

The Quest for Sanity

REFLECTIONS ON SEPTEMBER 11
AND THE AFTERMATH

MCB

In the Eye of the Storm

The MCB – Fulfilling Its Responsibilities

From September 11 and the critical days and weeks that followed, British Muslims were thrust in the limelight like never before. The Muslim Council of Britain was soon made aware that British Muslims were likely to become targets – whether from sections of the public wanting to vent their anger at whomever they associated with those responsible or from racist groups seeking to exploit the situation.

From the dark hours of that Tuesday, the MCB struggled to correct the dangerous misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims that were beginning to be aired in some sections of the world, and to alert the authorities to unjustified attacks on the life and property of British Muslims. Though the sanctity of life is one of the paramount values of Islam, the power of the media was such that by Tuesday 7.30 pm the MCB had received its first hate mails with bizarre references to 'Islamic terrorism' and 'Islamic violence' (see article by Inayat Bunglawala for examples).

The MCB issued a press statement on the same day with an unequivocal condemnation of the atrocities. Shocked and anguished at the killing of innocents, the MCB grasped every opportunity to convey its abhorrence of the atrocities that claimed thousands of lives from every part of the world, including British Muslims. For those who equated Islam with terrorism, the MCB could but quote from the Qur'an on the sanctity of life in Islam: "Whoever takes an innocent life, it is as if he has killed the whole of humanity, and whoever saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole of humanity" (5: 32).

Fourteen Days of High Drama

The next day, Mr Blair himself acknowledged the previous day's 'very strong statement of condemnation from The Muslim Council of Britain, echoing that of the American Muslim Council'. The Prime Minister also declared that the act of terrorism had nothing to do with Islam or Muslims, and government took up his lead. From the outset the MCB urged the Prime Minister to use his influence so that the crisis was not worsened through reactions and presumptions of guilt.

The Home Office shared concerns about the physical well-being of the Muslim community. As reports of attacks on Muslim individuals and institutions started to come in, the Home Office and police forces throughout the country were asked by Muslim organisations, including the MCB, to make arrangements to ensure that incidents of hate crimes against Muslims were minimised. Police guards were posted outside mosques and Islamic centres and people were urged to take care and report any incidents. On 12 September, Mr David Westwood, Chairman of the Race and Community Business Group of the Association of Chief Police Officers, sent a message to the MCB, "I assure you that the British Police service is sensitive to the potential of victimisation or even demonisation of the Muslim community."

By 12 September most other Islamic organisations had also released public statements condemning the atrocities. On major issues there is usually co-operation and co-ordination. The MCB therefore convened a meeting inviting all the major national Islamic organisations in Britain. This would provide the first opportunity for Muslims in leadership positions from different organisations to come together and talk about what had happened the previous day and decide how to proceed.

As attendees arrived at Regent's Park Mosque that evening, the police guards at the entrance provided a visual reminder of the changed landscape they now inhabited. The media were not too far away either. Inside the mosque camera crews from TV stations were in place to ask for views.

As they sat round the oval table on the first floor of one of Britain's most famous institutions facing one another, there was a palpable air of concern amongst the leaders and representatives of the organisations invited. Collectively the burden of responsibility upon them was immense. Even though they represented different strands of thought and opinion amongst the Muslim community, there was total agreement on the main points. This was a barbaric act of terrorism that has no place in Islam. It needed to be condemned totally. A joint statement was then released.

Muslim Organisations' Statement - 13 September 2001

The Qur'an equates the murder of one innocent person with the murder of the whole of humanity.

We, the Muslims of Britain, wish to offer our deepest sympathies to the families of those who have been killed or injured following the atrocities committed in the United States. We utterly condemn these indiscriminate terrorist attacks against innocent lives. The perpetrators of these atrocities, regardless of their religious, ideological or political beliefs, stand outside the pale of civilised values.

Terror affects us all. Terror of this enormity must not be compounded by knee-jerk reactions that would make victims of other innocent people. We would remind the government and the media that the consequences of unsubstantiated speculation in the past, such as the case of the Oklahoma bombing, produced a climate of fear among Muslims that should not be repeated.

