

**Combatting the Poison of Terrorism – The Importance of Muslim Communities,
Other Faith Communities and Government Inclusively Working Together
Global Counter-Terrorism Conference 29 November 2017 – London Olympia**

My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am once again honoured and privileged to speak in front of this distinguished audience.

The organisers of the UK Security Expo have brought together a diverse range of practitioners, all of whom are dedicated to keeping our country and communities safe.

Foremost amongst these are the women and men of our police forces, armed services and agencies who work night and day to protect us.

They deserve our respect, admiration and support.

They protect us not only by countering terrorism, but also maintaining the rule of law, and for British Muslim communities, by policing against the growing scourge of hate crime and terror directed against us.

Hate crime that was witnessed on the streets of London when a Muslim was murdered as a result of a terrorist attack in Finsbury Park.

Since I spoke last year, the summer attacks have come to represent one of the worst series of such violence experienced in our country for a very long time.

The scale of the body count has been comparable to 7/7. The manner and spectacle, has been just as shocking, if not more so.

Urgent and searching questions are being asked as to how the murderers of Manchester and London managed to get through and wreak havoc.

Were they radicalised here in Britain? How did they evolve to carry out their acts of carnage?

And, as ever, questions are placed at the door of Muslim communities. Were they complicit?

Is there something in their faith that allows these evil people to carry out murder in the name of our faith and community?

Whilst some of these questions may be understandable to some extent, they are both incredibly unfair as they - perhaps unwittingly - cast an eye of suspicion on millions of law-abiding Muslims.

And I hope we can clear some of these questions up today.

Yes, we must acknowledge that the people who carry out such crimes are Muslims. But do they do so in the name of Islam?

It has barely been a week since the attacks in the Sinai. With over 300 people killed by Daesh terrorists, it is certainly one of the bloodiest experienced this year.

The victims were Muslims. They were Muslims who were carrying out their religious duty and attending a mosque for Friday prayers.

These murderers chose sacred Islamic institutions and occasions to carry out their madness.

How this is in the name of Islam is beyond all of our comprehension.

These are people who act outside the fold of Islam and beyond the norms and rules set by our faith.

The Quran tells us very clearly that if one kills one person, it is as though they have killed the whole of humanity.

And our beloved Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has always encouraged us to look after and be mindful to our neighbours and our communities.

What we pray for is that these terrorists and their supporters face justice from almighty God in this life and the next.

Whether it be London, Manchester or now in Egypt: these criminals betray our Islamic values, and that makes us angry.

The level of our anger is such that, after the attacks in Manchester and later in London, British Imams from a cross section of Islamic traditions made it clear that they would not carry out the Islamic rites of burial for these murderers whose 'indefensible actions are completely at odds with the lofty teachings of Islam.

These are the people who are taking the poison out of the 'terrorist' message. Their counter-message comes from authenticity and an adherence to Islamic values.

British Muslims have been at the forefront in speaking out against terrorism, and reporting suspicious activity to the police.

This is borne out by the figures. Despite what Islamophobes and their supporters in the media try and tell you, a poll by ComRes showed that 94% of British Muslims would report an act of violence to the police if it was perpetrated by someone from within their community.

As we understand it, the Manchester bomber was already reported by local Muslims.

And, after the London attacks, the Muslim Council of Britain renewed its long-standing campaign to encourage communities to report anything suspicious to the authorities.

So, I would argue that there is certainly clear blue water between the vast majority of Muslims and these criminals.

Yet, it is undeniable that these people use Islam as an excuse, even though their actions are anything but Islamic.

They sully the faith of Islam, but they also look for ready recruits amongst Muslim communities and beyond.

Mothers, fathers and families are ripped apart when children or relatives whom they think they know suddenly go down this path to deviance.

It is in all of our interests to stop them.

We know that many of these people have previously led a life of delinquency.

They are attracted less so by the faith projected by extremists but by the glamour of killing, and an alternative life of delinquency.

It is one that makes killing and hating cool, and uses the words of Islam as a cloak to justify it.

