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Transcript: Q&A

Partnering with the Muslim Community as an Effective Counter-Terrorist Strategy

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Chair: Professor Rosemary Hollis

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Rosemary Hollis:

Well I don't think you've disappointed at all in terms of taking on the establishment and sundry individuals in terms of their attitude towards counter-terrorism. And I note that we can hear directly from Ibrahim Hewitt and Interpal in the first question.

By the way, would you all mind standing and announcing who you are and making your question as short as possible.

Question 1:

Thanks very much, Rosemary. I would just like to say, I'm Ibrahim Hewitt, I'm the Chair of Interpal. I'm British, because that's my nationality. I'm very proud of it. I'm English because Athelstan defeated the Northumbrians in 924. I'm a Geordie because I was born near Newcastle. And I'm Muslim by choice. I am multicultural. My family is multicultural. It really pains me to think that my country is starting now to have problems with being multicultural. So that's one point which I think when you read the book, and I hope as many of you as possible will read the book, you will find that there are very strong arguments in there based on sound evidence for Bob's modus operandi when he was with the police.

One of the things I'd like to point out is that from Interpal's point of view, we work with Palestinians trying to give humanitarian assistance, not only in Gaza and the West Bank as Bob pointed out that they're naturally almost most of the focus in the media and elsewhere. But we also do a lot of work in the refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon as Bob also pointed out. So you've taken half the wind out of my sails. Thanks very much.

The point is that it only appears to be the government in Israel who actually demonise us, and as a direct request from them to the United States where we are deemed to be a terrorist organisation. Now this has an incredible impact on us as a legitimate British charity, and I would like to ask Bob if it's possible in a couple of minutes whether he thinks that there is likely to be a change of approach from the British Government to [the way they have] have treated us since 2003, when we were designated as a specially designated global terrorist entity by George Bush, whether there is likely to be a change in the attitude towards charities and our work, like Interpal, by the government in this country.

As a British charity who have a right, I think, to expect the support and a defence from our government and from our ministers which is sadly lacking.

We're in a very ambiguous position, to the point that it is often dangerous for us to travel around the world.

Rosemary Hollis:

Okay, I think this is a bit of a set-up between the speaker and you. This is the last bit of the speech. We're very happy to hear the answer, I just don't want other people in the audience to be encouraged to give quite as long a preamble to their questions, with any luck. But it's very interesting. Thank you.

Robert Lambert:

Yes, I think at the moment the government policy is determined by the thinking that you can read in Michael Gove's book, *Celsius 7/7*, which is to say that there's a strong influence from think-tanks like Policy Exchange. Less so but equally, I think think-tanks such as the Centre for Social Cohesion which is now I think subsumed within the Henry Jackson Society and others. But it really isn't difficult to envisage a change of approach. In the coalition government, one thinks of statements from Nick Clegg, Sarah Teather before they were in the coalition government, you think of their... Actually from Nick Clegg some criticism of Policy Exchange in this arena.

So I think it may only be a matter of time. What I do think on all these issues is absolutely crucial is actually to come out and see the evidence. When you've inspected the records of Interpal and other charities and organisations that are regularly being demonised and you work with them, I think that can reduce a lot of unnecessary concern.

Rosemary Hollis:

Can you clarify the situation for us? What is the status of Interpal in the UK? What effect did the American attitude have in the UK? As well as... I'm not sure if we know how positive the future is for Interpal.

Robert Lambert:

Oh I think it's very positive. Not least because of the work of the Charity Commission. Now critics, again, whether it's Policy Exchange or any of their allies, they would say that the Charity Commission, rather like my work on the Muslim Contact Unit, well, of course they're a bit weak and soft. Not the sense that real tough approaches to terrorism will show you that Interpal and many

others are actually very much involved in terrorism. Well I argue the exact opposite, and I think there is a fair amount of evidence in the book to support my view.

