, ineffectiveness, selfish disinterest or exclusiveness of

\textsuperscript{47} K1. \textsuperscript{48} O2. \textsuperscript{49} N4.
the state and its democratic institutions, they still find channels for leadership, participation and self-expression in informal or non-government groups, which complement the civic efforts of the government—even if this is done by confronting the government. Apartists, such as many members of Hizb-Ut Tahrir, pin these informal and non-governmental groups with the same criticisms those groups make of the government. However, Hizb-Ut Tahrir members believe that working within the boundaries or institutions of the government reinforces the power of an un-divine—and therefore inevitably failing—system. As a result, they believe that people must divest from that system, and seek an alternative—in this case, Islamic—system of governance.

_Hizb-Ut Tahrir_ (Party of Liberation in Arabic) is a transnational Islamist political party that directs its efforts to re-establishing the ummatic _khalifa_ or caliphate that once covered much of the Eastern hemisphere in the centuries immediately following the Prophet Mohammed’s death. They aim to undermine status quo political systems and build public support for Islamic rule—based on the idea that Islam is not merely a set of rituals or religious norms, but a complete system of governance of all aspects of life. In gradualist fashion, the group readily admits that the United Kingdom and other Western states are not their primary targets, but says that the West is their main source of ideas and strategy. “In this country, all we can do is spread ideas” says Viq, a member. “A lot of ideas in the Muslim world start here. When a Muslim in the Muslim world sees Western Muslims—in our prosperity—desire shari’a, that’s going to make them want it too.”

It is important to note that, unlike the other Bangladeshi civic entities discussed thus far, _Hizb-Ut-Tahrir_ (HT) does not extend organically from the Bangladeshi community. It is very much a transnational organisation with a globalised leadership to complement its globalised ambitions. Branches function in various boroughs within the United Kingdom in different neighbourhoods with different ethno-cultural compositions. The organisation’s local leadership is usually a reflection of its local constituency. So although the East End’s local HT activists are Bangladeshi, the organisation pre-dates their membership and is attempting to root itself in the fertile soil of Tower Hamlets like seeds in the wind. Like civic entities and gangs, HT competes for the membership and participation of young Bangladeshi men quite directly. Like two grocery stores on the same High Street, HT has established youth clubs in the same neighbourhood where mosque-sponsored and Council-sponsored youth clubs meet. On Ponler Street in the Shadwell ward, HT gathers a weekly meeting in the same building as a council sponsored youth club. Before Thursday meetings, the neighborhood’s HT leaders will go into the Council-sponsored club downstairs to recruit attendees at their discussion group upstairs. They offer free snacks and soda, along with a discussion about issues that are slightly more relevant and enlightening than the adolescents’ game of billiards—Islam and British society. Moreover, the clubs offer a sense of belonging and community, all of it exclusivist.

The sessions provide extensive guidance about a very specific way of life, and usually involve a “guest speaker” (invariably a member) who offers a lecture followed by questions (often planted), discussion, and then fried chicken and chips. “Who wants to be a sheep when you can be the shepherd?” the youngest age group is prompted at one session. The kids are taught how to pray, shown clips of an Islamic comedian, they discuss school problems like bullying, and describe heaven. “It’s a place where you can eat all you want and not have to go to the toilet,” they are told. “You have to be a good person to go to heaven.” One boy says that his heaven would boast a back door to Old Trafford. Another says that in heaven he

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50 V6.
would be given a Star Wars-esque light sabre, which he would use to cut green beans. These local groups complement higher level efforts, in which the group and its inscrutable hierarchy attracts dozens of professional, well-educated Muslims to monthly meetings where often news-relevant topics are discussed by panels.

Especially with the teenagers and young men, the sessions strive to relate Islam to their modern lives and challenges. Weekly meetings follow the same format, and aim to address the very questions and confusion faced by the individuals in attendance. The topics are often those that mosques will not address, but remain at the forefront of young people’s minds—such as Citizenship in Islam, Obama’s foreign policy, Is Islam confined to the mosque? They also tap into young people’s frustrations and anger. “Sometimes I get very angry about injustice, and I just wanna run around killing everybody, but I know better,” says O, who has dabbled in HT circles. The withdrawn and alienated are attracted to HT, one Muslim leader says, “because they speak the words which they are afraid to say.”

However, those words are directed at a specific constituency of young Bangladeshi men in the East End: the educated. Their leadership is reportedly comprised of successful professionals, and their messages correspondingly represent advanced interpretations that question traditionalism and the status quo, as described above. Given the dichotomy of “street boys” and “house boys” in Tower Hamlets, HT recruits the latter. Their younger members appear to be striving for university educations, and the focused studiousness such aspirations require alienates some from larger, less studious social groups. HT offers “house boys” a sense of belonging and new identity security to combat the same challenges facing their “street boy” counterparts. One gang member interviewed said that he had joined HT after being persuaded by one of the group’s leaders. The leader was deported a year ago, and he young man has not returned since. He said that the HT members were “a cool lot,” but it was clear he had difficulty relating. So while Hizb-Ut-Tahrir’s cause appeals to many young Bangladeshis struggling with questions of their identity and civic belonging, their message and social circle segregates Bangladeshis to comprise a distinctly educated group of dissidents. Calim, a local HT organiser explains:

I see a lot of anger. There’s hatred for the sake of hatred. Some of those ghetto youths haven’t got a job or education, so they fight in gangs. These guys may start to mellow out by coming to Islam. Others become angry Islamic bullies. They maintain that anger and Islamify it. The appeal of HT to these guys isn’t there because we operate at a high level with advanced messages and a higher benchmark.

Nationally we’re trying to get the Muslim community to take some responsibility for themselves. We should be eradicating problems by returning to our moral values. At the moment, there’s an identity crisis where neither are we following Islam, neither are we Bengali, neither do we feel part of the wider society in Britain. We’re lost.

It is their continued response to this continuing crisis that has sustained HT’s appeal. However, their guidance involves a retreat that undermines the inclusiveness of British democratic society. So unlike the worlds of business, the mosque, and the state, HT competes simultaneously with the first three civic entities and the overarching democratic system of governance that facilitates their activism.

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51 O4.
52 C2.
Doubting Democracy

Regardless of whether interviewees participate in the first three civic organisations working within the democratic system, participate in the exclusivist activities of groups like Hizb-Ut-Tahrir, or do not participate at all, just about every interviewee acknowledged the ways in which government services and democratic processes provide services in the United Kingdom. Indeed, most young Bangladeshis have benefitted from effective public housing, education, food subsidies, unemployment coverage and welfare payments—instilling the near ubiquitous sense of entitlement discussed in the previous section. However, equally ubiquitously, participants expressed significant doubts about the ability of the democratic system to fully deliver on the justice, liberty, and representation it promises. In numbers that would probably be mirrored by a study of non-Bangladeshi young people, not a single respondent (except for one in the control group) says that the democratic system is fully sound. Indeed, each participant acknowledged certain—and sometimes many—considerable imperfections and dysfunctions.

Those participants who were able to see themselves as part of an ultimately fair and efficacious—however imperfect—system that strives to improve and can be changed by its constituent citizens working in democratic institutions (the government, the mosque, or desi avenues) tend to be more engaged in democratic participation or activism. Those who believe that the democratic system’s imperfections corrupt any chance of efficacy, that the system was not ultimately interested in a fair outcome, and feel powerless to change it through democratic institutions (the government, the mosque, or desi avenues) tend to be less engaged or engaged in forms of participation that undermine the system—both aparatist. Essentially, only a minority of this group actually indicts the entire system for not fully providing the justice, liberty and representation to which they feel entitled. The statements below exhibit these distinct perceptions.

Among those who were democratically engaged:

Pir: Gordon Brown wasn’t even voted in by the people. How is that democracy? I think that every system has a flaw. Capitalist regimes work better than communist regimes. But they’re not good for everyone. In the end, there are so many opinions. Still, democracy is better than other options, but only marginally. It works on paper, but not in practice.  

Amjad: “People in authority, we can send them letters and make demonstrations, but will it be implemented? It’s all about who they consult. We can get into their positions. A lot of people who don’t have the qualifications are in charge though. Some don’t even speak English. ... I also don’t see how [some people] reject their Britishness. They are protected by a British passport. If I were not British, then I should be asked to leave.”

Fadhil: Democracy works. Voices are heard, but not the voice of working class people. It’s the people with the money. We’re not getting what we want, but we don’t even know why. We ask a question but we’re never given an answer. That’s how democracy works. I vote because I have to vote. Just in case my voice is heard.

