

Obituary

# Fuad Nahdi, *Q-News*, and the Forging of British Islam: Some Personal Reflections

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**Abstract:** This obituary offers some personal memories of Fuad Nahdi (1957–2020), based on my interactions with him, as well as some reflections on the historic importance of *Q-News*, the British Muslim periodical Nahdi founded, which was published between 1992 and 2006, partly based on short impromptu interviews done with some who worked on the magazine with Nahdi. In *Q-News*, Nahdi created the most consequential UK Muslim publication of its day and helped shape how a whole generation of young Muslims saw their identity and faith. He should be remembered alongside Abdullah Quilliam (1856–1932) and Dr Kalim Siddiqui (1931–1996) as among the great journalists-cum-activists that British Islam has produced.

**Keywords:** British Muslims; Media Studies; Religious Studies; Islamic Studies; religious leadership; British Islam; identity; Fuad Nahdi; *Q-News*; religious authority; Sufism

## 1. Introduction

It is hard to think of life as a Muslim in Britain without recalling the presence of Fuad Nahdi (1 June 1957–21 March 2020) within it, may God have mercy on him, as he touched so many of our lives, directly and indirectly. His passing is devastating for myself and for countless others, including my wife Dr Fozia Bora (b. 1972), who had worked with Fuad at *Q-News* in the early 1990s and for whom he was an important mentor. We can only imagine the depth of grief felt by Fuad's family, his wife, the activist Humera Khan, his son Nadir and his daughter Ilyeh.

On the day that Sidi Fuad passed away, Saturday, 21 March 2020, once I steadied myself after the initial wave of shock and grief, I joined others in trying to ensure that his passing was marked in an appropriate way. That evening, I wrote a rather impersonal brief, slightly updated and expanded here, to send around to media outlets (which was later kindly retweeted, with permission, by Dr Hisham Hellyer). It went like this:

Fuad Nahdi was the *éminence grise* of British Islam. The founding figure of modern British Muslim media, Fuad and the talented young journalists he mentored at *Q-News* (1992–2006), helped to define “British Muslims” and “British Islam” in the 1990s.

Fuad was a prominent figure in interfaith circles, playing an active role in the Christian-Muslim Forum, established in 2005, was awarded the Interfaith Gold Medallion by the Three Faiths Forum in 2012, and was the first Muslim ever to address the General Synod of the Church of England in 2014. He was particularly close to the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

He was also active in policy issues from the 1990s onwards, as an influential figure in Whitehall. The “Radical Middle Way” he established in December 2005 was a flagship outreach programme to promote a positive British Islam that was confident, and not afraid to be outspoken when required.

Growing up in Kenya, of mixed Yemeni-Indonesian ancestry, Fuad traced his descent back to the Nahdi tribe of the southern Yemen. He came to London in 1983 to train at City University as a journalist and had an incredible career.

He worked and wrote for Reuters, Los Angeles Times, Arab News, The Nation, ABC News, Crescent International, Africa Events, and the BBC World Service. He contributed journalism and commentary to The Economist, The Independent, The Guardian, The New York Times, The New Statesman, Arab News, Mail & Guardian (South Africa), the BBC, Arabia Magazine, Asahi Shimbun, Channel 4, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and others. His opinion pieces were taken seriously by the British establishment.

A larger-than-life character with a wicked sense of humour, Fuad loved young people and did much to mentor them. Entrepreneurial and a capable networker, he put together many seminal events, such as the grand national celebration of the Prophet's birthday, "Uniting for the Prophet", at the Wembley Arena in May 2005.

Fuad Nahdi was a catalytic figure who helped to inspire a confident, outward-looking, progressive, and yet cosmopolitan British Islam.

He had been ill for several years and was among the first of the Muslim community's elders to be diagnosed with the Covid-19 infection.

Such then are the bare bones of an amazing life. But I wanted to follow up on this skeletal note with a more personal and considered remembrance, as the hastily-formulated briefing I wrote and sent out does not do justice to the unquantifiable scope of Fuad's varied contribution to British Muslim life, to what he meant to me personally or to his significance in the history of Islam in Britain. I attempt to rectify this somewhat by offering some reflections here, with a focus on Fuad and *Q-News*. It certainly does not attempt to capture the whole of Fuad's complex and multifaceted life, but only my memories and reflections of him, peppered with some of those who worked with him on the magazine.

