



In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

**Secretary General's Address  
at the Annual General Meeting of the General Assembly 2012**

Respected Chair, distinguished guests, sisters and brothers  
Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullah.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

I feel an immense sense of gratitude and honour in completing my two-year term as Secretary General. I am pleased to report on our progress and achievements – and the challenges we still face.

Looking ahead, by the mercy and grace of Allah (swt), we have before us many opportunities to grow as a confident and emerging community.

Meeting with the members of this community, our community – the young, old, men, women, long-established or recent arrivals – I always feel proud to represent the Muslim Council of Britain. There is expectation on us, as well as appreciation; acknowledgement and criticism – and plenty of advice! All of it gives me, and gives us as an organisation, strength.

Today we reflect on the Muslim Council's remarkable 15-year journey. Its formation was a landmark moment for the British Muslim community as Muslims from various traditions, backgrounds and practice resolved to come together to build a united platform to project a positive image of British Muslims, achieve intra-faith understanding, support and protect equal rights for Muslims and create mechanisms to have an organised voice for our faith community.

Then, as now, we remain dedicated to building an inclusive, positive and progressive British Muslim community.

For we are a community, not just isolated individuals. We must fight for our rights within a plural and culturally-diverse democracy. This is not about tribalism, isolationism or extremism. We do not seek separation or special privileges. We must understand where and how we fit within this rich but complex patchwork. We have made progress and some mistakes too. We are still learning. We are still motivated by our unique appreciation that – even though we are a diverse community – we are united by our bonds of faith, and are, together, emboldened by our collective desire to seek the common good.

In my report to you today, I hope to outline our activities and give you an overview of the issues facing us as a community. Over the year we have worked hard to fulfil our mandate –

to give voice to issues that affect us, and to explore mechanisms to overcome our challenges.

## **2. BRITISH MUSLIMS CONTINUE TO MAKE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION**

We have continued the established tradition of the Muslim Council of celebrating good news stories within our bustling community – and there are plenty of them.

This year we successfully held again our annual Muslim Leadership Dinner. It has now become an annual event in our community's calendar where Muslims from all walks of life come together to meet and celebrate Muslim life in Britain.

In this Olympic year, the Dinner celebrated our Muslim sportsmen and women within our community. The presence and messages from Muslim Olympians representing Great Britain in London 2012 was truly inspirational. As the Olympics progress in the next six weeks, the Muslim Council will work with affiliates and partners to celebrate the Olympics, and be welcoming to Muslim athletes from all over the world. I need not remind colleagues how my predecessors, colleagues and indeed the community as a whole were instrumental in bringing the Olympics to London by lobbying Muslim countries. Our former secretary general, Dr. Abdul Bari MBE, continues to serve on the LOCOG board, and now is working with the communities and various authorities to support the games.

London 2012 is going to showcase the best of Britain this summer. The Olympics and Paralympics have a great message for our community, particularly our youth. The Games highlight how commitment, dedication, discipline, engagement, competition and excellence enable an individual to contribute to the success of their team and bring success and pride to their nation.

In Winter, our fourth Young Muslim Beacon Awards acknowledged the outstanding achievements of youth organisations. We were delighted to have the Speaker of the House, the Rt. Hon. John Bercow MP as the chief guest. He present awards to the Osmani Trust, the winner of the best local organisation; the Somali Youth Development Recourse Centre, who won the regional category; and Charity Week UK, who took top prize in the national section.

The evening also awarded a Special Posthumous Awards to the three young Muslims who paid the ultimate sacrifice standing up to defend and protect their community from looters during riots in Birmingham, in August 2011. Haroon Jahan, Shazad Ali and Abdul Musavir were honoured with an award for Model Citizenship. The winners symbolised the solidarity and dignity



that people showed during these tough times. Indeed, when I visited the city with my colleagues we saw moving displays of solidarity between Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Hindus.

At the Beacons Awards, the Attorney General, the Rt. Hon. Dominic Grieve QC MP, applauded the MCB for recognising the work of youth organisations. He also paid tribute to the sacrifice of the three riot victims, saying their families had brought the country together and upheld the rule of law. He said: "All of us saw the riots tearing our communities apart but at the same time we were overwhelmingly impressed by the dignity of the victims' families."