As one expert has said, this not a radicalisation of Islam, but Islamisation of radicalism.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't claim to have a silver bullet to eliminating what is becoming a generational and global problem. And I know that we also struggle to understand the growth of the extreme far-right in our country.

But from my vantage point, it is quite clear that we Muslims must continue to play our part in rejecting the terrorists, and fight their message. Not because we have any special duty - but because we are part and parcel of this society.

I have already reported to you earlier how mainstream Muslim religious figures are going out of their way to delegitimise the terrorist cause.

Right-wing extremists will tell you that this message emanates from the mosque.

After the recent terror attacks we had some commentators succumbing to the terrorist agenda with one stating that we need 'less Islam' to defeat the terrorists.

Yet, in actual fact, the allure of extremism not found in the mosque, but on the fringes of society.

Clearly a handful of young people refuse to see the legitimacy of mosques, which is why they turn to agents of hate.

In this regard there are problems in our community. Of generational empathy, of identity, and of some young people not being able to relate to the world around them.

They would cite the double standards in our foreign policy, as has been pointed out by MI5, the Leader of the Opposition and the Foreign Secretary. Even so, there can be no excuse for their murderous intent.

We need to strengthen our mosques, enable our Imams, our youth leaders and others, giving them the tools and know-how to relate to young people with safe spaces to engage openly and without fear on issues such as foreign policy.

We Muslims must also face up to the mental health challenge, which is taboo in some of our communities. We cannot ignore the fact that a significant proportion of those prone to terrorist sympathies are known to have mental health and psychological problems, a problem not just limited to white extremist lone wolves.

But the issue of radicalisation transcends Muslim communities and is beyond the control of Muslims alone.

Online radicalisation is one of our biggest concerns.

We are finally seeing action from social media companies whose services are exploited by terrorists to brainwash new recruits.

While they are tightening up their act, I recognise the challenge they face in providing an open service while closing the many loopholes that appear as this technology evolves rapidly.

I understand that the government too are considering harsher penalties for those who view terrorist content. Many of us will be looking at the proposals closely, and we will want to see such penalties adhere to the principles of the rule of law, due process and non-discrimination.

In the technological sphere we also expect activity in tackling anti-Muslim extremism. We were alarmed to learn a few weeks ago that a network of anti-Muslim activists were utilising social media bots to exploit their message of hate and spread false lies about the 'Muslim threat'.

Hate breeds hate, as does fear which we must guard against.

As such, we must also speak of the role of the media whose over-the-top reporting of terrorist acts inadvertently glamorizes the actions of terrorists, and provides an added attraction.

Gone hopefully are case studies from as recently as 2014 where mainstream broadcasters would fall over themselves to report on the latest video released by Daesh, thus amplifying their message and notifying potential viewers of the latest snuff video for violent terrorism.

The acts of violence perpetrated by these terrorists are designed to cause the most shock, configured to sow fear and mistrust in our communities.

We must deny them this objective, but the media is at risk of inadvertently assisting in this aim. The imperative to inform must not be translated to giving such extremists a platform.

Rather than obsess about Daesh tactics, and their ability to reign terror, I would much prefer to read and watch reports about how our communities are pooling together to challenge extremists, and how we are keeping calm and carrying on.

That is why I wholeheartedly support Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley's caution where he said to an audience of editors: "I do think there are some ways that you can rein back what you do. There is a fine balance. If [Isis] are looking to influence, you have to ask, are you helping them to influence."

While I am not calling for state control of the media in this regard, I am appealing to media editors to exercise more responsibility in this regard, just as I am calling editors and producers to exercise more responsibility when reporting on Muslims generally.

Clearly all of us have our part to play in challenging the terrorists, and the government has the biggest and most influential role.

Here I want to outline how British Muslim communities are affected and how we need to work together.

It would seem for many of us that the biggest stumbling block for this to happen is the government's Prevent strategy -- first formulated in 2007 -- which aims to safeguard and support 'vulnerable individuals to stop them becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.'