Ridwan: People are disbelieving. They are losing faith in the government. We give our vote, but if they carry on in a manner we don’t accept, then they lose our trust. This is a problem with the

53 P1.
54 A4-5.
55 Fadhil4.
system. We think it’s gonna work, we think our vote is gonna count. We, as Muslims, vote for
the one who will create the least harm. But when that comes back in our face, we don’t have
the power to affect change. All we can do is create pressure groups and march. But we
shouldn’t have to take illegal or external means to speak to and access the government. As an
individual, I don’t have that kind of authority. They’re just going to think of me a one
individual. The local MPs don’t represent all our views. They pick and choose what they
want. Values should stem from those of the people. But [politicians] have created their own
values. It’s selfish, looking out for the good of the system and the people in charge, and not
for the good of society.  

Among those who are not engaged:

Ebrahim: “I’m relatively satisfied with government services, They give me education, health
coverage, housing for a family of nine. And I’ve been given a voice. But how loud is it?” [He
has experienced employer discrimination, police racism, and sensationalized press articles
that demonize Muslims, but says he has seen no policy change despite protests.] “What can I
do? I’ve seen other people try and they all fail. So why try?”

Omar: They don’t care about me. What has the government done for me? The government’s never
done nothing for me. ...I wouldn’t go to a council meeting because they wouldn’t listen to me.
They’d treat me like a kid.”

Yasir: I know it’s good to know the government because you’re living in their country, but I can’t be
bothered... It’s not that easy for change to happen... If I don’t know someone, I can’t trust
them. The same goes for people in the government.

Among those who are engaged in forms of participation that undermine the system:

Bilal: British foreign policy says we’re gonna engage the Muslim community, but after one million
people marched against the Iraq War, they were ignored, and five years later, we see all the
hypocrisy... You don’t need to engage the government to affect politics in the community. I
didn’t vote in the mayoral elections. You need to take an active role in the community. ... I
don’t have to take part in the government to do that.

Viq: There is no way you can change the British or US governments. It’s not going to happen. It’s
impossible to change the system by getting involved in the system. You can’t run in an
election if you don’t believe in secularism or capitalism. For me, the things I’m doing won’t
improve the lives of people in this country, but it’ll help the whole, the ummah. This country
has never been a Muslim country.

In each of these examples, the data show a substantial amount of doubt about the efficacy and
responsiveness of the democratic system. The extent of this sentiment is of concern.
However, there are nuanced differences in how each participant rationalises the imperfections

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56 Ridwan4.
57 E1.
58 O3.
59 Yasir1.
60 B5 and 9.
61 V6.
of the democratic system. Those who participate in the system place faith that it ultimately works, despite signs to the contrary.

**Democratic Participation Promotes Faith in Democracy**

The data suggest a strong correlation between those young people who participate in the first three civic entities described in this section and those who believe that the system of government normally works in their interest and should be entrusted with checked powers. These are people who participate in elections, activist movements, civic organisations, or interacted with government institutions in the past—even with relatively negative results, and even in the most limited way, or for the most self-serving reasons. Some may indeed participate because they already believe in the system. But in other cases, it seems clear that participation promotes belief in the efficacy or functionality of the system because participants either see themselves as invested in the potential results or because they have actually witnessed results. These groups include:

a) *The Democrat*: By joining the system and working within it.

b) *The Activist*: By confronting the system.

Correspondingly, the data exhibit a similar correlation between those participants who participate in exclusivist organisations or not at all and those who perceive the system of government to be working against their most general interests. With *Hizb-Ut-Tahrir*, access is conditional upon the individual’s submission to an ideology and its exclusivist outlook. Apartists participate in the civic sphere of the community in a way that weakens the democratic structures of engagement, or do not participate at all, and by doing so damage the representativity and responsiveness of the governing structure:

c) *The Active apartist*: By undermining or divesting from the system.

d) *The Passive apartist*: By not participating.

From these data, the objective of democratic authorities is unequivocally clear: promote inclusive democratic participation and faith in democracy. However this task is not a simple one in the East End. The first three civic entities—desi-business, the state, and the mosque—that work within the democratic system are inseparably connected to specific forms of identity and their moral paradigms. And as the next section explains, the civic entities are losing their relevance and credibility in the eyes of young Bangladeshi men precisely because the identity forms—of which they are civic manifestations—are losing their relevance and credibility first.

**An ‘Identity Crisis’**

Between 18- and 28-years-old, just about every second generation British Bangladeshi in Tower Hamlets is grappling with some degree of what participants almost universally refer to as an “identity crisis.” This crisis is created by young people’s confusion about the definitions of, their grappling with the rigidities of, and their sense of judgment about three main sources of identification: their British nationality and surroundings, their Bangladeshi ethnicity and culture of kinship, and their increasingly deterritorialised Islamic
religion. “Sometimes I say I have five faces,” says Tayyib. “Some friends think I’m religious. Some friends I go clubbing with. Some friends I talk politics with. Some friends I do community work with. And then I’m different with my family.”62 One community elder who works with young people said, “I see them all as zombies. They are juggling their faith, cultural ties, and attention to modernity in the West all at once. Depending where they are, they are different people.”63 The so-called identity crisis entails many individuals’ simultaneously questioning their own nationality, culture or religion—each seeming to undermine the other. Such simultaneous questioning is an evolution from the findings of earlier studies of young Bangladeshis, which noted their difficulty “ranking” their multiple identity forms.64 While many other Britons will also question their identity (especially those who similarly lack direction and believe the government fails to take them into account), this is typically a quiet and more personal struggle that is not given the public scrutiny and paranoid treatment that young Muslims are attracting from their schools and workplaces. Young Bangladeshis must therefore handle this traditionally private struggle very publicly, and their sensitivity to social judgment (by all parties) is especially acute.

In fact, nearly all the young Bangladeshis interviewed were indeed simultaneously questioning their nationality, ethnicity and religion. One Council official says that the identity crisis among young men is leading to broken families, disobedient youth, and domestic violence—both parents-on-kids and vice versa. He says children and parents are feeling demoralised because neither have fulfilled their roles or are accepted in society. “From where I sit,” he says, “confusion is very difficult. Until a person knows who they are, where they come from, they can’t do anything. As human beings, we have a purpose in life. So whatever you are, remember that every action has a reaction. You choose what you want to do, not because that’s what someone else tells you to do. It’s your choice and your consequences. Many of them don’t know the consequences or why, really why, they are doing it.”65 In the case of most young British Muslims, the consequences of their private struggle are perceived to be in the public interest. And as the British government and social discourse continue to base contemporary social divisions on religion, young Bangladeshi Muslims are unnecessarily forced to defend theirs.

Britishness

Nearly all the subjects of this study were born in Britain, attend or have attended British schools, and have absorbed years of British television, music and media content. English is their best and usually only language, as many speak very broken Shudoh, the Sylheti dialect, and little to no Arabic. They survive on a diet of curry when at home and halal fried chicken and chips on the streets. “I do want to feel British,” says Ridwan, “because then I’m not isolated. I don’t want people to say that just because I’m Asian or Muslim, I’m not British.”66 Similarly, Shahid says, “I don’t see myself as someone from outside this society. I’m British, and I am a product of this place.”

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62 T8
63 Ghalib 2
65 J1.
66 Ridwan7
shop, Hanif was asked what British people think of him. “I am British!” he chuckled, producing an outburst of laughter from his friends around the table. Indeed, despite this personal and private acquaintance with British culture and society, many participants found public acceptance of their Britishness laughable in light of perceived double standards. A majority of respondents say they feel definitively rejected by British society. “When I have kids, they may not even speak Bengali,” Qadim says. “But in the UK, I’ve been forced to think I’m different because of my skin colour and the shade of beard I keep. Everything I have is for this country. But I’m not allowed to feel a part of it.”

Naz, a 20-year-old university student from Stepney, asks:

What is British? Is it that I was born here? Or do I have to adopt the culture? Britain is multicultural. I know that. But there are certain things that I don’t accept, that this society does. So people assume, ‘Oh, he’s not like us. He’s radical.’ All Muslims feel out of bounds. Because of secularism, individualism, materialism, many people put Islam second. Where is multiculturalism if Britain is going to treat people differently, and not British? I’ve faced it. I’ve been told to go back to my country by an older white lady when I was playing football as a kid. Yes, my parents aren’t English. But I was born here. I went to the same schools.