As we go through these tough economic times, the Muslim Council has encouraged entrepreneurship and creative partnerships. In December, a delegation from our Business and Economics Committee participated in a two-day Young Entrepreneurship Conference in Istanbul, joining over 2,000 delegates from 35 countries, drumming up business for Britain. We hope to encourage and develop a range of services to support economic recovery in our towns and cities, including business awards and advice.



We have just celebrated the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, a momentous event that has only occurred once before, during Queen Victoria's reign. I wrote to the Queen offering the congratulations of the Muslim Council. During her reign, many Muslims have made this country their home, and have benefited from the freedom to practise their faith unhindered. Meanwhile, our community also continues to

utilise its unique position as a transnational community with links to the Muslim world. The Muslim diaspora has played a prominent role in the struggle for freedom, democracy and justice: during the Arab Spring in particular. We will continue to use our democratic rights to be a voice for freedom and Justice. The challenge ahead for us Muslims is to come together and speak with one voice – despite our diversity – against oppression wherever it may be.

### **3. THE NEGATIVE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON MUSLIMS**

I have outlined here what the Muslim Council has been doing to highlight, celebrate and encourage the positive contribution Muslims make to British society. Alas, as the evidence in the Leveson Inquiry revealed, such stories do not appeal to those journalists longing for salacious stories against Muslims. In some respects, I do not blame them. They are operating within the hostile landscape that frame Muslims negatively, and within the

narrow confines of extremism and terrorism – issues against which we have spoken out loudly and clearly.

Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes continue to affect us daily. The toxic diet of media misrepresentation, far-right marches against mosques, desecration of graves and attacks on individual Muslims continue unabated. The media is still sadly awash with Muslim scare stories. Religious slaughter is seen as barbaric, even though the practise is shared with our Jewish cousins. Concurrently, there has been a conflation of our faith with despicable crimes such as mass 'grooming', forced marriages and so-called honour killings. The Muslim Council has taken a firm line against this by stating that such crimes have nothing to do with our faith.

This re-enforces negative stereotypes. Ignorance breeds hostility, and that is something we must strive to counter. Islamophobia is rising, with support increasing for far-right parties across the continent. The disproportionate impact of the longest recession since the 1930s is likely to exacerbate the situation and stiffen anti-immigrant sentiment.

However, the anti-Muslim sentiment sweeping across the European continent is much more alarming. We should heed the warning of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg: "European countries appear to face another crisis beyond budget deficits - the disintegration of human value. One symptom is the increasing expression of intolerance towards Muslims. Opinion polls in several European countries reflect fear, suspicion and negative opinions of Muslims and Islamic culture."

An event as savage as Anders Breivik's massacre of 77 youth in Norway last summer should have been a wake-up call for the political class. The Far Right was on the march and anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments alongside it. Vote-chasing politicians and extremists like the English Defence League (EDL) in Britain have been propelling this so-called 'counter jihadist' trend, which holds that Muslims are 'taking over', much like Communists were supposed to be infiltrating America in the 1950s. The news that the EDL has joined hands with the far-right British Freedom Party (BFP) – founded by a former UKIP member and joined by ex-BNP supporters – is going to have political implications. Its main target is the Muslim community.

Together with grassroots bodies such as the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB); the Federation of Students Islamic Societies (FOSIS); and specialist organisations such as National Association of Muslim Police (NAMP) and Forward Thinking we have been campaigning for robust monitoring and action on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes. We have raised the issue with the Home Office and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). We are still worried that the issue is not effectively being examined, and any attempt to do so fall victim to the strident demands of right-wing Islamophobe commentators keen to downplay the phenomenon.

While the public discourse remains hijacked by a small number of hostile anti-Muslim journalists, there are, nevertheless, many more journalists eager to find out more about our community and our faith. The activities of our media office will testify to the brand value the Muslim Council continues to have in our national discourse. Each month our office fields

hundreds of enquires from journalists, policymakers and those whose work affect Muslims. Our busy and under-resourced media office and volunteers works hard to respond to these queries responsibly, ever mindful that our community must be represented faithfully, in all its technical diversity. This is an onerous task that places great strain on our resources. It requires your help.