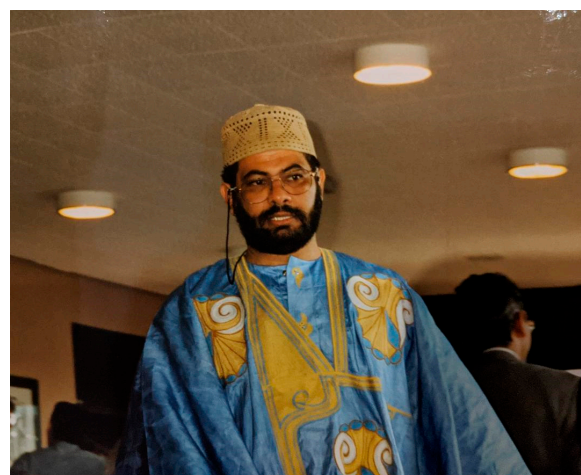
## 2. How I Got to Know Fuad Nahdi

I first met Fuad and Humera through my marriage to Fozia Bora in 1997; they joked that it was the first *Q-News* marriage, as we had met while she was on a journalistic assignment. Before the wedding, I went to their home in Wembley for an evening interview. Ostensibly, they were going through a marriage contract they had drawn up for us. They were concerned that this contract should reflect higher Islamic values—not just the legalities of wedded life—informed by an egalitarian ethos of mutual respect and care, which they palpably embodied in their own marriage. They were equals, and as such were unafraid to air their own differences on issues of the day before guests around their famous dining room table of hospitality and conversation in Wembley (see Figure 1). In retrospect, it seems obvious to me now that Fuad and Humera were making sure that one of their protégés at *Q-News* had picked a safe bet. Later on, Fozia's younger brother, Musab, would marry another *Q-News* editor in Shagufta Yaqub in 2002, which strengthened my connection to Fuad's circle.



**Figure 1.** Humera Khan (far left) and Fuad Nadhi (far right) hosting guests around their famous dining table at their Wembley home, well-known for great food and good conversation, in 2018. With them is Ismail Lea South (centre) of the Salaam Project and, to the right of him, Shuaib El-Nahla of Rumi's Cave. (Photo courtesy of Ismail Lea South.)

Like so many others, I was quickly adopted into Fuad and Humera's extended family—really a microcosm of the creative vanguard of the *umma* (the global Muslim community). Fuad, with typical generosity, threw himself into organising entertainments at our wedding celebration, including *munshidīn* (singers of devotional odes) from the Sudan and Bosnia, and we were honoured to have him act as our master of ceremonies, looking stately in a gorgeous blue Nigerian kaftan (see Figure 2). Fuad encouraged me, as he had so many others, to write my first published comment pieces and reviews for *Q-News* (from 2000) and I contributed to the magazine thereafter. We saw less of Fuad and Humera than we would have liked once we moved north from Oxford to Leicester and then later to Ilkley in West Yorkshire, but—as many others have attested—he had a gift for friendship and once he accepted you into his circle, he would neither forget you nor allow you to drift away.



**Figure 2.** Fuad Nahdi, officiating at the wedding of Yahya Birt and Fozia Bora in 1997, with his usual style and aplomb. (Author's collection.)



When Fuad would call me up out of the blue, with that inimitable Kenyan accent, saying, “As-salāmu alaykum, Yahya. It’s Fuad,” I always wondered what kind of trouble I’d gotten myself into. Famously, Fuad wasn’t someone whom you wanted to be on the wrong side of an argument with. He wasn’t one to suffer foolishness lightly. What had I done to provoke his ire? What had I written or said?

Equally, he could just as easily be ringing to ask for my comments or feedback on a piece he was drafting for the press or to chew over the latest cause célèbre in the Muslim community. He was always warm and personally generous. He loved to catch up with your news, pass on his news, his latest idea or project, or chew over what was going on in British politics, in the Muslim community nationally or around the world.

### 3. Q-News: A Brief History

In terms of expressing Islam in a British idiom, Fuad embodied the outlook that he put forward in *Q-News*, and its short-lived precursor, *MuslimWise* (est. 1988), a satirical monthly inspired by *Private Eye*. *Q-News* started out as a news-driven weekly with its first issue on 3 April 1992 (see Figure 3), but in later years it became a glossy monthly magazine with longer features (see Figure 4). It was always targeted at young Muslims, so to cater to them, Fuad mentored a young British Muslim team, passing on his considerable skills in journalism, public relations, community organising and event management. This cohort of young Muslim journalists then went on to help define the outlook of their generation that came of age in the 1990s—Fareena Alam, Faisal Bodi, Fozia Bora, Zeeshan Khan, Abdul-Rehman Malik, Roshan Salih, Shagufta Yaqub, Saba Zaman and many others.



