

An Ummah

The weeks after the London bombings of 7/7, the most deadly to strike the capital since the Second World War, have seen testing times for British Muslims, writes **Yahya Birt**. The challenge ahead is to focus our sense of moral purpose to tackle extremism, protect our freedoms, and work towards a long-term strategy of intellectual and civic engagement.

We struggle under a threefold burden. Like others, we nervously rang family and friends to find out if they were all right. The mangled and twisted frame of the familiar double-decker bus and the unseen horror in the Tube tunnels below London's streets signalled a new and bloody era. We learnt with shock that our own community had produced Britain's first home-grown suicide bombers, seemingly integrated British lads. Our feelings of moral outrage were tempered by profound disquiet that this had been carried out in the name of our religion. Finally, we have felt the consequences, the most fearsome part of which has not been the six hundred per cent rise in faith hate crimes in London during the first four weeks, but a lurch towards draconian legislation amid talk of the failure of British multiculturalism from across the political spectrum.

Number 10 launched a tough strategy on 5 August, which mirrors steps pioneered by the French in the mid-1990s, the Americans after 9/11 and the Spanish after the Madrid bombings. The proposed measures include new powers of deportation of foreign nationals on the grounds of fomenting terrorism and involvement with proscribed extremist bookshops, organisations, websites and networks; powers to close extrem-

ist mosques; widening the grounds to ban extremist groups; the banning of Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun's successor groups; stripping citizenship from naturalized British citizens engaged in extremism; a new offence of glorifying terrorism in Britain and abroad; and the extension of existing control orders, using a form of house arrest, to include British nationals. The new deportation powers would require derogation from the Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibiting torture and inhumane treatment, in order to guarantee the rights of deportees in some ten Muslim countries of origin, which have so far not agreed to uphold them, with the exception of Jordan.

The police presence permeates an enervated London, the merits and demerits of racial profiling are openly discussed, and the new shoot-to-kill policy is based on Sri Lankan and Israeli tactics. The Home Office Minister, Hazel Blears, caught in the midst of local consultations with Muslims, is suddenly to head a commission to examine "insufficiently integrated" communities, suggesting the rebranding of minorities along ethnic lines in the style of the American melting pot. Plans are mooted to charge extremist Muslim preachers under the Treason Act of 1351, the first time it would have been applied since World War Two.

The London attacks and their aftermath are the greatest challenge to have faced British Muslims, the precise challenge being to reject charges of collective guilt while taking up our share of responsibility. There has been much heartfelt condemnation of the attacks as might have been expected from Muslim community and religious leaders. But it is obvious to all that our older generation of leaders is out of touch with febrile and confused sentiment apparent among many young Muslims after 7/7. Anger, denial and fantastic conspiracy theories are rife, but community elders rarely know how to direct these sentiments in constructive directions. As for their religious responsibilities, British Muslims should seek to tackle extremism, to uphold and assist in the promotion of public safety while protecting the freedoms of all British citizens, to exonerate those who are falsely accused or unfairly treated, and to improve community relations. These teachings imply a delicate balancing act which promotes a precautionary but constructive engagement with the security agenda founded on the belief that preserving freedoms in a time of crisis will do more to ensure our security than hasty new measures; freedom and security need not be instinctively placed in mutual opposition with each



of Purpose

other as Shami Chakrabarti of Liberty has argued.

One matter is absolutely clear in the impassioned debate after 7/7 among young Muslims: they will not accept the silencing of their political voice through a spurious culpability by association. The invasion and occupation of Iraq, as they see it, lies precisely at the centre of their current disaffection. If it is indeed true to say that global jihadist puritanism was the unwanted progeny of the Cold War's last great conflict-by-proxy in Afghanistan against the Soviets, Iraq has nonetheless also opened up a whole new front in the "war on terror" that did not previously exist, as was argued in a recent report by the establishment think tank, the Royal Institute of International Affairs. It is particularly relevant in that the continuing "war on terror" has invalidated the "covenant of security" the extremist fringe believed they enjoyed in Britain, which underpinned the logic of Londonistan's very existence.