From news reports that cast South Asians and Muslims as dangerous, laws designed to profile them, personal and collective experiences with discrimination and racism, and negative informal social interactions, young Bangladeshis have become intensely insecure about their role in British society. Many young people feel singled out and subjected to unfair double-standards in the interest of feelings of security for other, non-Muslims people. “I felt like I belonged before the Terrorism Act,” said Imran, an 18-year-old sixth-form student from Shadwell. “But now I’m scared I might do something wrong. People used to speak their mind without worrying about it. Now people think they’re going to be put in prison.” Juxtaposed to the liberalism with which non-Muslims appear to express themselves, freedom of speech is perceived by many participants to be conditional.

Such double standards particularly undermine personal claims to Britishness. During the course of the case study in the East End, there was furore in the British press about the detainment of a British schoolteacher in Sudan over the naming of a class teddy bear ‘Mohammed.’ Concurrently, another Briton—of Bangladeshi heritage, named Rizwan Hussain—was beaten, interrogated and detained by police forces in the Dhaka airport. Though followed closely by East End publications, this story never made it into a mainstream British newspaper. For such reasons, Jalil, an unemployed gang member from Tredegger, said he doesn’t feel like Bangladeshis are looked upon as equals, even if, personally, they feel as British as anyone else. “I’m in the books as British,” he says, “but if push comes to shove, it’s a double standard, right? Look at Guantanamo Bay. If it were white Britons being tortured, they’d be out of there.” As a result, Bangladeshis quite generally are actively questioning their belonging and acceptance in the only country in which they hold citizenship—the only country they know.

Out of pride, many participants denied their desire for recognition, but still expressed frustration with the standards of belonging. “I feel like this is home,” said Zubair. “This is my comfort zone. This is the system I grew up with. As a citizen I want to reap the benefits. The
government provides me with a source of security. That said, just after 9/11, I once got stop and searched three times in a one hour and forty minute span, three minutes from my house. It made me feel very angry, undermined. I produced evidence that I’d been searched already, and the cops weren’t having it.” Ultimately, it appears that a repressed desire to be recognised as British is what makes rejection subsequently affect them so strongly.

Bangladeshi Heritage

If they are not fully British, are they Bangladeshi? The answer from respondents—young and old—is a resounding “No.” Depending on the age and class of the respondent, this response is for different reasons. Many of those who have earned enough money to leave the bari atmosphere of Tower Hamlets have begun to assimilate to British borough life. Within Tower Hamlets, elders believe the younger generation has abandoned their Sylheti cultural roots which once worked seamlessly with Islam to set them apart in an all-Muslim region carved from a Hindu subcontinent in 1947. While these elders have maintained points of reference from their rural lives in their new urban existence, the newest generation cannot make the same connection. One community elder says, “People are diverting away from our way of life, our culture, and one day, they’ll come back but it’ll be too late. Bengalis are not given enough opportunities to keep our roots. Whose standard is community cohesion based on? It’s about accepting people, not changing them. Our young people are disowning the very society they are from, and that is, in effect, genocide. They are changing their names, everything. There’s an old Bengali saying, just because you change your skin, doesn’t mean you’ll change your behaviour.”

Interestingly, young British Bangladeshi men have been taught to isolate as ethnocultural social traditions which their parents and grandparents (and many Westerners) have linked with Islam. Norms like arranged marriage, restrictions on women, clothing preferences, and certain ceremonies have been identified as part of an antiquated Bangladeshi culture that has no place in modern British lives. Zakaria says:

There’s a lot of things that the Bengali community does that I’m like, ‘You’re not following Islamic culture, you’re following Arab culture or Bengali culture.’...Most Muslim weddings in Tower Hamlets go by Bengali traditions, which are derived from Hinduism, not Islam. In Bangladesh, women had to stop studying to take care of the family. Here, they can keep going. A lot of Bengalis have twisted Islamic arranged marriage into forced marriage. Islam doesn’t give the parents the final say.72

One explanation for this discrepancy is offered by Pnina Werbner, who argues that “by contrast to South Asian popular culture, which is inclusive, absorbent, experimental, reflexively satirical and politically incorrect, the South Asian Muslim diaspora in Britain is represented by spokesmen as socially exclusive, high cultural, puritanical, politicised and utterly serious.”73 Between the older generation’s secular Bangladeshi cultural norms and the

71 J3.
72 Zakaria, 6.
younger generation’s Islamist image, Werbner identifies a middle ground of lucrative, hybridized culture that is palatable to British consumers, integrating many South Asians into British society without the demand that they abandon their South Asian transnational affiliations and orientations.\textsuperscript{74}

One significant problem is that there is a great deal of uncertainty about what actually constitutes as Bangladeshi. The second generation in Britain is very far removed from Bangladesh, and very few return with any frequency. In another conversation at a chicken’n’chips shop, I ask a young man to describe his ideal world. He responds by suggesting that it would resemble “Bangladesh,” as his friends giggled together. After an awkward pause, Zakaria said, “Yeah but that’s not the right place either. They don’t really understand us. In Sylhet, everyone thinks of us as Londoni.” Their accent in Shudoh is usually a “dead giveaway”—if the spiked hair and baggy designer jeans are not. Sylhetis migrated mostly from rural farming villages amid the tea plantations in the tropical northeast of Bangladesh, with few resources to construct exportable cultural goods. Truly, the spicy curries, masalas, tikkas, and naan bread that attract Londoners to the Bangladeshi-run balti houses on Brick Lane represent a Bangladeshi cuisine is actually an assortment of influences from across South Asia. Bangladeshi film and television is dominated by Bollywood content. Bangladeshi fashion consists of a selection of Western trends and Indian saari gowns. Indeed, the “dirty little truth,” as one Bangladeshi business-owner and community leader called it, is that “there really is no such thing as Bengali culture anyway.”\textsuperscript{75} So even if there was a desire to engage a tangible Bangladeshi ethnicity among youths in the East End, it is evanescent at best.

\textbf{Islam}

The simultaneously perceived rejection by British society and alienation from their Bangladeshi roots has led to a significant and well-documented “embrace” of a deterritorialized, ummatic Islam. However, the so-called “embrace of Islam” appears to be significantly rhetorical and fitted for identity discourse. Lifestyle preferences among participants interviewed are influenced by British social norms, and—as with so many other people who live in secular democracies—Islam is woven in as a set of moral virtues, heritage, and culture. The embrace of religious Islam is almost reluctant, as many youths appear very fond of the freedoms, liberalness, and individuality of British life—despite the fact that many aspects such as drinking, dancing, music, and free-mixing with the opposite sex are looked down upon in religious terms. Their embrace thus appears to be reactive to a securitized, polarized British social environment that undermines their claims to Britishness.\textsuperscript{76} Islam is a way to respond, that also satisfies the desire of parents and other local community members to follow certain ethno-religious traditions. So while many young people are separating themselves from the restrictions and anachronism of Bangladeshi culture, Islam is a sufficient replacement for all involved. Still, in this light, many young “cultural” Muslims who are indulging in questionable Western habits, temptations, and excesses seem to do so as a conscious choice. They are aware of the influence of British mass culture, and have chosen to

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.\textsuperscript{75} Yusuf9.\textsuperscript{76} See Archer, Louise, “Muslim brothers, black lads, traditional Asians: British young men’s constructions of ‘race,’ religion, ad masculinity,” \textit{Feminism and Psychology}, Vol. 11, No. 1, pages 79-105; and see Claire Dwyer, et al., ‘‘From cricket lover to terror suspect’—challenging representations of young British Muslim men,” \textit{Gender, Place, and Culture}, Vol. 15, No. 2, April 2008, pages 117-136.
engage it. The question for them is not only, “Do you feel British,” but also, “Do you want to feel British?” The answer commonly appears to be “yes.”

Nevertheless, for those British Bangladeshi participants sensing a degree of rejection by their white British peers, the idea of an identity that ignores borders and unifies like-minded people holds great relevance. “Islam simplifies,” Mahir says. “It’s all about unification, and that’s what we’re getting away from. I am a Muslim. Not a Barelwi, Tablighi Jamaat, Salafi, Hanafi or whatever. I’m a Muslim. I’m not British or Bengali. I’m Muslim.” Mahir did not seem to understand the differences among Islamic sects. However, his rejection reflects a common desire to move beyond differences to a universalist Islam that enables Muslims to transcend exclusive national ties. Similarly, Ismail, a high school student, says, “I don’t feel an identity crisis, because I feel like I have a relationship with God and so I don’t have any problem saying that I am a Muslim. I’ve put myself in a box, and eliminated my British and Bengali ties. Do I need to claim to be British? No, I don’t need to. I have a British passport. And I’ve only been to Bangladesh once, when I was a child, and I was too young to remember any of it.” Putting it quite simply, Pir says, “Once I get to the mosque, I know who I am.”