The public and political landscape remains very challenging for the British Muslim community. Just before the last AGM, the Coalition government finally launched the revised PREVENT (anti-extremism) programme, the third incarnation bearing that name. Unfortunately, from our perspective there did not seem to be much new from the old, much-discredited 'PREVENT' initiative. Despite countless statements and articles, the notion that Muslims are as much part of the problem as the solution continued.

The government announced that it would no longer support or fund groups it deemed as 'extremist'. As a result, we see Muslim community organisations receiving unfair treatment, the kind that would be unthinkable for other faith communities. Disturbingly, FOSIS – our premier student umbrella body – was criticised, despite it working actively with civil society in combating radicalisation. In a briefing meeting we called, community representatives and academics expressed concern that this policy set arbitrary measures for who was 'in' and who was 'out', in what was a very diverse community. The dangers of door state-sponsored sectarianism were clear to see.

We have spoken loudly and firmly against extremism and terrorism. At a time when the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East and Muslim populations resoundingly endorsed the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, is there any reason to believe that British Muslims are any different? No, of course not.

Let us urge our policymakers to stop viewing us through the prism of security. It contains the implicit assumption that Muslims are less able to function in an open democracy than other people; that they are more susceptible to totalitarian impulses; and are more likely to be incited to violence. It sends a wrong message to our community and is likely to fan the already-high flames of Islamophobia.

#### **4. PRACTICAL ISSUES AND CAMPAIGNS**

We were consulted by the independent reviewer of Terrorism Act 2000 and Part 1 of Terrorism Act 2006. We welcomed the recommendation that proscription of organisations should be time-limited and that the Parliament must be satisfied if they are to be re-proscribed. We also welcomed the recommendation for a full review of the Schedule 7 power, which allows for travellers to be detained at ports and airports without reasonable suspicion. However, with regards to the current statutory powers to stop and search without reasonable suspicion, the onus ought to be placed on the authorities to provide a satisfactory reason as to why they are using the power and how it is proportionate with respect to national security.

Above all, the MCB strongly agreed that there is a risk in treating terrorism as something

apart from all other criminal offences. It is capable of being dealt with under the orthodox criminal law, supplemented by procedures and additional criminal offences, just as the trade of firearms, explosives and plots to kill - which are all related offences - are dealt with under criminal law.

This brings me to the tragic case of Babar Ahmad, a 37-year-old British Muslim held for eight years without charge on an extradition request by the US. He is being held under the controversial Extradition Act 2003, under which several others are also being detained. The MCB decided to mobilise support for a Parliamentary e-petition for a debate to put Ahmad on trial in UK. Despite 140,000 people signing the e-petition, the debate was sidelined. In April, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected Ahmad's appeal and that of four other Muslim prisoners. We have since called on the Attorney General in the UK to order a full Public Inquiry following concerns raised about the handling of evidence by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). There is now a very real possibility of miscarriages of justice for not only Babar Ahmad, but fellow detainees under this Act, Syed Talha Ahsan, Gary McKinnon and Richard O'Dwyer.

We did not agree with the Coalition government's proposal to change the legal definition of marriage: marriage in Islam, as in all other major faiths, is defined as a union between a man and a woman. This is not about discrimination or equality. We are opposed to all forms of discrimination – including homophobia – and in February we welcomed the conviction of three Muslim men in Derby for distributing homophobic leaflets. In Islam there is no allowance for inciting hatred and violence against any people, even if any of their practices are religiously disapproved. With the advent of civil partnerships, both homosexual and heterosexual couples now have equal rights in the eyes of the Law. Similarity is a strikingly weak argument for equality.



We have launched a special website under the theme of Muslims Defending Marriage, currently mobilising support against the changing of the definition of marriage. However, I believe it is our duty to strengthen the whole institution of family by campaigning against all forms of discrimination, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, forced marriages, violence against children and abuse of those in care, particularly, our older generation. It is wrong to attribute these practices to any faith or

culture. I propose that we invite stakeholders on all these issues to help us formulate a proactive plan in the defence of the family.