The legal position is healthy. However, because of the situation in America, I notice that banks, because we live in a corporate world, you will find banks will say, oh well, should we work with Interpal? It's a very problematic situation. But it would be far worse without the efforts of both police and the Charity Commission.

Question 2:

Two points I'd like to take up with you very quickly. Some people applaud the failure of multiculturalism. Now, while I can see that we live multiculturalism in reality, and I see that what they see as a failure of multiculturalism is that probably some people on the right in this country, they try to use multiculturalism in order to coerce people of different cultures into integrating regardless. How do you see this question?

The other point is related to the relationship with America, especially on the security side of it. How much of the rash, harsh judgement of the Americans, or any situation, is taken by the British establishment here? And how much since can people like you working in the security establishment can bring into the American thinking?

Robert Lambert:

I think, dealing with the last point first, I think there is room for great optimism because I think there is an appetite now for debate. I think there's a recognition that forces that we can probably best describe as neo-conservative were the architects of the war on terror. It brought together a fascinating coalition from the left and right. In London, we noticed that perhaps first when Martin Bright came to write a report with Policy Exchange. We also saw it around the Euston Manifesto.

So I think that is still a very dominant discourse and position. It was also notable in 2006, and I must say I was really quite shocked. I was a bit despondent then when perhaps the doyen of the sort of anti-Islamist world view came to London to debate with Ken Livingstone. Ken Livingstone was Mayor of London then. Ken was, I won't say he was on a crest of a wave, but he was in power and he felt confident to have a debate with Daniel Pipes.

Daniel Pipes was supported by Douglas Murray who has since become far more prominent. Ken Livingstone was supported in the debate by Salma Yaqoob. I think the first thing that struck me was that Daniel Pipes probably had as much, if not more, support in Westminster, in the QE2 conference centre than Ken Livingstone on home territory.

So I think as we move on, I think there is such an appetite now, not least because of the Arab Spring. I really do think people are looking for more pragmatism, more compromise. I think there is such a level of, in places revulsion, about the, if we want to be polite we might talk about the excesses of the war on terror. But yes, I think there is every reason to be confident, but only if people are prepared to debate. I think it will be quite tough going.

And it's really the same groups and areas that talk to failures of multiculturalism. Again, I still think that's a debate that can be won. It's difficult to win it, though, unless we really do grasp the nettle of who is and who isn't a good Muslim. I never really wanted, and I still don't really like to get involved in this business of good Muslim, bad Muslim. I think my whole background was – and I think it remains – that you treat communities as they are. And when you encounter a community that is sort of particularly religiously devout in a certain way, you respect that. I think it's the same if you're dealing with the Orthodox Jewish community in Stamford Hill in North London, or you're dealing with a newer kind of religious thinking in South London.

So yes, I think there is... it can only be won through debate. I hope though that the sort of collapsing and the exposing of corrupt regimes in places like Tunisia and Egypt and Libya, I hope we can take advantage of that.

I mean look, I think this is relevant. I'll just make this observation. This was in 2005. I was invited one evening to a gathering of Muslim ambassadors, mainly from around the Middle East but not exclusively. I was surprised by the lack of religious practice. I was head of the Muslim Contact Unit, and I was used to Muslims around London... I mean, I never once went to meet a Muslim and was offered alcohol, you know, but here I was with these sort of ambassadors representing their Muslim countries, and goodness me – alcohol, cigarettes...

Rosemary Hollis:

Perhaps that's good diplomacy.

Robert Lambert:

Well yes, and it was nice food and it was nice discussion. But I suppose on the serious point, I mean they wanted to tell me when they realised who my Muslim partners were in London, they were the ones who wanted to tell me that this was completely counter productive and part of the problem. Not part of the solution.

Now, I think we have to understand. Whether it's someone whose grandfather was a head of the Muslim Brotherhood, or whether it's someone who is related to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, I think we really have to get over that and really recognise that these are potential partners in their own right.

Question 3:

As a former member of Scotland Yard, were you ever aware of al-Qaeda before 9/11?

