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Can you have Muslim soldiers? Diversity as a martial value

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Abstract

This essay was originally written for a book entitled *The State of Race* edited by Virinder Kalra, Nisha Kapoor and James Rhodes, published by Palgrave in 2013. The aim of the collection is to provide a counter weight to the 'end of racism' agenda that has been advanced in post-Obama America as it applies to the UK context, and at the same time to draw upon a variety of different writers and theoretical perspectives in order to both reflect upon and critique the contemporary 'state of race'.

The research and thinking in this essay, and in the more substantial book project *Military Migrants*, was carried out within the remit of CRESC Theme 2, Reframing the Nation, and continues under the heading 'The Militarisation of Everyday life'.

Can you have Muslim soldiers? Diversity as a martial value

When people raise the subject of racism with me and ask whether it is a matter of political correctness, I remind them that the most glorious hours of the British armed forces were spent when they stood alone against the most poisonous regime ever to emanate from the European continent. The poison at the heart of that regime was racism. There is no place for racism in the ethos of the British armed forces.¹ John Reid, Minister for the Armed Forces, 1997.

Nationalism and Patriotism are values that are totally compatible with Islam and Islamic teachings. Actually they not only compatible but are actually encouraged and seen as commendable traits. Therefore there a famous Islamic saying in Arabic “Hubbul watan minal eeman” - the love of your nation is part of your faith. Imam Asim Hafiz, Muslim chaplain to HM Armed Forces, 2010.

Diversity increases operational effectiveness. Slogan on RAF diary, 2012.

The British Army website is a movable feast. Like many corporate employers, the organisation constantly updates the online information and images so as to entice young men and women with the prospect of an exciting, fulfilling career. In February 2012, a page could be found in the section on joining the army, providing answers to frequently asked questions. ‘Army life has a lot of similarities to civilian life,’ it stated, ‘but there are times when it makes very different demands of the people who live it.’² A list of 12 questions could be found below, formatted in ‘accordion’ style so that the answers only appeared when the viewer clicked on the corresponding arrow. Thus it was possible to read them not just as a list but also an index of public ignorance surrounding the nature of military work.

The questions ranged from what soldiers ate and where they lived, to whether they could go home or were allowed to leave the army. They also included inquiries about different types of food, pensions, injuries, wages and contact with friends and family. In the middle of the list, however, a more incongruous example leapt out: can you have Muslim soldiers? This prompted the compact reply:

The Army has soldiers from all faiths and communities. There are Muslim soldiers as well as Jewish soldiers, Hindu soldiers and others from Britain and Commonwealth countries. The only thing that matters is that soldiers are prepared to work for each other and towards a common goal.

This brief response is notable for the fluency with which it conveyed the wide diversity of the workforce while simultaneously stressing the particular demands of soldiering. The only thing that matters was that people were prepared to work for each other, it declared.

There are good reasons to assume that this was unlikely to be a routine question faced by recruiters talking to young British citizens, and that its presence in this more humdrum list required an alternative explanation. For one thing, it provided an opportunity to articulate the army’s embrace of diversity, speaking directly to young Asian applicants from Muslim or Hindu backgrounds. Not only could you have Muslim soldiers, we are told, but they also worked happily alongside soldiers of other faiths. This assertion, along with the supporting information that halal food was provided where possible, indicated that the army had embraced modern forms of diversity management in line with the rest of Britain’s public institutions. The extent of an integrated, cohesive work environment even hinted that military institutions might provide a space for minorities, including Muslims, to negotiate their

identities as fully qualified national subjects, premised on their readiness to fight and die for their country.

The mention of soldiers from Commonwealth countries reflected the fact that non-British applicants were eligible to apply, although this was not addressed to them. But more troubling was the question itself: can you have Muslim soldiers? Asking why 'Muslim soldiers' might not be possible, permissible, feasible even, is a good place to start to reflect on the ways that war and racism are connected in 21st century Britain. The uncertainty about whether British Muslim citizens are either entitled or prepared to perform military service articulates a 'common sense' viewpoint that multiculturalism has become inseparable from national security. When the nation's security is perceived to be under threat, the appeal to national character, patriotism, and ethnoracial familiarity are asserted more forcefully (Goldberg 2009, 55). Soldiers are commonly associated with patriotism, serving Queen and Country and a heroic readiness to sacrifice their lives. The category of 'Muslims' is identified with the very causes of global insurgency, not least the dubious loyalties that lie beyond the borders of the national state (Qureshi & Zeitlyn 2012).

Against this background, the grounds for doubting the existence of the British Muslim soldier appear more solid. Yet the UK armed forces are seldom factored into political debates about citizenship, multiculturalism and immigration. They are regarded as operating on a different terrain, separate from the rest of the public sector to which they nominally belong, and their employment policies obscured behind the carefully managed screen of military PR. It has long been accepted that national military institutions play a significant role in representing countries in the global arena, including the combat zone, but their role in shaping social structures and values in domestic spheres is rarely acknowledged outside the confines of specialist military sociology (Krebs, 2004: 89). In some periods the question of who joins the army is relatively dormant as a public concern. But studied over time, military recruitment strategies can be seen to play an important role in shaping the definition of the political community. Approaching military service through the framework of the state-funded public sector offers insights into concepts of citizenship and national belonging because it raises in acute form the question of what the country owes those who volunteer to join the armed forces (Ware, 2010a). This is because, at certain moments, the act of volunteering to be a soldier is thought to reach into the heart of what it means to be a citizen and to 'serve' the country. And when greater attention is paid to the conditions of military service and the personal costs borne by the 'ordinary' women and men involved, the presence (or absence) of ethnic, cultural, sexual and religious minorities comes into view as an index of inclusion (or exclusion) in the wider society.

