

**After France: Unity - no to fascism, anti-Semitism,
Islamophobia – defend civil liberties**

Speech by Talha Ahmad, the Muslim Council of Britain

Pleasure and privilege to be here today in the company of colleagues, friends, fellow citizens who inspire me and give hope.

To be Muslim, British, European today is to experience daily dose of dispiriting demand to justify our presence in this country of ours. One news story after another, the Muslim problem seems to have become a permanent feature of our media driven public space.

And echoing Lady Warsi's remarks several years earlier, Islamophobia has passed dinner table test, and more, it is creeping into the mainstream of public policy and politics.

So in such charged environment, amid such hostility, much of which driven by ignorance, some by prejudice, it is refreshing and inspiring that the likes of you work tirelessly to make our country a better place – equal, plural, tolerant, respectful, fair and equitable.

To talk of Islamophobia, to challenge fascism, to defend civil liberties, to stand up to anti-Semitism, from Muslim perspective, there are three broad incidents/events that we need to reflect upon and draw lessons from –

Paris shooting brought back the all too familiar, if subtle, charge implied in the media coverage, Islam has an inherent problem with violence and terrorism;

Charlie Hebdo brought to focus “problem” that Islam has with free speech, free press and that we are reminded, sometime even by those who are otherwise understanding and friendly to

Muslims that Muslims must learn to live in civilised Europe by accepting the freedom.

Both these modelling – Islam as inherently violent, or prone to violence, and that it has a problem with free press – implies that Muslims are a foreign entity seeking to find ground in Europe, and not see it as part of British/European culture, society and value system.

Yet, the reality is, Muslims, my generation, the one after mine and so forth, are not foreign nor alien to British or indeed European ways of life. We are British, European with British values being our values. Therefore, charging Muslims to explain “Islam’s appeal to violence” defies our sense of history, betrays our intellect and tradition. Islam has no greater responsibility to answer for those who seek to commit violence against people and then justify such carnage in the name of their faith and no, you will not need to go far in history, our present is sufficient. Look at Christian Patrols in Tower

Hamlets, Britain First who wish to reclaim Britain that is essentially “Christian” value based, the militia in Central African Republic which has essentially cleansed an entire nation by killing and driving out Muslims who were embedded in that nation’s core. And if you care to go deeper in history, you will find plenty more example.

Or look at other religions too – only this week Hindu mobs set fire in a rural village in India killing Muslims, Buddhists in Burma and Sri Lanka eager to see the end of Muslims in “their countries” or, armed Zionists whether in the guise of IDF or settlers inflicting daily dose of violence on Palestinians.

Therefore, a violent thugs, or a terrorist is not representative of any faith or value system. They are criminals, perhaps worse than ordinary criminals, but criminals and should be treated as such. They are enemies of peace, and scar on our civilisation.

The sooner we recognise this with as much force the better and part of that realisation is to accept that wherever and whenever

such notion is implied, we must vocally and unequivocally challenge such narrative.

Then there is the issue of free press and most notably in relation to depiction of prophet Muhammad PBUH and many feel that this is incompatible with British / European values of freedom. Yet they forget, neither Islam nor Muslims are unfamiliar to this freedom. Islam's inherent message and the Islamic civilisation was built, among others, on the ideal of all men being equal which include their right to express themselves however critically and some will argue modern day European value system is inspired and build on that foundation that Muslims laid down several centuries earlier.

Some of my fellow Muslims attempted to respond to this by saying Muslims respect free speech but....

For me, both who frame free press/speech against Muslim's objection to depiction of Prophet and those who seek to justify Muslims' objection with qualified freedom are on thin ground.

Essentially, our civilisation, national identity and value system is not the product of once concept or many concepts in isolation. Our value system is a mosaic of inter-dependent values which in harmony creates our vision of fair, just, equitable society. So my question is, how do we wish to treat part of our society besieged by adverse, and at times subject of deliberate mischievous attack? Europe's history of treating minorities – Muslims in the middle ages, Jews in the 19th and 20th century, Romas, gays, lesbians and others – is not a glorious, inspiring one. We should therefore be weary of unsettling, unnerving communities already at disadvantaged economically, educationally, politically by further demonising, stereotyping, provoking and offending as it may let us down the slippery slope that we have been on many occasions.

And on that comes the last issues I wish to touch – anti-Semitism. Following Paris shooting, there was one incident at a Jewish grocers. Sad, tragic and despicable that it was, it was one incident. Yet media spoke of Jewish' communities anxiety, their desire to leave for Israel in large numbers. Do not get me wrong, I have spoken against anti-Semitism, and have welcome collaborating with Jewish community including defending in the media a controversial joint statement MCB signed with British Board of Deputies of British Jews. Given the history, understandably, Jews feel concerned every time their safety is affected. But do bear in mind, today's Jewish communities are among the most established, entrenched in the social fabric and particularly well represented in the corridors of powers. If that community feel vulnerable, threatened, how must a community that feels has no voice, or worth or position in the wider society must feel?

Yet, in relation to anti-Semitism two things are often not challenged almost as if they are given facts. In recent anti-

Semitic reporting, it is often implied that somehow Muslims are contributing to the rise of anti-Semitism when there is little or no evidence. Self-professed, out of touch, elitist individuals often claim in large swath of Muslims communities, anti-Semitism is rife, and that holocaust is seen as fabricated and untrue. Yet, as a former teacher teaching in schools with pre-dominantly Muslim students, as son of an imam living in the community, as an activists and leader living in the midst of the Muslim community, I have never seen such tendencies or beliefs. Why then these claims go unchallenged? Truth is, Muslims has no greater share of anti-Semites than any other faith or communities. Those who hate Muslims, the fascists, far rights, bigots has a problem with Jews, immigrants etc. Therefore, we must not link hatred and bigotry to any faith or community but challenge anyone, everyone that espouses hatred. And bear in mind, today's marginalised community are Muslims, fire bombs, graffiti, pig heads, hate mails are more frequently found in a mosque, at the door of a Muslim household. We must fight all hatred and particularly recognise that Islamophobia exists,

creeping into mainstream and the establishment is reluctant in recognising it.

I will conclude with this thought:-

We live in a free country but it was not always like that. Our country has evolved over many centuries, claimed many lives to evolve into a broadly speaking, fair, free and just society.

What has made us better and caused us to be proud amongst civilised nations are our values of freedom, respect, tolerance, civil liberties, justice and equality. Our concept of role of law has taken us above amongst nations.

This year, we cherish and celebrate the journey that formally made its mark 800 years ago with the signing of the Magna Carta. Yet, as we speak, in this building, laws are being enacted to subjugate one class of people to more scrutiny, victimisation and demonization. The Counter Terrorism and Security Bill will run a wedge at the heart of our civil liberties and contrary to our values of equality.

So let us be clear, our struggle for enduring freedom, respect and rule of law is every continuing and that our commitment to fight hatred and bigotry wherever and whenever they come from must be stronger than ever before.

Thank you!