Given their social lives which are generally limited to coteries of Bangladeshi friends, and their lifestyles which are mostly British existences interrupted by Islamic obligations (not the other way around), participants’ relationships with their British and Bangladeshi identities are simultaneously self-evident and impossible—as any individual’s relations with larger identity forms are. Their relationship with Islam therefore becomes chosen (and thus more closely defended), rhetorical (and thus more volatile), and one of necessity, as the religious intersects with the ethnic and national.

Because it supplants a rhetorical national or ethnic identity which requires no exercises beyond discursive identification, Islam as an identity doesn’t necessarily suggest practice or even accurate knowledge. “Without Islam, I have no identity,” Ebrahim, a student at Queen Mary University, says. “My practice is weak, yeah. I have little time in life for Islam. But it’s still my base. When I have nothing else, it’ll always be there.” One particularly zealous participant, Jalil, says that his ideal is embodies by “the peace of Islam. Everyone should read the scripture and they would be at peace.” Interestingly, he admittedly does not, and instead, he relies on elaborately colourful and fantastic stories about the roots of human civilization that sharply dichotomize good and evil. His ideas about good and evil are firm, clean-cut, and without any attention to nuance or greyscale. His knowledge of Islam is at best anecdotal, and at worst, downright apocryphal. He confesses to engaging in the haram—sexual desire, encounters with women, violence, and deception. But he says he does so for the “pleasure,” which he views as the result of hedonism. All participants who discussed their dablings in the haram say that they will return to the right path later in life. Islam is therefore an entity that—unlike Britishness and Bangladeshi culture—is perceived to be most flexible and enduring. It is not withheld because of third-party disapproval, nor is it evanescent with increasing time and distance. Indeed, Islam perceived to be more subject to personal interpretation than either British nationality or Bangladeshi heritage—even if this is erroneous.

77 M1.
78 G6.
79 E2.
80 Jalil2.
Irrelevant to individuals’ depth of practice or knowledge, Islamic identity simplifies the divisive networks of Muslim sects and ethnic groups that compete for power, and enables some degree of felt unity against their collective vilification in the West. “Up against violence, drugs, poverty, and bad housing, what holds this community together is religion,” says Tayyib. “Everyone has been told the difference between halal and haram. Those boundaries are always there. And the sense of brotherhood encourages help and feelings of solidarity.”\(^{81}\) Islam also provides an unequivocal answer to young people’s identity crisis. Omar, an unemployed former gang member in Tredeger, said:

Things in my life were rough—family issues, girls, school, money—everything. So I turned to Islam, began reading several books. I grew out my beard to emulate the Prophet, which makes me look older, forcing people to take me more seriously. ...The Quran is my way of life. ...I don’t need counsel because I can always look at the book. Everything I need is here. I don’t adapt the Quran to British citizenship. British citizenship is adapted to the Quran.\(^{82}\)

Demonstrating his inherent insecurity about the thoughts he offered so confidently, after his interview, the same young man quite humbly texted “It was nyc talking 2 u geeza. I dnt knw wat u fout ov me. Hw was I at arguing, or putin ma point acros ratha?” Indeed, he was quite convincing and charming. Many other youths become more religious or at least project a more Islamic identity in response to significant events in their lives. Much like people of other faiths, several participants said they relied upon Islam after a family member died, a friend was stabbed, a near-death encounter with narcotics, some simply because they encountered racism.

In embracing Islam, Britishness is commonly rationalised as temptation. Many participants fingered the creeping influence of contemporary “Western culture” and its malicious allure as the primary impediment to a more Islamic life. The temptation of mixed gender relations, alcohol, drugs, music, secularism and individualism was regularly blamed for the perceived deterioration of moral values among Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets and the waning ethno-civic solidarity within the community. “We are so bloody gullible,” says Calim, a schoolteacher from Stepney. “Look at the kids with the low, baggy trousers. They’ll follow anything. And as the generations go by, they’re getting spoiled and they’re throwing it all away... The situation has gotten so bad, and it’s going to get worse and worse. The hip hop culture is so damaging. These kids live for that life of guns, drugs, cash, fuck this, fuck that.”\(^{83}\) In a similar vein, Bilal says, “We still have the nuclear family structure here among Bengalis, but these kids are taking 50 Cent as their role model. The community is slowly becoming, you hate to say it, ghetto.”\(^{84}\)

Indeed by providing a transnational source of community to supplant the problematic local, the ummah facilitates claims to collective pride, loyalty, but also collective injury. And like a culture, followers of an Islamic identity tend to apply Islamic teachings as a complete way of life—as opposed to the way some of their parents have treated Islam, as a set of rituals to perform and repeat. However, this becomes problematic for many young people in Tower Hamlets because religious teachings and norms often clash with other more-embedded aspects of their non-Islamic identity. “Religion clashes with the style of the subculture,” Ridwan says. “I feel bad if I go to mosque when I style up my hair, so I wear a hat. I feel

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\(^{81}\) T7.

\(^{82}\) O1

\(^{83}\) C1.5.

\(^{84}\) B7.
weird, self-conscious when I wear my ripped jeans.”

Other youths are perplexed by the competing priorities of a demanding faith and demanding career ambitions. “I’m busy,” says Faisal, “but Islam says that Islam is always first.” Shahid asks, “How can we stick close to the text, and yet stay in the modern world?...I mean, if I had a job interview, I wouldn’t be wearing [a prayer gown and a cap]. A hijab similarly doesn’t go in our society. We are living in the West. It’s about conforming to local society.”

In light of similar statements, Olivier Roy contends that the term “Muslim” is now used as a “neo-ethnicity,” with no reference to faith or genuine religious practice. He writes, “‘neo’ means that the culture of origin is no longer relevant, and ‘ethnicity’ that religion is not seen as faith but as a set of cultural patterns that are inherited and not related to a person’s spiritual life.” Indeed, I concur with his argument that “British Muslims have constructed a new ethnic group, which did not previously exist as such, through a limited set of differential patterns isolated from a more complex and diverse cultural background.” However, this ethnic group is used more rhetorically in the socio-political sphere. In practice, young Bangladeshis neo-ethnicity has quite a British and post-Bangladeshi tint to it. They tend to socialise in insular groups of British Bangladeshis (often excluding non-Bangladeshi Muslims, and even non-Sylheti Bangladeshis) and relate as much to their shared experiences in the British public sphere as they do commiserating (often in jest) over their shared household customs. As a result, I believe their Muslim identity is not nearly as deterrioralised as some leaders claim. Though influenced by the words of sheikhs and individuals from beyond their countries and sensitized to the plight of Muslims worldwide, the young Bangladeshi men interviewed apply such messages to a distinctly post-Bangladeshi, British life. Indeed, the Muslims to whom they might feel connected elsewhere tend to also remain quite culturally rooted to the traditions and norms of Morocco, Indonesia and Iran—where they can also hardly relate to a British life of modern conveniences, luxuries, and the means to stage ideological revolutions.

Ubiquitous Social Judgment

For the young British Bangladeshi in the East End, judgment is simply ubiquitous—by community elders, by prospective employers, by imams, by police, by parents, by peers. This feeling of being judged by people in the community is a form of projected identification (or the confusion thereof). Indeed, the individual’s insecurities are often most candidly expressed through their specific concerns about judgment or compensatory fixation on one aspect of their persona. What further complicates these insecurities is the existence and implementation of more than one criterion based on the different identity constructions present.

With their impatience for Bangladeshi cultural traditions and felt social rejection by white British society, many British Bangladeshis who are not religiously inclined claim to employ a moral criterion connected to a distinctly restricted Islamic lifestyle. As explained earlier in this chapter, Islam dictates that food must be halal at all times; alcohol, drugs, and other any other intoxicants are banned; cross-gender “free-mixing” is not permitted; and depending on interpretation, non-Islamic music, iconography, charging interest on loans, and certain feminine fashion is frowned upon. Many of these are very public choices. In

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85 Ridwan.
86 Faisal.
interviews, however, the same men who claim a Muslim identity often admit to consuming alcoholic beverages, frequenting night clubs, listening to hip hop music on their mobile phone, and dating women casually. Without the foundation of a secure (hybridized) identity, these choices proved to foster strong feelings of guilt and weakness that affect their confidence and ability to assert themselves, participate in inter-ethnic activities, or join social spheres of other Bangladeshis who purportedly avoid haram activities. Calim says that before he became strictly religious, “My perception of Islam was a sensible, stable thing that grown-ups do. There was a certain amount of guilt, and I didn’t want to feel that guilt of getting punished and displeasing.” Many others say that they do not feel comfortable speaking to even slightly older Bangladeshis about taboo issues—particularly sex and “Western” temptations—which subsequently build up in their minds and lead many to keep secrets that estrange relationships between generations. “I would never even speak to my brother about a girl,” said Yusuf. “The British lifestyle is still not generally acceptable, and young people are still scared about judgment. ...As a result, they’re still not able to do what other British kids do. So they still stick mostly to other Bengali boys, and real assimilation and change hasn’t happened.”