Reviewing the 'diversification' of the UK armed forces over the last decade, this chapter will argue that the policies and practices introduced to manage a multicultural workforce have themselves been militarized. That is, the various strategies associated with equality and diversity have not only been absorbed into a military setting, they have also been associated with the core values adopted by the military as their organizational ethos. As it turns out, not only can you have Muslim soldiers who are exemplary patriotic citizens but along with other minorities they can also provide tools for the emerging defence, development and diplomacy nexus that shapes US-led foreign policy (Finney 2010). Accepting the potent meanings of soldiering as particularly symbolic work demands a much more rigorous analysis of the roles that the military institutions play not just in defining the bounds of the nation but also in arbitrating the terms of belonging as well. (Cowen 2008)

Political communities

Military organisations, including veterans' charities, provide substance to the national apparatus of Britishness, whether through the pomp and pageantry of royal occasions or the

annual ceremonies of remembrance which give voice to the full expression of national identity reiterated in a timeless language of war and sacrifice. Assumptions about how the military relates to civilian society are formed by a range of factors: historical events, traditional practices, political settlements, legal agreements, media representation and personal experience. They also depend to a large extent on what citizens think about the wars that national armies are sent off to fight. As a consequence, recruitment into the armed forces is a supremely social issue as well as an intensely political one, and the line between military and civilian spheres exists as an unpredictable and unstable fissure. For those researching the politics of citizenship, belonging and national identity, scrutinizing military employment policies and strategies when the country is at war becomes an important way of investigating the limits of the nation – both an idea and in policy terms as well.

Recent events have demonstrated how military service in the cause of defending Britain's interests in the past remains an important qualification for enacting modern claims to citizenship and defining the bounds of the political, national and post-colonial community (Paul 1998). This issue was exemplified by the media furore over the plight of elderly Nepalese ex-servicemen, many of whom had fought alongside the British Army in South East Asia in the 1960s. In 2008-9, the Campaign for Gurkha Justice, led by actor Joanna Lumley, pressurized the government to permit those who had served for a minimum of four years to live in the UK with full access to public funds. The Gurkha soldiers' record of fierce loyalty to the British Crown, demonstrated by countless deaths in both 1914-18 and in 1939-1945, provided the basis of public support for their right to social welfare in the UK. It was an important campaign not least because the strength of public support signalled the resilience of a powerful idea about what it meant to be a soldier in the service of the nation, regardless of nationality or ethnic origin.

While the continuing policy of employing Gurkha soldiers drew attention to Britain's historic recruiting practices, there was little comment at the time that the armed forces contained hundreds of other migrant personnel, particularly in the army. In 1998 the New Labour government relaxed the residency rules for Commonwealth citizens in response to severe manpower shortages. Individual regiments recruited directly from countries such as Fiji and Jamaica in order to deploy in Northern Ireland, Kosovo and Sierra Leone but by 2002 the army had begun to send pre-selection teams (OPTs) overseas to process applicants so that they could travel directly to the UK and begin training immediately. These expeditions were carried out at intervals until the summer of 2008 when the financial crash began to alter patterns of retention and recruitment in the UK (Taylor 2009).

The annual report on UK Defence Statistics issued in April 2011 showed that 92.2% of personnel in the army recorded British nationality, leaving 7.8% (7600 soldiers) who were not UK citizens.³ Of these, 7.3% were from either the Republic of Ireland or from Commonwealth countries, while 0.5% (460 soldiers) were Nepali citizens who had transferred from the Brigade of Gurkhas. Breaking down these figures even further reveals that there were soldiers from 33 Commonwealth countries who were serving in the British Army.⁴ Over two thousand were from Fiji, 800 from Ghana, 790 from South Africa and 440 from Jamaica. Although Zimbabwe and Fiji had been suspended from the Commonwealth, their citizens were still eligible under the British Nationality Act 1981.

The employment of migrant-soldiers with strong postcolonial ties to Britain challenges the 'common sense' racism that delineates the boundaries of our political community by colour and concepts of indigeneity. Although the majority of these soldiers, some of whom are also designated as white, might otherwise be cast as ineligible skilled and unskilled migrants from outside the EU, they are not automatically rewarded with citizenship as a condition of employment in the armed forces. Nor is their path to citizenship, should they wish to apply, significantly expedited by their readiness to 'serve'.

The employment of so many Commonwealth migrants has been fortuitous because it has allowed military institutions – particularly the British Army - to prove their commitment to successive diversity and equality policies, despite initial resistance on the grounds that HR policies devised for the civilian world did not apply (Dandeker 1994, 649). Anthony Forster has argued convincingly that military leaders fought a losing battle to control a professional space that remained outside legal interventions and impervious to societal pressure (Forster, 2006). Collating the interventions and initiatives that took place in the late 1990s brings into view the convergence of legal, administrative, political and constitutional motors of reform that challenged the MoD's claim to be an exceptional form of employer.

Corporate diversity

In 2011, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) issued a revised policy statement on diversity that was notable for the manner in which it moved away from the legalistic discourse of racial discrimination that had previously characterized its approach. 'Equality and diversity is not a policy we pursue just because the legislation requires us to,' it announced. 'We pursue the policy simply because it is morally right and because it makes excellent business sense.' Referring to the importance of recruiting civil and military employees across the breadth of society, it continued, 'We encourage people throughout society to join us, and remain with us, to make their distinctive contributions and achieve their full potential.' In order to do this effectively, the policy made it clear that the ministry would not tolerate 'any form of intimidation, humiliation, harassment, bullying or abuse.'