Thus, the Prime Minister, vulnerable over Iraq, has found it increasingly difficult to deny that Iraq has been an aggravating political factor. However the point is that after the attacks, while two-thirds of the British public saw Iraq as heightening the risk of terrorism in the UK, the Prime Minister received his second-highest personal approval rating since 1997. This indicates that the British public saw the threats of Saddam and of radical terrorism, falsely justified in the name of Islam, as separate, and secondly, that Blair is broadly trusted to take on the post-7/7 threat, unlike the Spanish after Madrid who promptly voted José Maria Aznar out of office. Besides personal conviction on these matters, two political factors have emboldened the Prime Minister to pursue a tougher stand and take on the liberal legal establishment, human rights activists, a more precautionary Home Office, and pretty much the entirety of the British Muslim community's leadership. Firstly, Blair was encouraged by the robust stance of the four-man delegation of Labour Muslim MPs led by Shahid Malik on 13 July. Secondly the wide public trust in Blair's capability to defend Britain against this threat has allowed Number 10 to set the security agenda in its own terms, advised by the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, whose tough approach has always been endorsed by the Prime Minister. It is in this shift of public opinion that the "rules of the game" have changed.

Furthermore, unfashionable as it might be to make the observation, Tony Blair was right to argue that the London suicide bombings have no moral connection with Iraq. The immediate challenge for Muslims is to isolate extremist elements by

returning to the ethical and moral foundations of our religion, and to argue calmly for peaceful democratic means of protest. Already in places like London and Birmingham, there are hopeful signs that a younger generation of opinion formers like Salma Yaqoob of the Respect Party or Abu Muntasir of JIMAS are reaching out effectively to those who feel radically disaffected by offering viable alternatives.

In the short run, a full debate will be needed, to which the input of religious leaders will be vital, on the suspect theology that spreads intolerance and hatred. A vital component in this regard will be to tackle the rise of takfirism, the rationale behind the rise of violent cults that see all other Muslims as expendable apostates. In this regard, British Muslims could look to build upon the Amman protocol of July 2005, endorsed by major Sunni and Shiite scholars of the Arab world, recognising eight orthodox schools of Islamic law. There are already encouraging signs that Islamic scholars and younger community leaders are disregarding old sectarian boundaries to make common cause against extremism. The old guard amongst whom petty rivalry and sectarianism remain predominant has not yet embraced this new entente.

Another key issue is the need to reclaim the high standards of ethical conduct in the jihad tradition, which, while upholding the right to self-defence, protects the innocent and condemns terrorist tactics. How is it that suicide bombing, first used and justified in the Muslim world by Hezbollah in 1983, inspired by the example of the Marxist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, has become the preferred tactic of resistance in the name of Islam, used in no less than 26 countries around the world, with Britain unfortunately being only the latest example? Is the Muslim world in danger of becoming the West's Gaza Strip, and the West, the Muslim world's Israel, by which the nameless and unnumbered casualties of American airpower are re-invoked by desperate acts of revenge, spreading Middle-Eastern-style fear and insecurity to the Western metropolis?

In holding the balance between freedom and security as British citizens, not just as British Muslims, it is our public duty to ask some constructive but searching questions about the new agenda. We should ask if the treatment of deportees can really be guaranteed as the government has failed many times after 9/11 to get the agreement of Muslim nations? Is it not short-termist to merely export the problem of terrorism? Why is it deemed an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of the

new shoot-to-kill policy that further innocent lives may be lost, even after the death of a Brazilian electrician tragically mistaken for a suicide bomber? Does not the closing of a place of worship potentially stigmatise the whole congregation as extremist rather than dealing with a problematic preacher? With the pro-

In the British context, however, the condemnation of terrorism, and indeed the constructive criticism of anti-terrorism measures, should not be allowed to halt the serious working through of issues around identity, belonging and citizenship by cosmopolitan Muslim Britons aware too of their religious soli-

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posal to extend control orders to British suspect extremists, do we not have a new form of internment, a policy that in Northern Ireland bolstered support for the IRA?

Particular concerns centre around free speech. In the new post-7/7 atmosphere, how would any "incitement to religious hatred" legislation be applied? Or for that matter "glorifying terrorist acts"? Would this for instance cover any number of examples involving struggles for self-determination in the Muslim world? What might be the consequences for political asylum seekers if new proscribed speech-acts or activities may result in rapid deportation? How will the process of proscription of designated extremist bookshops, websites, centres and networks be held up to proper scrutiny? Can we name any non-violent political organisation that has been banned since the Second World War despite the challenges of the Cold War and Irish Republicanism? If not, why is Hizb ut-Tahrir being singled out now?