**Figure 3.** The first issue of *Q-News*, then a weekly newsmagazine, published from London on 3 April 1992. (Image courtesy of the Convergence Trust.)



**Figure 4.** A cover of *Q-News* in its later years, when it had become a glossy monthly magazine with longer feature articles. This is issue No. 362, from April 2005, covering the general election campaign of that year. (Image courtesy of the Convergence Trust.)

With *Q-News* moving beyond beards, hijabs and halal meat (an early tagline), Fuad wanted to identify positively what it meant to be Muslim and British long before it became fashionable or even commonplace, as it is today. Fuad as a person and *Q-News* as a publication could be summed up in four ways: as progressive, cosmopolitan, attentive to context, and respectful but never deferential let alone obsequious towards religious and political authority. For Fuad and *Q-News*, being respectful included being unafraid to be maverick, even contrarian or satirical at times, and standing outside any easy or cosy consensus when it was necessary.

When *Q-News* was launched as a weekly newsmagazine, its location near Oxford Circus reflected both its quirky Britishness and its connection to the affairs of Muslims worldwide. Its busy offices at 44 Conduit Street were sandwiched between the flagship store of the famed British fashion designer associated with the punk movement, Vivienne Westwood, and the Embassy of Bosnia-Herzegovina on the second floor—and this was during the Bosnian War of 1992–1995. The office was dank and dingy, Faisal Bodi recalls, with no hot water, filled with old Macs and fan heaters to stop the staff freezing in

the winter. The state of its finances was so parlous that the staff didn't know if they would get paid from one month to the next. But that didn't matter, Bodi says, because the staff "believed in the vision and mission of *Q-News*, it almost inspired you more because it was a smaller struggle within a bigger and wider struggle." In Bodi's view, that vision and struggle was to give an independent voice to young second-generation British Muslims, distinct from the vernacular and cultural Islam of parents or the competing currents of Islam on offer to young Muslims in the large cities.

Ibrahim Hewitt, who came to work at *Q-News* as a sub-editor for two weeks and stayed for six months, recalls that Fuad ran a relaxed office that became increasingly frenetic as publication day loomed. Instead of finishing at 5 or 6 pm on press day, the staff would often find themselves putting the magazine to bed in the early hours or after an all-nighter. Faisal Bodi prefers to describe it as "organised chaos", remarking that "it was only the sense of purpose and belief in what we were doing that made it work." With the frenzy that came with putting the issue to bed, Fozia Bora, then a features editor at the paper, recollects that a huge picnic lunch would be assembled, consisting of baguettes, hummus, and cherry tomatoes, to keep tired brains ticking over and keyboard fingers nimble. "It was enjoyable," Bodi recalls, "and there was a great sense of camaraderie. It was fantastic. I loved it."

Even in his radical student days, Fuad was never one to fall into any single camp, defying easy pigeonholing—he had posters of both Mao and Khomeini hanging up on his college room door. *Q-News* would reflect this nonconformist spirit with its agenda-setting coverage on issues of Islamophobia and race, the Bosnia conflict and many others.

For Bodi, it gave a voice to a Muslim community that was voiceless, poorly understood and demonised at the time. *Q-News* articles were commonly cited in the national press. Fleet Street editors would often call up for the staff's perspectives on the news of the day. It was not that the magazine had the resources to pursue scoops—rather, its value lay in the fresh and new articulation it gave to British Muslim perspectives and priorities on current affairs.

At *Q-News*, Fuad and his young team worked to define a new expression of Islam in Britain, revolutionary at the time—the early 1990s—but perfectly timed to meet the needs of this second generation that was coming of age and finding its feet. How much we could still do with a *Q-News* now; it has often been sorely missed since it ceased publication in 2006.

The particular Islam that *Q-News* sought to nurture in Britain was urbane, reflective of Islamic diversity in Britain, intent on building a new sense of Muslim solidarity, and attuned to British cultural idioms. In that sense, the newsmagazine captured the zeitgeist of nineties British Islam, a decade now all-too-often only recalled for birthing extremism. But for those of us who lived through it as adults, the radical nineties was a decade of unfettered creativity, freedom and political incorrectness, which is now deeply missed, living as we do with a securitization of British Muslim cultural and intellectual life that has paralysed us over time like a slow-motion car-crash we cannot escape.