Over a decade earlier, the British Army issued a set of recruitment posters based on Alfred Leese's well known 'Your Country Needs You' image of Lord Kitchener from the First World War. In one of these, Kitchener's face had been replaced by that of Ghanaian-born Captain Fedelix Datson of the Royal Artillery.⁵ 'Britain is a multi-racial country,' the poster declared in small print at the bottom of the picture. 'It needs a multi-racial Army.' The word 'need' in this context illustrated the somewhat crude agenda set by a corporate version of multiculturalism, defined by Stuart Hall as an attempt 'to "manage" minority cultural differences in the interests of the centre' (Hesse 2000, 210). This process was driven in part by the climate of reform ushered in by the Macpherson Report, published in early 1999, and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act which followed in 2000, extending the definition of 'public authorities' to cover the police, and also for the first time, the prison service and the armed forces. The new bill also gave the CRE further powers to promote 'race equality', whether by issuing tighter codes of practice or by imposing specific duties on public bodies.

The evident disparity between this vocabulary of equal opportunities and 'racial groups' and the confident assertion of the moral economy of corporate diversity ten years later is not unique to the defence sector, but it requires a separate analysis. While it is possible to look back and assemble all the different measures of reform in a chronological pattern, we should also note that it has been a more chaotic, uneven and contested development, characterised by Stuart Hall in the Parekh Report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain as 'multicultural drift' (2000, 14). Although in hindsight this process has often been represented as a coherent programme driven by ideology, the reality has been far more complex.

The drive towards increasing the proportion of ethnic minorities in the military stemmed from three interconnected factors. The first was that New Labour was elected into office in 1997 with a mandate that promised a substantial reorganisation of the country's defence policy (Cornish & Dorman 2009, 248). In his introduction to the Strategic Defence Review, published in 1998, Secretary of State for Defence, George Robertson, wrote the chillingly memorable words: 'The British are, by instinct, an internationalist people. We believe that as well as defending our rights, we should discharge our responsibilities in the world. We do not want to stand idly by and watch humanitarian disasters or the aggression of dictators go

unchecked. We want to give a lead, we want to be a force for good.’ (Robertson 1998) The proposals laid out in the Review ranged from matters of global security to the minutiae of equipment to be used by each of the three services, and from the future shape of the armed forces to the conditions of service for both civilian and military personnel working within the defence sector.

The second factor was the chronic shortage of men that had plagued the armed forces since the end of conscription in 1960. In the early 1990s military organizations were facing an uncertain role in the post Cold War environment and, at the same time, the armed forces were struggling to maintain employment levels. By 1998 there was a deficit of at least 5000. ‘The matter is not open to simple solutions,’ Minister for the Armed Forces John Reid told the House of Commons in a debate about the SDR. ‘It involves a range of problems not only of numbers but of culture, retention, the nature of the modern armed forces and the nature of the community from which they draw their raw material.’⁶ Among the solutions to these problems was the widening of the recruitment pool to include ethnic minorities and homosexuals and a review of military occupations open to women. Seen in this light, the opportunities provided by the obligation to increase diversity offered a pragmatic approach to shortfalls in recruiting.

The third and related explanation for targeting minority recruits was the documented issue of racism inside the armed forces. In the same debate Reid stated that ‘We face a greater challenge in recruitment from the ethnic minorities. The armed forces have until relatively recently remained distanced from the progress in racial awareness made in other areas of society.’⁷ He also made it clear that this was not merely the view of the new government. The Chief of the General Staff had earlier issued a press release confirming ‘the Army’s view that there was a perception of racism inside the Army. The Chief of the General Staff—not politicians—made it plain that he would not tolerate it.’

The SDR contained the statement that the government was ‘determined that the Armed Forces should better reflect the ethnic composition of the British population’.⁸ The rationale for increasing the percentage of ethnic minority recruits was presented in the context of employing ‘our fair share of the best people this country has to offer.’ This was partly connected to the theory that public bodies should reflect the socio-demographic mix of the country, an idea that had gained credibility as an instrument for dealing with institutional racism. It was also a recognition of the ‘business case’ since ethnic minorities provided a potential pool of young, fit recruits. (Dandeker and Mason 2003) A paper outlining the policy shifts referred, somewhat obliquely, to the reasons why the current figure was so low: ‘We are also committed to making real progress on improving our record on equal opportunities through tackling the complex web of underlying factors which have inhibited people from various backgrounds choosing to join us in the past.’⁹

The history of under-recruitment reflected patterns of outright discrimination and exclusion which identified the armed forces as a particularly negligent employer. In 1997, for instance, the Office of Public Management released a damning report that found evidence of widespread racism in the armed forces.¹⁰ The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) had intervened in the army’s grievance procedures in 1991 in order to give complainants an opportunity to sidestep internal procedures which were not seen to be impartial. In 1994 the CRE initiated a more formal inquiry into the Household Cavalry after two serious incidents of discrimination and bullying (Bellamy 1994) A year later, Mark Campbell, the first black trooper to join the Household Cavalry, was discharged from the Queen’s Life Guards on medical grounds. In his evidence he claimed that he had faced taunts of ‘nigger’, been handed a note saying ‘there is no black in the Union Jack’ and had his bed soaked with urine (BBC 2006). The regiment had come under scrutiny before for its suspected policy of hiring an all-white workforce, and it was no surprise that the resulting investigation found it to have contravened the law on several counts: direct and indirect discrimination in recruitment and

selection; abuse and harassment of ethnic minority soldiers; inducement and instructions to discriminate (CRE 2000).

