



By: *Harvey Morris*

British Muslims are coming to feel like aliens in their own country



Baroness Warsi, a former Conservative Party minister who just **quit** its ranks in the House of Lords, belongs to a generation of self-made, high-achieving British women who have made it to the top.

Born in 1971 to working class parents in provincial Yorkshire, she studied law and, after an unsuccessful parliamentary bid in 2005, entered the upper house two years later as its youngest member. She joined the Conservative-led cabinet in 2010 and for two years chaired the party.

She is also a Muslim.

And that, as she describes in a book published last week, makes her part of a community that finds itself increasingly alienated from its British homeland where anti-Muslim sentiment has become a quasi-tolerated prejudice.

Muslim families, including those born in the UK, are increasingly concerned about their future in the face of rising Islamophobia, she writes. Many had made plans to move abroad, an option she had personally rejected.

Her description of the fears of Muslims in Britain came as Prime Minister Keir Starmer **warned** that sparks from the conflict in the Middle East risked igniting unrest at home, where there has already been an upsurge of hate crimes targeting both Muslims and Jews.

But while prejudice against other minorities is rightly denounced, "Islamophobia is Britain's bigotry blind spot," Warsi argues in *Muslims Don't Matter*. It was published days after she quit the Conservative benches in the Lords, citing the party's move to the right and its double standards towards different communities.

'Dinner party test'

It is more than a decade since Warsi **subjected** Islamophobia to the 'dinner party test', suggesting that expressions of anti-Muslim prejudice were considered acceptable around

the tables of middle class, polite society.

It turns out that she was on the right track. A survey by Birmingham University in 2022 showed 23.2 per cent of people from middle-class social groups held prejudiced views about Islam compared with 18.4 per cent of those from the working classes. Its report suggested a lack of public censure for Islamophobia was one reason the prejudice was so widespread.

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Spurred by the rhetoric of politicians, self-designated public intellectuals and sections of the media, non-Muslim Britons have been encouraged to regard Islam and its adherents as a uniquely alien threat.

The casual portrayal of the religion as backward, oppressive and hostile to Western values inevitably feeds into the view of the third of the general population who believe Islam presents a threat to the British way of life.

Toxic debate on illegal immigration

Islamophobia can be explained away as the regrettable response to the very real threat posed by fundamentalist violence, including the 2005 London bombings and subsequent deadly attacks on the British mainland.

The counter-terrorism Prevent strategy that was later introduced to tackle all forms of radicalisation has caused resentment in the wider Muslim community for effectively regarding every Muslim youth as a potential jihadist in the making. As Sayeeda Warsi writes: "Prevent has become one of the most toxic and politicised policies among British Muslims, the community it overwhelmingly targets."

Negative attitudes towards Muslims have been further heightened by a toxic debate on how to handle cross-Channel illegal immigration, a phenomenon spurred in part by conflict in the Middle East.



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It could just be that Muslims are just the latest victims of a nativist backlash against incomers that has been replayed for centuries during waves of immigration that enriched the "British way of life" we are told we must protect.

There are eery echoes in the past in some of the rhetoric now directed at Muslims. When Jews fleeing pogroms in eastern Europe arrived in Britain in the 19th century, many settling in the East End of London, there was talk in the press of the country being swamped.

The uncovering of child grooming gangs run by men of Pakistani origin has led to the erroneous conclusion, including by former Home Secretary Stella Braverman, that they are the main perpetrators of such sexual exploitation.

A century ago, a similar prejudice was widespread about the small and peaceable Chinese population of London's Limehouse,

viewed as the locus of sinister drug dens and prostitution.

Cultural fallout

The neighbourhoods once settled by eastern European Jews are now inhabited by immigrants and their descendants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia and other Muslim-majority countries.

They are among the many Muslims who have made Britain their home over hundreds of years. A 1641 document refers to "a sect of Mahomatens discovered here in London".

They included the many seamen recruited in India and East Africa from the 18th century onwards. From the 19th, they included ship's cooks from Sylhet, in what is now Bangladesh, who went on to work in British restaurants and eventually to make curry a British staple. Even the nativist Islamophobes eat it.

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Footnote: Having plugged Baroness Warsi's book, let me recommend another - *Bloody Foreigners* by British writer Robert Winder, published in 2004 and updated in 2013.

It traces the history of immigration into Britain over the centuries, with multiple stories of the trials, tribulations and eventually acceptance that many communities have experienced.

The author told the Guardian in 2013 that the previous decade of immigration had seen some turbulent times, linked in part to the cultural fallout of the 'War on Terror'. "The noisy one is the Islamic one. I think that is what has shocked people into a pretty old-fashioned, nationalistic mindset."