Fostering community cohesion and countering extremism

Speech by Harun Rashid Khan, Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain
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Ladies and Gentlemen

Firstly I would like to thank Lord West, the Chairman of this UK Security Expo, and his organising team for inviting me to speak in front of you.

It is certainly an honour.

The audience here today represents quite literally the business-end of a sector devoted to creating a more secure and safe environment for our society.

Here I pay tribute to our law enforcement authorities; our policemen and women, armed forces and agencies who work tirelessly for the public good.

And I commend the organisers for bringing together a cross section of wider stakeholders to assist this aim.

While we must rightly defer our safety and security to the law enforcement authorities to whom we place so much trust, the issue affects us all and we must play our part.

That point is not lost on British Muslim communities, in all its diversity and complexity.

The scourge of terrorism affects us in very profound ways.

Muslims are likely to be victims of terrorist attacks, especially in the Muslim world.

Here in the UK, Muslim families are worried that they may be torn apart as a minority of our young people fall prey to the lure of terrorist propaganda.

And whenever a terrorist atrocity does take place anywhere in the world, falsely and erroneously in Muslims name, we are compelled to repudiate their actions.

Some would say apologise for the actions of others.

But as Muslims it is our duty to stand firm and speak loudly and clearly against such atrocities.

Not because we are compelled to do it.

We speak out against terrorist atrocities because it is our Islamic duty to do so, just as we would about any injustice.

Every time these people unleash havoc, and take innocent life, we are reminded of the verse in the Qur'an:

"Whosoever kills a human being... it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind." (5:32)

And when extremists attack or call for discrimination against non-Muslims, our rich Islamic tradition points to the contrary.

Whether it be our Holy Prophet Muhammad's pledge to shelter and keep safe Christians or Jews and their places of worship, or his insistence that Muslims must actively take care of their neighbours, regardless of colour or creed: there is a wellspring of scripture and commandments that repudiate the actions of these terrorists.

In practise, around the world we have seen Islamic scholars and institutions repeatedly and forcefully contradict their message.

Here in the UK, since 9/11, the Muslim Council of Britain has initiated campaigns amongst its affiliates to report any wrongdoing and work towards ensuring our young are not lured by the message of the extremists.

This is reflected in polling data where, according to a [BBC/Comres poll last year](#), an overwhelming 94% of Muslims said they would report terrorists planning violence to the police.

And around the country there have been independent initiatives to dissuade young people from the terrorist narrative.

Last year, we took out national newspaper adverts following the second tragic attacks in Paris. There we stated that the 'the barbaric acts of Daesh have no sanction in the religion of Islam, which forbids terrorism and the targeting of innocents.'

And yet, despite these efforts, for too long we have had a dialogue between Muslims and policymakers that has been taking place at cross-purposes, if at all.

Muslims are told that they are not doing enough to tackle the threat.

Told to root out extremists from amongst their own, and told that they must acknowledge that there is something in their faith that triggers these people to do what they do.

We are either accused of denial or accused of colluding with extremists.

By contrast Muslims would argue that we take responsibility by precisely distancing ourselves from these militants.

These are people who have little or no grasp of Islam, and who defy the tradition, letter and spirit of our great faith.

We have had cases of young Britons who have packed themselves off to join Daesh in Syria along with copies of *A Dummies Guide to Islam*.

And we know that terrorists such as the Paris and Brussels attackers had hardly led devout lives.

We have constantly stated, and I have no hesitation in repeating here: extremism and radicalisation takes place outside of the mosque and on the fringes of society.

Extremists prey on the religious illiteracy of a minority of young gullible recruits who hardly know better about the religion of Islam.

In my humble view there are many drivers to radicalisation, and while religion may be deployed as an excuse, it is a smokescreen to deflect the real drivers.

This is not only borne out by Muslim communities who are experiencing this on the ground, it is evidenced by countless studies as well.

A few weeks ago, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the West Point US Military Academy revealed that the vast majority of almost 1,200 militants surveyed had no formal religious education and had not adhered to Islam for their entire lives.

According to the report, Islam played a secondary role in recruiting extremists. It states: "The ability of jihadi groups to recruit foreign fighters is thus based on creating a narrative that is focused on the ongoing deprivation of Muslims."

Yes, some may look at this study dimly, especially as only last week the Oxford English Dictionary coined the term 'post-truth' as the word for 2016.

In other words, analysis rooted in evidence are increasingly being discarded at an alarming rate.

Indeed, that may also best explain our analysis of terrorism and extremism as well:

It is often dominated by people intent on pursuing a phoney 'culture war'.

It is one that falsely represents the life and practice of many Muslims as "conveyor belts" to violence, with the assumption that the more conservative you are, the more prone you are to extremism.

It accuses such Muslims of leading separate lives, and therefore more likely to produce terrorists.

That narrative saw its most extreme expression in the US presidential campaign.

We all heard how the President-elect falsely claimed that there were Muslim no-go areas in London, and demanded that Muslims must "report when they see something going on", as if this did not happen at all.

This perhaps explains partly why I have been asked to speak today about both community cohesion and countering extremism. Both are important issues, but the two should be distinct and well defined.