Perhaps the most basic criterion for judgment—of which a young Bangladeshi male is cognizant since birth—is that of marriage suitability. This is a criterion rooted in Bangladeshi culture. And outside of exceptional circumstances, no matter how backwards a boy finds Bangladeshi culture, if he wishes to marry within the Bangladeshi community, he must navigate a mine field of social judgment. Commonly, this involves an elaborate dance to adhere to etiquette and heed Islamic restrictions. Because casual dating and romance is barred, it is usually secretive. When a relationship based on text messages, encounters in the street, and going out in separate groups is ripe, the male must approach his non-girlfriend’s father to request the commencement of wooing. Permission is based on what is already known about the young man, and the prospect of such an ultimate Judgment Day resides in the back of his mind at all times within a community where reputations reach all corners. If permission is granted, thus commences a period in which the male is invited to his non-girlfriend’s home for a series of dinners and other family gatherings—during all of which he will be scrutinized. The consequences are manifold. Many secretly enduring “love” relationships are deemed improper when they are found out. Many marriages take place before a male has had much interaction with women, or without the persuaded interest of the bride. And more than anything, young Bangladeshi men can almost never feel truly free from the community’s judgment. “A lot of things in the Bangladeshi community are about what others think of you,” Yusuf says. “One bad reputation for the family ends their chances of marrying off their children. So if the kids are taking drugs or doing bad things, the family can become socially isolated or they may just shut off communication with the community. The son is a reflection of the family.”

While there is significant overlap between Bangladeshi marriage and Islamic criteria, a third criterion of judgment—that of greater British social acceptance—can seem quite conflictive. British youth social spheres are perceived to be—and occasionally are—significantly based on drinking alcohol, casual dating, listening to diverse types of music, and clubbing. And young Bangladeshi men are confronted with this social model by newspaper reports about household-name celebrities, television content, and increasingly, online personal profiles on sites like Facebook, MySpace and HighFive. In this manner, a drastically different lifestyle is showcased and many participants said that they are either attracted to it,
or feel pressured to accommodate it in the interest of social acceptance (perhaps both). They say social pressures are manifested in school, at work, and during social interactions with non-Bangladeshis. The three criteria of judgment make for existential conflict, but parents and elders are showing some signs of flexibility. Zubair says:

It’s like you have an oxygen mask on, and the air is slowly depleting. Things are getting tight. Our hierarchy of needs is changing. ...The bari culture, it’s not something that we can carry over to this country. My parents and their generation can. But London is like a machine, a clock that ticks non-stop. But I think people here are changing. I think Bengali people are very happy for their daughter or son to go to uni, in a free mixed environment. My mum now learns English, she swims in the sea in a saari, attends a women’s club. She carries a diary now. This is just in the past three years, and it’s empowering. The women, they’re moving much faster than the men. They’re the ones who are progressing. I think people are embracing Western culture and lifestyles. Buts some things, of course, won’t change.  

Qadim explains that meeting the three criteria makes for a hybridised individual:

The sisters want what I call a ‘bad boy brother.’ Someone who is attractive and respected by the boys, but presentable to the family. So I say ‘insha’allah’ and keep this thin beard. But even your beard is thicker than mine. I don’t pray, and I’m gonna want to shag every chance I get. The embrace of Islam is huge and it’s become mainstream now. H&M is selling Palestinian checkered scarves. If I claim to be practicing, I get a support system. It’s for protection.

The individual’s management of these three criteria of social judgment contributes to the definition of their civic life. Indeed, the more security with which they can go about their affairs, the more likely they may be to lead or participate publicly and bridge ethno-religious differences. The question is, can individuals find a substantive base for this security despite their overlapping and intersecting identities? In practice, those youths with greater apprehension about reconciling their manifold identity are more susceptible to the clarifying exclusivist doctrine of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir or more likely to become sociopolitically marginalised. Indeed, few participants were surer of themselves than the members of HT.

**Apartheid Rejectionism**

*Hizb-Ut-Tahrir*’s East End activists and recruiters recognise that young Bangladeshis feel excluded from British society and have retreated into a tentative, defensive embrace of their embattled Muslim faith without actually accepting its traditional moral paradigm. The group opportunistically exploits young Bangladeshis’ perceptions by filling the voids created by these circumstances—an uncertain nationality and an uncertain moral paradigm. HT attempts to replace Britain as young Bangladeshis’ nation-state by connecting them to an invisible, global, ummatic nation governed by the resurrected structures of the extinct *khalifa*. It welds this nation together by their segmented religion but more strongly by a false moral paradigm that claims to supersede the “petty divisions” and “irrelevant” rituals of their parents and relatives. In doing so, all three principle pillars of the young British Bangladeshi Muslim’s

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89 Zubair3.5.  
90 Qadim7.
identity are abandoned in favour of one which simultaneously encompasses all of them and none at all.

In this study of young Bangladeshis, Apartism in the East End is limited to those individuals who are withdrawn from the British civic sphere (mostly gang members and drug traffickers) and members of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir. While the British government continues to investigate cells of Al-Muhajuroun an Al-Qaeda, these groups were not encountered in the fieldwork and therefore not interviewed or observed. However, from secondary sources, it is clear that each doctrines promotes the same deterritorialised Muslim culture and state that challenges the foundations of local Islam, local ethnicity, and local democratic government.

Rejection of Britishness

A general rejection of the British democratic government is underpinned by the argument that the West fosters hatred for Islam, uses an undivine system of governance, and provides freedoms which promote the haram. Hizb-Ut-Tahrir showcases democracy’s imperfections and attempts to exhibit a global agenda against Islam to demonstrate that it is a system not fit to govern Muslims anywhere. It highlights the system’s obvious weaknesses that require the representative “leap of faith” shown to be necessary for active civic engagement in the institutions of democracy. At a June meeting in Toynbee Hall, the lead speaker says:

The Western governments have achieved backwardness, corruption, and the oppression of the masses based on a policy of secularism and Western values. There is an utter loss of confidence in our rulers, and utter loss of confidence in our system of government.

While Muslims in the West hate our rulers, rulers like [Afghanistan’s Hamid] Karzai are treated like heroes when they [make state visits to other countries, because they are propping each other up]. The West relies upon them for access to resources and markets. We should replace these useless states with one that will protect unity, honour Islam, and rob the West of what it’s been stealing.

Today, if you want forces out of Iraq, sharia law, Islamic economics, then you are extremists. If you accept [oppression, invasion, and inequality], then you are moderates, and have been accepted into Western Islam.

The West needs hatred for Islam to support its interventions in the Muslim world. They want us to be afraid enough to accept Western Islam, because our Islam is scaring them and making them lose sleep.

The leader of the Stepney group organised a month-long series on citizenship in Islam, in which weekly dialogue condemned democracy and encouraged attendees who wished to “get involved” to do so by circumventing the vehicles of activism provided by the state. In one discussion, he employed a deceptive account of democracy’s “lies”:

It is explained to us that democracy is the only system. But democracy is a system based on lies and myths. Just like the myth of British prosperity for a Bangladeshi immigrant, who comes here and ends up cutting onions in a restaurant.

The first lie is that the government is going to look after us. Member sof the government are just looking out for themselves. Just last month, MPs in the House of Commons were debating about whether to give themselves a payrise to £60,000. That’s more money than we’ll ever make.
The second lie is accountability. The Brown tax breaks only went to the middle class, but not to the guys who work at Sainsbury’s [supermarkets].

The third lie is that political parties actually care about Muslims. The terrorism laws are passed by MPs who are arguing about how long to put you in prison. These people looking after your interests are trying to get rid of habeas corpus so that they can throw you away without evidence. …These laws are aimed at Muslims.