There exists a heightened sense of insecurity amongst Muslims in Britain though we warmly welcome our Prime Minister's comments yesterday when he emphasised that Muslims in this country clearly condemn this atrocity. The Prime Minister warned against speculation that can endanger the lives of the entire community. Our thoughts and heartfelt concerns are with all those affected at this mournful moment.

The MCB, in conjunction with the Islamic Cultural Centre, Association of Muslim Schools, Al Khoei Foundation, the Muslim College and the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), organised a press conference in London on 13 September. It was another opportunity to reinforce the MCB's message and express condolences. Yousuf Bhailok and Iqbal Sacranie asked that the media exercise "responsible journalism" and not unwittingly fuel religious and social anxieties in the aftermath of the attacks. Michele Messaoudi of FAIR mentioned recent incidents involving Muslim schoolchildren and women in headscarves. She said that the Muslim community was being targeted and singled out for abuse and harassment. The conference was well attended with representation from *The Guardian*,

Associated Press, BBC Breakfast News, Radio 5 Live, ARY Digital, Zee TV, and other media bodies.

On the occasion of the special debate in Parliament on 14 September the MCB prepared a statement that was sent individually to each MP. With the aim of ensuring that one tragedy did not lead to more innocent lives being lost, it noted that "a historic burden of responsibility lies with our elected representatives to demonstrate the supremacy of the rule of law by seeking just means to counter the great injustice that is terrorism. There must be no more innocent victims to add to the toll of suffering caused by those guilty of this terror".

It also alerted the House of Commons to the worry of the British Muslim community that a climate of intolerance and revenge was emerging, directed at them. The father of the House, Tam Dalyell MP, and MEPs, including John Bowis, the MEP for London, responded with words of support. The Foreign Secretary, Rt Hon Jack Straw, also took the initiative to improve community relations. In a newspaper article he recognised how the Muslims viewed the US tragedy: "It's a sense of shock and loss which, I know, is strongly shared by the Muslim communities here in Bradford and across our country...blaming Islam for what has happened would be as wrong as blaming Christianity for sectarian attacks in Northern Ireland." Gradually the tide of vitriolic emails received by the MCB grew smaller and was replaced by a greater number of positive messages of support and encouragement. The full record was published on the MCB web site for all to view.

The MCB in a meeting with Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, on 19 September, requested guidelines to be issued to head teachers. At a separate meeting with David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, the need for the introduction of legislation to deal with incitement to religious hatred was stressed, as well as the need to expedite the enacting of the law against discrimination on religious grounds. The MCB itself issued a letter of guidance on 19 September to over a thousand community organisations and mosques on issues of personal safety and mosque protection.

The MCB convened a special meeting of its Central Working Committee on 22 September, attended by the Director General of the Islamic Cultural Centre, Dr Ahmad Al-Dubayan, and other distinguished Muslims, including religious scholars. At the meeting, Khurshid Drabu, barrister and human rights expert stressed that "Muslims are and must be seen to be firm upholders of justice and the rule of law, and so must governments and coalitions who have declared a war on terrorism." On behalf of Muslim imams and ulama, Dr Suhayb Hassan also quoted the

Qur'an to highlight the uncompromising Islamic concern for justice: "O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, that is next to piety, and fear God. For God is well-acquainted with all that you do." The economist Iqbal Asaria reminded the meeting that more than half of British Muslims were born in this country and Britain was their only home. "We must all realise that citizenship carries rights as well as obligations," he said. "We must adopt the principled stance that the rule of law is inviolable. Muslims have a duty to participate in the society and they have a responsibility to add value to society as a whole. Otherwise, Muslims are in danger of being ghettoised communities and run the risk of being put in concentration camps." He also noted that such camps were not unknown in recent European history.

One participant at the MCB meeting recounted how he felt a shiver running down his back when he heard President Bush talking about 'If you are not with us, you are against us.' This was the language of the repressive regime in the Middle East under which he lived and which stifled not only all dissent but also all discussion and made everyone guilty of suspected treason.

