

Article for Eastern Eye

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Fifteen years ago, at the height of the Satanic Verses Affair, the Muslim writer Shabbir Akhtar declared his belief that the next time gas chambers were used again in Europe, it would be Muslims who were pushed inside them. Merely an example of journalistic hyperbole?

Well, who could have guessed at the time that, just a few years later, in the middle of the 1990s, when Europe was supposed to be benefiting from the Peace Dividend following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we would witness the slaughter of 250,000 Bosnian Muslims at the hands of the Serbs? This would include the single worst massacre in peacetime Europe of over 8000 Muslim men, women and children in Srebrenica despite the full glare of the world's media being focused on them.

Now, with the responsibility for the horrific bombings in Madrid seemingly being laid by our politicians at al-Qa'ida's door, there is a widespread conviction that the UK must now be near the top of the terrorist hit list. Britain's two million Muslims find themselves in a volatile and dangerous situation indeed.

Just last week, British Muslims were appalled to hear a senior cabinet minister refer to 'Islamic terrorists' on the Today programme on Radio 4. This was despite repeated assurances received from the very highest levels of government that Ministers would not employ offensive phrases that could in any way serve to create a link in the minds of ordinary people between Islam and terror. Of course, similar terminology continues to be used day in and day out throughout the print and broadcast media.

In the light of Israel's criminal assassination this week of Shaykh Ahmad Isma'il Yasin, the renowned Islamic scholar and founder of the leading Palestinian Resistance Movement, Hamas, British Muslims are demanding that our government take a stand against acts of state sanctioned terror too. We must condemn and take action against all acts of terror whether committed by individuals, groups or states. They are equally as abhorrent. The international community, particularly Britain and America, need to show visible signs that they are prepared to condemn terror from any quarter irrespective of its ethnicity, faith or nationalistic background. The double standards currently being

employed in the so-called War on Terror are only counterproductive and will not bring peace to the region or the wider world.

The past few days have seen some alarming developments. In Plumstead, South East London over 40 graves were desecrated in a Muslim cemetery; in Ilford, a Christian fanatic abducted a Muslim schoolgirl and with a razor blade slashed crosses on her hand, upper arms and side, while demanding that she recite the Trinity during an hour-long ordeal; in Redbridge, a young Muslim mother wearing the distinctive hijab (headscarf) was driving home from a trip to the supermarket when a man in a white van abruptly cut in front of her. Every time the mother tried to change lanes, he would swing his van sharply across to try and block her. He then tried to run her off a flyover. Tipton's Wellington Road mosque received an envelope containing a mystery white powder with a letter alleging it to be anthrax along with anti-Islamic literature which warned that further action would be taken against Muslims in the area. The writer said Muslims would be killed in retaliation and that the blood of Muslim children would be spilled like innocent blood was spilled in Spain. And these are incidents that we know about. How many other incidents of faith hate have occurred elsewhere in the country or gone unreported?

Large sections of the media share some of the responsibility for the current anti-Muslim climate. By giving massive coverage to the rantings of loud-mouthed non-entities like Omar Bakri and Abu Hamza in the Muslim community, they have grossly exaggerated their influence to the detriment of ordinary Muslims. Given the hugely distorted image the media has portrayed of the Muslim community, it is not surprising that many of our fellow citizens now view British Muslims more warily.

It is in that context that the call this week by Sir John Stevens and the Assistant Commissioner David Veness for Britons to report on any suspicious behaviour – however seemingly insignificant - is of such concern. We understand that the police have a difficult enough task to ensure the security of this country, but one cannot help but feel that the majority of those reported on will be innocent Muslims. The existing record of almost 600 arrests of British Muslims under the anti-terror laws – with only five convictions secured – raises serious questions about whether these laws are being applied with due care and process.

Still, the terror threat is undoubtedly all too real. One can only imagine what the dreadful repercussions to the British Muslim community would be if, God forbid, a major al-Qa'ida-linked terrorist incident finally occurs here. With this in mind, the Muslim Council of Britain, the UK's representative Muslim umbrella body with over 400 affiliated national, regional and local organisations, mosques, charities and schools, has called a meeting this week of all major Muslim organisations in the UK to discuss and prepare for this terrible possibility.

There is a genuine fear that the entire Muslim community will be denigrated and subjected to further abuse and faith hate incidents. It is now becoming increasingly important that we get the message across, not only to the media and the British public at large but also to the world community, that to attempt to link these inhuman and barbaric atrocities and acts of terrorism to the teachings of Islam and the Qur'an is a crime that is feeding into the demonisation of Islam and Muslims. That is unacceptable and must be resisted.