The veteran activist Massoud Shadjareh recalls Fuad in those years:

Fuad Nahdi and his career should be looked at in the round. Foremost, he was a journalist and activist, acting as a genuine alternative voice of Muslims. His true work dealt with issues like the Rushdie Affair, Bosnia, Islamophobia and Muslim identity. His ability to work with and recognise the Muslim community as a whole made him pan-Islamic.

It should also be remembered that *Q-News* was the first British Muslim periodical to centre the voices, concerns, thoughts and agendas of Muslim women—and this was driven by the tireless and pioneering activism of Humera and Khalida and Aisha Khan, the women who had founded the Muslim gender equality organisation, the An-Nisa Society, established in May 1985. It was also the second British Muslim periodical to appoint a Muslim woman as editor: Shagufta Yaqub, in 2000; Sarah Joseph preceded her at *Trends* in 1994.

Yaqub, who edited the magazine between 2000 and 2003 (see Figure 5), recalls that the magazine's nonconformism and independence left *Q-News* with its fair share of detractors, determined to prove it was a front of some kind:



Nobody could quite place *Q-News*. The conspiracy theories about who was funding us or what our secret agenda was were hilarious—as was the speculation about what Q really stood for. In reality, we barely had any funds and certainly no blind loyalties. Fuad gave me the freedom to publish articles he disagreed with and then publicly defended my right to publish them. Those who weren't used to a free media couldn't get their heads around this. Nor did some of the older male Muslim leadership of that era like being held to account by a young female-led magazine backed by a strong and irreverent character like Fuad.



**Figure 5.** Shagufta Yaqub, Editor of *Q-News* between 2000–2003, at her desk in the Dexion House office in Wembley with Fareena Alam, News Editor, seated, packing the magazines for subscribers. The Muslim Council of Britain later moved in down the corridor in the same office block. (Photo courtesy of Shagufta Yaqub.)

#### 4. A Son of the Indian Ocean Forging Cosmopolitan British Islam

Fuad was a true citizen of the world, a son of the Indian Ocean, sired of those ancient maritime circuits that Islam linked through religion and trade from East Africa, Southern Arabia, India to Southeast Asia. Born in Arusha, Tanzania, and growing up in Mombasa, he had Yemeni-Indonesian ancestry, and later married Humera in 1989, herself of British-Pakistani heritage, six years after moving to London. He and his family embodied globality, something much augmented by his tireless community organising and journalism that took him around the world many times. In his very bearing and person, Fuad was an argument against all kinds of parochialism. He wanted Muslims in Britain to embrace their *biryani*-like richness, to recognise and acknowledge each other's unique flavours and to marinate together to cook up something beautiful and new.<sup>1</sup>

Fuad was schooled in the scholarly and spiritual traditions of the Bā-'Alawiyya of the southern Yemen, a lineage of pious and holy men descended from the Prophet Muhammad (*sādāt*), famous for their historic role in spreading Islam in many countries over the centuries (see Figure 6). His spiritual mentor was the famed Ḥabīb Ahmad Mashhūr al-Haddād (1907–1995). Fuad was at the forefront of the first culturally impactful wave of the Bā-'Alawiyya in Britain in the early 1990s, along with Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad (Dr Timothy J. Winter) (see Figure 7).

<sup>1</sup> *Biryani* is a South Asian Muslim dish that combines cooked rice with spiced vegetables or meat.



**Figure 6.** Fuad Nahdi (left) with Habīb Umar ibn Hafiz (b. 1963, right), Dean of Dār al-Mustafā in Tarīm, Hadramawt in the southern Yemen. (Photo courtesy of Shaukat Warraich.)





**Figure 7.** Prayers in Fuad Nahdi's back garden at his home in Wembley, circa 2014, with members of the Bā-'Alawiyya and other close friends. (Photo courtesy of Nadir Nahdi.)<sup>2</sup>

Fuad was always attentive to centring the early British converts to Islam like Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936) and Quilliam, just as he was to all converts to Islam whom he knew, drawing them closely to him as *mu'allafat al-qulūb* (those whose hearts must be drawn closer or reconciled). He was among the first to look at Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam's *Crescent*, the first Muslim newspaper to be published in Britain between 1893–1908, in the British Library and at one point considered doing a doctorate on him, wanting to think through how British Muslims could relate to the legacy of the early converts, and how it could be furthered today.