The MCB once again encouraged Muslims to participate in local and Mayoral elections on 3<sup>rd</sup> May this year. Remaining non-partisan, we issued Friday sermons for imams, highlighting the importance of voting.

After Hijab, minarets, terrorism, and Shariah courts, the latest proxy for fears about Muslims – to parrot the words of Mehdi Hasan – is 'Halal Hysteria'. With media caricature of halal being inhumane, pressure groups have intensified their campaign to remove the exemption

which allows religious communities such as Jews and Muslims to slaughter animals without stunning.

Under the leadership of Dr. Shuja Shafi, our deputy secretary general, the MCB last week held a meeting of community leaders and organisations involved in the halal industry to agree the launch of a new a Halal Commission. At the Birmingham meeting, a declaration was signed affirming the Muslim community's resolve to resist the attempts to ban religious slaughter. It rejected criticisms of Halal, saying that no other method of slaughter was more humane, provided proper standards were maintained. The new Commission will involve all the partners to develop an 'assurance scheme' to ensure strict adherence to animal welfare and other halal standards. It will also address wider issues relating to training, education, food ingredients, and pharmaceuticals.

## 5. KEY ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES

When I assumed my responsibility two years ago, my key priorities were:

- agreeing our long-term strategic goals and an action plan
- undertaking a comprehensive review of the constitution
- building internal capacity
- connecting with all sections of our communities
- increasing participation of women and young people
- and strengthening our civil society alliances

My assessment is that we made progress to varying degrees on all these issues.

We were able to finalise our strategy document for 2010-14 and develop our action plan. The three priorities we have set are:

- i) support greater co-operation, unity and good practice among Britain's diverse Muslim communities
- ii) foster better relations between British Muslims and wider society, protecting religious and civil rights
- iii) empower the Muslim community to contribute towards a cohesive, just and successful British society.

I believe a concerted effort in implementing these plans is now the key challenge in the coming period.

I am pleased that under the Chairmanship of Judge Khurshid Drabu CBE, the Constitution Review Committee was able to complete a thorough process of consultation, scrutiny and revision. They took part in road shows, called witnesses from a large cross section of Muslim opinion makers, community leaders, academics and professionals. After carefully considering the representations and extensive debate the recommendations will be placed to the annual general meeting today. These recommendations include changing the current two-tier election of the secretary general and deputy secretary general with direct voting by

delegates in future elections. I believe the amendments will help to enhance participation, provide clear roles and a more efficient decision making process.

The religious, cultural and ethnic diversity represented in MCB enables it to become an effective voice to serve the community and the country. The challenges requiring our utmost attention remain organisational capacity, a new generation of committed and dedicated volunteers, and much greater involvement of women and youth.

## 6. MCB – SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

The MCB's work is based on its aims and is mostly carried out by a large number of volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, men and women. The detailed activities of the projects and committees are reported elsewhere in the report. I will mention only a few broad areas:

- **Strategic Review & Plan:** Since the approval of the strategy document at the last AGM, further work was undertaken to align the committees with the strategic goals. This was followed by a weekend retreat to develop leadership alignment and specific implementation ideas.
- **Constitutional Review:** Undertaken after almost a decade to ensure MCB's structure and processes are suitable for its purpose. They enable it to be democratic, inclusive, representative and responsive.
- **Capacity Building:** Projects that are ongoing are Books for Schools, Footsteps, Leadership Development Programme, Negotiation Skills Course and our work with Mosques and Imam National Advisory Board (MINAB).
- **Media and Public Affairs:** As mentioned earlier, our media office and volunteers field hundreds of media enquiries. The continuous engagement with the media, issuing of PR's and statements, ensuring we have a balanced view of Muslims in the media. The positive impact of this should not be underestimated. Our spokespersons have participated in numerous TV/Radio interviews and our comments quoted by major newspapers. We are developing our presence in social media, Twitter and Facebook, on Youtube, and through a number of opinion pieces in national and international media by our senior spokespeople. Ultimately, for this central public service to continue, we need to invest in further resources, and create an institution with a professional communications team.