The extra work generated by September 11, not least the unprecedented media attention upon the MCB, meant that work on other areas came to a virtual halt as nearly everyone's attention was diverted to helping out on this issue. Volunteers were drafted into the office, people took time off work to help out, a system for logging hate incidents was set up and the phones never stopped ringing. People worked more or less round the clock. An emergency committee was established to co-ordinate work across the various committees. It met weekly and was open to people from different community organisations that wanted to be kept abreast of the latest developments and contribute ideas.

In the meantime, more hate mail streamed into the MCB office. However Muslims were not the only victims of hostility. There were instances of Sikhs being mistaken for Muslims and being subject to intimidation and harassment. Dr Fatma Amer represented the MCB at a meeting of the Sikh community on 20 September.

Community Representation and Work

There was a growing sense of anxiety within the Muslim community. Women wearing the hijab were particularly vulnerable as they were easily identifiable as Muslims. Some women restricted their movements as a precaution. Muslims, both men and women who were identifiable as such,

were urged to exercise care when using public transport and some Muslim schools closed temporarily. A number of incidents of verbal and physical abuse and mosque desecration occurred, that were centrally logged. The MCB also set up a help-line at its office as a contact point for anyone in distress. The MCB established contact with a variety of public bodies and government departments to raise the community's concerns and ensure some action was taken.

Prime Minister Tony Blair invited members of the British Muslim community to a meeting at 10 Downing Street on 28 September. Representing the MCB were Yousuf Bhailok, Iqbal Sacranie, Tanzeem Wasti and Dr Fatma Amer. Mr Blair denounced abusive behaviour against Muslims as "acts and attitudes [that] have no proper place in our country". The meeting was an opportunity for a frank and robust exchange of views, in which was highlighted the massive problem of the emerging refugee crisis in Afghanistan and the need to secure justice, and not vengeance, in the capturing of those accused of having carried out the terrorist attack. A delegation from the MCB also subsequently met Conservative Party Leader Iain Duncan Smith a few days later.

On 29 September, The Muslim Council of Britain convened a unique meeting of scholars, imams and ulama to discuss world events and their impact on British Muslims. They were asked to provide advice and guidance to the community. A detailed statement prepared by the Ulama was then translated into Urdu, Bengali and Gujrati and circulated by the MCB to all mosques and Muslim community organisations. The full text was made available on the MCB web site.

The MCB's regular newsletter, 'The Common Good' at the end of September also provided information that might be useful to the community, including examples of good practice projects adopted by mosques and Islamic associations to dispel stereotypes and communicate with neighbours and other faith groups. The newsletter included a 'social contract', calling on British Muslims to be "faithful to the Islamic values of truth, justice, care and compassion".

Our Social Contract

Faithful to the Islamic values of truth, justice, care and compassion, Muslims should have nothing to hide and fear and remain open and transparent as we go about our daily lives. While further upheaval and devastation is being visited on Muslim communities, and the fires of civil war are being stoked up in Muslim lands, it is natural to feel pain and anguish especially when injustice is being done and the misery of starving and destitute populations is compounded over and over again.

As British Muslims we have the right and the duty to use wise counsel and all our powers of argument and persuasion to impress on our government the duty to uphold the rule of law and follow ethical policies both at home and abroad. As citizens of Britain, we have a social contract to maintain the peace and stability of this country. No one must be tempted to commit any criminal or subversive activity.

One of the immediate results of the atrocities of September 11 is that the phenomenon of 'Islamophobia' has been released anew on an unprecedented scale. Terms such as Islamic terrorists are being bandied about not only by the media but by security agencies and people in government. Much of this may be quite deliberate. Islam as a religion has nothing to do with terrorism. However, there is a lot of confusion and ignorance about Islam and Muslims and a dominant image of Muslims is often that they are extremists. We have a duty to set the record straight.

At these times especially, everyone including Muslims should be especially vigilant for their own safety and that of their neighbours. People must be careful how they respond to acts of provocation, misinformation and disinformation which tend to proliferate especially in times of war. We must not act on the basis of hearsay. The instructions of the Qur'an are clear: "When a mischief-maker comes to you with some news, check it out lest you cause injury to someone out of ignorance." "When ignorant people address them, worshippers of God Most Gracious reply, 'Peace!'."

