

Muslims in Britain
Challenges & Reality
Speech delivered by SG Farooq Murad
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I am really delighted and privileged to be here today. One of the benefits of my new position is that I am beginning to see wonderful Muslim institutions such as this one. I had heard much about the fantastic work you do and therefore it is a real honour to have this opportunity.

I have been involved in Muslim community work for over 25 years but never had I imagined that one day Muslim community would be as important and critical an issue for our society as it has become today, rightly or wrongly. I suppose there is always an opportunity in every crisis.

Since yesterday we have been witnessing the amazing story of the survival and rescue of the Chilean miners. For the last 2 months I have often thought of them and my prayers have been with them. For me it has highlighted the great human spirit God has bestowed upon us and the power of faith, courage and resilience. Of course Quran is full of such stories and has placed much emphasis on these for our guidance. As a community today we can take heart and strength from all of these in order to deal with the challenges.

I try to see our presence in Britain and Europe from a Quranic perspective and see great parallels with many stories of migration. So the coming of millions of Muslims to Europe over the last 50 years or so due to both the acute labour shortage after the War as well as the economic and political crises in Muslim countries, ironically most of which were under the direct rule of these very European powers for over 100 years, is not an unprecedented event. It can be a spiritual event for us if we take the Qur'anic perspective and do not see it merely as an accident of history or only in the context of personal, social and economic factors. Faith means that we try to see the divine will in all events in our lives.

Let us now look at our situation. Where do we stand and what are the issues. Many of us feel we are living under a siege. Last week travelling from Europe I felt reluctant to get up and open the luggage compartment in case it caused a panic amongst my fellow travelers. We are endlessly checking our behaviour and trying to prove our innocence. This is an awful psychological siege. This is even more unfair when the facts are that it is the Muslim world, our relatives and friends, who are living through bombings, suicide attacks and killings on almost daily basis.

Due to increasing marginalization we are worried about our future, about finding employment, about policies which impact on basic human rights such as not being able to wear the Hijab (head scarf). We are worried about the anti-terror legislation, the shoot to kill policies and the increasing Islamophobic attitudes in certain parts of Britain. In Europe we are seeing an increase in far right extremist activities. And of course, we are frustrated about the double standards in the foreign policy, about war in Iraq, Palestine-Israel issue, Kashmir and about many other countries where we see oppression of Muslims, poor governance and lack of action. Media's constant focus upon the linking of terrorism and Muslims is forcing many of us to ask the question what it means to be a Muslim and British. How do we deal with all these tensions and conflicts? What is our identity? What is our future?

Nothing has raised more tension and issues than the questioning of our belonging and loyalty in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, Madrid attacks, various other suspected plots to cause havoc, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, and so on. These attacks seem to have made Muslim integration in Europe an illusion. They have raised questions about survival of multiculturalism. The notion peddled almost daily by certain sections of the media that Muslims are extremist, unfit for democracy, a threat, the fifth column, subscribe to a barbaric faith and Shariah law are most damaging and the biggest challenge to social cohesion.

The fact is that a lot of it is far removed from the reality and based on alarmist Islamophobic tabloid headlines and hype. Developing our vision and strategies based on a knee-jerk reaction to international terrorism or to the War on Terror including Iraq War, would be naïve and dangerous. It would be counter productive. It will isolate more people than integrate. Such a policy is likely to be based on simple and one sided explanation and

interpretation of the problem and its causes. The most extensive data and research compiled by Robert Pape at the University of Chicago, published under the title *Dying to Win* categorically refutes any connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions. He says, "rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland". It also says "The notion that Islamic fundamentalism is bent on world domination is "pure fantasy".

European counter-terrorism officers go further to suggest that the war on terror is being lost because of a serious problem of misperceptions. At the Wilton Park conference on Muslim Youth in February 2005, one officer put it, "because of stereotyping, media exposure, cultural differences, and mutual suspicion, what we think we see is not necessarily the reality. The police may focus on a group because of their physical appearances, fundamentalist views, or radical criticism of foreign policy. Yet, they may overlook the real threat that remains unseen and undefined. Avoiding stereotyping and working in partnership with the Muslim community leaders are essential to win the war against terror.