**Committees:** Some key activities:

- Muslim Vote 2012 Election campaign
- Engagement at World Islamic Economic Forum
- Participation in the community and faith forum at World Economic Forum, Davos
- 4th Young Muslims Beacon Awards

- Inter Faith Affairs Committee's event at the House of Lords to mark the Inter Faith Week
- Research and Documentation committee's Muslim Archives and Living History Centre project
- Chaplaincy work and training
- Representation at national events such as Remembrance Sunday, Diamond Jubilee
- Representation at the Olympics committees, opportunity to welcome and host the Muslim visitors during Ramadan
- Significant contribution in leading the campaign of standardization in Halal across EU
- Eid Reception held at 61 Whitehall
- Interfaith event at the House of Lords to mark the International Harmony Week
- Some committees undertook activities in response to consultations of government departments or to call for submissions by select committees.
- Some of MCB's established affiliates, like the Muslim Council of Wales, and new ones, like Muslim Council of Scotland, have worked in close partnership with the devolved governments in Wales and Scotland.
- The continuous close relationship with diplomatic Missions of Muslim countries in London was maintained.
- 4<sup>th</sup> Muslim Leadership Dinner (MLD) was held successfully at Millennium Hotel, Grosvenor Square, Mayfair. The focus this year was on Celebrating the Best of British Sport.

## **7. BUILDING FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE**

Our vision of being representative, inclusive and responsive require discipline and dedication. Our priority must be engaging a whole new generation of young volunteers, inspired by the vision of building a confident and contributing Muslim community. We cannot only answer with anger, or play the victim: we must be right at the heart of our communities, and at the heart of Britain and politics, too, so that our collective voice is heard by those in power.

As an organisation and community we need to invest a great deal more in our youth to ensure that they do not fall through the net. I appeal to our institutions and imams to engage with them, listen to them, cater for them and invest in them. We are looking into educational bursaries to ensure that the disproportionate impact of rising university fees does not further exacerbate the socio-economic divide. We must engage our women more, too – they have an important contribution to make but they need opportunities, space and support in our institutions.

With regards to external events: the MCB should not just react in a knee-jerk manner. It must patiently build meaningful bridges. What we are facing is ignorance and mistrust, and exploitation by certain groups and individuals for their self interest. We must plan, strategise and choose where best to place our voice.

Our work is carried out mainly by volunteers, people who do an amazing job on very little resources, often in unsocial hours and without financial reward. They do so, like I, because the need is there. We need many more individuals to come forward and help us: so consider joining one of our committees, and help us develop new ideas and solutions to today's problems.

## 8. CONCLUSION

As I conclude this overview of my term, I do so believing the MCB remains the best platform on which to lobby for the Muslim community. Strategic thinking will help us to ignore petty hostilities, identify allies and highlight the importance of building alliances and coalitions. Only by taking such steps will we become strong enough to confront organised campaigns of hate and marginalisation.

Today we must stand firm and not let our country and continent slip into the intolerant past. We must join hands and withstand the spectre of Islamophobia and help sail this country of ours through rocky times: to do so, we must work together, Muslims and non-Muslim alike. It is time we listen to the voices of sanity, not hate.

We will work to strengthen bonds of brotherhood and mutual understanding between the different Muslim communities here in Britain. We will represent Muslims in an authentic, independent, competent and well-informed manner in national conversations. And we will nurture best conduct and practice within our institutions, and ensure individuals from our communities uphold the highest standards in public and communal life.

Last but not least, I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one who has contributed to the success of this AGM today and to the overall work of the MCB during my tenure as Secretary General – the Office Bearers, the Advisors, the Board of Counsellors, the Committee Chairs, the CWC members, the Staff and our volunteers. I want to thank all our affiliates and non-affiliates with whom we have worked, our partners.

I seek mercy from Allah (swt) and forgiveness from you for my shortcomings in carrying out this great task, and any good thing I achieved was from Allah (swt). Thank you all for your patience.

Wassalaam.



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The Muslim Council of Britain