<sup>2</sup> Habīb Kāzim Saqqāf (b. 1967) leads the prayers, who first began visiting Britain in 2007. The Habā'ib, the religious leaders of the Bā-'Alawiyya, when visiting Britain would often pay their respects by visiting Fuad at his home.

**Front row** (L to R): (1) Omar "Omareeto" Sayid, a British-Somali Qādirī devotee (2) Fuad Nahdi, (3) Sh. Ibrahim Ossi-Efa, co-founder of the *rihlas* (neotraditionalist educational retreats) in the West, and the regular host of Habīb Kādhim in the UK, sat directly behind Habīb Kāzim.

**Second row** (L to R): (1) Sayyid Tahir Bunumay, grandson of Habīb Umar ibn Sumayt, with a green scarf, (2) Sayyid Shams al-Haddād, Kenyan-born, London-based, with the henna-dyed beard, (4) Sh. Muhammad Mlamali Adam (d. 2019), Zanzibari intellectual and editor of *Africa Events*, a close mentor of Fuad's in London, with a blue scarf.

**Third row** (L to R): (1) Tariq Khan, Fuad Nahdi's brother-in-law, (2) Sh. Babikr Ahmed Babikr, British-Sudanese Sam'ānī Sufi shaykh and Director of Rumi's Cave, (3) Wael Zubi, British-Libyan translator for the Habā'ib, partially obscured behind Sayyid Shams al-Haddād.

**Standing at the back** (L to R): (1) Edris Khamissa, South African educationist, (3) Shahid Hanif, Cambridge Central Mosque project volunteer, (4) Dr Mustaqur Rahman, (6) Sauqab Ashraf, Blackstone Architects, (7) Sh. Abdal Hakim Murad, Dean of Cambridge Muslim College and Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at University of Cambridge, holding baby Ibrahim Hanif. (Photo by Nadir Nahdi.)

At the same time, he was opposed to the argument of some white converts that Islam can only be authentically British if it is defined by them (Birt 2017b, pp. 142–48). He understood that while white converts were an integral part of enculturating Islam, the faith was always going to be generous and inclusive rather than parochial in Britain, a sum greater than its parts, an outcome to be carefully cultivated and nurtured. For Fuad, Islam in Britain was not something to be dishonoured and diminished by exclusivist white British ethno-nationalism or smothered by revanchist ethnocultural expressions of Islam from Asia, Africa or the Arab world. It had to resemble *biryani* or *kusharī* more than mushy peas.<sup>3</sup>

In his work, Fuad formed important partnerships with converts like Ibrahim Hewitt, Daud Rosser-Owen, Yusuf Islam, Abdul-Azeem Saunders, Abdul-Lateef Whiteman, Martin Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn Lings (1909–2005), Hasan le Gai Eaton (1921–2010), and—in a sustained way—with Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Shaykh Nuh Keller, Dr Umar ‘Abd-Allah, Imam Zaid Shakir, Shaykha Halima Krausen, and, in the deepest way, with Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad (see Figure 7), who was also close to Habib Ahmad Mashhūr al-Haddād. When Abdal Hakim returned from his studies in the Arab world, he and Fuad would support each other on many projects over the next thirty years.

Besides the spiritual influence of the Bā-‘Alawiyya, another important early set of influences on Fuad was at the University of Nairobi studying economics, where he picked up an abiding love of nonconformist political activism; he was arrested for his role as a leading student protestor against Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi (1924–2020). He ran the Muslim student association there and started a student newspaper. It was an intellectually important time at the university in those days: key figures included the famous Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who taught English Literature to Fuad, and the Marxist political scientist Ahmed Muhiddin, who also advised Julius Nyerere. Other important journalist-cum-activist mentors for Fuad after he came to London to study journalism were the political scientist and former-*Guardian* writer and sub-editor Dr Kalim Siddiqui, founder of the Muslim Institute in London in 1974, who had relaunched *Crescent International* in 1980 as the “newsmagazine of the global Islamic movement” (see Figure 8), and Zanzibari intellectual and ex-BBC journalist Mohamed Mlamali Adam, who edited the political monthly, *Africa Events* (see Figure 7). Fuad wrote and worked for both periodicals in the 1980s. (Bakari 2020; O’Sullivan and Malik 2020).