While no one should have any problem in wanting to prevent terrorism, this attempt to tackle 'pre-crime' is based on extremely flawed underpinnings.

It attempts to deal with extremism while failing to grasp what extremism is. Extremism is defined poorly and in highly subjective ways.

It results in personnel at schools, hospitals and other agencies being obliged to report extremist behaviour without knowing what that is.

For instance, Ofsted proudly mentions in its survey of Prevent duty implementation that a child was reported for having a Qur'an hidden in his bedroom, which they cite as a sign of radicalisation.

This is one of the many examples of the strategy explicitly conflating religiosity with extremism despite claims to the contrary.

And the figures of Prevent referrals appear to show how it disproportionately targets Muslims

New statistics show that a [third of all referrals](#) – forming the greatest source of Prevent referrals – come from the education sector.

Half of these are under the age of 15, meaning that more than 2,000 young children in a one-year period have been referred to Prevent, including some from nurseries! What this means is that either teachers considered these children as having exhibited signs of radicalisation and that these children will have a permanent note on their record to that effect, even though they did not require further support.

It is little wonder that an increasing number of parents in Birmingham, for example, are home-schooling their children - a worrying trend that if done for this reason - cannot help our goals.

At universities, academics have warned of the chilling effects of Prevent on free speech, where perfectly normal events organised by Muslims or affecting Muslims are deemed as extremist. This includes forums that highlight the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

Contrast this with events held in Parliament recently with known and actual anti-Muslim extremists sharing a platform with government ministers that go unchallenged..

If this was a truly inclusive Prevent strategy, we would also expect it to scrutinise government, police, politicians civil society and, crucially, the media.

And we would expect a far greater focus on far right extremists. Only recently did we learn that about 40 neo-Nazis are being investigated by police amid fears that they are plotting terrorist attacks against Muslims around the country.

It points to a double standards felt by many Muslims. One that looks at Prevent as discriminatory, motivated by an impulse (justified or not) to consider the practise of the faith of Islam itself as a conveyor belt to extremism.

Last year, the government's then Independent Reviewer of Counter-Terrorism Legislation, David Anderson QC, claimed that Prevent was a "significant source of grievance" among students, teachers, academics and broader civil society, encouraging 'mistrust to spread and to fester'.

Ladies and gentlemen -

I have laid out to you how Muslims are ready, able and willing to work with all partners to challenge terrorism.

Prevent is stopping the government and its agencies from engaging, as equal citizens, with all sections of the Muslim community, the majority of whom want to cooperate in challenging terrorism.

In short, Prevent needlessly holds the UK's counter-terror strategy hostage -- between those Muslims wanting to help and those fervent ideologues of Prevent who are not even willing to countenance an independent review of the strategy.

I hope the recent, if not reluctant, initiative by the Home Office to release figures of Prevent referrals is a start towards more transparency in this regard. But now we need to build trust.

After the attacks in the summer, the Prime Minister declared that 'enough is enough', and called for the need to have difficult conversations.

We are ready to have those difficult conversations, as equal citizens with an equal stake in this fight.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister is speaking about conversation: it implies that we must listen to one another and work together to be part of a truly United Kingdom.

Those conversations are yet to take place. As I mentioned last year, government engagement with Muslim communities takes place only through the prism of security and only with those who provide an echo chamber in support of the government's Prevent strategy.

We at the Muslim Council of Britain have already stated very clearly that, as an independent, democratic organisation, we will continue to critique Prevent, but are ever ready to engage with government to improve policy to keep us safe.

We hope the government shows courage and leadership, allow for a Leveson-style truly independent review to lay out on the table where over a decade of policy has gone wrong and engage with all sections of the Muslim community.

At the end of the day, the kind of terrorism we witnessed last Friday in Egypt tells us that we are all facing a problem that transcends borders, government and, crucially, faith.

As such I hope in the final analysis we deny the fight the terrorists want to have and take religion and culture wars out of counter-terrorism and focus on building a strong consensus in challenging terror.