One of the results of this inquiry was to threaten the Ministry of Defence (MoD) with a non-discrimination notice, but in 1997 this was deferred after the MoD agreed to work with the CRE to implement a campaign for equality across the armed forces. In March 1998 the MoD and the CRE signed a five-year Partnership Agreement which included an 'action plan' with a series of fresh initiatives intended to eliminate discrimination and harassment from the three services. Among these was the collection of data on minority recruitment to be presented and analysed in quarterly reports. Other forms of monitoring were to be introduced, along with new models of equality training and outreach schemes targeted at ethnic minority communities in the UK. An exhibition, entitled 'We Were There', was prepared by the MoD 'to honour the invaluable contribution made by the ethnic minorities to the Armed Forces for more than 200 years'.¹¹ The recruitment posters mentioned in the introduction were also part of this drive to target minorities as prospective recruits. The language of 'need' evidently expressed the legal pressures to take racism seriously as much as the ideological components of a state programme.

Britishness

In terms of numbers, the lengthy process of reform that began in the 1990s can be deemed a success story. In 2011 the figure for ethnic minorities in all three services and in all ranks was 6.7 per cent (DASA 2011). Among officers the figure was 2.4% and other ranks, 7.6%. In the British Army the percentages start to vary more widely: the overall figure rose to 9.6% (2.8% among officers and 10.7% in other ranks). However, if we investigate how these figures were achieved, a more complicated picture emerges. From 1999 the figure for ethnic minorities started to rise exponentially, exceeding planned recruitment targets set by the SDR, but the increase had little to do with these measures. The ethno-racial diversity of the British Army today derives largely from migrants whose eligibility for military service began, as we have seen, as a strategy to cope with this crisis in recruitment and retention.¹² By the end of the decade the requisite targets for ethnic minorities had been reached and their numbers had risen from 360 to more than 6,600.

So successful was the sustained recruitment drive in the eastern Caribbean and Fiji, that, after a decade during which, a decision was announced that reflected mounting unease that there might be too many minorities accumulating in particular sections of the army. In 2009 the government announced that a cap would be placed in certain sections of the army where the number of Commonwealth citizens was already approaching or had exceeded the 15% mark. This was being done in the 'interests of operational effectiveness', defence secretary John Hutton explained, since the aim was to restrict the number of personnel whose foreign citizenship could leave them 'potentially subject to legislation contrary to our own decisions - on, for example, operational deployments' (Norton-Taylor 2009). The decision to apply the cap to certain trades was an outcome of extensive calculations aimed at steering a path between breaking the law of the land and damaging the army's attempts to be seen an enthusiastic equality and diversity employer. Introducing the decision to restrict foreign nationals in certain parts of the army, Hutton told the Commons that they had also borne in mind 'the importance of ensuring that the armed forces continue to be identified with and representative of the UK'. (ibid)

Two years previously the *Daily Mail* had reported that 'Defence chiefs want to limit the number of Commonwealth troops in the Army to retain its "Britishness"' (Leake 2007). Under the headline: 'Race uproar over Army troop quota,' it reported that 'confidential papers prepared by the Army General Staff, headed by General Sir Richard Dannatt, suggest Commonwealth troops - mostly non-white - should be limited to 10 per cent of the 99,000

total'. One of the main reasons for restricting the number of Commonwealth troops was 'cultural'. The article only hinted at what this actually meant:

One source said: "The main reason is this view of Britishness, ensuring that the norms and values of society are reflected in its armed forces.

"For example, gender equality in Britain means that the dominant view is that women should have a role in the armed forces. It's different in other countries (Leake 2007).

The implications of this statement were that some nationalities had issues serving alongside women, and that this was causing problems within the organization. There was also a suggestion that foreign nationals produced more administrative work for the army due to logistical factors, but combined with the earlier point about 'norms and values' there was clearly a more substantial charge being made: that dealing with the different cultures of some of the Commonwealth soldiers was proving an additional burden that had not been anticipated. It was fortuitous that the rhetoric of Britishness promoted by Brown's government at the time allowed the legitimacy of a cap on migrant soldiers to pass as an imperative of social cohesion in the nation as a whole as well as a requirement for 'operational effectiveness'.

However, the same decade saw a number of other reforms that forced the armed forces to fall in line with the public sector. In 2005 the appointment of Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu chaplains replaced a system whereby religious leaders were engaged as advisers on issues specific to each faith group. These non-uniformed civilians joined three hundred commissioned Christian chaplains who, until then, bore responsibility for providing spiritual care for all members of the armed forces. This was a direct consequence of the Employment Equality Regulations which came into force in December 2003, incorporating the religion and belief elements of the European Employment Framework Directive into UK legislation. As the 'Guide on Religion and Belief' published by the Ministry of Defence made clear, this new legal obligation made it unlawful to discriminate against personnel on the grounds of religion or belief (MOD 2004-5)

The Armed Forces and MOD Civil Service have been practising policies that respect individuals' religion or belief for some time. However, it is important to understand that, where in the past MOD as a matter of policy aimed not to discriminate, the new Regulations make discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief unlawful and give individuals a right to bring Employment Tribunal claims for breaches of the Regulations (5).

The transition to an officially multi-faith employer was thus mandated by law, reflecting the extent to which, as a national institution, the armed forces were obliged to conform to a corporate multiculturalist script.¹³ Within a relatively short period, Muslim servicemen and women, in common with sexual minorities and other faith groups, saw the recognition of their position within the institution as an opportunity to organize their own forms of mutual support. In doing so they were able to articulate incontrovertible claims to citizenship as well as performing a strategic role in the counterinsurgency itself.

Bridging the gap

When the Imam took up the post of Muslim chaplain to the armed forces in 2005 it was unclear how many Muslims were serving in the three services, although the majority were in the army and a significant proportion were migrants from Gambia and Nigeria. When comprehensive statistics began to be collected in 2007, a more accurate picture emerged (UKDS 2011). By 2009, when there were 500 Muslims in the regular armed forces, 410 of whom were in the army, the Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA) was set up as a

support network for individual Muslims scattered across the institution. Writing in the first AFMA newsletter, the Secretary of AFMA, Cpl Mohsin Al Mughal, spelled out the reasons why it was so important for Muslims to be recognised within the armed forces: ‘The make-up of the armed forces is increasingly becoming a mirror of modern-day Britain.’ The AFMA was an important step in supporting ‘this diverse community to maintain and foster their individual and respective cultural and religious beliefs, practices and identity’ (Al Mughal 2010).