We want better community cohesion, and we want to certainly confront and counter terrorism. But it is not the police's job to engage in social engineering, nor the state's job to engage in state-sponsored sectarianism to determine which version of Islam best suits their subjective counter-extremism needs.

But that is precisely what is happening in the government's Prevent strategy, which aims to safeguard and support 'vulnerable individuals to stop them becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.'

Yet in the latest of a series of studies critiquing this strategy, the Open Society Foundation concluded that "the current Prevent strategy suffers from multiple, mutually reinforcing structural flaws", adding that there are "serious indications that Prevent is counterproductive".

The government's counter-extremism strategy is flawed because it has defined extremism poorly and in highly subjective ways.

The implementation of the Prevent strategy has resulted in numerous case studies of young children, teachers and health patients being referred to Prevent for spurious reasons, making up [80% of a growing number of referrals](#).

This includes the case of [a hidden Qur'an in a child's bedroom](#) as a sign of radicalisation.

In education, we need robust debate to challenge the extremists. Yet Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford has slammed the Prevent strategy for cutting free speech; a view reiterated by teachers across the UK.

The flaws also reveal themselves when this attempt to detect extremist 'pre-crime' (as coined in the film *Minority Report*) is generally found to be oppressive to everyone.

Only the other week, the Archbishop of Canterbury is reported to have been concerned that a 'conservative evangelical group in a Church of England church' could be deemed extremist.

Others were concerned at the prospect of Ofsted inspectors being sent into Sunday schools and into youth groups in search of radicalisation.

Perhaps they need not worry.

A government official is reported to have told Gavin Robinson MP that he should not "push the issue too far" because "it is really a counter-Islamic strategy," after he asked why Northern Ireland was not included in the counter-extremism strategy.

And the former education secretary Nicky Morgan said on Channel 4 News that converting to Christianity is "of course not" a sign of radicalisation, but plenty of evidence have shown that conversion to Islam raises alarm bells.

Of course, while the implication here is that the Prevent strategy is focused on Muslims, Muslims themselves have rightly complained that such a focus is discriminatory, as it treats them as suspect communities.

That discrimination is felt far more profoundly a week after the verdict against Thomas Mair, the terrorist killer of Jo Cox MP.

Indeed, it is not lost on any of us that unlike the horrific and callous murder of drummer Lee Rigby in 2013, I understand that there were no meetings of COBRA held at the Cabinet Office after Jo Cox's murder.

And while we saw officials provide a steady drip of briefings to feed the subsequent coverage around the Lee Rigby case, newspapers were warned of sub judice in the run-up to the Jo Cox trial.

Indeed, it might explain why there has been muted coverage of the latter compared to the former.

I understand that there are some commentators who are only now making the case for Prevent to aggressively look at the far right problem.

Others have said that the Prevent strategy simply needs relaunch with names such as 'Engage' or 'Connect'.

But for many, Prevent is far too toxic for a rebrand.

The exercise would be futile if there is no real desire to examine why there is widespread opposition to it and learn lessons from the past decade.

The government has stated that Prevent works 'best when delivered in partnership with communities, civil society groups and individuals.' And yet it refuses to open the Prevent strategy to scrutiny or oversight.

More importantly, it refuses to engage with the very communities it seeks to serve.

For example, while we feel policy is best served if there is engagement with diverse stakeholders, the government has refused to engage with my own organisation. An organisation which is the largest non-sectarian umbrella body of Muslim institutions and mosques across the country, working for the common good for nearly two decades. Even though we only claim to speak for our affiliates the same BBC ComRes poll in 2015 found that 55% of Muslims across the country agreed with the views we express.

That is the government's choice -- and we will continue to put our case forward regardless -- but I am struck by the reasons given for non-engagement.

One reason is because the Muslim Council of Britain is critical of the Prevent strategy.

This is strange since, given that we live in a democracy, the government should be open to listening to multiple voices and receptive of scrutiny.

It only confirms to us the 'top-down' approach to Prevent: there is no 'partnership'.

The second reason for non-engagement is because of unsubstantiated, and frankly insulting insinuations that we are supposedly extremist ourselves or close to extremists.

This is unfortunate as such accusations are manufactured by what we have now come to know as the 'alt-right', people intent on discriminating and fostering hatred against Muslims for populist ends.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the impasse we find ourselves in.

On the one hand, British Muslim communities want to deal with extremism, with government, but as equal partners, while on the other, government only engages with those sitting compliantly in its echo chamber.

The impasse is best encapsulated by the former security official and Prevent strategy architect, Sir David Omand, who observed in the Open Society Foundation report I mentioned earlier: "The key issue is, do most people in the community accept [Prevent] as protective of their rights? If the community sees it as a problem, then you have a problem."

We at the Muslim Council of Britain are alive to the problem.

And given that we do not claim to possess no magic wand that will see the problem of terrorism go away, we initiated last year a grassroots conversation around the UK to work out what Muslim communities should do and what Muslim communities want from the government and agencies so that we can all challenge the threat together.

Since then we have had very productive conversations and some very interesting ideas have come through.