The proposal to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir would, if enacted alongside these other measures, drive radicalism further underground, and in a more subtle way, muzzle Muslim political protest through fearful self-censorship. If Hizb ut-Tahrir is not considered by Scotland Yard sources to be part of the terrorist problem, the conclusion is that the ban is political. Inevitable comparisons are being made with the British National Party. British Muslims might therefore conclude that their politics was being criminalized too, and associated by the official mind with terrorism. The ban tells us something else that is disturbing: that unlike the cohesive movement of Irish Republicanism, in which the political wing had a moderating impact on the IRA, the government's judgement is that extremist, radical and moderate currents among British Muslims are too disaggregated from each other to justify a strategy of encapsulation. In other words, the government believes that while Hizb ut-Tahrir contributes to a general atmosphere of radicalisation, it cannot recall the extremists from violence anymore than the moderates can. Thus the onus is upon the Party to admit to its confrontational and radicalising role prior to 1996 (when Omar Bakri Mohammed left to found al-Muhajiroun) and to become committed to a preventative strategy in future.

The symbolic weight of Hizb ut-Tahrir's banning for the Muslim community would probably vitiate the opportunity to promote an intelligence-led approach and thereby squander the widespread goodwill among Muslim communities in the wake of the bombings. What would be left except for heavy policing and therefore further alienation? The effective exclusion thus far of British Muslims from the new security agenda reveals how much the very community most likely to be impacted by these policies is held in distrust and suspicion.

The question is being asked: can solidarity to the ummah be affirmed as part of British Muslim identity, as a matter of civic conscience rather than of cosmic or geopolitical alterity? It would be fruitless to place loyalties to ummah and nation in political opposition, and therefore to portray this purported dichotomy as an ever-present existential crisis of cultural identity for British Muslims. At a time when national sentiment is eroded by commodification, devolution, Europe, the sheer fact of cultural diversity, globalization, even by a collective failure of the imagination, is it just or fair to expect minority groups to bear disproportionately the burdens of nationhood in moments of crisis like this?

It is precisely this expectation that currently shapes the debate around the integration (often nowadays a euphemism for assimilation) of British Muslims, and it constitutes a political bear-trap. After 7/7, as after 9/11, the problems of our various communities are held to be our own, and these are problems of cultural backwardness. The tropes of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism re-emerge in the form of twenty-first century Islamophobia: they mistreat their women, they illiberally uphold harsh rites and a merciless law, their loyalties are suspect and lie beyond those of the nation-state. These assumptions threaten to overtake official discourse about Muslim integration: Muslims are silenced in this debate, they are more talked about and dissected by others in an endless trial by media.

One could name other culprits, but the current silence of the Commission for Racial Equality—the statutory body tasked with protecting ethnic minority groups from prejudice and discrimination—is scandalous. Trevor Philips' announcement of the end of multiculturalism after the Madrid bombings has again been taken up by the right, and he recently opined that, despite the devastating picture of Muslim disadvantage in the 2001 Census, the Muslim problem is attitudinal: "too many people in this country live in the old country in their heads" In Trevor's terms, Muslims "need to create a strong British Muslim identity"—that's not a problem, except that the role model he stipulates for Muslims still mentally living "back home" is Konnie Huq. How surprising it is that he misses that cornerstone of English liberalism, the personal choice to be different (and not just the same), a fact recognised by Shabina Begum's defence lawyer, Cherie Booth. It seems that after the CRE failed in 2004 to incorporate the faith strand under the "race umbrella" as part of the proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights, it has kept away from "faith" issues except in areas where it claims ownership, like "stop and search", shoot-to-kill or racial profiling, but it has not even said anything on these after 7/7.

The sheer fact of cultural diversity defines modern urban

Britain, particularly the capital, and so the challenge is to reinvigorate multiculturalism by emphasising civic responsibilities over the entitlements and rights-based approaches of the past. Another problem is the outdated compartmentalization of policy into foreign and domestic spheres when they so clearly now interpenetrate each other, and in reaction to this blurring of sovereignties and boundaries, political retrenchments-like tribal religion and lumpen nationalism-emerge at a time of crisis as Hamza Yusuf bravely tried to tell British Muslims after 9/11. Are we to be a tribal ummah, prepared for the sake of unity to defend Muslims, right or wrong, to ignore Muslim-on-Muslim violence, or become oblivious to general human suffering and pain?