**Figure 8.** Fuad Nahdi (centre) speaking at the funeral of Dr Kalim Siddiqui (1931–1996), who mentored him in both journalism and political activism when he first came to Britain. (Photo courtesy of Muhammad Ahmedullah.)

<sup>3</sup> *Kusharī* is an Egyptian dish, combining Italian, Indian and Middle Eastern elements, bringing together rice, lentils, and macaroni.

## 5. Respect and Irreverence towards Religious and Political Leadership

Fuad demonstrated how to be respectful towards authority, religious or political, without ever being obsequious or deferential. He was like this with everybody. He was a singular personality with an infectious sense of humour, charm and warmth that did not mask his underlying seriousness of purpose. Whether it was renowned shaykhs, archbishops or chief rabbis, leading politicians, civil servants or diplomats, Fuad was always himself. If he felt that something was nonsensical or ill-advised, he would say so. But not in a way that alienated people, for, with Fuad, it was always criticism with love, with concern, with compassion.

Fuad was the opposite of a hypocrite. He never liked to attack from behind; rather, if he had to criticise you for something then his preferred method was the frontal attack. Face to face, as befitted his ancestry, which Fuad traced back to the Nahdi Tribe of the Southern Yemen, who acted as protectors to the peoples of the Hadramawt Valley. Such then was his intent in protecting upfront what he saw as the best interests of his community or society at large. Yet behind the charm and humour lay a steeliness towards those whom he thought threatened those interests. Fuad's old colleague, the human rights campaigner Massoud Shadjareh, reflects upon these qualities when he observes, "I worked with him on many projects and sometimes we fundamentally disagreed with each other but this didn't impact our brotherhood and friendship negatively."

He loved being around people. After Friday Prayers in Wembley, he would have a kebab and a chat with local Muslims there. His corner of northwest London—Wembley, and more generally Brent—was a nexus for the cutting edge of Islam in Britain in the late 1990s. The Muslim Council of Britain and *Q-News* shared the same office block. Fuad would, despite their rivalries, lend the Council his interns. His neighbours included figures like the exiled Saudi dissident Muhammad al-Mas'ari, Massoud Shadjareh and Arzu Merali of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, Sarah Joseph and Mahmud al-Rashid of the Islamic Society of Britain and *Emel*, Dr Abdul Wahid of Hizb-ut-Tahrir UK, and, of course, Humera, Khalida and Aisha Khan of the An-Nisa Society, among so many others. Intellectuals important to the articulation of this new zeitgeist like Tariq Modood and Salman Sayyid also had longstanding connections with Brent.

Behind the scenes in Fleet Street and Whitehall, Fuad fought a patient rear-guard battle against the maligning of Muslim organisations and individuals, even some of those who were his rivals, saving them when he could from some of the worst savagery that the national press could dish out. But, of course, that was a lonely struggle and a losing battle in the end, because of the post-Murdoch tabloidization of British newspapers, and the effective merger between government spin and the 24-h rolling news media machine.

Fuad was the finest political tactician of his generation in the British Muslim communities. He was always about three to five steps ahead of anybody else in the Muslim community, and, lacking the support networks and resources of the established Islamic revivalist movements, relied instead on his own agility and wits to stay ahead of the curve. It is no surprise that he was a trusted mentor to anyone in the next two generations of British Muslim community organisers who were coming through the ranks. His tactical acumen and sagacity were invaluable for young, ambitious Muslim activists who were navigating the choppy and dangerous waters of British public life for the first time. Fuad always gave freely of his time, despite, as his son Nadir has remarked, the serious illnesses he had to contend with in later life. He gave so much of himself but hid his own grave underlying health issues for the last thirteen years of his life, diverting well-wishers when he was laid low in hospital with a smile, a joke or a well-deserved bit of admonition.

Let me share an example of Fuad's political nous. After the 7/7 attacks of 2005, the Blair government put together a consultation, "Preventing Extremism Together", that September with the Muslim community, comprised of the activist circuit and its own Labour Party contacts. Typically, Fuad was aware from the beginning that the government was uninterested in the myriad suggestions that Muslims would come up with about Islamophobia, foreign policy, youth issues, or media bias (not that these weren't important in their own right). But, being the informed realist that he was,



Fuad knew the government was only really interested in what we British Muslims would do in our own communities to address political violence and how they could best support it. So, it was unsurprising that Fuad's Radical Middle Way became one of the three New Labour government's flagship projects to emerge directly after the London attacks, and before Prevent became an established policy.

