

## **Why Muslims must rise up now and join the battle against extremism**

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ON FRIDAY last week I agreed to add my name to a letter to the Government from Oxfam, other non-governmental organisations and individuals to express, in the wake of the Middle East crisis, our commitment to the fundamental humanitarian principle that all innocent lives should be valued equally.

As has been made apparent to me over the past few days, the letter was open to several interpretations. It has never been my contention that the Government ought to change foreign policy because of terrorist threats within our borders. We must never be held to ransom by those who would deliberately shed innocent blood in the name of their cause. I firmly believe that justice, righteousness and national interest should be our policy compass. So when ministers such as Kim Howells and Douglas Alexander argue that "no government worth its salt would allow any policy to be dictated by threats of terror", we are at one.

I doubt if many would question my commitment to fighting terrorism. I have vociferously argued, ever since it was revealed that the leader of the 7/7 bombers was my constituent, that no policy, domestic or foreign, can ever justify or excuse British-born Muslims strapping on suicide belts.

Yes, foreign policy causes anger among many British Muslims but this does not in itself cause terrorism. Unquestionably, the lethal ingredient is a twisted, perverted interpretation of Islam whereby you can legitimately kill yourself and other innocent people, and you will go to Heaven.

The notion that you change foreign policy to save civilian lives in, say, Lebanon, or Palestine, by slaying innocent men, women or children in the UK or US is perverse and profoundly abhorrent. Furthermore, all it does is create tremendous misery for the overwhelming majority of Muslims who reject the terrorist ideology.

On a recent visit to the US, I was shocked to learn that tens of thousands of Muslims left their adopted country after 9/11 -with more planning to continue the exodus because of increased domestic hostility. Even in Britain, fear has propelled some Muslims to build homes abroad, just in case.

While being tough on terrorists, however, the Government should be flexible enough to listen to those who have genuine policy concerns. Today I, along with other Muslim MPs, will discuss with John Prescott some of the challenges ahead. The Prime Minister has also indicated that he is willing to meet those with concerns.

This is the way forward. Any British Muslims who are in disagreement with foreign policy must follow the path of others by exercising their right as citizens to influence policy through the established route: that is, by engaging in the political process.

In this world of indiscriminate terrorist bombings, where Muslims are just as likely to be victims of terrorism as other British and US citizens, we have an equal stake in fighting extremism. But more importantly, given that these acts are carried out in our name (Islam), we have a greater responsibility, not merely to condemn but to confront. As an MP for the constituency with the country's highest BNP vote, I strongly believe that the BNP will only be defeated by white people taking leadership. Likewise, Muslims themselves must take the lead if we are to defeat the extremism within.

With the exception of a very few, mosques in Britain are extremely vigilant about who and what they allow on to their platforms. The greater danger is now posed in the virtual world, by the preachers of hatred accessible on the internet and based virtually anywhere, ever ready to prey on the angry and frustrated.

As I said to some 500 Muslims in a hall in Leeds on Saturday, a whole year on from the heinous acts of 7/7, the Muslim community has not yet risen to the challenge presented by extremism in its ranks. This was depressingly laid bare by a recent Times poll that stated that 13 per cent of British Muslims believed that the 7/7 attackers were martyrs.

And foreign policy issues are undoubtedly a factor in formulating such beliefs.

Is it a sane response to kill more than 1,000 civilians in Lebanon -mainly women and children -for the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers (not forgetting the 40 or so civilians killed by Hezbollah rockets)? The answer is unequivocally "no".

And that's before we even touch on Kashmir and Palestine, both of which have UN resolutions 59 and 39 years old respectively with no international will to deliver justice to these people. It is this perception of double standards that fuels anger and hatred and has single-handedly served to undermine our counter extremism arguments.

As a Muslim I believe that there is no better place in the world to live than Britain. After 7/7 we expected a backlash against Muslims but it didn't really materialise. Yet had 7/7 taken place in Pakistan and the perpetrators done it in the name of Christianity, how many Christians, one year later, would be dead? Ten or 100 or perhaps 1,000? A real-life analogy in that region came in 2002 when some 50 Hindus died on a train in Gujarat. What was the response? Some 3,000 Muslims were butchered, hundreds of women raped, businesses and homes looted and razed to the ground.

The freedoms and lifestyle we enjoy here cannot be matched in either the Muslim or non-Muslim world, but they do demand a price. Despite accusations of "sell out", a barrage of hate mail and the compromising of my personal safety, I would still support the Government's anti-terror legislation, including the 90-day pre charge maximum detention period.

For British Muslims the fight against extremism is not just for the very soul of Islam but for the freedoms we enjoy as Britons.

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