How much is this narrowed conception of the ummah, held to ransom by the various expressions of Muslim nationalism, a product of post-caliphatism? In other words, is it a form of nostalgia for the imperial Ottoman model misinterpreted as a unity based on the collective human community of monotheists, with the state re-imagined along the lines of interwar European totalitarianism? Rather it is the case, as Ibn Taymiyah and Shah Wali Allah contended in different ways, that the ummah is a body of purpose based upon the worship of God, upholding values of universal mercy and justice for all of God's creation, which philosophically allows for the practical recognition of multiple polities within itself, a multiplicity that is in any case an abiding fact of Muslim political history. This correct attachment to the ummah of purpose does not render the Muslim rootless, unanchored from the nation-state, as the philosopher Roger Scruton has contended, but rather loyalties emerge from the ground up, recognised variously in the principles of moral conduct, social obligation, and contractual and legal obligations. The rights of creation (*huquq al-'ibad*) encompass family, clan, neighbourhood, city, nation, religious community and humanity, and Muslims are held to be morally and legally responsible for their fulfilment either individually or collectively.

Concomitantly, we are, as Tariq Ramadan has reminded us, a community that bears witnesses to the truth, or *ummah al-shahadah*, to all of humanity, that defends and establishes justice, solidarity and values of honesty, generosity, fraternity and

state is iniquitous, and that a non-assertive secularism comfortable with faith-based activism in the public sphere is preferable to a rigid *laïcité*. In return, new religious communities have been encouraged to undertake a civic engagement cognizant of the common good and are minimally expected to promote mutual respect and tolerance. This dispensation has now been shattered by the bombs; and for such a gross violation of deportment, deportation now looms, as Abdal Hakim Murad predicted some years ago.

The marked weakness of the intellectual contribution by British Muslims to subsidiary debates around multiculturalism, citizenship, foreign policy objectives, civil liberties and security issues has become a critical problem. The nature of Muslim community engagement has largely been driven in the past by a political activism without a strong tradition of cultural and intellectual engagement, and by limited self-critical debate within the community itself. This shortfall will prove all the more telling as the national discussion oscillates between culturalist and chauvinist explanations from the Right, namely that Islam itself is the problem, and the reflex of the Left that disaffection is explained by disadvantage. If that were the case, how could we explain the private school educations of Sajid Badat and Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh?

The most important point that British Muslims can make in these secondary debates on issues like multiculturalism is to insist that they cannot be completely redefined by reference to terrorism for the simple reason that whatever the causes of disaffection or disadvantage are among Muslim communities, there is no causal conveyor belt leading automatically to the London attacks. As the abortive attacks of the 21 July demonstrate, we cannot afford to slip into the fallacy that the answers lie with cultural issues among disadvantaged Mirpuri communities in the North. Whose cultural ideosyncracies will next be found to promote Islamist extremism and violence: Somalians, African-Caribbeans or Ethiopians? Problems of disaffection and disadvantage have their own provenance, which are in many ways disconnected with 7/7, and should be addressed as such, but their exploitation by opportunistic advocates of assimilation will in the current climate serve to stifle the Muslim voice, which is essential at present. So in general, the

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love for all. It is therefore as committed British citizens of good conscience that we may work for the common good by standing by these very principles of bearing witness to the truth, and standing up against injustice in the world and against all forms of chauvinism and self-interest. It is through this renewed vision of citizenship that British Muslims will be able to escape the perils of tribalism, to avoid victimhood and to embrace civic responsibility without surrendering their commitment to truth and justice. This renewed engagement is easily expressed in terms of the multicultural liberal democracy that has characterised Britain in recent times. This country has largely accepted that the non-recognition of cultural diversity by the

response of the Muslim communities should be to add sophistication to the national debate, to humanize it by aiding understanding of their nuanced, lived experience over the past half century in Britain, of better comprehension of the Muslim world and of the true face of their religion.

Any successful long-term strategy has to prefer a battle of theological ideas, an open, constructive debate about background causes, and a collaborative and smart intelligence-led approach to extremism. But the government may disable any such possibility by its speedy recourse to the law, and runs the danger of creating a country where the loss of precious freedoms will not make any British citizens more secure. ■