

Institution: University of Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 31 Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Review of Sharia Law and the Public Understanding of Islam in the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011–2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Mona Siddiqui	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2011–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>With her unique profile as a Muslim female theologian and highly respected public intellectual, Siddiqui has reached a wide international audience through her work on Islamic thought, law, and ethics. The Home Office recognised her expertise in 2016, inviting her to chair an independent commission on sharia councils. The review, published 2018, was endorsed by the Council of Europe in 2019, shaping the current policy debate on sharia law and marriage. Its findings also persuaded the Home Office formally to support the Register our Marriage Campaign (ROM). Combining her research with contemporary political and societal concerns, Siddiqui has contributed a “brilliant, balanced” voice to public conversations on religion and society, bringing a deeper understanding of issues concerning gender, citizenship, faith and liberalism.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Siddiqui’s research into classical Islamic law and contemporary ethical issues has underpinned and shaped her impact upon government policy and the wider public understanding of Islam. In her 2012 monograph <i>The Good Muslim</i>, she reflects upon the rich discursive style of the Islamic legal and theological traditions, a style which Siddiqui argues has been lost in contemporary debates on Islam (3.1). Her exploration of key issues in Islamic law and theology has informed her analysis of the processes of marriage and divorce in sharia councils in England and Wales. In particular, Siddiqui demonstrates that the Hanafi tradition of Islamic jurisprudence affords women legal rights in marriage and divorce but that social conditions frequently restrict the implementation of many of these rights and freedoms. In 2013, she gave a lecture at the university of Lund which focused on the challenges of defining public faith in western Europe. In the case of Islam, complex terms like sharia are wrongly appropriated to polarise political and cultural debates (3.2)</p> <p>Siddiqui has also explored the interface between Islam and Christianity in an accessible manner that nevertheless represents a concerted scholarly effort to deconstruct complex issues (3.3). Her discussion of love and law in <i>Christians, Muslims and Jesus</i> (2013) explores the problematic (mis)interpretation of Islam from those within the Christian tradition (3.4). For Christians, the law is tempered by grace, but in Islam, the observance of law and ritual are seen through the prism of divine mercy. <i>Christians, Muslims, and Jesus</i> draws on selected Muslim and Christian texts to explore themes such as law, love, revelation, salvation, and sin. In doing so, Siddiqui offers a nuanced and perceptive interpretation of these two major religions in a way that undermines</p>		

polarising and polemical arguments, thereby opening up possibilities for fresh and deeper reflection.

In an endorsement of *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams wrote 'Probably only one person could have written this book. Mona Siddiqui's combination of deep expertise in Islamic thought and long exposure to interfaith dialogue have produced a really distinctive and distinguished reflection on the Christian/Muslim divide that is sympathetic, courageous and immensely constructive for dialogue at every level ... It will be profoundly welcome – and challenging – for the faithful of both traditions' (3.4).

With her research expertise in Islamic law and its reception within British society, Siddiqui was considered well-placed to investigate the possible injustices caused by existing legislation during the Home Office Review into UK Sharia Councils in 2016. Her published work makes the important claim that, as Islamic law encourages Muslims to abide by the laws of the land, the recommendation for Muslims to register their sharia marriages in a civil ceremony should be seen as a legal obligation. This proved a decisive consideration in the subsequent report of the Review.

3. References to the research

3.1 Mona Siddiqui, *The Good Muslim: Reflections on Classical Islamic Law and Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511980015> (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.2 Mona Siddiqui, 'Reflections on Public, Private and Secular Space,' in Jesper Svartik and Jakob Wiren (eds.), *Religious Stereotyping and Interreligious Relations*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 63–73. ISBN: 978–1–137–34460–1
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137342676> (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.3 Mona Siddiqui, *Muslim-Christian Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2016). ISBN 9781138937918 (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

3.4 Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). (Can be supplied by HEI on request)

4. Details of the impact

Siddiqui's research into Muslim-Christian relations has received international acclaim for its unique contribution to policy change and public debate. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer wrote that Siddiqui 'deserves recognition as one of the most imaginative leaders of contemporary Islamic thought' (5.1). Acknowledging her reputation as a balanced and incisive academic, the UK government in 2016 appointed Siddiqui chair of its Home Office review into the practices of sharia councils (5.2). The first review of its kind, this was established in response to claims that some sharia councils were ruling in ways that deprived women of their rights under UK law. Siddiqui's selection for this role was subsequently covered across UK broadsheets.

In 2018, the Sharia Review published its findings (5.3). Despite an open letter in which 200 signatories criticised the bias of the review body and predicted a 'whitewash' (5.4), the analysis and recommendations of the Review proved robust and challenging. The key legislative change proposed was that sharia marriages be registered under UK civil law, thus following Siddiqui's argument about the religious obligation to abide by the laws of the civic community. The report was quickly welcomed by the *Daily Telegraph* as providing a 'landmark' (5.5) and its findings were endorsed by several commentators. Its recommendations received widespread press

coverage (5.5). Writing in *The Spectator*, Tim Wyatt referred to the 'damning Home Office report by Professor Mona Siddiqui [which] identified "discriminatory practices" in the system and called for much tougher regulation of sharia councils' (5.5). The intense discussion over the relationship between Islamic and UK civil law also coincided with high-profile comments from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, whose 2018 book, *Re-Imagining Britain*, rejected sharia in the UK.