People say there are no politics in Islam. But there are so many verses. [He recites a sequence of Arabic excerpts that few attendees understand.] Who is worse: the ones who want to imprison you for 20 days under anti-terrorist laws, or the BNP? They’re gonna send you back home [to Bangladesh].

So how do Muslims get involved in politics, when we don’t believe in democracy? Politics is simple. It’s about looking out for people’s needs. Islam can do that too. Allah gave us clear rules and laws for doing that. Allah provided us with a system. Allah chose for us the Islamic system and way of life because we didn’t need democracy.

Shortly after the meeting, Ismail, an 18-year-old from Stepney says he is persuaded to not support a democratic system. “At any moment,” he says, “maybe 70% of the population doesn’t want the government in power. It has its mistakes. But that’s because it’s man’s law, and man is fallible. That’s not something we can live by when we’ve been given divine texts. Here, someone with money gets a bigger say. Poor people are usually underrepresented. Democracy entails capitalism which requires inequality in the world.” Another attendee says, “Democracy is a man-made system, so of course it is going to fail. We are not averse to believing that people have power. It’s the source of where the problem lies. The will of the people isn’t being acted on. The system isn’t anything like the system claims to be. The choices are always limited to those which are secular and Western-oriented. It’s just a tool to serve the interests of the superpowers. People genuinely want to live by the shari’a.”

HT activists point to their own success in the East End as evidence that the state is not necessary to build community strength. Viq says:

I spend more of my money on this community project, but I have a greater effect in my volunteer work than any committee or councillor ever would. The councillors know we control a lot of youths, and they’ve even approached us for votes. Councillors Alibor Choudhury [Labour] and Mohammed Abdul Munim [RESPECT].

Our community, we’ve had many councillors, many different governments, and nothing has changed. Until we established the club. No councillor can solve our problems. He can write a speech, but he’s not on the ground. There were these two boys who approached in the midst of a serious, threatening argument over a drug deal in which one purportedly owed the other 50 pounds. So I just gave one of them 50 pounds, and asked if life is really worth killing each other over.

Such deceptively clear solutions also underpin HT’s response to the social rejection their young members are encountering from their non-Muslim, British peers. They claim that
the freedom of British society is un-Islamic in its enablement of temptation, and that the culture of individualism undermines the solidarity of the Muslim minority. “We live in a society where everyone wants to think they are free,” said a HT leader at a meeting in Shadwell. “So they think they are also free from God’s restrictions. They want to get out and enjoy themselves. We’re not free. We are slaves to Allah. And if so, we need to follow Allah. And it’s not just Muslims. We have got the solution for the whole of society. We have to give up freedom.”93 At another meeting in Toynbee Hall, a speaker says, “Freedom of speech is a license to attack Islam. There was culture, science, discovery in the old khalifah. It didn’t need freedom of speech to make people think. The Quran addressed them in a rational way that made people think.”94 In spreading this da’wa, or message, the Shadwell group leader compared the social rejection experienced by its members to the disbelief and condemnation experienced by the Prophet:

In every town, when prophets are sent, they are always mocked. Like when Mohammed walked in Makkah. Sometimes they are even threatened with death. This is the same thing you see today. You want to go speak to someone about Islam. They say, ‘Hey, those preachers are coming. Let’s have some fun with them,’ or ‘Oh, here goes that ninja girl’ or ‘Here goes Bin Laden.’ Our duty is to convey the message. If the prophets were ridiculed, then surely we should expect that people will ridicule us. Wherever we go, Islam is being attacked. The media, everywhere. In this situation, our obligation is to tell people about Islam.

‘Forget about talking about politics,’ we’re told, ‘because if you talk about the government, they’ll close down our ministry.’ When the Prophet told people not to cheat in the market, not to bury unwanted babies alive, they said, ‘you are a troublemaker.’ People want to remain comfortable. The same goes here. People are on the streets smoking a spliff with a bottle of alcohol, going after girls. These are people that are comfortable. If you tell them to stop, you become a troublemaker.

When people can’t win an argument, they will resort to making fun of your funny beard or long gown. When we call out the British government for killing innocent people, they make legislation. Now if you criticize the war, they’ll put you in prison. If you join a certain group, they’ll put you in prison. But this is nothing new.95

### Rejecting Bangladeshi Heritage

*Hizb-Ut Tahrir* rejects the cultural ties of East End Muslims to their decreasingly relevant Bangladeshi heritage, calling it Hindu-ised, backward, and *haram*. This echoes the thoughts of many young Bangladeshis who grow impatient with the seemingly misplaced traditionalism of their parents. HT’s stand against the embrace of Bangladeshi culture was applied strongly during the East End’s *Baishakhi Mela* new year’s festival. On a local club’s website, an author wrote:

With many Muslims attending the Boishaki Mela, an event which was a sad day for Muslims in London. Ask yourself; why are the Muslim youth so blind that they proudly wear the flag of Bangladesh when Bangladesh has legalised prostitution and in itself is a mela of corruption? So then why do Muslim youth celebrate nationalistic pride (*kufr*)? That day was

93 HTB6.
94 HTA3.
95 HTB2-4.
truly a sign of the days of *Jahiliyyah* (ignorance) that our beloved Prophet (pbuh) faced before. So, like then we need the mercy of Islam again, and its isn’t just growing a beard, praying, and wearing Islamic clothing- as these types also attended the mela!. What does it mean to feel the true mercy of living under the shade of the Quran? Will we enter the shade of the Quran during this hot summer weather and abstain from un-Islamic behaviour, thus avoiding the searing heat of *Jahannam*?

The prophet (saw) warned against imitating those ignorant people who think they’re free. Muhammad (pbuh.) said:

"Do not be a mere imitator with no firm determination. You say, ‘I am with the people. Should people do good, so do I. And if they do evil, so do I’. But school yourselves. If people do good so should you. But if they do evil shun their evil deeds”.

Such a statement reflects the organisation’s argument that Muslims must operate according to a pan-Islamic moral paradigm—in all aspects of their lives, in full. They reprimand Muslims who limit Islam’s role and follow Islamic norms halfway, leading to a chastising critique of Bangladeshi mosques for tolerating such malpractice:

Islam is a complete way of life; it is unlike any other religion. We do not believe in secularism as it is a separation of church from state i.e. Deen from Dunya. We believe that Allah (swa) has blessed us with a complete Deen which solves problems in ALL aspects of life. We do not believe like the Christians do. ‘render unto ceasar [sic] what is ceasars’, render unto God what is Gods’ as in Islam everything that belongs to ceasar belongs to God as well as all creation.

So if we reject secular values, why do Muslims youths act the way they do? Is it because by being brought up in a secular country we have adopted secular values without knowing?

If you think Muslims don't think in a secular way, why does the following happen, and why is it justified by some Muslim ‘scholars, community leaders, councilors, parents, older brother etc’:

Muslims pray on Friday Jummah, but not any other fard prayer (kind of like going Church on Sundays)

Fasting in the first few months of Ramadhan and then ‘allowing it’ for the remainder... mosques are so packed, people are praying on the pavements...15 days into Ramadhan and the Masjid is half full.

Why is it that Muslims dress up in 'Islamic clothing' and go to the Mosque on Lailatul Qadr (night of power) and cry their eyes out in dua, and then the next day, continue with the haram (interest based) mortgages, vote for non-Muslims who implement other than Islam. Isn’t that render unto ceasar what is ceasars....?

Why do restaurant owners who have fully licensed (serving pints and fine wines) go to Hajj every year with their Alcohol money? Do we accept as a Muslim that its ok because its legal in the UK or is it the same as drug dealing according to Islam?

We see Muslims boasting about how many restaurants and takeaways they have, and how many houses they've bought with interest based loans (riba). If this is sinful and shameful why are they viewed as 'successful Muslims in the UK'?
Why do some of our elders wear a 'fanjabi' and a waistcoat and a cap and walk into Ladbrokes? Why can't they see the contradiction?

Why do some parents say, that "namaz is farz" (fard=obligatory) and yet when the exam time clashes with the Salah, they say you should miss the Salah and go to the exam. How can a Muslim youth grow up to be practicing and fear in Allah, when he/she is told to only fear Allah in the Masjid and not in the exam hall?

Why do some Muslim youth who pray and fast because its fard but wont do Dawa and wont do 'politics' even though it fard.

How come the 'Masjid committees' say no politics in the mosque’ yet they work with MP's and councilors and have old traditional divisions over 'party' lines of BNP, Jamaat & Awami league.