In the same publication Imam Hafiz explained how the organisation also hoped to persuade Muslim civilians about the significance of their work:

Unfortunately there is a huge ... ignorance in some parts of the Muslim community and I hope that AFMA will be able to bridge the gap between the Armed and the Muslim community and be a reminder that HM Forces are as integral to British society as are other British institutions such as the Police Force, the fire service and the NHS that are here to serve this nation as whole including the Muslim community (Hafiz 2010).

By the end of 2010, the importance of acknowledging Muslims within the British armed forces was demonstrated in Helmand Province itself. On November 16 that year the Muslim chaplain gave a sermon to a multi-national congregation in the festival of Eid ul Adha in conjunction with the Imam of the local 205 Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA). A lengthy report in the MoD’s Defence News site revealed that there were 600 Muslims present, including representatives from across ISAF military forces, defence contractors and civilian workers as well as ‘local Afghans’. The occasion was hailed as a reflection of ‘the united relationship’ between ISAF and the Afghan National Army. (MoD 2012)

The report stated that ‘The sight of ISAF troops and the local community joining together to celebrate their faith offered some respite for the whole camp from the difficulties being faced in Afghanistan.’ Linking the timing of the occasion to the services of remembrance held to mark Armistice Day, the Imam also played his part in emphasising that Muslims were integral to the mission in Afghanistan (Ibid). ‘This mission’, he continued, ‘need not be a combat one but could be a partnership of development and progress for ordinary Afghans. ISAF has again demonstrated that Islam and the West are compatible, and that Muslims are proud citizens of their countries - they fly their flags with pride and willingly serve their nations.’

Proof that some military leaders had grasped the importance of diversity within the armed forces was provided when the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir David Richards, accepted the offer to become patron of the AFMA. Endorsing the launch of the organisation he observed that Britain ‘had a commitment to Afghanistan and the region and all those Muslims with whom we have a natural identity, given our own core values reflect very strongly to those of Muslim faith (Versi 2009).¹⁴ Meanwhile a decade of disastrous military expeditions had taught NATO forces that a better knowledge of ‘culture’ and specifically of ‘cultural difference’ was an essential tool in modern warfare (Kilcullen 2006; Gusterson 2010, 280).

On the frontline

The representation of Muslim soldiers in Afghanistan as ambassadors for a multicultural Britain reinforces the centrality of culture in the ‘war on terror’ as well as the importance of propaganda, providing a link between the management of information about the aims and objectives of the global counter-insurgency and the representation of the war aims to sceptical publics at home. The BBC, a global institution which plays a strategic role in airing UK defence and security issues, demonstrated the salience of these calculations in a report in 2011

entitled 'UK's Muslim soldiers "fighting extremists not Muslims"' published the same day as a radio documentary, broadcast through its Asian network, called 'Muslims on the frontline.' (Taneja 2011) In both items, journalist Poonam Taneja interviewed a number of British Muslim servicemen and women in Afghanistan as well as British Muslim opponents of the war. Cpl Raziya Aslam, for example, a citizen of the UK whose parents migrated from Pakistan before she was born, talked enthusiastically about her work as a linguist, acting as interpreter in negotiations with villagers. 'I don't see it as a war against Islam,' she said. Pte Shehab El-Din Ahmed El-Miniawi was reportedly even more emphatic: 'My home is the UK,' he said. 'As a Muslim, that's the place I'd happily die for and kill for. That's the same way it's going to remain until my dying day.'

Another informant was Zeeshan Hashmi, one of the first British Muslim servicemen to be deployed to Afghanistan in 2002 and a member of the Intelligence Corps for five years. In 2006 his brother Jabron Hashmi became the first British Muslim soldier to die in Afghanistan. Zeeshan spoke of the pride his family felt when they were asked to lay the foundation stone for the National Memorial Arboretum which was opened in 2007. Since his brother's death they had received over 100 letters from well-wishers of all faith and backgrounds, which, he said, were a great source of comfort. However, he also described how 'There were certain remarks put on the internet, on a given website, certain people see my brother as a traitor because of his role as a soldier, because of his role in the armed forces, in Afghanistan.'

The importance of employing Muslims 'on the front line' was emphasised by the Ministry of Defence as well. In 2010 the website hosting the 'We Were There' exhibition was revised and updated, placing the original project within a revised historical perspective. The first incarnation, launched a decade earlier, was intended as 'a significant statement about the contribution of Britain's ethnic minority communities to UK defence over the last 250 years', explained the new introduction. The initiative was seen at the time as an educational resource describing the benefits of cultural diversity as well as helping to promote 'better understanding between communities by showing how men and women from Africa, Asia, the West Indies and other Commonwealth countries fought and served alongside British forces during many major conflicts.'¹⁵

In the more recent version, a new dimension was added, providing evidence that the role of military history in asserting the rights of minorities had become more important in the meantime, particularly in the context of debates about Britishness and national identity. 'For students of history and citizenship,' the new website suggested, 'the exhibition offers a wider and more inclusive perspective of our military past. It demonstrates how people from different religions, races, and cultures came together at times of great social, political, military and geographical change to help create and then defend the British Empire and democratic freedom. What has surprised many people is that most of those who served from the colonies were volunteers, including the whole of the Indian Army.'