Following the recommendation of the report (5.3 p18), the Home Office has since implemented an awareness campaign aimed at educating Muslim women as to the differences between Islamic and civil marriage. In 2019 the Council of Europe endorsed the Review, calling for new legislation that requires UK Muslim couples to register marriages prior to or during Islamic ceremonies (5.6). The findings of the Review subsequently persuaded the Home Office to back the independent Register our Marriage Campaign (ROM) which has the dual aim of raising awareness of the lack of legal protection for unregistered marriages and reforming the 1949 Marriage Act to require the civil registering of all religious marriages; this resulted in government funding for one of the ROM campaigns (5.7). In October 2019, the UK government indicated that it was still considering the legal reforms recommended by the Review.

Siddiqui's public platform has grown extensively through her broadcasting and popular writing. This is evident in her regular contributions to the BBC and other media outlets. These activities have enabled her to enrich and shift public understanding of Islam in the UK. In recent years, she has steadfastly condemned extremism through interviews and newspaper articles (5.8). Her inclusion on regular radio programmes, including BBC Radio 4's 'Moral Maze', also testifies to the value of her input on a range of issues beyond strictly religious matters. She is the only Muslim – and sole academic – who is a frequent contributor to BBC Radio Scotland's and BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' (TFTD) which attracts a weekly audience exceeding 7,000,000 (5.9). After a TFTD discussion on homosexuality, Siddiqui received the following email: 'I'm now crying as I type this. It's so hard being both Muslim and gay – trying to be faithful to my belief and who I am ... Your words were so beautiful and I hope they have an impact wider than little old me who is trying to keep it together in the kitchen while I get ready for my first day back at work after the summer holidays. Thank you so much – please keep on talking – this country needs people like you' (5.10). The crime writer Val McDermid tweeted to her 39,321 followers in September 2016: 'If one person justifies the existence of @BBCRadio4 Thought For The Day, it's the brilliant balanced @monasiddiqui7'(5.10).

Her core role in promoting ecumenical relations was recognised by the Church of England in 2019 when she was granted a Lambeth Award; the citation described her as one of the UK's 'most eloquent and articulate advocates for interfaith dialogue and a most cogent commentator on current affairs, religion and public life' (5.11). Further, Siddiqui has become a go-to figure in times of national crisis. She was invited onto TFTD the day following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France, as well as on the 10th anniversary of 9/11; her TFTD in the wake of Charlie Hebdo was reproduced in several newspapers (5.12).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1. Jonathan Benthall, 'Abraham's Children', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 January 2014, p.13

5.2. Email from Home Office, 26 January 2017

5.3. Independent Review into the application of sharia law in England and Wales, 1 February 2018

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/applying-sharia-law-in-england-and-wales-independent-review>

5.4. 'Sharia review branded "whitewash" over appointment "bias" concerns', *Independent*, 9 July 2016

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sharia-courts-review-branded-whitewash-over-appointment-bias-concerns-a7128706.html>

5.5. 'Sharia Marriage Should be Recognised in British Law, Review Commissioned by Theresa May Concludes', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 2018 (circulation: 385,346)

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/02/01/sharia-councils-should-not-banned-could-forced-underground-review/>

'Register Islamic Marriages Under Civil Law, Sharia Review Says', *Guardian*, 1 February 2018 (circulation: 130,484)

<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2018/feb/01/sharia-councils-review-islamic-marriages-uk-law>

'Muslim couples must get a civil wedding at the same time as a Sharia ceremony in future, a review of Islamic law in Britain says', *Daily Mail*, 1 February 2018 (circulation: c1,334,142)

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5341075/Sharia-weddings-include-UK-civil-ceremony-future.html>

'Sharia marriage should be recognised by UK law to protect wives, report warns', *Express*, 1 February 2018

<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/913246/sharia-marriage-wedding-law-council-theresa-may-report>

'Sharia marriages should be registered under UK law, says independent review', *Independent*, 1 February 2018 (circulation: 21,994)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sharia-marriages-uk-law-registered-islamic-review-muslim-wedding-womens-rights-a8189541.html>

Tim Wyatt, 'Justin Welby's Stance on Sharia Law is a Welcome Relief', *The Spectator*, 8 March 2018 (circulation: 71,102)

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/justin-welby-s-stance-on-sharia-law-is-a-welcome-relief>

5.6. 'Council of Europe calls for Muslim couples in the UK to legally have to register marriage before or during Islamic ceremony', *Independent*, 24 January 2019

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/council-europe-sharia-law-muslims-couples-marriage-women-protection-a8743341.html>

5.7. Register Our Marriage website.

<https://registerourmarriage.org/Muslim-marriage-and-divorce-practices-in-contemporary-Britain>

Email from Matthew Willis, Home Office, to Mona Siddiqui, 5 May 2020

5.8. 'Mona Siddiqui: There needs to be more self-criticism among Muslims', *Herald Scotland*, 29 April 2016 (circulation: c108,000)

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14463121.mona-siddiqui-there-needs-to-be-more-self-criticism-among-muslims/>

'We Muslims can't wait for the next bomb before we speak out', *Telegraph*, 19 November 2015

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12006370/We-Muslims-cant-wait-for-the-next-bomb-before-wespeak-out.html>

5.9. 'Stable quarter for BBC radio according to latest Rajars' quoting listener figures for The Today show

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/2019-q4>

5.10. Private email correspondence, 5 September 2016

Sourced from Twitter, 5 September 2016

<https://twitter.com/valmcdermid/status/772689518239551488?s=20>

5.11. 'Lambeth Awards honour "extraordinary contributions to the Church and wider society', 5 April 2019

<http://web.archive.org/web/20190408135919/https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2019/04/lambeth-awards-honour-extraordinary-contributions-to-the-church-and-wider-society.aspx>

5.12. 'BBC Thought for the Day, Professor Mona Siddiqui', 8 January 2015

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02grr5l>