If the Khutbas’ are meant to be a vital opportunity to speak to the community about anti-terror laws, the Iraq war, difficulties Muslims are facing in the UK and abroad then why are the Khutba's always providing the government message? Like 'spy on your Muslim brothers..or Sharia is for the individual and not for life's affairs'. So every governments message is explained in plain English, and everything else is said in a language we don't understand.

Why do some scholars say to seek 'the lesser of two evils'? Its sound like enjoining the evil and forbidding the good to us!

Has the disease set in? Pray to Allah (swa) for Hidayaat (guidance) gain Ilm (knowledge) about the Deen and discuss your issues so that we can filter out the good ideas from the bad.

Embracing Global Islam, Rejecting Local Islam

In response to what it portrays as a war on Islam by Western governments, HT advises its members to take refuge in the solidarity of a global transnational ummah. Facilitated by “the tools of globalisation”96 that make the ummah feel more real than imagined, HT attempts to blend the local ethnic, tribalist, and nationalist affiliations into a homogenous Islamic populace. The group produced a slickly made 8-minute film, with graphics and a full soundtrack. It explains how non-Muslims perceive the Quran. There are images of a hand getting chopped off, of graphic Quran-burning demonstrations. Yet it remains unspecific about which non-Muslims hate the Quran and how many. In response, it shows a force of millions of non-descript pilgrims making hajj to Mecca to demonstrate Islam's strength in numbers outside the Western world. It shows images of women in prominent career positions as doctors and scholars. A tint spreads across a map of North Africa into the Middle East and South Asia. It calls for the ummah to stand for Islam, to stand for the khalifa. After showing the film at one East End meeting, Furdoz reads a passage in Arabic and translates, “Take no friends but yourselves, they will do nothing but harm.”97

This message extends to exclude other East End Muslims—both the aforementioned enablers in mosques, the “halfway” Muslims, and the terrorists who have rendered Islam its

96 HTA8.
97 HTA.
negative reputation in the West. The criticism not only estranges youths from their mosque communities, but also from their parents and an older generation. A HT blogger wrote:

Every Jummah, I want to scream and shout out: Tell them how they, the parents tear our lives apart. Tell them how the parents have become strangers to their own sons and daughters. How we don’t eat together anymore and there is no laughter at home. Tell them to stop forcing us to be someone else and be proud of whom we are. Tell them to stop bribing us with their politics and their love to look so good in front of the community. Say to the rest of these people that it’s time we find out what the youth need. Tell them, that we can run, laugh, play, fight in a mosque. Tell them, this mosque is our home, our identity, our foundation to build our community.

Every Jummah, my heart starts pounding, the sweat starts to touch my brow and I am consumed into silence. I then sit and stare at the Imam and listen to words that don’t inspire me. I see that same robotic expression and hear that same burst of shouting and that same movement of lips from people, which is drowned by insincerity. I look around at some of the community leaders who promised so much to each other and still, years have gone by and everything is still the same. No, I lie. It has gone backwards.

The man on that pulpit keeps talking and I reflect on how we, the youths have become nothing but ghosts, a dowry, a graduated photograph, a status, a symbol for recognition, a cry of acceptance for adults to obtain from the world. We’ve become numbers on a government file or outputs for a college. We’ve even become competition for banks who want to loan us money and get us into debt. As if we haven’t got enough problems. The greatest one of all is many don’t know the meaning of the Holy Qur’an when they rock to and fro and some don’t even read it in its own language - Arabic. And we expect to solve the issues of the world and make it happen? They must be kidding. I must be kidding myself too because I don’t know the meaning of the verses I read. Now, that is one twisted way to live a way of life called Islam, isn’t it? Yes, it is.98

In this scenario, the political party and its “real” Islam also stands in for its members’ schoolteachers, imams and fathers—leaving believers alienated from all three support structures sectors of their identity—fully dependent on the ideology of Hizb-Ut Tahrir. They advertise this ideology as a “real”, purist Islam that is as true today for the modern world as it was for the Prophet and his followers in the 7th Century. They make (often flawed) analogies between today’s challenges and those of biblical and Quranic figures to demonstrate Islam’s adroit ability—and the secular, Western, democratic system’s incapacity—to resolve their most pressing problems with simple (and exclusivist) black-and-white answers. Such ideology attempts to fill a void created by a severe lack of faith in the competence of the democratic system, its complementary institutions, and quite counter-intuitively, local mosques.

A common denominator shared by all HT activists interviewed for this study was their estrangement from their local mosque. It is this estrangement—often for different reasons— which both inspires their affiliation with HT and also enables their persuasion, due to a lack of proper Islamic education. Yusuf, the community leader, says, “With the extremist groups, the deal-breaker is teaching. Who taught them Islam? Their viewpoints are the product of not having teaching at an early age. And just because you’re academically smart doesn’t mean that, islamically, you’ll pick the best option. Bit by bit, you’re attracted by what

98 HTE4.
seems like the truth. And you’re not knowledgeable to know the difference. After regular
attendance at their meetings, it’s just a matter of time. My madrassas taught me to read
Arabic without telling me what the words mean. Most mosques are like this.  
Independent of their levels of Islamic education, participants expressed different
reasons for their mosque disaffection:

Calim: You’d go in the mosque and they’d send you to the back of the line. The committee, they’d be
older guys, and it was as if you were a nuisance in their private club. So I decided to just step
out and relax. It was the same in all the local mosques. The imams couldn’t speak any
English. Not there. No guidance. We used to go for Arabic prayers, and they were just angry
old men.

Bilal: Where were the older people addressing us at the mosque? There is a large age gap, but where
was the family feeling? I feel welcome at the youth club. I didn’t feel that way walking into
the mosque. I never talked to elders about the Iraq War and the things that affect Muslims.
You go, you pray, and bish bash bosh, you leave. The only announcement they ever made that
affected youth specifically was a warning from authorities to drive safely on Eid.

The imams, they’d never talk to me about the world. Just ‘salaam’, ‘how’s your family?’ It’s
not that I wasn’t comfortable talking to them. It’s that they don’t feel comfortable talking to
me. Young people bring change, and yet every single time, we are ignored.

Ismail: The mosques and their sermons are influenced by the government. They’re not speaking about
42-day detention laws, human rights, et cetera. They’re speaking about ablution before prayer.
Even the prophet didn’t do that. He talked about things that mattered.

The key themes that emerge are two-fold. First, young people do not feel comfortable
or welcome in mosques. Two youth organisers say that youth clubs are remedies for that
void. “The mosque, as it was 1400 years ago, was a vibrant place,” says Qadim. “It was
social, you could wrestle with other boys. There was a café and marketplace. Now if you go
into a mosque, shhh, it’s like a library. You wanna attract young people? Put in a luxury
leather sofa and a Playstation. We wanted the mosque to be open, without limitations, for 24
hours.”

Ghalib says, “Most mosques don’t want to engage the younger people. Their
committees are usually run by the elders, and they don’t understand that young people don’t
want to go to mosques just to pray like the elders. They want a place to talk, laugh, learn,
socialize and network.”

Second, imams are failing to communicate in an appealing or relevant way. This
spectacular failure is made all the more significant with Bangladeshi youths’ embrace of an
Islamic identity. Quite simply their primary point of reference for this identity construction is
incapable of explaining its meaning and its proper role in non-Muslim society:

100 C6.
101 B10.
102 I7.
103 Qadim9.
104 Ghalib8.
Viq: I’m not happy with the mosques. After the War in Iraq started, people went to the East London Mosque for a response. They did a talk on the benefits of honey. When I was young, I remember I wanted to get rid of the mosque and start one in the basement. Now I know better. Because so much is government funded, it’s hard for the masjid to be anti-establishment. They have to play ball. But because of terrorism, the mosques that have always wanted to remain depoliticized were all brought into the politics. I mean the East London Mosque asked people to spy on fellow Muslims. Imams are supposed to share their knowledge. They aren’t doing this. They’re just following the government line.

They teach Islam in the wrong way. They teach young people to be individualistic by making Islam look like a bunch of rituals, rather than a complete way of life. The mosque doesn’t view itself as a place to discuss worldly issues. But if you need a marriage, funeral or blessing, they’re there for you.

Naz: Imams are the people who are meant to give you guidance. But they only come in for prayer and then look you out. If they’re there to help, why don’t they say what’s best for you? And they speak in Arabic, but 95% of people can’t speak Arabic.