The final page of the current exhibition was the most relevant because it illustrated the convergence of diversity management with national security, foreign policy and the proliferation of roles that national militaries were expected to play. 'The MOD and the Armed Forces now operate on a global scale,' read the text, 'in a wide variety of roles such as war fighting, counter-terrorism, defence diplomacy, peace-keeping and the delivery of humanitarian aid'.¹⁶ The expanded list of military roles from war-fighting to peace-keeping reflected the transformations in global warfare that had taken place in the intervening years. The constellation of geopolitical, technological, economic and moral factors that sanction the deployment of NATO forces was neatly compressed under the much-laudered banner heralding international peace and stability, thus concealing the true costs of the global counter-insurgency, aggressive nuclear proliferation and the rapid fragmentation and privatization of military work.

The same panel reiterated the importance of representing and including minorities: ‘Men and women from ethnic minorities make up 5.6 % of the Armed Forces and 2.9% of the MOD and Civil Service. They all contribute to the common aim of defending their country through strengthening international peace and stability and being a force for good in the world.’ But it was the image that captured the fused political imperatives of a securitized multiculturalism. It showed the back view of a uniformed man giving the thumbs up to a Chinook helicopter delivering aid with a caption that read: ‘Flight Lieutenant Sohail Khan in Pakistan where he helped with the earthquake relief effort’.¹⁷ The choice of this image demonstrated that military service was not about fighting Muslim antagonists, it was about helping them, bringing aid to the vulnerable in the interests of global security.

Enemies within

The question: can you have Muslim Soldiers? dramatises the connection between what happens inside the armed forces and the purpose of the operations they are required to carry out. In other words, it accepts that the institution’s approach to racism and diversity among its workforce is intrinsically related to foreign policy, national security and the global counter-insurgency. While statutory obligations have ensured that military institutions take equality and diversity seriously, the uneven pace of reform must be analyzed against a background of intense deployment in unpopular wars as well as increased securitization at home.

During this period war has become normalised in the political life of the UK. One consequence is that the figure of the soldier is ubiquitous throughout the media, constantly visible in news, military bulletins, films, digital games, forums, art and photography. The image of the flag-draped coffin, however, remains a site of intense struggle, not just over the meanings of military sacrifice but also the perceived value of the war in which the individual soldier ‘gave’ their life. Until the repatriation of bodies was re-routed in 2011, the homecoming parades at Wootton Bassett demonstrated the volatile mix of political opportunism, public alarm and private grief that resulted from the deaths of soldiers in Helmand Province. Paying close attention to the figure of the soldier as a particular kind of worker-citizen can expose the hidden material and financial resources that are required to commit the country to war. It can also provide a focus for tracking the ideological energy involved in securing public acquiescence, and in marginalising opposition as a form of disloyalty to the national state. (Ware 2010a).

Following the mass demonstrations against the proposed invasion of Iraq in 2003, oppositional spaces for protesting against war have steadily diminished. In 2005 activist Maya Evans became the first person to be convicted under Section 132 of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act, the controversial new law that banned unauthorised protests from taking place within half a mile of Westminster. At the time she was reading out the names of soldiers killed in Iraq in solidarity with Military Families Against the War, a group formed in opposition to what they saw as Blair’s cavalier attitude to the safety of UK soldiers. But as anti-war protestors attempted to hold a line between ambivalent support for ordinary soldiers and criticism of the politicians that deployed them, interventions such as the Military Covenant Campaign and the charity Help for Heroes effectively rendered the concept of military service as an exceptional form of employment undertaken for the benefit of the nation as a whole, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the war in question. One effect was to narrow the ground on which protestors have been able to express dissent against military operations in Afghanistan, Libya and Somalia.

Meanwhile those Islamist groups and individuals expressing their opposition to the war on terror on the basis that fellow Muslims are being slaughtered by British soldiers have come under particularly intense surveillance. Militant groups such as Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades, which articulated vocal opposition at soldiers’ homecoming marches and

commemorative ceremonies, were systematically banned under the Terrorism Act 2000 on the grounds that they were glorifying terrorism. Muslims who were prepared to enlist were not only threatened by members of these groups, but their participation in the armed forces was cast as a form of apostasy. In 2008, for example, Parvis Khan, pleaded guilty to plotting the kidnap and execution of a British Muslim soldier, which he planned to film and release for propaganda purposes (Gardham 2008). During this period, the mobilisation of the fascist English Defence League under the banner of fighting the spectre of Islamic extremism infused racism and Islamophobia with militaristic expressions of patriotism, masculinity and whiteness.

More recently, increased surveillance of social media sites has led to the criminalization of those who criticize soldiers on Facebook. In March 2012 teenager Azhar Ahmed was charged with racially aggravated public order after posting angry comments about the publicity given to the deaths of six UK soldiers in Afghanistan.¹⁸ This charge was subsequently amended to one of sending a message that was grossly offensive under the Communications Act 2003. At his hearing, protestors from the group Combined Ex Forces carried banners that read: 'Jail those who insult our troops'. (Champion 2012) This case can be linked to an earlier incident in Coventry when a group of five Muslim boys and a non-Muslim girl calling themselves the 'Muslim Defence League' were investigated by police after posting threats of violence on a class mate's wall. The 13-year-old boy had written a supportive comment about British troops with two photos of Armistice Day, and in response the group had announced their intention to kill him (Ellicott 2012).

These incidents have contributed to a further identification of Muslim citizens who are critics of UK foreign policy as a homogenous and unpatriotic section of the population. There has been minimal attention paid to the impact that Blair's wars have had on younger generations, many of whom were barely in primary school in 2001. Research among young Pakistani Muslims in Birmingham, for example, has indicated that many have responded to the questioning of their citizenship in the media 'with reflexivity, introspection and explicit political engagement' (Qureshi and Zeitlyn 2012).