However, it would be falsifying history to portray Fuad as a government patsy. Far from it. Civil servants and SPADs (Special Political Advisors)—so often used as gatekeepers by ministers—would think twice about getting in his way. How typical it was of Fuad to try and reclaim the term “radical” positively so early on, and to work behind the scenes to negotiate hard for the project's independence from Whitehall interference.

It is noteworthy that as soon as its autonomy was threatened, Fuad moved the Radical Middle Way away from any UK government funding streams in 2011, just after the Conservative-led Coalition came to office. He knew when to engage and when to disengage; in his last decade, he focused his attention abroad on Islam outside the Arab world and at home on interfaith. As Abdul-Rehman Malik, who knew him as well as anyone, observed shortly after his death, Fuad came to believe in later life that renewal would come not from the shattered twenty-first-century heartlands of Islam, but from its peripheries where Islam's cumulative tradition had not been disrupted in regions like West Africa or Southeast Asia in partnership with the Muslim communities of the West. He dubbed his envisioned alliance a crescent of hope.

Over these last ten years, when I worried aloud to him that the perception of compromised collaboration with state soft power would trump his good intentions and safeguards, and that focusing too much on theological correction diverted us from some of the real issues we faced, Fuad always gave me a courteous hearing. Yet he stayed true to his *modus operandi* of principled yet savvy engagement and shifted his field of endeavour when he felt his independence might be threatened.

Fuad honoured and respected the *shuyūkh* (authorities in Islamic moral education and spiritual guidance) and the *ulama* (the class of Muslim scholars specialised in Islamic theology, jurisprudence and other scholastic disciplines) in their role as inheritors of the prophets, as befits the Bā-ʿAlawiyya tradition that he came out of. Yet, at the same time, he always could be frank with the *shuyūkh*, in ways that would never come easily to British Muslims brought up in traditions of deference and sometimes of unquestioning loyalty. Fuad would always prefer honesty with respect over disquiet with deference. He could be blunt with the *shuyūkh* when he felt they had stepped out of their lane of religious learning and were opining on some other matter they knew little about, whether it was public relations, or media, or the British political situation. He trusted his own counsel, his own insights, his own experience in navigating these domains for the benefit of British Muslim communities—and rightly so. At the same time, he gave the *ulama* full respect for their competence and expertise in the religious sciences.

He demonstrated how to have an adult relationship with learned religious authorities in Islam, which is not meant to be obsequious or unduly deferential but should be a relationship of mutual respect, mutual learning, and the sharing of expertise and experience in pursuit of the common good in any challenge facing Muslim communities. In short, it should be a collaborative relationship based on benefitting from each other in positive ways, casting aside either vituperative disowning of the *ulama* and their learned tradition or alternatively a childish obsequiousness that encourages mediocrity, complacency and moral cowardice in our religious scholars. Fuad was an exemplar to me in how he walked this fine line.

After the Arab Spring, we shared our profound disappointment at our teachers and their loyalist activists and students who sided with the counter-revolutionary monarchies and republics trying to crush democracy at birth. But, unlike me, Fuad judged that it was better to offer private counsel. He always respected my decision to go public with my criticisms (Birt 2017a), even if he went through its contents and its reception with me after publication with a fine and exacting toothcomb. I would have expected nothing less of him.

Fuad had the social confidence and ease to be with leaders or the people, and be just the same, just like Malcolm X or Kalim Siddiqui. He was singular in that way, and as such he made a doughty

champion for the British Muslim community in the corridors of power. He stood out for his confidence, ease and flair in a generation of community organisers who were often awkward and stolid, oscillating between reaction and obsequiousness in their dealings with government. His assurance, aplomb and style were qualities that younger Muslims could relate to and be inspired by. He gave us hope that the future could be different and could be better.

*May Sidi Fuad rest in peace, may God forgive him, and grant him the company of the martyrs, the righteous, the veracious and the prophets in Paradise. And may God's blessings be upon the Beloved our Master Muhammad and his family, whom Sidi Fuad loved and honoured and served. And may God give us the ability to build upon Fuad Nahdi's vast legacy for our own welfare and benefit, and for his everlasting and perpetual reward in the Hereafter. Āmīn.*

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