[The imam] taught me how to pray, how to wash myself. At a young age, you’re with your parents. But from 10 to 16, the imam taught me. After that, I thought, Islam can’t just be about prayer. There are so many other obligations. There are so many other problems that Islam can fix. Imams are the people we look up to, but don’t tell me that it’s only about prayer.

Subsequent interviews with several imams exhibit a conscientious and well-meaning group of Islamic guides, who readily acknowledge their inability to connect with young people. Each imam interviewed for this study required an interpreter. One imam in Shadwell says, “Because of the communication gap, I can’t always communicate with youth. I refer them to the madrassas teacher who speaks English. I see all the problems among young people, and I wish I could handle them all, but it’s just not possible. It’s mostly Bengalis I see, and they know they should act better. With young people, we need to get them to the mosque to be taught. There is a gap between older and younger people. Each thinks that the other doesn’t know anything.” The greater part of UK mosques “import” imams after training or experience abroad, because many British seminaries lack legitimacy among local mosque leaders and many communities prefer imams with specific ethnic allegiances. Inside the UK, there are only 20 local, independent, and often small, institutions of Islamic scholarship—or *dar al-ulum* (houses of knowledge)—where they can train to become imams and lead mosques. “These places are doing a great job trying to produce people who aspire for a very frugal, simple, and devoted lifestyle,” Zaki said. “Of course, that doesn’t fit into our materialistic, consumerist society. At the end of the day, they are producing people with a simple outlook in life. But our society is much more complicated, and these people are inadequate to deal with that.” Many smaller and even medium sized mosques, import imams from the home villages of their congregation and committee members. While this fosters comfort with the older generation, it does little to comfort youths.

Such a gaping void in guidance is being filled by other sources of information. HT members and non-HT members say that they receive information about Islam from a variety of sources including books, sheikhs, pamphlets and especially the internet—none of which are distributed with any accountability. Only three participants say that they go to their imam...
for advice. It is the same imam—Sheikh Abdul Qayyum of the East London Mosque, who is fluent in Arabic, Bangladeshi and most importantly English.

**Spectrum of Identity Construction**

In sum, we see that *Hizb-Ut-Tahrir* does not merely reject British nationality and its cultural norms and values. It also rejects the equally fundamental identity components of Bangladeshi heritage and local Islam, in the interest of promoting a singular—simultaneously purist and revisionist—identity: its own. This completes the spectrum of identity construction for young Muslims in the East End. One group of individuals is able to accept all components of their identity (in all their conflicting complexity) as part of a postmodern existence. In this group, we can include:

a) *The Culturally Islamic*: Islam is my heritage but it does not necessarily dictate the private or public life I live.

b) *The Ethnically Islamic*: Islam defines who I am privately, but it is one factor among many in my life, which influence my public lifestyle and choices.

c) *The Secularist*: Islam belongs in the private sphere where I may pray and follow a traditionally religious lifestyle to the extent I deem appropriate, without imposing it on anyone else.

In the middle reside those who are confused by all of their competing identity components, a significant proportion of young Bangladeshis in London’s East End that this qualitative study could not measure. And on the other side of the spectrum are non-exclusivist Islamists and *Hizb-Ut-Tahrir*, an organisation which advocates accepting none of those identity components at all:

d) *The Non-Exclusivist Islamist*: Islam is a complete lifestyle that informs all of our private decisions and daily choices, personal and political. And while we should spread *da’wa* and advocate Islamically sanctioned choices and public policies, others have a right to disagree.

e) *The Exclusivist Islamist*: Islam is a complete way of life that not only dominates our personal and political choices, but should also be adopted as a divinely created politico-legal system. Anything else is flawed and should be divested.

**Conclusion: Integrated and Alienated**

At its beginning, this chapter set out to better understand the challenges and patterns of civic engagement among young Bangladeshis in London’s East End. From the data, we discover a tripartite paradigm of identity and moral judgment that complicates nearly all participants’ private decisions within and statements about what is a remarkably active and cohesive public sector. This tripartite paradigm is sharply broken down into the nationally British, the ethno-culturally Bangladeshi, and the religiously Islamic (see Figure One on the next page). Yet civicvially, participants exhibited that they are all identities at once—transcending such man-made, ideological boundaries. However, this convenient rationalization conceals the reality that participants are extremely cognisant of the corresponding moral criteria produced by this paradigm and employed to judge their public
lifestyles. The common realisation that one will be unable or unwilling to fully satisfy all of the criteria from each aspect of their identity inspires as much personal dynamism as it inspires remorse and disappointment.

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Figure 1: This chapter outlines three forms of East End Bangladeshi identity construction, their corresponding criteria of social judgment, and their corresponding civic manifestations.

Among apartists in particular, these private feelings are exacerbated by perceived public rejection from “British society.” Participants experience this via interpersonal interactions, discriminatory public discourse, or collective injury from a peer’s negative experience. British citizenship is rhetorically advertised to be a flexible identity that embraces a spectrum of difference into a common, open political arena, but many participants believe recognition of “Britishness” is dispensed on a highly conditional basis, riddled with double standards and discrimination against Muslims. From the data, participants show a sensitive awareness to their rights under a democracy (more than to their obligations) and are subsequently acutely sensitive to their nonfulfillment. While, some participants acknowledge such democratic flaws as features of an imperfect but ultimately effective political system, apartists suggest that the flaws are reflective of a system that is ultimately not interested in the welfare, equality or future of British Muslims. The data thus suggests that such variability is strongly correlated with participants’ perceptions of the structural environment that they share in common.

Apartists’ perception of a breach of British citizenship terms produces intense feelings of sociopolitical alienation and a reluctance to express themselves or participate in the mainstream institutions of British civic life. Their response reflects an important truth that emerged from the data: Apartism—as much as ideal normative democratic activism—is a feature of successful political integration into the state and society. Indeed, a sense of entitlement about civil liberties, individual rights, representative institutions, and responsive governance can only emerge from political integration and an understanding of the democratic system of governance. Therefore, it would be erroneous to argue, as many government authorities have, that “better integration” of religious or ethnic minorities is essential to combat political alienation. In fact, the former appears necessary for the latter to occur.

In some ways, the best hope for many young British Bangladeshis to reconcile their “identity crisis” of belonging is through membership in a state which actually does accept all comers on the basis of a civic contract that is blind to the disparities and contradictions of ethnicity, culture and religion. This is not to say that private lifestyle choices about levels of
piety and traditionalism would be resolved. They would not. However, the public manifestation of such private dilemmas would be limited and the state would not be implicated—just as the state is neither involved in a Buddhist family’s debate about the spirituality of their children nor a Chinese family’s discussion about speaking Mandarin in the house. Indeed, in all democratic countries with large communities of ethnic or religious minorities of migrant-origin, individuals face questions about how much they assimilate to their family’s new home country—often the only home country later generations know. And indeed, in all democratic countries, citizens must grapple with the necessary truth of democracy that some people will simply not get their way. Representative democracies and their independent politicians rely on the perception that individual voices matter, and that all are equal under common law despite the inequity that pervades quotidian existence. Unable or unwilling to make either democratic leap of faith, apartists divest from the system or place their faith in a competing system of government. Importantly, the Islamic alternative promises nothing more than its democratic counterpart—equality and protection for all. While the Islamic system’s ability to deliver is highly debatable, apartists are certain that they would not be discriminated against or treated as an underclass in the ways they feel currently. And that is appealing to them.

While this qualitative study is unable to permit generalization about the extent of the discovered trends, we are better able to comprehend the nature of the phenomena discussed. Among the minority of young Bangladeshis who subscribe to the apartist outlook detailed above, we see that their path is only slightly divergent from their non-apartist peers in the East End. Nearly all study participants demonstrated a strong sense of entitlement to the democratic provisions of justice, liberty, and representation. Nearly all participants expressed severe doubts about the democratic system’s capacity to deliver. And nearly all participants’ insecurities about East End democratic institutions are connected to their insecurities about the relationships they are struggling to maintain with one or all of the three principle forms of identity that underlie those civic institutions. While the democrats and activists who invest and sustain faith in the democracy can overlook its inherent imperfections, apartists—in light of their sense of entitlement—are consumed by these imperfections, perceiving them to be symptomatic of a society and state that does not have their interests in mind.

What is clear then is that there are severe doubts in the East End’s community of young Bangladeshis about the democratic state’s ability and interest in delivering equality and protection to British Muslims. And while such doubts are common in any democratic community of people, many participants in this study believe that the state’s inefficacy is targeted and some are seeking to undermine the system’s channels for reform in order to foster the change they desire: equal protection—a change that doesn’t actually seem so impossible to deliver.