Number 2, if I may, apart from the IRA, Britain was never a target of international terrorism until Tony Blair decided to invade Iraq. Is that the facts? Thank you.

Robert Lambert:

Yes, before 9/11 as I said, the first attack on the World Trade Centre in 1993, really very similar motivation. If you study the court records, and as I say I was involved in the investigation. So really, no major surprises. I think later during the 1990s, I think an awareness that people like Abu Qatada, others, were coming to London either for a short period or a longer period. People like al-Suri. People now that we understand more clearly to be al-Qaeda strategists.

I think again of *Londonistan* – it is possible to talk about London in the 1990s as being negligent towards a burgeoning al-Qaeda related threat. I wouldn't disagree with that. But I think the problem comes when commentators want to spread that to include the very people who were the very first to highlight the problems. In Brixton, my good friend Abdul Haq Baker, the Salafi who's now considered not particularly suitable for government funding which he was last year... 1996, he went to the Metropolitan Police to complain about the problem of violent extremism.

Again, there's another myth here within this sort of pre-9/11 period and after 9/11. This myth that's been spun that Muslims in London were somehow

negligent or complicit in a problem. Actually, those that could by virtue of where they were in London and who they were dealing with were actually very, very proactive and very brave. It was a regret for myself and colleagues that we only met them in 2002. We wished we'd met them in 1996.

And the second point. Do you mind just very quickly just recapping it?

Question 3:

It's about the... Britain was not a target of terrorism, international terrorism before the invasion of Iraq, apart from the IRA.

Robert Lambert:

Yes, but one has to really look much more broadly. I mean, within Metropolitan Police Special Branch there used to be a wonderful department, a section called E Squad, which looked at a whole range of international terrorist threats. I mean there was never a period where we weren't concerned with an aspect of international terrorism. I refer back in the book to the 1980s, when there was a real problem with Sikh terrorism. I had some wonderful police colleagues who would go to Southall to talk to Sikh community leaders about the problem of terrorism.

And that's where I learnt... well, I learned every day from very experienced colleagues. But that's where I learnt that you don't always need to offer people money. You certainly don't need to coerce people to help you. In Southall in the 1980s and early 1990s, Sikh community leaders provided a very good role model, along with Special Branch colleagues, for what we were later able to do on the Muslim Contact Unit. Very old-fashioned work. We had to dress it up as something new, because that was the sort of demands of new police management.

Question 4:

Dr Lambert, I know you have just briefly touched that, but I would like to know, given the fact that Islamic terrorism is taken to be a generalised term. I was wondering with the given state of the sectarianism in Islam, where one sect is not ready to accept the other as a Muslim, how do you get a representative statement of Muslims when working in partnership with Muslims?

Robert Lambert:

I don't think you should really strive for one. I've never fully understood that. I mean, when we were tackling Irish Republican terrorism we understood that getting condemnation from the Reverend Ian Paisley was not really going to cut any ice in the Catholic community. And so I've never really understood why Muslims are set different standards.

Goodness me, I still... And I also have trouble with what I would call sort of divide and rule policies. I was very disappointed in 2006 when the new Secretary of State for Communities Ruth Kelly began that approach. Where all of a sudden new groups were emerging but were very critical of my Muslims partners. The Sufi Muslim Council and then later followed by the Quilliam Foundation.

I felt this was the beginning of counter-subversion. And I think it's still a problem. I think it's quite easily defeated, because it is so hugely counter-productive. But yes I think we should still be very much on the alert for both those sort of divide and rule tactics and the seeds of counter-subversion approaches.

Question 5:

I remember shortly after 9/11 when we had a discussion here at Chatham House, in spite of the enormous effects of the attacks on 9/11 or possibly because of it, there had been a distortion of attitudes in the United States to terrorism and Islam. And it seemed to me after all this was only 15 terrorists or 15 men from Saudi Arabia, ineptness of American officials at Boston airport and so on.