The young Pakistanis had joined in enthusiastically in public protests against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst echoing the wider patriotic terming of the armed forces as 'our boys', they understood them as victims of the conflicts and the new imperialism. Their analysis stressed the role of power and imperialism in the war and the deaths of civilians and combatants on both sides.

War crimes

This chapter has attempted to describe the importance of military work for delineating the grounds for inclusion in and exclusion from national citizenship in the UK. In doing so it has argued for a re-thinking of what is meant by multiculturalism and a radical re-evaluation of its effects on British public life. Although comparison with other national institutions, such as the police and prison service, are useful, the armed forces play a unique role in mediating between domestic and international politics (Krebs, 2004: 123) A critical examination of the ways in which military organizations have weathered the external pressures to diversify their workforce is therefore important but not sufficient. It is a task that is inseparable from the work of monitoring and resisting the ways in which the national community becomes defined by and inured to militarism as a defining aspect of British national identity.

In this final section I suggest that the equality and diversity laws that protect soldiers' individual and collective rights must be studied in relation to the enforcement of military regulations governing the treatment of civilians and detainees by occupying armies. In the British Army, for instance, the overlap between these two policy areas has resulted in a

renewed commitment to inculcate ‘the military ethos’ through teaching a set of core values, one of which is ‘respect for others’ (Aitken 2008).¹⁹

It was these same values to which former Chief of the General Staff, General Dannatt referred when, in 2011, he told to a theological think-tank that society was no longer providing new recruits with ‘an understanding of the core values and standards of behaviour’ that the military looked for in young people. ‘Given that much of our society is pretty unstructured these days,’ he wrote, ‘and given that the military has the unique opportunity to educate its own into the importance of a proper moral understanding, then perhaps the military community may have a wider contribution that it can make to the nation.’ (Dannatt 2011) His thrust was that the concept of values was a defining characteristic of military culture, differentiating it from civilian society which was perceived as individualistic and amoral. The mental and moral preparation of our soldiers was as important as their physical training, he declared. ‘They must be able to kill and show compassion at the same time; they must be loyal to their country, their regiment and their friends without compromising their own integrity.’ One implication of his speech was that the army could not be blamed if individual soldiers failed to live up to these values. Much more controversial was his claim that civil society could benefit from adopting the values espoused by the military.

His intervention took place shortly after the inquiry into the unlawful killing of Iraqi citizen Baha Mousa reported that had been ‘an appalling episode of serious gratuitous violence’ (Cecil & Cheston 2011). The Gage report, published in 2011, revealed that the chain of command right up to the MoD was implicated both in the atrocities and in subsequent attempts to investigate. Baha Mousa was one of seven suspected insurgents arrested by British soldiers while working as a hotel receptionist in Basra, southern Iraq, in September 2003. The men, who were innocent of any crime, were systematically abused and tortured while they were held in detention, resulting in Mousa’s death 36 hours later. An extract from a press report of the inquiry detailed their treatment at the hands of the soldiers.

The seven hotel workers, together with three other men arrested later the same day, were hooded with hessian sandbags by Cpl Donald Payne as soon as they arrived at the TDF. Soon afterwards, one detainee described ‘being beaten and having his feet kicked into a stress position’. For most of the next 36 hours Baha Mousa would be hooded and kept in a ‘ski’ position, with legs apart and bent at 45 degrees and hands raised, whilst being subjected to repeated beatings. Soldiers would also kick and punch him if his arms began to drop or he relaxed in any way.

The men described having fingers pressed in their eye sockets, water being squeezed into their mouths and being kicked in the genitals and kidneys while they were kneeling. One man said he had petrol rubbed in his face before a cigarette lighter was lit close to him...One of the prisoners, referred to in the report as D001, described how the detainees would be ‘arranged in a circle on their knees, and soldiers going around the circle hitting and kicking’ them, which made them ‘emit groans and other noises and thereby playing them like musical instruments’.(Rayner 2011)

Mousa was found to have sustained 93 injuries while he was bound and hooded in conditions of ‘intense heat and extreme squalor’.(Bingham & Hough 2011) After an internal inquiry headed by Brigadier Aitken, seven members of the First Battalion, the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, were court-martialed in 2007, including the battalion's former commanding officer Jorge Mendonca. Only one was found guilty. The MoD agreed to pay £2.83m compensation to the ten Iraqis who were tortured (BBC 2008), and the subsequent report made recommendations to change internal procedures. However, there was lingering evidence of complicity among more senior personnel, and doubts about the reliability of the Royal Military Police who carried out the internal investigation.

In 2008 a public inquiry was ordered by then Defence Secretary Des Browne, and it was to become the most significant examination of military conduct in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. In a devastating indictment of military culture, retired appeal court judge Sir William Gage's 1400-page report, released in September 2011, ruled there was widespread ignorance of the correct way to deal with prisoners of war, and that senior officers bore a 'heavy responsibility' for troops using banned interrogation techniques. The impact of this investigation, and of the earlier army-led Aitken Inquiry in 2008, would be profound, leading to a revision of the procedures involved in the detention of prisoners: 'Managing the process of detention properly is now a mainstream military skill which requires mandatory education, specific permissions, and well-practised procedures.' (Wall 2011)

Just as the Macpherson report acknowledged the extent of 'institutional racism' the Metropolitan Police in 1999, so this inquiry in 2011 laid bare the extent army's culpability in failing to prepare soldiers to handle civilian detainees in a war situation and then protecting those who were guilty. Dannatt's successor, CGS General Sir Peter Wall admitted that Baha Mousa's death in 2004 cast a 'dark shadow' over the Army's reputation. He articulated the conventional pact between the national armed forces and civilian society in his acceptance that, 'The nation places its trust in us and we expect our soldiers' conduct to reflect that trust'.