At the same conference, Muslim community leaders and European counter-terrorism officers highlighted and exposed the myth that mosques are primary centers of recruitment and radicalization. They refuted any connection between terrorism and community networks such as mosques, charities, and social support groups. Focus on Muslim communities in Europe as breeding grounds for global jihad can be very misleading.

Of course, terrorism is a serious issue and we must investigate and understand why and how some individuals, even one is too many, become extremists and what pushes them to act on their beliefs. Some point to unscrupulous terrorist leaders who exploit social and political grievances and feelings of humiliation and alienation among Muslim youth. These secret leaders recruit and indoctrinate operatives by resorting to a variety of manipulation "techniques." They may use international and inter-religious conflicts, promise divine rewards, exploit spiritual and material needs, and even exert physical and psychological

pressure. We need to disable, eliminate and disarm such elements. What we must not do is to question loyalty of the whole community, breed mistrust and suspicion.

Apart from eliminating the rogue elements, the most effective way to counter them requires dealing with the real issues of disenchantment and alienation. The increasingly available data on Muslims in the UK highlight serious marginalisation faced by the Muslims.

Muslims in the UK are an ethnically diverse group with the youngest age profile of all faith groups in Great Britain. According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2001, one third of Muslims were under the age of 16 as compared to one fifth for the population as a whole. The average age of Muslims is 28, 13 years below the national average. As a result of this younger age profile, Government policies aimed at children and young people will have a disproportionate impact on Muslim communities. It is vital, therefore, that Government departments and agencies implementing and delivering policy in relation to children and young people lead the way in ensuring that policy is sensitive to the needs of Muslims.

Muslims are concentrated in the most deprived urban communities – 75 per cent live in 24 cities, including around 38 per cent in London. The concentration of Muslims in the poorest areas of cities is indicative of the marginalization and means that the inter-faith and inter-ethnic interactions are often of a confrontational nature. The social conditions breed fear and mistrust of the “other side.

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission Triennial Review 2010’, How Fair is Britain, published only a couple of days:

- One in 4 Bangladeshi and Pakistani women work, compared with nearly 3 in 4 White British women. Only 47% of Muslim men and 24% of Muslim women are employed. These gaps impose a cost not only on individual and families, but on the economy as a whole; estimates from the National Audit Office in 2008 suggested that the overall cost to the economy could be in the region of £8.6bn per year.
- 33% of working age Muslim women have no qualifications, and only 9% have a degree.

- Young Muslim people are also more likely than Christian people to spend periods out of the labour market. Muslim people have the lowest rate of employment of any religious group. Only 47% of Muslim men and 24% of Muslim women are employed and figures suggest that 42% of young Muslim people are not in employment, education or training. Muslim men are as likely to be in managerial or professional jobs as elementary ones.
- Muslim people currently make up 12% of the prison population in England and Wales.
- Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups are more likely to report 'poor' health than average. These groups are more likely to experience poor mental health, more likely to report a disability or limiting long-term illness, and more likely to find it hard to access and communicate with their GPs than other groups. Among groups defined by religion, Muslim people tend to report worse health than average.
- Muslim women may face particular difficulties in accessing childcare.
- Religious and ethnic minorities are still under-represented in Parliament although the number of ethnic minority MPs doubled in the 2010 election. The number of Muslim MPs doubled in 2010, with the first three female Muslim MPs taking their seats.

One important factor for such disparity is discrimination. The need for protection from religious discrimination has been a key demand of Muslim communities for over 20 years. The Home Office Citizenship Survey 2001 indicates that one third of Muslims felt that the Government was doing too little to protect the rights of people belonging to different faith groups in Britain. Young Muslims (16-24) feel particularly dissatisfied. 37 per cent felt that the Government was doing "too little". When asked about the amount of respect employers showed for the customs of people belonging to different faith groups, one third of respondents in all faith groups thought employers were doing too little.

Religious discrimination can manifest itself in a number of different ways, including discounting the religious beliefs of others, religious jokes, compulsory religious services and non-association due to the other person's religion. Young Muslim women suffered most discrimination in the aftermath of September 11 and this was often related to their dress choice. Studies have found that "practising" young Muslim women encountered hostility from students, lecturers and employers, and that they faced "double discrimination based on the grounds of gender and religious adherence".