A remarkable meeting at The Methodist Central Hall in Westminster held on 3 October endorsed a statement bringing together London's faith communities. Attended by the Bishop of London and representatives from other faiths, the meeting concluded with a signed statement from religious

leaders that condemned indiscriminate acts of violence against innocent people. A number of speakers, including Atma Singh of the Greater London Authority, called for the pursuit of justice without vengeance. The Bishop of London observed that 'terror makes victim of us all' and said that he was appalled by the use of terms such as 'crusade' in the aftermath of the tragedy. Dr Anas Abu Shadi, Deputy Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre, participated in the public reading of the statement, and Mahmud Al-Rashid spoke on behalf of the MCB. He called for the planners and perpetrators of the September 11 atrocity to be brought to trial in an international court. The MCB was against the intimidation and threats of war in Afghanistan, and the impact of these actions had been to force hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in terror. Ajmal Masroor of the London Civic Forum Executive provided a rousing concluding address.

On 9 October, reflecting the community's anger with US-led strikes against Afghanistan, the MCB issued a press release noting, "British Muslims want justice to be done for the horrifying events of September 11. These day and night strikes – which are already leading to innocent civilians deaths amongst the long-suffering Afghan population – will not achieve this purpose. In Islam, all innocent human life is precious. These attacks will only lead to further polarisation in the world. This will not be a fitting memorial to those who died in the September 11 atrocities. We are now hearing talk of 'widening the war' to encompass other Muslim countries. We fear that these events could spiral out of control. We urge world leaders to react with reason and awareness of the long-term consequences of their actions." The statement underlined the belief that the phenomena of mass terrorism could only be resolved through examining and addressing the root causes of terrorism.

Positive Outcomes

Throughout this initial period there were many distressing instances ranging from irresponsible and sometimes malicious comments in the media through to physical attacks on Muslims. But there have been many positive outcomes too.

In an important issue of policy the MCB took a public stand to confront groups within the community that not only misrepresent the values of Islam but also cause ill will through foolish statements and quixotic behaviour. The MCB now urges TV producers and newspaper editors not to offer a high profile to such people, who not only do not represent the mainstream community views and feelings, but indirectly inflame passions and spread hatred.

A reception organised by the MCB in November 2001 at the London Islamic Cultural Centre provided an opportunity to thank some of the Muslim community's well-wishers who had sent in messages of support. The renowned photographer Peter Sanders presented a slide show based on his travels in the Muslim world, providing guests with a flavour of the expanse and cultural richness of the world of Islam. The atmosphere of the meeting was warm and open, with guests using the opportunity to enquire about Islam and exchange points of view. Many other Muslim organisations hosted such events, and such efforts have created new bridges and friends.

The MCB has encouraged its affiliates - especially mosques - to open their doors to members of the public who wanted to know about what Islam really stands for. There is a greater move at the grass-roots level to seek out a dialogue with other faith groups and build trust and understanding at the local level.

Interspersed amongst the e-mail messages of hostility received by the MCB there were also messages of care and concern - from which a great deal of strength and encouragement was drawn. For example, a Muslim community leader, A K Gheewala of Leicester, found something of personal significance in the catalogue of emails available on the MCB web site: "I have spent more than five hours in reading emails posted on this subject. Fortunately, letters with positive views outnumber the letters projecting total ignorance towards Islam and Muslims. As a chair of Muslim welfare trust and a member of many other voluntary and community groups, on behalf of the entire Muslim community, I wish to thank all those who have either been sympathetic to us or have written against the racist/prejudiced remarks. I would request other friends to become familiar with Islam, its philosophy and teaching before arriving at any conclusion. On reflection I consider it a shortcoming that we are failing to convey the correct message of Islam."

The initiatives taken by the MCB in establishing contact with public bodies and government departments have also borne fruit, for example leading to the standing consultation between the police and representatives of the Muslim community to discuss and deal with problems as they arise on a regular basis.

September 11 and its aftermath has been a searing experience, in which representative bodies serving the Muslim community have endeavoured to keep a steady ship in a period of continuing agitation and turmoil. They would need to demonstrate the same qualities and commitment in the days ahead.