This seemed to exaggerate the whole impact in world history of 9/11. And I rather suspect since then that some of my thoughts have been proved right in Iraq and various other places. I'm just wondering if our speaker can tell us if there is going to be a reaction, or a correction of the distortions that occurred after 9/11. And what one can do about it in resulting what our speaker has been very much involved in doing.

Robert Lambert:

I think this is where the academics at St Andrews are very helpful. Some of the more experienced scholars of terrorism, people like Alex Schmid, Paul Wilkinson who sadly died recently, who were very quick to point out that it is always the purpose of any terrorist, whether he's acting in the name of al-

Qaeda, whether he's acting in the name of the Provisional IRA or if, like Anders Breivik, he's acting in the name of some new anti-Muslim anti-multicultural point of view.

And it's axiomatic, and this is one of the very helpful things that I've found. As a practitioner coming into the academic world, the sort of realisation that this is a central terrorist purpose. Now, the architects of 9/11, the strategists, were superbly skilful. One has to say, and I accept these are still difficult things to say, one has to say that Anders Breivik was also hugely skilful. Because the purpose of a bomb outrage or a shooting spree is to capture the media attention, the political attention, and invariably, it is the purpose and it was Alex Schmid who I think first said this most clearly – it is the purpose to prompt governments to overreact.

So we see, not long after 9/11, we see al-Qaeda strategists... Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, goodness me they say, ‘we could not have wished for a better response from our point of view’. The war on terror was everything that bin Laden and his strategists would have wished for and more.

Now how do we educate politicians to be more counter-intuitive? Well I think there's an onus on all of us, whether it's academic experience, practitioner experience, to try to educate them. Otherwise we will find the next prime minister playing to the gallery, playing to the popular tune, the next time we have a terrorist outrage.

Question 6:

First, I wasn't going to mention it, but I was delighted that you mentioned Michael Gove. Michael Gove is very anti-Muslim. He's a danger to the Government. And he's very close to the Prime Minister. Today in the paper, it wasn't very amusing to have his name as a neo-con with Liam Fox.

But my point, I am a Christian. I grew up in a Christian country. My best friends until now are Muslims. They are the same. What annoys me, since Blair and Bush started the word 'Islam', it means terrorist. Why is it that the word Islam only means terrorist? I had to explain to so many English people...

Question 7:

You said before that you were looking for community leaders with certain skills. Can you elaborate a bit on what you're looking for and what are the pitfalls in selecting who you work with?

Robert Lambert:

In 2004, looking for knowledge. What is the al-Qaeda problem, what experience do you have of it. Very much a grassroots understanding. I think also time dependent. You know, I wouldn't immediately want to translate everything that was relevant in 2002 or 2007 to the present day. But local skills are crucial, local knowledge. Actually, bravery, frankly I think goes to the top of the list, because you look at the current Prevent agenda, and it's very widespread and it has some good points and some poor points, but it's never sufficiently understood that when you're in the police, you don't ask people to intervene. If someone is robbing a bank, you say, ‘Leave that to the police.’

And yet I've had the pleasure of working with Muslim Londoners who were extraordinarily brave. None more so than at Finsbury Park mosque and also in Brixton. So yes, I think that's why from a police perspective, you value it. When you find bravery, also reliability. I mean these might seem very mundane... but there's no point in having a partnership with someone in the community who's well meaning... We did try that, I mean we made lots of mistakes, and so it's not a question of who we think is ideologically sound and who's unsound, it's a question of who is good and who's up for it and who's going to be there when you're meeting at six o’clock on a cold February Saturday morning to do something that's quite dangerous. Who's going to be there? So very police oriented, I'm afraid.

Rosemary Hollis:

Listen, I can feel the appetite for more, but we're under strict instructions. He has to get to Singapore. He has to run for a plane. Please sit where you are, we'll all join to thank him in applause and then you can rush to buy his book and read what you didn't manage to hear from his own mouth. Thank you very much.