Perhaps here I should clarify one idea that has received a huge amount of coverage, but is in no way the stated policy of the Muslim Council Britain: and that is the creation of an alternative Prevent strategy run and administered by the Muslim Council of Britain, or the community at large.

While this strategy may seem appealing, I think it is important for our authorities to take charge in this area. Muslims cannot be 'vigilantes' that 'police' their own community.

As a struggling community, we do not have the resources. And in any case it perpetuates the 'them vs. us approach' which we are trying to avoid.

Nevertheless, I am struck by the level of debate it has generated within the community, and by friends and critics alike.

It resonates with friends as it demonstrates that Muslims are keen to challenge terrorism in meaningful ways.

It alarms our critics, I would argue, because it shows that Muslims are prepared to do this on their own terms, in keeping with their own traditions.

So what are we calling for, and what alternatives are we putting on the table?

Well, we are still midway through our consultation process, and we hope to have a full set of proposals next year.

But, as I have stated here before you: the status quo is not an option. That is the consistent message you will hear amongst Muslim communities up and down the country.

On Prevent, we call for an independent review, especially in its statutory implementation in schools, healthcare and other areas of life.

In terms of moving forward, **we firstly want equality.** By giving Islamophobic hate crime the seriousness it deserves -- as we do with other hate crimes.

And by ensuring that all communities are subjected to the same counter-terror policies. Thus we know that the Prevent duty is not applicable in Northern Ireland -- this is for good reason. But the reason is equally applicable across the country.

It means looking at British Muslims not simply through the lens of security as they currently are.

We offer so much more to British society. We would like fairness, not favours.

This will involve treating community cohesion separately and distinctly from Prevent.

So we should avoid bizarre situations where mosques and churches engaged in worthy and much-needed inter-faith activities do not suddenly get overshadowed by involvement from local Prevent teams or counter-terror police units.

We also want community cohesion and we have done a lot of work in this area. For example the Muslim Council of Britain has commissioned comprehensive census research and as a result raised concerns about youth unemployment and challenge the economic inactivity of Muslim women.

We have commissioned research and suggested initiatives where mosques, parents and schools work together to support the life outcomes of school children.

We have initiated national Visit My Mosque day to invite British mosques to open up to their fellow Britons.

And as I took on the leadership of the Muslim Council of Britain, I wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* about the generational gap in British Muslim communities and highlighted the need for British Muslim institutions to inspire young people to play their full part for the good of society.

These are all urgent priorities that will help Muslims play their part in British society.

But we do a disservice to that cause by treating it as a security problem.

Secondly, in tackling the terrorist challenge, we want to strengthen our police forces so that they can focus on intelligence-led policing.

This means that the police should focus on what they do best: investigation, police work, confronting violent terrorists.

 They should not be embroiled in the contentious activity of working out who is a non-violent extremist.

Our affiliates and our communities have expressed their willingness to be able to work with the police with utmost trust.

Thirdly, we must recognise but be realistic about the role mosques and Islamic groups can play in tackling terrorism, and we Muslims must recognise our shortcomings.

As I have said earlier, extremism is bred outside of mosques and on the fringes of society.

We feel that mosques should be strengthened so that their narrative of the true message of Islam is more appealing from the pulpit than it is from the extremist propaganda of social media accounts.

I have spoken about the generational gap which we Muslims must bridge. We Muslims must also face up to the mental health challenge, which is taboo in some of our communities.

[A police study recently foun](#)d that 'Half of all people feared to be at risk of terrorist sympathies may have mental health or psychological problems.' We cannot ignore that, and we need to ensure that at community and national levels, mental health is given due support.

In this regard, we support the National Policing Lead for Prevent Simon Cole, who has passionately argued on the importance of stronger mental health support at community levels.

We also endorse the Home Affairs Select Committee's recommendation of the Aarhus process for foreign fighters where -- rather than facing criminal sanction -- they are offered assistance in mental health, counselling, healthcare and even education, employment and accommodation.

Fourthly, we need to remove the culture of fear. From CCTV cameras in Muslim dominated areas, to the rise of frivolous referrals for those suspected of extremism, Prevent is deepening a culture of fear.

If Imams are scared to speak about politics in a mosque, and young people scared to speak about politics in schools, is it no wonder that some will find their way to the dark corners of the internet and are attracted to those who are more open.

We need to be proud of our openness. And young people should feel free to be open with their frustrations: to debate, to challenge and speak truth to power as part of our democratic society.

Finally, the message we are hearing from our affiliates and, by extension our communities is that the fight against terrorism requires consensus and cooperation from across the board, and not just Muslim communities.

With Brexit and the US election, I am extremely concerned that in 2016 we only saw a deepening polarisation in our society.

The real risk of extremism is potent from all sides.

If there is to be a link between community cohesion and security, then it is one where the government, police, politicians civil society and, crucially, the media, all play their part in encouraging positive integration and actively shun the singling out and demonisation of any minority.

In this regard, we give our full support.

Ladies and gentlemen: as British Muslims we love our country, and care about its safety as much as anyone else.

It is perhaps time for those in power to appreciate that and offer a genuine hand in partnership.

Thank you.