

If you want sharia law, you should go and live in Saudi

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Shahid Malik, the Labour MP, explains why he told fellow Muslims that if they don't like Britain they should pack their bags

Scotland Yard described it as a plot "to commit mass murder on an unimaginable scale". John Reid concurred: "The terror threat to the public was unprecedented, the biggest that Britain had ever faced."

As it transpired, there was nothing melodramatic about these descriptions. It was to be a "terror spectacular" beyond our worst nightmares, involving blowing up a dozen aeroplanes in mid-air over the Atlantic Ocean, with the wilful massacre of more than 1,000 innocent men, women and children.

Last Tuesday, after a 90-minute meeting with John Prescott, the deputy prime minister, to discuss the challenges of extremism and foreign policy, I emerged and was immediately asked by the media whether I agreed that what British Muslims needed were Islamic holidays and sharia (Islamic law). I thought I had walked into some parallel universe.

Sadly this was not a joke. These issues had apparently formed part of the discussion the day before between Prescott, Ruth Kelly, the communities minister, and a selection of "Muslim leaders". I realised then that it wasn't me and the media who were living in a parallel universe -although certain "Muslim leaders" might well be.

Maybe some of these "leaders" believed that cabinet ministers were being alarmist, that the terror threat posed by British extremists was exaggerated. Maybe they thought that the entire plot and threat were the "mother of all smokescreens", a bid to divert our attention from the killing fields of Lebanon. Or maybe it was another symptom of that epidemic that is afflicting far too many Muslims: denial. Out of touch with reality, frightened to propose any real solutions for fear of "selling out", but always keen to exact a concession -a sad but too often true caricature of some so-called Muslim leaders.

Other members of the Muslim community I am sure would have cringed as I did when listening to Dr Syed Aziz Pasha, secretary-general of the Union of Muslim Organisations of the UK and Ireland, who explained his demand for sharia and more holidays: "If you give us religious rights we will be in a better position to convince young people that they are being treated equally along with other citizens." He has done much good work over the years but this is clearly not one of his better moments.

Who speaks for Muslims? The government has a near impossible task but I'm sure even it realises that we need to look beyond some of the usual suspects and, crucially, to find mechanisms directly to engage with young people, where many of our challenges lie. To me the plot seemed all too real: I flew back from the United States that very week; my sister, her husband and their two kids live in New York so we all regularly shuttle to and fro. If the alleged plot had been realised we could all have been "statistics".

As I have repeatedly said, in this world of indiscriminate terrorist bombings, where Muslims are just as likely to be the victims of terrorism as other British and US citizens, we Muslims have an equal stake in fighting extremism. Hundreds of Muslims died on 9/11 and 7/7. But more importantly, given that these acts are carried out in the name of our religion -Islam -we have a greater responsibility not merely to condemn but to confront the extremists. In addition to being the targets of terrorism, Muslims will inevitably be the targets of any backlash.

Given this context, most Muslims will perhaps feel disappointed at some of the comments of those "leaders" who went in to bat on their behalf. Of course self-indulgent bad timing is not the sole preserve of Muslim leaders: David Cameron's gross misjudgment of the national mood in his criticisms of how the government had failed to keep us safe and secure were just as crass. Cameron's stance, in undermining the unity required from our leaders on such occasions of national unease, played into the extremists' hands.

So too, unfortunately, did the comments of some of the "Muslim leaders" who demanded sharia for British Muslims rather than the existing legal system. The call for special public holidays for Muslims was unnecessary, impracticable and divisive. Most employers already allow their staff to take such days out of their annual leave. And what about special holidays for Sikhs, Hindus, Jews? If we amended our laws to accommodate all such requests, then all the king's horses and all the king's men wouldn't be able to put our workplaces and communities back together again.

When it comes to sharia, Muhammad ibn Adam, the respected Islamic scholar, says: "It is necessary by sharia to abide by the laws of the country one lives in, regardless of the nature of the law, as long as the law doesn't demand something that is against Islam." It is narrated in the Koran that the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "It is necessary upon a Muslim to listen to and obey the ruler, as long as one is not ordered to carry out a sin." (Sahih al-Bukhari, no2796 & Sunan Tirmidhi).

In Britain there are no laws that force Muslims to do something against sharia and Muslims enjoy the freedom to worship and follow their religion, as do all other faiths. Compare Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, a sharia regime where women are forbidden to drive; or Turkey, a secular country where women are forbidden to wear the hijab; or Tunisia, where civil servants are forbidden to wear a beard.

I believe that as a Muslim there is no better place to live than Britain. That doesn't mean that all in the garden is rosy; often Islamophobia is palpable. But my message is: whether you are white, Asian, black, Muslim, Christian or Jew, if you

don't like where you're living you have two choices: either you live elsewhere, or you engage in the political process, attempt to create change and ultimately respect the will of the majority.

When Lord Ahmed, the Muslim Labour peer, heard my comments -I said essentially that if Muslims wanted sharia they should go and live somewhere where they have it -he accused me of doing the BNP's work. He is entitled to his opinion. However, a little honesty, like mine, in this whole debate might just restore trust in politicians and ease the population's anxieties.

Since I made my remarks my office has been overwhelmed with support. I also know that some Muslims feel uncomfortable, not necessarily because they disagree but because they feel targeted. But what I want to say to my fellow British Muslims is that in this country we enjoy freedoms, rights and privileges of which Muslims elsewhere can only dream. We should appreciate that fact and have the confidence to fulfil the obligations and responsibilities as part of our contract with our country and as dictated by sharia law.

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