Despite this summoning of the nation as an entity that could be betrayed by the actions of a few, the responsibility was seen to fall squarely within the institution rather than reflect attitudes and behaviours emanating from UK culture more generally. In an interview with Guardian journalists, Lt Col Nicholas Mercer, the army's former chief legal adviser in Iraq, accused the MoD of 'moral ambivalence' and a 'cultural resistance to human rights' that allowed British troops to abuse detainees (Norton-Taylor 2011).

While Dannatt had fully condemned what had happened in Iraq, he would also have known that further revelations would continue to emerge as other families who suffered abuse at the hands of British soldiers sought compensation. Although the Baha Mousa inquiry formally ended in late 2011, campaigning lawyers continue to pursue two further inquiries with wide-ranging remits to investigate allegations that UK forces abused and unlawfully killed Iraqi civilians while they controlled parts of southern Iraq (Marsden 2012). After more than a decade of military operations in Afghanistan it is likely that the UK armed forces will continue to face legal challenges of abuse and unlawful killing for many years to come (Cobain 2012).

Britain's more recent military exploits, particularly under Blair's leadership from 1997 to 2007, have clearly had momentous effects on public perceptions of the place of the military in society. Military institutions constitute a valuable field of postcolonial study because it is here, at the intersection of defence, security and foreign policy, that the country's adjustment to the loss of empire is registered on multiple levels. The modern history of the British Army, which includes the reform of the ways that soldiers are treated as employees as well as how they treat their detainees, can only be understood against the backdrop of Britain's transition from a once imperial power to its current status as a junior partner of the USA within NATO. In this protracted scenario, racism continues to bind the politics of post-colonial citizenship to the bloody context of military occupation and the conduct of war itself.

¹ House of Commons. HC Deb 28 October 1997 vol 299 cc724-808. 724
http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1997/oct/28/defence-policy#S6CV0299P0_19971028_HOC_201 (accessed 15 February 2012)

² <http://www.army.mod.uk/join/25629.aspx> (accessed 12 February 2012)

³ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/modintranet/UKDS/UKDS2011/c2/table214.php>

⁴ Trained UK Regular Forces by Service and nationality at 1 April 2011. Obtained under FOI.

⁵ Online. Available HTTP <<http://www.nam.ac.uk/exhibitions/permanent-galleries/conflicts-interest-1969-present/gallery-highlights/equality>> (accessed 15 March 2011)

⁶ House of Commons HC Deb 28 October 1997, vol 299 cc728-29. <http://goo.gl/PntWc> (accessed 15 February 2012)

⁷ House of Commons HC Deb 28 October 1997, vol 299 cc728-730. <http://goo.gl/jjGFk> (accessed 15 February 2012)

⁸ Modern Forces for the Modern World, Strategic Defence Review, July 1998. Supporting Essay Nine, 'A Policy for People'. Section 41, p. 214.

⁹ Ibid, Introduction, p. 205.

¹⁰ National Army Museum, NAM 1998-10-244, Equality. <http://goo.gl/YA9XS> (accessed 20 October 2011)

¹¹ The exhibition was launched by The Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mr John Spellar and the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Mr Gurbux Singh. The We Were There exhibition. Ministry of Defence, launched 28 November 2000. <http://goo.gl/tNuWb> (accessed 30 October 2011)

¹² In 2004-5, for example, the shortfall of trained soldiers rose by 300 per cent, and although recruitment improved the following year, with an increase of 9.2 per cent, poor retention of existing personnel led to an overall shortfall of 1,500. <http://goo.gl/bNI3x> (accessed 13 April 2012)

¹³ By 2010, the list of other faiths recorded in the annual survey of religious backgrounds for 2010 included Buddhist (0.3%), Sikh and Christian tradition, meaning Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and others (0.1%), Hindu (0.6%), Muslim and other religions (0.5%). Minority religions included Druid, Pagan, Rastafarian, Spiritualist, Zoroastrian (Parsee), Wicca and Baha'i.

¹⁴ In the same interview Richards also said, 'It is very important for the Muslim community to be exposed to an alternative view as it is for the rest of the nation. The Taliban kill many more Muslims than we do.'

¹⁵ Introduction, 'We Were There'. MoD, <<http://goo.gl/6iLtl>> (accessed 30 October 2011)

¹⁶ 'We Were There' home page. <http://goo.gl/OJoN0> (accessed 31 October 2011)

¹⁷ The exhibition was subsequently updated to provide short biographical accounts of individuals, including Sohail Khan. However, underneath his personal entry, the same image of Khan working in Pakistan was featured, with the caption: a Chinook Helicopter. <http://goo.gl/ll2LU> (accessed 28 February 2012)

¹⁸ In 2012 a Yorkshire teenager was charged with a racially aggravated public order offence after posting on Facebook allegedly offensive comments about six UK soldiers killed in Afghanistan. 'Teen Charged Over Dead Soldiers Facebook Post', Sky News, Monday 12 March 2012. <http://goo.gl/TeMwb> (accessed 16 March 2012)

Noting that there was nothing in the incriminating post that mentioned race or religion, one commentator remarked that: "'soldier" is not a race but, if you're Muslim in Britain, you can pretty much forget any freedom of speech niceties that we bandy around when we compare ourselves to despotic foreign regimes that crush peoples' human rights.' 'SHUT YOUR FACEBOOK. Anti-occupation rant leaves one Facebook user facing serious charges', Weekly Schnews, Brighton, 16 March 2012. <http://goo.gl/F1vn3> (accessed 17 March 2012)

¹⁹ See also 'Values and Standards of the British Army', 2008. AC 64813. http://www.army.mod.uk/documents/general/v_s_of_the_british_army.pdf (accessed 10.2.2011)

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