Attitudes and treatment based on stereotypes and prejudice are one of the ways in which Muslims encounter discrimination. Muslim young men have emerged as the new "folk devils" of popular and media imagination, being represented as the embodiment of fundamentalism. To be a British Muslim is defined "solely in terms of negativity, deprivation, disadvantage and alienation". Muslim women are represented as both oppressed and powerless, stereotypes that impinge directly on the lives of Muslim women.

Discrimination in the criminal justice system, in particular with respect to police stop and search powers, continues to be of concern to the young British Muslims. They report that they face religious profiling, and that they are being stopped and searched on the basis of their appearance. The incarceration without trial, under anti-terrorism legislation, of detainees at HMP Belmarsh, also serves to further undermine Muslims' confidence in the justice system.

Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), has found that: "victimisation of Muslims under the anti-terrorism legislation has led to increased incidences of Islamophobia and racism against Muslims. This has manifested itself in the form of vandalism of mosques, desecration of Muslim graves and homes" and that "the increased hostility towards Muslims has also seen an increase in hate campaigns against Islam and Muslims from far right groups".

Human Rights Watch has also found that the enforcement of the legislation “has harmed race and community relations” and undermined the willingness of Muslims in the United Kingdom to cooperate with police and security services.

The Way Forward

MCB’s vision is to empower the Muslim community to contribute in achieving a cohesive, just and successful British society. Rather than expecting to be showered with a better future or operating from the demand mode we must become partners in shaping a more equal, accepting, peaceful and prosperous Britain for all her citizens. We need to provide and create broad based leadership which is dedicated to the vision of integration and cohesion. My definition of integration is that communities retain their identities and values but agree to interact on civic duties as equal partners. They work for the well being of our country and all the citizens. We run our affairs in a democratic, pluralistic and transparent manner. The aim would be to create a society in which we have unrestricted and equal association. Cultural diversity is not seen as a threat to British way of life, but strength of it.

Developing the concept of a composite identity such as the British Muslim or the Scottish or Welsh Muslim for that matter is the first important step. Being a Muslim and a citizen are not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing. This allows young Muslims to beautifully merge the living of their faith and loyalty to the place of birth or residence. It enables them to look at Citizenship as an expression of their faith. Researches show that more and more Muslims are now seeing themselves as Muslim and British. The increasing political assertiveness by British Muslims should not be mistaken for a desire for separateness. In fact, avenues for political engagement and protests is one way to create sense of belonging amongst those who may be feeling frustrated and marginalised.

The emergence of a European identity that transcends narrow nationalist considerations may provide the best political and cultural framework to reduce the problem of alienation among Muslim youth. Rather than forced cultural assimilation, the building of a European identity would go hand in hand with the construction of a European Islamic discourse. Only through a familiar and coherent cultural order can Muslims forge a “confident personality,” articulate common interests, and develop a sense of belonging and civic responsibility.

A more robust action plan involving all the stake holders is needed to alleviate everyday social problems associated with poverty, unemployment, bad schools and housing, drugs and petty crimes, and street violence.

Mosques and community organizations need to encourage and guide Increasing information about the possibilities and benefits of social and political participation through civic education, religious education and political mobilization.

A major aim of a representative body such as MCB is to work for the recognition of Islam and Muslims as an important part of our society. This requires concerted effort from within and without.

In brief, our strategy is based on leadership, participation, representation, recognition, inclusion, alliances and development.

Muslims are the second largest religious group in much of Europe. For many Muslims it is a soul-searching journey when adapting to life in the West and having to face the prospect of where their identities truly lie. The movement of immigrants, refugees, migrant labor and exiles from all over the Muslim world to these countries has created a new dynamic, transforming the old relationship between "Islam" and "the West." They have become part and parcel of the West. I see a bright future for Muslims in Britain and believe that a dynamic leadership will emerge from here. Many young people are becoming more and more active. They hope to live in a world where people are respected and communities are able to live along side one another - accepting as opposed to tolerating the "other." They hope to see a world where justice prevails. They hope to see a world where the wealth poverty divide is no more. I believe that the Muslim world will look to British Muslims for guidance and support in the future.